

# A Missional Church Model

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## Abstract

Statistical evidence is clear; the Evangelical churches in North America are in decline. There are many reasons for this decline, not least of which is the reality that the North American Evangelical churches now exist in a post-Christendom milieu. A new ontology and a new praxis are needed to address this new reality. However, the model is perhaps not new, but merely a return to the intended purpose for the church since its inception in Jerusalem more than 2,000 years ago. This article explores a fourfold missional model for the North American church moving from liminality through *communitas* and emergence to mission.

## Keywords

anthropology, religion, social anthropology, social structure, sociology of religion, theology

## Introduction: A Missional Model of the Church as a Complex Adaptive System

The most eminent sociology researcher concerning the church in Canada, Reginald Bibby, asserts (Bibby, 2004) that the church in Canada is in decline. Since the 1960s, the Evangelical church in Canada has been in decline (Grenville & Posterski, 2004). *The New York Times* (Krauss, 2003) in a front page article, December 2003, highlights the difference between Canada and America by highlighting the fact that 80% of Canadians agree that “you don’t need to go to church in order to be a good Christian” whereas only roughly 50% of Americans would agree with that statement. Even more recent data (Bricker & Wright, 2005) highlight this concept that Canadian faith has become privatized and state that while 84% of Canadians believe in God, 81% of Canadians agree that you do not need to go to church to be a good Christian.

There are many possible reasons for the decline in church attendance in Canada, but three key reasons are cited by researchers in the field of Canadian Evangelical Christianity (Grenville & Posterski, 2004).

1. After 1960, Canada “became a nation of believers, but not believers . . . Today, Canadians do not go to church because they don’t think they need to.”
2. Many Canadians see all religions as equally true and good. For this reason, belief has moved from the realm of the exclusivity and necessity of Christianity to a concept of a moral and privatized spirituality.

3. Many Canadians believe that religion is not essential for guidance in their daily life.

In addition to the statistics given above is the telling statement given by Outreach Canada (2001):

Research shows 65% of churches have plateaued in their numerical growth. Churches are faced with many challenges. Canada’s social structure has changed, and churches need to adapt to meet the needs of their communities. Many areas of our cities have no evangelical churches, and the programs that do exist have not kept pace with the modern world. As a result, a generation of young people has grown up largely without church ties. It is apparent that there is a lack of robust health among Canadian evangelical churches.

Table 1 shows the results of research conducted by Outreach Canada (2001).

In contrast to the decline in Evangelical churches in Canada in the period 1961-2001 (Statistics Canada), there has been a marked increase in Eastern non-Christian religions. In 1961, Eastern non-Christian religions comprised 0.1% of the Canadian population. In 2001, they comprised 5%. For the same period, those claiming to have no religion jumped from 1% to 16% (Outreach Canada, 2001). This increase in non-Christian religions has a twofold effect. First,

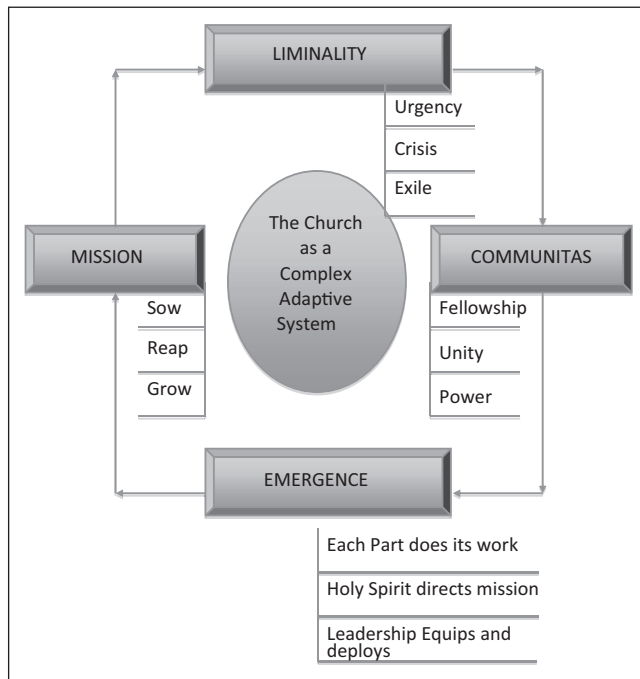
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**Table 1.** Outreach Canada Research Into the State of the Canadian Evangelical Church

Stage of growth	% of Evangelical churches
Initial formation	10
Maximum efficiency	10
Plateaued	65
Declining	10
Disintegration	5



**Figure 1.** A missional model for the Canadian context

it poses a spiritual alternative to those who are seeking (Emberley, 2002). Second, it strengthens the notion of pluralism and many paths to God (Bricker & Wright, 2005, pp. 78-86), because many Canadians build close and meaningful relationships with immigrant people, and through that process come to see the religious perspectives of those immigrant people as both meaningful and sincere.

*Research Question 1:* What church model within the context of Canada in the 21st century will bring about the health and missional effectiveness of the Evangelical church in Canada?

In this article, I present a missional model as one of the possible mechanisms to reverse the decline of the Evangelical church in Canada. The model is diagramed in Figure 1 and then explained throughout the rest of this article.

## An Explanation of the Model

Heitink (1999) suggests that all theory and praxis interact continuously. Osmer (2008) further expands this notion of the interaction of theory and praxis when he stated,

The pragmatic task is a form of transforming leadership, grounded in a spirituality of servant leadership: taking risks on behalf of the congregation to help it better embody its mission as a sign and witness of God's self-giving love. In short, the leaders of congregations carry out the tasks of practical theological interpretation to guide their community in participating in the priestly, royal, and prophetic office of Christ. (p. 29)

Figure 1 graphically represents a model that might be useful within the Canadian Evangelical context, a model that seeks to fulfill Osmer's (2008) bold call to the leadership of the church, cited in the previous paragraph. The first aspect of the missional model presented in the diagram is "liminality" (Hirsch, 2007, pp. 220-229). Liminality is the sense of crisis that descends on an individual or community when entering a new context in which there is perceived risk or real risk. Figure 1 defines this "liminality" with the subtopics of "urgency," "crisis," and "exile."

The next part of the model moves from "liminality" to "communitas" (Hirsch, 2007, pp. 220-229). Communitas is the sense of shared mission and collaboration that arises when each of the parties involved realizes that it is not alone in the process of liminality and that there is more to be gained from working together than there is from isolation. "Emergence" is the next component of the model. Liminality and communitas should give rise to an emergent solution. At the center of the model is the conception of the church as a complex adaptive system.

## The Church as Complex Adaptive System

One of the helpful insights gained through research is the notion of the church as a complex adaptive system (Ebright, 2010). Within semantic domains, each of the terms rendered above might mistakenly imbibe a meaning that readily springs to mind and thus throw the reader off track in terms of the actual implication of what is meant by "complex adaptive system." So, for instance, by "complex" is not meant complicated. By "adaptive" is not meant shapeless or undefined. By "system" is not meant a rigid and unchanging framework. To what then does the term *complex adaptive system* actually refer?

Complex adaptive systems are "diverse living elements made up of multiple interconnected agents that have the capacity to change and learn from experience" (VanderKaay, 2010). From this definition, it is evident that complexity

refers not to the notion of complicated but rather to the sense of many diverse yet interconnected living elements. It is true of the church that it is made up of many diverse (1 Corinthians 12:12-31) yet interconnected living elements and can thus be deemed to be “complex.” Oden (2006) highlights the complexity of the church and helps the reader to understand the nature of the church’s complexity when he states,

Christianity has never been merely a matter of isolated individuals being converted and voluntarily joining together to constitute autonomous, voluntary organizations of believers. Rather the body of Christ is called out by Divine address, from the world from the outset as a corporate, social reality. There can be no absolute individualism in the body of Christ. The church is from the outset defined as a single living organism, an interdependent body with every member depending on the community of faith made alive by the Son through the Spirit (1 John 1:1-7). (p. 280)

The church, though many, forms one body (1 Corinthians 10:17); this is complexity epitomized. Every local church (Grudem, 2000) comprises a community of believers who have come together around a common commitment to the Lordship of Christ and His saving work in their own personal lives. Each local church (Erickson, 2007) comes together for purposes of (Erickson, 2007; Oden, 2006) fellowship, prayer, worship, encouragement, Evangelism, discipline, service, baptism, Holy Communion or the Lord’s Table, and teaching. Every person who is a part of a local church has a role (Ephesians 4:11-13; 1 Peter 2:9) or function (Grenz, 2000) within that local church, as people exercise the spiritual gift or gifts that have been given to them by the Holy Spirit. It is because of the church’s organismic (Oden, 2006) nature, and the vast array of diversity within the unity of the Spirit under the Lordship of Christ, that the church can be said to be a “complex system.”

Having described the nature of the complexity of the church, it is helpful to also discuss the concept of the church as an “adaptive” system. The notion of the church as an adaptive system implies that both within the church and outside of the church there are many different agents acting (Nikolic, 2010) and reacting (Senge, 2006). This notion of agency as an aspect of the adaptive nature of systems is extremely helpful when developing a model for the growth of the Evangelical churches in Canada because it alerts us to the reality that the churches in Canada are not static, inanimate entities. The churches in Canada, and all over the world, are complex living organisms that are affected by the actions of agents both within and outside of the church. The linear (Kaiser, 2006; Kaufman, 2008), mechanistic (Borden, 2003; Malphurs, 2004), success model (Rima, 2002) of Church growth methodology may not always acknowledge the powerful impact of internal and external agents. Understanding the church as an adaptive system alerts us to

the need for a keen awareness of, and research into, the multiplicity of internal (Brunson & Caner, 2005; Richardson, 1996) and external (Carson, 2008; Wells, 2005) realities that affect the systemic health and vitality of our own local churches. The church is adaptive and continually changing, moving (Revelation 2-3) either toward health and vitality or disease and stagnation (Phillips, 2001).

We have identified that the church is both a “complex” system and an “adaptive” system. Is it plausible to define the church as a system? Capra (1997) defines living systems in a way that is reminiscent of the church as a living body or organism when he states,

Living systems are integrated wholes whose properties cannot be reduced to those of smaller parts. Their essential or “systemic”, properties are properties of the whole, which none of the parts have. They arise from the organizing relations of the parts, i.e. from a configuration of ordered relationships that is characteristic of that particular class of organisms, or systems. Systemic properties are destroyed when a system is dissected into isolated elements. (p. 36)

The church is a system because it comprises many interdependent parts, or members (1 Corinthians 10-12) as the Bible refers to them. These members influence each other for health (Ephesians 4:29-32; Philippians 4:1-3; Colossians 3-4) or unhealth (Titus 1:10-11; James 4; 2 Peter 2; 3 John 9-11; Jude 3-16), dependent on the nature and purpose of their mutual interactions. As Lars Skyttner (2005) points out,

A system is a set of interacting units or elements that form an integrated whole intended to perform some function. Reduced to everyday language we can express it as any structure that exhibits *order*, *pattern* and *purpose*. This in turn implies some constancy over time. A system’s purpose is the reason for its existence and the starting point for measuring its success. “The purpose of a system is what it does.” (p. 57)

The function of the church is multifaceted, but all synthesizing into the one key purpose of mission. The church is a living organism on mission for God. All that the church does should accomplish the missional purpose of “bringing many sons to glory” (Hebrews 2:5-10). If the goal of the church is to serve as God’s light in the world, sent by the Risen Savior, then perhaps it is essential to change the measurement of success, and hence redefine the purpose of the church.

If the church is a complex adaptive system, a living body created by the Lord for His glory and the fulfillment of His purpose, then, the statement in the quote above, “The purpose of a system is what it does” is germane. In the Christendom model of church life and ministry, success has been measured based on consumer values. How many people attend? How much do they give to support the programs

of the church? and How often do they attend to support the ministries of the church? Perhaps, in a post-Christendom milieu, the measure of success should no longer be ecclesio-centric or church centered but should, now, be discipleship centered or missio-centric, according to the call of Matthew 28:19-20. If the Evangelical churches in Canada can shift the foci of their membership away from size and success to missional, and by implication discipleship, there may yet be hope for the continuance of the Gospel ministry in this country.

It is this missional, post-Christendom, organic view of the church that informs and gives rise to the model for growth, a model we will now explain in detail with reference to how the Evangelical churches in Canada can use this model as a framework for sustainable, impacting, missional ministry.

***Liminality and the Missional Church as a Complex Adaptive System.*** The model presented in Figure 1 begins the cycle with the concept of “liminality.” Liminality is a concept that was popularized by Victor Turner (1967) in his seminal work detailing his study of the rites of passage of the Ndembu tribe of Africa. The term *liminality* has been co-opted (Frost, 2007; Roxburgh, 1997; Swanson & Rusaw, 2010) by missional writers, because it helps to describe the state of the post-Christendom Evangelical churches in North America. Basing his definition on the work of Victor Turner (1967), Roxburgh (1997) states,

Therefore, liminality is the conscious awareness that as a group (or individual) one's status-, role-, and sequence-sets in a society have been radically changed to the point where the group has now become largely invisible to the larger society in terms of these previously held sets. (p. 24)

This is the crisis for the North American Evangelical church! It has become largely invisible to the larger society. As set forth earlier, the decline in regular church attendance from the 1960s in Canada until the present day is radical (60%-11%). But more than the decline in attendance, which is alarming, is the decline in influence on legal and governmental structures of the Christian ethos. Canada has become a secular and multicultural nation in which spirituality is highly privatized. This has, indeed, pushed Evangelical Christianity to the margins of society as exiles (Frost, 2007) who now need to live missionally in a post-Christian culture. As the model portrays, the Evangelical churches in North America are in a state of liminality, with the three subset areas in the model under “liminality” as follows:

***Urgency.*** As Christians awaken to the weakening of the Evangelical church in both attendance and influence, there needs to be a sense of urgency to awaken again to the task of making disciples to obey the call of the Lord Jesus in

Matthew 28:19-20. This urgency (Kotter, 1996) should enable the church leadership to enact change within the local churches, away (Hirsch, 2007) from a Christendom model of success and consumerism church, to a missional model of outreach and disciple making.

***Crisis.*** The church is in crisis because its original maps (Roxburgh, 2010) no longer make sense, the terrain has changed externally, and as a complex adaptive system, those external changes have brought cataclysmic changes to the church. It is a crisis of being as much as it is a crisis of doing. The church must answer the ontological question “What must we be, what is our purpose?” and then the praxis question “What must we do in order to fulfill our purpose?” This crisis can be an extremely helpful change agent (Rendle, 1998) because it awakens within the church membership a sense that they are already in the wilderness (Bridges, 2003) and are thus free to be the church and do church in ways that adapt (Stetzer & Putman, 2006) to this new reality. It is not for us as leaders to create the crisis, but when God's Sovereign Hand leads the Evangelical churches into a place of liminality, the resulting crisis may be extremely liberating!

***Exile.*** The Evangelical churches in Canada no longer (Frost, 2007) hold a privileged position; they are now pilgrims and strangers in what has become a foreign land. Their comfort and strength (Frost, 2007) no longer lies in their privileged position, but now their comfort and strength arise from the richness of fellowship—fellowship with the Risen Savior and fellowship with one another in a strange land. The richness of this fellowship, arising from the position of liminality the church now finds itself facing within the North American context, leads to the next aspect of the model, “communitas.”

***Communitas and the Missional Church as a Complex Adaptive System.*** The concept of communitas, like liminality, was developed by Victor Turner (1967) as an outflow of his studies of the rites of passage of the Ndembu tribe in Zambia. Communitas, not community, is another sociology term that has been co-opted (Frost, 2007) by missional thinkers and missional writers. Frost (2007) defines communitas in this way:

In short, Turners concept of communitas denotes an intense feeling of social togetherness and belonging, often in connection with religious rituals, in which people stand together “outside” society, and society is strengthened by this. Communitas is the opposite, in many ways, of normal society, but with each one feeding and enriching the other. Societies need the liminal experience of communitas because it pushes society forward, nurturing it with freshness and vitality that come from the deeper communion that is experienced there. (p. 110)



Communitas, then, within the North American context is,

a group of people undergoing a shared ordeal. In other words, you can't have the marvelous experience of communitas without being in a liminal state. Many churches want the exquisite experience of rich, deep relationships, but they aren't prepared to embrace the challenge of coming out of mainstream society. When in a liminal state, coping with the difficulties and ordeal of being outside the structure of normal society, people find themselves thrown together in a richer, deeper, more powerful sense of togetherness. Not community, communitas! (Frost, 2007, p. 111)

Perhaps one of the helpful products of the liminality of the Canadian Evangelical church will be this sense of communitas, in which Christians deepen their fellowship with, and support of, one another because they share a common ordeal, namely, that their Christian faith is seen to be on the margins of society and that they, themselves, are in a sense invisible in terms of impact and privilege. The Canadian Evangelical churches will need to embrace and foster communitas through the development of the three subelements expressed in the model, namely,

**Fellowship.** It should not surprise the Evangelical churches in Canada that they are marginalized and invisible. This is no different from the promise (Matthew 10:22; Mark 13:13; Luke 6:22; 21:17; John 15:18-19) of the Lord Jesus and the experience (Acts 4:1-31; Acts 6:8-7:60; 8:1-3; 12:1-19; 14:19-23; 16:16-24; 17:1-9; 18:9-11; 19:21-41; 21-28) of the early church. Yet, as much as the early Christians experienced the intensity of the hatred of the world as predicted by the Risen Savior, so too have they experienced the incredible communitas/fellowship (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 9:31; 20:17-38) that this liminality afforded to those who proclaimed and lived the Lordship of Christ. The decline of the Evangelical churches in Canada and the marginalization of the Christian faith in Canada may actually be a blessing for the churches of God, because it may produce the fruit of faith, and the blessing of close and authentic fellowship, in the proclamation and living of the Gospel message! The liminality of the Evangelical churches' marginalization and decline leads to communitas, and within that close fellowship around the common cause, the believers of God will find a new kind of unity.

**Unity.** The Evangelical churches in Canada have struggled (Bibby, 2004; Tangelder, 2010) with the "circulation of the saints." Often, members or affiliates will leave one specific church in a certain area to attend another church in that area. Sometimes, addition to the membership occurs through geographical transfers when people move into a new area and choose to attend a church within the same denomination as the church they were attending in their previous location. The Bible urges Christians (Ephesians 4:3) to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Communitas arising from liminality should assist the local churches in keeping unity as their focus moves from a consumer-driven model of a Christendom church to a missional-driven model of a disciple-making church. This certainly seems to be the experience of the disciples in Acts 4:31-33. Their liminality (being arrested and censured by the religious leaders) led to a strong sense of communitas (the multitude of them who believed were of one heart and one soul). It would be interesting to assess how many churches, coming out of a position of privilege and social acceptance in Canada over the last 60 years, have a membership that is of one heart and soul?

The unity that will arise from liminality, as Evangelical churches choose to let go of the Christendom model and view themselves as sent on mission by the Lord Jesus Christ, will in turn (John 13:34-35) be a powerful witness to the Canadian society at large

**Power.** A by-product of communitas is power. An example of the power that ensues from the communitas that emerges from liminality is the recent experience of 33 Chilean miners trapped underground:

But Claudio Ibanez, co-leader of a psychological team at the mine and the first to make contact with the trapped miners, says their mental health, overall, is strong. He says the presumption that men and women will usually break down emotionally if subjected to severe hardship is flawed. "Most people have deep resilience and the ability to persevere in extreme situation," he notes. Those miners reached for the best in themselves. Maybe if it were one man trapped down there, he would have died. But as a team, they survived. (Petrou, 2010, pp. 42-44)

The liminality for these 33 miners arose when the walls around them began to collapse and they realized that they were trapped. The communitas arose when they realized that they needed to work together if they were to have any hope of survival. As one reads further, in the article by Petrou (2010), it is interesting to note that leadership emerged from within the group to equip the group for the rough days ahead, including food and water rationing and other survival techniques.

The Evangelical churches in Canada may not be aware that they are entering a state of liminality, that communitas will be vital in the days ahead, and that hopefully the Holy Spirit, working through the Evangelical churches, will raise up and empower new leadership to again focus on the mission of the church to make disciples in the midst of an increasingly secular, and perhaps somewhat anti-Christian, environment.

Whereas liminality arises from a sense of crisis, urgency, and exile (powerlessness), the system may move to restore homeostasis through communitas, which in turn gives a new type of power, as Frost (2007) states,

**Table 2.** The Differences Between “Community” and “Communitas”

Community	Communitas
Inward focus	Social togetherness outside society
Focus on encouraging each other	Focus on the task at hand
Safe place	Pushes society forward
Something to be built	Experienced through liminality

In short, Turner’s concept of *communitas* denotes an intense feeling of social togetherness and belonging, often in connection with religious rituals, in which people stand together “outside” society, and society is strengthened by this. (p. 110)

This power that arises from *communitas* is different from the power of community as exemplified in Table 2 (“Community vs. *Communitas*”; Frost, 2007, p. 111). As with the 33 trapped Chilean miners, the power that emerges from within the group emerges because of the combined efforts of the group, now functioning together as a complex adaptive system.

The Evangelical churches in Canada will experience this wonderful *communitas* and the renewed power and strength it brings as these churches move from an inward focus to a sense of being on mission for God, which truly is the task at hand, according to Matthew 28:19-20. Frost’s (2007) major thesis is that we are not safe, we are exiles in a post-Christendom North America, and, as such, we need to live out the values of the Kingdom; our post-Christendom reality places the churches in a state of liminality, which in turn should lead them to *communitas* and a sense of renewed power and perspective as together we focus on God’s call to be salt and light in a dark world. This experience of liminality also assures (Fee, 1994) the believer, and the believing community, of the Holy Spirit’s power in abundant measure through times of suffering and struggle. The Thessalonian believers (1 Thessalonians 1:4-8) experienced the Spirit’s power as a community of believers, and in *communitas*, focused on the task of discipleship to such a degree that the Word of the Lord sounded forth (1 Thessalonians 1:8) from this church throughout the whole region.

Within the New Testament, we see great renewal and power when the early church experienced liminality, and in turn moved to *communitas*, as for instance in passages such as the following:

1. Acts 4:31, the disciples are filled with the Spirit and they speak the Word with great boldness, this following the severe chastening handed down to Peter and John by the same religious rulers who had crucified Jesus!

2. Acts 8, the persecution and diaspora following the death of Stephen leads to great and powerful witness by the community of disciples.
3. Acts 9:31, a great sense of *communitas*, walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, the church multiplied. The persecution of the church created a sense of liminality, but the Holy Spirit empowered the people of God with a sense of comfort and the result was the further growth of the church. The benefit and forward movement of the wider society here is that many become believers and also there is a sense of widespread peace.
4. Acts 11:19-25, the hand of the Lord was with the believers and as a result a great number turned to the Lord. It is important to note that the liminality of dispersion led some men into *communitas* expressed in working together in Antioch to proclaim the good news of the Lord Jesus.

Liminality for the Canadian Evangelical churches should lead to a stronger *communitas*, and that *communitas* will produce greater unity, fellowship, and spiritual power, from which mission should emerge, as outlined in the following section.

***Emergence and the Canadian Evangelical Church as a Complex Adaptive System.*** The third aspect of the missional model for the Canadian context is that of emergence. When all the parts of the system are working properly, something will emerge (Gell-Mann, 1994) that is unexpected and something that no one part of the system could singularly (Innes & Booher, 1999) produce. This view of the church as a living organism, a complex adaptive system, means that the church is a living entity, but more than this, that the church is the sum of its parts and that when all of the parts are working well (Ephesians 4:15-16), the system is healthy and thrives. Suffering is an integral part of the growth of the church. It seems hard to understand why suffering is a necessary ingredient for the growth of the church until it is understood that the church is a living organism, a complex adaptive system, and that to thrive, the church needs liminality, which leads to *communitas*, which in turn leads to emergence.

For the Evangelical churches in Canada, then, the marginalization of the church, the passing of the Christendom era, the rapid decline in attendance, and the financial struggles of churches, may all be a great blessing, even though perceived as a great threat, because this liminality will lead to greater *communitas* as people within churches band together to revive the life of the church, as the churches band together to do a greater work for the Kingdom and, most of all, as the Holy Spirit impels the church, under the Lordship of Christ, to shine in an increasingly dark world. The question that the notion of emergence brings is, of course, what exactly will

emerge once the church has entered into liminality, and then *communitas*? In the model presented at the beginning of this article, and as evidenced in the New Testament, the pattern of liminality, *communitas*, and then emergence arises from suffering, which leads to closer fellowship within the body and with the Risen Savior. This threefold process then leads to greater missional outreach and impact. There are three key factors in the process of emergence, and these are discussed briefly as follows:

*Each part does its work: Ephesians 4:7-16.* This notion of each part of the body, or system, doing its work is vital to the health and growth of the church. Each local church is a representation and part of the larger body of Christ. However, each local church comprises a group of believers who come together in a specific geographic location around a common set of shared doctrines. Local churches are only healthy when each part of that local church does its work. Furthermore, the global church of the Lord Jesus thrives and flourishes when each local church is functioning well and doing its part within the global body of Christ. Commenting on Ephesians 4:7-16, MacArthur (1996) states,

The growth of the church is not a result of clever methods but of every member of the Body fully using his spiritual gift in close contact with other believers. Christ is the source of the life and power and growth of the church, which He facilitates through each believer's gifts and mutual ministry in *joints* touching other believers. The power in the church flows from the Lord through individual believers and relationships between believers. Where His people have close relationships of genuine spiritual ministry, God works; and where they are not intimate with each other and faithful with their gifts, He cannot work. He does not look for creativity, ingenuity, or cleverness but for willing and loving obedience. The physical body functions properly only as each member in union with every other member responds to the direction of the head to do exactly what it was designed to do.

*The Holy Spirit directs mission: Acts 13:1-3.* The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is (Lang'at, 2009) nourished and nurtured by the triune God, and participates (Van Dyk, 2009) in the mission of the triune God. It was the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts and chapter 13 that instructed the leaders of the church in Antioch to set aside and send Paul and Barnabas on their mission work of church planting among the Gentiles. The church at Antioch was birthed from the liminality or suffering of the diaspora, a diaspora spawned by the martyrdom of Stephen. The diaspora lead to *communitas* on a number of levels: first, as the disciples banded together and shared the Gospel wherever they went and second, as the church in Antioch grew out of the Gospel preaching and Jerusalem sent Barnabas to observe and to minister. Barnabas in turn sequestered the services of Paul the apostle to assist him in

the ministry at Antioch, and for 2 years Paul and Barnabas taught the people at Antioch. This is the fellowship, unity, and power that comes from the *communitas* that was the church at Antioch. It is because the church at Antioch was healthy, growing, and, as Acts 13 shows us by the diversity and extent of leadership in Acts 13:1, each part was doing its work, that the Holy Spirit directs the church into further mission as seen in Acts 13:1-3. As MacArthur (1994) states,

Effective, strong churches inevitably have godly leaders, and the church **at Antioch** was no exception. God has always put a premium on spiritual leadership (Acts 6:3; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; cf. Hos. 4:9; Matt. 9:36). These five men were the heart of the ministry at Antioch.

Luke describes them as **prophets and teachers**, two important New Testament terms. **Prophets** played a significant role in the apostolic church (see 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 2:20; 3:5; 4:11). Like the apostles, they were preachers of God's word and were responsible in the early years of the church to instruct the local congregations.

*Leadership equips and deploys.* The third aspect of emergence in the missional model for the Evangelical churches in Canada is that, as the Spirit directs, obedient leadership functions to equip growing believers for ministry and service and then assists those growing believers to be deployed for works of service. In Acts 13:1-3, the next phase of the ministry of Paul and Barnabas emerged at a certain phase of that church's life. In Acts 11, the church was birthed and Barnabas is sent to teach and minister, and in the process, then calls Paul to assist him in doing this. By the time the reader comes upon Acts 13, 2 years later, there is a multiplicity of leadership within the Antioch church, leadership that has grown through the spiritual ministry of Paul and Barnabas. Ephesians 4:7-16 highlights the equipping role of the teaching and shepherding leadership within a local church. Acts 13:1-3 exemplifies the principles laid out in Ephesians 4:7-16. It is also interesting to note that (Acts 13:4-14:23) Paul and Barnabas led people to a saving faith in the Lord Jesus and through that process local churches were started, and Paul and Barnabas equipped and deployed leaders in those churches too. It is through the gifting (1 Corinthians 12) and enablement (Romans 12:4-8) of the Holy Spirit that leaders emerge and who in turn are responsible to equip and deploy new leaders who, through the work of the Holy Spirit, continue to emerge within the local church. But, when every part of the body is doing its work, according to Ephesians 4:7-16, it is not just leaders that emerge. Ephesians 4:7-16 also informs us that the whole body becomes healthier and stronger as each part does its work. The leadership of the church exists to train God's people for works of service so that, through *communitas*, they may together accomplish

the mission of the church as set forth by the risen Christ in Matthew 28:19-20. When the body is healthy, though complex and diverse, the mission emerges, because the church is missional in nature, as highlighted in chapter 4 of this thesis. As Skyttner (2005) points out, "The purpose of a system is what it does" (p. 57). The church is a missional community that exists for the glory of God by accomplishing the mission of making disciples from among every nationality (Matthew 28:19-20). If the purpose of the system is mission, then mission is what should emerge when the local church is healthy and functioning well. This mission is outward focused and, like all *communitas*, exists because of liminality. It is to this mission, as the fourth and final component of the model, that we now turn our attention.

***Mission and the Canadian Evangelical Church as a Complex Adaptive System.*** At this juncture, we present the final component of the model for the growth of the Evangelical churches in Canada, namely, "Mission."

*The Evangelical churches as missional nodes.* Evangelical churches need to adopt a missional ontology, to understand themselves as missionaries to the community of which they are a part. Stetzer and Putman (2006) illuminate this missional ontology when they state,

We are sent as God's missionary. The only question is where. Just as God is a missionary God, so the church is to be a missionary church. Jesus taught that "as the Father has sent me, so I am sending you" (John 20:21). Our purpose, therefore, is to go to this expression of life, culture and values and to face a fundamental challenge. That challenge is to learn to think about [our] culture in missional terms. (p. 7)

For a church to transition (Bridges, 2003; Herrington, Bonem, & Furr, 2000; Rendle, 2002) from a Christendom model to a missional model, it will need to again embrace a radical commitment to the missional principles of the early church. These missional principles have been superlatively reframed and restated (Smith, 2011) in the Lausanne Cape Town Commitment (CTC) as set forth in the following paragraphs.

*A missional church loves the triune God.* As the Lausanne CTC so eloquently emphasizes,

We love the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. With respect to the Father, the CTC calls for a renewed appreciation of God's fatherhood. Concerning the Son, it highlights our duty to trust, obey, and proclaim Christ. Of the Spirit, it says, "Our engagement in mission, then, is pointless and fruitless without the presence, guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. . . . There is no true or whole gospel, and no authentic biblical mission, without the Person, work and power of the Holy Spirit." (Smith, 2011)

The 21st century church in Canada will need to remind God's people of the centrality of God in their everyday lives, and also the way in which believers can cultivate a deep and resonant love for God not only in their personal walk with God but also in their corporate worship as a church family. This love of the triune God leads, in turn, to a fivefold manifestation of that love in the following ways (Smith, 2011):

- A love for and submission to the Bible as the revealed will of God.
- A love for God's world with all of its diversity, pain, and suffering.
- A love for the Gospel as God's saving and transforming message.
- A love for God's people that manifests in unity, solidarity, and honesty.
- A love for God's mission, which is the proclamation and demonstration of the Gospel.

*A missional church serves the world through action.* The 21st century church in Canada will need to rally to action to fulfill the mission of God. This missional call is fulfilled through six key actions (Smith, 2011):

- *Bearing witness to the truth of Christ in a pluralistic, globalized world:* Within the Canadian context, such a witness must build an effective theology of engagement (Elkington, 2010) that addresses all areas of life and culture in relation to the Lordship of Christ.
- *Building the peace of Christ in our divided and broken world:* This action is a call to Biblical peacemaking in which Christ's truth is brought to bear on prejudice in any form, slavery and human trafficking, and poverty.
- *Living the love of Christ among people of other faiths:* Within the Canadian context, such a mandate is incisive given the vast number of immigrants of different faiths who enter Canada each year.
- *Discerning the will of Christ for world Evangelization:* Six key areas are identified as strategically important for the next decade—(a) unreached and unengaged people groups, (b) oral cultures, (c) Christ-centered leaders, (d) cities, (e) children, all with (f) prayer.
- *Calling the Church of Christ back to humility, integrity, and simplicity:* Within Canada, the missional community needs to be a holy community (Elkington, 2010) that returns (Smith, 2011) to humble, sacrificial discipleship; simple living; and moral integrity. We need to be separate and distinct from the world (morally). Four "idolatries" were singled out: disordered sexuality, power, success, and greed. Disciples of Christ must reject these. (The prosperity Gospel is rejected under the banner of "greed.")
- *Partnering in the body of Christ for unity in mission:* Paul teaches us that Christian unity is a creation of



God, based on our reconciliation with God and with one another. Within Canada, the divisiveness within our churches and of our churches and organizations has deeply hurt our message of reconciliation for a divided world. Our failure to live in reconciled unity is a major obstacle to authenticity and effectiveness in mission. We must commit to *partnership* in global and local mission. The missional community within Canada needs to work virulently and intentionally at personal and corporate forgiveness and reconciliation.

## An Application of the Model

The missional model, presented in this article, is circular, not linear, precisely because church growth is not a cause-and-effect process, but rather a systemic interaction of a multiplicity of factors, beginning with liminality, moving from liminality to *communitas*, and then from *communitas* through the process of emergence so that mission will emerge. The system model is closed to show that it is self-replenishing, because the Evangelical churches that embark on mission will, through the process of mission, move to a state of liminality once more and so the cycle begins all over again. The Christendom model of church life seems to engender stagnation and death, whereas the missional model reveals the church to be a living organism, able to renew and replenish and grow in the face of great adversity. The Holy Spirit works within the missional community to ensure that the leadership and mission that emerges fits His, the Holy Spirit's, agenda, such as we see in Acts 13:1-3, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4:7-16.

## The Model Applied in the Canadian Context

*Liminality: Urgency, crisis, exile.* At the outset of this article, the realization that the Evangelical churches in Canada are in marked decline initially caused great consternation for the author. During the process of research, and especially in looking at the book of Acts, it emerged that a state of liminality can actually prove to be a blessing, because the urgency, the sense of crisis, and the sense of exile may lead believers to lean more on God's strength than on human methodologies as a valid response to the emerging decline. It is not that we create a state of liminality through poor choices or scare tactics. Rather, it would seem, we need to have an awareness that we are in a state of liminality, that things within the Canadian context are no longer as they used to be, that we are now living in a post-Christendom era, and that this may actually be a blessing rather than a bane. The model places liminality as the first phase of moving to a state of health and potential growth. The leaders of Evangelical churches in Canada might change how they lead, and their measurements of success, if it is understood that we are now in a state of liminality as Evangelical churches. This model suggests that success is measured by how well the church moves to *communitas* and then, through emergence, to missional lifestyles.

*Communitas: Fellowship, unity, power.* Once the reality of liminality is grasped, and understood, this should lead the Evangelical churches to a sense of *communitas*. *Communitas*, in turn, should produce fellowship, unity, and power. At this juncture, it is important to note that this proposition may be glaringly counterintuitive to the previous methodologies of the attractional church model in which the tempo needs to be positive, upbeat, and tending to "felt needs." This missional model proposes that we acknowledge the current state of liminality, that we embrace our current milieu, and that, much as the church in the book of Acts, the liminality should actually lead the Canadian Evangelical church to greater health and growth because it needs to live and act by faith in the power of God rather than the preservation of Christendom! Furthermore, the sense of liminality, when acknowledged, explained, and embraced, will, according to this model, lead to a greater level of commitment from among the members, rather than diminishing it.

*Emergence: Each part works, Holy Spirit directs, and leadership equips and deploys.* The next aspect of the model is that of emergence. When every part of the system is working, as it should, the result should be the health and the strength of the whole system. When the Evangelical churches in Canada acknowledge and embrace their liminality, the members who form a part of each church will come together in *communitas*, which will produce fellowship, unity, and power. The church, as a complex adaptive system, functions best when every part of the system—the Spirit-empowered and Spirit-gifted membership—are working together in fellowship, unity, and power. When such a condition of fellowship, unity, and power exists, the Evangelical churches in Canada will see amazing things emerge, such as each part of the body doing its work, enabling the leaders within the local churches to train, equip, and deploy the membership within those churches. This training, equipping, and deploying will have great impact as the Holy Spirit in turn directs the mission of the Evangelical churches in Canada through the leaders and members of these churches.

When the Evangelical churches in Canada embrace the current reality of liminality, and this leads to *communitas* and then emergence, the result should be a missional mode of function, which is the final component of the model, and to which we now turn in the next section.

*Mission: Loving the triune God and serving the world.* Within a post-Christendom era, the attractional model of church, a model where the maxim "if you build it they will come," no longer holds true. The church needs to embrace its liminality and, as an exiled people in crisis, work together in *communitas*, equipped by leadership and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The church needs to regain its identity as a community sent by God into the world to bring blessing to the nations.

Christianity in general, and Evangelical churches in particular, will increasingly find themselves relegated to the sidelines and thus marginalized within the emerging secular society that Canada is becoming. Church attendance is in

decline, and new ways of being the church and doing church ministry will need to be embraced. The Lausanne CTC (Smith, 2011) is an excellent framework around which to develop a missional ministry within the Canadian context in the 21st century. As the Lausanne CTC highlights, churches will need to view themselves as communities on mission with God, and instead of thinking how it is that they might attract more people into the church building, they will need to creatively think of ways to go out into the community to act as servants to the community, to live incarnationally among the people of their community, and to back their message with the authenticity of their lives.

The Canadian Evangelical churches will need to embrace a new scorecard to measure their success at doing the work of God. Church size should no longer be the measure of success; rather, the church's missional footprint should be the measurement of true success, as outlined by the Lausanne CTC (Smith, 2011). The measurement of success is centered on how effectively the missional community is loving the triune God and serving the world around it. This love for the triune God and service to the world will render an authenticity and beauty to the Gospel message that will create points of entree to share the Gospel message that is already being lived by the missional community.

### *The Summum Bonum: Why I Am Encouraged*

This model represents years of research, reflection, interaction, and refinement. When I began this process of researching the decline of the Evangelical church in Canada, few were talking about the decline or even acknowledging that we are in fact in decline. Now, 5 years later, I am astonished at the sense of fear and apprehension that permeates the statements of some concerning the current state of the Evangelical churches in Canada! This apprehension is quite understandable, though, perhaps not altogether in synchronization with the Biblical material on the early church. There can be little doubt that the Canadian Evangelical church is on the periphery of Canadian society, and that there is, indeed, a growing atheism among Canadians or, if not atheism, a growing number of those who practice an individualized spirituality.

Yet, I find it strangely refreshing that the church is not in a privileged position any longer and that those who identify themselves with Christ may have to "go outside of the camp" to do so. This is encouraging because it means that we have an opportunity to return to the Bible, to renew our understanding of the ontology of the church, and to allow the ontological realities of the church to affect the praxiological functions of the church. In short, the current state of liminality is a blessed place to be because it causes the churches of God in Canada to come back to God for strength, for power, and for effective witness. Within Canada, to follow the Lord Jesus Christ is to make some hard choices and to often have to make those hard choices again each day. To follow the Lord Jesus Christ in Canada in the 21st century means that believers will need to work together, pray together, and enter

the battle for the souls of men! It is no longer fashionable or easy to be a Christian! This is a good thing! It is no longer easy to pastor a church, this is a good thing. A humility and graciousness is descending on many churches and many leaders of churches as together we realize that we are exiles in a foreign land, that there is urgency and crisis confronting us, and that together, in *communitas*, we can do what before we foolishly believed we could do on our own.

We are a pilgrim people of God in a secular society. This means we must learn to trust God more, and humbly fellowship together in the mission of God to which we are called. Our success is no longer measured by the sizes of our churches but rather by our commitment to the mission. As the Father sent the Lord Jesus, so now He has sent us, there is no more blessed realization than this: "We, God's people, are on mission with God!"

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