

While I am unable to discuss how the trends discussed in this book relate to churches in the Arab world (mainly due to my own lack of experience in the region), there is no doubt that these trends will affect AWM as a Western organisation. We rely on local churches to send us workers and to fund our activities. We also have a core belief that the local church is a critical entity in the propagation of the gospel. If Barna is accurate in his predictions, by 2025 we will have access through local churches to only 35 per cent of the Christian population in the US, which is the major source of both our funding and workers.

If we want to survive as an organisation as these trends take hold, we will need to seriously review our core belief in the local

It is sometimes hard to distinguish between the results of his research and his theological beliefs

church and see what the reshaped Church will look like, in order to attract the *unchurched* American Revolutionaries. We will need to look at ways to accommodate these Revolutionaries and offer them organizational structures they can be comfortable with. It is likely that issues like justice, the environment and poverty will be high on their agendas, along with a great desire to worship God in a holistic way. Being highly flexible in their understanding of what church looks like, they may bring new ways of gathering seekers and BMBs together that are quite different from the typical models currently used in the Arab world. In the same way that this will be a challenge for the American church, it will also be a challenge for AWM. I just hope that we will not miss the boat...

reviewed by Yannick Bherer

Yannick, a French-Canadian, has served AWM in IT services in Worthing for the last four years. He is very interested in a Christian postmodern worldview, both intellectually and personally, as it significantly shapes his faith journey.

Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Communities in Postmodern Cultures

Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 345 pages.

In this volume of *Seedbed* we read of Paul-Gordon Chandler's suggestion that there are good models to be taken from the characteristics of *emerging churches* in the West that can be adapted into appropriate approaches to Muslims in the *East*. In anticipation of this *Seedbed*, and in order to get a better grasp on what 'emerging churches' are all about, I purchased and read *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian*

Communities in Postmodern Cultures, which is billed as 'The best book yet on the emerging church' (back cover). I am including this review in *Seedbed* in order to help readers understand more about the nature of the churches that are emerging in *missional response* to the postmodern cultural realities that are increasingly shaping Western societies. In addition, a look at emerging churches in

the USA and in the UK will provide helpful context to understand why Chandler and Mazhar are drawn to them for models in the Arab world.

Gibbs (American) and Bolger's (British) treatment of emerging churches is based on extensive research conducted over five years. Collecting information on about 200 churches that met their initial criteria, they narrowed down their research and made site visits to interview the leaders of roughly fifty churches in the USA and the same number in the UK. Their book begins with a quick look at postmodern culture (chapter 1) and then describes emerging churches (chapter 2). Here is a helpful description of *emerging churches* that they heard from one leader:

The emerging church is a quest for a more integrated and whole life of faith. There is a bit of theological questioning going on, focusing more on kingdom theology, the inner life, friendship/community, justice, earth keeping, inclusivity, and inspirational leadership. In addition the arts are in a renaissance, as are the spiritual disciplines. Overall, it is a quest for a holistic spirituality (p. 42).

Gibbs and Bolger believe that their research shows that emerging churches are characterized by three core practices:

1. identifying with the life of Jesus
2. transforming secular space
3. living in community (pp. 43-4).

From this threefold core, six other characteristics flow:

4. welcoming the stranger
5. serving generously
6. participating in worship experiences as producers and not mere spectators
7. using their creativity

8. leading as a body
9. participating in spiritual activities drawing on both ancient and modern practices (p. 45).

Gibbs and Bolger devote a chapter to each of these nine characteristics (chapters 3-11). An insightful appendix consists of ninety pages in which fifty leaders of emerging churches share their own testimonies of their pilgrimage of thinking and faith into new ways of being church.

So, what is one to make of the *emerging churches* described by Gibbs and Bolger? There are a number of characteristics of emerging churches that are very positive. They are seeking to radically identify with the people in the culture emerging around them in order to present Christ in an attractive way. The questions their leaders are asking are very similar to the questions that we are asking as we seek to engage our Muslim friends and neighbours. They are seeking to exhibit radical obedience to Christ in order to connect in transparent and authentic ways with postmoderns. There is little that does not appear to be attractive to all Christians in the list of nine core characteristics above. There also seems to be much that could be relevant to the shape that our witness and community life takes in the Arab world, especially in the practices numbered 1, 3, 4 and 5 (see *previous paragraph*).

A few years ago, when I heard Brian MacLaren (one of the main spokesmen for the emerging churches, and author of many books, including *Generous Orthodoxy*) speak on how to do evangelism in a postmodern culture, much of what he said resonated with my experience in sharing Christ's love with Muslims. MacLaren spoke eloquently of the need to draw alongside people and love them to Christ over a long period of time,

only sharing truths with people as they were ready to hear them. He spoke of not expecting people to understand *anything about* the gospel, and of the need to patiently bridge the huge gap in worldview. There is truly much in the emerging churches that is attractive and deeply challenging. Gibbs and Bolger were very impressed with the social and cultural practices of the churches they researched: 'Virtually all these communities support women at all levels of ministry, prioritize the urban over the suburban, speak out politically for justice, serve the poor, and practice fair trade' (p. 11).

And yet, as I read through Gibbs and Bolger's glowing account of these churches, I found myself increasingly frustrated and saddened by what was being described. The typical *emerging church* described in the book is very small and appears to be struggling (15 to 50 members) with people coming and going, and a core membership of often less than a dozen. They focus so much on 'incarnating Christ' that the proclamation of the gospel is often little emphasized. They focus most of their energy on trying to live like Jesus, and they almost try to make *Jesus* into a postmodern. They focus on the Kingdom, but reinterpret it in ways that seem, at times, to be far removed from the New Testament vision of the kingdom of God. They exhibit an insistent imbalance in interpreting Jesus in the Gospels in ways that seem to entirely dismiss the teaching of the Apostle Paul and the rest of the New Testament. As in so many new movements

that claim to go back to the New Testament and follow Christ, the *pride* that they have in their rejection of 'modern' ways of doing church is, sadly, much in evidence. Much of the time, the things they are rejecting in their former church experience, sound like exaggerated caricatures, rather than recognizable characteristics of evangelical churches. So much of what is described is a reaction against expressions of church that they have found wanting and rejected. The multiple imbalances and the sense of superiority so common in movements built in reaction to other Christians are a serious concern in the movement of *emerging churches* described in this book.

Gibbs and Bolger, in writing their book, sought to let the voices of those they interviewed speak more loudly than their own voices. This made for a rather uneven and disjointed text. It is clear that the authors like what they found, but I found that their hesitancy in evaluating and critiquing the movement weakened the book. I came away from the book with a sense of frustration at the authors' shallow, or unexamined, perspective on the phenomenon they describe. They are rightly charitable in their assessment of the movement, but I wish they had engaged a little more in weighing the validity of so many of the seemingly off-the-wall statements and claims that they quote. I would only recommend this book for those who are seeking an in-depth portrait of the current state of the movement of *emerging churches*. Other

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books will need to be read if one wants help in discerning the value and biblical faithfulness of some of the main players in this growing movement.

Those criticisms aside, there is much that is positive and challenging in the emerging church movement, as it is described in this book. The fact that postmodern culture rejects Christianity and is not at all interested in the message that they associate with the modern church motivates these leaders to creative response. For Christ and the gospel to get a hearing again in the West, radical rethinking of the shape of the church and of the packaging of the gospel message may well need to be attempted before the church will be seen as attractive by postmoderns.

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It is this same desire to have Christ seen as relevant to a group of people who despise Christianity that motivates our efforts towards contextualization in the Muslim world. In spite of its *serious flaws*, I believe that these movements of churches struggling to engage their diverse contexts in fresh ways have much to teach those of us who are seeking to do the same thing in Muslim contexts, which are so often hostile to Christians and Christianity, but attracted by Christ himself. May we all be drawn by the Spirit of God into radical faith and radical love for those who are wandering and lost without knowing the loving God that sent his son to demonstrate his love for humanity, whether Muslims or postmoderns.

reviewed by Don Little