

FOREWORD

I have mixed feelings about the term “emerging church.” Yes, I believe some new and exciting things are emerging. But I think they’re emerging not in one movement or among one group of people and certainly not along one model, but rather in diverse ways across the spectrum of the church—in spaces ranging from cathedrals to storefronts, from country chapels to urban pubs and living rooms.

These emerging realities aren’t the brainchildren of any single leader or organization: They’re springing up spontaneously, literally around the world. People are finding one another and saying, “What? You too? I thought I was the only one.”

What’s going on? What’s behind or beneath these changes? Are there common subterranean sources nourishing these global shifts?

Critics say it’s all surface, style, and cosmetics—nothing substantial, just pandering to and accommodating the latest fads and consumer demands. Others chalk it up to “new methods” for the “unchanging message.” Participants themselves are often moving to new practices, thinking, and values somewhat intuitively—they can’t explain what’s going on any better than anybody else.

That’s where Shane Higgs comes in. Aided by the work of one of the most important creative thinkers of the 20th century, Marshall McLuhan, Shane excavates beneath the surface layers to some deep insights that I’ll bet you’ve never considered before. I know he has helped me see new dimensions to the dangers and opportunities hidden both in the status quo and in the new emerging realities of the church.

Have you ever considered the powerful impact of the printing press? Can you imagine the pre-printing-press church—a church without Bibles, without hymnals, without bulletins (impossible!)? But Shane takes us deeper, asking how the form of that revolutionary 16th-century technology has affected the church—its piety, its authority structures, its structures of theology, its forms of public worship, its very articulation of the gospel.

Then consider the impact of electronic media—telegraph, radio, film,

television, computer, the Internet, even the projection screen. How did and how will these innovations rewire our minds and change the way churches function—in piety, in authority structures, in structures of theology, in forms of public worship, in the articulation of the gospel?

I thought about this a good deal even before reading Shane's work, partly because I read McLuhan back in the 1970s. But Shane sharpened a number of issues for me and left me sometimes murmuring, "So that's why..." and other times worrying, "Oh, no...I hadn't thought about that."

Before your church launches into another round of "worship wars" (whether your battle lines are on the contemporary or emerging church front), read this book. You still might have some arguments, but they'll be better ones, deeper ones. You'll be paying attention to the bulk of the iceberg you've never seen from the surface. The outcomes will be more worthwhile and lasting.

Reading McLuhan years ago for me was, as it is for many people, tough and sometimes maddening—slow going through convoluted thinking but yielding flashes of insight that made the hard slogging well worth it. Shane's prose by contrast is lucid, clear, and enjoyable, and it's hard to believe, but the same quality of insights come through without the literary pain. It's not exactly "McLuhan for Dummies," but it's an intelligent yet intelligible appropriation of McLuhan for today's Christian leaders.

For those testing the waters, trying to decide whether it's worthwhile to make a break with the standard traditional or contemporary church, this book will serve as an excellent primer, focusing less on esoteric intellectual history and more on right-in-your-own-living-room social history (especially the sociology and psychology of the media).

For those already knee-deep in the emerging church conversation, this book will help us avoid unwise overreactions as it warns us from being used by the tools we think we're using. It will also help sensitize us to the ways our methods can contradict our message—and with a message as important as ours, that's a needed sensitivity! Everyone who reads these pages will come away with a renewed sense of the importance of the local church and the quest for authentic community in particular, a quest that is at once helped and hampered by cell phones, e-mail, websites, blogs, and the rest of our digital universe.

A Christian publisher recently told me there is some concern in his field about the passing of a generation of respected authors (I won't mention names); the dependable mainstays of the publishing world are aging, retiring, and passing away, and many wonder who will replace them. While reading Shane's book, I felt deeply encouraged by the quality of his work—as well as the work

of many fine young writers making their debuts these days. These are thoughtful people, well educated (in the best sense of the word), and skilled writers, and they speak well for the future of the church in these challenging times. emergentYS is to be congratulated for finding emerging talents like Shane and making sure their messages are made accessible to the rest of us.

Yes, it's in the form of a book, and yes, mass-produced books are part of modernity's legacy. But as Shane wisely points out, we'd be foolish to lose the skills we've gained during the print era. Balanced minds cannot live on websites and chat rooms alone. It's important to remember that every innovation is an amputation as well as an extension—and if you don't know what that means, then read and digest this book you're now holding.

— **Brian McLaren**, pastor (crrc.org), author (anewkindofchristian.com)