

Dear Peter,

This is an article I wrote in February 2006 while studying at Regent College, Vancouver. From what I understand, the information contained in it is still relevant. Mr. Driscoll is passionate, engaging and Calvinistic; nonetheless, I am a little concerned by the uncritical approach that Australians are taking toward his belief that we have to present 'Jesus on steroids' as the new panacea for unbelief. As Presbyterians, I don't think many of us need to be convinced that Jesus will execute the will of God without compromise and with terrifying violence, as well as grace without measure to the undeserving penitent. What Driscoll seems to be calling for, however, is a new generation of elders/pastors (dudes) who are more Charles Bronson and less Hugh Grant. After spending the last 25 years attempting to cultivate a sensitive side and tuck our shirts in, my fear is that we will be tempted to act rashly and jettison our meagre and fragile accomplishments. Macho dudes may have greater evangelistic success with Aussie heathen than respectful wimps, but we will need to consider the cost of a total Driscoll 'dude' makeover; for instance, we will need to allocate additional funds to provide each Session meeting with a slab of beer and hot chicken wings. And further, who exactly is going to tell our wives that we are back in charge and waiting for hot dinners? Like the next beleaguered and desperate pragmatist, I am up for anything that works, but I am wondering if we have given the wimpy love thing a fair shake – our time may be just around the corner. What is most interesting about the Mark Driscoll phenomenon, in my meekest estimation, is that Australia now seems to have lost the formula for producing loud, aggressive, homophobic yobs that are mates with Jesus; why else would we bother paying \$28 to see a foreign reincarnation of the 'Aussie bloke'? Brother, surely we can discover our own 'great white yob' if we look hard enough! Perhaps we can get Sam Newman teaching pastoral etiquette and Gordon Ramsay teaching elocution at our colleges to harvest our latent talents; after all, we don't want to miss out on the next big revival.

#### What is going on in the emergent church?

This week I had the opportunity to attend an elders' conference run by Acts 29 in Seattle. Its host was Mars Hill Church; with 5,000 in weekly attendance it is probably the largest church in Seattle. I went by invitation after expressing an interest to learn more about how an 'emergent' church looked. 'Emergent' is the name given to the new breed of churches that are trying to be non-denominational, faithful and contemporary. This movement should interest us all, and if it has not caught your attention yet, I am sure that it soon will. The pastor at Mars Hill is Mark Driscoll. He is 35 years old and has been pastor there for 10 years. The church grew out of a Bible study in his home. The extraordinary success of the church cannot be understated. Seattle has a church-going population of around 4%; possibly making it the least churching city in the United States. Pastor Driscoll has been named one of the 25 most influential men in Seattle. Acts 29 had its beginning here and has since planted 100 churches, with a failure rate of 6%, which is substantially lower than the average church plant failure rate of 80%. A number of these churches have congregations approaching and exceeding 1000 members. They have just been offered \$300,000,000 by a business consortium to plant 50 churches, one in each

capital city of the USA. That is \$6,000,000 per church plant. They have plans for going international and will no doubt succeed. This movement has the potential to be the dominant Evangelical influence throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I hope that this has caught your attention. My interest in all this was to discover what exactly is emergent about Acts 29. Mark Driscoll spoke for 2.5 hours, without stopping, on the role of the elder. It was clear from his presentation that he has a clear and uncompromising Evangelical perspective. He outlined his view of eldership, which was in conformity with the traditional Reformed perspectives with small modifications. His view of the parity of the elders was refreshing and his insistence that elders not be chosen because of their business acumen was also nice to hear. His view, which I am probably in agreement with, is that elders qualify themselves by being good carers and pastors of their families. In other words, model husbands and fathers. My concerns, however, began to emerge when he mentioned that he would not have a single man serve as elder, and insisted that childless elders should adopt children.

As the meeting progressed I was a little concerned about some of the other things being mentioned, but was so taken up by the confidence of the charismatic presenter that I did not properly reflect on them till the long drive back to Vancouver. In the interest of brevity I will list only three further concerns. I cannot be sure that these concerns are reflected throughout the whole movement, but I suspect that they are, as none of the 200 elders and pastors in the room challenged the statements. Firstly, all elders must be in complete conformity with the direction, vision, theology and unity of the church. The only person who assesses these (the gate-keeper) is the pastor himself. He makes it plainly known that the elder's job is not to critique the pastor or represent community concerns. He said, in partial jest, 'if you come after me they won't find your body'. Secondly, elders have to be pals with each other. It sounded to me that this was a bit of a boys' club. A prospective elder is disqualified if he doesn't want to go to ball games with the other elders, if he wishes to keep some aspects of his life private (e.g. number of times copulation occurs in one's domicile), or if he owns a lemon sweater. The last of these was a reference that only 'real men' need to be elders. I suppose that also disqualified most women. The last concern was to do with finance. He believed that it was the elders' business to examine the individual giving history of prospective elders, and anyone else. It occurred to me that this could be a little invasive.

Apart from these concerns, which may or may not be indicative of the emergent movement, the only other distinctive that was apparent was a propensity to refer to males as 'dudes' and the appropriation of the most common language available, including some mild vulgarities. A friend of mine summed the movement up as 'fundamentalists with beer and tattoos'. I am not sure if I completely agree, but I suspect his assessment may have some truth to it.

It would be a shame if the emergent movement will be characterised by rigid conformity when it promised to be so much more. My only hope at this stage is that I came away with the wrong impression. Until I get further information, I am afraid that it is only a

very slim hope. If anyone is interested in a cheap but smart lemon sweater, please give me a call.

Martin