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ORIGINAL PAPER

Emergent Church Practices in America: Inclusion and Deliberation in American Congregations

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Abstract In the last 15 years a small but growing movement organized under the label "emergent church" has begun to help push the church through what many of them believe to be the first careful steps that will usher in a new understanding of Christianity for the twenty-first century. An emergent church model is quite a radical one that prioritizes the agency of those in attendance to determine the beliefs and direction of the church. In this way, emergent churches, at least in theory, are radical deliberative democrats in orientation, which may have profound effects on how the church is run and how members view the church, each other, and society as a result. Using the first dataset known to acquire this identity of Protestant clergy, we assess whether emergent Christian clergy adhere to a different set of religious beliefs, values, and deliberative norms than those in the modern church.

Keywords Emergent church movement · Emergent church · Emerging church · Deliberation · Missional

Introduction

In the past 15 years, an influential and controversial new movement, the emergent church, has arisen that presents a potent "postmodern" challenge to the modern Christian church. The movement claims to be emergent in the scientific sense, building truth from the ground up through complex social interaction, rather than

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collecting people in order to disseminate truth. Some of the particular values that emergents espouse are distinctive and some are shared with religious liberals, raising questions about whether in fact the movement is distinctive. To this point there has been some social scientific research to try to understand this movement almost completely dominated by the use of case studies and interviews (Poloma and Hood 2008; Lee and Sinitiere 2009; Marti 2009; Bielo 2011a; Wollschleger 2012; Packard 2013). Our research adds to this body of work by approaching the emerging church movement from a different perspective, employing surveys in order to systematically collect data about clergy who may identify with the emerging church. These data allow us to compare what movement leaders articulate with what we know and can show about the way the modern church functions. Do emergent Christian clergy adhere to a different set of religious beliefs, values, and democratic norms than their fellow denominational clergy?

The Postmodern Emerging Church

In the last 15 years a small but growing number of Christian pastors and thinkers have begun to discuss the possibility that there has been some significant and lasting change occurring in the culture of the US that should be reflected in the theology and practice of the Protestant church. This understanding is based on the belief that the average person now understands important matters like truth and the purpose of life in a way most accurately described by postmodern philosophy through its emphasis on subjectivity over objectivity. In particular, they argue that younger Americans are no longer identifying as Christian due in large part to the rapid advances in technology that have given young people unprecedented access to understanding other world religions (Kimball 2003). Those who embrace form of this postmodern philosophy have become loosely organized under the label 'emergent church' and have begun to help push the church through what many of them believe to be the first careful steps that will usher in a new understanding of Christianity for the twenty-first century (McLaren 2001; Kimball 2003; McLaren and Campolo 2006).

The word primarily used to define the movement, *emergent*, is intentional and attempts to be descriptive of the church model. In scientific usage, emergence refers to a result that comes unpredictably from interactions in a local medium. Emergence is a component of complex systems theory, in which higher order organization results from a few simple rules and is not dictated either from on high or by individual preference (see, e.g., Holland 2000). Thus, an emergent church model is quite a radical one which prioritizes interaction among those in attendance and describes the agency of a diverse group to determine, perhaps unpredictably, not just the direction of the church but its beliefs as well.

In this way, emergent churches might be called radical deliberative democrats in orientation. Deliberation is a process by which participants engage each other governed by norms of openness, equality, and reciprocity to reach a conclusion that is not predetermined (e.g., Gutmann and Thompson 1996). This link is helpful in distinguishing the ECM from other liberal or progressive religious bodies. Liberal

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denominations acknowledge that some biblical prescriptions are time bound and need to be updated to be relevant to a changing world. The reaction, however, is top down, reflected in an updated translation of the bible, for instance. Liberal churches, too, have democratic polity that govern how the organizational church is run, but there is still a core that is not up for debate. The emergent church agrees with the importance of relevance, but leaves the determination of what to adopt, how to interpret it, and how it should be relevant to people in dialogue. In other words, this form of postmodernism and deliberation agree that truth is what people collectively make of it rather than something specified a priori. We should not get too carried away with this distinction since there are tremendous opportunities for diversity of mission and application in liberal churches. But, a postmodern, deliberative approach to church may have profound effects on how the church is run and how members view theology, the church, each other, and society as a result.

The core principles of the movement have been developed in mass market books. Brian McLaren, credited as "the emerging church's most influential thinker" (Carson 2005, 35), points to Middleton and Walsh's *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be* (1995) as a turning point in his understanding of Christianity that led him to embrace the emergent church movement. What followed from McLaren was a series of highly influential books concerning his approach to postmodern Christianity, including his most famous work, *A New Kind of Christian.* Four central themes are developed in these works: relativism, inclusivism, mission, and discussion. We will describe these in some detail below by drawing on writing by leading figures in the ECM, a tactic used by other social scientists studying the movement (Lee and Sinitiere 2009; Bielo 2012; Packard 2013). We close each section with a hypothesis concerning how ECM identifiers should be different from non-identifiers if they hold beliefs consistent with the mass presentation.

Relativism

One of the foundational principles of the ECM is an emphasis on the subjective interpretation of the bible. This lack of objectivity is rooted in the understanding that human beings are the product of the environment in which they were raised—the philosophy they were taught and the historical context in which they grew up. What further complicates biblical interpretation is the limited ability of language to describe the divine (Bielo 2012). One prominent ECM scholar wrote in response to a desire for the movement to create a doctrinal statement, "[T]he struggle to capture God in our finite propositional structures is nothing short of linguistic idolatry" (Shults 2006).

An acceptable faith for the twenty-first century is not the same as a faith during or before the Enlightenment. But emergent church theorists would push farther, that "Postmodernism, then, holds there is no single universal worldview. All truth is not absolute, community is valued over individualism, and thinking, learning, and beliefs can be determined nonlinearly" (Kimball 2003, 49–50). Moreover, Bell contends in *Velvet Elvis* that, "To think that I can just read the Bible without reading any of my own culture or background or issues into it and come out with a 'pure' or 'exact' meaning is not only untrue, but it leads to a very destructive reading of the

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Bible that robs it of its life and energy" (Bell 2006, 54). In part, this may be a quite practical response to make the church relevant. Some scholars point to the writings of Lesslie Newbigin, an Anglican priest who wrote that the proper response to a Western world that sees Christianity as irrelevant and archaic is a moving away from certainty, instead embracing the mysteries of faith (Bielo 2012). Adopting a relative faith makes the concept of hell problematic. This is what Bell argued in *Love Wins* (2011), which not surprisingly has generated a firestorm of controversy.

It is important to note that it is difficult for many thinkers in the emergent movement to use the term relativist to describe themselves. Brian McLaren, for example, writes in one place, "Speaking of smoke, this book suggests that relativists are right in their denunciation of absolutism. It also affirms that absolutists are right in their denunciation of relativists. And then it suggests that they are both wrong because the answer lies beyond both absolutism and relativism" (McLaren 2006b, 38). While it is difficult to operationalize the concept "post-relative-absolutism," using questions concerning a literal interpretation of the bible provide an approximation of the concept (Chia 2010). Because relativism is a central tenet of the emerging church we arrive at Hypothesis 1:

H1 Clergy who identify with the emergent church will be less likely to adopt a literal view or believe there are moral absolutes in the world.

Inclusivism

One of the manifestations of the emerging church movement's understanding of relativism is the desire to be as inclusive of outsiders as possible. This inclusivity is extended both to those who do not prescribe to any religious faith or those coming from a different religious tradition. The key is recognition by those involved in reaching out that Jesus is already present among target populations: "Truth is everywhere, and is available to everyone" (Bell 2011, 78). As an example, McLaren took a group of emergent church leaders on a trip to Africa, and before they reached their destination McLaren told the group: "When we get over in Africa, we are not going to say anything; we're going to learn, we're going to be quiet. Our African brothers and sisters are going to teach us how to think about our Christian faith" (Lee and Sinitiere 2009, 101). Such an approach tries to reach people where they are, given their particular conditions, allowing conversion in context (see also Burke and Pepper 2003). Statements like these are indicative of the pervasive belief in the emergent church that the line between those who are part of the ingroup and those who are not should continue to dissolve.

This becomes concrete in the suggestion that evangelical Christians should begin to create bridges with those of other religious traditions. In his book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren relates a story in which a Christian woman was attempting to teach her daughter about religious diversity. One day her daughter noticed their Muslim neighbor was wearing a veil and asked her mother why the neighbor covered her head. The mother responded, "She dresses like that—and covers her head with a veil, because she loves God. That is how her people show they love God" (McLaren 2006b, 265). In another instance, some members of the emerging

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church movement had decided to observe the Muslim tradition of Ramadan, noting the number of similarities between the act of fasting in Christianity and the use of fasting in Islam (McLaren 2009).

This shift in perspective by emerging church elites has tremendous implications for the way the church interacts with the larger culture. The ECM no longer sees itself as an adversary to the world, but instead should focus on the commonalities between groups (Burke and Pepper 2003). This focus on inclusion is carefully assessed by Lloyd Chia who describes a variety of "maps" showing how the ECM will relate to different Christian as well as non-Christian groups. The movement is focused on creating friendly territory with different faith groups by "decentering" Christianity from a Western, male dominated ideal to a more inclusive faith (see also Packard 2013). For instance, a prominent emergent church conference, Christianity 21, consisted of 21 talks by exclusively female speakers (Chia 2010, 144–145).

This focus on inclusivism runs counter to the sense of embattlement that evangelicals typically perceive. After conducting hundreds of interviews with evangelicals across the United States, Christian Smith concluded, "Evangelicals observe that every racial, ethnic, religious, political, and ideological perspective is given fair time, except for the Christian perspective" (Smith 1998, 140). Other work has concluded that based on this feeling of disrespect, evangelical Protestants are more likely to support the Christian Right (Wald et al. 1989) and less likely to extend basic freedoms to groups on the political or religious fringe of American society. At the same time, seeking out new members in an inclusive way is the dominant strategy in the religious economy (Stark and Finke 2000; Finke and Stark 2005), and is certainly common among Mainline Protestants (Wuthnow and Evans 2002; especially in the context of available measures which we will discuss below), leading us to wonder whether the emergent approach is distinctive.

H2 Emergent church clergy should be more committed to inclusivity and less to exclusivity than non-emergent identifying clergy.

Missional

The term 'missional' was popularized through a number of Christian writers who began to understand the notion that the church was not merely a physical location but instead the way a Christian should approach all aspects of their faith (Bosch 1992; Roxburgh 1997; Guder and Barrett 1998). Frost and Hirsch operationalize this idea by writing," [T]he missional church disassembles itself and seeps into the cracks and crevices of society in order to be Christ to those who don't yet know him" (Frost and Hirsch 2001, 43). Pastors like Tim Keller began to advocate that churches should be equipping its members to go 'on mission' with the surrounding community to show, by example, the way in which the church is counter to the culture that it inhabits (Keller 2001). The stakes involved here are high, as McLaren (2006b, 109) writes: "[Living missionally] gets us beyond the us-them thinking and in-grouping and out-grouping that leads to prejudice, exclusion, and ultimately to religious wars."

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This change should result in members who are constantly reassessing their purpose in the community and asking, "What am I—and what are we—supposed to be doing in this world these days, to fit in with God's creative and ongoing mission" (McLaren and Campolo 2006, 77)? Social scientists describe this missional process as "settling into a locale and becoming intimately familiar with a place, its people, and their language." (Bielo 2011a, 209). The end result of this constant reassessment is a believer who is not adding to the problems of humanity (McLaren and Campolo 2006, 123). Because of the focus on living missionally, we will test Hypothesis 3:

H3 Emergent clergy will place a greater emphasis on congregants interacting with individuals who are not part of their religious community.

Faith Through Discussion

The method through which the emerging church urges the formation of theology, expresses inclusion, and seeks mission is through constant dialogue: "The emerging church uses the metaphor of conservation to describe itself" (Chia 2010, 61). This becomes quickly apparent when reading what is considered one of the most important writings of the movement, Brian McLaren's *A New Kind of Christian* trilogy, which uses the device of conversation throughout. McLaren uses the phrase "partner in the emergent conversation" three times in the acknowledgements section of the first book, as an example. McLaren writes in the foreword to the final book, "I am more interested in generating conversation than argument, believing that conversations have the potential to form us, inform us, and educate us far more than arguments" (McLaren 2008, xxiii). Many times leading emergent church thinkers will begin their books and talks by stating, "Welcome to the conversation" (Chia 2010, 83).

Several of the most important books in the emerging church movement contain significant elements of dialogue. *Adventures in Missing the Point* is arranged as a number of different topics with Brian McLaren offering up his initial thoughts on a topic with Tony Campolo providing a response, or McLaren responding to Campolo's initial thoughts. Dan Kimball's book on the emergent church contains sidebars throughout the book that include commentary by a number of other Christian authors including Rick Warren, Brian McLaren, and others. In addition, entire books about the movement have been written in the style of conversation. *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives* consists of five 'dialogues' with Christian thinkers who have a variety of perspectives on the ECM (Sweet and Crouch 2003).

This focus on dialogue, however, does not come without its pitfalls. When authors of this movement are pressed to write about some of the controversial and potentially divisive issues facing the church they become resistant and are quick to change the subject. When Brian McLaren is asked directly about the issue of homosexuality he has been consistently evasive, saying in one instance that there was no good position to take in the debate because all positions are hurtful to a segment of the community (Carson 2005). In another instance McLaren wrote concerning homosexuality, "Perhaps we need a five-year moratorium on making

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pronouncements. In the meantime, we'll practice prayerful Christian dialogue, listening respectfully, disagreeing agreeably…Then in 5 years, if we have clarity, we'll speak; if not, we'll set another 5 years for ongoing reflection. After all, many important issues in church history took centuries to figure out" (McLaren 2006a). While this ongoing dialogue is crucial to the formation of this new theology, it is interesting to note where the conversation falls silent. Academic observers of the movement have noted that this conversation is not always coming from a myriad of sources, with the most popular and influential contributors to the conversation largely well educated, white males in the Western world (Chia 2010; Packard 2013).

Because of the emergent church's emphasis on dialogue we hypothesize that those who affiliate with this movement will express greater support for deliberative norms. Indeed, democratic deliberation appears to capture the essence of the movement. As Gutmann and Thompson (1996) describe it, deliberation is the procedure by which a diverse group works through a disagreement through conversation. Importantly, that conversation must be guided by a few essential norms to reach a decision that is acceptable to all—participants are committed to the process, they have equal status and access to participation, participants value the contributions of others, and participants consider others when expressing their opinions. Some lists of the requirements of deliberation are much longer (e.g., Mendelberg and Oleske 2000), which leads some to find little deliberation in public outside of organized forums (Mutz 2006). But scholars looking to American religion have found instances of it in a wide variety of settings, including denominational assemblies (Wood and Bloch 1995), congregations (Coffin 2005; Djupe and Olson 2013), adult education sessions (Neiheisel et al. 2009), and clergy speech on political issues (Djupe and Neiheisel 2008; Olson et al. 2011; Djupe and Calfano 2012). Thus, while it is plausible to find deliberation in American religion, this also suggests that the emerging church model may not be so different from average church practice. This leads us to Hypothesis 4:

H4 Because of the desire for deliberation in their community, emergent clergy will be more likely to adhere to deliberative norms.

Data and Design

We draw on data from the most recent incarnation of the Cooperative Clergy Study, which was coordinated by Corwin Smidt at Calvin College in 2009 (see also Smidt 2004). A group of scholars coordinated surveys of clergy covering a wide spectrum of Protestant denominations. The denominations surveyed included 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, 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

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Kopko, n = 520, rr = 53.6—the Mennonite survey did not include the emergent church measure and were dropped). Each researcher was responsible for acquiring a list of congregational clergy, taking a random sample, and administering cooperatively composed surveys by mail.

The survey included measures that are useful for this project, if not ideal. Most important, the survey captured an emergent church identity by asking: "While no one likes religious labels, do any of the following describe your religious faith?" Among other labels, the survey listed "emerging church." This constitutes the key independent variable for this investigation, taking on the value of 1 for an affirmative identification with the emerging church and 0 otherwise.[1]

The process of classifying a church as emergent is filled with methodological pitfalls, as even those who typify the movement bristle at the word with McLaren writing, "[N]early everyone is sick of it" (McLaren and Campolo 2006, 249). Bielo gives the most comprehensive overview of attempts at identifying and quantifying the emerging church, and makes clear that any attempt at such an endeavor will be less than ideal, noting that enumerating emerging churches will result in missing many emerging Christians who do not attend an emerging church (Bielo 2011a, 37). To further exacerbate this problem, Packard (2013) notes that none of the observed churches take a record of attendance as they have no body to which the church reports. In this way, using a self identifying strategy may be closest to the ideal, allowing portions of a population to adopt the label if they feel it fits.

However, there are two obvious counters that apply to all identity based claims. Are "emergents" emergent? That is, do those who adopt the label know what "emergent" entails? And does one have to adopt the label to be emergent? Are churches emergent when they do what emergents do? And when one attends (or pastors) an emergent church are they de facto emergent?

To an extent there is a chicken or egg problem here that is unavoidable in survey research of this kind. What we are studying is whether those who adopt the label have distinctive beliefs and behaviors from those who do not adopt the label and perhaps nothing more. We presume, though cannot tell definitively from these data, that adopting this label is a meaningful act. Fortunately, we are studying a population that is widely considered elite (e.g., Stark 1971; Quinley 1974; Guth et al. 1997; Olson 2000; Djupe and Gilbert 2003) and if anyone knows what this term entails, it would be clergy, and especially Protestant clergy. While it would appear very unlikely that a church leader would identify with the emergent church when in fact they are not, it is possible that the converse is true—that emergent identification would be depressed due to the stigma that the word carries in many evangelical churches (DeYoung and Kluck 2008).

Along with a long list of traditional theological and demographic measures, the survey included two sets of measures that capture (1) commitment to inclusive and exclusive religious values as well as (2) the commitment to deliberative norms in

[1] The wording of the item is perhaps non-standard, raising questions of whether the identity refers to the congregation or the individual. We argue that the difference is not meaningful—identity items always refer to whether the individual adopts a group label. Clergy adopting the label "Catholic" means that they identify with the Catholic Church. Whether there is variance in the beliefs and behaviors of identifiers is subject to empirical verification in all cases.

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adult education. To measure the values, respondent clergy were asked how often they presented four specific value statements, introduced using the following language, "How often do you preach on the following values in your sermons?" The two inclusive values are, "To be a good Christian, it is important to love your neighbor as yourself;" and "To be a good Christian, it is important to invite others to church even if the church changes as a result." The two exclusive value statements are, "To be a good Christian, it is important to shop at stores owned by Christians;" and "To be a good Christian, it is important to associate primarily with other Christians." We combine the two statements for each into averaged indices that range from 1 (never) to 4 (very often) (inclusive $\alpha = .71$ and exclusive $\alpha = .74$). It is important to note that the inclusive values are not uniquely subscribed by the ECM, but are common among clergy (see Djupe and Calfano 2012), and hence may not be ideal to capture the true extent of inclusion adopted by ECM clergy.

The survey also included measures to assess commitment to deliberative norms in adult education—a setting where difference is most likely to be confronted in houses of worship and where such norms would most likely come into play (Neiheisel et al. 2009). These four items cover the essential components of a deliberative encounter, including commitment to reciprocity, exposure to difference, full and equal participation, and connecting values with opinions (see the "Appendix" for all variable coding). Responses on a likert scale are averaged and run from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree ($\alpha = .78$). Likewise, ECM clergy may extend these norms to govern other facets of the church than just adult education, including worship. Future work on the ECM should approach the application of deliberative norms more broadly.

To these data, we add state-level results from the 2010 Religious Congregations and Membership Study. The 2010 RCMS[2] report on the state-level adherents and congregations for the major religious traditions as well as 236 religious groupings in the United States. From this dataset, we draw on the total adherence rate, the evangelical adherence rate, and a Herfindahl-style index, which captures the concentration of adherence in a state.[3] The state-level measures we use are not ideal—they are not tight enough to describe the precise local environment in which individual churches function. At the same time, the state-level data are highly correlated with county-level data.[4]

We have contrasting expectations for how these variables relate to an emerging church identification. On the one hand, higher religious adherence areas have a greater supply of religiously inclined people to support a novel effort like an emerging church. This is especially applicable to the evangelical adherence rate. On the other hand, emergent churches are a reaction to the established way of doing church and are perceived to exist in under-churched areas. The same logic applies to

[2] These data were downloaded from the American Religion Data Archive (http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/RCMSST10.asp).

[3] Herfindahl indices sum the squared proportions of groups within a population. Scores that approach 1 signal a monopoly and scores toward zero signal pluralism.

[4] For instance, the evangelical adherence rate in the state is correlated with the county evangelical rate at r=.73.

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our measure of the concentration of adherence in a religious tradition (the Herfindahl-style measure)—high concentration is a sign of success, which might crowd out a new style of church, but is also a measure of supply that enables innovation.

Results

We begin with an overview of the presence of emerging church identification among clergy of the denominations sampled. It is important to note that this is not an estimate of the proportion of emerging churches in the clergy population. Indeed, we suspect that there are many non-denominational emergent churches which would not be captured in our sample since movements are not bound by denominational strictures and may even be "resistant" to them (Packard 2013, 146). One might suspect that denominational traditions are likely to impose on how church is done and weaken the drive to innovate, so this test of emergent identification is a strong one and necessarily limited by the denominational sampling frame. At the same time, many emergent groups were started by clergy in established religious families including the Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, and even Catholics (Chia 2010, 203–204).

Figure 1 shows the proportion of each sample denomination identifying as an "emerging church." Overall in the sample, 7 % identify as an emerging church, but the percentage varies by denomination. There are only 2 Southern Baptist Convention churches (out of 245—.8 %) that so identify, and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod only has 3 % identifiers. It is interesting that the Assemblies of God has the same proportion identifying as the ELCA (5 %). The largest concentration is in the Disciples of Christ, which has 14.5 % of sampled clergy identifying as an emerging church.

For perspective, we show the proportion of each denomination identifying as "progressive" and "ecumenical," labels with which emergents are often branded. Clearly, these labels are much more heavily subscribed, though the proportions are also clearly correlated with the adoption of the emergent label. What the graph cannot do for us is give us a sense of how often emergent churches adopt the other two labels. And it is heavy. Forty-seven percent of emerging church clergy identify as progressive compared to only 17 % of other clergy. The comparison is similar for the label "ecumenical"—48 % of emerging church clergy adopt it compared to only 25 % of the others. We get the sense from this that there is considerable overlap between emerging churches and theological liberals. At the same time, that overlap is not nearly complete given that less than half of emerging churches take on these labels and only half of emergents identify as evangelical.

We explore their theological commitments in more detail in Fig. 2. The results there show emerging churches to be less dogmatic, more open, and more questioning of denominations (all differences are significant at the .05 level), thus showing initial support for H1. The clearest distinction of emergents from others is how they consider denominations, with high agreement that denominations should embrace modernity rather than preserve tradition. On most other measures, the gaps

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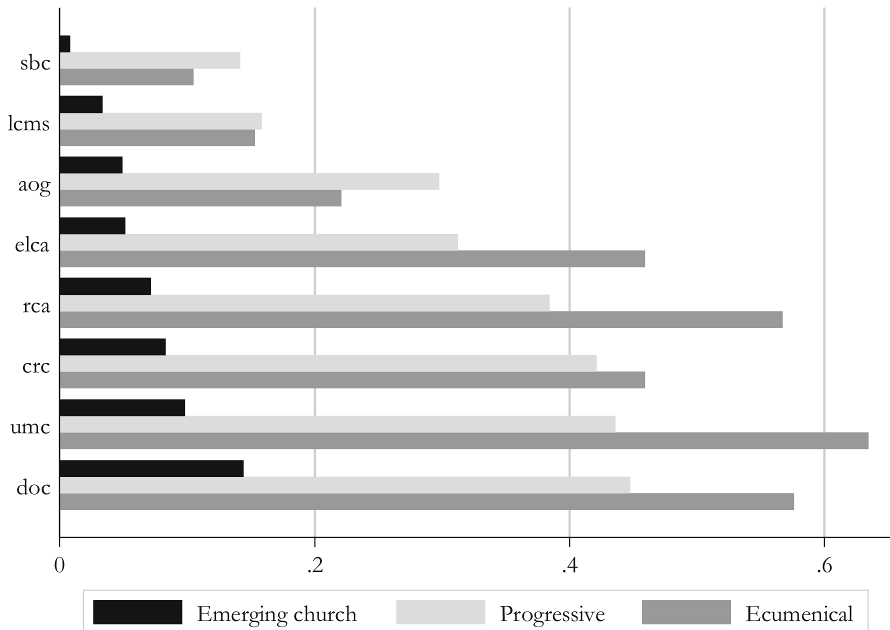

Fig. 1 The proportion of CCS sample denominations identifying as an emerging church, progressive, and ecumenical. *Source* 2009 Cooperative Clergy Study

are smaller, but still confirm the expected character of emergents. They are more likely to disagree with an inerrant view of the bible and less likely to agree that there are moral absolutes or there is just one way to get to heaven. While emergents are more open to women and gay clergy, they will not go so far as to embrace the view that all religions are equally good and true (though they disagree a bit less than other clergy). These are the patterns we would expect to see of a group that is committed to inclusion, equality, and dialogue, which begs the question of whether in fact they are more committed to those norms specifically.

Thus, we turn to an examination of the presentation of inclusive and exclusive religious values as well as the adoption of deliberative norms in Fig. 3. The gaps in the adoption of deliberative norms in adult education are small, but in the expected direction (see Fig. 3). If a church is truly an emergent property, then it depends on the free and full interaction of participants that have a range of views. We find that emerging church clergy are more committed to these deliberative values than are clergy of other churches. The largest difference is on whether it is essential to have a range of views present. Still, it is important to note that clergy of other churches display average agreement with the proposition. While the differences between emergent and other churches would be greater if the questions asked about deliberative norms in worship services rather than limiting them to adult education sessions, these findings provide support for Hypothesis 4. As Neiheisel et al. (2009) argue, adult education is where deliberation is most likely to happen in a church given that these groups are where sometimes contentious issues are addressed by

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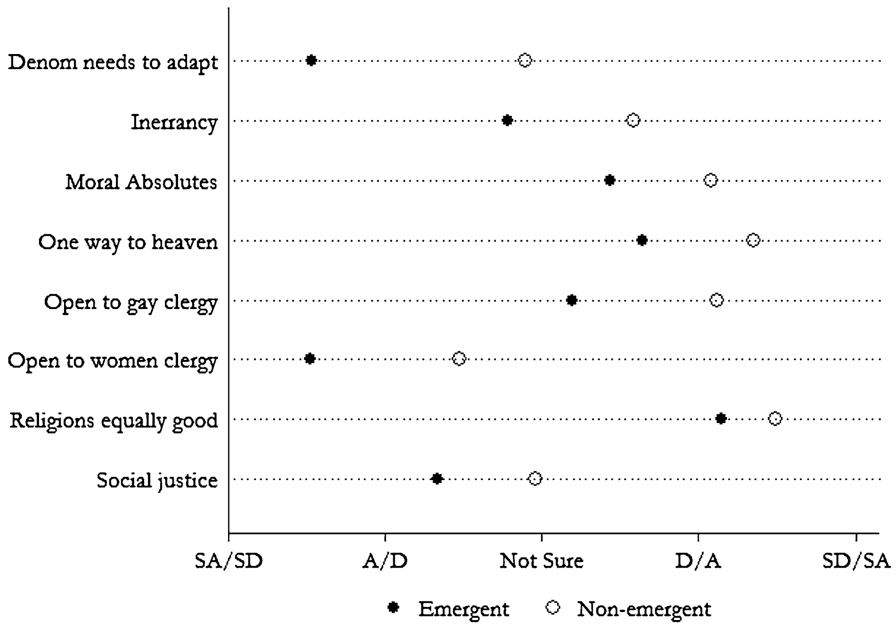

Fig. 2 Theological commitments of emerging churches compared to others. *Source* 2009 Cooperative Clergy Study. *Note* All differences are statistically significant at the .05 level

some diversity of members. Deliberative norms, emphasizing respect and equality, are ideal practices to handle disagreement safely. But, implementing deliberation in a worship service, which appears to be a commitment of emergents, is an entirely different story. We suspect that many clergy would be uncomfortable with worship as an opportunity to express dissent and implement discussion, but we do not have the measures necessary to address this suspicion at this time.

In contrast to Fig. 2, the differences between ECM and other clergy in terms of their value presentations are quite a bit smaller and two are insignificant. First, emergent clergy report never suggesting that to be a good Christian their congregations need to consort with other Christians or shop at Christian stores (i.e., exclusive values). Other clergy do not report doing this much either, but promote exclusivity in greater numbers than emergents. The two insignificant contrasts are with the inclusive values, which are nearly universally advocated among sample clergy. While there are other ways in which emergents are inclusive in orientation (see Fig. 2), the evidence is mixed about their orientation toward non-members, thus offering only partial support for Hypotheses 2 and 3. There is still variance, as we will discover below, but the skewed distribution toward inclusion offers comment on what the religious economy model of Stark and Finke (2000) predicts, which we visit in the conclusion.

Of course, these comparisons so far have been extra-denominational and the differences in the two value sets may compound when considered jointly. In Fig. 4, we show a scatterplot of inclusive and exclusive value presentations by denomination

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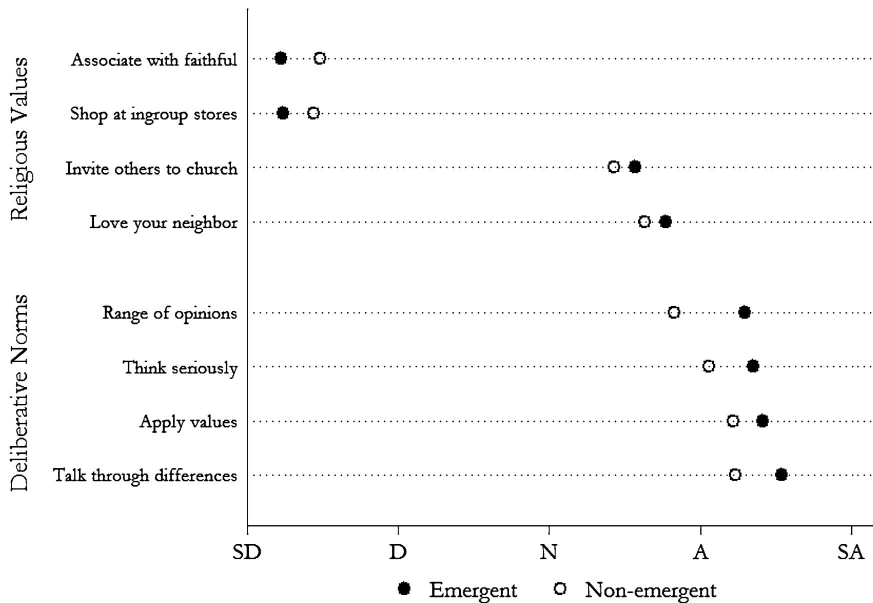

Fig. 3 Commitment to inclusive/exclusive religious values and deliberative norms in emerging churches compared to others. *Source* 2009 Cooperative Clergy Study. *Note* All differences are statistically significant at the .05 level except for the two inclusive values (invite others and love the neighbor)

and emergent identification. Emergent churches (solid black circles) occupy the upper left quadrant, showing a high presentation of inclusive values and borderline zero presentation of exclusive values, while other churches occupy the middle to right side. The figure shows that there is not very much variance in inclusive value presentations as Fig. 3 suggested, though there does appear to be a bit more inclusion presented in emergent churches. Instead, we can see more marked differences between emerging and other churches in their exclusive value presentations. Some of the most eye-catching differences are for small n comparisons, such as the two SBC emergent churches. That gives us pause, but is also suggestive of how much of a break adopting an emergent identity may indicate, especially in evangelical circles.

Model Results

At this point, we have shown that emergent churches are different from other churches in their denominations, though the differences may be the result of many other forces including their location, demography, theology, or something else. To gain more confidence that emergent churches are in fact different because of that identity and its commitments, we turn to path models that examine first what affects the adoption of the identity and then how that identity shapes inclusive and exclusive value presentations as well as deliberative norms. We focus on these values and norms for two reasons. First, they represent behavioral outcomes rather

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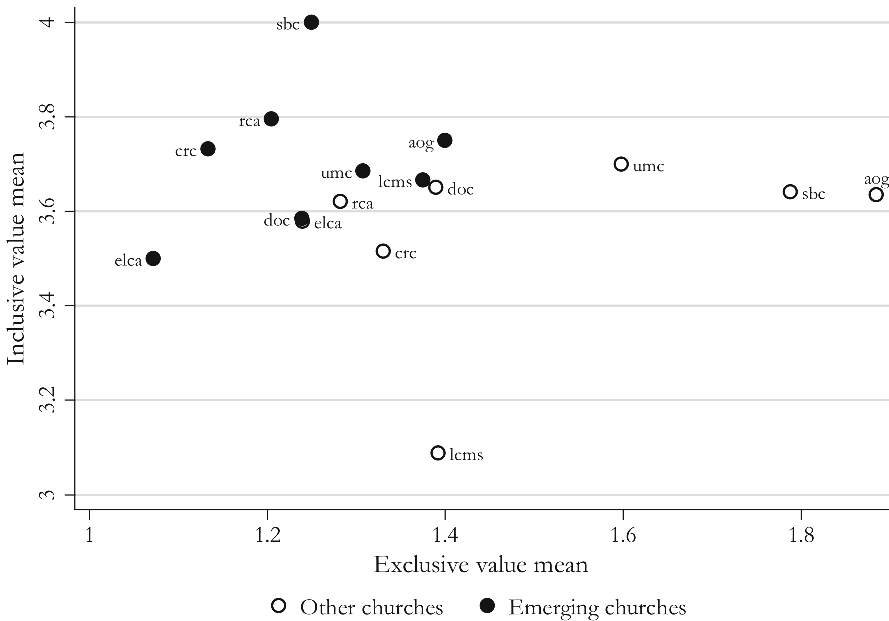

Fig. 4 Scatter of inclusive and exclusive values by denomination and emergent identification. *Source* 2009 Cooperative Clergy Study

than just ideas. Thus, they capture what happens in churches with emergent identifying clergy rather than just the commitments clergy may have privately. Second, these dependent variables offer comment on actual church practices on which emergent churches are, perhaps, the most innovative.

We compose a very simple, additive path model to estimate the links between the variables we employ. Emergent church identification is not exogenous to the variables we would use to estimate the values and norms dependent variables, so a selection of variables is used to estimate an emergent church identity (we discuss the contents of the model in each section below). Next, emergent identities are used alongside a list of other independent variables to estimate inclusive and exclusive values. Finally, emergent church identities are used along with inclusive and exclusive values to predict commitment to deliberative norms. Much more complex models could be specified, especially in the connections between the controls. But we believe that these models accomplish our goal to provide more honest estimates of the effects of emergent church identities, which is the focus of the research, than if we had simply presented OLS models of the values and norms with an exogenous emerging church dummy.[5] Moreover, structural equation modeling allows us to assess direct and indirect effects, which we engage at appropriate places.

[5] Given that there is an imbalance in the supply of emergents by denomination we also tested models to see if the results depended on the inclusion of low supply denominations like the SBC. In one, we excluded the SBC; in another, we included a list of denominational dummies. In both cases, the results were almost identical to what are presented in Table 1.

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Emergent Church Identities

Our model of emergent churches is composed of church, clergy, and place descriptors. We suspect that emergent congregations are more diverse and use the respondent clergy's assessment of whether the congregation is of mixed class and how the clergy's views on social issues compare to the congregation's. These are not ideal measures of diversity, for which we would prefer measures of the actual demographics and views of congregants. Additionally, we include measures of the size of the congregation and its location, expecting emergent churches to be more common in urban areas and less so in rural areas. The model controls for the education level, age, and gender of the clergy; we expect that emergent clergy are more educated, but have no strong expectations for age and gender. More importantly, we control for the clergy's religious conservatism, which is an index of seven measures described in full in the "Appendix". We expect that more religiously conservative clergy will be less likely to identify as emergent. Lastly, we include additional descriptors of place taken from the 2010 RCMS. We have contrasting expectations here, as described above.

Table 1 presents the estimates of this model. The first column contains the results for an emergent identity and a number of the variables find statistical purchase. Congregational class diversity is positively related to identification as emergent as are clergy who disagree with their congregations on social issues. There is no guarantee that causality runs in the way the model suggests, but if it does then these results suggest that adopting an emergent church model is at least partly a function of the practical problems of handling internal diversity rather than purely a theological imperative. Of course, this could easily represent reverse causality—that emergent churches consciously recruit or attract a more diverse congregation.

More religiously conservative clergy are less likely to be emergent, as are clergy in rural churches. Interestingly, older clergy are more likely to identify as emergent than younger clergy. Together, it is no surprise that emergent churches are the result of a confluence of factors—a location with available diversity (cities and suburbs), diversity in the pews, and a leader who is open enough to share control with the congregation. Regardless of which direction causality runs, what is most important for the other models is documenting the correlates of an emergent identity rather than assuming such an identity is independent of them.

Value Presentations

The second column of Table 1 provides model estimates of inclusive value presentations. The model now includes an emergent identification along with the political ideology, years in the ministry, and years at the current congregation of the clergy. Importantly, in the face of many other controls, the effect of an emergent identification is significant and positive. The effect is not large, but there is not tremendous diversity in the sample on inclusive value commitment and it does signal that, all else equal, emergent churches convey more inclusive messages than other churches. There are only a few other scattered effects—male clergy of larger churches who have been in the ministry longer convey more inclusive messages too.

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Table 1 Path model results of emergent identification, inclusive and exclusive values, and deliberative norms (OLS)

	Emerging church		Inclusive values		Exclusive values		Deliberative norms	
	β*	*p*	β*	*p*	β*	*p*	β*	*p*
Emerging church	–		.10	*	.00		.13	***
Exclusive values	–		–		–		−.08	***
Inclusive values	–		–		–		.16	***
Church descriptors								
Mixed class church	.02	*	−.02		−.04		.00	
Clergy-church issue disagreement	.02	*	−.01		.00		.03	
Church size	–		.00	***	.00		.00	
Urban	−.01		.05		−.03		.03	
Rural	−.03	**	−.04		.08	**	−.04	
Clergy descriptors								
Rel. conservatism	−.02	**	.02		.12	***	−.08	***
Education	.01		−.01		−.09	***	.05	**
Age	.00	***	.00		.01	***	.00	
Male	.00		−.13	***	−.15	***	.05	
Political ideology	–		.00		.03	*	−.09	***
Years at church	–		.00		.00		.00	
Years in ministry	–		.00	***	.00	*	.00	*
State descriptors								
Total adherence	.00		.00	**	.00	**	.00	
Evangelical adh.	.00		.00	**	.00	***	.00	
Herfindahl index	.01		1.48	**	1.21	*	−.60	
Constant	.42	***	4.15	***	.98	***	3.86	***
Equation-level statistics	R^2 = .05, var dv = .06 (.00)		R^2 = .04, var dv = .36 (.01)		R^2 = .16, var dv = .35 (.01)		R^2 = .20, var dv = .27 (.01)	
Model statistics	R^2 = .31, N = 1947, LL = −76,269. 5 7							

The more interesting effects are from the state religious environment. They make the most sense to discuss when paired with the exclusive values model results (column 3). In both models, all of the state-level measures promote a greater presentation of *both* inclusive and exclusive values. More overall adherence, more evangelical adherence, and a higher concentration of adherence promote a greater intensity of messages that promote seeking (inclusion) and retaining (exclusion) market share. Two things are notable about these results. First, they provide some of the first evidence that clergy presentations are related to market pressures. Second, they suggest the inverse of what the religious economy model might predict. While the religious economy approach would suggest that competition is highest in non-monopolistic, pluralist environments (Finke and Stark 2005), these results show

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clergy responding to higher market concentration in ways that indicate intense competition.

There is a way to reconcile the predictions and findings. First, while a supply side formulation may explain change in the market over the long haul, in the short run demand is likely to be elastic, responding negatively to a proposed change in price. Put another way, people may have a hard time switching to a radically different religious tradition, especially in an area where one tradition is dominant and normative. Under these conditions, demand drives competition more acutely the more one tradition is dominant.

Returning to the model of exclusive values, emergent churches are not more or less likely to convey them. In part this result is driven by small variance in the presentation of such values by emergent clergy—essentially there is none. Instead, exclusive value communication is driven up by rural, more religiously and politically conservative, less educated, female clergy, who have served in the ministry longer. There are a few ways to view these results. First, these are measures and correlates of a theologically dogmatic emphasis on tension with the world, with the exception of being a female clergyperson. At the same time, and second, if rural areas experience a net loss of population over time, then the dominant strategy for congregations should be membership retention (exclusivity). This helps unite the effects of a rural context with the female clergy, who tend to be assigned to or acquire lower status pulpits in smaller churches in more rural areas (e.g., Zikmund et al. 1998; Sullins 2000).

Deliberative Norms

The last column (4) of Table 1 shows the estimates of deliberative norm commitments from a model that now includes inclusive and exclusive values as predictors. Again, the first thing to note is the significant effect of an emergent identity, boosting the commitment to deliberative norms by just over a tenth of a point. But an emergent identity also has a significant, indirect effect through inclusive values (.02), which adds marginally to the case for considering emergents. As we might expect, a higher presentation of inclusive values is related to more deliberative commitment, while exclusive values tamps it down. Because the range of average observed range of these value presentations is restricted to about a point on the four point scale, the marginal effects are not much larger than the coefficients of these two variables. Beyond these three variables, which capture elements of the church experience, no other church-level or state-level descriptors find statistical purchase in the model.

Instead, several clergy attributes are significant, though surely as proxies for measures of the congregation. Religious and political conservatives are less deliberative, while more highly educated clergy are more committed to deliberative norms. On average, the results suggest political conservatives to be about a third of a point less deliberative than liberals; religious conservatives would be a sixth of a point less deliberative than religious liberals (using one standard deviation from the mean in either direction to signal average). Also, longer-serving clergy are more deliberative, which suggests they have developed strategies for dealing with internal

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conflict. We should also not discount the significant, if small, indirect effects of other variables. Religious conservatism gains strength through its boost to exclusive values and depression of emergent identification. Older, rural, and politically conservative clergy also indirectly depress deliberative norms through the other dependent variables.

Conclusion

We had two goals for this paper: provide some perspective on the emergent church and push forward the investigation of certain theoretically and normatively important values and norms. The emerging church has been identifiable for about 15 years now and has lead one researcher to conclude boldly that, "Ultimately…the Emerging Church has become the most vocal, influential, and debated movement among US Christians since the Religious Right's rise to political and cultural prominence in the late 1970s" (Bielo 2011b, 269). We saw an opportunity to assess how well it has permeated a selection of clergy from established Protestant denominations and how clearly its practices and commitments offer a counterpoint to the modern church. Our finding that 7 % of these denominations' clergy classify themselves as emergent is not an insignificant number, especially for such a recent movement. We placed special emphasis on comparison of the religious values of inclusion and exclusion and deliberative norms, which are central to the most public face of ECM theorists and congregations.

The short answer is that emergents are what they say they are. They are inclusive, non-dogmatic, and committed to discussion, but are also convinced that all religions are not equally good. That is, they are committed to a general Christian belief system, but it appears that anything else is on the table, able to be discussed and debated, discarded, or adopted by members. Moreover, it does not appear that emerging churches are merely upper class debating societies, but are actually full of a mix of people, though our measures on this score are not ideal. Two particular failings of these data are the inability to comment on the average age of the congregation members and their political diversity.

What is particularly striking, however, is how little emergents differ from their denominational affiliates. Despite the considerable depth of the emergent critique of modern denominational religion, the expression of denominational religion is not far off the mark. The average clergyperson in these denominations is inclusive, not exclusive, and committed to deliberation (at least in one setting—adult education), though a little less than ECM clergy. In the broadest sense, that covers the range of the emergent critique.

Now it is unfair to say that the ECM critique is unfounded. First, this sample is not a random sample of all American Christianity and especially not of evangelical Christianity. That means the sample does not capture all practice and cannot comment on the average Christian church or clergyperson in America. That also means the sample does not offer comment on the average ECM clergyperson in America, but merely the average ECM clergyperson in these denominations. It is entirely possible that non-denominational ECM clergy are even better exemplars of

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the norms and values espoused by the movement's leaders. Given the distributions of the variables we consider, however, it is hard to make this case—there simply is not room on these tails to move very much. But there are other measures to consider, such as the involvement of deliberation in (or *as*) worship services. It is possible, even likely, that emergents do not limit debate to special, small group debating sessions about public affairs. And future work should gauge theological commitments that embrace relativism even more strongly than these.

Considering the emergent church also allowed us to investigate the general determinants of some norms and values considered important from several perspectives. They define the general membership strategy of the congregation in the religious marketplace (see Finke and Stark 2005; Johnson 1963; Niebuhr 1951; Troeltsch 1931), and also, thereby, set boundaries for the ingroup (see, e.g., Appleby 2003; Volf 1996). At the least, these values are important indicators for the religious economy approach and social identity theory.

These results offer comment on the degree to which inclusive and exclusive strategies are adopted in the religious marketplace. Though it is simply a theoretical distribution, Stark and Finke's proposed normal curve is badly misspecified according to these data (2000, 197). If we can be permitted a bit of leniency in our argument, which of course weakens the critique, there is far less tension between congregations and the world as captured in terms of membership outreach and retention strategies. There simply is not much commitment to maintaining high boundaries and much more to reaching beyond the ingroup for new members. This still suggests strongly felt competition and high turnover such that congregations may not be considered effective at maintaining congregational composition. This does not comment, of course, on the nature of individual belief and how those beliefs create and reinforce tension in the environment, but the pattern does bear witness to congregational practice as defined in clergy commitment to these two value sets.

Lastly, the emergent church is explicit about its commitment to discussion. Whether through push of expediency or pull of ideology, almost all ECM congregations in this sample report a commitment to deliberative norms. The variation that is present is minimal, if explainable, as shown in Table 1. Deliberation may simply be functional, helping to hold together fragile social groups. But deliberation also holds normative importance as it may help build the skills and commitments necessary to hold together other, larger social groups such as the state and nation. Though it has not been tested as such, participation in deliberative encounters in small social groups, such as congregations, may build tolerance that is necessary for limited democracy to survive in the long run.

Coding Appendix

Emerging church "While no one likes religious labels, do any of the following describe your religious identity?" 1 = Emerging church, 0 = not circled. (the same coding applies to "progressive" and "ecumenical" in Fig. 1).

Exclusive values Averages across two items that were initiated with, "How often do you preach on the following values in your sermons?" The first item was, "To be

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a good Christian, it is important to shop at stores owned by Christians." The second item was, "To be a good Christian, it is important to associate primarily with other Christians." Each item was coded 1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = often, 4 = very often so the final index ranges from 1 to 4.

Inclusive values Averages across two items that were initiated with, "How often do you preach on the following values in your sermons?" The first item was, "To be a good Christian, it is important to love your neighbor as yourself." The second item was, "To be a good Christian, it is important to invite others to church even if the church changes as a result." Each item was coded 1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = often, 4 = very often so the final index ranges from 1 to 4.

Deliberative norms Is an averaged index ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree including responses to four statements: We explicitly encourage participants to think seriously about the opinions of others; It is essential that a range of viewpoints be presented; It is essential that participants learn how their values and religious beliefs relate to social and political issues; It is essential for participants to learn how to talk through their differences of opinions on such matters.

Mixed class church "Which of the following do you think best describes the nature of your congregation?" 1 = Mixed, 0 = Working class, or lower-middle class, or Upper-middle class.

Clergy-church issue disagreement "How would you compare your own views on social issues with most members of your church?" 1 = about the same, 2 = mine somewhat more liberal/conservative, 3 = mine much more liberal/conservative.

Church size "Approximately how many adult members are there in your church?"

Urban/Rural "What is the kind of community in which your congregation is located?" (for rural, 1 = rural, 0 = all else) (for urban, 1 = Suburb of a very large city, very large city (over 500,000), Suburb of a very large city, or Large city (100,000–500,000), 0 = otherwise).

Religious conservatism An averaged index composed of seven questions. Each is coded from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree (except for the fifth, which is reverse coded), which means the index runs from 1 to 5 ($\alpha = .93$). The items include: "Adam and Eve were real people;" "Jesus was born of a virgin;" "The Devil actually exists;" "The Bible is the inerrant Word of God both in matters of faith and in history;" "All great religions of the world are equally good and true;" "There is no other way to salvation but through belief in Jesus Christ;" and "Jesus will return bodily to earth 1 day."

Education "What is the highest level of education you have attained?" 1 = Grade school or less, 2 = High school graduate, 3 = Some college, 4 = College graduate, 5 = Postgraduate work (other than seminary).

Age in years.

Male = 1, 0 = female.

Political conservatism We hear a lot of talk in politics about liberals and conservatives. How do you think of yourself? 1 = Extremely liberal, 2 = Liberal, 3 = Somewhat Liberal, 4 = Moderate, 5 = Somewhat conservative, 6 = Conservative, 7 = Extremely conservative.

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Years at church/ministry in years.

Total adherence rate Taken from the 2010 RCMS.

Evangelical adherence rate Taken from the 2010 RCMS.

Herfindahl index This measure takes the sum of the square proportions of the religious traditions' adherence (not the rate per 1,000) in states in 2010. We used proportions of evangelical, mainline, Catholic, Black Protestant, Orthodox, and other. Values toward zero indicate high pluralism and little concentration; values toward 1 signal monopolistic conditions. The measure ranges from .09 to .49 in these data.

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