

# Unless We Become Humble People



**Brian McLaren**, more than anyone else, is associated with the “emergent church” conversation now going on within Christianity. McLaren does not fit neat categories. *Time* magazine named him among the Twenty-Five Most Influential Evangelicals in America, but many evangelicals were as surprised as was he with that designation. The title of his book *A Generous Orthodoxy* captures his spirit of dialogue and openness. He is founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in Spencerville, Maryland. His website is [www.anewkindofchristian.com](http://www.anewkindofchristian.com).

## **What is your short description of the “emergent church movement?”**

These days, I’d say it involves the church emerging from its colonial captivity. I’d rather not describe it as a sector of the church, as if it were another denomination. This is why I don’t normally use the term “emerging church movement.” More, I hope it is a kind of “green tip” on the end of many branches of the church where forward-looking leaders sense it is time for the church to move beyond a lot of dimensions of our modern Western Christian expressions. That’s why the prefix “post” comes up so often—postmodern, post-Enlightenment, post-religious Right, post-culture wars, that sort of thing. Of all these, I feel the term “postcolonial” is most comprehensive.

I also don’t normally use the term “movement” yet. I hope it becomes a movement. But I don’t think the movement train should leave the station until the right people are on board. I think many of those people are still in transit to the station. I would rather wait for them now than run the risk of not having them on board for the adventure. Their voices are so needed. I’m especially thinking of nonwhite people in North America. But

I’m also thinking of our postcolonial brothers and sisters from the global south. I don’t mean just Christians in the global south; I especially mean Christians who are coming of age after the era of the Western missionaries and are seeking to understand, live, and communicate their faith in their native idioms, contextualizing Christianity to their own changing cultures.

## **To what extent does the emergent church movement respond to the failure of more established churches in reaching younger generations?**

I’d say this drop-off in church attendance among younger generations explains why white middle-class people were first to see this as an important topic. As well, Asian Americans experienced similar drop-off among second and third generations, and they have been actively involved in the emergent conversation since the beginning. The black church, by contrast, is just beginning to experience a similar drop-off in attendance by younger people. Because of the role of the black church in African American culture, it has had more social strength and holding power. But that is beginning to change.

## What are the most important things the church can do differently to connect in a postmodern culture?

The first thing that comes to mind is to avoid questions like this one, because as understandable as it is, it tempts us to see the needed changes as primarily pragmatic, technical, or cosmetic. On a deeper level, it is much more important for us to begin by realizing how enmeshed we have become in recent centuries with modern Western culture. That means one of the best things we can do is study church history, seeking to understand how the message of Jesus translates from culture to culture, age to age, paradigm to paradigm. Lamin Sanneh's works, such as *Translating the Message*, can be helpful in this regard, as can Vincent J. Donovan's *Christianity Rediscovered*.

More practically, church leaders can forestall doing anything other than listening. We need to listen to people and not respond defensively to their critical words, but rather try our best to see what they see. We need to listen to people who have dropped out of church and to people who have always stayed away. We need to assume they have good reasons for doing so, and we need to prepare to respond to what we learn from them. There are no shortcuts in this regard: if we think we're going to listen to a sermon, read a book, or go to a seminar and get the five easy steps, we'll fail. Unless we've become humble people who care enough to ask questions and listen and understand, it will be the same old "us" running another program that will smell inauthentic to postmodern people.

This listening will force us to go back to the Scriptures and see them in a new light. Then, things will get interesting. Then we have some hope.

I know this may sound impractical, but this is the only honest answer I can give.

## What are the key challenges facing clergy as they seek to reach younger generations?

We are so stuck in our program mentality—that every problem can be solved with a new gimmick or technique. So our biggest challenge may be to give up on the techniques and gimmicks, and actually connect with people and relate to them.

## Do you have suggestions for clergy who want to "retool" to address the changed landscape of religious life?

First, anyone wishing to do this should be both congratulated and warned. Congratulated because we need intrepid souls to venture into this new territory, and warned because it won't be easy. If you follow this path, you will be misunderstood and criticized by a wide array of people, both "liberal" and "conservative." And you won't make anyone happy.

Second, I think there's no shortcut to launching out on a reading list. There are so many good books being written. It helps to start digging in to the best and most thoughtful literature you can find.

Third, I'd recommend finding some people who are engaging with these issues. The best group I've found is the emergent network ([www.emergentvillage.com](http://www.emergentvillage.com)). There are a lot of Methodists involved already and there is a good affinity between Methodists and emergent. There are learning cohorts forming around the country—groups of people gathering to discuss what they're reading, thinking, learning, experimenting with. This change isn't simply adding new information to a full brain; it involves very deep changes, the kinds of changes that can only happen in community, among friends, in "safe places" where you can ask tough questions and work things through at a livable, unhurried pace. Also attending conferences and other gatherings can be helpful.

Fourth, as I said earlier, I'd do a lot of listening.

Then, it may be time to either start some experiments or bring in some outside consultants to help a congregation explore possible first steps.

## What particular issues do you think younger clergy face?

For some young clergy, "postmodern" is their native tongue. They go into a traditional church and they seem to have an accent that more modern folk don't

understand. They will be pressured to change their accent for the church culture, but to the degree they do so, they'll lose their ability to communicate with their own generation. This is an agonizing dilemma. Other young clergy are so thoroughly enculturated in the church culture that they know they don't communicate to their unchurched peers. This is another agonizing dilemma.

## How has your own approach to ministry evolved?

Of course, I've written about eight books to try to explain this evolution as it unfolds, so it's hard to summarize. But in short, here's what I'd say: I've become convinced that I will spend the rest of my life in a time of transition. I don't expect to "arrive." My friend Alan Roxburgh speaks of "liminal space," living in "in-between-ness." I've gotten comfortable with the discomfort of that. Or at least I've come to accept it.

It's a little like Wesley's idea of itineracy, in a way. Just as he wanted his preachers to keep moving so they didn't become stagnant, I've realized that stagnancy, comfort, complacency are death to effectiveness. While we may find it counterproductive to keep moving geographically (as Wesley prescribed in his setting), we may need to see ourselves as always on the move, always moving into new territory. Under our feet, the world is constantly moving, and I really believe it is true: the world we have inherited and grown accustomed to is giving way to a new world. That's scary, but it's exciting too.

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