

(Dis)Organized Religion

Introduction

The last three decades have seen the rise of the megachurch as a distinctive force in the U.S. religious landscape¹. Scott Thumma, a leading researcher of megachurches, describes megachurches as congregations which are characterized by their large worship numbers (over 2000 per week) and positive, practical messages that avoid being overly theological or controversial delivered by a “spiritual entrepreneur” whose personality is indelibly printed throughout the organization. Although different in style from traditional churches, the fundamental components of the megachurch as an organization (leadership hierarchy, organizational framework, etc.) have much in common with more established religious structures such as denominations. In many ways, these large churches are simply an extension of the trend toward larger and more bureaucratic organizations in all facets of life that are part and parcel of living in a modern society.

However, as with any phenomenon of this size, there is a growing movement within Christianity that has arisen as a response to the large and relatively homogenous megachurch experience. The Emerging Church has developed in the last 25 years as an alternative to the highly institutionalized religious experience symbolized by the megachurch. This relatively new form of religion reflects the spread of massive distrust among young people in what has traditionally been a well-respected social institution and represents a turn away from a consumer

¹ Mara Einstein, a scholar who has written extensively on contemporary religious formations in the West, points to the recent megachurch phenomenon and the manner in which small and mid-size churches have lost out on membership, while megachurches continue to expand their membership rolls. Einstein (2008) writes, “This means that a limited number of *very* large churches are providing services to the majority of religious consumers” (p. 13). That is, the bulk of Christians in the U.S. are increasingly being concentrated in a few churches, namely megachurches.

model of religion. In spite of the outward resemblance to many other protestant denominations such as Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and the like, individual Emerging Churches *intentionally* and *strategically* seek to develop internal styles and structures that are unique, open to change, and constantly evolving.

The Emerging Church can best be described as a collection of congregations that share important characteristics but operate independently of one another with no formal organizing body. The most important of these common beliefs is a sense that religion in general and Christianity in particular should not be treated as a static entity. This is exemplified in the use of the word “emerging” to describe this way of doing church. Rather, people in the Emerging Church take the stance that people’s experience of the sacred should change as people and societies change. This core belief affects both their organizational structure and religious practices in profound ways. In distinct opposition to rigid forms of religious organization that characterize megachurches and denominations, Emerging Churches have no distinct vision, mission or organization as a group, and the individual congregations proceed with very little formal doctrine. Indeed, one of the most common refrains from participants in the Emerging Church is that they are part of a large “conversation” where people exchange thoughts, ideas and experiences rather than a quest to obtain a “right” answer about faith.

This central idea that religion is constantly evolving dramatically affects their activities as well. The basic building block of any organized worship service is typically the liturgy or religious script that is repeated ritualistically. Again, in distinct opposition to mainstream organized religion, the Emerging Church does not have a singular liturgy or even a collection of pre-determined liturgies. Rather, they utilize multiple liturgies, borrowing heavily from many traditions within Christianity. Walk into any one of these churches and you are likely to

encounter something very similar to what is going on in most mainstream churches. The difference lies in the experience over time. As one congregant told me “They [the pastors] always say that we’re going to do something different. We hear it all the time. ‘We’re going to do something different’ and we’re like ‘Okay. Whatever.’ Every week there is something different going on. We don’t have the same weeks.” These congregations strive to be in a constant state of flux so that the religious experience does not become routine or taken for granted. In other words, what happens at one service is not necessarily an indication of what will happen at the next service.

Additionally, Emerging Church congregations actively seek to be engaged with the surrounding culture. Rather than avoiding popular culture or attempting to make secular society conform to religious ideals, people in the Emerging Church embrace technology and modernity or, as they would say, postmodernity. Scott Bader-Saye, who studies religion and culture, points out that this stands in direct opposition to the megachurches when he writes that “[u]nlike the megachurch that seeks to centralise and Christianise cultural activity by building its own schools, gyms, bookstores and coffee shops on the church ‘campus,’ Emerging Christians tend to prefer bringing the church into the world.” Indeed one of the hallmarks of many Emerging Churches is a movement away from investing money on buildings and other forms of fixed capital. Instead, many congregations meet in people’s homes, art galleries or even bars. More than most, the Emerging Church strives to be comfortable blending the sacred and the secular without trying to impose the former on the latter.

These characteristics appeal to a distinctly different kind of believer. While the megachurches focus with varying degrees of success on attracting the unchurched, those who have little or no experience with organized religion, the Emerging Church prides itself as a home

for what some in the field of religion are beginning to characterize as the “previously churched” or the “dechurched.” The most successful Emerging Churches have managed to thrive by attracting people who have left organized religion due to bad prior experiences, usually while growing up. This is a demographic that is beyond the reach of traditional religious organizations and is thus not typically accounted for in our understandings of contemporary U.S. religion.

The manifestation of the dechurched in these religious organizations sheds new light on why people might characterize themselves as spiritual but not religious. As it turns out, many people gave up organized religion for “spirituality” simply because they lacked a viable option to the heavily bureaucratized and institutionalized form which characterizes much of the modern U.S. religious experience. As one woman returning to organized religion in the form of an Emerging Church said, “I’ve always been spiritual, but I hesitated in the past to call myself ‘religious.’ I guess I just hadn’t found the right kind of church.” This sentiment is important because it helps us to understand this phenomenon in a larger social context.

While some people might view the lack of internal organization in the Emerging Church as a hindrance, it is clear that they succeed because of this anti-institutional approach. The rise of the Emerging Church at this particular point in history suggests that the recent interest in things like homegrown and local agriculture and the explosion of the DIY (“do-it-yourself”) movement in everything from music production to computer programming should not be seen as isolated occurrences, but rather as linked activities that result when a culture is dominated by a few large producers.

Consuming Religion

While it is possible to trace the Emerging Church movement back to the development of specific organizations, it is much more useful to understand the religious and cultural conditions that

made this kind of church not only possible but appealing for many people. In general, organized religion experienced the same kinds of homogenizing forces that other parts of Western culture were subjected to in the past few decades. In megachurches, interactions between pastor and congregation typically take place in a large auditorium or on a television set as many congregations have services that are broadcast regionally or nationally. This largely passive interaction of transmitting information from the expert to the uneducated is at the heart of the megachurch worship experience. In his study of the religious habits of the baby boomer generation, Wade Clark Roof locates the rise of this consumer model to the economic boom following WWII. The relative stability and economic success of the period freed people to internalize an identity based on consumption rather than the “work-and-save” ethic that characterized previous generations. It is no accident, then, that a form of church would rise up to take advantage of the same cultural forces which compelled the growth of an ethos of consumerism in general. To put it bluntly, the megachurch is to religion what Wal-Mart is to shopping.

This means that we can effectively think of the recent development of the Emerging Church as similar to the resurgence of farmer's markets, fair trade shops, co-operatives, and even downtown revival plans. It's not that these attempt to compete in a direct way with the megaliths that dominate their respective industries, but rather that there is a recognition that Wal-Mart does not and cannot satisfy everyone's shopping needs precisely because of its size and bargain basement prices. Similarly, the Emerging Church is not in competition for the same congregants as megachurches. People are drawn to the Emerging Church exactly because it is not a large, bureaucratic, consumer driven experience. It is, or at least attempts to be, a fundamentally different kind of religious experience catering to a very particular clientele.

As Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger point out in their book *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Culture*, these are not people who avoid organized religion altogether. In fact, they want to be a part of a worshipping community that does things communally and holds each other accountable. In other words, the Emerging Church is not simply Church-Lite. What they take issue with, however, is the notion that church must be done in one particular way, and by extension, that any one person, such as a pastor or other religious professional, has a more accurate or complete understanding of God than anyone else. This doesn't mean that the Emerging Church has no pastors but simply that they use them differently. Gibbs and Bolger's research confirms what I observed in the course of my own study of half a dozen Emerging Church congregations, namely, that the congregation is expected to take responsibility for producing many aspects of the religious experience that are normally left to religious professionals. This is precisely what drew Jessica, a member of a small congregation in Texas, to the Emerging Church. She said, "You know, I've been to a lot of different churches... And really, at the end of the day, they're all basically the same. I come and do what I'm told, but there's no ability for me to actually change or shape anything. Every church just has the way they want it done. It's not like that here." Gibbs and Bolger designate this characteristic of Emerging Churches as "Participating as Producers." Put simply, it means that the role of the congregation is not to passively consume a religious product, but rather to be continually involved in deciding what different elements, from worship to outreach, will actually consist of.

This notion of participation rather than consumption is extended into the theological beliefs of the church as well. Specifically, churchgoers viewed any relationship to a higher power as shaped by an individual's unique history and experiences. Therefore, the idea that someone else

might be able to provide these answers for another person because of particular training or credential, is implausible. William, the pastor at Faith church, said “We like to think of our gatherings as a time and place where we come together to corporately express our individual relationships with God. And that relationship is one that other people can help you with, but ultimately it’s between you and God.”

The second major social factor that has left people disenchanted with large scale religious organizations is a general erosion of trust in all positions of authority that occurred during the second half of the 20th century that social scientists have been documenting for some time now. This decline in confidence was especially salient for younger cohorts such as those that make up the bulk of the Emerging Church. While the current dissatisfaction is probably not rooted in the televangelist and savings and loan incidents of the 1980s, the Catholic sex abuse scandals and corporate fraud cases of the late 1990s and 2000s have more than picked up the slack. The result is a twofold distaste for traditional religion and its increasingly corporatized form. Tony, a 27 year old former youth minister and current blogger who writes about the Emerging Church regularly, grew increasingly uncomfortable with the church where he worked. He told me that “the pastor was very upfront about calling himself the CEO of the church. But I think it’s pretty apparent just from Enron, Worldcom, Arthur Anderson, etc., that a lot of the practices in the business world are incompatible with how the church should run.”

This lack of trust in authority figures combined with the idea that people should be active participants in all aspects of the church has shaped how the Emerging Church utilizes religious professionals. Religious professionals are not disregarded; seminary training is not seen as a contaminant. However, there is a belief that the scope and power of credentialed religious professionals should be circumscribed. Thus, even when congregations have the funds to

employ one or more pastors full time and the size which one might believe necessitates additional pastors, they often do not. This is meant to preclude the possibility that one person within the church can have too much control, even if that person is a professional minister selected by the congregation itself.

The Niche Market

The previous half-century has witnessed the consistent marginalization of a particular kind of believer by the institutionalized church, and collectively these people now make up a distinct market of potential congregants. In short, there is a substantial niche market for Emerging Church congregations. The niche that the Emerging Church occupies is one The only requirement is a willingness to engage with others in the production of meaningful religious activity, an activity that is ultimately defined by the participants. The lack of traditional organizational structure in the Emerging Church allows this kind of activity to take place. Although none of the congregations in my study would admit to actively, consciously courting this market, they were attracting these people all the same. While the data indicate that this niche market does exist, it also shows that the people who make up this group of potential churchgoers are very savvy and particularly distrustful of anything which appears manufactured or “inauthentic.” In other words, one could fill a large congregation with people from just this niche alone, but probably not by *trying* to since that would be perceived as overly manufactured and contrived. Rather than providing an evangelical roadmap, this should be taken as a signal of a growing trend in American Protestantism in particular.

As cultural sectors become more and more highly guarded by professional gatekeepers demanding credentials for participation, we are likely to see a subgroup that, rather than struggling to attain these qualifications, simply eschews them altogether in favor of an alternate

route. In a more general sense, then, the Emerging Church can be seen as part of a larger tendency in society of some people turning away from monolithic, rationalized organizations in favor of a more contingent, contextual, and DIY mentality. It seems important to understand that phenomena like the Emerging Church operate as a kind of third choice between participating in traditional denominational structures and simply opting out of organized religion altogether in favor of an individual spirituality. In this sense, then, it seems more appropriate to characterize these efforts as a DIO (Do it Oursevles) approach. The Emerging Church is full of people who have chosen to remake corporate religion into what they want rather than giving up on it completely.

In what he describes as the Pro-Am (professional-amateur) movement, Charles Leadbetter, a social critic in the UK, notes that while “the 1990s were a decade in which large corporations were rampant...the rise of the Pro-Ams suggests counter trends were at work as well” (2004:9). While the 20th century was defined, in large part, by the rise of professionals, Leadbetter argues that the 21st century will be determined to a significant degree by the contributions of unpaid and uncredentialed amateurs with professional standards, networks and commitment. In his article, *The Pro-Am Revolution*, Leadbetter describes how serious, nonprofessional work is dramatically influencing everything from astronomy to the arts. The Emerging Church gives us a glimpse into what this movement looks like in organized religion and suggests that elements that might have been thought of as a hindrance such as lack of money, credentialed professionals, and organizational infrastructure are actually a boon to creating the space for Pro-Ams to flourish.

One of the movements that Leadbetter documents in his work is the dramatic increase of Pro-Am astronomers. Many of the recent advances in astronomy have been credited to Pro-Ams

working without benefit of top-notch equipment, university support or a professional organization. While the initial impulse might be to try and organize this group of people into some coherent body which can make more efficient use of resources and knowledge, the lessons of the Emerging Church suggest that instead, this group is likely to benefit from support of a different kind which involves less regulation, fewer rules and, perhaps, few collectively agreed upon goals. What this kind of a system lacks in classic efficiency is made up for in attracting very dedicated and talented people with exceedingly high standards to the field. Nobody would advocate that these kinds of Pro-Am and third way movements should supplant traditional organizations, but rather that developing both is in the interests of everyone in society.

This is perhaps the biggest insight that we can gain by examining the Emerging Church in relation to other, similar phenomena. One of the things that distinguishes Pro-Ams and other grassroots movements is a common sentiment that they would be even stronger or better off if they had more resources. There is a lamentation that more resources would really go a long way if we could get them to these people, or if they were just better organized. The story of the Emerging Church shows that this is not necessarily the case. More resources and a “better” organizational structure would actually hinder the development of the Emerging Church and deter its ability to attract the dechurched, the very people that make up the bulk of Emerging Church. This is not to suggest that we should not be supporting community farmer’s markets or civic art clubs, but rather to point out that the kind of support these organizations need to truly flourish is likely to be substantially different than the kind of support from which a grocery store or a performing arts center would benefit.