Gladys Ganiel –

Response in Authors Meet Critics Session, *The Deconstructed Church,* AAR 2016

Greetings from Belfast! First of all, I'd like to say I'm very sorry that I'm unable to be with you in person. I cancelled my travel plans at the last minute last week when myself and my baby became ill. Though I am beginning to feel better now, I am not sure I would be if I had embarked on the long trip. The baby is well now.

I am so grateful for the opportunity for this session at AAR, and for the chair and respondents who are taking part – especially those of you who made such long journeys to be in San Antonio. And I'm of course grateful for Gerardo, who will be meeting all of you in person and speaking on our behalf.

I was fortunate to be given sight of some of the critics' comments prior to this session so I could prepare a response. I also am certain that Gerardo is more than capable of handling anything and everything that is thrown at him on the day!

Wendy began her comments with big, broad questions: Why has the ECM emerged now? What are the broader non-religious social/demographic forces that help to explain the emergence of this movement? She notes that we write a bit about this in our conclusion, so that gives us something to build on. The so-called non-religious social/demographic forces she asks about are actually central to one of the key arguments of the book – that the ECM is one of the most important reframings in Western Christianity in the last two decades (p. 5). The ECM is important precisely because it fits so well within the individualized, globalized, fluid, and networked societies that now characterize many Western societies.

Sociologists across all disciplines – even those who know little about religion – are well aware of these macro-trends and how people seem to be forced to be 'individuals', choosing their own destinies, in what can at times seem a bewildering and precarious world. Yet at the same time that they are forced to be individuals, they also have increasing opportunities to embed themselves in networks of like-minded people, often online, to fulfil their needs for community. It's not just religious groups who are moving towards flatter, more networked-style modes of communication and shared leadership. Workplaces and civil society organizations are moving in this direction. So what people experience as a norm of interaction in secular spheres, they expect to be reflected in their religious or spiritual lives. That's why we think people will increasingly be attracted to emerging congregations, or start changing existing religious institutions so that they become flatter and more networked. Emerging Christians are leading the way in this regard, and that's what makes them so important.

There's nothing new about how sociological, political and religious trends interact with each other, of course – it's no accident that there are parallels between monarchies/empires and the structures of Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches; between democracies and some Protestant churches; and between networked models of governance and society and emerging

churches. It's not a simple cause and effect relationship, to be sure, but these spheres of life do seem to echo and interact with each other.

Before moving on, though, I just want to say a word about characterizing some forces as 'non-religious' and some as 'religious.' We write in the conclusion about how secularization itself also is a force that seems to be driving the emergence of the ECM. Is secularization a religious or a non-religious force? Does secularization – however it may be defined – actually hinder or help the vitality of religion? I'm a sociologist of religion who is convinced that the vitality of religion cannot be reduced to attendance numbers or adherence to traditional doctrinal beliefs. So I tend to argue that secularization as it is often understood in the West actually creates opportunities for increased religious vitality. And we see Emerging Christianity as evidence of that – it's an extremely rich and vital movement. The fact that it is not as concerned with perpetuating its own institutions as more traditional forms of religion are means that other sociologists of religion may dismiss it.

Wendy also asks about what we learned analytically from our comparison of the US and UK forms of the movement, as these are the main focus of our book. Indeed, the US/Northern Ireland comparison is the main focus, and Northern Ireland is an atypical part of the UK, to be sure. Northern Ireland emerged from the Troubles only in the late 1990s and is still in the throes of post-violence transition. Like the US, Northern Ireland remains far more conventionally 'religious' (in terms of church attendance and levels of belief) than the rest of the Western world. In his review of our book, Matthew picks up on this. He says:

> The empirical data gathered for the book are chiefly from the US and Northern Ireland, where the two authors are respectively based, and, while other contexts are engaged via the available secondary literature, this focus is sometimes reflected in the direction of the argument. For example, the counter-sectarian tendency of the ECM in the US and Northern Ireland is not reflected to anywhere near the same degree within ECM groups in England, Australia or New Zealand, in which emerging churches appear less vituperative, less aggressively reactionary, and more sanguine about their institutional and cultural proximity to mainstream churches.

Matthew is right to point this out. In the US, most Emerging Christians are dismayed about the role the religious right has played in politics, and many have been hurt by a judgemental and moralistic evangelical subculture (though not all Emerging Christians are former evangelicals). In Northern Ireland, Emerging Christians are dismayed about the role the churches played during the Troubles and that religion has played throughout centuries of conflict. They also feel victimised by a judgemental and moralistic evangelical subculture. Matthew notes that in other parts of the world, counter-sectarian and reactionary tendencies have not driven Emerging Christianity to the same extent. I still think that for those who become Emerging Christians after other experiences of Christianity in other parts of the world, there is usually some sort of 'deconversion' experience, or negative experience of religion that drives them. Most Emerging Christians have a Christian background – they are not secular 'converts' so to speak. So I don't think you can escape the reactionary element,

even in contexts beyond the US and Northern Ireland. But it may be a less wounded (and sometimes less angry) reaction.

In the book, we write somewhat more broadly about the UK in general, including the Fresh Expressions movement, post-evangelicalism, and the alt worship movement. Doug has written much more deeply on these trends himself, and would be able to speak much more eloquently about what makes Fresh Expressions and other UK-based Emerging groups different from the US. One initial point I would make, though, is that in the UK, Fresh Expressions is strongly associated with the Church of England and to some extent the Methodist Church, so there is a much more structured way for Emerging Christians to relate to traditional denominations than there is in the US. I expect this structured relationship will make a significant difference in how Emerging Christianity develops in the US and the UK over the coming years. This also gets to Wendy's question about the money. Our research did not systematically trace where emerging congregations get their financial support. In the UK, I think Fresh Expressions may have a better chance at start-up funding or sustained financial support, due to structural relationships with parish churches, bishops or the wider church. Relationships with denominations in the US would appear more ad hoc. Having said that, we know that some Emerging Christians see financial relationships with traditional churches or denominations as a hindrance. Funding from sources like this imposes on their freedom to innovate, on their freedom to resist institutionalization. I also don't have the sense that emerging congregations survive from the sale of products. Rob Bell or Peter Rollins, as individuals, make money from their books and talks, but this doesn't translate directly into supporting various communities. Leaders of emerging congregations are not striving to create mega-church campuses that have coffee shops, gift shops, and recreational opportunities for the whole family. Rather, my sense is that most emerging congregations are sustained by the relatively modest financial contributions of those who attend – not to mention the hours they spend investing in building the community. Many emerging congregations intentionally meet in very humble surroundings and even reject offers of permanent buildings, seeing property as an unnecessary expense when the church should be investing more in 'social justice.'

As far as Wendy's question about whether the ECM has cousins in other religious traditions. What we say about this is buried in a footnote on page 210:

The ECM has spread from evangelicalism and influenced Christians among Mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Greek Orthodox congregations. There are now emergent cohorts in every major city including Atlanta, Baltimore, Charlotte, Kansas City, and Seattle. The movement also has spawned many special interest emergent groups like Emergent Women, Globemerging, Presbymergent, and Queermergent. Since around 2005, Christian publishers have devoted entire book series, and Christian bookstores set apart entire bookshelves, for emerging products featuring bright, pop-culture echoes of style and colors. Most surprising, the spread of the movement is evident in recent moves towards recognizing "Emergent Jews" and even "Emergent Muslims."

I am not aware of any surveys that have counted emergent Jews or emergent Muslims – so while they may exist, we don't know how many there are.

I would add that we consider new monastic communities (which often include Catholics) as part of the ECM, embedding Catholics within Emerging Christianity – whether or not they retain a Catholic identity alongside an Emerging orientation. (We use the term religious orientation rather than religious identity in the book to try and capture the fluidity and flexibility of Emerging Christianity.) In the Ikon collective in Northern Ireland, although most were from evangelical backgrounds, there were two prominent, practising Catholics on the small core team. And I also would see developments like the Catholic Worker Movement as a precursor or 'cousin' to Emerging Christianity.

In her question about race and class, Wendy gets to a key demographic question: Why is the ECM disproportionately white, middle class, and highly-educated? In some senses, it could even be said that the ECM is Christianity for the 'creative middle classes', a point Matthew has made. Women are also under-represented in the leadership of the ECM. Emerging Christians often beat themselves up about their lack of demographic diversity, especially since they want diversity within their congregations. But these demographic facts remain. This may be due in part to the fact that it is the creative middle classes who are able to survive reasonably well, even thrive, in the individualized, globalized, networked society I described at the beginning of my remarks. They are less likely to have been left behind and struggling to make ends meet. So they have enough leisure time to invest what's necessary to be part of an emerging congregation. In a networked congregation where people are expected to participate, dialogue and be involved, there's not much room for 'free riders.'

We found some evidence that some ethic groups – African Americans, Latinos – can experience Emerging Christians as naïve or paternalistic. This is most likely to be seen when Emerging Christians start new monastic communities in deprived neighborhoods – they come with the best intentions of living with and among people of a different class and race, but often struggle to develop equal, meaningful relationships. On pages 151-152, we quote emerging leader Kelly Bean, who writes of her community's struggle with this issue:

Kelly Bean, one of the founders of Urban Abbey in Portland, Oregon, writes of her awareness of her group as a middle-class white haven. Casting herself as "the dreamer," she writes in a stylized "once upon a time" format, with passages such as:

Despite the denominational and theological hybridity, there was no denying it: in this ethnically diverse neighborhood the Abbeyites were all white, white as could be. The teenaged son of the dreamer attended a multicultural high school where as a white boy he was an ethnic minority. He enjoyed challenging the Abbeyites, reminding them that their stated values and ideals were somewhat disconnected from this reality. Following the advice of the wise Dr. John Perkins, the dreamer began to attend neighborhood gatherings and to learn from longtime neighbors. Her dear friend Donna helped by sharing her own experiences and perspective as a black woman in the predominantly white Pacific Northwest. One relationship at a time, one story after another, is how the transformation takes place. The little abbey was open to be taught.

I will conclude with just a short comment on Wendy's question about historical precursors. I suppose through Christian and religious history there have always been reform groups springing up on the margins, trying to challenge and change what they see as the shortcomings of the institutions of the day. Whenever I speak about the ECM, there are comments like: 'They're like the Quakers'; 'They're like the Jesus People'; 'They're like the early Methodists'. And so on. Structurally, they do occupy similar space as these historical

movements. Emerging Christians use resources from their religious tradition to critique that tradition – in this sense, we describe them as 'institutional entrepreneurs.' But while most institutional entrepreneurs try to institutionalize the changes they make, Emerging Christians see a danger in institutionalization. To institutionalize would be to stop the 'conversation' about faith, and for them, conversing is in many ways *the* faith journey. You must keep asking questions, but be suspicious if you ever arrive at 'final' answers. It remains to be seen what sort of impact a movement that intentionally resists institutionalization can have. For many Emerging Christians, success might mean the dissolving of their congregation or community, with members scattering to other communities and extending their influence. Success may mean seeing denominations change their structures and their operating practices, due to pressure from those who have been influenced by Emerging Christianity – whether they recognize the pressure as coming from the ECM or not. Such slippery ideas of what success looks like make it a particularly difficult movement for sociologists to evaluate. I suppose the 'iron law' is that most movements like this either fade away, like the Jesus People, or institutionalize – some quite 'successfully', like the Methodists. But that presupposes an idea of 'success as institutions', which Emerging Christians explicitly reject.