

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

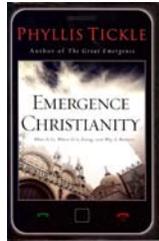
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A new Christianity emerges

For many years, Phyllis Tickle was religion editor for *Publishers Weekly*, the trade journal for the English-language book industry, and wrote mostly for a professional audience. In recent years, however, she started spending more time traveling across America, talking and listening to lay and clergy audiences. She also started reading what lay and clergy scholars had said over the centuries and in the very recent past, about religion-related subjects.



That experience led her to start writing for general audiences about the landscape of religion as it was being lived out in America. It has now led her to write her fourth book about what she sees happening, *Emergence Christianity: What It Is, Where It Is Going, and Why It Matters* (Baker Books, 2012).

An opportunity and a call for us

Tickle calls this latest book “a dispatch from the field” and emphasizes that it is only an interim report. “Whatever else one may say of Emergence Christianity,” she writes, “one must also say that it is growing and shifting and reconfiguring itself in such a prodigious way as to still defy any final assessments or absolute pronouncements.”

She offers the book as “an opportunity for us all to assess where we are, project where we probably are going, and enter prayerfully into this new thing that God is doing.” But she warns us that our aim in reading, studying, and discussing Emergence Christianity should not be to save our own denomination or any other such institution. Rather, she feels, we are called to study and discussion in order to discern how best to serve the kingdom of God in whatever form God is presenting it.



Connections Live! 2012

DVD set and photos



Participants in the recent **Connections Live! 2012** gathering are still sending me enthusiastic comments about it. In an e-mail that just arrived, one says, “I loved it! I found it to be one of the most spiritually revitalizing experiences of my life.” Another has written, “From start to finish, the atmosphere was electric; people came expectant and left gratified. The interaction among participants was exciting.” And another, “I’m still on a high, partly from listening to Robin Meyers and partly from just being with lots of like-minded folks.”

A DVD set of the gathering, featuring keynote speaker Dr. Robin Meyers, is being produced by the D. L. Dykes Jr. Foundation and will be available after December 15. You can pre-order the set now or order it after that date by phoning Jennifer Vail at the Dykes Foundation office, 601-354-0767, or by e-mailing her at jennifervail@faithandreason.org. To get the special *Connections* price of \$25, say that you learned about the set from “Barbara’s *Connections*.”

You can see several photos from the event on the **Connections Live! 2012** page of my website, www.connectionsonline.org.

It is with that aim in mind that I’m describing Tickle’s book here for *Connections* readers. I wish every reader would actively try to get his or her church congregation, Sunday School class, or study group to learn and talk together about what Phyllis Tickle is reporting.

What is it, and why is it emerging?

Many of us have heard of the “emerging church,” but if you’re anything like me you haven’t been quite sure what it is. Tickle’s book helps to clear up that uncertainty. She explains that several different labels are being used—not just “emerging,” but also “emergent,” “free ex-

pression,” “hyphenated,” “cyber church,” and more. Also, a very wide variety of groups and activities are being included in what we hear called by these names. Some of them even refer to groups that are opposites in some of their beliefs, so it’s no wonder if we’re unsure what the names refer to. But if we care about the church, we need to know about these new forms of Christianity because they’re all around us.



Most important, we need to think about *why* they are emerging and growing. Why are so many people, especially younger people, feeling the need to avoid traditional church congregations, worship services, and organizational methods? Why are some adopting religious practices that many longtime churchgoers find pointless or even unchristian?

Upheaval every five hundred years



Phyllis Tickle has pointed out in earlier books that about every five hundred years, Western culture and the areas that have been colonized by it have gone through a time of enormous upheaval in which essentially every part of the culture is reconfigured. The chief characteristic of each of these upheavals, observes Tickle, is the disestablishment of whatever source or definition of authority has been operative. This leads to the question, “where is our authority now?” And even hearing that question asked can be scary, especially for the people who are depending heavily on existing ways.

Disturbing as it may be for some of us to realize, we’re in one of those times of upheaval now.

Before now, the most recent of them was the Protestant Reformation, which we tend to equate only with religious change. Tickle reminds us, however, that it was also about political change in Western governance, from fiefdoms, baronies, and hereditary domains to the nation-state configuration that has informed our Western way of ordering life ever since. In all such times, Tickle points out, just as religion informs, counsels, and tempers the society in which it exists, also every religion is informed and colored by its hosting society.



Active architects of what’s emerging

What’s important about our being in the midst of such an upheaval, in Phyllis Tickle’s view, is that we can be either its passive medium or its active architects, and that “being active architects is much more appealing as well as more honorable than passivity.” However, being active architects “requires a great deal of thought and more informed consultation than passivity does, and it also requires naming the beast before we try to engage it.” That’s what she’s urging North American Christians to do.

A new form of Christianity

Tickle’s book describes key religion-related steps in the development of the current period of upheaval, which began to be evident in the late 1800s. These early steps included the convening of Vatican I and especially Vatican II in the Catholic Church. In another part of the church, they included the Niagara Bible Conferences that declared five principles of the faith as nonnegotiable—principles that came to be called the fundamentals and became the basis of what we now call Christian fundamentalism. A later, related step was the birth of Pentecostalism, and the Social Gospel movement came still later.



Several features of the new form of Christianity that was appearing became its hallmarks. One was movement away from attendance at or involvement with the established church. Another was a return to the so-called house-church form of worship. Other hallmarks were seen in the beginnings of three site-based but global communities: the Catholic Worker Movement in New York City; what became the Iona Community in Scotland; and the community in France that would become Taizé. New forms in the U.S. mostly came later.

Features churchgoers need to recognize

I found some aspects of Phyllis Tickle’s writing distracting. Use of the capitalized word “Word,” for example, which she did consistently, makes me think only of the words of the Bible or of Jesus, as if only those could be equated with what God has said in the past or says now, which I don’t think they can. I also was turned

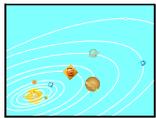


off by her failure to acknowledge the sexism of the Anglican liturgy that she's used to and that much Emergence worship apparently uses. However, I found her book extremely helpful in presenting what she finds to be the main features of what she calls Emergence Christianity. They are features that all of today's church members need to be aware of and to consider what they may imply for traditional congregations and denominations.



- Above all, Tickle finds Emergence Christianity to be deinstitutionalized and to have forms of organization that are not hierarchical.

- It has a comfortable and informed interface with the physical sciences, especially physics. Even more than the other features of Emergence Christianity, this feature tends to make a big difference between



Emergence Christians and traditional, especially older, Christians. Many in the older group aren't knowledgeable about scientific discoveries that are well known to today's younger people. This difference has therefore proved to be an impediment of monumental proportions, Phyllis Tickle observes, to the ability of established church leaders and Emergence leaders to interface with each other, especially in matters of belief.

- Emergence Christians are technologically savvy, another big difference between them and many traditional Christians. Emergence Christianity, Tickle emphasizes, is as intimately tied to and as dependent on electronic and computer technology as Reformation Christianity was to the printing press.

- Emergence Christians have a deeply embedded commitment to social justice, including an assumption of all forms of human diversity as the norm.

- They also have deep concern for the natural environment. They see ecology and the sustainability of resources as essential for Christianity to address.

- Emergence Christians sacralize today's urban experience in ways that older forms of faith sacramentalized features of earlier centuries' rural life. This leads to sacraments like the "blessing of the bicycles."



- Music is central to the spiritual experience of Emergence Christianity. Newer music and festivals built around it have become important ways of spreading and celebrating the Word.

- Emergence Christians recognize that they must integrate their roles in the church, the state, and the culture. They see that this triple citizenship brings triple loyalties and obligations, some of which can be in conflict or at least in tension with each other.

- Emergence Christians tend to have dialogical and contextual habits of thought, and they have what Tickle calls a penchant for paradox. Emergence Christianity thus has moved away from—has almost aggressively rejected, in fact—doctrinalism, dogmatism, and printed or sworn-to "official" statements of belief. Emergence Christians tend toward mysticism instead of absolutes and assertions. Many have



an approach to God and ways of describing God that speak in terms of what God is not, rather than what God is.

These Christians are skittish about putting too much blind faith in words, and especially about believing that anyone can reduce God to a description and say what God is or what God thinks.

- Emergence Christians see actions designed to alleviate problems of the poor and disadvantaged as sensible. However, they find that as long as "we"

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. For paper copies of any of the 20 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I'm a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

do these beneficial things for “them,” we fail to act in the name and manner of Christ. Only when we act together as children of God are we really acting as Christians. For Emergence Christians, therefore, “mission” happens in the neighborhood where one lives and works. Thus many Emergence pastors don’t want full-time congregational positions. They choose to be self-supporting and work in the world as both ordained persons and members of the secular workforce.

- In Emergence Christianity, the word “incarnate” still refers to the assumption of human flesh by God in the person of Jesus,



but it also requires using the human body as a vehicle of worship and receiving the Word physically. This means expressing it in tangible forms such as visual art, dance, or meditation. Emergence worship thus embodies the faith in artful ways, and it is informal, social, and joyful.

Knowing that these features are so important to today’s Emergence Christians, should we be surprised that so few of them want to take part in the worship, buildings, organizational structures, and programs of our traditional churches? What might we need to do about that?

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A new Christianity emerges

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Emergence in society and nature

“Emergence” is what Phyllis Tickle finds scholars calling the period of upheaval we’re in. It’s the current one of the sequence of major upheavals she sees as having happened in latinized Western culture about every five hundred years.

In the current upheaval, she finds, the following characteristics are showing up not only in many aspects of society but also in the physical world of nature.

- √ The period’s hallmark is complexity that comes suddenly and in unprecedented and inexplicable ways.
- √ Emergence is communal, not ruled by a hierarchy. Authority or leadership is not from the top down but from the bottom up or sideways, from component parts networking with one another.
- √ The resulting structural complexity is greater than what could have been logically predicted from the structure or substance of the component parts.

