

Maintenance Exhaustion

A postscript to the debate on emerging church



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The debate about 'emerging church' is thought to be a debate about theology, more specifically missiology and ecclesiology. In some cases it is. I notice that even the term 'emerging church' can provoke a theological debate (see the conversation posted on the discussion board of the last edition of Encounters, where one assumption is that 'emerging church' necessarily suggests that behind the term lies a postmodern epistemology which is unfaithful to the gospel). Certainly those involved initially in the Base Ecclesial Communities in Latin America (see Article 2) might want to claim that their whole movement was empowered by a different ecclesiology – less 'high', less hierarchical, less priestly – than that of the mainline Roman Catholic church of their day. As for the movement among Muslim Background Believers to establish their own fellowships rather than join already existing Christian formations, this too might express theological differences – in the case cited in Article y a profound difference over theological language, for example.

Nevertheless, I wonder whether, in Britain particularly, there is not something else going on at the same time, something much more simple, which you could call 'maintenance exhaustion' and which might be revealed not by theological reflection but by a little sociological analysis. Let me explain.

If we look at the life of the average or typical couple found in our churches today we may assume that both parents are busy people. Dad has a job, and jobs, if you have one, seem to be increasingly demanding. Christian people are often, rightly, the best employees, in the sense that they are the most conscientious and, as a result, are often given onerous responsibilities. So Dad is a busy man. Mum may also be working, even full time. If there are children then both parents have additional, very demanding, responsibilities. A multitude of Christian books, again rightly, exhort parents to spend enough time with their children and to give them the love and attention that they need as they grow up. There may well be other family responsibilities. Aged parents, perhaps, need caring for. Even if they are not a direct responsibility, they need and deserve attention and time. The wider family circle deserves an occasional glance as well! Then there is the house and garden. No doubt in our society we are too worried about possessions and we are all familiar with people who seem obsessed with improving their houses or producing a beautiful garden. Yet whatever we feel about this, we cannot simply allow our houses to go to rack and ruin, or our gardens to become jungles. Some time must be spent on them. Life has other demands: we must attend to such matters as shopping, banking, insurance, laundry, ironing, not to mention recreation, time off for entertainment, family holidays, reading and hobbies.

I have left something out: the time our couple gives to go to church. Now whatever that time is, is it really possible that church participation will be much more than an extra. Please note that I am not saying this in the spirit of: 'they spend all their time on their job and family and have no real commitment to the church'. Given the quite genuine responsibilities that the average couple has, I do not think that we can expect anything different. Do we want Christian people to be under-committed to their jobs, to neglect their families, to allow their homes and garden to become eye-sores, to have no time to order their domestic affairs, to have no recreation and therefore be liable to a breakdown!

One of the answers to this dilemma is to have the church largely run by professionals. Under these circumstances the congregational members are simply not responsible for the church's activities. They go to church to be inspired and taught ('to be fed') and to worship. This boost to their Christian lives, along with their private devotions, then helps them to function better in

the workplace and at home. This sounds all right as a working model but there are, in practice, some serious objections.

Firstly, it is doubtful whether the church can work effectively in this way. The paid professional, even if he or she has other full-time or part-time people working alongside, cannot cope with all the church needs to do, at least as church programmes are usually configured. A long list of workers – Sunday school teachers, youth workers, a visitation team, musicians, caterers, mission promoters, door-knockers, treasurers, not to mention more formal roles such as elders and deacons or members of the PCC – are usually required.

Secondly, church members themselves are not satisfied with this state of affairs. They know that they have something to offer and that they need to exercise their spiritual gifts in order to grow. It is common knowledge that 'pew-sitters' tend to stagnate spiritually. If people are contributing nothing to the church (apart perhaps from their money) they will inevitably begin to regard church as an optional extra. But this just restates the difficulty with which we started. How can people who have so little time contribute effectively to an organisation which demands more time than they have to give?

My answer to that question is another question: can we begin to think seriously about 'low-maintenance' churches? Also, is this possibly one of the things that 'emerging church' is about? We are simply being crushed by the weight of the structures we have created in order to maintain our church life. People find they cannot take the weight and are slipping out to look for something which meets their spiritual needs and to which they can contribute something, but which does not weigh on them so heavily. Viewed from within the church, this is the familiar dilemma of 'mission versus maintenance'. We are putting so much energy into maintaining the structures that we have not got time for anything else.

I leave my readers to figure out what might be a practical response. Burning down the church building might be a useful start! But the principle seems simple enough. No doubt structures are necessary – but they need to be light, flexible, easily re-invented, inexpensive, people-friendly, contextual (particularly contextualised to people's busy lives) appropriate and all the rest.

So here is my thesis: one important aspect of 'emerging church' is that it is a protest by busy people about the 'maintenance exhaustion' that involvement in their recently attended churches has induced. Existing, more traditional churches need to 'lighten up' in order to respond to this need and to be more effective.

PPS. This postscript is intended to add a 'practical' note to our discussions. If anybody has any suggestions about how we can escape from burdensome ecclesiastical structures (without destroying the whole show!) please write and tell us.

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