
Our House and the Unhoused



**An article for the *Cathedral Times*
by the Rev. Dr. Theophus "Thee" Smith, *Priest Associate***

"Emergent church." Years ago it was an enterprising, popular expression. A kind of movement occurred during the early 2000s. Since then, however, the phrase has virtually disappeared from conversation. Perhaps it succumbed to its original problem: How to define 'emerging' or 'emergent' when applied to so many new ways to 'be church?' Maybe the very efforts to clarify the idea exhausted us! Certainly writers did their level best; writers like Brian McLaren in *A New Kind of Christian* (2001) whom we invited to speak here at the Cathedral, and Tony Jones in *The Church is Flat* (2011). Yet confusion and vagueness become inevitable when we're confronted with a plethora of challenges to faith and practice. Already in 2004 Stuart Murray commented:

Emerging churches are so disparate there are exceptions to any generalisations. Most are too new and too fluid to clarify, let alone assess their significance. There is no consensus yet about what language to use: 'new ways of being church'; 'emerging church'; 'fresh expressions of church'; 'future church'; 'church next'; or 'the coming church'. The terminology used here contrasts 'inherited' and 'emerging' churches.

—*Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (2004/2018); 2004, p. 73

These considerations prompt my query: How might our beloved community here be experienced as a type of 'emerging church?' When I seek to discern an answer I'm encouraged by the creative ways in which our clergy and lay ministries improvise and innovate. Here's a short case study that may be instructive and inspiring. For context, consider how we define church membership. On the one hand we retain the traditional category of formal membership for people who provide baptism and confirmation records alongside contributions and pledges. On the other hand we recognize as 'belonging' a fluid population of people who do neither. Those folks simply show up for events, classes and programs on a regular basis. Indeed they regularly attend, participate in, visit, inhabit or 'occupy' our buildings or campus.

In addition many Cathedral members are aware that we provide formal arrangements to assist needy persons through our Outreach ministries, including aid agencies like Buckhead Christian Ministries (BCM) and Intown Cares (IC). But there remains a population who for various reasons fall through the net of such resources. One such person has involved me in an experiment in 'emerging church' practices that neither he nor I could have anticipated. He is an unhoused frequenter who began regularly visiting years ago when our outreach provided snack bags of sandwiches, with fruit and maybe a cookie.

After a couple of years I felt led to volunteer a more substantial weekly lunch for him in Child Hall during our Wednesday lunch offering for staff and whosoever. I used my Cathedral account of clergy discretionary funds; funds accumulated from funeral and wedding fees I earn in addition to ad hoc donations. When our kitchen option was terminated due to Covid-19 I improvised, phoning in a credit card payment once-weekly offsite to a local restaurant. Nowadays I also periodically provide hygiene, safety, and nutritional products such as towels and sanitizers, flashlight batteries and handwarmers, vitamins, and other health aides. Occasionally I use the funds to pay for recreational or educational opportunities like a holiday movie or an Atlanta History Center special event.

Significantly, our unhoused member has asked me to share the following proverbs with you; shared from his own perspectives on ministry that resonate with his background as a preacher's kid. I feel they express his lived experience of the Cathedral as "a house of prayer for all people" (Isaiah 56:7). Also I discern an implicit exhortation to extend our ministries to include other unhoused people among us. On a personal note, a clergy colleague enlightened me that he also 'feeds' my spirit as we continue to 'be church' by feeding him.

- "Iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens the countenance of another." (Proverbs 27:17 KJV adaptation)
- "When spider webs unite they can tie up a lion." (African Proverb)
- "We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond." (Gwendolyn Brooks)

Emerging church among us?