

Introduction

Planting churches in Canada today involves an awareness that as of the year 2000, ninety percent of Canada is being considered urban, or operating under an urban agenda.¹ Relevant is also the increasingly pluralistic context that Canada finds itself in, with growing levels of diversity in religious affiliations, decreases in church affiliation and overall growth of the population claiming to possess 'no religion.'² Into this environment, *the open house*, a house church planting expression is developing in the city of Vancouver, British Columbia. This paper will address the key issue of how the postmodern worldview is informing Canadian urban church planting by using *the open house* as a case study.

A description of the specific context of *the open house* will be given first, with the geographical, cultural, and religious blueprint of the area and its people. Following this is a brief discussion on postmodernism, differentiating between postmodernity as "the era following modernity" and postmodernism as "an intellectual mood of the era."³ This discussion will also highlight the response of the emerging church to postmodernism. The majority of this paper will then focus on a critical evaluation of *the open house*, examining key features of its theology, structure and community life; how it is being formed, shaped, challenged and opposed by postmodernism.

¹ Geoff Tunnicliffe, "Mission Toronto '90," *World Christian* (February 1990), 18.

² 16.2% of Canadians now claiming 'no religion' on the 2001 Census. In 1971, this figure was less than 1%. Majority of Canadians (72%) still categorize themselves as Christian (Catholic or Protestant), which is down from 80% in the 1991 Census. All other major faiths showing an increase in membership, Muslims (128.9% from the 1991 Census) are now 2% of the Canadian population. Hindus, Buddhist, and Sikhs all showing increases of over 80% during the same time period and together make up about 3% of the total population in 2001. Christ Brunjes, "Canada's Religious Profile Becoming More Diverse," n.p. [cited 21 May 2002]. Online: <http://www.canadianchristianity.com/cgi-bin/na.cgi?nationalupdates/030521diverse>

³ Grenz, Stanley J., *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 13.

Hastings-Sunrise District of the city of Vancouver

Located in East Vancouver, just within the inner core of the city, Hastings-Sunrise has slightly over 33,000 of the 546,671 people living in the city of Vancouver.⁴ The Greater Vancouver area holds over two million people in twenty-one municipalities and is the third largest metropolitan area in Canada.⁵ The roadway, Commercial Drive, which boasts a long history of local business, the arts, entertainment, ethnic diversity, social awareness and the “alternative,” borders the community of Hastings-Sunrise and helps provide the “fusion of flavour” present in Hastings-Sunrise.⁶ The community has a large Chinese speaking population of 41.2%, followed by 36.4% English speaking, and 12.8% Italian, Vietnamese and Spanish.⁷ Religiously, a key feature of the city of Vancouver is the overwhelming percentage of the population (42.2%) claiming ‘no religious affiliation’ on the most recent Census.⁸ This is a significant difference from the overall Canadian picture mentioned earlier and provides a key contextual factor for *the open house*.

Hastings-Sunrise hosts a majority of single detached homes (57.5%), average household size of 3 individuals, largest age group of 20-39 year olds (32.4%), has 19.2% single parent families, and an average annual income of £24,000 (\$54,171Cdn).⁹ As an acknowledged limited glimpse, these statistics nevertheless

⁴“Hastings-Sunrise Community Statistics Census Data,” n.p. [cited 16 April 2007]. Online: <http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvcs/Census2001/Hastings03.pdf>

⁵ “Visitor Information,” n.p. [cited 16 April 2007]. Online: <http://www.vancouver.ca/visitors/htm>

⁶ Kyle Martin, “Where We Do Life,” n.p. [cited 10 March 2007]. Online: http://theopenhouse.ca/?page_id+6&w=life

⁷ Compared to the city of Vancouver as a whole, which is 49.4% English Speaking and 26.4% Chinese speaking. “Hastings-Sunrise Community Statistics Census Data,” n.p.

⁸ This category in the 2001 Census included agnostic, atheist, Humanist, Darwinism, and ‘no religion.’ Other percentages are Catholic (19%), Protestant (17.4%), Buddhist (6.9%), Other Christian (6.1%), Sikh (2.8%), Jewish (1.8%), Muslim (1.7%), Hindu (1.4%), and Other religions (0.8%). “2001 Vancouver Community Profile,” n.p. [cited 16 April 2007]. Online: <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/Profil01/CP01/Details/Page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=5915022&Geo2=PR&Code2=59&Data=Count&SearchText=vancouver&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=59&B1=Population&Custom=>

⁹ Average income is below the city of Vancouver average of \$69,190. All statistics from 2001 Census. “Hastings-Sunrise Community Statistics Census Data,” n.p.

are a starting point in shaping the identity and ethos of the community of Hastings-Sunrise and the contextual setting for *the open house*.

Discussion of Postmodernism and Emerging Church

Before entering into the critical evaluation of how *the open house* is being informed by the postmodern worldview, it is appropriate to discuss what exactly is meant by use of the term ‘postmodern.’ As mentioned earlier, postmodernism, as a primarily Western phenomenon, has been described as the ‘mood of the era,’ or the “intellectual boundary between the old world and the other side.”¹⁰ There is debate about the validity of labelling eras of time or worldviews as ‘post’, as well as the awareness that “dissatisfaction with the current times” is an reoccurring, “old phenomenon.”¹¹ Nevertheless, “there is widespread agreement that our world is changing – and changing rapidly. Whether one considers this phenomenon of change a good or bad thing, it is virtually impossible to deny its reality...the present intellectual atmosphere has come to be known as postmodernism.”¹²

Grenz states that the term postmodern might have first been coined in the 1930s, but did not gain widespread attention until the 1970s. It first referred to “architecture, then academic circles...eventually it surfaced as the description for a broader cultural phenomenon...postmodernism signifies the quest to move beyond modernism, specifically, it involves a rejection of the modern mind-set, but launched

¹⁰ Brian McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 70.

¹¹ Frederica Mathewes-Green, “Under the Heaventree.” in *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*. (ed. Leonard Sweet; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 153.

¹² Millard J. Erickson, “The Challenge of Postmodernism.” in *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism*. (ed. Millard J. Erickson; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 13.

under the condition of modernity.”¹³ Particular is the rejection of the modern notions of knowledge as certain, objective and good.¹⁴ While modernity was a “rage for order, regulation, stability, singularity and fixity;” postmodernism is a “rage for chaos, uncertainty, otherness, openness, multiplicity and change.”¹⁵ Framed in different terms, postmodernism embraces centrelessness, lack of absolute truths, celebration of diversity, movement from an objectivist to constructionist perspective and signals the end of the ‘meta-narrative’ and the end of science.¹⁶ Another awareness is that in postmodernism, there is “extreme openness to spiritual things” - spiritual but not religious.¹⁷

A recent response to this atmosphere is the emerging church development.

Emerging churches, according to Eddie Gibbs, are “missional communities arising from within postmodern culture and consisting of followers of Jesus who are seeking to be faithful in their place and time.”¹⁸ He brings a warning as well. Emerging church seeks to:

“dismantle ideas of church that simply are not viable in postmodern culture. Neither the gospel nor the culture demands these expressions of faith. Emerging churches remove modern practices of Christianity, not the faith itself...many of us do not know what a postmodern or post-Christendom expression of faith looks like. Perhaps nobody does. But we need to give these leaders space to have this conversation, for this dismantling needs to occur if we are to see the gospel translated for and embodied in twenty-first-century Western culture.”¹⁹

¹³ Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 2.

¹⁴ Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 4.

¹⁵ Leonard Sweet, *Aquachurch: Essential Leadership Arts for Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture* (Loveland: Group, 1999), 24.

¹⁶ Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 8-48.

¹⁷ Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 86-88.

¹⁸ Eddie Gibbs, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 28.

¹⁹ Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 29.

The emerging church response has been that “if you have a new world, you need a new church. You have a new world.”²⁰ In terms of answering the question of how Christians relate to culture, the emerging church states that there is a place for ‘adapting to’ and ‘arising from’ culture. “We won’t need a new religion per se, but a new framework for our theology. Not a new Spirit, but a new spirituality. Not a new Christ, but a new Christian.”²¹ There is balance of what must change and what must not. Finding this balance is what urban church planters in Canada are facing today. Now, taking for example, *the open house*.

Theology and Mission of The Open House

The open house, recently featured in a *Relevant* magazine article on spirituality in Vancouver,²² claims four key values that line up with their mission statement, “a missional community walking in a Jesus direction.” These four values are mission, community, walking, and Jesus.²³ Kyle and Anna Martin, along with friend Kristin Cato (all in their late 20’s) were the initial members when they started meeting for weekly meals and prayer in late 2005. The vision to create “a community of followers of Jesus Christ who have a heart for our city...are unified by faith, committed to serving our community and compelled to touch the world with the love and hope of Christ” was put into action. Now in Spring 2007, they have contact with over fifty people, who find themselves involved in several ‘spaces’ of *the open house*. These spaces or ‘expressions’ are created intentionally to how people learn; through extreme public, social, personal and one on one intimate gatherings. These include two Tuesday night house church gatherings, monthly public gatherings (at local

²⁰ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 11.

²¹ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 14.

²² “The Scene: Vancouver,” *Relevant Magazine* (March/April 2007), 5-6.

²³ For a description of these four values, along with other features of *the open house*, see Appendix I, page 18.

community centre), arts nights, coffee shop get togethers, pub nights, sports, and social justice events to name a few.

The theology of *the open house* is definitely in reaction to modern theology, particularly in the language used to describe their key elements:

The theology that [we] teach is not one of “you are bad, so become good by following Jesus,” but instead that there is something unique and valuable in your life that God has put there that needs to be used for life and not for death. There are those things people do in their life that destroys them, and there are things that make them alive, we focus on that. We focus on a present life now, where heaven comes to earth, and less about the future heaven/hell constructs. We talk about a future, but a holistic one that is more focused on creating a future for our family, and the people in this world. We also try to be incarnational in our approach, and help people see how they are the incarnation in everything they do.²⁴

Their influences include Stanley Grenz, Rob Bell and N.T. Wright who are helping shape *the open house* into a community who are “helping people toward what they would call a ‘new humanity,’ a new way of being human in the world.”²⁵ As an official church plant of the Canadian Convention of Southern Baptist’s, *the open house* is funded and mentored by the CCSB, but this affiliation is rarely, if ever mentioned by those involved. While they hold to the statements of faith of the CCSB, there is fluidity in their practice, related to their particular context and self-theologizing.²⁶

This desire to be self-theologizing and to in fact resist being too closely identified with one particular denomination, model of church, or church movement is common to the emerging church experience. As Gibbs mentions, “from a postmodern perspective, the ultimate question is, Why is it important to label oneself... Aren’t labels simply artificial divisions that make us feel safe or help us exert control? What

²⁴ Kyle Martin, Letter to the author, 13 March 2007.

²⁵ Martin, Letter to the author, 13 March 2007.

²⁶ Such as affirmation of different modes of baptism of those wishing to become members.

is obvious is that the ecclesiastical or theological label one decides to wear is of far less concern to emerging churches than how one relates to the gospel and culture.”²⁷ This focus off of labels, even to the point that *the open house* prefers language such as ‘spaces’ and ‘expressions’ versus ‘house church/cell church/seeker-sensitive/seeker-driven/base community/emerging church,’ etc. is evidence of the postmodern influence.²⁸

Two key areas that inform their theology and mission are related to absolute truth and pluralism. In one sense they are opposing postmodernisms rejection of absolute truth, by identifying Jesus as their absolute, the standard against which they measure their lives and mission. On the other hand, in relation to the topics of discussion in the church, language is important, so both Kyle and Kristin (as the Tuesday night facilitators) avoid speaking about absolute truth and biblical authority and instead emphasis Jesus and the Bible as a main source of understanding Him. The embrace of pluralism, as well, seems to be a double-sided coin. There is a definite acceptance of pluralism as the reality of the culture, but also as an ideology. In Kyle’s words, “pluralism can be a good thing, if we understand it in light of its original meaning; that more views allow us to truly understand why we do things a certain way and how we can learn from other people...in terms of religious pluralism, I think it serves the same purposes, but maturity in Christ is being able to see the differences between good and evil and then being able to point them out.”²⁹

²⁷ Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 39.

²⁸ This may also be more understood as a distinctive of being Canadian; often preferring to be known for what one is *not*, versus what one is *for*, and also wanting to be distinct from Americans, where much of the emerging church publications are originating. One label Kyle does not mind is ‘contemporary.’ Contemporary in that they are trying to allow their model to be represented by the people in their community and neighbourhood, “people learn in so many different spaces that for us to stick with one model we would become irrelevant with 75% of our neighbours.” From March 13, 2007 email.

²⁹ Martin, Letter to the author, 13 March 2007.

To this end, the open house also values a rejection of metanarratives, “a summary of the bible story will not cut it any longer. People are sceptical and should be and we (church leaders) should be more inclined to read parallel material, and understand the story behind the story, not only for our hearers, but also for ourselves.”³⁰ This seems to echo some of Newbigin’s words³¹ but is in contrast to what Grenz sees as the very area the church needs to stand its ground, in “rejecting the rejection of the metanarrative.”³²

The Incarnation can be seen at the crux of the mission of *the open house*. All they are being and becoming is viewed incarnationally. This emphasis on ‘being’ the gospel versus ‘doing’ or ‘sharing’ is a rejection of the modern forms of evangelism and missions.³³ The focus is on building the Kingdom versus building the institutional church. There is a rekindling and refocus on ‘ancient spirituality,’ and a journey down the Celtic road versus the more modern Roman road.³⁴ It is a focus on subsuming missions (plural) into the Mission of God, and a more holistic approach.³⁵ They do not see culture as primarily secular or sacred, but as “the medium in which we can

³⁰ Martin, Letter to the author, 13 March 2007.

³¹ “A Christian congregation is a community in which, through the constant remembering and rehearsing of the true story of human nature and destiny, an attitude of healthy scepticism can be sustained, a scepticism which enables one to take part in the life of society without being bemused and deluded by its own beliefs about itself.” Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 229.

³² Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 163. Also, “we cannot totally affirm the central tenet of postmodernism as defined by Lyotard – the rejection of the metanarrative...our world is more than a collection of incompatible and competing local narratives...there is a single metanarrative encompassing all peoples and all times,” 165.

³³ For example: postmodern “evangelism offers an invitation into the kingdom instead of a way to get to heaven...more dialogue and listening than preaching and telling...being evangelism versus doing evangelism.” From Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 203-208. Also, Darrell L. Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church’s Witness* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 8. “There has been a growing sense of discomfort [in North America] with many evangelistic tactics and strategies that have emerged since the onset of the revivals in the 17th century.”

³⁴ Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 205.

³⁵ Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church’s Witness*, 33. Incarnational witness as holistic and defined in terms of reconciliation; “It is not possible to describe the healing and saving purposes of God too comprehensively.”

communicate Christ's truth in relevant ways to others."³⁶ As Sweet articulates, "the problem of how Christians relate to culture is as old as Christianity itself...The ultimate act of communication in history, the Incarnation, means that Christ becomes a part of culture and can't be understood apart from culture."³⁷ The caution here is that as much as Christ becomes a culture, He is also outside culture, transcultural. There is a place for a balanced approach, for as much as theological history has great triumphs of adapting the gospel to many different contexts; it also has "numerous examples of the inappropriate accommodation of Christian faith to various ideologies and cultural norms. This checkered past confirms the vitality of Christian theology while warning of the dangers of too closely associating it with any particular form of cultural expression."³⁸ An ongoing missional challenge for *the open house* will be holding this tension of Christ *above* but working *through* culture.

Leadership, Structure and Form

Answering the question of how and who will lead *the open house* is an ongoing, intentional deliberation. While postmodernism would welcome a decentralization of leadership and organizational structures, this has not been a practical reality for *the open house*. Listen to Kyle's perspective, "My first thoughts were that we could get to the point of being totally 'lay-led' but I have changed my opinion. I think at the end of the day there needs to be a 'go to' person. Not traditionally like a Pastor-CEO model, but more like a network coordinator. I have heard about and witnessed many organic church plants die because of the mere fact that no one wanted the buck to stop with

³⁶ Martin, "What we Value," n.p. [cited 10 March 2007]. Online: http://www.theopenhouse.ca/?page_id=6&w=value

³⁷ Leonard Sweet, "Garden, Park, Glen, Meadow." in *The Church in Emerging Culture*, 13-14.

³⁸ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke. *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 4.

them. This is a bigger issue here in Canada, where we like to critique the leaders far more than be one.”³⁹ The issue of church plants dying for lack of leadership is a known concern for emerging churches, they will either “thrive for many years as a small circle of friends who don’t call themselves a church and don’t invite too many people to join” or the “little church will die after a few months or years.”⁴⁰ To avoid this early death, *the open house* has two recognized leaders, Kyle (currently full-time employed by *the open house* who anticipates going bi-vocational in the next year) and Kristin (bi-vocational). They each facilitate a Tuesday night house church gathering and divide up administrative responsibilities with Kyle as the network leader/coordinator and Kristin with local and global missions and mobilizations. In terms of decision-making, they have regular ‘community forums’ where the whole community comes together for vision setting and evaluation.

Pastoral care is where perhaps, a postmodern distinction arises. With the focus on incarnational community and mutual resourcing, pastoral care is relationship-based and primarily given one member to another, as opposed to a hierarchical ‘top-down’ approach. Gibbs states that the main challenges for postmodern church leaders are “pursuing the kingdom and motivating others to do the same, yet without using the primary tool of modernity: control.”⁴¹ For *the open house*, this translates into how pastoral care is done as well as the teaching components of the Tuesday house church gatherings. All is done in an environment of mutual giving and sharing. While Kyle and Kristin will give background information to a biblical text, the discussion then begins, as each member in a sense becomes a ‘local theologian.’ The focus is

³⁹ Martin, Letter to the author, 13 March 2007.

⁴⁰ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 97.

⁴¹ Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 193.

not on conformity, or even unity in thought, but in honouring diversity and common commitment to ‘walking in a Jesus-direction.’ It is here that *the open house* has found commonality with base communities as characterized by an “absence of alienating structures, by direct relationships, by reciprocity, by a deep communion, by mutual assistance, by communality of gospel ideals, by equality among members.”⁴²

The structure and form of *the open house* is characterized as ‘being different;’ different from established church and from traditional forms of worship. They are different to also address the Canadian context of their recreation-based city and their neighbourhood. “We meet on Tuesdays because it worked for most people, because Canadians like to have their weekends free, and because we thought it would be good to begin teaching how church could be different by meeting on a different day.”⁴³ This emphasis on difference is again in part a reaction against modern expectations of consistence and predictability.⁴⁴ Schwarz and McLaren both point to ‘systems thinking’ as the way forward in postmodern culture, “a new systems approach to program – an approach that anticipates change.”⁴⁵ The theme is change, fluidity, and flexibility when speaking of church structure and organization.

For *the open house*, accountability is found less in the denominational affiliation, although they have a new ‘coach’ recently assigned to them, and more in a network

⁴² Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), 4.

⁴³ Martin, Letter to the author, 13 March 2007.

⁴⁴ John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity and the Future of the Church* (Darton, Longman and Todd: London, 2000), 35. Other characteristics of the McDonaldization theory include efficiency, calculability and control that Drane applies to the modern church and why so many of today’s people struggle so much with it.

⁴⁵ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 42. For biotic principles of church growth see Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Practical Guide to a New Approach* (Moggerhanger: British Church Growth, 1996).

based initiative, *Resonate.ca*; an online community of likeminded planters. This network provides feedback, support and resources to Canadian church plants. The emphasis here is on commonality of practice versus 'brand.' Virtually every denomination or non-denomination is represented and valued equally. The strength of this network comes from its diversity, not in spite of it. Networking is a common theme in emerging churches, not only for how the individual church is organized,⁴⁶ but amongst churches as well.⁴⁷ There is strength in this networking, as opposed to a more modern 'territorial' perspective. More can be accomplished for the Kingdom by working together than separately, even despite doctrinal differences.⁴⁸

To this end, *the open house*, also recognizes the transience of their people and the reality of 'comings and goings.'⁴⁹ That members may move on to other plants and ministries is in fact encouraged and anticipated. The intentionality of using the word 'open' allows freedom for members to join the various spaces as time and proximity allow. Thus, even membership is defined differently. It is not about taking a class, being baptized and signing a form. In fact, *the open house* resists all attempts to determine 'who is in' and 'who is out.' Membership is relationship-based. They are trying to avoid church being equated to program and activity, and rather identify church as people. Membership is defined by, "I've been trying to live a different kind of life," not who shows up on Tuesdays. Emerging churches, "abhor the idea of church as a meeting, a place of routine...church is a people, a community, a rhythm,

⁴⁶ Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), 43.

⁴⁷ Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 109.

⁴⁸ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 62. Even the word 'accomplishing' is modern, McLaren would argue for networks with a variety of traditions for the purpose of 'trading up spirituality;' the idea that diversity brings depth to quality versus increase in quantity.

⁴⁹ Particularly noticed in the Hastings-Sunrise district, where the rate of mobility (the population of the community that has moved since the last Census) is 38.9%, with the rate for the whole of the city of Vancouver being 51.7%. From "Hastings-Sunrise Community Statistics Census Data," n.p.

a way of life, a way of connectedness with other Christ followers in the world.”⁵⁰ This ‘relaxed’ approach to membership and commitment poses its own set of problems for *the open house* (financial giving is inconsistent, lay-leadership is harder to ‘coerce,’ and accountability becomes relationship versus institution-based) but is preferred to a modern model of control and efficiency.⁵¹

Community and Communication

Finding a place to belong, to feel at home in and to be authentically known, is a key feature of what those in postmodern culture are looking for. Postmodernism as post-individualistic coincides well with the Christian practice of communality.⁵² The key distinction from modernism is the ordering of believing, behaving, and belonging. Postmodernism places priority on belonging first, which is related to the tenet of ‘truth as relative to a specific community’ and as such “tends to be a communal.”⁵³ The experience of *the open house* has been that belonging comes first, followed then by believing and behaving; “people need to feel like they can come as they are and take part in whatever we are doing, whether its in a gathering or out in the community. By feeling they belong they can begin to explore Jesus and believe in his teachings and who he says he is. Then the behaviours begin to change.”⁵⁴

Another aspect of their community life that is also being informed by postmodernism include the place of narrative, the telling of ones story, not from a pulpit, but from

⁵⁰ Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 115.

⁵¹ Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*, 29.

⁵² The individual Christian is always understood in the community aspect. “The individual Christian is constitutionally dependent: he or she is part of an organic whole that lives and functions only as all its parts exercise their mutual interdependence.” From Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church’s Witness*, 26.

⁵³ Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 8.

⁵⁴ Martin, Letter to the author, 13 March 2007.

within a circle. Hebblethwaite shares this focus on circle (versus pyramid) as where “people can turn and face each other, and where they can know and love each other, and where everyone can be known and loved.”⁵⁵ *The open house* uses food around a table to facilitate this focus on ‘circle’ and ‘turning to face each other.’ Every gathering involves food and drink, and mutual sharing of each other’s daily story.⁵⁶ This focus on narrative is seen as a postmodern response to modernism. Crouch claims, “the certainties of the modern era are lost...the new generation...[is] much more interested in narrative, or mystery or just nose rings.”⁵⁷ This post-rational narrative is a ‘bottom-up’ approach, starting with ‘my story’ and moving to ‘His-story.’⁵⁸ The house church model of church planting is where this narrative style of teaching and learning can be seen in its most natural of setting, the home: “here we can teach each other by example, by questions and answers, drawing everybody into the teaching and learning process, building not individual head-knowledge...but corporate understanding.”⁵⁹

Communication for *the open house* means that *how* something is communicated is as important as *what* is communicated. Postmodernism’s rejection of the certainty and objectivity of knowledge⁶⁰ means that postmodern communication will be more humble, authentic and open to response. This is evident in *the open house*’s use of dialogue, online blog’s and email listserv that allow for immediate reaction and evaluation. Also informing communication in *the open house* is the focus on journey

⁵⁵ Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Basic is Beautiful* (London: Fount, 1993), 30.

⁵⁶ The term ‘meating’ given to a style of eating and learning, as used by Jesus. Coined by Wolfgang Simson, *Houses That Change The World* (Carlisle: OM Publishing, 1998), 82.

⁵⁷ Andy Crouch, “Life after Postmodernity,” in *The Church in Emerging Culture*, 65.

⁵⁸ Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*, 173.

⁵⁹ Simson, *Houses That Change The World*, 217.

⁶⁰ Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 166.

as more important than destination.⁶¹ Here, Drane is focusing on ‘midwife teaching.’ The goal is to understand how people learn; the approach is to “draw existing knowledge out of the learner” and assist in “giving birth to their own ideas, thereby making their own tacit knowledge explicit and at the same time elaborating it.”⁶² This focus on how people learn and the communal aspects of postmodernism leads McLaren to declare, “don’t worry about the content of the conversations. Just get them going and see what happens.”⁶³ A critique could be that not worrying about the content may mean that evangelism becomes safe and muted. Quite the opposite, McLaren and Ward suggest; evangelism becomes dance, no topic is off limits, and the potential of growth for both parties is endless.⁶⁴

A point of disconnect between *the open house* and postmodernism, is found in their communication of hope and the potential for a good future for the earth and its people. Because postmodernism asserts that the world has no centre, optimism is replaced with a “gnawing pessimism” and “gone is the belief that every day...we are getting better and better.”⁶⁵ This lack of hope for the future is foreign to *the open house* who hold to a positive view of the ‘already but not yet’ Kingdom of God.⁶⁶ McLaren calls this an eschatology of hope, looking ahead in constructive ways; an eschatology that says, “you ain’t seen nothing yet!”⁶⁷ This departure from the pessimism of postmodernism may be a distinct way in which *the open house* of the

⁶¹ Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*, 177.

⁶² Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*, 177.

⁶³ Brian McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize: Evangelism as Dance in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 135.

⁶⁴ McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, 11-17. Ward, *Liquid Church*, 44. Ward places this emphasis on dance in a theology of God; *perichoresis* - the dance of God, the relationship of the Trinity.

⁶⁵ Grenz, *A Primer for Postmodernism*, 7.

⁶⁶ Kyle Martin, Telephone Interview, 13 April 2007.

⁶⁷ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 152.

Hastings-Sunrise community in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada claims allegiance with the universal and global church of history that is 'sure of what it hopes for and certain of what it does not see.'

Conclusion

There is no doubt that life in the Canadian urban context presents a great opportunity for church planting today. Postmodernity exemplifies life in Canada, to the point that most Canadians don't talk about postmodernity, they just live it.⁶⁸ What is the church's response then; to resist this postmodernity or to adapt and work within in, as a culture that is worthy of being embodied by the Christian faith? Grenz suggests the latter, "to reach people in the new postmodern context, we must set ourselves to the task of deciphering the implication of postmodernism for the gospel...we must claim the new postmodern context for Christ by embodying the Christian faith in ways that the new generation can understand."⁶⁹

The greater concern is answering how appropriate and necessary is it for postmodernism, as an *ideology* or *worldview*, to be informing, specifically, urban church planting. By using *the open house* as an example, this paper has shown several significant areas where postmodernism is indeed impacting theology and mission, leadership, structure and form; along with community and communication. There have been points of concern and warning, but as observed, often areas of agreement and potential for how postmodernism can provide a fresh perspective, for allowing the question to become about joining the mission of God versus merely

⁶⁸ "We Canadians are coming to define a new sociological "post-modernity," characterized by multiple, flexible roles and identities." From Michael Adams, *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada and the Myth of Converging Values* (Toronto: Penguin books, 2003), 82.

⁶⁹ Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 10.

'doing church.' It allows yet another platform for the ageless invitation to be given yet again: "we would love for you to join us, wherever you are on the spiritual journey, as we discover our place in this world."⁷⁰

Word Count: 5443

⁷⁰ Martin, "Who We Are," n.p.

Appendix I

From “What We Value.”

Kyle Martin, *the open house*.

Online: http://theopenhouse.ca/?page_id+6&w=value

Mission

In Canada, much of our urban context is filled with diversity. We live in a mosaic of many cultures, languages, ethnicities, generations, and religions. In light of that the Christian church is often primarily associated with a building. We believe the Church is not limited or bound by walls. We desire to see the Church built up through spreading out. The person of Jesus continues to be central, but the church itself becomes decentralized, spreading Kingdom of God living and activity throughout the city. We don't see culture as sacred or secular but as the medium in which we can communicate Christ's truth in relevant ways to others. Our hope is that you become an advocate for your neighborhood and participate in what God is doing in your community.

Community

We don't profess to be experts of life, but we want to offer a place where you can build authentic relationships, reflect on the spiritual and the profound, ask questions, share in conversation and experience, laugh and cry. We desire to cultivate a humble, selfless life just as Jesus demonstrated in His life on earth. We value people and want to be generous in giving of our resources, time, talents, and gifts to serve and meet the needs of individuals, our community, and the world. We invite you to simply be in community with people who are committed to caring for each other and to making a difference in a world marred with brokenness and uncertainty. In essence, we want to be the kind of place where you feel like you belong. A place you can call “home.”

Walking

Although we, as a church body, enjoy dreaming and dialoguing about how we can serve and get involved in our community, the Bible says, “Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?” We want to be active in sharing God's love and bettering our world, not to see Christianity as “being in the club.” Each of us is meant to play a part in God's work on this earth, its natural resources and those who inhabit it. People are encouraged to be creative and use their talents and abilities, not only to grow individually and bless the church, but also to transform the places they live, work, and play with the message and acts of Christ.

Jesus

We believe that everyone is on a journey of becoming what they are meant to be. We believe we were created by God and are meant to know Him. We can do that through His Son, Jesus Christ. Walking in a “Jesus-direction” simply means that our life's journey involves getting to know Him more and more in relationship. So our sights are set on Jesus, and we walk through life heading in the direction that moves

us closer to Him. We may stumble along the way or travel with uncertainty of where the path may take us, but we move forward trusting that Jesus is guiding and leading the way to Himself. Not only do we walk toward Jesus, but we aspire to walk like Him. Jesus lived a life that was not only active in community development, but also in spiritual transformation. We believe the kind of life Jesus was living, perfectly and completely in connection and cooperation with God, is the best possible way for a person to live.

From “Who We Are.”

Kyle Martin, *the open house*.

Online: http://www.theopenhouse.ca/?page_id=6

The open house is a community of followers of Jesus Christ who have a heart for our city. We are unified by faith, committed to serving our community and compelled to touch the world with the love and hope of Christ.

Our community is called **the open house** because, just as our name suggests, we want to be a place where people from all different backgrounds and life experiences can come together in a safe and welcoming space to explore the things of God, the Bible, and life. Our vision is to see interconnected small groups working together to benefit their respective neighborhoods. These smaller communities can meet in homes, in coffee shops, on offices, in parks - anywhere where people can gather, not just to “do church”, but to be the Church.

We would love for you to join us, wherever you are on the spiritual journey, as we discover our place in this world.

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