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## *Women in the Emerging Church*



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The emerging<sup>1</sup> church movement has offered a great foundation for the expansion of the Christian church. The emergent church is a movement that seeks to “reach and engage the emerging culture” by leading “missional, kingdom-minded” lives,<sup>2</sup> recover early church tradition and vision, operate organically with fewer constrictive structures, focus on its members as a community and a collective entity, and appreciate and include the arts.

Because the emerging church movement is relatively new and has only recently taken on a collective identity,<sup>3</sup> literature and commentary on the emergent church remain limited, and writings by and about women in the emerging church appear even sparser. However, the overall goal and mission of the emerging church forms a basis for viewing the roles and place of women in emergent communities. Irrespective of the debate on women as head pastors, I believe that the Bible and our inherent sense suggest that women have the ability, and are needed, to serve in more leadership positions and public ministry roles, form a bigger part of the communal process of church, and be respected as having equal worth. The emergent church affords women the space for just such roles and treatment.

After a brief introduction to the two main evangelical perspectives on the roles of the women in the church, I will

describe common themes about the emerging church by employing and analyzing various writings from within and about the emergent church movement. Based on these common themes, I will then present my conclusions on women in the emerging church. Additionally, I will offer insight gained from interviews with four different women who are currently involved in emergent communities in order to obtain perspectives on women serving in the church.<sup>4</sup> Finally, I will speculate on the future of women in the emergent church movement.

### EVANGELICAL VIEWS ON WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

For the purposes of this article, the evangelical church will be defined<sup>5</sup> as the Protestant, Western Christian church that ascribes to basic tenets such as the inerrancy of the Bible, conversion, and active sharing of the gospel.<sup>6</sup> Because in many ways the emergent church is a response to the evangelical church and because an understanding of women's roles in evangelicalism forms a useful comparison, the following discussion proves important to the broader agenda of this article.

Two main views on women in the church exist within the evangelical realm, and both use Scripture in the formation and support of their perspectives. The first, complementarian (also termed traditionalist or hierarchalist), maintains that women should be excluded from positions of ministry in which they exercise authority over men. The second, egalitarian, seeks to permit women to serve in all areas of ministry, including head pastor. In the 1980s, evangelicals of both perspectives formed two separate councils, or organizations, to address the issue of women's roles. The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, a complementarian organization, offered a statement that concluded, "God created men and women 'equal in personhood and value, but different in roles.'" Egalitarians formed Christians for Biblical Equality and issued the "Statement on Men, Women, and Biblical Equality" to affirm the equality of men and women, even in roles.<sup>7</sup>

Complementarian Thomas Schreiner of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary states that he understands Scripture

to "forbid women from teaching and exercising authority over a man," according to 1 Timothy 2:12.<sup>8</sup> Further, he maintains that the different and distinct roles for men and women were established in Genesis 1–3, marriage texts, and ministry texts such as 1 Timothy 2:11–14, 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 14:33b–36.<sup>9</sup>

Many complementarians argue that women should serve in the church in many capacities but not in positions such as head pastor. While Schreiner concludes, for example, that women did serve as deacons in the New Testament church, he believes that the deacons of the early church fulfilled a different role than deacons in many modern churches (i.e., he maintains that there were elders/overseers to govern and deacons for support positions, whereas today many deacons serve as the governing board).<sup>10</sup> Another complementarian, Ann L. Bowman of the International School of Theology, argues, "focusing on the one area where Scripture has placed a limitation on women's service—the role of senior pastor—is counterproductive." She contends instead that in "our fast-paced world we need to focus on the multi-faceted opportunities that are available to women." Bowman also maintains that women and men are called to minister together to accomplish and fulfill the Great Commission.<sup>11</sup>

Further, Schreiner concludes that complementarians should "celebrate and advocate" women serving in ministry roles other than that of head pastor or those in which they would exercise authority over men.<sup>12</sup> Bowman affirms the "equal standing before God in ministry," "equal empowering available for ministry," and "equal spiritual gifts available for ministry."<sup>13</sup>

Evangelical egalitarians generally take the opposite view. Craig Keener states, "the Bible permits women's ministry under normal circumstances and prohibited it only under exceptional circumstances."<sup>14</sup> He presents Scripture passages that support women as prophetesses, judges, female apostles, and women who share in Paul's ministry of the gospel.<sup>15</sup> In response to Scriptures that appear to prohibit women in ministry, such as 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 and 1 Timothy 2:11–14,

Keener suggests that these passages addressed specific situations and concludes that they do not, therefore, contradict other passages in favor of women's ministry.<sup>16</sup>

Linda Belleville of North Park Theological Seminary also argues for an egalitarian view of women in the church. She contends that the difference between complementarians and egalitarians is a "different understanding of the created order of male and female."<sup>17</sup> Belleville views the "divine intent" of Genesis to be "that of partnership—a co-dominion over the earth. . . . Dominion of one over the other . . . is gender dysfunction, not gender normalcy."<sup>18</sup>

Some evangelical perspectives on women seem to reflect both complementarian and egalitarian views, such as Sarah Sumner. Members of emergent communities often cite Sumner's work on men and women in the church. Sumner, one of the first women to earn a doctorate in systematic theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and who is also an associate pastor in a large, evangelical church, maintains that women should not serve as head pastor. However, she says that because Christ is the head of the church, the debate over headship surrounding women in ministry is quite superfluous.<sup>19</sup> Further, she states that "it is not unprecedented for Christian women to lead men."<sup>20</sup>

Like most evangelicals, Sumner uses Scripture to support her position, but challenges the church to "learn the difference between what we have been taught to think and what the Bible says is true about men and women."<sup>21</sup> She proposes a step-by-step process to "rightly interpret" the Bible. These steps include acknowledgement and respect of the nature of Scripture as a unique and inspired text, understanding of the nature of human language, reliance on the Holy Spirit, and abandonment of certain cultural assumptions when approaching the biblical text.<sup>22</sup> She also presents examples of women in the Bible such as Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Abigail, Priscilla, Phoebe, and Junia as examples of women who led men.<sup>23</sup>

Sumner's philosophy provides parallels to emergent philosophy on women as it provides a thought-provoking,

open-ended response to the question of women in the church. She resolves "to wait in hope for men and women in the church to build a consensus on Christian leadership."<sup>24</sup> "Women's equal worth is a novel idea in church history";<sup>25</sup> and later she comments, "As far as I'm concerned, we are on the brink of a new day."<sup>26</sup>

#### WHAT THE EMERGENT CHURCH SAYS IT IS

The emerging church has, in many respects, been "on the brink of a new day" since its inception. The name "emergent" implies birth and growth, or in the words of author/pastor Brian D. McLaren in his book *A Generous Orthodoxy*, "emergent" implies a "God-given thirst [to bring] us beyond where we have been."<sup>27</sup> The desire to move the church beyond where it has been is reflected in emergent writings. Several common themes are evident in literature and commentary about the emerging church, including references to equality and inclusiveness, new ways of looking at the Bible, non-hierarchical views on leadership and headship, focus on community, and use of imagery.

Most texts and writings on the emerging church boast equality and inclusiveness. In his book *Searching for God Knows What*, Donald Miller states that "Jesus . . . wouldn't believe one person was any better than another. Apparently this counterintuitive belief system was obvious in the character of Christ."<sup>28</sup> Authors Curtiss Paul De Young, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim note in their book, *United By Faith*, that the "diverse and inclusive nature of early congregations . . . was the result of embracing the vision and strategy of Jesus."<sup>29</sup> Emergent churches today take on that same inclusiveness by recognizing the equality of all people in the eyes of God, regardless of gender, race, class, background, or lifestyle. In *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller recounts how his pastor "said he thought we should intentionally befriend people who are different from us . . . loving people just because they exist."<sup>30</sup> People who visit emergent churches for the first time often comment that it is the most diverse church they have ever attended.<sup>31</sup>

On the issue of leadership, emergent authors agree on a structure that does not appear hierarchial. Responding to the question of whether church is summed up in a single earthly leader, Frederica Mathewes-Green, in her article "Under the Heaventree," responds that the church is rather the body of Christ in which all members are equal. She continues, "All together guard the faith. The leadership of the church does not create or impose beliefs. Instead, all believers, including those in leadership, are under the authority of the common faith."<sup>32</sup>

Because all members "guard the faith," the pastor or "head" of the church looks much different in the emerging church than most. Dan Kimball, founding pastor of Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, California, reflects that preachers in emergent communities see themselves as "fellow journeyers" not as "authoritative[ly] transferring . . . biblical information."<sup>33</sup> Brian McLaren, a pastor at Cedar Ridge Community Church in Spencerville, Maryland, continues, "the preacher becomes the leader of a kind of group meditation, less scholar and more sage, less lecturer and more poet, prophet, and priest."<sup>34</sup> In the preface to his book *Reimagining Spiritual Formation*, pastor Doug Pagitt writes a list titled "We Dream of a Church Where . . .," in which he says, "the next generation of leadership is built up and leaders are servants. Everyone is equipped to do ministry."<sup>35</sup> Finally, Kimball notes the shared responsibility of teaching Scripture in the early church and the effort of the emerging church to follow that pattern. "The teaching and preaching spring from the community. Jesus is the centerpiece, not the preacher."<sup>36</sup> In other words, the head, though it may be a man in most cases, is not really the "head" of the church, therefore the focus of leadership shifts from one single leader to the community as a whole.

Additionally, the emergent church emphasizes community. In his discussion of a multi-sensory approach to worship gatherings in the emergent church, Dan Kimball addresses the communal feel of the music and singing portion of a service. "Much of this communal feel," he posits, "has to do with who is leading, how *he or she* is leading, and

where *he or she* is leading from." He continues, "There is a brutal attempt in most emerging worship gatherings to not have 'leaders' draw attention to themselves as they lead during the meeting. The organic tone is communal, so there's a sense of everyone being equals." Kimball also argues that the physical placement of worship "leaders" can contribute to or take away from the communal feel of a service (i.e., on a raised platform or stage versus among the people).<sup>37</sup> Further, Kimball notes that because of the focus on home or small groups in the emergent church, the large community gathering often contains a shorter "sermon," and the focus of teaching Scripture becomes more interactive.<sup>38</sup> Kimball also places emphasis on community planning on the worship service in order to remove leaders from isolation and involve the church members in the experience.<sup>39</sup> Doug Pagitt says he desires a church where "people participate in the Kingdom of God in accordance with their abilities and gifts. . . . We value innovation and are willing to take risks in order to bring glory to God."<sup>40</sup> The emergent church thus recognizes that all in the body of Christ have gifts and valuable input to offer and thus makes deliberate attempts to focus on all its members, not simply the input of a hierarchical leadership.

Feminine imagery and female characteristics of God are also a topic of discussion in emergent writings. In essence, the postmodern church brings to light the female imagery already present in the Bible that the evangelical church typically ignores. In a chapter titled, "Do You Seriously Expect Me to Think of God As an Old Man with a Long White Beard?" Brian McLaren addresses the issue of the gender of God. He reasons, "God is not less than male or female, but neither is God equal to male or female in human terms: just as God does with our categories of personhood, surely God must include and transcend our gender categories."<sup>41</sup> In addressing the question of maternal imagery, McLaren notes that God is not limited to "he-ness," and therefore contends that use of maternal imagery in the church today is worthwhile as long as the church ensures to "avoid stereotyping women." He also warns against over-feminizing or over-masculinizing God. "God,"

he continues, "in whose image male and female were created, must include all authentically masculine and feminine qualities and at the same time transcend them."<sup>42</sup> McClaren's Neo character in *The Story We Find Ourselves In* refers to God as "him" and apologizes to his friend, Kerry, "for having to use that masculine pronoun, but what can we do, stuck in language as we are?"<sup>43</sup>

Another major emphasis of the emergent church is that of analyzing cultural productions to find redemptive stories therein. An example of finding a redemptive story in a classic work appears in Donald Miller's book *Searching for God Knows What*. Miller retells the story of Romeo and Juliet as an allegory for the gospel story. He paints Juliet as the Christ figure and Romeo as the Church. When Juliet calls to Romeo, she asks him to deny his own name and to "not gain love for love's sake, but rather Juliet herself. . . . Christ's invitation was not an offer of heaven or mansions or money; it was, rather, Himself."<sup>44</sup> Miller further quips that Romeo realizes that to be made new, he "has not ability to change his own name. . . . If she [Juliet] calls him love, then he will be called love, both his name and his nature changed, made new."<sup>45</sup> In this case the Christ figure is female and the figure for the church is male. Such use of imagery and story in the emergent church expands the ways of reaching and engaging culture, invites diversity into conversation about the gospel, and affirms the existence of redemption in many different places.

The emerging church also encourages new ways of looking at the Bible. In an article titled "Life After Postmodernity," Andy Crouch reflects on how the church might operate in a postmodern age. He contends that postmodernism is "calling forth new ways of reading the Scriptures and the Christian tradition that expose vitality in the unlikeliest places," to "discover new depths and previously uncharted territory in the gospel."<sup>46</sup> This falls in the same vein of Doug Pagitt's view of the role of the Bible in the emergent church. He refers to the Bible as the "authoritative community member. . . . We are called to step toward it and see what it has to offer us in areas of hopes, experiences, thoughts, ideas and information."<sup>47</sup> In

his article, "Better Homes and Gardens," Horton suggests that "faith gives us confidence to believe that Scripture provides new glasses through which to view the world from God's perspective, albeit accommodated to our capacity."<sup>48</sup> In other words, though the Bible has not changed in this postmodern society, emergent churches should equip their members to interpret the Bible with open eyes. Pagitt concludes, "We need to allow the Bible to share with us those things that correct us, teach us, and lead us, even when we don't understand or like what it says."<sup>49</sup> The emergent church holds that the Bible offers clear direction on issues such as justice, love, and community and encourages people to respond to the world in the way the Bible dictates.

#### CONCLUSIONS ON WOMEN IN THE EMERGENT CHURCH

Very few emergent writings confront the issue of women in the church; however, several conclusions can be drawn. Although strictly speaking, relatively no writings exist that specifically address the place, role, and future of women in the church within the emergent context,<sup>50</sup> the challenge here is to explore how emergent thinking may apply to women in the postmodern church.

First, the equality and inclusiveness boasted by the emergent church suggests that, at least philosophically, women are equal (to men) and should be included in all the proceedings of the emerging church. Though this is seldom stated outright, placing all people on an even scale with inclusiveness and equality often flows over onto treatment of women. Krista Vossler, who serves as a worship leader in Ecclesia, an emergent community in Houston, Texas, notes that when she began leading worship in that church, it never occurred to her that she should feel as though she should not lead in that capacity.<sup>51</sup> Doug Pagitt's reflections on Solomon's Porch Community church are filled equally with the voices of women and men in the formation and practice of church.<sup>52</sup> Deliberate attention to diversity and inclusiveness, coupled with the belief that God has created all people with inherent

equal worth, helps to encourage both the inclusion of females in support and leadership roles, and upholding the worth of women more intentionally than is typically found in the evangelical church.

Second, the lack of hierarchy and importance of community allow more women to lead and have significant input. This focus on community, collective identity, and group planning brings importance to every member, including women. Krista Vossler of Ecclesia Houston feels that women and men leading and serving together is natural.<sup>53</sup> Meeka Karger, the wife of a lead pastor at Ecclesia, reflects that she enjoys the leadership women have been given during worship.<sup>54</sup> At Ecclesia, women frequently give the invocation, serve communion, lead songs, take offering, give benedictions, and occasionally preach.

Third, new ways of looking at the Bible offer a space for the treatment and roles of women to be revisited. The forthcoming paraphrase called *The Voice* also boasts female authors such as Lauren Winner and Sarah Groves. This female perspective will certainly offer new ways of looking at the Bible as it will present the Scriptures in a light different from what standard translations offer. *The Voice* does not seek to create a new translation for the sake of doing so, but to bring the Scriptures to life in a new way. The inclusion of women in the planning, editing, and writing of this project marks an important step for women in the emergent church.<sup>55</sup>

Fourth, the use of female or feminine imagery is important to the place of women in the emerging church because it includes them and uplifts their perspective. Amina Al-Attas of Ecclesia Houston notes that because women have a different perspective from men it is important for them to communicate their understanding of female imagery. For example, in many narratives in the Bible, God pursues Israel as a man pursues a woman. In this case, Al-Attas quips, "women are playing the role of all humanity. . . . As a woman I can talk about what it's like to be pursued, to be a bride as we are all the Bride of Christ."<sup>56</sup> Ignorance of the female characteristics of

God, for example, only serves to alienate women. Bringing light to feminine imagery in the Bible and showing examples of female redemption figures not only uplifts women but also illustrates the importance of women to the church as a whole.

Fifth, there is a distinct lack of gendered language in discussion of the body of Christ in most emergent writings. For example, Brian McLaren and Dan Kimball cautiously say "he or she" instead of simply "he" when referring to people in their writings. Occasionally some authors use the term "man" or "mankind" to describe the human race, but many use the term "humans" or "humankind." This deliberate non-gendered language suggests a conscious effort not to exclude women in theological conversation.

Sixth, there is no consensus on the roles, place, and future of women in the emerging church. Within the emergent church, complementarians and egalitarians and everything in between can be found. The questions about women in the church do not change simply because the emergent movement has stepped away from evangelicalism in many senses or because emerging churches operate in a different setting. For example, in a sermon on Genesis 2 and 3, Chris Seay, pastor of Ecclesia Houston, addresses gender roles, stating that men and women are "equal but different." The church, he reflects, does not have the opportunity to latch onto either misogyny or complete egalitarianism, because the Bible affords us a more balanced solution.<sup>57</sup> As previously stated, both complementarians and egalitarians use the Scriptures to back up their viewpoint. People within the emergent church continue to hold different opinions on women in the church based on the same biblical passages and concepts.

Seventh, there is a disconnect between what the emergent church boasts philosophically and the structure of the leadership of both the local church and the networking organizations. This final point will be discussed in the following section.

#### VOICES OF EMERGENT WOMEN

Because so few women contribute to the emergent conversation through literature and commentary, the voices of

individual women in the postmodern church form an important part of the conclusions presented in this article. While writings and the structure of the church suggest the conclusions presented in the previous section, some women feel differently about the praxis and implications of these inferences. Here I will present insights gained from interviews with four women who serve in the emergent church. Amina Al-Attas, though she holds no official ministry title, serves in Ecclesia in many capacities including leading the invocation, discipling congregants, and occasionally preaching. Meeka Karger is the wife of a lead pastor, mother of three, and unofficial women's minister at Ecclesia Houston. Krista Vossler also serves in Ecclesia as a worship leader and has worked with a postmodern bookstore, Taft Street Books, that operates from Ecclesia's arts facility.<sup>58</sup> Finally, Jen Lemen helped to start and lead the Emerging Women's Leadership Initiative.

The voices of these four women are not representative of every woman in the emergent church, but their perspectives are vital and in many ways illustrate viewpoints that are not necessarily reflected in emergent writings. Because equality and inclusiveness is a stated goal in the emergent church, many emergent leaders and churches hope that "equality will be a given . . . and that power equity will emerge naturally as more women join the conversation."<sup>59</sup> Some of what follows is a reflection of frustration towards disconnect between stated goals of equality and the ambiguity of where women fit into the church. Regardless of any frustrations, however, each of these four women cherishes their experience in the emergent church and the potential for women in the emergent movement.

Amina Al-Attas says that she feels there are many possibilities for women in the emergent church. She maintains:

This is why I think there's room for women in the emerging church and why we'll see a need for it more and more and a desire for it: great things demand diverse perspectives. Great things in all its manifold mysteries require all different perspectives.

Within those diverse perspectives, she believes that women have an important viewpoint to communicate. For example, she recalls speaking with several men who have difficulty with the concept of playing the role of the bride of Christ. "In my mind," she says, "I put on a wedding dress, pretend I'm holding flowers, and walk down the aisle every week to communion," a practice she feels she can communicate as a woman to help the congregation understand their role as bride. She maintains that "men and women [together], have an important narrative" and that both need to be conveyed equally.

Al-Attas observes that within the emergent church "there are people all over the spectrum" on views about women in the church. She posits several reasons for this diversity of viewpoints. First, there is no single, written, doctrinal statement that expounds the theological beliefs of the emergent church. Along the same lines, she reflects that "it's not like there are emergent seminaries where everyone is taking Women's Issues 101." Further, because many emergent churches started quickly, she contends that these churches "decide their doctrine based on the most recent crisis," what she calls a reactionary doctrine. In other words, one reason there is no consensus on women is because there is no formal consensus on most issues in the emergent church.

Second, she notes background as a reason for beliefs on women. Some emergent leaders, she says, firmly base their views on women by looking at the Bible. Others "haven't taken a good look at the Scriptures in a while but [their views on women] are what they've always believed." Some people grew up around egalitarian churches and are comfortable with such beliefs and practices concerning women.

Third, Al-Attas feels that beliefs about family structure motivate the treatment and roles of women in the postmodern church. Though she acknowledges that she knows of more than one emergent church that would welcome a female pastor, she cites other emergent churches that would not welcome a female elder because they fear it would "endanger the family hierarchy . . . [or] undermine the [traditional] family



structure." In other words, roles in the traditional family structure seem to restrict women from places of pastoral leadership. Al-Attas also notes that while motherhood is elevated and honored in the emergent church, there is less of a place for single or childless women. "If you're a woman and you're not a mother, where does that leave you?" she asks.<sup>60</sup> In essence, single and married women (with or without children) struggle to obtain or maintain positions of leadership because of loyalties to traditional family structure and the implications of those familial relationships.

When asked about the future of the emergent church as far as women are concerned, Al-Attas predicts that two halves will emerge—one holding more traditional (complementarian) views and the other having more egalitarian philosophies. She feels that continued conversation about women in the church will bring attention to the concerns of women and the necessity of their broadened service and hopes that conversation will affect change.<sup>61</sup>

Meeka Karger, when asked why she became involved in the emergent church, says that "as a pastor's wife, together [my husband and I] feel called to this type of church because of the freedom to minister to real needs and be the people God created us to be and worship from that foundation." She continues, "I love the lack of pretense. I so appreciate the embrace of people's different gifts and the encouragement therein."

Karger and her husband began serving in an emergent community before the term "emerging church" became a set label. As a woman, she recalls that she has felt very "valued, encouraged, heard, and ministered to." She finds that there is a more open space for the "voice of the emergent woman" than in most evangelical churches as well as roles of greater responsibility. Also, she sees "a willingness on behalf of the men to discuss [women's] roles," something she found missing from her evangelical experience.

When asked to speculate on the future of women in the emerging church, Karger thinks that the place and role of women will depend on the particular local church. She concludes, "I trust that we would be encouraged to fulfill the

calling that God has given us as women . . . and that calling is going to look differently than a man's."<sup>62</sup>

Krista Vossler, who grew up in China and quickly became disenchanted with the Protestant evangelical church when she moved to the United States, appreciated the vision of the emerging church to reach the culture. She recalls feeling both "awkward and at home" when she first became involved in the emergent church and enjoying the flow of the service, focus on the arts, and inclusion of traditional religious rituals such as communion each week. In her words, she found the emerging church to be "people living out their everyday lives and being family."

As far as her experience as a woman in the emergent church, Vossler finds that there is much more talk about and from women in the postmodern church than others and feels that her "unique perspective [as a woman] is well received." Further, she appreciates that women give the benediction, lead worship music, and serve in other public capacities. Vossler maintains that women should not necessarily hold head pastor roles. However, to her, service and leadership are synonymous and she asks, "Why should women not serve?" As a female worship leader, Vossler recalls that it never occurred to her that she should feel barred in any way from this type of service leadership. She also feels that men and women leading worship together is natural.

Vossler admits she continually questions the role of women in the church and claims to "not have everything figured out yet." In some senses, however, she still feels that the "female side of things," or the perspective of women, is missing within the emergent church. Vossler states, "I know what the ideal is. . . . It's equality" of worth for both genders, but adds that this viewpoint is not always represented in the formal structure of the emergent church (i.e., there are typically more male leaders than female). "We're two halves of a whole," she maintains, considering the need for women's perspectives and contributions in the postmodern church.

In the future, Vossler hopes to see a church where there is no "difference in the [worth and contributions] of the two

genders." The emergent church, she posits, offers more foundation for change than many churches. "The walls will be knocked down," she predicts, as questions on women in the church come to a head in the future, and members of emergent communities continue to honestly ruminate and reflect on these questions.<sup>63</sup>

The Emerging Women's Leadership Initiative (EWLI) developed in 2004 as an offshoot of Emergent Village. The EWLI set out to "increase the number of women who identify themselves as leaders in the emerging church" and "to bring the insights, experiences and passion of emerging women leaders to national attention."<sup>64</sup> Though the organization has recently disbanded for reasons that will be discussed below, Emerging Women Leaders accomplished many of their goals by networking women together, holding conferences, and teaching critical concerns courses on women in the church through Mars Hill Seminary.

Jen Lemen, one of the founding members of EWLI, reflects that when Emerging Women Leaders held a national consultation, the organization realized how much women were already doing in the emergent church. Women "weren't waiting for an invitation" to contribute to or lead in the emerging church; they simply took up tasks. Further, Lemen reflects that when these women were given a space to talk about their work and concerns, they talked for hours. Soon after beginning their work, Lemen notes that the organizational leaders realized the importance of racial and ethnic diversity as well as gender diversity. To accommodate this goal, the leadership, for example, often gave up plane tickets or paid the way for other women to attend so that women of color were in attendance at events, or were a part of every conversation. They also discovered that many women were suffering grief from treatment they had experienced in the evangelical church. Lemen notes that EWLI had to decide whether to "tend to grief and deal with inequity, or forge ahead and try to feed back with [the] wisdom, input, etc., of other women." Emerging Women Leaders found the grief work valuable, but they chose to try to focus on "mining the

wisdom of women and their experience leading the emerging church as a primary task . . . to contribute something valuable and make more headway" by first building relationships with numerous women, and then seeing where the work could go from there.

EWLI was groundbreaking in several aspects, and the leadership reflects that. All five women shared the burden, never took the stage alone, and operated with equal responsibility. Because of EWLI's relational methodology and commitment level, the leadership soon became exhausted with the breadth of the work to be done on women and chose to disband. The leadership realized that more funding and a full-time position would be necessary to "protect against serious burnout and any more financial strain on their respective families." By disbanding, Emerging Women Leaders also hoped to allow for other women to continue the work at a more grassroots, organic level. Lemen quotes the explanation of Heather Kirk-Davidoff, another EWLI leader, on the reason Emerging Women Leaders disbanded:

We finished phase one of the initiative, discovered in the process that the work to be done was expansive and would require a variety of projects and initiatives beyond the scope of our project to address the needs. We feel proud of our accomplishments and feel that we got the ball rolling.

Although Lemen enjoyed her time as part of EWLI, she became disenchanted with the stance of the emergent church on women. For example, she observes a disconnect between the stated goal of justice and equality and the way in which women are sometimes marginalized in the conversation. "There is still a bias toward certain male styles of leadership," she continues. Thus, it proves harder for "some women's work to be recognized as vital and valid to the conversation because [women's work] doesn't always place the same emphasis on growth or key leadership." She also notes that traditionalist views that negatively affect women are not intentional, but rather so deeply ingrained that most men do not realize the

effects of their perspectives. Lemen observes that in her work with EWLI,

Sometimes women leaders are still guarded with their male counterparts, and that frank conversation about how gender impacts relationships are still rare. Too many male leaders are not hearing the full story while women adjust and adapt to fit in without making waves.<sup>65</sup>

She hopes that in the future, women will be more outspoken, emergent churches will be more deliberately inclusive of women, and that emergent leadership will be more willing to discuss power equity.

#### THE FUTURE OF WOMEN IN THE EMERGENT CHURCH

In the words of Brian McLaren,

No emergence is perfect. Old things, previous gains that should be retained and integrated, are forgotten or rejected. Scars that should be embraced and thus healed are rejected . . . new things that should be added are similarly feared and shunned. . . . The process is messy.<sup>66</sup>

This messy process aptly refers to women in the church as well. It is my belief that if women become more vocal about their concerns, and if emergent leadership opens up to honest discussions about biblical views on women, the condition for women in the emerging church context will improve. Since its inception, the emergent church has offered a greater space for women than the evangelical church because of its stated goals of equality, inclusiveness, new ways of looking at the Bible, and leadership with less hierarchy. The lack of consensus on the issue of women in the church is not necessarily negative. Rather, it opens a space for constant change and reevaluation. Most importantly, women should be honored as people of equal worth to men, respected for all the particulars of their identity such as marital status and ethnic background, and given an open space to

contribute, lead, and communicate within the emergent church.

There undoubtedly will always be a wide spectrum of viewpoints on women in the church, and the emerging church is no exception. However, part of the beauty of the emergent movement is constant change, growth, and rebirth. "We constantly emerge from what we were and are into what we can become," reflects Brian McLaren, "not just as individuals, but as participants in the emerging realities of families, communities, cultures, and worlds." He concludes, "So will our current emergence yield a superior and ultimate form of Christianity? Will this emerging form finally get it right? *Of course not.*"<sup>67</sup> The emergent church may not "get it right," but it has the potential to accomplish something beautiful, especially for women.

#### Author

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#### Notes

1. In this article, the terms "emergent," "emerging," and "postmodern" are used interchangeably.
2. Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Emergent YS and Zondervan, 2003).
3. See "The Emergent Story" at [www.emergentvillage.org](http://www.emergentvillage.org) for more information on how Emergent Village was formed and now operates as a network organization for the emergent church.
4. Thanks to all interviewees: Phil Sinitiere, LeAnn Kerr, Matthew Schunke, Carrie Saum, Adam Newton, and Ecclesia Houston.
5. For further reading, see Larry Eskridge's article, "Defining Evangelicalism," on the Wheaton College Web site, [www.wheaton.edu/isae/defining\\_evangelicalism.html](http://www.wheaton.edu/isae/defining_evangelicalism.html).

6. The emergent church ascribes to these tenets as well, although it often acts them out in different ways from the evangelical church. For example, actively sharing the gospel in the emergent church generally focuses on relationship ministry as opposed to handing out tracts, street evangelism, etc.
7. Stanley J. Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 20–22.
8. Thomas Schreiner, "Women in Ministry" in *Two Views on Women in Ministry: Egalitarian and Complementarian*, ed. James R. Beck and Craig L. Blomberg, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 177–8. This volume includes essays by Schreiner and Ann L. Bowman on the complementarian view, and Craig S. Keener and Linda Belleville on the egalitarian view (all bearing the same title, "Women in Ministry," as referenced in the notes that follow below), with reflections on both views from the editors.
9. Schreiner, "Women in Ministry," 200–232.
10. Schreiner, "Women in Ministry," 194.
11. Bowman, "Women in Ministry," 299.
12. Schreiner, "Women in Ministry," 232.
13. Bowman, "Women in Ministry," 267–72.
14. Keener, "Women in Ministry," 29.
15. Keener, "Women in Ministry," 29–40.
16. Keener, "Women in Ministry," 46–55, 70.
17. Belleville, "Women in Ministry," 13.
18. Belleville, "Women in Ministry," 148.
19. Sarah Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church: Building Consensus on Christian Leadership* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 28.
20. Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church*, 98.
21. Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church*, 112.
22. Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church*, 123–5.
23. Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church*, 98.
24. Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church*, 324.
25. Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church*, 47, italics in original.
26. Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church*, 324.
27. Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Emergent YS and Zondervan, 2004), 284.
28. Donald Miller, *Searching for God Knows What* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 123.
29. Curtiss Paul De Young, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, *United By Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 22.

30. Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz* (Nashville, Tenn: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 135.
31. Part of this trend is owed to the urban placement of emergent churches and a deliberate attempt at diversity.
32. Frederica Matthewes-Green, "Under the Heaventree," in *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, ed. Leonard Sweet, (Grand Rapids: Emergent YS and Zondervan, 2003), 165.
33. Dan Kimball, *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Emergent YS and Zondervan, 2004), 87.
34. As quoted in Kimball, *Emerging Worship*, 88.
35. Doug Pagitt, *Reimagining Spiritual Formation: A Week in the Life of an Experimental Church* (Grand Rapids: Emergent YS and Zondervan, 2003), 17.
36. Kimball, *Emerging Worship*, 91.
37. Kimball, *Emerging Worship*, 82–83, italics mine.
38. Kimball, *Emerging Worship*, 87.
39. Kimball, *Emerging Worship*, 103.
40. Pagitt, *Reimagining*, 17.
41. Brian D. McLaren, *Finding Faith: A Self-Discovery Guide for Your Spiritual Quest* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 135.
42. McLaren, *Finding Faith*, 137–8.
43. Brian D. McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 28. This particular story focuses on conversations between Neo, the central male character, and Kerry, the central female character.
44. Miller, *Searching*, 225.
45. Miller, *Searching*, 220, 227; Miller also uses Romeo and Juliet to communicate the gospel story to people who might otherwise not receive it, an example of "reaching and engaging the emergent culture."
46. Andy Crouch, "Life After Postmodernity," in Sweet, *The Church in Emerging Culture*, 92–93.
47. Pagitt, *Reimagining*, 122–3.
48. Michael Horton, "Better Homes and Gardens," in Sweet, *The Church in Emerging Culture*, 115.
49. Pagitt, *Reimagining*, 122–3.
50. See Jen Lemen, "Emerging Women: Are Women Leaders Finding a Place in the Postmodern Church?" *Mutuality* (Fall 2004): 2–6. Available at [www.cbeinternational.org/new/pdf\\_files/free\\_articles/EmergingWomen.pdf](http://www.cbeinternational.org/new/pdf_files/free_articles/EmergingWomen.pdf).
51. Krista Vossler, interview with the author, May 16, 2005.
52. In each chapter of *Reimagining Spiritual Formation*, Pagitt includes reflections of both men and women.
53. Vossler interview.

54. Meeka Karger, interview with the author, May 23, 2005.
55. Carrie Saum, interview with the author, July 2, 2005. *The Voice* is a paraphrase of the Bible that is set up like a screenplay. Different authors, pastors, and artists such as Chris Seay and Donald Miller are contributing to the paraphrase of different books. In addition, *The Voice* will offer a musical companion. The proceeds from *The Voice* will benefit missionary organizations. A short explanation of the project is available at [jacobswellchurch.org/tim/archives/001686.php](http://jacobswellchurch.org/tim/archives/001686.php).
56. Amina Al-Attas, interview with the author, April 10, 2005.
57. Sermon given by Chris Seay, February 13, 2005. In this sermon, Seay states that men and women are "equal in worth but different in roles."
58. "2115 Taft" at [www.ecclesiahouston.org](http://www.ecclesiahouston.org).
59. Jen Lemen, interview with the author, July 1, 2005. Power equity, of course, means different things to different people in the emerging church. Here Lemen is referring to men and women leading together.
60. See Lauren Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth About Chastity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 136–7. Winner reflects the same sentiment about unmarried women in the church: "Despite the fact that Jesus never married, the contemporary church too often assumes that married life is the norm." Winner also notes that she seeks to ensure single parishioners serve on church committees.
61. Al-Attas interview.
62. Karger interview.
63. Vossler interview.
64. See "Who We Are" and "Our Purpose and Plan," [www.emergingwomenleaders.org](http://www.emergingwomenleaders.org). EWLI also states the following as their purpose: "The purpose of the Emerging Women's Leadership Initiative is to transform the church by transforming its leadership. We seek to dramatically increase the number of women who are leading others on a national and local level through their words and their actions in an exploration of how to bring the Gospel to our changing culture."
65. Lemen interview.
66. McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 284–5.
67. McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 284–5.