Emergent Fault Lines: Clergy Attitudes Toward the Emergent Church Movement

Abstract
The emergent church movement stands as one of the most significant religious movements in recent memory. With its postmodern foundation and critique of established Protestant Christianity it has attracted many converts and a significant amount of media attention. The Emergent Church, then, offers an opportunity for researchers to assess how the movement's core tenets have diffused into other religious populations. Drawing from a sample of Protestant clergy, we find that diffusion of the emergent church movement is surprisingly low, especially among pastors from evangelical backgrounds. We note several religious, political, and demographic factors that facilitate religious diffusion. In addition, our results indicate that approval of the movement lies along the lines of the emergent critique, garnering support from those with strong democratic norms, political engagement, liberalism, and antagonism for authority in the pulpit and textual interpretation.

In the last two decades the emergent church movement (ECM) has laid out a significant critique of modern evangelicalism. Many emergent leaders have taken issue with what they perceive as an evangelical tradition that discourages questions and seeks uniformity of belief. This approach has met with some success as emergent authors such as Rob Bell and Brian McLaren have both appeared in Time Magazine as influential church leaders (Time Staff 2005; Meacham 2011b). In response, some evangelical leaders have taken note of the ECM, calling it, among other things, a “threat to (the) Gospel” (Roach 2005). However, there is little data to document how much of the emergent debate has become known to congregational-level leadership. This tension between the relatively new emergent church movement and long established evangelical Christianity offers researchers a useful opportunity to test a long held concept in social science: diffusion. More specifically, in this paper we ask: what cultural factors (religious, political, geographic, and demographic) are linked to an acceleration of religious diffusion?

Each year in September the Family Research Council hosts a summit of socially conservative activists in Washington, D.C. The meeting typically consists of keynote speeches by prominent
conservative politicians and commentators and is designed to energize and educate voters on a host of Republican issues. In 2013 Art Ally, one of the featured speakers at the meeting, made headlines when the subject of his breakout session was revealed to be what he considered to be the three adversaries to America: communism, Islam, and the Emergent Church Movement. Ally stated, “The Emergent Church has watered down biblical Christianity,” and, “(is) weakening further our church community” (Bailey, 2014).

In an incident that has become well known in evangelical circles, one of the leading voices of the Emergent Church Movement (ECM), Rob Bell, released a video that promoted his then unreleased book *Love Wins*. In the teaser video Bell makes reference to Mahatma Gandhi and questions whether human beings can know for certain that Gandhi went to Hell after his death. This video quickly created a backlash in the evangelical community with John Piper, a conservative evangelical pastor, famously tweeting, “Farewell Rob Bell” (Menzie 2011). Piper was joined by Al Mohler, the President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary who called Bell’s book, “theologically disastrous” (Meacham 2011a).

These incidents are but two of the myriad examples of the friction that is being caused by the appearance of the ECM on the national religious landscape. The ECM sees evangelicalism as a system that is highly exclusive, only welcoming those who affirm conservative theology. In opposition, emergents portray themselves as radically inclusive (Burge and Djupe 2015) and struggle with “the dichotomous boundaries like Christian/non-Christian, saved/unsaved, holy/unholy” (Chia 2011: 132). Evangelicals are highly skeptical of the ECM, noting that their openness to theological backgrounds does not include evangelicalism. One evangelical author writes that the ECM has been reductionist in their understanding of church history and intellectually incoherent when it comes to describing what evangelicals believe about Jesus and the Bible (Carson 2005). Perhaps the divergence that exists at the core of this debate is that of authority. The ECM is known
for encouraging a flat hierarchical structure in its churches (Jones 2011), with one author writing, “Many emergent pastors seem to find the very notion of clergy slightly embarrassing” (Worthen 2013: 256). In contrast, evangelicalism has thrived on clear lines of authority and a great deal of faith in church leadership (Barker and Carman 2012). With these two movements standing in opposition to another, it seems helpful to understand how much impact the emergent critique has diffused into the evangelical culture and beyond.

From reading this summary researchers could assume that the ECM is highly salient to mainstream Christian audiences. The critics of the ECM that have been mentioned previously are all nationally known religious leaders and often seen as spokesmen for conservative Christianity; Rob Bell, and others, are well known authors articulating their critique of evangelicalism and pressing for a relevant religious presence in America. These figures involved in the debate become national religious elites by becoming perceived opinion leaders for the religious movements in which they associate. Of course this simply begs the question of whether there is a foundation for their perceived elite status. The same set of arguments have been employed in the study of clergy. Social scientists have noted that religious leaders can play an important role in the two-step flow of information as they are constantly assessing potential threats and translating the importance of world events to constituents (e.g., Smidt 2003). At the same time, effective communication to their audiences is challenged by a number of forces, including attention, agreement, and access (Djupe and Gilbert 2009).

The degree to which clergy are engaged with the ECM can be explored through diffusion – “the spread of something within a social system” (Strang and Soule 1998: 266). That “something” could include material items such as hybrid corn or prescription drugs (Ryan and Gross 1943, Coleman et al. 1966) or less tangible ideals that lead to, e.g., strikes among French coal miners (Conell 1995). Diffusion is the process by which individuals become aware of new ideas and is
central to many institutions that form society. Religion, broadly considered, is a fruitful conceptual area in which to study diffusion processes. Religion, especially denominational religion, might be thought of as a vast communication network, with links developed at local, regional, and national levels (e.g., Djupe and Olson 2010). At its core, the act of a pastor preaching to a congregation of unchurched individuals is diffusing religious ideas to new populations. If these sermons are the essence of diffusion then an individual converting to this new religion is the culmination of diffusion in a tangible sense.

However, the literature has been notably sparse in its description of how religious ideas diffuse both in the subculture as well as in the larger society. There have been a few notable exceptions, with some work using the concept of diffusion to explain how church membership patterns are dependent on how church membership exists in other places (Land, Deane, and Blau 1991). Also, diffusion helps explain how religious denominations changed organizational policy in systematic ways in order to allow women to be ordained as clergy (Chaves 1996; 1999). The degree to which issue positions are diffused by clergy is driven by their national/denominational ties conditioned on the environment in which they preach (Calfano 2009; Djupe and Olson 2010; see also Gray 2011; Ntet and Wallsten 2012).

The emergent church movement offers a good opportunity for researchers to assess diffusion in a religious context. The ECM itself may be more or less salient and the clear divergence between the two movements offer several tangible ways to look for evidence of diffusion: (1) knowing the movement, and (2) evidence that attitudes toward the ECM are structured along the lines of the debate between the movements. More specifically, the goal of this research is to see what relational and ideational conditions allow for the diffusion of religious ideas to the larger society.

Notably, this addresses a broader tension in the diffusion literature along relational and ideational lines. The older, and surely still the dominant, strand indicates the importance of structural
location, or network ties (Coleman, Katz, and Menzel 1966; Burt 1987; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). This “relational” approach indicates that diffusion is promoted by access that is granted by the social and institutional structures present in public life. In this view, which does host some debate (e.g., Burt 1987), weak ties are particularly important in moving ideas through society (Granovetter 1973) and power is wielded by those who fill structural holes that can connect otherwise disparate populations (e.g., Burt 2004). “Contagion” is a good synthesis of this process if it does not depend on cognitive adoption (such as the spread of a disease) and otherwise may depend on the degree to which the proposed practice or idea accords with an actor’s interests. Thus, relational diffusion does not negate agency. Representing a newer, challenging strand, Strang and Meyer argue that, “[D]iffusion is importantly shaped and accelerated by culturally analyzed similarities among actors” (1993: 487). Similarities of interest, taste, values or attitudes constitute ties in the same way as explicit network ties. But these similarities should not be confused with the role of agreement in relational diffusion mentioned above. Here, similarities are a different model of organizing society that transcends relational ties. Diffusion is especially promoted by the “theorization” of cultural categories (Strang and Meyer 1993: 492), which serves to build worldviews that standardize reactions to uncertainty (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

The tension, clearly, implicates a world organized by structural location in the first instance versus worldviews in the latter. Here, the tension is visible in the different ties that members of these two movements tend to occupy. Emergents occupy, arguably, different geographic, demographic, and ideational spaces than evangelicals. Thus, along which lines is diffusion most likely to flow and hence what shapes the accessibility and structure of the debate?

While there a number of dimensions which can impede or accelerate the diffusion of ideas, we set our focus on four broad categories – geographic adjacency as well as religious, political, and demographic commonalities. What follows is an effort to describe the spaces that each movement
occupies separately, while also indicating dimensions where both camps share commonalities. The effects of these dimensions will then be tested using a sample of clergy from traditional Christian denominations as a way to assess factors that aid in diffusion among religious populations. It is important to note that the critiques explored below exist on a continuum and thus define the opposite pole in a particular dimension of support.

**The Emergent Church and Critique**

The Emergent Church Movement began in the early 1990’s when a number of youth pastors and college ministry leaders organized a series of conferences to begin to understand why their traditional recruiting techniques were less successful in attracting the next generation. A consensus began to emerge that something was different about the next wave of potential converts to evangelical Christianity. Many of the conversations turned to an analysis of postmodern philosophy and a shifting cultural landscape based on increased access to technology and communication (Gibbs and Bolger 2005). The participants in this discussion began to believe that while every previous generation in the United States had grown up as a Christian by default, the teenagers they were ministering to had grown up with a wealth of information about religion just a few keystrokes away and therefore were deeply skeptical of Christianity before they entered their formative years. Leaders began to recalibrate their approach in trying to win converts to Christianity and in turn began to develop what later became known as ‘emerging’ or ‘emergent’ Christianity (Kimball 2003).

While it is necessary to accurately describe the ECM in order to understand its criticism, the task is notoriously difficult. One observer writes, “Defining the emerging church is like nailing Jell-O to the wall” (DeYoung and Kluck 2008: 16-17). As evidence of this ambiguity, several of the recognized leaders penned an open letter that read, “Contrary to what some have said, there is no single theologian or spokesperson for the emergent conversation. We each speak for ourselves and are not official representatives of anyone else, nor do we necessarily endorse everything said or
written by another” (Jones et al. 2005). To further complicate matters, there is no creedal or doctrinal statement that has been endorsed by adherents of the emergent church. With those qualifications in place, we will attempt to describe the significant characteristics of the ECM along with the most popular criticisms of the movement.

Theological Criticism

One of the undergirding principles of the ECM is a belief that there is no correct way of reading the Bible, but instead many valid interpretations. For example, Rob Bell writes in his first book, *Velvet Elvis*, “The idea that everybody else approaches the Bible with baggage and agendas and lenses and I don’t is the ultimate in arrogance” (Bell 2009: 54). Bell’s sentiment is echoed by Dan Kimball who describes the ECM as believing that “there is no single universal worldview” (2003: 49-50). The back cover of *Why We’re Not Emergent (By Two Guys Who Should Be)*, succinctly describes evangelicals’ point of departure with the ECM, “Here’s the Truth – There *Is* Truth.” De Young and Kluck struggle with emergent theology on a number of fronts, most notably with the ECM’s embrace of doubt and uncertainty. The authors believe that the ECM encouragement of a doubting faith leaves adherents “being tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine” (DeYoung and Kluck 2008: 51). They argue that Peter, the disciple of Jesus, would not have been able to walk on water if he was engulfed by doubt, writing that, “Doubt was not the friend of Peter’s faith but its enemy” (DeYoung and Kluck 2008: 51)

DeYoung and Kluck also have difficulty with the great lengths that the leading voices in the ECM have attempted to go to jettison traditional church labels, especially the desire to not have a recognized leadership. Speaking specifically of how many emergent authors say they are not the definitive voice of the emergent conversation, DeYoung and Kluck write, “Once you start selling thousands of books...you’re no longer just a conversation partner. You’re a leader and teacher” (2008: 17). Their critique is less a logical trap than a representation of value conflict, as they
complain about the emergent movement’s “uneasiness about authority and control” (2008: 159). The authors express further frustration by noting that, “the ‘we’re just in conversation’ mantra can become a shtick whereby emergent leaders are easy to listen to and impossible to pin down” (DeYoung and Kluck 2008: 17). These authors, who are much closer to modern evangelicalism, are expressing a desire for Truth, clearly conveyed, and with obvious lines of authority in its presentation. The ECM deliberately fails all of those standards.

An outgrowth of the ECM’s belief in relativism is the focus on a communal understanding of biblical Truth centered around the act of dialogue. Those who have observed the movement have concluded that conversation is foundational to emergent congregations (Chia 2011; Burge and Djupe 2014). Brian McLaren, who has been described as “the emerging church’s most influential thinker” (Carson 2005: 35), places a great deal of value on dialogue using the phrase “partner in the emergent conversation” three times in the acknowledgements of one of his books (McLaren 2008, xxiii). Additionally, a number of McLaren’s books take the form of a dialogue including his most famous work, *The New Kind of Christian* series.

This illustrates a larger disagreement that many evangelicals have with the way that emergent leaders characterize the modern church. While the leadership of the ECM is hesitant to clearly describe the movement, many emergent authors are often quick to create a caricature of evangelicalism, presenting it as a unified whole. On the flip side, it is certainly possible that some of the criticisms that some evangelicals lob at the ECM may be rooted not just in philosophical underpinnings but also in feelings of organizational threat. As social scientists have described, many of the members of the ECM have felt disillusioned with conservative Christian theology and have found a more welcoming place in an emergent congregation (Hempton 2008; Marti 2009; Chia 2011; Bielo 2012).
As previously described, many adherents to the ECM note that they grew up in conservative evangelical churches before being drawn to emergent theology (Bielo 2012). It is also crucial to note that even though the ECM and evangelicalism differ on a number of important pieces of theology, they are still (relatively) culturally similar as both are rooted in a belief in Jesus Christ and a reverent view of the Bible. However, the two movements differ quite significantly in terms of their religious process and structure – how they do church – with evangelicals more committed to authority in content and leadership and the emergent critique clearly indicating a directly opposed view. The degree of competition between evangelical Christianity and the ECM may be bound up in identity effects. It seems likely that respondents who identify as “evangelical” or “conservative” would show lower levels of knowledge and support for the ECM, as these two religious movements have significant cultural differences which should impede the diffusion of ideas. On the other hand those who identify as “liberal” or “ecumenical” would espouse greater awareness and support. But, primarily, we believe that ideas about religion and how to do church correctly are at the root of opinions about the ECM. Because of the ECM’s focus on relativism, those who score lower on a religious conservatism scale will be more aware of the ECM. We will also test for the effects of a new “religious authority values” scale that captures adherence to relativism, anti-authoritarian leadership, and emergent truth through discussion, which, if diffusion has occurred, should be tightly linked with knowledge of and support for the ECM.

Political Criticism

While some point to the creation of the ECM as rooted in the philosophical transition from a modern understanding of faith to a post-modern interpretation, there is another possible explanation for the genesis of the movement. During the 1980s, a number of evangelical churches and organizations became associated with the Republican Party in the United States and began to wage what later became known as the “culture war” (e.g., Hunter 1992; Layman 2001). The
Religious Right engaged with popular culture for two purposes: to provide easy access to potential converts (Smith 1998), while also creating a clear distinction between evangelicals and nonbelievers (Patrikios 2008; Penning 2009). One of the many implications of the creation of the Religious Right was that many marginally attached Christians became uncomfortable with churches that quickly assumed a more conservative political posture and began to disaffiliate from religion altogether (Hout and Fischer 2002).

Taken from this perspective, the emergent church becomes a safe haven not just for theological refugees but also those who have become uncomfortable with a church that some perceive has become too political. In a 2005 interview Brian McLaren noted, “When many people encounter the religious right, what they sense from these people is anger, judgment, a kind of rejection and combative attitude. People look at our world and say, ‘I don’t want to be part of a religion that is combative and judgmental and angry...Jesus doesn’t seem that way’” (Huang 2005). Other ECM leaders have taken up the cause of political neutrality with Rob Bell writing, “A Christian should get very nervous when the flag and the Bible start holding hands. This is not a romance we want to encourage” (Bell and Golden 2009 : 18).

While some ECM leaders state their desire to remain politically inclusive and tolerate a variety of ideologies, the reality may be something different. Tony Jones, who was once the coordinator for the Emergent Village was often told that, “the emerging movement is a latte-drinking, backpack-lugging, Birkenstock-wearing group of 21st-century, left-wing, hippie wannabes” (McKnight 2007: 7). This perception finds support in the many emergent leaders who have publically endorsed Democratic candidates for political office (Jones 2012), including Brian McLaren who was part of a campaign advertisement for Barack Obama in 2008 (B. McLaren 2008).

In terms of issue positions, the loudest voices in the ECM often espouse liberal positions on a number of social issues. Critics of the ECM have picked up on this political liberalism and noted
that while ECM leaders argue for inclusivity, they don’t appear to welcome conservatives (but see Burge and Djupe 2014). DeYoung and Kluck write, “God may not be a Republican or a Democrat, but from reading the emergent literature, it sure seems like He votes Democrat. No doubt emergent leaders would argue that they are trying to correct an imbalance themselves, but one imbalance does not deserve another” (2008: 189). These authors encapsulate the larger critique that the ECM has become a safe haven for those who are more concerned with the social gospel and less interested in seeking salvation for those who are not believers in Jesus (McKnight 2007).

From an outside observer’s perspective the rift between evangelicalism and the emergent church has been exacerbated by the war on terror and the increasing animosity toward Islam. One author on a prominent conservative website writes, “The emergent church is an ally in the war against radical Islam – al Qaeda’s ally. Not in the sense they are supplying bullets and bombs to Osama, of course, but in the sense they are weakening our conviction to fight” (Pastore 2007). Conservative ideologues see the inclusion and liberalism of the movement as a threat to what they perceive as the American way.

While the two movements are distinct in terms of the distribution of religious theology (Burge and Djupe 2014); the ECM and evangelical Christianity differ significantly in regards to their political affiliation and voting patterns, as well. These political differences could then suppress the diffusion of ideas among populations that identify as political conservatives, while diffusion could be accelerated among liberals. However, another possible hypothesis is that Republicanism and ECM opposition may actually create enough controversy to drive up knowledge diffusion, though equating the ECM with Al Qaeda may be a bitter pill to swallow except among the most politically active, strong Republicans.

Demographic Differences
Observers of the ECM consistently note that the movement does not, at least
demographically, represent a broad slice of society. Instead social scientists like Packard (2012: 142)
note that typical emergent churchgoers are “anti-institutional” and lead “permanently unsettled
lives.” These overarching themes lead to the tendency of certain societal groups to gravitate toward
the ECM, which stereotypically is young, white, male, and well educated (Packard 2012).1 This
description is given support in data described in Marti and Ganiel’s The Deconstructed Church. Using a
survey of eight congregations that was collected by Tony Jones for his doctoral dissertation research,
they paint a picture that is largely in line with Packard’s assessment. Over three quarters of the
sample had at least a bachelor’s degree or other vocational education, with nearly a quarter obtaining
a graduate degree (Marti and Ganiel 2014: 171). In terms of age, the ECM is distinctly youthful with
69% being under the age of 35 and nearly the same proportion (68%) having no children (Marti and
Ganiel 2014: 21).

The significant young and educated skew of the ECM comes as a point of consternation for
many leaders, however. Chia writes that, “The point is that white, educated middle-class men
symbolically represent a kind of elitism that the movement wishes to avoid. But yet, there is no
escaping the fact that the movement rode on the popularity and reputation of these white men to
draw an audience to its message in the first place” (Chia 2011: 240). Chia’s description includes a
demographic component that is also important to the ECM: the most read and followed leaders are
all (white) males including Jones, Bell, McLaren, and Peter Rollins. While the congregational data
indicate that the gender breakdown among congregants is nearly equal (Marti and Ganiel 2014: 170),
the ECM does recognize that this gender inequity among the leadership is a problem. In response,
they organized a conference called Christianity 21, which consisted of 21 talks by exclusively female

1 A survey by the Pew Research Center found that the most likely demographic groups to move are those with college
educations and incomes above $75,000/year. Full report available here:
speakers (Chia, 2010: 144-145). To relate this discussion back to the topic of diffusion, it would appear that the most likely group to have learned about the existence of the ECM would be the demographically similar: young, white, and educated. Thus, diffusion would be less pronounced among older, less educated, and minority clergy.

*Geographic Adjacency*

Many observers have noted that the movement is almost completely an urban one. Marti and Ganiel write that the ECM is completely focused on urban areas as it provides a wide variety of spaces for the group to meet and allows for the possibility of living in close contact with other members of the congregation (Marti and Ganiel 2014: 129-130). Other social scientists who write about the movement believe that the desire to be missional is intimately linked to the urban orientation of many ECM congregations, allowing emergents the potential to live transformationally among those populations who most typify “the least of these” (Bielo 2011b). Thus, one way to think about the ECM is as an idea diffused into new populations by physical contact with the phenomenon (Huang and Gould 1974; Bailey 1975). The reach of physical contact goes beyond knowledge of tangible products to the foundation of political identity, which is partly shaped through generational patterns of political attitudes based largely on geographical proximity (Lieske 1993; 2010). Since we believe the ECM to be largely an urban movement (Bielo 2011b), this creates more opportunities for contagious diffusion in large cities, while severely limiting the ability of diffusion to occur in small towns, rural areas, and suburbs.

*Data*

Arguably, the best place to start assessing how the movement is viewed is among Christian clergy. They are most likely to know about the movement given their access to and interest in media covering religion and capturing the degree of knowledge of the movement is important in understanding diffusion processes (see, e.g., Djupe and Gilbert 2003: 28). Moreover, they are
opinion leaders whose communications on matters of theology and politics may bear on how a significant portion of the population may come to view the movement (Stark 1971; Quinley 1974; Guth et al. 1997; Olson 2000; Djupe and Gilbert 2003). Still, the views of clergy are but one piece of a much broader mosaic of opinion and communication that is important to understand.

Our data from clergy result from a survey conducted via the internet through the Qualtrics platform after they were invited by email to participate. We obtained responses from United Methodist, Southern Baptist Convention, Reformed Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), and Greek Orthodox clergy. This is clearly not a random sample of clergy, nor are the denominations/traditions present fully representative of the American religious population. These groups were included from what started as a longer list because they agreed to participate in several cases and then because we could gain access to others through commercial vendor lists that helped extend coverage. Though it is de facto a convenience sample, we did attempt to cover a wide spectrum of American Christianity and the distribution of responses bears that out. What is useful about the sample, despite its limitations, is that appropriate questions were asked to gauge approval of the ECM and the sample includes considerable diversity of religious and political conservatism.

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2 Clergy were contacted to participate via their listed office email address. For the smaller denominations in our study – the Greek Orthodox and RCA – addresses were culled from publicly-available parish and denominational websites that listed this individual-level contact information. PCUSA clergy contact information were provided to the authors from the denomination’s in-house research office. For the largest denominations in our study – the UMC and SBC – we relied on a commercially-generated email list from the vendor Exact Data, which maintains current congregational lists for a variety of US denominations. Each of the culling methods has drawbacks from the standpoint of representativeness, although it is not possible to determine exact sampling biases a priori. In each denominational case, we endeavored to use the total population of clergy with listed email addresses, which is a subset of the total clergy population in each denomination. Given missing data, we received somewhere between 375-411 valid responses depending on the question.

3 We can compare our data to recent, larger survey efforts of clergy, like the Cooperative Clergy Study (Smidt 2009), which was a cooperative venture between a number of scholars to survey clergy in 10 Protestant denominations: Assemblies of God, Christian Reformed Church, Disciples of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, Presbyterian Church (USA), Reformed Church in America, Southern Baptist Convention, United Methodist Church, and Mennonite Church. A religious conservatism measure from the CCS with 7 likert (5 point) items has a mean of 4.1 (sd=1.0), while a comparable measure from these data has a mean of 3.6 (sd=1.1). That is, the distribution of religious conservatism in our data is more flat, including more moderates and liberals than the CCS. Our data are also symmetrically distributed in terms of partisanship (45 percent each Democrats and Republicans), whereas the CCS is somewhat more heavily Republican (55 percent). This is not to say that either is better, but is simply to say that there is considerable diversity in our sample and moreover that the two samples are not radically different from each other.
With appropriate controls, we can test with some confidence our hypotheses about the religious, political, and demographic correlates of ECM diffusion. On the other hand, we have little confidence that the descriptive statistics regarding the levels of knowledge of the movement and approval rates can be generalized to a relevant population. We will still display them (especially by denomination, which look representative), but they should not be taken as representative of the larger population of all clergy without circumspection.

**Extent of the Movement**

Despite the hundreds of books published about the emergent church movement, there is little consensus about how many churches or individuals actually adhere to emergent theology or identity. Bielo gives an estimate of 700 ECM communities in the United States and notes that any effort will vastly undercount the number of those who conform with ECM beliefs but have been unable to find a gathering of other individuals who share the same theological outlook (Bielo 2011a: 37). Packard notes that an online database of self-identified ECM congregation puts the number around 300 in the United States, Canada, Europe, New Zealand and Australia. Even with this number of congregations, assessing the total number of congregants would be difficult as many of the churches do not keep attendance records since they have no denomination or organization that requires regular reporting (Packard 2012). Other approaches to counting ECM churches have focused on the Fresh Expression movement in the United Kingdom. According to surveys in England, 14% of the Methodist Churches and 6% of the Church of England identifies with the Fresh Expression perspective (Moynagh 2012: 71).

Before we venture into assessing the awareness of and support for the ECM, it is useful to undertake a more scientifically rigorous approach to counting the number of emergent congregations in the United States. Using data from the survey described above as well as the Cooperative Clergy Study which was coordinated by Corwin Smidt at Calvin College in 2009, we
have access to a sample of 2,773 clergy. These two surveys together were distributed to leaders of ten Christian denominations with a significant presence in the United States. Both survey instruments included a question that asked clergy to report if they identified with the emergent church, and taken together 7% of all respondents reported an emergent identification. Table 1 displays the percentage of each denomination’s clergy that identified as emergent as well as the total number of churches each denomination reports is active in the United States. The striking part of this exercise is the total number of churches who are being led by clergy who identify as emergent – nearly 8,800. When compared to previous estimates of the ECM, this number represents a tenfold increase over the largest recorded estimate by a social scientist (Bielo 2011a: 37).

Table 1 About Here

It is important, however, to offer some caveats about this reported number, as it might not accurately reflect the total number of ECM congregations in the United States. There is some evidence in the literature that indicates many mainline clergy actually hold liberal views on both religious and political topics but do not disseminate those views to congregations that they perceive as being more conservative (e.g. Quinley 1974; Djupe and Neiheisel 2007). It is plausible then that some of those clergy would be the only member who identifies with (or is aware of) the emergent church movement. At the same time, having a clergyperson identifying with the movement is linked to a set of congregational norms and procedures consistent with an emergent approach (Burge and Djupe 2014). To offer a further caveat, these two surveys were conducted among clergy who were attached to established denominations, thus leaving out non-denominational clergy. This fact could severely undercount the number of clergy attached to the ECM, including some who took their congregations out of their denominations after affiliating with the movement. And, of course, these data are from a limited set of denominations. Despite these qualifications, what we can say with

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4 See footnote 2 for a list of included denominations.
5 No Greek Orthodox Clergy reported ECM identification and were excluded from this part of the analysis.
some certainty is there are likely over 9,000 churches in the United States being led by clergy who identify themselves as emergent.

**Diffusion and Approval of the Movement**

These numbers seem significant and social scientists who study the movement are quick to assert the importance of the ECM. Bielo writes, “Ultimately…the Emerging Church has become the most vocal, influential, and debated movement among U.S. Christians since the Religious Right’s rise to political and cultural prominence in the late 1970s” (Bielo 2011: 269). Bielo’s point is echoed by Marti and Ganiel, “Our research leads us to believe that the ECM is one of the most important reframings of religion within Western Christianity in the last two decades” (Marti and Ganiel 2014: 5). If the ECM is crucial to the evolution of Western Christianity then it would be logical to assume that the movement would have a high degree of diffusion among Christians, especially clergy.

We use two measures that capture whether diffusion about the ECM and the debate between the ECM and evangelical leaders has diffused. Both are taken from the same question: “Do you approve or disapprove of the “emergent church” movement?” The respondents were given a number of response options including strongly approve, approve, neither approve nor disapprove, disapprove, or strongly disapprove. They were also given the option to respond with “I don’t know enough to rate the movement.” Of the 387 clergy providing a valid response, the majority of respondents were either positive concerning the ECM or ambivalent about the movement – 9.6% strongly approved, 28.7% approved, 9.3% disapproved, and just 3.6% strongly disapproved of the emergent church movement. However almost half of the respondents were unwilling or unable to provide an opinion with 34.9% saying they “Neither approve nor disapprove” and 14% saying that they don’t have enough knowledge to rate the movement. Both choosing the middle option, such as this one, and choosing the “don’t know” option have been used in previous research as measures of opinionation (e.g., Krosnick and Milburn 1990). Thus, the two measures that can indicate diffusion
are (1) opinionation, whether they have enough information to rate the movement one way or another, and (2) approval of the movement. In both cases, we are looking for evidence that knowledge and support for the movement follows the lines of critique and the pathways of diffusion discussed above.

Predictors of ECM Diffusion

These low levels of diffusion, to the extent they generalize, run counter to the claims of many observers of the movement who believe it to be incredibly important to Western Christianity. While we agree about the importance of the emergent critique and model, it is not yet in the vernacular of many of these American Christian clergy. Further analysis uncovers some noteworthy trends regarding which factors are related to these low levels of diffusion – in this case, choosing the ‘don’t know’ option (=1) versus another response (=0) – (full numerical results available in appendix Table A.1). The results from a model predicting choosing the DK option can be seen in Figure 1.

The least knowledgeable group about the ECM is the Greek Orthodox clergy, with over half the small sample (60.9%) stating that they do not know enough to rate the movement. This finding supports the conclusion that diffusion occurs more extensively when there is a cultural similarity between the two groups. This percentage is especially high when compared to those in mainline Protestantism (RCA – 6.1%, PCUSA – 11.1%, and UMC – 12.5%). Notably, Southern Baptist clergy had the lowest levels of awareness among Protestants with 20% choosing the “Don’t know enough” response option. When one considers that the leaders of the ECM are highly critical of evangelical denominations and many interviews with ECM congregants include stories of growing up in strict evangelical Christian households, it is odd that a significant number of Southern Baptist pastors are not even aware of the movement (Bielo 2011a).

[Figure 1 about here]
If diffusion is promoted by cultural similarity (favoring religious liberals) and along the lines of critique (favoring religious conservatives), then it would make sense that religious authority and religious conservatism have no systematic effect. Neither religious conservatism nor religious authority views are systematically related to choosing the don’t know option, though the results hint that conservatives and the authority-minded are less likely to choose the don’t know option.

As described in the literature, the ECM is perceived to be largely an urban phenomenon with most (if not all) the major emergent congregations in the United States located in densely populated urban centers. It would follow that those pastors who serve in rural areas or small towns would have lower levels of diffusion, but there is considerable variance within each level of urbanity, such that none of the city types are distinguishable from rural areas (the excluded reference category). Thus, living in a large or very large city does not necessarily lead to higher levels of knowledge of the ECM, though most of the effects point in that direction (that would appear as a negative effect as they are less likely to choose the DK option). In our sample, those who lived in most city types had higher, though statistically indistinguishable, levels of knowledge of the ECM compared to rural clergy. Suburban clergy were also indistinguishable from rural clergy, though the sign pointed toward them being less knowledge. Clergy in different regions also have indistinguishable levels of knowledge about the ECM, thought the results point toward more knowledge in the Western US. Taken together, these results suggest that geographic adjacency plays little role in the diffusion of knowledge about the ECM.

Given the connection to political concerns in the opening paragraph, we investigated whether diffusion was connected to political engagement (recognizing that political engagement is closely connected to civic concern and social awareness). The survey asked clergy to indicate in which of ten different political activities they had personally participated. The activities ranged from common, low resource involvement (voting in a national election) to much more intensive activities
(participated in a political protest; attended a political rally). The average clergyperson in the sample engaged in 3.5 activities (out of a range of 0-8). There is a significant interaction between political activity levels and partisanship, which Figure 2 visualizes. The most politically active (black line) has a very low incidence of choosing the DK option. The least active are more likely to choose don’t know, but it heavily depends on partisanship. Only inactive Democrats and Independents are more likely to not know the ECM and inactive Republicans are indistinguishable from active ones. The substantive effect is reduced by the fact that Democratic clergy are more politically active than Republicans (by .6 activities, p<.01) and there are fewer Democratic clergy who engage in very few activities (25% of Democrats versus 40% of Republicans engage in 2 or fewer activities).

[Figure 2 about here]

Approval of the ECM

Our second measure of diffusion assesses whether clergy’s substantive opinions about the ECM are structured according to the critiques and diffusion forces discussed above. An ordered logit model was estimated that included a number of factors that bear on our 4 main hypotheses, including a religious conservatism index, religious authority scale, partisanship, and political activity, denomination, gender, community type, economic class of congregation, and region of the United States. To reiterate our expectations, we suspect that theological conservatives, those who do not adopt an emergent value system and support religious authority, and political conservatives will disapprove of the movement. We also suspect that those outside of the main demographics that seem to inhabit emergent churches would be more opposed (older, less educated), as would those in geographic locales (rural and suburban) that do not face the same challenges of outreach and mission that emergent churches seem to.

The results in Figure 3 confirm that approval of the ECM falls along the lines of the emergent critique of evangelical Christianity. There were no significant differences across the five
different denominations included in the sample net of everything else. Instead, support may be linked to the beliefs that clergy held that may mark them with cultural commonalities. The survey included a number of classic items that assessed the overall theological orientation of the respondent. Several of these items (including questions about a literal interpretation of the Bible, the virgin birth, the reality of Satan, and men’s authority over women) were combined to create a religious conservatism scale ($\alpha=.92$). The effect of religious conservatism fell just outside of statistical significance ($p=.13$), but hints that more religiously conservative clergy were more likely to disapprove of the ECM.

![Figure 3 about here]

Our survey included a series of questions that assessed attachment to clergy’s values regarding religious authority. These items were chosen since they are foundational to the emergent church movement and its critique of evangelicalism. We used five items that address the attachment to leader and textual authority in the church by asking for agreement or disagreement with the following statements: The more clergy can step out of the way of the congregation the better; It is important for the congregation to construct their own salvation; The Gospel is what the congregation makes of it; The church must adapt to a postmodern culture in order to spread the Gospel; and I believe there are many valid interpretations of the Bible.  

The scatterplot of our religious authority scale with religious conservatism (Figure 4) shows that the two are clearly linked in the same direction ($r=.63$). Religious conservatives are more supportive of authority, a link widely affirmed (e.g., Barker and Carman 2012). The figure also shows there are a significant number of clergy who score the maximum possible value on the religious

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

7 Though these variables are relatively highly correlated, this correlation has essentially no effect on the rest of the model – removing religious authority, for instance, changes very little of the other estimates save for religious conservatism, as discussed in the text.
conservatism scale (x axis), while no respondent adheres to the same minimal level of religious authority (y axis). Not surprisingly, emergent church identifiers score lower on the religious authority scale than others (about 10% lower, on average, controlling for denomination). Still, they are not perfectly correlated and the figure shows that there is essentially equal variance at each level of religious conservatism about the value of religious authority.

[Figure 4 about here]

Without including the religious authority scale, the religious conservatism scale had a statistically significant effect predicting lower levels of support for the ECM – moving from the lowest levels of religious conservatism to the highest level reduced the probability of supporting the ECM by about 20% (not shown). This finding falls largely in line with what critics have said about the movement and its desire to create a clear alternative to typical evangelical Christianity. However, when both the religious conservatism scale and the religious authority scale were placed in the same model along with the requisite controls, religious conservatism no longer reaches statistical significance, while religious authority is significant (p<.01). The coefficient is large and negative, indicating that moving from the most disagreement with authority to the highest possible investment in religious authority cuts approval of the ECM by about 40 percent.8

We included several identifications that were likely to place clergy on one side or the other and the clearest placements help distinguish support, though in somewhat unlikely ways. Not surprisingly, emergent identifiers are more likely to support the ECM (by just over 10 percent). Those who identify as ecumenical are neither more nor less supportive than others. And evangelical identifiers are actually slightly, but significantly more supportive of the movement than others (by about 5%). Those others tend to adopt labels such as “conservative,” which helps to make the case why evangelicals who do not adopt the label conservative might be more supportive of the ECM.

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8 On average (one standard deviation below the mean to one above), emergent values shifted approval by just under a point or 25% of the scale.
Moreover, evangelicals are only distinguishable when controlling for religious conservatism and religious authority. Absent those controls, evangelicals are not distinguishable.

We tested our political hypothesis through several variables including an interaction of political participation and partisanship, feelings toward two Religious Right interest groups (Family Research Council and the Christian Coalition – $\alpha=.93$), and Tea Party identification (18 percent of the sample). Tea Party identifiers are marginally ($p=.10$) more likely to disapprove of the ECM (by about 5%), while feelings toward the Religious Right clearly have no effect. The interaction is significant and to help with its interpretation we present the results in Figure 5, showing the probability of selecting “approve” as illustrative. Political activity is differently linked to approval of the ECM by partisanship – it is more likely among Democrats than Republicans. But we can see these results through another lens. The ECM attracts support from essentially all groups except politically active Republicans, which is suggestive that attitudes about the politicization of religion are active here. Politically inactive Republicans surely object to the politicization of religion, especially since we have controlled for feelings toward the Religious Right, whereas politically active Republicans are more likely to be exposed to groups attempting to reinforce the Republican-conservative Christian connection. The results ratify the media story that opposition to the ECM is located in the most highly politically charged and religious wing of the Republican Party.

The model also included measures of individual demographics, congregational practices, and congregational location. While clergy gender did not distinguish approval of the ECM, both years in the ministry and education did. While the survey did not include an item tapping a respondent’s

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9 What is particularly noteworthy is that politically inactive clergy tend to disagree with a variety of the central “social theological” touchstones (see Guth et al. 1997). They disagree that “if enough people were involved in the church, social ills would take care of themselves,” while they also disagree that “churches should emphasize transforming the social order over individual salvation.” Only the politically active clergy have meaningful correlations of their partisanship with these items. Ratifying this view, the politically inactive clergy also express a statistically distinguishable preference that their denomination be less politically involved.
actual age, the years of clergy service is an adequate (though imperfect) proxy measure. The more years of experience that clergy reported led to a higher level of approval for the ECM, which is quite counterintuitive when considering the ECM is often perceived as a youth oriented movement (Marti and Ganiel 2014). Moreover, more educated clergy were more opposed to the movement. Of course, these variables are for clergy and not congregants, so their applicability to the key demographics of the ECM is less than ideal. But they are suggestive that the ECM is not tightly packed with highly educated, younger people.

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

Conclusion

The diffusion of ideas to receptive populations is essential to the growth of many organizations, but none more so than religious groups. Despite its importance, diffusion can be a subtle or even subconscious process, making it incredibly difficult to assess. However, we feel that our sample of Christian clergy offers a good opportunity to examine how religious ideas diffuse in an elite population. What we find provides an initial understanding of what factors (political, religious, demographic, and geographic) accelerate or impede the ability of diffusion to take place. Speaking denominationally, we find that mainline Protestants are the most likely to have formed an opinion about the emergent church while the group that is consistently critiqued by emergent leaders (evangelicals) evince the lowest levels of knowledge of the ECM. These findings provide
some evidence to support the claim that a reactionary religious movement cannot count on its criticisms to actually come to the attention of the established religious group. In this way it would appear that mainline pastors may become more aware of the ECM largely because it offers a sympathetic alternative to evangelicalism.

However, once respondents have a substantive opinion, we find little support for the relational view of diffusion, though our measures are not ideal. Instead, we find that the primary driver lies along religious dimensions giving weight to the cultural similarity approach to diffusion. Given the depth of the critique the ECM presents, it is expected that adherents to an authoritative understanding of scripture would stand opposed. Along these lines, we debuted a new set of items that tap support for authority in belief and leadership. While these sentiments are negatively associated with religious conservatism, it is notable that typical clergy in this sample are not fundamentally opposed to the ECM model of authority. While Southern Baptist clergy average “disagree”, UMC and PCUSA clergy average “agree” in response to the five items. Thus, emergent-like rejection of authority is quite widespread among Protestant clergy. And when pitted against each other, it is our religious authority scale that defines the primary religious dimension of conflict with the ECM. While we know that there is opposition based on the perceived politics of ECM leaders, the primary conflict may be over the approach to church conceived of as the role vs. anti-role of leadership. Clearly, there is more to flesh out with regard to the role of leadership and authority in the debate over the modern church.

The results highlight, too, that opposition to the ECM turns on politics in a way that suggests the ECM as a response to the Christian Right. There are partisan differences in views toward the ECM, but they are conditioned on the political activity of the clergyperson. True opposition is rare, but those few most opposed are located among the most politically active Republicans. A plausible understanding of this relationship is that strong party identifiers who are
politically active are well placed to see the divide between the ECM and their own position. Further research might explore the extent to which information about the ECM’s politics structures approval or whether differences in approval are structured by fundamental value commitments to inclusion vs. exclusion and boundary maintenance.

Our findings concerning demography are worth further consideration on a variety of fronts, most noticeably with regards to the impact that age of clergy has on the approval of the ECM. Other surveys have indicated that the movement is very young with over two thirds being under the age of 35 and having no children (Marti and Ganiel 2014), but older clergy in the sample actually showed higher levels of support for the ECM. We think this finding could have a number of possible explanations including a fatigue that some clergy may be experiencing with the culture wars, or the possibility that some clergy are in favor of any movement that they perceive is trying to make Christianity relevant and accessible to future generations. The ECM is still a young movement (it has been just 15 years since McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian* was published), and it remains to be seen how the movement will evolve when the average emergent congregant is not a single person in their late twenties with no children, but is instead a middle aged parent.

This leads us to reflect on what is possibly our most valuable findings: the number of clergy who identify as emergent and how much the emergent approach has diffused into mainstream Christianity. We have used two different surveys that contained a large number of respondents and projected that approximately 7% of churches in the United States are being led by a pastor who identifies as emergent, which translates into just shy of 9,000 congregations (at the least). On the other hand, nearly 15% say they do not know enough to rate the ECM and nearly a third of the sample said they neither approved or disapproved of it, which is another common measure of (lack of) diffusion. While we could surely push clergy into choosing sides, many clearly prefer acknowledging how little they know about the movement. A reasonable extension of this finding is
that the overall diffusion of the ECM among frequent church goers would likely be much lower as clergy are typically more informed about religious movements than their laity (Finke and Dougherty 2002). This overall low level of awareness may be due to the fact that ECM is still relatively young, however when compared to the Religious Right a decade after its creation it would appear the emergent church movement is far less well known. Given the lack of connection with a political party it is perhaps expected that the ECM has not gained the same notoriety as the Religious Right.
References


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Table A.1 – Logistic Regression Estimates of Choosing the Don’t Know Option Regarding Approval of the ECM

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Source: 2014 Clergy Study.
Model Statistics: N=289, % correctly classified=91.3%, % reduction in error=28.6, pseudo $R^2=.37$
Table A.2 – Ordered Logit Estimation of ECM Approval

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Source: 2014 Clergy Study.

Model Statistics: N=254, Pseudo $R^2=.27$, $\chi^2=183.2$ ($p<.01$)
Figure 1 – Predicted Change in Probability of Choosing the “Don’t Know Enough To Rate” Option (Logit)

Note: The plot displays the change in probability of choosing the don’t know option across the full range of the independent variable. The lines represent the 90% confidence interval around the estimated effect.
Figure 2 – Interactive Effects of Partisanship and Political Activity on the Probability of Choosing the “Don’t Know to Rate” Option
Figure 3 – Predicted Effects on Support for the Emergent Church Movement (ordered logit)

Note: The plot displays the ordered logit coefficients with lines representing the 90% confidence interval around the estimates.
Figure 4 – Scatter of Religious Conservatism and Religious Authority

Source: 2014 Clergy Study.
Note: 90% confidence intervals shown on the linear fit line.
Figure 5 – Interaction of Partisanship and Political Activity on Approval of the ECM

Source: 2014 Clergy Study. 90% confidence intervals. Inactive and active represent the end points of the political activity index.