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# EMERGENT FAULT LINES: CLERGY ATTITUDES TOWARD THE EMERGENT CHURCH MOVEMENT

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## Abstract

With its postmodern foundation and profound critique of established Protestant Christianity, the emergent church movement has attracted relatively few converts but has gained a significant amount of media attention. The emergent church offers an opportunity to assess how the movement's core tenets have diffused into other religious populations. Drawing from a sample of Protestant clergy, we find that diffusion of the emergent church movement is surprisingly low, especially among the targets of the emergent critique—pastors from evangelical backgrounds. But, among those with an opinion, approval of the movement lies along the lines of the emergent critique, garnering support from those with strong democratic norms, political engagement, liberalism, and antagonism for authority in the pulpit and textual interpretation.

## Background

In the last two decades the emergent church movement (ECM) has laid out a significant critique of modern evangelicalism. Many emergent leaders have taken issue with what they perceive as an evangelical tradition that discourages questions and seeks uniformity of belief. This approach has met with some success as emergent authors such as Rob Bell and Brian McLaren have appeared in *Time* magazine as influential church leaders.<sup>1</sup> In response, some evangelical leaders have taken note of the ECM, calling it,

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<sup>1</sup> *Time* Staff, "The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America—Brian McLaren," *Time*, February 7, 2005, [http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1993235\\_1\\_993243\\_1993300,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1993235_1_993243_1993300,00.html); Jon Meacham, "Pastor Rob Bell: What If Hell Doesn't Exist?" *Time*, April 14, 2011, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2065289,00.html>.

among other things, a “threat to (the) Gospel.”<sup>2</sup> However, little evidence is provided to assess whether the ECM has inspired a reaction among congregational-level leadership. Are congregational clergy informed about this debate over religious authority? Drawing on a long-held concept in social science—diffusion—we find that although the ECM has intentionally positioned itself as an antidote to evangelicalism, evangelical clergy are less aware of the ECM; however, when they are aware, their attitudes conform to the lines of the emergent critique.

### Diffusion of the ECM

The emergent church movement offers a good opportunity for researchers to assess diffusion in a religious context. Diffusion is “the spread of something within a social system,”<sup>3</sup> the process by which individuals become aware of new ideas; diffusion is central to many institutions that form society. That “something” being spread could include material items such as hybrid corn or prescription drugs<sup>4</sup> or less tangible ideals that lead to, for example, strikes among French coal miners.<sup>5</sup> Religion, broadly considered, is a fruitful conceptual area in which to study diffusion processes. Religion, especially denominational religion,

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<sup>2</sup> David Roach, “Leaders Call ‘Emerging Church Movement’ a Threat to Gospel,” *Baptist Press* March 23, 2005, <http://www.bpnews.net/20420/leaders-call-emerging-church-movement-a-threat-to-gospel>.

<sup>3</sup> David Strang and Sarah A. Soule, “Diffusion in Organizations and Social Movements: From Hybrid Corn to Poison Pills,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24(1) (1998): 265–90.

<sup>4</sup> Bryce Ryan and Neal Gross, “Acceptance and Diffusion of Hybrid Corn Seed in Two Iowa Communities,” *Rural Sociology* 8 (1943): 15–24; James S. Coleman, Elihu Katz, and Herbert Menzel, *Medical Innovation: A Diffusion Study* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966).

<sup>5</sup> Carroll Conell and Samuel Cohn, “Learning from Other People’s Actions: Environmental Variation and Diffusion in French Coal Mining Strikes, 1890–1935,” *American Journal of Sociology* 101(2) (1995): 366–403.

might be thought of as a vast communication network, with links developed at local, regional, and national levels.<sup>6</sup>

However, the literature has been notably sparse in its description of how religious ideas diffuse in the subculture as well as in the larger society. A few notable exceptions can be found, with some work using the concept of diffusion to explain how church membership patterns are dependent on the composition of churches in close proximity.<sup>7</sup> Diffusion helps explain how denominations changed organizational policy in systematic ways to allow women to be ordained as clergy.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the degree to which issue positions are diffused by clergy is driven by their national/denominational ties conditioned on the environment in which they preach.<sup>9</sup>

Finding instances of clergy engagement with the ECM offers several tangible ways to look for evidence of diffusion regarding (1) knowing the movement and (2) evidence that attitudes toward the ECM are structured along the lines of the debate between the ECM and the religious right. More concretely, the very lines of debate inspired by the ECM on religious and political authority might prevent their critique from spreading to target populations.

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Djupe and Laura Olson, "Diffusion of Environmental Concerns in Congregations across U.S. States," *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 10 (2010): 270–301.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth C. Land, Glenn Deane, and Judith R. Blau, "Religious Pluralism and Church Membership: A Spatial Diffusion Model," *American Sociological Review* 56(2) (1991): 237–49.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Chaves, "Ordaining Women: The Diffusion of an Organizational Innovation," *American Journal of Sociology* 101(4) (1996): 840–73.

<sup>9</sup> Brian R. Calfano, "Choosing Constituent Cues: Reference Group Influence on Clergy Political Speech," *Social Science Quarterly* 90 (2009): 88–102; Djupe and Olson, 282; Mark M. Gray, "CARA Catholic Poll 2011: Fordham Center on Religion and Culture Questions" (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2011); Tatishe M. Nteta and Kevin J. Wallsten, "Preaching to the Choir: Religious Leaders and American Opinion on Immigration Reform," *Social Science Quarterly* 93(4) (2012): 891–910.

## The Emergent Church and Critique

The emergent church movement began in the early 1990s when a number of youth pastors and college ministry leaders organized a series of conferences to begin to understand why their traditional recruiting techniques were less successful in attracting the next generation. A consensus began to emerge that something was different about the next wave of potential converts to evangelical Christianity. Many of the conversations turned to postmodern philosophy and a shifting cultural landscape based on increased access to technology and communication.<sup>10</sup> The participants in this discussion began to believe that while every previous generation in the United States had grown up as Christian by default, the teenagers they were ministering to had grown up with a wealth of information about religion just a few keystrokes away; therefore, they were deeply skeptical of Christianity before they entered their formative years. Leaders began to recalibrate their approach in trying to win converts to Christianity and in turn began to develop what later became known as *emerging* or *emergent* Christianity.<sup>11, 12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Although it is necessary to accurately describe the ECM in order to understand its criticism, the task is notoriously difficult. One observer writes, "Defining the emerging church is like nailing Jell-O to the wall." (Kevin L. DeYoung and Ted A. Kluck, *Why We're Not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be* [Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008]: 16–17). As evidence of this ambiguity, several of the recognized leaders penned an open letter that read, "Contrary to what some have said, there is no single theologian or spokesperson for the emergent conversation. We each speak for ourselves and are not official representatives of anyone else, nor do we necessarily endorse everything said or written by another." (Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Spencer Burkner, Brian McLaren, Dan Kimball, Andrew Jones, and Chris Seay, "Our Response to Critics of Emergent," *emergent-us*, 2005. [http://emergent-us.typepad.com/emergentus/2005/06/official\\_respon.html](http://emergent-us.typepad.com/emergentus/2005/06/official_respon.html).) To further complicate matters, there is no creedal or doctrinal statement that has been endorsed by adherents of the emergent church. With those qualifications in

*Theological Criticism*

One of the undergirding principles of the ECM is a belief that there is no correct way of reading the Bible, but instead many valid interpretations are possible. For example, Rob Bell writes in his first book, *Velvet Elvis*, “The idea that everybody else approaches the Bible with baggage and agendas and lenses and I don’t is the ultimate in arrogance.”<sup>13</sup> Bell’s sentiment is echoed by Dan Kimball, who describes the ECM as believing that “there is no single universal worldview.”<sup>14</sup> The back cover of *Why We’re Not Emergent (By Two Guys Who Should Be)* succinctly describes evangelicals’ point of departure with the ECM: “Here’s the Truth—There *Is* Truth.” De Young and Kluck struggle with emergent theology on a number of fronts, most notably with the ECM’s embrace of doubt and uncertainty. The authors believe that the ECM encouragement of a doubting faith leaves adherents “being tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine.”<sup>15</sup>

DeYoung and Kluck also have difficulty with the great lengths to which the leading voices in the ECM have gone to jettison traditional church labels and recognized leadership. Speaking specifically of how many emergent authors say they are not the definitive voice of the emergent conversation, DeYoung and Kluck write, “Once you start selling thousands of books...you’re no longer just a conversation partner. You’re a leader and teacher.”<sup>16</sup> Their critique is less a logical trap than a representation of value conflict, as they complain about the emergent movement’s “uneasiness about authority and control.”<sup>17</sup> The authors express further frustration by noting that, “the ‘we’re just in

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place, we will attempt to describe the significant characteristics of the ECM along with the most popular criticisms of the movement.

<sup>13</sup> Rob Bell and Don Golden, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians: A Manifesto for the Church in Exile* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2009), 54.

<sup>14</sup> Kimball, 49–50.

<sup>15</sup> DeYoung and Kluck, 51.

<sup>16</sup> DeYoung and Kluck, 17.

<sup>17</sup> DeYoung and Kluck, 159.

conversation' mantra can become a shtick whereby emergent leaders are easy to listen to and impossible to pin down."<sup>18</sup> These authors, who are much closer to modern evangelicalism, are expressing a desire for Truth, clearly conveyed, and with obvious lines of authority in its presentation. The ECM deliberately fails all of those standards.<sup>19</sup>

As social scientists have described, many of the members of the ECM were disillusioned with conservative Christian theology and have found a more welcoming place in an emergent congregation.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the degree of competition between evangelical Christianity and the ECM may be bound up in identity effects.<sup>21</sup> It seems likely that respondents who identify as evangelical or conservative would show lower levels of knowledge and support for the ECM, as these two religious movements have significant cultural differences that should impede the diffusion of ideas. On the other hand, those who identify as liberal or ecumenical would espouse greater awareness and support. But, primarily, we believe that ideas about religion and how to do church correctly are at the root of opinions about the ECM. Because of the ECM's focus on relativism, those who score lower on a religious conservatism scale will be more aware of the ECM. We will also test for the effects of a new

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<sup>18</sup> DeYoung and Kluck, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Ryan P. Burge and Paul A. Djupe, "Emergent Church Practices in America: Inclusion and Deliberation in American Congregations," *Review of Religious Research* 57(1) (2015): 1–23.

<sup>20</sup> Gerardo Marti, *A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Lloyd Chia, "Emerging Faith Boundaries: Bridge-Building, Inclusion, and the Emerging Church Movement in America," Doctoral Dissertation, University of Missouri, 2011; James S. Bielo, "Belief, Deconversion, and Authenticity among U.S. Emerging Evangelicals," *Ethos* 40(3) (2012): 258–76.

<sup>21</sup> Jason Wollschleger, "Off the Map? Locating the Emerging Church: A Comparative Case Study of Congregations in the Pacific Northwest," *Review of Religious Research* 54(1) (2012): 69–91; Jason Wollschleger, "Disengaged and Indistinct: The Subcultural Identity of the Emerging Church Movement," *Social Compass* 62(1) (2015): 105–121.

“religious authority values” scale that captures adherence to relativism, anti-authoritarian leadership, and emergent truth through discussion, which, if diffusion has occurred among ideational confederates, should be tightly linked with knowledge of and support for the ECM.

### *Political Criticism*

Although some point to the creation of the ECM as rooted in the philosophical transition from a modern understanding of faith to a post-modern interpretation, there is another possible explanation for the genesis of the movement. During the 1980s, a number of evangelical churches and organizations became associated with the Republican Party in the United States and began to wage what later became known as the culture war.<sup>22</sup> The religious right engaged with popular culture for two purposes: to provide easy access to potential converts,<sup>23</sup> while also creating a clear distinction between evangelicals and nonbelievers.<sup>24</sup> One of the implications of the creation of the religious right was that many marginally attached Christians became uncomfortable with churches that quickly assumed a more conservative political posture and began to disaffiliate from religion altogether.<sup>25</sup>

Taken from this perspective, the emergent church becomes a safe haven not just for theological refugees but

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<sup>22</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control the Family, Art, Education, Law, and Politics in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Geoffrey Layman, *The Great Divide: Religious and Cultural Conflict in American Party Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Christian S. Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> Stratos Patrikios, “American Republican Religion? Disentangling the Causal Link Between Religion and Politics in the US,” *Political Behavior* 30(3) (2008): 367–89; James M. Penning, “Americans’ Views of Muslims and Mormons: A Social Identity Theory Approach,” *Politics and Religion* 2(Special Issue 2) (2009): 277–302.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations,” *American Sociological Review* 67(2) (2002): 165–190.

also for those who have become uncomfortable with political churches. In a 2005 interview, Brian McLaren noted, “When many people encounter the religious right, what they sense from these people is anger, judgment, a kind of rejection and combative attitude. People look at our world and say, ‘I don’t want to be part of a religion that is combative and judgmental and angry...Jesus doesn’t seem that way.’”<sup>26</sup> Other ECM leaders have taken up the cause of political neutrality with Rob Bell writing, “A Christian should get very nervous when the flag and the Bible start holding hands. This is not a romance we want to encourage.”<sup>27</sup>

While some ECM leaders state their desire to remain politically inclusive and tolerate a variety of ideologies, the reality might be different. Tony Jones, who was once the coordinator for the Emergent Village, was often told that “the emerging movement is a latte-drinking, backpack-lugging, Birkenstock-wearing group of twenty-first-century, left-wing, hippie wannabes.”<sup>28</sup> This perception finds support in the many emergent leaders who have publicly endorsed Democratic candidates for political office,<sup>29</sup> including Brian McLaren, who was part of a campaign advertisement for Barack Obama in 2008.<sup>30</sup>

In terms of issue positions, the loudest voices in the ECM often espouse liberal positions on a number of social

<sup>26</sup> Sherry Huang, “Beyond Business-as-Usual Christianity,” *Beliefnet*, May 2005, <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2005/05/Beyond-Business-As-Usual-Christianity.aspx>.

<sup>27</sup> Bell and Golden, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Scot McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church,” *ChristianityToday.com*, January 19, 2007, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/february/11.35.html>, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Tony Jones, “Whom I’m Voting for, and Why,” *Tony Jones Blog, Pathos*, November 22, 2012, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/tonyjones/2012/11/02/whom-im-voting-for-and-why/>.

<sup>30</sup> Brian McLaren, “Matthew 25 Ad for Barack Obama,” *Brian McLaren Blog* 2008, <http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/matthew-25-ad-for-barack-obama.html>.



issues. Critics of the ECM have picked up on this political liberalism and noted that while ECM leaders argue for inclusivity, they don't appear to welcome conservatives.<sup>31</sup> DeYoung and Kluck write, "God may not be a Republican or a Democrat, but from reading the emergent literature, it sure seems like He votes Democrat. No doubt emergent leaders would argue that they are trying to correct an imbalance themselves, but one imbalance does not deserve another."<sup>32</sup> These authors encapsulate the larger critique that the ECM has become a safe haven for those who are more concerned with the social gospel and less interested in seeking salvation for those who are not believers in Jesus.<sup>33</sup>

The two movements are distinct in terms of the distribution of religious theology<sup>34</sup>, and the ECM and evangelical Christianity differ significantly with regard to their political affiliation and voting patterns, as well. These political differences could then suppress the diffusion of ideas among populations that identify as political conservatives, while diffusion could be accelerated among liberals. However, another possible hypothesis is that Republicanism and ECM opposition may actually create enough controversy to drive up knowledge diffusion, though equating the ECM with Al Qaeda might be a bitter pill to swallow except among the most politically active, strong Republicans.

#### *Demographic Differences*

Observers of the ECM consistently note that the movement does not, at least demographically, represent a broad slice of society. Instead, social scientists like Packard note that typical emergent churchgoers are "anti-

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<sup>31</sup> But see Ryan P. Burge and Paul A. Djupe, "Truly Inclusive or Uniformly Liberal? An Analysis of the Politics of the Emerging Church," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53(3) (2014): 636–51.

<sup>32</sup> DeYoung and Kluck, 189.

<sup>33</sup> McKnight, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Burge and Djupe, "Truly Inclusive," 646.

institutional” and lead “permanently unsettled lives.”<sup>35</sup> These overarching themes lead to the tendency of certain societal groups to gravitate toward the ECM, which stereotypically is young, white, male, and well-educated.<sup>36</sup> This description is given support in data described in Marti and Ganiel’s *The Deconstructed Church*. Using a survey of eight congregations that was collected by Tony Jones for his doctoral dissertation research, they paint a picture that is largely in line with Packard’s assessment. More than three quarters of the sample had at least a bachelor’s degree or other vocational education, with nearly a quarter obtaining a graduate degree.<sup>37</sup> In terms of age, the ECM is distinctly youthful with sixty-nine percent being under the age of thirty-five and nearly the same proportion (sixty-eight percent) having no children.<sup>38</sup>

The significant young and educated skew of the ECM comes as a point of consternation for many leaders, however. Chia writes that, “The point is that white, educated middle-class men symbolically represent a kind of elitism that the movement wishes to avoid. But yet, there is no escaping the fact that the movement rode on the popularity and reputation of these white men to draw an audience to its message in the first place.”<sup>39</sup> Chia’s description includes a demographic component that is also important to the ECM: the most read and followed leaders are all (white) males including Jones, Bell, McLaren, and Peter Rollins. While the congregational data indicate that the gender breakdown among congregants is nearly equal,<sup>40</sup> the ECM recognizes that this gender inequity among the leadership is a problem. In response, they organized a conference called Christianity

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<sup>35</sup> Josh Packard, *The Emerging Church: Religion at the Margins* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012), 142.

<sup>36</sup> Packard, 57.

<sup>37</sup> Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 171.

<sup>38</sup> Marti and Ganiel, 21.

<sup>39</sup> Chia, 240.

<sup>40</sup> Marti and Ganiel, 170.

21, which consisted of twenty-one talks by exclusively female speakers.<sup>41</sup> To relate this discussion back to the topic of diffusion, it would appear that the most likely group to have learned about the existence of the ECM would be the demographically similar: young, white, and educated. Thus, diffusion could be less pronounced among older, less-educated, and minority clergy.

### *Geographic Adjacency*

Many observers have noted that the movement is almost completely an urban one. Marti and Ganiel write that the ECM is completely focused on urban areas as it provides a wide variety of spaces for the group to meet and allows for the possibility of living in close contact with other members of the congregation.<sup>42</sup> The desire to be missional is intimately linked to the urban orientation of many ECM congregations, allowing emergents the potential to live transformationally among those populations who most typify “the least of these.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, one way to think about the ECM is as an idea diffused by programmatic contact.<sup>44</sup> Since we believe the ECM to be largely an urban movement,<sup>45</sup> this creates more opportunities for contagious diffusion in large cities, while severely limiting the ability of diffusion to occur in small towns, rural areas, and suburbs.

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<sup>41</sup> Chia, 144–145.

<sup>42</sup> Marti and Ganiel, 129–130.

<sup>43</sup> James S. Bielo, “Purity, Danger, and Redemption: Notes on Urban Missional Evangelicals,” *American Ethnologist* 38(2) (2011): 267–80.

<sup>44</sup> Jui-Cheng Huang and Peter Gould, “Diffusion in an Urban Hierarchy: The Case of Rotary Clubs,” *Economic Geography* 50(4) (1974): 333–40; Norman T. Bailey, *The Mathematical Theory of Infectious Diseases*, 2nd ed. (London: Hafner Press/ MacMillan Publishing Company, 1975).

<sup>45</sup> Bielo, “Purity, Danger, and Redemption,” 271.

## Data

Arguably, the best place to start assessing how the movement is viewed is among Christian clergy. They are most likely to know about the movement given their access to and interest in media covering religion, and capturing the degree of knowledge of the movement is important in understanding diffusion processes.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, they are opinion leaders whose communications on matters of theology and politics could influence how a significant portion of the population may come to view the movement.<sup>47</sup> Still, the views of clergy are but one piece of a much broader mosaic of opinion and communication that is important to understand.

Our data from clergy result from a survey conducted via the internet through the Qualtrics platform after they were invited by e-mail to participate. We obtained responses from United Methodist, Southern Baptist Convention, Reformed Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), and Greek Orthodox clergy.<sup>48</sup>

## Extent of the Movement

Despite the hundreds of books published about the emergent church movement, there is little consensus about how many churches or individuals adhere to emergent theology or identity. Bielo gives an estimate of seven

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<sup>46</sup> Paul A. Djupe and Christopher P. Gilbert, *The Prophetic Pulpit: Clergy, Churches, and Communities in American Politics* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

<sup>47</sup> Rodney Stark, Bruce D. Foster, Charles Y. Glock, and Harold E. Quinley, *Wayward Shepherds, Prejudice and the Protestant Clergy*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); Harold E. Quinley, *The Prophetic Clergy: Social Activism among Protestant Ministers* (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 1974); James L. Guth, John C. Green, Corwin E. Smidt, and Lyman A. Kellstedt, *The Bully Pulpit: The Politics of Protestant Clergy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997); Laura R. Olson, *Filled with Spirit and Power: Protestant Clergy in Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

<sup>48</sup> Further details about the survey sample can be found here: [http://pauldjupe.com/s/JRL\\_online\\_appendix.pdf](http://pauldjupe.com/s/JRL_online_appendix.pdf).

hundred ECM communities in the United States and notes that any effort will vastly undercount the number of those who align with ECM beliefs but have been unable to find a gathering of other individuals who share the same theological outlook.<sup>49</sup> Packard notes that an online database of self-identified ECM congregations puts the number around three hundred in the United States, Canada, Europe, New Zealand, and Australia. Assessing the total number of congregants would be difficult as many of the churches do not keep attendance records because they have no denomination or organization that requires regular reporting.<sup>50</sup>

Before we venture into assessing the awareness of and support for the ECM, it is useful to undertake a more scientifically rigorous approach to counting the number of emergent congregations in the United States. Using data from the survey described above as well as the Cooperative Clergy Study that was coordinated by Corwin Smidt at Calvin College in 2009, we have access to a sample of 2,773 clergy. These two surveys together were distributed to leaders of ten Christian denominations with a significant presence in the United States.<sup>51</sup> Both survey instruments included a question that asked clergy to report if they identified with the emergent church, and taken together, seven percent of all respondents reported an emergent identification.<sup>52</sup> Table 1 displays the percentage of each denomination's clergy that identified as emergent as well as the total number of churches each denomination reports is active in the United States. The striking part of this exercise is the total number of churches that are being led by clergy

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<sup>49</sup> James S. Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 37.

<sup>50</sup> Packard, 2012, 142.

<sup>51</sup> See the online appendix for the list of denominations included: [http://pauldjupe.com/s/JRL\\_online\\_appendix.pdf](http://pauldjupe.com/s/JRL_online_appendix.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> No Greek Orthodox clergy reported ECM identification and were excluded from this part of the analysis.

who identify as emergent—nearly 8,800. When compared to previous estimates of the ECM, this number represents a tenfold increase over the largest recorded estimate by a social scientist.<sup>53</sup>

It is important, however, to offer some caveats about this reported number, as it might not accurately reflect the total number of ECM congregations in the United States. Some evidence in the literature indicates many mainline clergy hold liberal views on religious and political topics but do not disseminate those views to congregations that they perceive as being more conservative.<sup>54</sup> It is plausible then that some of those clergy would be the only member who identifies with (or is aware of) the emergent church movement. At the same time, having a clergyperson identifying with the movement is linked to a set of congregational norms and procedures consistent with an emergent approach.<sup>55</sup> To offer a further caveat, these two surveys were conducted among clergy who were attached to established denominations, thus leaving out non-denominational clergy. This fact could severely undercount the number of clergy attached to the ECM, including some who took their congregations out of their denominations after affiliating with the movement. In addition, these data are from a limited set of denominations. Despite these qualifications, we can say with some certainty that more than nine thousand churches in the United States are likely led by clergy who identify as emergent.

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<sup>53</sup> Bielo, “Emerging Evangelicals,” 37.

<sup>54</sup> Quinley, 1974; Paul A. Djupe and Jacob R. Neiheisel, “Clergy Deliberation on Gay Rights and Homosexuality,” *Polity* 40(4) (2007): 411–35.

<sup>55</sup> Burge and Djupe, “Emergent Church Practices,” 20.

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**Table 1** – Projected Number of ECM Churches in the United States from Select Denominations

Denomination	Total # of Churches	Emergent ID	Projected Churches with ECM Clergy Identifier
Assembly of God	12,722	4.93%	627
Christian Reformed Church	1,100	8.31%	91
Disciples of Christ	3,646	14.46%	527
Evangelical Lutheran Church	9,638	5.19%	500
Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod	6,158	3.38%	208
Presbyterian Church—USA	10,262	11.5%	1,180
Reformed Church in America	907	5.1%	46
Southern Baptist Convention	46,034	.6%	276
United Methodist Church	35,275	9.5%	3,351
<b>Total</b>	<b>125,742</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>8,798</b>

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## Diffusion and Approval of the Movement

These numbers seem significant, and social scientists who study the movement are quick to assert the importance of the ECM. Bielo writes: “Ultimately...the Emerging Church has become the most vocal, influential, and debated movement among U.S. Christians since the Religious Right’s rise to political and cultural prominence in the late 1970s.”<sup>56</sup> If the ECM is crucial to the evolution of Western Christianity, then it would be logical to assume that the movement would have a high degree of diffusion among Christian clergy.

We use two measures that capture whether the debate between the ECM and evangelical leaders has diffused. Both are taken from the same question: Do you approve or disapprove of the “emergent church” movement? The respondents were given a number of response options including strongly approve, approve, neither approve nor disapprove, disapprove, or strongly disapprove. They were also given the option to respond with “I don’t know enough to rate the movement.” Of the 387 clergy providing a valid response, the majority of respondents were either positive concerning the ECM or ambivalent about the movement: 9.6 percent strongly approved, 28.7 percent approved, 9.3 percent disapproved, and just 3.6 percent strongly disapproved of the emergent church movement. However, almost half of the respondents were unwilling or unable to provide an opinion, with 34.9 percent saying they “Neither approve nor disapprove” and 14 percent saying that they don’t have enough knowledge to rate the movement. Both choosing the middle option, such as this one, and choosing the “don’t know” option have been used in previous research as measures of opinionation—having a valid opinion.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the two measures that can indicate diffusion are (1) opinionation, whether they have enough information

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<sup>56</sup> As quoted in Marti and Ganiel, 5.

<sup>57</sup> Jon A. Krosnick and Michael A. Milburn, “Psychological Determinants of Political Opinionation,” *Social Cognition* 8(1) (1990): 49–72.



to rate the movement one way or another, and (2) approval of the movement. In both cases, we are looking for evidence that knowledge and support for the movement follows the lines of critique and the pathways of diffusion discussed above.

### **Predictors of ECM Diffusion**

These low levels of diffusion, to the extent they generalize, run counter to the claims of many observers of the movement who believe it to be incredibly important to Western Christianity. While we agree about the importance of the emergent critique and model, it is not yet in the vernacular of many of these American Christian clergy. Further analysis uncovers some noteworthy trends regarding which factors are related to these low levels of diffusion—in this case, choosing the “don’t know” option (=1) versus another response (=0).<sup>58</sup>

The least knowledgeable group about the ECM is the Greek Orthodox clergy, with more than half the small sample (60.9 percent) stating that they do not know enough to rate the movement. This finding supports the conclusion that diffusion occurs more extensively when there is a cultural similarity between the two groups. This percentage is especially high when compared to those in mainline Protestantism (RCA: 6.1 percent, PC(USA): 11.1 percent, and UMC: 12.5 percent). Notably, Southern Baptist clergy had the lowest levels of awareness among Protestants, with 20 percent choosing the “Don’t know enough” response option. When one considers that the leaders of the ECM are highly critical of evangelical denominations and many interviews with ECM congregants include stories of growing up in strict evangelical Christian households, it is odd that a significant number of Southern Baptist pastors are not even aware of the movement.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Full numerical results are available in online appendix Table A.1 and Figure A.1 available here: [http://pauldjupe.com/s/JRL\\_online\\_appendix.pdf](http://pauldjupe.com/s/JRL_online_appendix.pdf).

<sup>59</sup> Bielo, “Emerging Evangelicals,” 8.

If diffusion is promoted by cultural similarity (favoring religious liberals) and along the lines of critique (favoring religious conservatives), then it would make sense that religious authority and religious conservatism have no systematic effect. Neither religious conservatism nor religious authority views are systematically related to choosing the “don’t know” option, though the results hint that conservatives and the authority-minded are less likely to choose the “don’t know” option.

It is surprising that living in a large or very large city does not necessarily lead to higher levels of knowledge of the ECM. In our sample, those who lived in most city types had higher, though statistically indistinguishable, levels of knowledge of the ECM compared to rural clergy. Suburban clergy were also indistinguishable from rural clergy, though the evidence suggests that they are less knowledgeable. Clergy in different regions also have indistinguishable levels of knowledge about the ECM from each other, though the results point toward more knowledge in the western United States. Taken together, these results suggest that geographic adjacency plays little role in the diffusion of knowledge about the ECM.

Given the connection to political concerns in the opening paragraph, we investigated whether diffusion was connected to political engagement (recognizing that political engagement is closely connected to civic concern and social awareness).<sup>60</sup> The most politically active are the most likely to have an opinion about the ECM. The least active are more likely to choose “don’t know,” but it depends heavily on partisanship. Only inactive Democrats and Independents are more likely to choose the “don’t know” option; inactive Republicans are just as knowledgeable as active ones. The results point to different ways the two partisan camps learn about the ECM—Democrats through civic engagement and Republicans through mediated critiques, such as

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<sup>60</sup> Figure A.2 shows this relationship in the online appendix: [http://pauldjupe.com/s/JRL\\_online\\_appendix.pdf](http://pauldjupe.com/s/JRL_online_appendix.pdf).

conservative author Frank Pastore, who wrote, “The emergent church is an ally in the war against radical Islam—al Qaeda’s ally.”<sup>61</sup>

*Approval of the ECM*

Our second measure of diffusion assesses whether clergy’s substantive opinions about the ECM are structured according to forces discussed above. An ordered logit model was estimated that included a number of factors that bear on our four main hypotheses, including a religious conservatism index, religious authority scale, partisanship, and political activity, denomination, gender, community type, economic class of congregation, and region of the United States.<sup>62</sup> To reiterate our expectations, we suspect that theological conservatives, those who do not adopt an emergent value system and who support religious authority, and political conservatives will disapprove of the movement. We also suspect that those outside of the main demographics that seem to inhabit emergent churches would be more opposed (older, less educated), as would those in geographic locales (rural and suburban) that do not face the same challenges of outreach and mission that emergent churches seem to.

The results confirm that approval of the ECM falls along the lines of the emergent critique of evangelical Christianity. Support is linked to the beliefs that clergy held that may mark them with cultural commonalities. Most important to explaining support was clergy’s values regarding religious authority. We used five items that address the attachment to leader and textual authority that are foundational to the emergent church movement and its critique of evangelicalism: The more clergy can step out of the way of

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<sup>61</sup> Frank Pastore, “Why Al Qaeda Supports the Emergent Church,”

Townhall.com., July 22, 2007,

[http://townhall.com/columnists/frankpastore/2007/07/22/why\\_al\\_qaeda\\_supports\\_the\\_emergent\\_church](http://townhall.com/columnists/frankpastore/2007/07/22/why_al_qaeda_supports_the_emergent_church).

<sup>62</sup> The results can be visualized in Figure A.3 and Table A.2 in the online appendix here: [http://pauldjupe.com/s/JRL\\_online\\_appendix.pdf](http://pauldjupe.com/s/JRL_online_appendix.pdf).

the congregation, the better; It is important for the congregation to construct their own salvation; The Gospel is what the congregation makes of it; The church must adapt to a postmodern culture in order to spread the Gospel; and I believe there are many valid interpretations of the Bible.<sup>63</sup>

The scatterplot of our religious authority scale with religious conservatism<sup>64</sup> (Figure 1) shows that the two are clearly linked in the same direction (correlation  $r=.63$ ).<sup>65</sup> Religious conservatives are more supportive of authority, a link widely affirmed.<sup>66</sup> The figure also shows that a significant number of clergy score the maximum possible value on the religious conservatism scale ( $x$  axis), while no clergyperson adheres to the most minimal level of religious authority ( $y$  axis). Not surprisingly, emergent church identifiers score lower on the religious authority scale than others (about ten percent lower, on average, controlling for denomination).

Without including the religious authority scale, a religious conservatism scale predicted significantly lower levels of support for the ECM. This finding falls largely in line with what critics have said about the movement's desire to create a clear alternative to typical evangelical Christianity. However, when the religious conservatism scale and the religious authority scale were placed in the same model,

<sup>63</sup> These items hang together modestly as an index ( $\alpha=.66$ ). We keep them together, despite some higher-than-desired internal variance, because in total they capture the emergent style regarding authority.

<sup>64</sup> The survey included a number of classic items that assessed the overall theological orientation of the respondent. Several of these items (including questions about a literal interpretation of the Bible, the virgin birth, the reality of Satan, and men's authority over women) were combined to create a religious conservatism scale, which had a very high reliability score –  $\alpha=.92$ .

<sup>65</sup> Though these variables are relatively highly correlated, this correlation has essentially no effect on the rest of the model; removing religious authority, for instance, changes very little of the other estimates save for religious conservatism, as discussed in the text.

<sup>66</sup> David C. Barker and Christopher Jan Carman, *Representing Red and Blue: How the Culture Wars Change the Way Citizens Speak and Politicians Listen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

religious conservatism no longer reaches statistical significance, while religious authority is significant ( $p < .01$ ). The highest possible investment in religious authority cuts approval of the ECM by about forty percent.<sup>67</sup>

We included several labels that helped distinguish support for the ECM, though in somewhat unlikely ways. Not surprisingly, emergent identifiers are more likely to support the ECM (by just over ten percent). Those who identify as ecumenical are neither more nor less supportive than others. And evangelical identifiers are actually slightly, but significantly more supportive of the movement than others (by about five percent). Those others tend to adopt labels such as *conservative*. Evangelicals are only more supportive once we control for religious conservatism and religious authority.

We also tested the media story that fueled this paper, using feelings toward two religious right interest groups (Family Research Council and the Christian Coalition –  $\alpha = .93$ ), and Tea Party identification (eighteen percent of the sample). Tea Party identifiers are marginally more likely to disapprove of the ECM (by about five percent), while feelings toward the religious right have no effect one way or another. Instead, the ECM attracts support from essentially everyone except politically active Republicans, which suggests that attitudes about the politicization of religion are active here.<sup>68</sup> Politically inactive Republicans show greater support because they surely object to the politicization of religion, whereas politically active Republicans oppose the ECM because they are exposed to groups that reinforce the Republican-conservative Christian connection. The results ratify the media story that opposition to the ECM is located

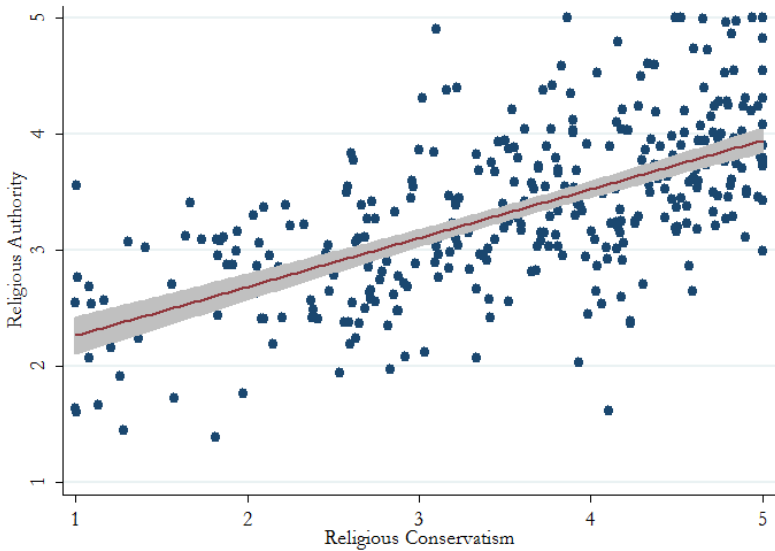
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<sup>67</sup> On average (one standard deviation below the mean to one above), emergent values shifted approval by just under a point, or twenty-five percent of the scale.

<sup>68</sup> The relationship between political activity and partisanship can be visualized in Figure A.4 in the online appendix:  
[http://pauldjupe.com/s/JRL\\_online\\_appendix.pdf](http://pauldjupe.com/s/JRL_online_appendix.pdf).

in the most highly politically charged and religious wing of the Republican Party.

**Figure 1** – Scatter of Religious Conservatism and Religious Authority



Source: 2014 Cooperative Clergy Study, see: [http://pauldjupe.com/s/JRL\\_online\\_appendix.pdf](http://pauldjupe.com/s/JRL_online_appendix.pdf). This study is an expansion of the data collected by Corwin Smidt in 2009.

*Note:* Ninety percent confidence intervals shown on the linear fit line.

The model also included measures of individual demographics, congregational practices, and congregational location. Clergy with more years of experience reported a higher level of approval for the ECM, which is counterintuitive when considering the ECM is often perceived as a youth-oriented movement.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, more

<sup>69</sup> Marti and Ganiel, 173.

educated clergy were more opposed to the movement. Of course, these variables are for clergy and not congregants, so their applicability to the key demographics of the ECM is less than ideal. But they are suggestive that the ECM is not tightly packed with highly educated, younger people.

Little evidence suggests that support is driven by geographic concentration. Compared to support in the West, support is distinguishable in the East ( $p=.09$ ) and Midwest ( $p=.11$ ), pointing to slightly higher support. In terms of other differences based on location, the results are relatively consistent that the more urbanized the congregation is, the more clergy approve of the ECM (compared to rural clergy). While most community size/type options do not reach the necessary threshold of statistical significance, it is clear that clergy in very large cities are more likely to approve of the ECM than those in rural settings (by about eleven percent on average).

## Conclusion

The diffusion of ideas to receptive populations is essential to the growth of many organizations, but none more so than religious groups. Our sample of Christian clergy offers a good opportunity to examine how religious ideas diffuse in an elite population. Speaking denominationally, we find that mainline Protestants are the most likely to have formed an opinion about the emergent church, while the group that is consistently critiqued by emergent leaders (evangelicals) evinces the lowest levels of knowledge of the ECM. These findings provide some evidence that a reactionary religious movement cannot count on its criticisms to come to the attention of the established religious group.

With regard to the overall level of diffusion of emergent ideas to clergy in established denominations, we find a mixed bag of results. On one hand, we find that a number of pastors identify themselves as *emergent*, with the implication that around seven percent of churches in the United States are led by someone who is sympathetic to the emergent

critique. On the other hand, nearly fifteen percent say they do not know enough to rate the ECM, and nearly a third of the sample said they neither approved nor disapproved of it, which is another common measure of the knowledge level or the lack thereof. A reasonable extension of our findings is that the overall diffusion of the ECM among frequent churchgoers would likely be much lower as clergy are typically more informed about religious movements than their laity.<sup>70</sup> This overall low level of awareness might be due to the fact that ECM is still relatively young. However, when compared to the religious right a decade after its creation, it would appear that the emergent church movement is far less well-known. Given the lack of connection with a political party, it is perhaps expected that the ECM has not gained the same notoriety as the religious right. It is possible, and maybe even likely, that one of the defining characteristics of the ECM—a lack of clear leadership and centralized planning—might be its ultimate undoing with regard to its ability to diffuse ideas.

Our data indicate that the strongest predictors of these apathetic clergy are ties to a political party as opposed to any sort of religious beliefs. For example, while true opposition is rare, which is telling, among those few most opposed are the most politically active Republicans, who are well placed to see the divide between the ECM and their own position. This highlights a persistent danger that religion loses its status as a driver of cultural responses to partisan cues.

However, once respondents have a substantive opinion, we find that the primary driver is cultural similarity following religious dimensions. Given the depth of the critique the ECM presents, it is expected that adherents to an authoritative understanding of Scripture would stand opposed. Along these lines, we debuted a new set of items that tap support for authority in belief and leadership.

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<sup>70</sup> Roger Finke and Kevin D. Dougherty, “The Effects of Professional Training: The Social and Religious Capital Acquired in Seminaries,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41(1) (2012): 103–120.



Naturally these sentiments are negatively associated with religious conservatism, but it is notable that typical clergy in this sample are not fundamentally opposed to the ECM model of authority. While Southern Baptist clergy average “disagree,” UMC and PC(USA) clergy average “agree” in response to the five items. Thus, an emergent-light rejection of authority is widespread among Protestant clergy (as is the embrace of democratic norms, which is also in close correspondence with the emergent model).

The ECM is useful in raising what is ultimately a research question confronting American religion: What is the model of doing church that will sustain its relevance? How will religion continue to attract adherents, and how will it confront pressing societal questions? Many clergy know of and understand the ECM’s radically different model and have already adopted norms and practices consistent with it. Others, primarily evangelicals and those who most stridently affirm religious authority, have not confronted these questions. Perhaps as membership challenges come to long-standing evangelical denominations, as they have to the SBC, these questions will become more salient.

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