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EDITOR: KEITH A. MORSE

The Challenge of the Emerging Church

by Gary E. Gilley

The emergent church is a slippery name for a slippery movement. The movement is so new (originated in the late 1990s), so fragmented, and so varied that there is no defining it. It has no official leaders¹ or headquarters;² some have said that there are thousands of expressions yet only a few churches have sold out to the concept; and even those claiming the name can't agree on what is going on.³

Brian McLaren, the closest to a spokesperson for the movement so far, states:

"Right now Emergent is a conversation, not a movement. ... We don't have a program. We don't have a model. I think we must begin as a conversation, then grow as a friendship, and see if a movement comes of it."⁴

The name "emerging church" speaks of a church that is emerging from something, coming out of more traditional expressions of the church, and emerging into a postmodern expression. Its adherents see it as a postmodern church for a postmodern culture.

Even this gets tricky because the prefix "post" has become all too trendy. We hear not only of post-



modern, but also of post-Christian, post-Protestant, post-analytical, post-liberal, post-conservative, post-everything. The problem with "post" is that it describes what one is not, much better than it describes what one is.

McLaren believes that defining "postmodern" is premature⁵ — we don't yet know what form it will take, so defining the postmodern church is even more problematic. Emergent church leaders all believe that the modern church cannot connect with the postmodern mind. But for now we can say the emergent church is a movement chasing a culture.

Dan Kimball, author of *The Emerging Church*, says this is necessary because the "basis of learning has shifted from logic and rational, systematic thought to the realm of experience. People increasingly long for the mystical and the spiritual rather than the evidential and facts-based faith of the modern soil."⁶

Kimball suggests that the seeker-sensitive church, the church that chased the last generation's culture, is out of date:

"...the things that seeker-sensitive churches removed from their

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