

Emerging Churches and the HungerTruth Project
by:
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Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger in their newly released book, *Emerging Churches*,¹ have revealed nine principles that are common to these up and coming communities. I will examine the HungerTruth community, which I facilitate, in light of the principles found in their work. I will start by giving a short description of the HungerTruth community, proceed to give a summary of each common denominator of Emerging Churches, immediately followed with a comparison with the HungerTruth project.

HungerTruth was birthed in the summer of 2005. Starting off in my living room, it eventually moved to hold its meetings at the First Congregational Church, right in the heart of downtown Riverside. HungerTruth is a community of individuals who desire to pursue the truth about the past and present; therefore we discuss and share our perspectives on politics, religion, history, and philosophy for the purpose of better understanding our world and each other. We believe that there is no issue too sacred to challenge or bring under intellectual scrutiny. We honor our Creator by utilizing our reason and thinking capacity. Instead of allowing ourselves to be calloused, apathetic, passive and sometimes even partakers of the world's problems, we resolve to be a part of the solution. Our truth conversations consist of entering into dialogue with expert guests concerning their journey and specialty or watching documentaries followed by critical discussion. We also arrange interfaith dialogues, debates, panel discussions and forums in order to inform and educate ourselves to the largest degree possible. Each session gives participants opportunities to express their viewpoints without feeling obligated to adhere to any authoritative belief. This way, everyone has the freedom to believe or think whatever makes the most sense to them. We focus on providing a safe and friendly atmosphere where critical inquiry and responsible thought is welcomed and encouraged.

¹ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

The HungerTruth community shares the following values:

1. We desire to love God and our neighbors.
2. The search of truth is done better collaboratively.
3. Our understandings are provisional and tentative.
4. We desire to reserve and suspend judgment and merely collect data in areas that we are unfamiliar with.
5. We strive to be respectful, sensitive, considerate and open-minded, yet always carefully examining the evidence presented.
6. We will inevitably make better and more informed decisions by concerning ourselves with the search for truth.

Identification with Jesus

One of the primary characteristics of Emerging Churches is that they have a renewed sense of what the gospel of Jesus was all about. These communities have realized that Jesus did not walk around telling people that he was going to die for their sins on the cross and that if they believed this, their souls would end up in heaven when they died. It seems that Emerging Churches have recognized that Jesus' disciples were preaching the gospel, yet when they were told by Jesus that he was going to die, they did not understand what he was talking about (Luke 18:31-34). This indicates that there was a good news prior to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

Following the insights of N.T. Wright, Dallas Willard, Brian McLaren and others, Emerging Churches are recognizing that the good news was all about the kingdom of God. Jesus said that preaching the gospel of the kingdom was his mission, the very reason he was sent (Luke 4:43). For Emerging Churches, this idea of kingdom provides a new emphasis of life in the here and now. This translates into mission, social justice, holding hands with God so to speak in order to join God to bring about the most good on earth as possible. The gospel, "is concerned with bringing heaven to earth."²

² Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 55.

Although I am thankful for this new focus on the kingdom of God, there still seems to be a lot of confusion about the kingdom, and Jesus' gospel. Was it really a call to participate in what God was doing, or a call to prepare for the breaking of a new age without death, pain, and suffering; a time of judgment and resurrection? Where is the future kingdom in all this talk of the present? In my studies, it seems that Jesus' kingdom proclamation was rejected, at which time Jesus foretold future judgment (Mark 13). Jesus' gospel concerned the timing of the kingdom, as it was 'at hand'. This was the good news. Some might say that the kingdom came, but I would side with those that say it didn't. It seems that the early Jewish communities continued to anticipate the kingdom as many are even today. How this translates into our understanding of what the good news is a topic that can be covered later.³

As far as HungerTruth, there are varying degrees of understandings of the gospel. I would say that most of the community would perceive Jesus as preaching and proclaiming the kingdom of God, and by that they would conceive of God's restoration of the earth. Most of our group understands God as desiring to renew and redeem all of creation (Romans 8). The HungerTruth community does not feel a need to see everything in the same way, yet at the same time realizes that there is value to sharing our perspectives and modifying our thoughts when we understand something in a way that is helpful, or maybe more consistent with Scripture and reality. HungerTruth also realizes that we do not have to be like Jesus in every respect. Since Jesus walked around as an itinerant kingdom proclaimer for 3 years, we do not necessarily think that we are called to do the same. Many see Jesus as revealing God's character, which is a call to show mercy, love, and kindness regardless of adverse circumstances.

Transforming Secular Space

Emerging Churches are breaking down the walls that separate and divide secular and sacred. For too long, spirituality has taken place in private, in the closet so to speak. People

³ I have wrestled with related issues in a separate paper. Dan Mages, "The Openness of the Kingdom: The Gospel of the Imminent Fulfillment of the Davidic Promises; Rejected and Thereby Delayed by the Israelite People" (paper will be presented at the 15th Annual Theological Conference, Atlanta Bible College, Morrow, Georgia, April 22, 2006).

worship within the confines of church buildings and retreat centers. Since Constantine, traditional Christianity has more or less been focused on the soul instead of the body. Dualism has been a major problem, ripping apart the intellect from the heart, emotions from the will, faith from reason, God from the world. Emergent Churches renew the idea that everything in and on the earth is the LORD's (Psalm 24:1). There is a sense that all of life should be an act of worship. In other words, taking a shower, driving to work, lunch breaks, watching movies, and having sex can be and should be worship. Emerging Churches are prone to place less emphasis on God speaking primarily through one conduit who is typically the preacher/pastor. They are metaphorically providing microphones for everyone, as each person has something to say and contribute. God is said to speak through parables, stories, personal narratives, not just the three point expository sermon on Sunday.

Reason is seen as a gift from God and worship can take place in almost any venue, context, and in any number of ways. If some subculture happens to be technologically savvy, then this is utilized, if others are not, this is not seen as less holy or less honoring to God. Again, worship is seen as wholistic, comprising of every area of life. Taking care of ones body, massage, exercise and diet are all expressions of love toward God and examples of good stewardship. Hanging out with friends, rich conversations over a meal, and a down to earth mentality are valued within the Emerging movement.

The HungerTruth community ranks high in this category as many traditional, dualistic, churchgoers might wonder how God fits in with what we do at our meetings. There are rarely spoken prayers, worship songs have never been sung, a sermon has never been preached, yet most if not all within the community see what we do as profoundly spiritual and honoring to God. This is exactly the point: our spirituality is not mystical, but extremely tangible. It is displayed in our conversations, our tone of voice, our openness to new ideas and the refreshing way in which we live life. The manner in which we treat one another and our desire to help where and when help is needed is our spirituality. Our worship is the welcoming, safe, friendly, gracious, and caring environment we create. We are sanctified and refined through our meals together as they are infused with discussions about health, the environment, animal rights, human rights, local and world politics, biblical interpretation, and even the weather. The HungerTruth community attempts to be real,

down to earth, dare I say, normal. Trying to manufacture spirituality is not attempted. People can be themselves, with no need to perform, acting like something or someone we are not is not looked upon favorably. Prayer is something that some see as the ongoing, continuous desire, sometimes expressed, other times not, for God to bring the kingdom to earth. We want to see people happy and our world self-sustained. We want to be a part of the solution when we are able to the many issues that plague our world.

Living as Community

One of the phenomena of the Emerging Churches is that they see their church as their community, their network of friends. In this way people conceive the church as the people of God and not a building. Emerging Churches perceive themselves as on a journey, not as people with all of life's answers. Their theology is not static and stuck in some system but evolving within each individual community and human heart. These communities compose of networks of people where each person is involved in the others life to different degrees. While some communities actually live communally others do not. Lives are shared through birthday parties, hangouts, barbeques, and just everyday interaction. Less emphasis is placed on the main meeting, and more emphasis is placed on being involved with one another on a day-to-day basis.

Emerging Churches share common values, not necessarily the same exact doctrines. There is a spirit of acceptance, an inclusiveness that is rare among traditional 'doctrinally sound' churches that assume their understanding is the same as God's. Emerging Churches seem more open to new insights, and realize that the community is helpful, not just the leader for understanding their sacred texts. People are accountable to one another, and ultimately the community, as each person desires to see one another flourish in life and to be the best they can be.

Since the HungerTruth community does not live within walking distance from one another, community takes place on different levels throughout the week depending on relationships and the life rhythms of each individual or couple. For some, the meeting is the primary time to talk, interact, catch up, network, and collaborate. For others, the established

friendships continue throughout the week whether it is going to the gym for a workout, commuting to acting class, hanging out in the evening drinking a beer at home, juice parties (people bring organic fruit to juice), playing poker, watching movies, going out to dinner, or a weekend hike. Community also takes place throughout the week through phone calls and e-mails. Since HungerTruth attracts a wide variety of people including Muslims, Mormons, Roman Catholics, Agnostics, and Protestant Christians, some consider this group to be their primary community while others are active in other circles. It seems that for many, this community is one that best embodies their desire to learn in an open and safe environment. There is no pressure to join anything, or any pushes for commitment as the people that come are there because they want to be. They see the value of being in a community that attempts to maximize life opportunities and to learn and live out the respective gifts and abilities each one possesses. Lastly, HungerTruth embodies the idea that we are a community by allowing each person the time and freedom to participate during our meeting. Although there is usually a guest who is the focus of the evening, each person is encouraged to ask questions, contribute and work through each issue as a community.

Welcoming the Stranger

For too long, people have been subtly pushed out of churches because they felt unwelcome. Many times churches pressure people into conforming to their particular understanding of the Bible, Jesus, and God. If a person does not necessarily see things the same way, they are looked down upon, seen as less spiritual, or simply doomed. Emerging Churches are stressing the importance of including those who are dissimilar, different, and other than the norm. These communities see value in learning about other people, other cultures, and other perspectives. There is nothing to lose and all to gain. Condescending attitudes are dismissed as infantile, and theological humility is on the rise.

These Emergent communities are aware that they might be wrong on any number of issues and they don't feel that they are in the business of defending God. Truth is truth and truth won't be changed by what any person thinks. This provides the framework to freely listen, search, and collaborate; besides, one's lifestyle is of critical importance anyway. It will not matter how much one assents to this or that doctrine when the judgment seems to

involve what a person did with their life (Matthew 25; Romans 2). Emerging Churches are more comfortable with unanswered questions than traditional churches that seem to want a security blanket for each and every difficult question. There is an understanding that even Paul saw through a glass darkly (1 Corinthians 13:12). When the above principles are in practice within a community the stranger will feel welcome and desired, regardless of whether there are shared beliefs about the afterlife, Jesus or God.

HungerTruth embodies these ideas better than any community in which I have ever participated. In fact, it is out of having been excluded and feeling unwanted in traditional churches that HungerTruth was birthed. After realizing that the differences I have had with other churches were because of an alternative understanding of an ancient text, it became clear that this alone should be no basis for exclusion.

A Roman Catholic apologist came and talked about 5 things that Protestants most misunderstand about Roman Catholicism. He felt so respected that he was willing to come a second time and even mentioned the possibility of joining us weekly. As stated earlier, we have a frequenting Muslim, a Mormon, an Agnostic, a few biblical Unitarians, some Protestants and some considering becoming Roman Catholics. It is a very eclectic group and people from different backgrounds feel respected without anyone having to have the same exact ideology.

Serving with Generosity

Emerging Churches can also be defined as missional churches. They are groups of people who desire to join God's purposes in the world. This means that they are active in bringing about the most good in any given community. They care about single moms, orphans, the poor, refugees, and those caught up in various addictions. Emerging communities are not into holy huddles, but in hallowed hospitality. Money is not typically drained by a pastor or building project, but used toward those who are really in need. Keny Michell of Tribe in New York, following James 1:27, is quoted as saying, "unless the widow

is being taken care of, we are not following Christ.”⁴ Emerging Churches are earning the respect of city councils, schools, and police by starting sex education programs, painting over graffiti, picking up trash, and working in gardens of the elderly.

Although the HungerTruth community is encouraged to live thoughtful, environmental, healthy, and humane lives, our community is yet to organize and engage in a project as described above. This is something that I really desire to see take place and am confident it will take place. It is something that I do not want to force as I am sensitive to and repulsed by the common manipulation maneuvers and guilt trips used to motivate masses. I am looking forward to individuals being inspired by information they are exposed to by our guests and within the context of our conversations. I see our discussions as a perfect place for grass roots organizing and a breeding ground for social justice projects. We have a spokesperson for Crop Walk coming this Thursday to tell us about a local walk to raise money for the poor in Africa. This just might be our first step in the right direction.

Participating as Producers

Emergent Churches do more than just talk about everyone participating; they actually create opportunities and a place for everyone to be involved. Based on the knowledge that everyone has a gift to contribute, painters are asked to paint, sculptors are encouraged to sculpt, singers to sing, and poets to read poetry. Everyone has a voice. The monologue of a preacher is replaced with the voices of the community. Discussion and participation are vital as being a part of a community is not a spectator’s sport. Everyone is a celebrity because everyone is unique. Emergent communities are flexible and because of this, vulnerable. There is an element of experiment, which does not always work out. There are awkward moments, and mistakes made. This is not something that brings fear, but is to be expected when genuine, authentic discussions take place. Life is filled with these sorts of experiences, and they are seen to be normal within many of these new communities.

HungerTruth certainly fits this category in some ways, but fails in others. One of my motivating factors in creating HungerTruth was realizing that it would be utterly limiting to

⁴ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 141.

submit everyone to my ideas, thoughts, and perspectives each and every week. It seemed more fair and educating to have a Roman Catholic teach about Roman Catholicism, a Unitarian Universalist to inform us on their tenants, a Baptist to do the same for their understanding of things. Why should I act like I know it all, when I do not? It seemed more raw and noble to really interact with others' ideas instead of just erecting straw men and knocking them down with empty rhetoric.

Secondly, the best learning environment seemed to be one in which people were comfortable enough to express their true doubts, questions and problems. When real conversation takes place, it seems like real learning is taking place. Usually in lectures, with minimal interaction, some who are listening become lost and never recover. If questions are allowed throughout, usually everyone can stay on the same page and work through issues together. Those of us who are regulars to our meetings, almost always either raise questions or contribute insight in one way or another.

Sometimes an individual, especially if new to the community, will become upset at something that is expressed by either the guest or another participant, become red in the face, raise their voice, and bark about their disagreement. It usually soon becomes apparent to these individuals that this is not the spirit that our community embodies. It is perfectly fine to have disagreements, but ferocious yelling is not the way we resolve our differences. In fact this only makes things worse, creating more of a divide that previously. We desire to build bridges to our perspectives and dispositions by humility, kindness, and gracious dialogue. Each member in the community is encouraged to ask questions, seek clarification, and express disagreements in so far as it is done in the right way. This is something that is of utmost importance to our community.

At this point, we have not brought music, art, song, or poetry readings into our meeting, although if somebody wanted to do this, it would not be opposed. Once a month we stroll around Riverside, going to different art studios and participate in what is called Art Walk. Local artists present and sell their works while joining in conversations over wine, cheese, and crackers. Ballet studios put on shows, churches sell crafts, and college students create unique exhibits native to their culture and interests. Since conversation and

discussion seem like the most natural way to relate and communicate within our particular community, this will probably be the primary means of worship during our meetings, but I am open to change. I would like to dance one week, but I'm not sure if everyone else would want to do that, I'll have to find out!

Creating as Created Beings

Closely linked with the last identifier, Emerging Churches are placing a lot of value in being made in the image of God. They see themselves as creative beings, designed to beautify their surroundings. If church is just like watching T.V. or just joining in on a sing along, then a full expression of creativity has not taken place. "Worship services that reduce people to passivity or to routinized responses fail to recognize the true nature and calling of the individual."⁵ Everything that goes into preparation for meetings including phone calls and e-mails are done as an act of worship. Some Emergent communities are finding a renewed sense of ritual, with candles, incense, banners, pictures, and symbols filled with new and variant meanings.⁶ Dancing, frugality, and homemade gifts are valued as they are expressions of joy, stewardship, and artistic love. Gifts can range from financial advice, to home-produced birthday cards. A purposeful attempt is made by these communities to move away from the McDoaldization of the world of mechanistic, assembly line control, toward a more free and collaborative effort to produce good in the world.⁷ Emergent gatherings are often places where community members are proud to bring their non-Christian friends.

The HungerTruth community recognizes that each community member has something unique to contribute; yet there has not been a push to have everyone express all of their talents at our gathering. It is assumed that what each individual does in life is an extension of who we are as a people. We encourage one another to excel, create, and realize our fullest potential. We do not feel the need to take away from what our people are doing in mission by redirecting their energies to our meetings. I would actually like to see our

⁵ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 176.

⁶ See Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 183.

⁷ See Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 174.

community initiate appropriate background music before and after our conversations, candles, and incense might be a great addition to what we are already doing. On the other hand, it may just be that these things would become distractions to what we are doing, as we are just regular, everyday people trying to understand our world better. Trying to mystify and create something spiritual might look, seem and be foreign to our culture and people. Why not live in and face reality together instead of manufacturing religious experiences which people use as an escape mechanism?

Leading as a Body

This is an area that is dramatically different than traditional institutional churches. Emergent communities are more egalitarian in the sense that everyone is seen as a priest. Controlling people's minds is not a priority. Information is presented for people's consideration instead of the common telling people what to believe scenario. Persuasion is put on a pedestal and any particular interpretation is seen just as that, an interpretation. Clergy laity distinctions are blurred so that there is a mutual and shared respect. Condescending attitudes are unbecoming as insights are learned, not inherent to our persons.

Leadership is shared so that those who are gifted in various areas can lead in those areas. Authority comes from knowledge and skill, not by position. Emergent leaders are not so quick to be considered pastors, as that title has been utterly misused, and thus has distorted connotations. Emergent Churches are weary of subtle power plays and see the E-Bay model a better model, giving the buyer control to purchase from those who are trustworthy and time tested. Giving people freedom, instead of restriction, advice instead of commands, and allowing consensus decisions instead of monarchy rule is common within Emergent communities. These principles are seen as more healthy and beneficial to the people who participate in them.

Although I see myself as a leader of HungerTruth, I see myself as a different kind of leader. I see myself as a facilitator, one who models the values shared by the community, and one who encourages people to use their minds. I am one who participates within the

discussions, not hoarding the time to myself. I may end up as the guest one week and sit in the hot seat, but this would be the exception to the rule. This would place my thoughts and ideas on the table for people to examine and consider. Normally I just introduce our guest, get the conversations rolling, and step in when we need to get back on track. I conduct informal interviews with our guests, which provides a framework for each guest to share their lives and thoughts about the world. Ideas stand or fall on their own merits, and I see no benefit in defending any particular doctrinal or creedal statement. People are free to think and believe what makes the most sense to them and ask questions based on their own conceptions of the cosmos. Many times, guest will realize that questions are based on certain pre-suppositions and as a side tangent address those along the way. I see my goal as empowering others to stand on their own feet intellectually, morally, and spiritually. I have had people want to call me pastor, but typically say, "Just call me Dan." Why construct unhealthy relationships?

Merging Ancient and Contemporary Spiritualities

Through their interviews, Gibbs and Bulger found that consumer culture and watered down pop culture churches have given many people a desire for something with more history. In fact this has led to many people leaving church altogether in order to find God. There seems to be a backlash from the frivolous to the old, rich, and symbolic traditions of times past. Traditions laced with emblematic meaning have regained a place in some of these Emerging communities. Some of these communities are finding this history in the Eucharist. Ancient liturgies are being put to use including live revolving around Jewish or Orthodox worship calendars.

The HungerTruth community does what feels most natural and does not seek to emulate or imitate this or that community. I suppose it could be said that HungerTruth is in process, evolving as time goes on. At this point, with people coming from very different traditions, it seems best to remain somewhat tradition neutral in order to give people a safe place to talk about the positive and negative aspects of various traditions and cultures. It feels as if we are creating our own culture of intellectual honesty, authentic relationships, and a true interaction with ideas that are new or foreign to the ones to which we've been

exposed. We are beginning to establish a practice of eating together after our meetings, but again, our lives intersect at varying degrees throughout the week. Within our community, spirituality truly does consist of eating healthy (organic, plant based diet), regular exercise, and the practice of living justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly before our God.

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Recommended Reading

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