

Truly Inclusive or Uniformly Liberal? An Analysis of the Politics of the Emerging Church

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The emergent church movement has fashioned itself as an alternative for Christians who do not want to walk away from their faith, but feel uncomfortable with the dogmatic conservatism found in mainstream evangelicalism. The emerging church movement has portrayed itself as diverse and inclusive, which is a direct result of evading ingroup-outgroup boundaries. However, despite the desire for a plurality of opinions, the movement's leaders have been known to take political positions that are largely left-leaning. We use the first dataset known to gather this identity from a sample of Protestant clergy, and assess whether denominationally connected emergent church clergy do, in fact, present a distinctive political profile. Emergent clergy are what they say they are—diverse and inclusive—while they are, on average, more liberal than nonemergent clergy in the sample.

Keywords: *emerging church, clergy, Religious Right.*

INTRODUCTION

In the irony of American religion, the purity of intent often leads to the opposite outcome (Marty 1986) and thus movements toward one end tend to spur movements in another. The most prominent religious movement in the United States, the rise of evangelical conservatism, has been described as a direct reaction to the liberalization of American society both in matters of culture and religion (Armstrong 2009:271–72; Marty 1986:208). This movement has been credited with helping Ronald Reagan win the White House in 1980 and being the difference in George W. Bush's narrow victory over Al Gore in 2000 (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2006). One of the distinct characteristics of the Religious Right that differed from previous evangelical theology was an engagement with the larger culture, which had the dual purpose of providing easier access to potential converts (Smith 1998) while at the same time creating a strong group identity for members (Patrikios 2008; Penning 2009). There has been, however, some scholarship to indicate that while conservative evangelicalism was effective in bringing new converts, it may have driven some individuals to disaffiliate with the movement because of disagreement with the dogmatic theology and politics of the Religious Right (Hout and Fischer 2002).

In the wake of the culture wars, a new movement arose among the younger generation in evangelical Christianity with a focus that is much different than the movement that has come before. This “emergent church” has largely argued against creating divisions between those inside and outside the church, and instead places a significant emphasis on inclusivity and deliberation (Huang 2005; Kimball 2003). Many of the leaders of the emergent church continually emphasize their willingness to be open to all viewpoints and ideologies (McLaren 2012b). And social scientists who study the movement describe it as one of inclusivity: “[The ECM] seeks the rethinking of dichotomous boundaries like Christian/non-Christian, saved/unsaved, holy/unholy etc., what they see as a highly problematic ways of framing ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Chia 2010:132).

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At the same time, the movement's publicly identified leaders have been known to take political positions that are unmistakably liberal, including support for environmental protection, aid for the poor, and even gay rights. These positions could potentially alienate a large number of individuals and confirm the suspicions of critics that they are simply political liberals using the guise of evangelicalism to instill preferred positions.

Using survey data from denominational Protestant clergy, we assess this tension at the theological/philosophical core of the emergent church. Put simply, are emergents uniformly liberal or are they diverse and inclusive? One of the complications, however, is how to assess whether the emerging church is different. The standard logic, present in a wide variety of tests from analysis of variance to regression, is to compare group means. While we perform this test, we believe that the emergent church presents a distributional argument. That is, a claim to diversity implies a nonskew distribution and a claim to inclusivity implies a flatter, less-peaked (platykurtic) distribution. On the other hand, exclusivity implies selection based on substantive criteria and thus likely a skewed and a more peaked (leptokurtic) distribution. Emergent church clergy should present with a different distribution—flatter than normal and nonskew—from those outside the movement.

While it is impossible to fully describe such a nuanced movement as the emerging church in such a short space, in the following pages we attempt briefly to outline the history of this emergent church as well as the principles that guide the movement. There, we draw on the writings of publicly identified “leaders” of the ECM. However, an important caution needs to be made before any researcher attempts to use the opinions of emergent church leaders as descriptive of the movement. Because of its deconstructed nature, very few of the leading voices in the movement see themselves as leaders. While “[l]eadership in the Emerging Church has always been a rather tricky issue” (Chia 2010:390), others go so far as to argue that the most appropriate voices for the movement are “leaders who refuse to lead” (Rollins 2008:1). While the emergent church movement (ECM) consistently is critical of the traditional hierarchical church structure, it nonetheless still has a number of “symbolic leaders who are synonymous with the [ECM]” (Chia 2010:391).

Determining who exactly these leaders are is another matter entirely. If one does a Google search using the phrase “leaders of the emergent church,” very few websites are returned that are actually connected to the ECM. The overwhelmingly majority of sites that name specific leaders are what could be most easily be described as conservative or fundamentalist Christian organizations that are critical of the ECM.¹ These results align well with how the ECM positions itself as leaderless in relationship to the established church, which it perceives as having a strong desire to reinforce hierarchy. We therefore understand that using the writings of certain members of the ECM to describe the movement is a precarious exercise and their descriptions only gain weight with consistency across practitioner and researcher observations.

THE EMERGENT CHURCH

The emerging church movement began in the mid-1990s when pastors working with youth groups and college students were observing that the same methods that had been used for decades were no longer effective in recruiting a new generation of young people. This observation coalesced in a series of gatherings of youth workers that concluded that the next generation coming of age was undergoing a fundamental philosophical shift rooted in postmodernity (Gibbs and Bolger 2005). This postmodern generation would no longer be generically Christian in its orientation but instead would feel capable of choosing or rejecting Christianity after a knowledge gathering process. This change was attributed to the rapid expansion of technology that would

¹An example of sites on the first pages of results include nowtheendbegins.org and takebackcanada.com.

allow young people to have access to a wealth of information about many of the world's religions (Kimball 2003).

One of the foundational principles of those who associate with the emergent church movement is the lack of an objective interpretation of the Bible. Brian McLaren, an author cited as "the emerging church's most influential thinker" (Carson 2005:35) writes, "I think that when you let go of the Bible as God's answer book, you get it back as something much better" (McLaren 2004:52). D. A. Carson (2005:27) writes: "Postmodernity . . . recognizes how much of what we 'know' is shaped by the culture in which we live, controlled by emotions and aesthetics and heritage, and in fact can only be intelligently held as part of a common tradition, without overbearing claims to being right or true." Other emergent authors echo this philosophy. Dan Kimball writes: "Postmodernism, then, holds there is no single universal worldview. All truth is not absolute, community is valued over individualism" (Kimball 2003:49–50). The end result of this understanding is a belief that there are many interpretations of the Bible and therefore divergent opinions should be considered and respected.

Because of these principles, the emergent movement has been especially attractive to young people who grew up in a conservative evangelical environment. James Bielo, an anthropologist who has written extensively about the movement, argues that while evangelicals will explain their acceptance of faith through a conversion narrative, many emergents have developed a "deconversion" story that explains how they felt disconnected from the church in which they were raised (Bielo 2012). What is remarkable about emergent Christians, however, is that they do not jettison religion entirely, as many others who have felt disenfranchised from evangelicalism have done (Hempton 2008). Instead, these individuals tell deconversion stories of finding refuge in emerging churches, which they see as less religiously dogmatic (Bielo 2012; Chia 2010; Marti 2009), less likely to become embroiled in political debates (Bielo 2011a), and "non-homogeneous spaces" (Chia 2010:434).

The way in which emergent leaders approach politics naturally reflects their postmodernism, which is often articulated as a rejection of dogmatic Christianity. In an interview, McLaren indicated: "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'" (Huang 2005). This desire to separate the emergent church from particular position taking is evident in the writings of others involved in the movement. For example, Rob Bell writes: "A Christian should get very nervous when the flag and the Bible start holding hands. This is not a romance we want to encourage" (Bell and Golden 2008:18).

At the same time, emergent leaders are people who do take political positions and many of those positions lean liberal (McKnight 2006:27). This observation is apparently a common one; as Tony Jones, the former national coordinator of the Emergent Village, has consistently been told, "the emerging movement is a latte-drinking, backpack-lugging, Birkenstock-wearing group of 21st-century, left-wing, hippie wannabes" (McKnight 2007:7). This perception finds some purchase when considering the political activity of those who are perceived to be leaders in the emergent movement. Brian McLaren publicly endorsed Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential election (McLaren 2008b) and appeared in a campaign ad for Obama (McLaren 2008a). In addition, Tony Jones publicly indicated that he would vote for President Obama in the 2012 presidential election (Jones 2012). While the emergent movement has stressed time and again its desire for inclusivity, its most visible leaders, at least, have consistently declared their liberal leanings on a number of issues of importance to voters.

Gay Marriage

An issue at the heart of the tension between inclusion and theological conviction is gay rights, especially gay marriage. It is no surprise that those involved in the emergent church movement have often been reluctant to address the issue of homosexuality directly. Several times when

Brian McLaren was asked about the topic in different forums he deferred, arguing (rightly) that any discussion of the topic will be hurtful to some members of the Christian community (Carson 2005). In a web posting McLaren also indicated that he believed that the Christian community should declare a moratorium on speaking of the issue for a number of years and pray for wisdom in the meantime (McLaren 2006). One reason for McLaren's reluctance became apparent when a report surfaced that he had led a Christian commitment ceremony for his son and his same-sex partner (*New York Times* 2012). When McLaren was questioned about his participation in the ceremony by a reader of his blog, he responded by echoing his arguments on relativism that also lays bare his politics (McLaren 2012a):

Over time, I could not square their stories and experiences with the theology I had inherited. So I re-opened the issue, read a lot of books, re-studied the Scriptures, and eventually came to believe that just as the Western church had been wrong on slavery, wrong on colonialism, wrong on environmental plunder, wrong on subordinating women, wrong on segregation and apartheid (all of which it justified biblically) . . . we had been wrong on this issue. In this process, I did not reject the Bible.

The Environment

One of the primary focuses of those who associate with the emergent church is to live missionally in their communities. A missional approach emphasizes removing the separation between those who are in the Christian community and those who are not involved in the faith (Bosch 1992; Keller 2001; Roxburgh 1997). It alters the way in which Christians perceive the goal of their faith. Emergent author Tony Campolo has contended that a missional approach to Christianity attempts to “save the Earth without worshipping it,” (2008:123) which means that Christians should continue to try and save the world while making it a place where everyone, not just Christians, can “live together with dignity” (McLaren and Campolo 2006:105).

Abortion

The leading thinkers in the emergent movement are nearly unified in their belief that abortion is undesirable and that every effort should be made to severely limit or completely eliminate the number of abortions that are performed in the United States. Tony Jones has said, “I find [abortion] an abhorrent practice and a blight on society” (Jones and McDowell 2007). Tony Campolo echoes this sentiment when he writes: “Red Letter Christians are overwhelmingly pro-life, even though we refuse to get caught up in the power-centered politics of the Religious Right” (Campolo 2008:120).

International Affairs

In the days before President Bush authorized a military incursion into Iraq, Brian McLaren published a letter on his website in which he implored President Bush to consider every possible option before deciding to wage war against the Iraqi regime: “For the follower of Jesus, war must always be seen as a defeat, before the first shot is fired or the last body is buried” (2003:1). McLaren goes on to ask the president if he would be willing to share the number of Iraqi lives lost in the conflict as a method to teach the American people compassion for the people of Iraq. He then asks President Bush to commit to spending twice as much on rebuilding Iraq as was spent destroying it (McLaren 2003).

As an inclusive church, emergents do not distinguish between enemies and friends as all people have worth. Moreover, it is no surprise that the emergent emphasis on dialogue would dictate a particular method to resolving international disputes focused on dialogue and cooperation. Tony Campolo echoes many of McLaren's sentiments in his book *Choose Love Not*

Power (2009) when he contends that the United States should be more reluctant to use military means to resolve conflicts and should instead focus on making peace around the world.

THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS

While one of the primary focuses of the emergent movement is on inclusivity, there seems to be a struggle among the leading thinkers involved with the emergent church. Many have pointed to the fierce divisions in the evangelical community fueled by the politics of the religious right, so it seems possible that the emergent church is merely a group of liberal Christians who have congregated under a new banner to differentiate themselves from their older mainline counterparts (Fitch 2005:25). The aim of this study, then, is to determine if those who affiliate with the emergent church are truly an inclusive group that consists of a diversity of opinions and political ideologies or if the group has a distinct and uniform (liberal) political voice.

The nature of the test is particularly important to consider and in the “Introduction” we argue that emergents are making a “distributional argument.” Let us assume for a moment that emergents are what they say they are—inclusive and diverse. Nonemergent clergy from these denominations are typically conservative. Thus if we compare the means of emergent to nonemergent clergy, emergent clergy will be found to be more liberal. But the mean of other clergy is only one basis of comparison. To evaluate the claim that emergents are diverse, we can compare their opinion distribution to a distribution that suggests a degree of uniformity—the normal distribution. That is, we can evaluate the skew of the distribution as well as its peakedness (kurtosis). A flat distribution would suggest that the movement is diverse, including a wide range of positions. A nonskew distribution suggests that the movement is inclusive and does not lean in any particular direction. Therefore, the emergent claim to diversity and inclusion would find support if its opinion distribution is nonskew and flatter than normal (platykurtic).

If we expect emergent clergy to have a nonskew and platykurtic ideological distribution—their ranks include both liberals and conservatives—then emergents will have a mean score that is more liberal compared to nonemergent clergy. But if the movement does not exert a particular influence on the direction of opinion and is truly inclusive, then there should be no systematic directional effect of an emergent status once individual dispositions are accounted for. Essentially, once we control for individual political ideology and theological conservatism, we expect an emergent identification will have no relationship with their political attitudes.

DATA

To begin investigation into this question, we examine the political commitments of Protestant clergy—the population from which the elites of the movement are primarily drawn. The data we use were gathered by a group of scholars in the most recent incarnation of the Cooperative Clergy Study, coordinated by Corwin Smidt at Calvin College in 2009 (see also Smidt 2004).² The group surveyed a diversity of denominational Protestant clergy, including the Assemblies of God (run by John Green, $n = 208$, response rate [rr] = 21.1), Christian Reformed Church (Corwin Smidt, $n = 370$, rr = 53.3), Disciples of Christ (Christopher Devine, $n = 335$, rr = 34.9), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (Laura Olson, $n = 272$, rr = 34.1), Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (Jeff Walz and Steve Montreal, $n = 359$, rr = 41.7), Reformed Church of America (Corwin Smidt, $n = 312$, rr = 50.9), Southern Baptist Church (James Guth, $n = 248$, rr = 25.4), United Methodist Church (John Green, $n = 282$, rr = 28.7), and the Mennonites (Kyle

²These data are not available yet through ARDA, but data from the earlier round of studies are available here: <http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/COOPCLER.asp>.

Kopko, $n = 520$, $rr = 53.6$). The Mennonite survey did not have all of the requisite questions for this study and was therefore dropped.

The key independent variable for this study came from the following question: “While no one likes religious labels, do any of the following describe your religious faith?” Among other labels, the survey listed “emerging church.” Neither this sample nor any survey method of capturing emergents is perfect. We are relying on the reports of clergy to describe their own behavior as well as some of the goings on of their congregation. Their reports have been widely adopted as representative of their congregations (see, e.g., Chaves 2004), though there is always some slippage (see Frenk et al. 2011). While we cannot be absolutely sure that clergy who select “emerging church” as an identity actually are emergent, if there is one portion of the population that should be well aware of what the movement consists of it would be Protestant clergy. Through explicit training, social networks, and ongoing media use, clergy obtain deep wells of religious capital and therefore have a better understanding of religious movements than the laity (Finke and Dougherty 2002). Relatedly, clergy often display more ideological constraint than average citizens, ratifying their elite status (Guth et al. 1997), which also casts doubt on whether these findings apply to average citizens. We make no claim that they do. Furthermore, alternate sampling strategies, such as cluster sampling in congregations, will be needed to capture the sentiments of average members of emergent churches since simple identification tags in the individual sample survey are unlikely to be reliable indicators.

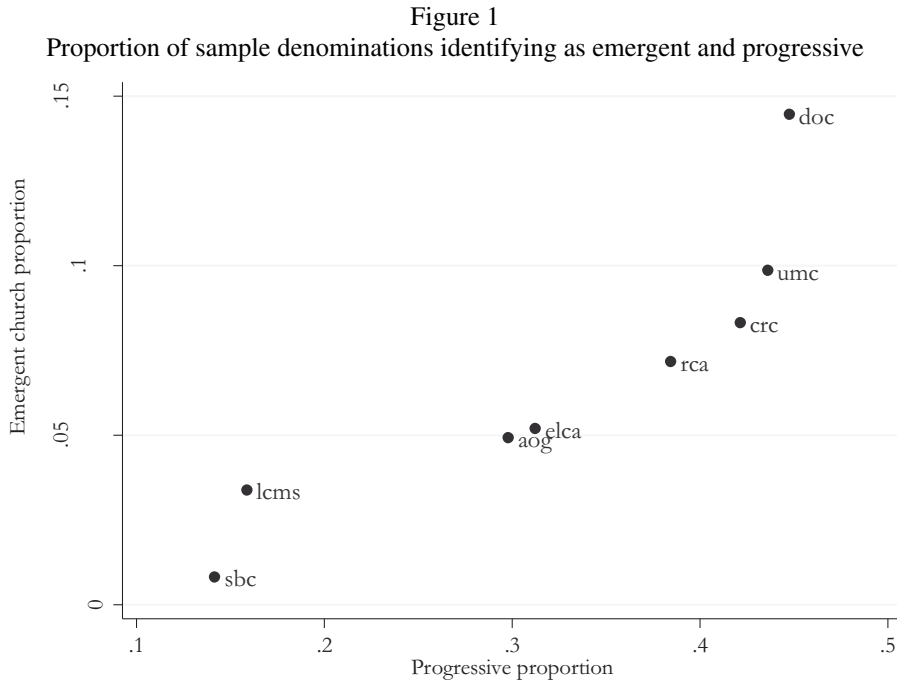
Moreover, it should be clear that these findings apply to clergy affiliated with these denominations. The proportion of emergent churches that are in and outside denominations is simply not known. Bolstering the value of these data, Chia discovered that many in the movement had been, or were currently attached to, an established Christian denomination, including Lutherans, Methodists, Anglicans, and Catholics (Chia 2010:203–04). However, a recent incident highlights the potential tension between congregations and denominations. While many Protestant denominations have been encouraging young church leaders to establish new churches using unconventional means, this has led to a precarious relationship of ECM congregations to evangelical denominations. For example, a growing emergent church in St. Louis, Missouri, was given a \$200,000 loan from the Missouri Baptist Convention, a member of the Southern Baptist Convention. After a news report indicated that this ECM church was hosting weekly Bible studies in a popular downtown bar, the Southern Baptist Convention changed course and indicated that it would not be extending loans to churches who operate using culturally liberal principles (Miller 2007). Since the incident, the church in question (The Journey) does not have any reference to a Southern Baptist affiliation on its website (thejourney.org).

Because of incidents like this, it is understandable why some untold number of emergent churches that were once affiliated with established evangelical denominations have now had to sever ties. Our survey data do not include this type of emergent church, which could open up these findings to the possibility of selection bias—Are the emergent churches outside denominational boundaries even more liberal? In the absence of such data, this study is a useful addition to a growing literature on the ECM as long as its limits and uncertainties are clearly understood.

RESULTS

Distributional Results

The emergent church movement is a young movement, but has achieved considerable penetration of study denominations, drawing the identification of 7 percent of this sample. Again, it is important to note that this is not an estimate of the proportion of all churches identifying with the movement, but simply within these denominations. The distribution shows denominational variation, as Figure 1 demonstrates. For contrast and some additional insight, we scatter the



Note: aog = Assemblies of God; crc = Christian Reformed Church; doc = Disciples of Christ; elca = Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; lcms = Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod; rca = Reformed Church in America; sbc = Southern Baptist Convention; umc = United Methodist Church.

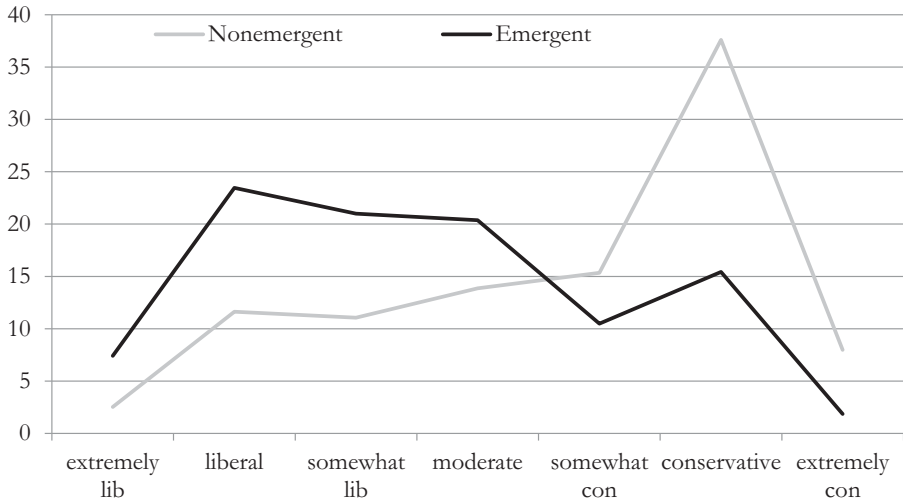
Source: 2009 Cooperative Clergy Study.

proportion of each denomination identifying as “emerging church” with the proportion identifying as “progressive.” Emergent identification was the most common among Disciples of Christ clergy (14 percent), who were also the most likely to identify as progressive. The opposite corner of the plot is occupied by the Southern Baptist Convention, among whom 1 percent (and two churches in this sample) identified as emergent and 14 percent as progressive. The remainder lies in between, following a nearly linear trend. Clearly, the two identities are linked. But it is important to note that while identification as progressive is uncommon among nonemergents (only 17 percent so identify), emergent clergy are split in their identification as progressive (47 percent do, 53 percent do not).

The key dependent variables have been used in previous studies of clergy (see, e.g., Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Guth et al. 1997). They include political ideology and a number of political attitudes that are germane to public discussions about the politics of the emergent church. Echoing Figure 1, Figure 2 confirms conventional wisdom by showing that emergent church clergy are in fact more likely to be political liberals than are other clergy. A bare majority (52 percent) of emergent church clergy are liberals of some stripe (and 28 percent are conservative) compared to only 25 percent of nonemergent clergy (among whom 61 percent are conservative).

Here it is instructive to compare the two distributions in a more systematic way beyond their mean values. Confirming what we see in Figure 2, the nonemergent clergy have a strong, significant negative skew ($-.595$, $se = .053$), meaning it has a long left tail and a concentration on the right (conservative) side. In contrast, the emergent clergy ideological distribution is nonskewed ($.277$, $se = .191$ —a test value twice the standard error is needed to claim a skewed distribution). Moreover, both distributions are not normal in terms of kurtosis (nonemergent: $-.803$, $se = .106$; emergent: $-.927$, $se = .379$) and can be described as platykurtic, or flatter than normal. Therefore, while emergents have a mean score that is more to the left compared to nonemergent clergy, their

Figure 2
Ideological distribution of clergy in emergent and nonemergent churches



Source: 2009 Cooperative Clergy Study.

distribution is not skewed around its mean and is relatively flat, supporting a conclusion that emergents are diverse and inclusive.

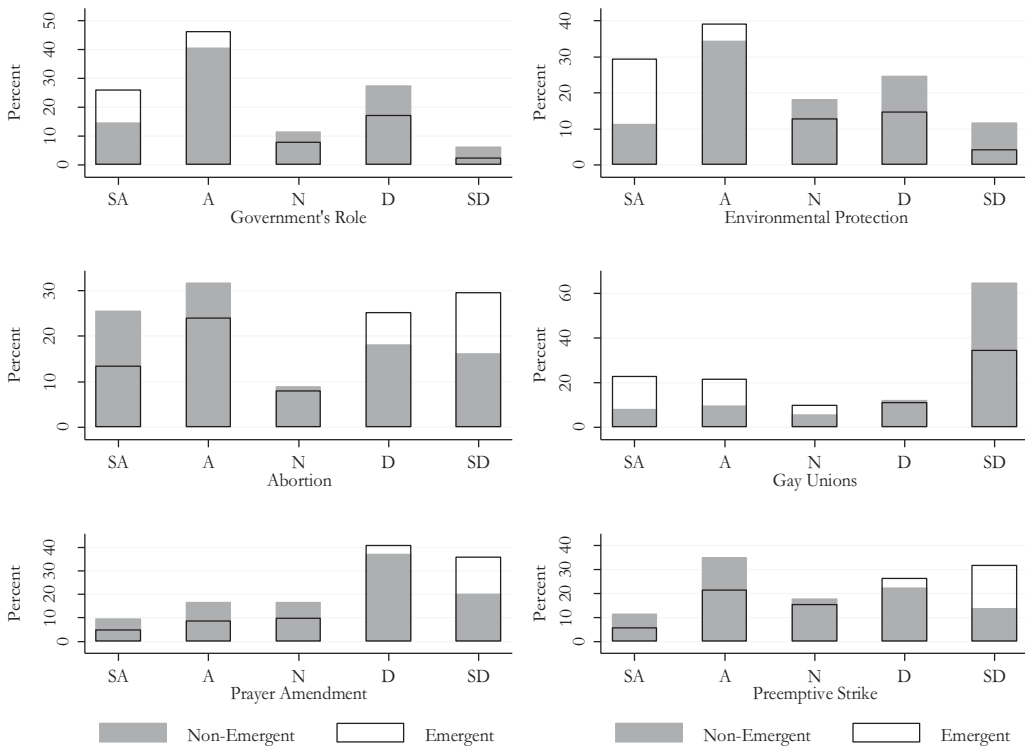
Figure 3 compares the political attitudes of clergy in emergent and nonemergent churches on six issues that we will follow from here. They cover a range of issues about which there have been public discussions by emergent church leaders and by elements of the broader public about the emergent church—they include welfare and poverty, gay rights, environmentalism, abortion, school prayer, and foreign policy. The responses by nonemergent church clergy are shown with gray bars while the emergent clergy are shown with black-bounded boxes.

All of the differences between the two groups are significant at the $p < .01$ level, reinforcing that emergent church clergy, on average, are in fact politically distinctive from nonemergent clergy.³ Emergent church clergy do take modestly more liberal positions on the government's role in solving social problems, and display considerably more support for greater environmental protection and same-sex unions. Whereas over three-quarters of nonemergent church clergy oppose gay unions, emergent clergy are split (45–46) on the issue. Emergent clergy also show stronger opposition to the United States engaging in preemptive strikes to boost national security. Emergent clergy take considerably more liberal positions on two classic cultural wars issues—abortion and school prayer. They show 20 points more disagreement with the constitutional amendments to allow prayer in schools and to prohibit abortions compared to nonemergent clergy. These results cement that emergent clergy are, on average, considerably more liberal than their denominational counterparts on at least some issues. Of course, we do not yet know to what extent these differences are due to identification with the emergent movement or can be ascribed to denominational ties, theological differences, or some other factor.

To help get at the root of what an emergent church identity entails, we show how emergent church clergy and congregations differ from nonemergent clergy and churches in terms of forces

³We also combined these variables into an index ($\alpha = .85$) and compared them between emergent and nonemergent clergy. A two-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test confirms that the distributions are not equivalent ($p < .01$). The skew and kurtosis tests confirm the nonnormality of both distributions. The nonemergent skew is toward a conservative concentration; the skewness of the emergent distribution is just outside statistical significance ($p = .06$).

Figure 3
Distribution of select political attitudes of emergent and nonemergent clergy



Source: 2009 Cooperative Clergy Study.

that often correlate with the political attitudes of clergy. Clergy attitudes can be a function of their political ideology and theology, their personal interests (represented by their demographics), or may reflect the socialization of their community (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Guth et al. 1997). Table 1 presents mean values (and *p* values for associated *t*-tests) for emergent and nonemergent clergy, their churches, and their communities (at the state level). The overall sample means are quite close to the nonemergent means, of course. First, we include a measure of the religious conservatism of clergy, which incorporates belief in Adam and Eve, biblical inerrancy, virgin birth of Jesus, the reality of the devil, whether all religions are equally good and true, that there is only one way to salvation, and whether Jesus will return to earth one day ($\alpha = .93$). Emergent clergy take consistently (but only modestly) more liberal stands on these issues and hence, when combined, are nearly a point more liberal on the index, as Table 1 shows. The same is true for their political ideology. Emergent clergy are twice as likely to be female (20 percent compared to 10 among nonemergents), reflecting denominational sourcing, are slightly more educated, are a bit younger, and have been in the ministry and at their present post for shorter durations. Their churches are the same size, on average, and are 10 percent more likely to be in a city and 18 percent less likely to be in a rural area. Their communities have slightly less religious adherence (about 2 percent less), have the same evangelical adherence rate, and are in states with a marginally greater amount of religious competition—a lower figure on the herfindahl index signals more pluralism and less concentration of adherence.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics by emerging church identity and *t*-test results

Variable (Range)	Nonemergent	Emergent	<i>p</i>
Religious conservatism (1–5)	4.30	3.60	.00
Political conservatism (1–7)	4.70	3.60	.00
Male (0–1)	.90	.80	.00
Age (23–88)	52.60	48.20	.00
Education (1–5)	4.30	4.40	.07
Years present church (0–77)	9.00	6.20	.00
Years in ministry (0–77)	22.20	18.10	.00
Church size (1–8,500)	852.50	897.00	.94
City (0–1)	.29	.39	.00
Rural (0–1)	.48	.30	.00
Total adherence rate (276–791)	493.60	479.00	.02
Evangelical rate (23–420)	167.80	157.60	.17
Herfindahl index (.03–.49)	.09	.08	.06

Source: 2009 Cooperative Clergy Study.

Model Results

The consistent differences between emergent and other clergy demand that we control for these variables before ascribing any distinctiveness to emergent status in models of their political attitudes (using the same six attitudes described in Figure 3). In fact, a key test is whether an emergent church identity is more than a function of the individual attributes people bring to the movement. If it is truly diverse and inclusive and individual differences are respected, then attitudes of member clergy should be a simple function of individual attributes. Because we incorporate state-level variables in the model, we employ standard errors clustered at the state level. Every dependent variable we model uses an ordinal scale, so we employ ordinal logistic regression.

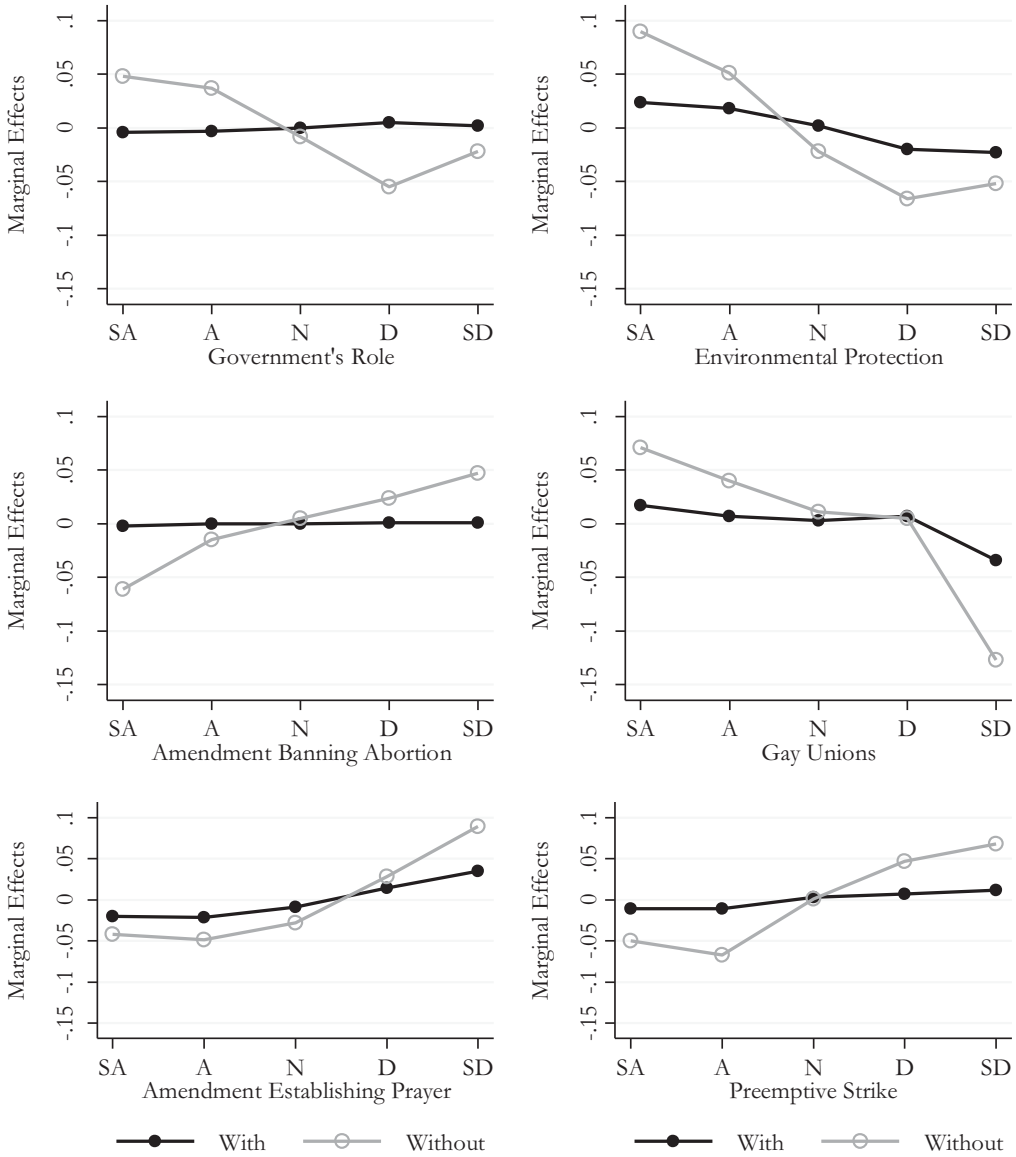
The full results, available in Table S1, point to the dominating effects of political ideology and theology. But there are also persistent gender differences showing that women clergy take more liberal stances on these issues. There is also some hint that, net of other controls, the composition of the state is related to clergy attitudes as well—clergy in more evangelical states take more conservative positions on gay rights, preemption, and abortion.

We focus on Figure 4, which shows the marginal effects of an emergent status on the probability of selecting each option in the Likert scale of each DV. We draw attention to two sets of results in the figure. One shows the marginal effects of emergent identification (black lines) in the presence of two powerful controls—religious conservatism and political ideology; the other set (gray lines) shows the marginal effects of being an emergent church identifier without those controls in the model. The short story here is that emergent status makes no difference on the six issues studied at conventional levels of significance (black lines) unless religious conservatism and political ideology are removed from the model (gray lines).

In no case does an emergent identity shift opinions at the $p < .05$ level in the presence of controls for religious conservatism and political ideology. Instead, it has a statistically marginal effect on support for environmental protection ($p = .15$), support for gay unions ($p = .09$), and opposition to a prayer amendment ($p = .14$). Among the other issues—government's role in solving social problems, an amendment restricting abortion, and the doctrine of preemptive strikes—emergent status does not budge opinions in the presence of those two powerful controls. Those controls work as expected, with political and religious conservatives much more likely to take positions against government social welfare and rights for gays and lesbians, but for

Figure 4

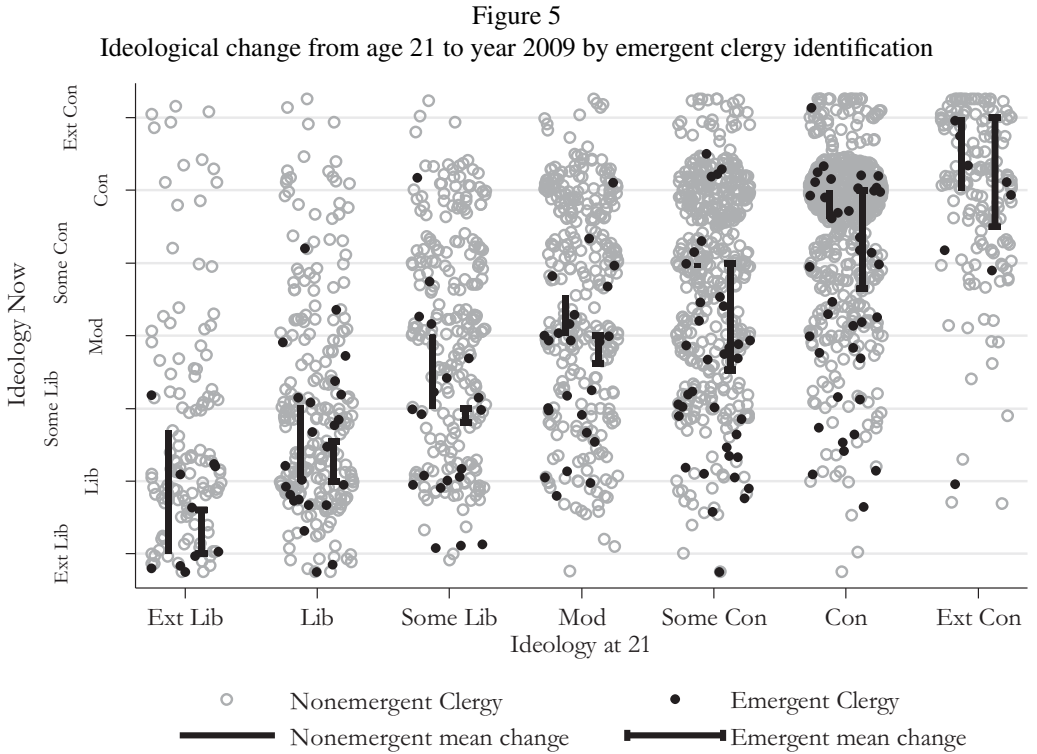
Marginal effects of emerging church identification on six political attitudes, controlling for religious conservatism with and without those controls



Source: 2009 Cooperative Clergy Study.

government establishing prayer, banning abortion, and striking other countries from which threats are perceived.

When those controls are absent, an emergent ID has effects that are significant ($p < .01$) in all cases, adding to the probability of taking more liberal positions (see the gray lines in Figure 4). For instance, emergent clergy are about 7 percent more likely to strongly agree to the blessing of same-sex unions and are 13 percent less likely to strongly disagree. Emergents are more likely to strongly disagree with preemptive strikes, an anti-abortion amendment, and a prayer amendment. They are more likely to agree with more environmental protection, government



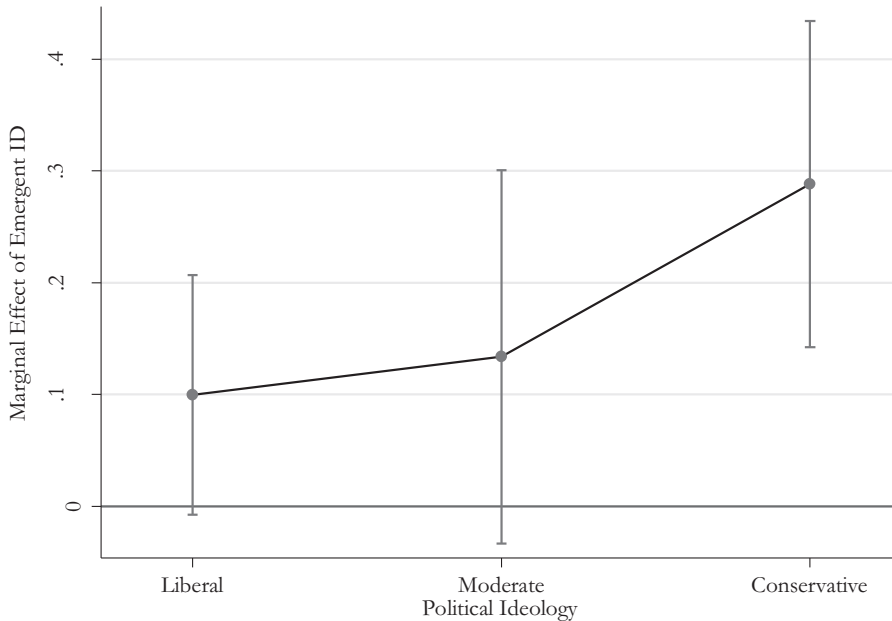
Source: 2009 Cooperative Clergy Study.

involvement in solving social problems, and expanding gay unions. However, these differences are simply a function of the distribution of religious and political ideology in the movement compared to nonemergent clergy. That is, emergents, as an inclusive movement, tend to house more theological and political liberals than their denominational counterparts, and ideology and theology are closely linked to political position taking. Put differently, emergent clergy are a more inclusive group and their lack of uniformity is reflected in the fact that their identification does not promote a particular set of views.

DISCUSSION

Our cross-sectional data do not admit of a particular process by which emergent clergy came to identify with the movement, of course, but there are a few questions that may be helpful in starting to think about it. Sample clergy were asked about their political ideology at age 21. We have seen that emergent clergy lie all over the ideological map, but where did they start? Figure 5 shines light on this by scattering their ideology at age 21 (x axis) compared to now (y axis—emergent = black circles, nonemergent = gray circles). The figure also shows the average change in ideology for emergent (capped line) and nonemergent clergy (noncapped line), anchored to their starting place at age 21. Aside from expected regression toward the mean, we see that emergent clergy are more likely to retain liberalism and, if conservative at 21, tend to shift in a more liberal direction more strongly. Nonemergent clergy who were liberal at age 21 shifted more sharply toward conservatism and retained more of their moderation and conservatism from age 21. Thus, the views of clergy who came to identify as emergent shifted over time in a liberal direction.

Figure 6
Marginal effects of emergent identification on adult education inclusiveness
(90 percent confidence intervals)



Source: 2009 Cooperative Clergy Study.

However, this evidence, too, is ambiguous. The shift may simply indicate increased advocacy for liberal views or it may show a shift toward inclusion. Supporting that view, emergents are simply more likely to have changed their views (in any direction)—the average nonemergent was likely to change by 1.05 points in ideology, while emergents were likely to change 1.2 points ($p = .09$). Ideological change puts one in tension with social surroundings and may create a personal incentive to pursue an inclusive environment.

We have one more test available to assess how to view ideology in the emergent church. The Cooperative Clergy Study (CCS) included a short battery of questions about the norms governing adult education that have been used to measure commitment to inclusiveness in a deliberative setting (Djupe and Calfano 2012; Djupe and Olson 2013). Commitment to these practices is high across the board but not uniform and there is variation to explain. We composed simple models of these inclusive practices including as independent variables ideological change from age 21, ideology in 2009, emergent identification, and an interaction between emergent identification and current ideology, as well as controls (gender, age, and denominational dummies—see Table S2). Greater ideological change predicted support for more inclusive adult education practices (the same effect holds regardless of ideology at age 21) and the interaction between current ideology and emergent identification is marginally significant. The marginal effects of an emergent identification across ideology are presented in Figure 6, which show that emergents are nearly distinguishable from nonemergents among liberals and moderates, but are clearly more inclusive than other current conservatives. While not definitive evidence, we find that emergents are not distinctive in their politics from other similarly ideologically identified clergy (Figure 5), and that emergents are at least as, if not more, inclusive than their nonemergent peers of the same ideology (Figure 6).

CONCLUSION

A first important finding of this research is the reasonably large number of emergent clergy who hail from a mainline denominational affiliation. This finding does not find support in previous social science literature concerning the ECM. Marti (2009) described an emergent church as a place of refuge for those coming from conservative evangelical backgrounds, while others conclude that many members of the ECM become attached to the movement after deconverting from evangelical Christianity (Bielo 2011b; Chia 2010; Hempton 2008). The most logical explanation for this unexpected finding is related to how the data were collected—specifically through established Protestant denominations. This does not weaken its importance, but does highlight how little is known about the true distribution of ECM congregations in and out of denominations.

The movement intends to be theologically flexible, reach people where they are, and enable followers to determine the direction of the movement. On its face, this quick description suggests that emergent churches (as seen through the lens of clergy respondents) can be found anywhere on the ideological and theological spectrums, with the expectation that they should mirror the composition of the congregation. The descriptive results provide some evidence to back this assertion. Figure 2 shows that emergent clergy are distributed across the ideological spectrum, and nonparametric statistics reveal the distribution to be nonskewed and flatter than normal, which we interpret as evidence of diversity and inclusivity.

These findings provide support for other social science research on the ECM. While leaders in the movement are quick to talk about some of the crises facing the mainstream Christian church, they are very reluctant to create an “us versus them” dualism, which they believe is destructive. This hesitancy to create bright lines between the movement and traditional Christianity is rooted in the ECM’s desire to have churches of all denominations come together to find consensus where possible (Chia 2010:138–39). The ECM’s focus on drawing from all religious traditions and political perspectives is more than just a high-minded ideal, it is a statistical reality.

At the same time, compared to other clergy in this sample, the average emergent clergyperson is more liberal in his or her theological and political beliefs. Compared to the average denominational colleague, the average ECM clergyperson takes more liberal, sometimes much more liberal, stances on important issues of public policy. But, by and large, since the movement is more diverse and inclusive than nonemergent Christianity (in these denominations), it naturally contains more political and theological liberals.

This pattern presents two problems, one analytical and one practical. The analytical problem is that we are limited in the ways we can study the emergent movement. With traditional frequentist methods, we need to compare those who identify with the emergent church to something. That comparison group is more conservative, which dictates our result that the emergent movement is more liberal. However, this does not mean that the emergent movement drives people to *become* more liberal, and testing this proposition requires a different research design.

It is entirely possible, and consistent with the emergent approach, that an emergent perspective allows more diversity compared to traditional approaches to church. Assessing this requires gathering data on who chooses to attend emergent churches and how those churches socialize and aggregate opinion. If emergent proponents are correct, then we should see (1) less selection bias in choosing to attend emergent churches and (2) greater opinion shifts and conformity in traditional churches than in emergent churches where acceptance of diversity is emphasized.

The practical problem that confronts the emergent church movement may explain why we see tortured public statements described earlier about gay rights, abortion, and other divisive issues. An inclusive approach may simply enable diversity, welcoming all comers to an open dialogue. At the same time, that inclusive approach seems to demand accepting people who have not yet had the same rights as others. Thus, here is where Brian McLaren calls for a five-year moratorium on gay rights, which can be seen as calling for study, reflection, and dialogue, or simply putting off taking a stance that could alienate part of this potentially fragile coalition.

In this way, the emergent church is not much different from other religious bodies. Almost all of them host disagreement on some dimension, which makes position taking risky. In part, this is why clergy often hedge, avoid drawing lines in the sand, and emphasize process and relationship maintenance over outcomes. What is particularly useful about studying the emergent church is the theological and practical lengths to which it has gone to elevate process above a schedule of desired outcomes.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

Appendix 1. Variable Coding

Table S1. Ordinal Logit Estimates of Six Political Attitudes; Results for Emerging Church Identification in Models With and Without Religious Conservatism and Ideology

Table S2. Estimated Effects of Ideological Change, Ideology, and Emergent Identification on Adult Education Inclusive Values (OLS Regression)