

# [Meetings we missed] Emerging church seeks to get back to church roots

By Linda Green  
NASHVILLE, Tenn. (UMNS)

Young adults, seminarians and pastors with a heart for the Gospel are thinking and talking about new ways to “do church” by transforming churchgoing from the inside out.

More than 50 people gathered in Nashville Oct. 4-6 for an “emergingumc” conference on getting back to the roots of church and its mission. The event was sponsored by the United Methodist Board of Discipleship.

The emerging church is a non-denominational grassroots movement that intertwines evangelism and social justice to make the church more relevant to today’s culture and to make worship and Christian life authentic, experiential and connected.

Known officially as the emerging missional church, the concept is about turning the church from a place of ritual worship to one of reclaiming mission as the foundation, said the Rev. Taylor Burton-Edwards, director of worship resources for the United Methodist Board of Discipleship.

“The core is not to get people to come to Sunday morning worship. The core is to get disciples of Jesus to be on mission wherever they are and however they can do that,” he said.

## What is it?

An emerging church is not necessarily a new church start. A lot of “emerging” is taking place within existing congregations of all sizes and denominations and is especially being led by young adults. They relish a non-institutional approach to church and innovative worship but hold to traditional Christian beliefs. They also reconstruct and deconstruct those beliefs to accommodate and “do church” in post-modern culture. They create community.

According to United Methodists in the movement, the emerging church seeks to transform churchgoing from the inside out through questioning basic traditions. It is a movement about theology but is ambiguous and anti-programmatic. Conversations about an emergingumc, alternative ways of “doing church” and community building are occurring at <http://emergingumc.blogspot.com>.

“Emerging church is a community of faith that is striving to be authentic to the Gospel and the culture,” said the Rev. Jack Terrell-Wilkes, an ordained deacon in the Oklahoma Annual (regional) Conference.

Within a congregation might be two or three people passionate about discipleship and reaching people. Those individuals would create ministries from their passion and also begin to live their passion. “Church then happens,” said conference attendees during focused discussions. “It is about getting back to the roots of Christianity.”

“The emerging church has a heart for the poor, the last, the least and the lost,” said the Rev. James Walker, the United Methodist co-leader of Hot Metal Bridge Faith Community in Pittsburgh. The church provides opportunity to experience church in new and unconventional ways, including drama, he said.

Conference presenters affirmed the belief that disciples of Jesus Christ are sent to be Christ’s body in the world.

“Christianity is not just about a set of beliefs and propositions that we believe. It is about our lives and about how we live,” Burton-Edwards said.



UMNS photo by Linda Green

Participants at the “emergingumc” conference share ideas on ways to make The United Methodist Church more relevant and authentic in today’s society.

People studying Jesus’ Great Commission often emphasize the command to “go make disciples” as the way mission is done. However, Burton Edwards says the emphasis should be on making disciples as you go. “Wherever you are, figure out what making disciples looks like there and do that there.”

Making disciples for Jesus has to grow out of and be incarnate in each place, he said.

Just as God became flesh among us, God’s kingdom as it is working throughout the world takes on different forms. Our role is to figure what those are so that the good news of God’s kingdom can be made known in those places,” he said, adding that the look of those places will vary from place to place.

Characteristics of the emerging missional church are a revived mission or mandate; theological conversations that focus on the kingdom of God and the way of Jesus rather than denominational or ecclesial dis-

tinctiveness; spiritual formation using both personal and communal traditions and practices that “deeply” form disciples of Jesus; and worship that is experiential and connected to traditions of the Christian faith.

## United Methodist roots

United Methodist followers say the concept harkens back to Methodism founder John Wesley, who in 18th-century England had a strong sense that the established Church of England was wonderful at worship and terrible at making disciples. It was wonderful at creating structures so that people could have the potential to make disciples but was terrible at delivering on that promise.

“What Wesley did was create systems that could make disciples alongside the Church of England and keep them in a symbiotic relationship so that the strength of the movement and the strength of the Church of England could both be leveraged for the better good,” said Burton-Edwards.

Katie Dawson, a seminary student at Vanderbilt Divinity School and intern at West End United Methodist Church in Nashville, attended the gathering to become familiar with the emerging church and postmodern ideas as she works toward ordained ministry in the Iowa Annual Conference.

“Anytime the culture changes, the church changes in response,” she said. “The church is a part of the world. It is not separate, above or better. It is a part of God’s creation as well and we need to be aware of that to continue to be in ministry with people ... in the city and in the rural areas.”

While the emerging church has no concrete definition, Dawson suggests staying attentive to whatever local church you are in, learning its struggles and hopes and where its ambiguities lie, and then developing practices and theology that provide hope. “Emerging church is about connecting people with the reality of their lives,” she said. ■

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# [Meetings we missed] United Methodists explore cyber safety in ministry

By Jeanette Pinkston  
NASHVILLE, Tenn. (UMNS)

The nebulous world of cyberspace is a huge mission field for the church.

Such was the opening message at a United Methodist conference exploring topics dealing with “CyberSAFEty in Ministry.”

The Oct. 1-3 event was sponsored by the United Methodist Board of Discipleship. About 150 people from across the United States gathered in Nashville to share strategies and tools to harness the potential gift that technology promises in an environment of stewardship and safety.

From Holston Conference, participants included the Rev. Dan Gray, coordinator of youth ministries; Anita Henderlight, coordinator of children’s ministries; Jaymie Derden, Children’s Ministry Team; and Jason Onks, Camping and Retreat Ministries. “I think it’s important for churches to consider a presence in cyberspace because that is where the people are,” said Paul O’Briant in his opening address.

Director of technology for Currituck County Schools in North Carolina, O’Briant cited U.S. statistics that 143 million people use the Internet, and that two-thirds of Internet users have searched for spiritual topics online.

“So much of the population uses cyberspace on a daily basis and searches for answers in that space, so we need to be there where they are,” he said.

## Lurking dangers

With the opportunities of cyberspace come dangers as well.

“I think it’s important if we are going to go into that space we understand the dangers and how to keep our people safe. Understanding that our kids and congregations are already in those spaces, we need to provide them the tools they need to keep safe,” he said.

O’Briant reported that some 27,000 registered sex offenders have MySpace accounts, and half of American youth have MySpace accounts. The average age of initial exposure to Internet pornography is 11, and there are an estimated 100,000 Web sites that feature child pornography.

“Cyber safety needs to be a part of our Safe Sanctuary planning and implementation,” said O’Briant, noting that the church and its leaders are far from immune to the growing problem of sexual addictions.

A 2000 survey by “Christianity Today” indicated that about 40 percent of clergy had acknowledged visiting sexually explicit Web sites.

In 1996, the denomination’s top legislative body passed a resolution calling on every church to develop policies and procedures to reduce the risk of child sexual abuse in its ministries and facilities. Regional training sessions followed, inviting conferences to send representatives who could return and train local churches on Safe Sanctuary procedures.



UMNS photos by Jeanette Pinkston

ABOVE: The Rev. Stephen Streett (left), media specialist Karen Douse, and Paul O’Briant lead a panel discussion on social networking and technology in ministry.

RIGHT: Internet investigator Tom Evans offers advice on protecting children from dangers on the Internet.



Ministry teams representing local congregations, 44 conferences, four agencies, and camping and retreat professionals were among participants at the cyber safety conference. Event organizers hope participants will return to their ministries and create policies, goals and action plans related to the safe use of technology.

## Tool for predators

“Internet safety with kids is so important because the problem is prevalent, and exposure to inappropriate material and file sharing are growing,” said Tom Evans, an agent investigator with Internet Crimes Against Children.

Evans has seen a rise in the number of cases involving children, including (in order of prevalence):

- Possession of child pornography
- Distribution of child pornography
- Solicitation of a minor
- Manufacturing of child pornography
- Endangering the welfare of a child

“There is a need for legislation to put offenders behind bars for crimes against a child. We need to increase sentencing guidelines, and stiffer penalties are needed,” Evans said.

Evans advised participants to:

- Reign technology in, remembering that “kids don’t need to be that wired”;
- Encourage parents to have a MySpace account;
- Ensure that kids don’t include identifying information on social networking sites such as MySpace and FaceBook;
- Know all user names and passwords;
- Leave off names and limit the number of photographs posted on social networking sites.

Fifty-five percent of all online Americans age 12-17 use online social networking sites such as MySpace, according to Pew Internet Research. Meanwhile, the typical profile of an Internet child sex offender is a white male ranging in age from 19 to 70, according to Evans.

“It is not unheard of for children to be abducted. Anything that identifies a child on a Web site can be used by a predator to focus on where a child is located,” he said. Alerting participants to the dangers of file sharing, Evans warned that “it is not just in big cities. It’s everywhere. File sharing is important because it lets us know how prevalent child porn is. Kids are using this for free.”

“Cyber safety is not a one-time event,” said the Rev. Stephen Streett, an associate pastor from the North Georgia Annual (regional) Conference. “We must have an awareness of youth culture ... and find out what they are listening to.” ■

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