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World Religions and Spirituality Project: Emerging Church

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WRSP EMERGING CHURCH PROFILE

FOUNDER/GROUP HISTORY

The roots of the Emerging Church in the US can be traced back to the success of evangelical megachurches (churches with regular attendance of approximately 2000 people) over the last two decades of the twentieth century. Although records of megachurches date back to the early 1900's, it was their exponential growth from the mid-1980's to the mid-1990's that catapulted these types of religious organizations into national discussions of religion (Thumma and Travis 2007). From this success, the Emerging Church developed via two different avenues.

The first avenue reflects organizational strategies implemented by evangelical megachurches to reach Post-Boomer Generations (those who were born after 1965) through worship services and programs targeted toward youth and young adults (Gibbs and Bolger 2005). These services were characterized by loud, passionate, contemporary music often with a rock-concert like vibe; raw, narrative preaching; witty, irreverent banter, and an appeal to all the senses through the use of visual aids, such as art and candles. Although subsidized by megachurches, these services and programs started a process of creating youth congregations that were organizationally autonomous from their parent(s) congregations, essentially creating "a church within a church." Over the last two decades these youth congregations developed their own organizational structures and theological positions that often stands in contrast to the megachurches from which they were birthed.

The second avenue revolves around the unique partnership that developed between evangelical megachurches and the business world during the last decades of twentieth century. As megachurches grew, staffs were reorganized according to corporate models with the senior pastor exercising authority akin to a CEO, rather than preacher and teacher. In some cases, megachurches poached employees from upper level management positions at top corporations to fill staff positions (Samson 2012). This

merger of corporate models and megachurch organizational structures created new territories for religious entrepreneurs. One such entrepreneur was Bob Buford, a successful business man who founded The Leadership Network, an organization that was commissioned to train pastors and congregational leaders in business-like methods of church growth. As part of their strategy to extend this model of leadership into the future, The Leadership Network began a program to develop leaders from Post-Boomer generations, particularly Gen-X. This became known as The Young Leaders Network and included the trailblazers of the Emerging Church, such as Tony Jones, Brian McLaren, Mark Driscoll, and Doug Pagitt.

In essence, The Leadership Network helped connect isolated, yet innovative, leaders of Post-Boomer churches in a series of conversations focused on the epistemological reorientation of evangelical practices and theologies. These young pastors, theologians, and congregational leaders wrestled with post-modern philosophies and theologies in an attempt to understand the role of the Christian Church in a post-Christian culture. Seeking to move past the 'outdated', modern categories and ways of doing ministry, they were asking questions that were uncomfortable to the penultimate modern institutions from which they had developed – megachurches and The Leadership Network. For example, rather than sharing best practices for church growth, these young leaders were asking why churches should be concerned with growth to begin with, consequently challenging evangelical norms and ways of doing things. Ultimately, these conversations served as a catalyst for a movement that coalesced organizationally into what we now refer to as the Emerging Church.

Comparing the transitions of the American Church to software upgrades, Driscoll (2006) claims that churches have progressed from Church 1.0 to 2.0 and then from 2.0 to 3.0. Church 1.0 was the traditional, institutional church that operated under assumed modern epistemologies and occupied a place of privilege. In essence, this was the denominational church of the early to mid-twentieth century

in which pastors were teachers who led by virtue of their spiritual authority, worship was accompanied by a robed choir, and congregations supported denominational missionaries around the world. Church 2.0 is the church that arose from within the Baby-Boomer generation and precariously straddles modern, late-modern, and post-modern epistemologies. These churches have been on the forefront of the culture war (Hunter 1991) attempting to regain the Church's lost position of privilege and power. Pastors in Church 2.0 are CEOs running businesses that market spiritual goods and services, missions are still global but they are run through the local congregation, and worship is characterized by the use of 1980s and 1990s pop culture (music and drama) to attract seekers. Many of these churches are megachurches, which, as noted above, are the progenitors of the Emerging Churches, or as Driscoll notes, Church 3.0. Leaving the culture wars rhetoric behind, Church 3.0 exists as a marginalized group in a post-Christian America, claiming that they are local outposts of Christianity amidst post-modern culture. In this case, pastors are framed as social movement leaders as well as local missionaries; congregations approach missions with a glocal mindset, juxtaposing the social forces of globalization within a localized space; and worship blends ancient practices, such as chanting, into contemporary styles of worship in what is referred to as ancient-future faith (Webber 1999).

The transition described by Driscoll (2006) involves two key changes: (1) changes in the cultural and religious context as well as (2) changes in the institutional form of churches, the first necessitating the second. Emerging leaders, often influenced by the same theologians and philosophers (Jones 2008), believed that the Western world was experiencing a transition from modern to post-modern culture and specifically that the US was moving from a Christian to a post-Christian nation. This change in culture necessitated adaptations in the institutional expression of the church. No longer could congregations rely on denominations or other 'modern' religious institutional arrangements, nor could they take it for granted that the average person had an elementary knowledge of Christianity. These adaptations

ultimately define the emerging church – a post-modern re-envisioning of all that was taken for granted in how church was done, a promise ‘to do’ church in a new way.

Since the original conversations amongst the members of the Young Leaders Network, the Emerging Church has developed into two different, yet interrelated, expressions. On the one hand, some emerging churches have created intentional communities in which congregants attempt to worship, recreate, socialize, work, and minister within artificial boundaries typically spanning only several neighborhood blocks. Blending the tradition of previous intentional communities, such as Catholic Worker Houses and Reba Place Fellowship, these emerging communities usually adopt twelve principles (detailed in the next section), known as the 12 Marks of New Monasticism, from which to operate (Rutba House 2005; Wilson-Hartgrove 2008). Hence, this expression of the Emerging Church is often referred to as New Monastic Communities (NMC).

On the other hand, most emerging churches are local congregations that network with one another through websites, conferences and publications. In 1998, theooze appeared online, offering networking opportunities for congregational leaders as well as resources for Emerging Church practices and theology (theooze 2014). This was followed by Emergent Village in 2001, which distinguished itself by developing localized cohorts of Emerging Church pastors (Emergent Village 2014). The first Emerging Church conference was held in conjunction with the 2002 National Pastors Conference (Bielo 2011), but since then Emerging Church conferences have become much more regional and tend to focus on creative expression and social justice as represented by the annual Wild Goose Festival. After the success of books such as McLaren’s (1998), *The Church on the Other Side*, and Sweet’s (1998), *SoulTsunami*, major publishing houses developed book series target toward Emerging Church practitioners, leading to more popular publications such as McLaren’s (2001), *A New Kind of Christian*, and Miller’s (2003), *Blue Like Jazz*. Nonetheless, apart from the weak network ties facilitated by

websites, conferences, and publications, the Emerging Church lacks a broad national structure, instead relying on local congregations for organizational continuity. Consequently, the Emerging Church is better framed as a movement, rather than a denomination or an official association of like-minded churches.

DOCTRINE/BELIEFS

Doctrinally, Emerging Churches do not differ dramatically from mainstream Protestantism. It is not doctrine that sets them apart from other forms of Protestantism but rather an orientation or set of beliefs about how to 'do church' (Wollschleger 2012). Over the course of five years Gibbs and Bolger (2005) interviewed 50 leaders in the emerging church in the US and Great Britain. From these interviews they identified nine key patterns that define the emerging church: "Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, and (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities" (Gibbs and Bolger 2005: 45).

Subsequent to Gibbs and Bolger (2005) there have been four key studies of Emerging Church values.

One of the consistent themes in this research is the connection between key beliefs held by the Emerging Church and their unique organization, rituals and practices. As such it makes it somewhat difficult to separate doctrines and beliefs from rituals and congregational organization. Nonetheless, broadly speaking there is a consensus among scholars as to five doctrines that characterize the Emerging Church. These are: (1) being missional (Bielo 2011; Packard 2012; Wollschleger 2012), (2) emphasis on place (Bielo 2011; Packard 2012; Wollschleger 2012), egalitarianism (Packard 2012; Wollschleger 2012), ancient-future worship (Bielo 2011; Wollschleger 2012), and (5) authenticity (Bielo 2011; Wollschleger 2012). These doctrines are detailed in the following paragraphs.

Being Missional

In their analysis of Christian practices amongst Post-Boomer populations, Flory and Miller (2008) note that many are adopting a set of collective ideologies that emphasize concrete, physical acts of spiritual commitment in the larger community through various types of service activities and cultural engagements. These concrete, physical acts constitute an “embodiment” of faith that stands in contrast to private, inward, spiritual ritualization of evangelicalism. Others have confirmed Flory and Miller’s findings through their research of emerging evangelical practices. For example Bielo (2011) examines the widely-used emerging category “being missional,” which is employed by the Emerging Church to define evangelism within local contexts. Unlike previous types of evangelism, which stressed individual gospel presentations or large revival events, “being missional” includes ways of speaking (e.g. using local dialects), everyday acts of service (e.g. moving into underserved neighborhoods), as well as the significance placed on the aesthetic presentation of religious symbols, buildings, and institutions. Essentially, “being missional” is a way of life that is meant to embody the sensual kingdom of God in that others are to feel, hear, touch, and see the gospel.

Emphasis on Place

As opposed to the diffused, segmented socio-geographical relationship of suburban megachurches (Wilford 2012), emerging churches organize their congregations around local neighborhoods, viewing such neighborhoods as missionary space. Originally meeting in individual’s homes, congregation leaders sought spaces that (1) would release homeowners from the burden of hosting weekly gatherings of people, and (2) would connect the congregation to local neighborhoods in order to cultivate intentional relationships with residents and businesses (Packard 2012). These relationships are intended to create a mutual affinity between church participants and neighborhood residents, not for the purpose of conversion, rather in place of conversion itself (Bielo 2011). In this sense, the Emerging Church’s

emphasis on place is a critique of Baby-Boomer evangelicalism, which views space as a container for conversion, as opposed to a vehicle for learning, developing a sense of self, and (re)creating the physical kingdom of God on earth (Bielo 2011). Consequently, many emerging churches locate in deleterious urban neighborhoods, embodying their faith in these socio-geographic spaces through micro-entrepreneurial service projects, such as litter cleanups, as well as beatification programs, such as public mural painting, while purposefully building relationship with individuals who inhabit these spaces as an 'ends' to mission, not a 'means' for mission.

Egalitarianism

Unlike the hierarchical bureaucracy of evangelical megachurches, emerging churches tend to flatten their organizational structure in an attempt to create equity amongst participants. Pastors of emerging churches typically arise from within congregations and, as opposed to traditional forms of legitimacy, such as a seminary education or a well-developed resume, are legitimized through their experiences in the congregation (Packard 2012). Furthermore, Emerging Church pastors are often bi-vocational, a product of small financial budgets as well as the desire for organizational flexibility (Packard 2012). Having a part-time pastor allows congregants to have more power over institutional procedures and initiatives. Packard (2012) labels this phenomena as the "Do-It-Ourself (DIO) approach," in which emerging churches, led mostly by congregants, contextualize religious practices, church programing, and ways of doing things based on local tastes and preferences. Thus, in place of a monolithic organizational structure, every emerging church congregant is encouraged to participate in all aspects of congregational decision-making (Wollschleger 2012). Collectively then, the Emerging Church is quite diverse, as every church will have a different feel and constitution.

Ancient-Future Worship

Bielo (2011) notes that, in its critique of Baby-boomer evangelicalism, the Emerging Church does not accept contemporary megachurch worship performances, nor does it necessarily create new expressions of worship. Rather the Emerging Church remembers, drawing on ancient traditions to satiate their worship desires. Originally identified by Webber (1999), ancient-future worship incorporates a variety of different practices into church services, including the use of liturgy, creedal recitation, public reading of prayers, burning incense, burning prayer candles, chanting, use of icons, establishing prayer stations, and adapting Protestant hymns to contemporary music (Bielo 2011, Wollschleger 2012). These practices serve two functions. First, since some of the practices are conducted by individual congregants (e.g., prayer stations), they preserve some semblance of personal spirituality; the practitioner is fixed on their relationship with God (Bielo 2011). This function is a carry-over from megachurch evangelicalism, out of which the Emerging Church developed as described in the previous section. Second, ancient practices tend to be expressive, allowing congregants to embody faith through their senses (Bielo 2011). In contrast to the perceived lack of sensualism in Baby-Boomer evangelicalism, emerging churches will use incense to engage congregants sense of smell, prayer beads to engage the sense of touch, art to engage visual senses, chanting to engage audio senses, and, as with other churches, communion bread and wine to engage congregants sense of taste. Thus, ancient-future worship allows emerging churches to be creative in their worship as they determine which ancient practices to incorporate and, consequently, which senses to arouse.

Authenticity

Taken as a whole, the preceding doctrines can be classified as the Emerging Church's attempt to achieve "radical authenticity" within Christianity (Wollschleger 2012). Seeking to overcome the modern divisions in Baby-Boomer evangelicalism – liberal vs. conservative, evangelical vs. mainline, sacred vs. profane –

the Emerging Church is deeply committed to the person of Jesus Christ (Wollschleger 2012) and to kingdom theologies that stress the visibility and achievability of heavenly ideals (Bielo 2011). Thus, as Jesus Christ was God's authentic incarnation on earth, the Emerging Church aspires to be the same. For some emerging churches, particularly NMC's, such incarnation means full immersion into communal life. For other emerging churches authenticity is embodied when genuineness supersedes decorum. In one instance, Wollschleger (2012) twice witnessed spontaneous laughter amongst congregants and their pastor during Eucharist in response to a comical event, noting that "no one felt the need to hold back or appeared uncomfortable with laughing in the midst of a 'holy' moment" (p. 77). In general, faith for the Emerging Church is not something to be performed solely on Sunday morning, rather something to be authentically embodied in public.

Although NMC's display the five doctrines outlined above, it is important to note their doctrinal variation from other emerging churches. As previously stated, NMC's adopt "The 12 Marks of New Monasticism" (Wilson-Hargrove 2008) as behavioral principles. These twelve principles are listed below with accompanying explanations.

1. Relocation to the Abandoned Places of the Empire – Physical relocation to underserved neighborhoods that are largely ignored by government services (e.g. policing) and commercial business (e.g. grocery stores). The term "Empire" is used by New Monastics to refer to the influential position of the American government and economy in global affairs and the ethical dilemmas that develop when given such influence.
2. Sharing of economic and material resources – Sharing, in this sense, occurs at varying levels. On the one hand, in some communities all finances and material objects, including underwear, are the property of the entire community and anyone has access to these resources equally. On the other hand, in other communities resources are maintained as private property but sharing

occurs freely between members of the community as well as their neighbors on an as-need basis; for example, when someone needs to borrow a community member's vehicle to drive to the grocery store.

3. Open Hospitality – the opening of homes to visitors or anyone in need of shelter. Although restrictions typically do apply (e.g. no drug use), such hospitality often includes, but is not limited to, meals, sleeping arrangements, use of showers, use of internet services, and recreational activities.
4. Lament for racial divisions and active pursuit of reconciliation between races and ethnicities – In this case, “reconciliation” refers to the active deconstruction of racialized structures and the reconstruction of new structures that facilitate racial and ethnic equity. An example of racial and ethnic reconciliation would be the establishment of a multi-cultural worship service which is led by individuals of varying races and ethnicities who share power equally.
5. Submission to a church body – Although New Monastic communities generally develop independent from a church body, they will pursue active membership or partnership in an organized church body in order to provide emotional and financial support, as well as leadership accountability.
6. Development of membership processes and intentional mentoring of potential members – Many New Monastic communities have learned to develop a novitiate process where prospective members are vetted for a period of time before being allowed to join the community.
7. Nurturing of communal behaviors and practices – Such behaviors and practices include sharing of resources, eating meals together, collective worship, and creating a rhythm of life in which members of a community maintain similar daily schedules of religious devotion, work, recreation, and sleep.

8. Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children – In this case “support” includes the elimination of family-only programming (e.g. family movie night), equal emphasis given to singleness and marriage in community teachings, and the incorporation of non-partnered individuals in community leadership.
9. Geographic proximity of community members that supports a common rule of life – The phrase “a common rule of life” refers to the coordination of daily schedules that facilitate common times of religious devotion, work, recreation, and sleep amongst members.
10. Sustainable environmental practices and support for local economies – As in other arenas, “sustainable” refers to the development of systems that allow for continual reuse; for example, New Monastic communities often plant gardens to create a sustainable food production system.
11. Practice of pacifism, peacemaking, and conflict resolution based on Biblical doctrine – In this case, New Monastic Communities cite a process for conflict resolution and peacemaking presented by Jesus of Nazareth in The Gospel of St. Matthew, Chapter 18. The lack of violence presented in these verses, as well as throughout the Christian Gospels, leads many New Monastics to value pacifism in regards to armed conflicts.
12. Commitment to monastic disciplines that lead to a contemplative life - In this sense, “monastic disciplines” refer to traditional religious practices that help individuals develop their spiritual lives, such as prayer, fasting, and silence. These practices are meant to develop a faith that is self-reflective, sincere, and deep (e.g. contemplative).

Although NMC’s tend to favor some of these principles over others, as a set of behavioral principles they reflect Emerging Church doctrine.

RITUALS

It is hard to classify a defining set of rituals for the Emerging Church. On the one hand, rituals abound in church services due to the incorporation of ancient-future worship practices. On the other hand, every emerging church determines which ancient-future elements best fit their congregation. Thus, unlike the ritualistic predictability of denominational churches and evangelical megachurches, one could experience an emerging church in Los Angeles and have a completely different experience at an emerging church in Ohio. Nevertheless, three rituals that reflect the doctrines of the Emerging Church are noteworthy. The first are vows of stability (Bielo 2012). Pulling from ancient monastic traditions, congregants who make vows of stability commit to residency in a neighborhood, providing financial, social, and emotional resources to their neighbors. In this sense, vows of stability reflect the Emerging Church's emphasis on 'being missional' in a particular place. The second is establishing daily rhythms of life. As indicated by the twelfth mark of New Monasticism, emerging church congregants will blend ancient religious practices, such as meditation and silence, into already established daily habits, blurring the lines between the sacred and profane. In this case, daily dinners can be framed as both an act of consumption (e.g. eating food) as well as an act of spiritual communion with family and friends. The third is pilgrimage to ancient religious sites, such as the Sanctuary of St. Patrick and Iona. This ritual demonstrates how place becomes a religious resource for Emerging Church congregants, a way, as Bielo (2012) notes, to enhance belonging and experience.

ORGANIZATION/LEADERSHIP

As previously noted, the Emerging Church has very little organizational structure apart from loose online networks, such as Emergent Village, and annual conferences, such as the Wild Goose Festival.

Consequently, those who would be considered Emerging Church leaders, such as Doug Pagitt, Brian

McLaren, Rob Bell, as well as John Wilson-Hargrove and Shane Claiborne of the New Monastic tradition, do not provide overarching authority to emerging churches. Rather, apart from their own local congregations, their leadership centers on creating a national dialog concerning Emerging Church doctrines and beliefs through publications and speaking engagements.

This lack of organization leads researchers to frame the Emerging Church as a reactionary movement against the institutionalizing forces of megachurch evangelicalism and the organizational ethos of American society. Packard (2012) asserts that the unique essence of the Emerging Church is its resistance to institutional pressures, particularly organizational success. Instead of conforming to isomorphic standards of success-driven evangelical megachurches, the Emerging Church rejects organizational practices, such as large children's ministries, that attract a multitude of people. Nonetheless, this rejection ultimately appeals to individuals who are alienated by corporate megachurches, thereby fortifying the presence of the Emerging Church on religious landscapes.

While the Emerging Church is a reactionary movement, unlike other reactionary movements there is no attempt to return to a golden age or the 'good old religion,' rather the Emerging Church seeks to be constantly in process, always emerging, and continually resisting institutionalization. This perspective is echoed in the vignette told by Wollschleger (2012) about the emerging pastors' negative reaction to recognizing that their movement has been branded and defined, complete with emerging divisions at major publishing companies.

ISSUES/CHALLENGES

There are three challenges for the Emerging moving forward. The first challenge is based on life stage. Packard (2012) notes that congregants of emerging churches tend to be young and childless and questions whether the anti-institutional nature of the Emerging can survive as families grow. Time needed to facilitate DIO programs becomes much more scarce as childcare demands increase. The

second challenge is evangelical blow-back by nationally known pastors, such as John Piper, who is supported by a cottage industry of anti-Emerging Church publications and videos. Labeling Emerging Church leaders as theological apostates these critics have sought to marginalize emerging churches. Nevertheless while some evangelicals have provided scathing critiques, other evangelical churches and mainline denominations have begun to incorporate Emerging Church practices into worship services and church policy. For example, borrowing ideas from emerging churches in the United Kingdom, the Episcopal Church has established Fresh Expressions, an initiative to start local congregations through the Episcopalian Diocese based on Emerging Church doctrines. Such acceptance of the Emerging Church begets the third challenge, which is to define what exactly is “emerging.” Are there, as this profile indicates, emerging churches or emerging practices that will reshape American Christianity? This question is yet unanswered, leaving some to declare the Emerging Church dead within one generation (Bradley 2010).

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