

Issues of Post-denominational Identities and Emerging Ecclesiologies

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Introduction

The decline of mainline churches has been observed and reported in the last quarter century by religious and secular media alike. Ironically, the most frequently proffered evidence of that decline has been the continuous report of membership losses. Ironic because the membership losses experienced by Presbyterian, Methodists, Episcopalians and other mainline churches can be largely explained by demographic factors of morbidity and mortality. Having expanded rapidly after World War II and the subsequent baby boom, these churches now suffer membership loss as the older generation passes away and their heirs fail to replace them, either in the pews or in the general population.

If membership losses can be mostly explained by theories of “birth dearth” the irony is that other measures of institutional decline are harder to explain but largely ignored. A half century ago, denominations as stalwart protestant vanguard institutions enjoyed authority and leadership in virtually every aspect of American life. Denominational structures outlined their respective theological dogma, set mission priorities at home and abroad, determined standards for holy orders, published required Sunday school curriculum, operated powerful publishing houses and determined and often produced the appropriate vestments and hymnals to be utilized in their respective congregations. They mediated their authority to carry out their will through elaborate, expensive and precisely organized and maintained middle judicatories. The rapid and thorough-going demise of much of this authority, and hallmarks of these institutional structures, is seldom marshaled as evidence of decline.

Heralded or not, the denominational retreat from these functions, the dismantling of middle judicatory structures and the loss of their once sacrosanct authority are more thorough-going evidence of denominational decline than membership loss statistics.

The complex reasons for these changes are not the subject of our inquiry here but suffice it to say the causal factors run well beyond the consequence of membership loss. Whatever the reasons, much of American Protestantism find itself in a post-denominational context in which congregationalism is the de facto church governance paradigm despite canon laws based on more complex ecclesiological understandings.

Post-denominational Motifs

Now, early in the 21st century, it is apparent that multiple factors have given rise to new reactive post-denominational behaviors within various faith communities which are now altering the religious landscape. This paper examines four adaptive patterns of emerging ecclesiologies now observable as topographical features on the American religious landscape. While a number of other post-denominational patterns might have been included here, space limitations required a selection from among the diverse forms of congregational experiments and expressions visible in early 21st century America. The four patterns that are examined below are descriptive of a very broad portion of the adaptive behaviors of tens of thousands of US congregations. Each pattern is, for its adherents, an attempt to reconcile the inherited faith with the zeitgeist of the age. The congregations which live out these various patterns tend to be drawn from mainline or oldline protestant denominations that bear in their institutional memories the comforting legacy of cultural hegemony. Presbyterians must surely be included within such a description. Thus, these particular patterns are examined here because each, to one degree or another is operational within Presbyterian circles. Finally, these four patterns have been selected because each, it will be argued, has implications for how the quest for Christian unity is perceived and the ecumenical calling lived out.

1) Megachurches

In the last two decades few local religious phenomenon have captured more media coverage than megachurches. The very names of Willowcreek of Saddleback conjure up images of contemporary congregations and worship “events” in a mode that seems to have burst upon the religious scene at the end of the 20th century. While nearly all those who speak or write about religious life in America are familiar with the term “megachurch”, there is no consensus on the definition of the term. Scholars and researchers generally use a membership of at least 2,000 as an operational definition to delineate megachurches.

Such quantitative aspects, while necessary, are not a sufficient criterion to provide an adequate definition. Size alone does not a megachurch make. Megachurches, in the absence of a clear definition, are commonly linked with a freewheeling style of providing engaging worship with high-energy music, and a de-emphasis of traditional music, vestments, and liturgical formality. These churches are associated both with small group intimacy and a large congregation’s capacity to get things done. Often centers of diverse activities, the term “megachurch” is suggestive of much more than the size of the membership and/or physical plant. Indeed, many congregations with membership exceeding 2,000, including many Catholic parishes that count all baptized Catholics within a geographic area as members, are not ordinarily classified as megachurches.

Further complicating the problem of adequate definition is the persistent presence of two or three distinct types of megachurches. Some megachurches are quite as conventional, though much larger, than the churches within their respective theological traditions. Other megachurches share distinctive styles of leadership, program focus, and

theological leanings. Still other megachurches and their offshoot congregations appear as loose confederations of congregations or proto-denominations. While many megachurches have developed during the last twenty years, others can trace their roots to the 19th century.

Most reliable estimates place the number of megachurches at a number greater than 600. Using a projected membership of 2,000 for each congregation (and many megachurches have membership in excess of 5,000) megachurches can conservatively be thought to account for at least 1.2 million American Christians. A broader estimate suggests that more than 2 million Christians are affiliated with megachurches. Since many megachurches are not affiliated with any denomination, a substantial lacuna exists within the data of national church membership reports.

Beyond organizational affiliation and membership studies, megachurches present a more complex challenge to understanding the newer ways of “being church.” With sprawling multi-purpose buildings, seven-day-a-week programming and innovative worship (or, as some prefer to call it, “celebration”) megachurches sometimes represent more distinctive differences from traditional churches other than their size. Popular literature has been fascinated with tales of the variety of the more exotic offerings drive-in theatres, closed circuit worship services, on-site fast food restaurants, and special interest groups (including Christian quilting and faith-based auto repair). Whether and to what extent these innovations alter faith convictions, mission goals and long term membership patterns must be studied carefully over time by those equipped to distinguish authentic and meaningful changes from those changes that are of less enduring importance.

In our current and future religious landscape, megachurches will account for an increasingly large share of all those attending worship. The meaning and style of the worship life experienced by those attending megachurches will also continue to have significance for understanding contemporary changes in Christianity itself. Such congregations may hold trenchant and authentic indications of an innovative way of formulating Christian life and faith for a relatively broad segment of Protestantism. The study of megachurches is important not only in itself, but for what it can help us learn about the Christian faith and its features within the religious life of the American people.

Megachurches draw adherents from a wide range of sources including independent evangelical churches, mainline churches, religiously plural families, and the unchurched or families with lapsed church membership. While ecumenism, as such, is seldom a conscious field of exploration within megachurch life, this pattern of congregational life is often a lived experiment in interdenominational engagement. Moreover, megachurches, such as the Vineyard Churches, bring a proto-denominational reality to which traditional communions have yet to respond in terms of bilateral dialogues, shared ministries or other forms of church to church relationship.

2) Theological Affinity Groups

With increasing strength and frequency, the last quarter of the 20th century provided a fertile context for the rise of a number of special interest groups within mainline protestant churches. These groups often referred to collectively as theological affinity groups, vary in structure and function. They may be related to a single mission impulse such as environmental concerns (greens) or overseas mission for instance. Sometimes they are formed to express a desired emphasis (new or old) within a given church (e.g. the Prayerbook Society within the Episcopal Church).

Other theological affinity groups form within congregations around mission priorities such as “Stephen Ministries” or local priorities such as a homeless shelter, soup kitchen, etc. Still other affinity groups form around social justice and/or moral issues such as abortion (pro or con) or the inclusiveness of the church.

While to some degree such theological affinity groups (often in the plural) have long existed within congregations, the pattern suggested here is not the mere presence of such groups. The emerging pattern occurs when the identity of the theological affinity group becomes central to the life of the congregation as to displace its denominational identity. In such circumstances a congregation, as a whole, embraces that affinity group identity so thoroughly that its strongest relationships outside of the congregation are those with other affinity group identified congregations, sometimes across denominational lines. For example, a congregation with a strong environmental consciousness may have local, regional or even national ties to other like minded congregations that are more frequent and more highly esteemed than their ties to the existing ecclesial structure within their denomination. Particularly with regard to issues related to homosexuality and abortion, these linkages have been perceived as denominational fault lines along which rupture or schism is ultimately possible. Any such schisms and subsequent re-formation is likely to realign denominational identity, ecclesiology and ecumenical perspective.

3) Broadening Role of Parachurch Organizations

Parachurch organizations have had a pronounced and prominent role in American church history since at least the middle of the 19th century. Often focused on missions at home or abroad or with specific demographic groups (Christian Businessmen, Prayer Fellowship, Church Women United, Campus Crusade for Christ) these parachurch organizations have historically not been viewed as laying claims either ecclesiastical or ecumenical in nature. In the last quarter century as denominations have loosened or even relinquished their grip on various functions and services, congregations have increasingly turned to parachurch organizations for such services.

Habitat for Humanity, for example, not only provides congregations with “hands on” mission experience but offers stewardship resources, liturgical matters and children’s educational material. Moreover, it can be argued that over the course of its 25 year tenure, Habitat has supplanted most denominational housing ministry strategies.

Similarly, World Vision and other agencies, it can be argued, have increasingly shaped mainline perspectives and expectations regarding both international mission and humanitarian aid.

With varying degrees of intentionality, parachurch organizations can exercise substantial influence on congregational identity and even ecclesiology. As with theological affinity groups, congregations with strong affiliation with particular parachurch organizations may find their relationships with other such congregations across denominational lines, more enduring than their denominational identity or relationships.

4) Emerging Church

The Emergent Church or EC, as it is frequently called by proponent and critic alike, is a many-faceted expression of Christian faith. Sometimes called the “emerging church” or the “emerging church movement,” its origins lie in late 20th century Protestantism. Its participants like to refer to it as a “conversation” rather than a “movement” although it increasingly has some of the hallmarks of the latter. Characterized by a robust energetic and growing online and hardcopy literature, the EC is a vigorous attempt to shape a Christianity responsive to contemporary culture. Fueled by postmodern philosophic perspectives, the conversation centers around deconstructing inherited faith and practice and reconstructing a Christianity centered around:

Christocentrism – following closely and emulating the person and ministry of Jesus

Narrative theology – in which truth is found in the story not in repair to doctrinal standards

Missiological focus – which challenges extant forms and understandings of church and in imitation of Christ, finds identity in service to a broken world

Responsive Worship forms – the place of worship is central to the EC drawing from apostolic as well as contemporary sources to forge a diverse worship through experimentation.

Yet, any attempt to summarize this loosely confederated conversation is perhaps premature since it is, well, emerging still. What is clear is that while elusive to easy definition, it is a significant development in Christian thought and practice in which reductionism and propositional theology have been displaced for a broader embrace.

While participants in the Emergent Church discussion are drawn from a wide range of Christian and even non-Christian backgrounds, it is possible to describe the demographic characteristics of many of the participants. Those most prominent within the EC come from evangelical protestant backgrounds with an age cohort largely in their 20s and 30s. Some notable and influential figures are older, such as, Brian McLaren and/or associated with mainline Protestantism such as mainline protestant, Leonard Sweet. The EC is largely Eurocentric with substantial participation in the United Kingdom and Australia as well as the United States. While organizational forms are resisted within EC circles and

“leadership” designations flexible and fluid, it is possible to identify a number of the (largely male) bellwethers. Many are practitioners and founders of churches – founder being used to convey a sense of the movement away from the CEO model of pastor.

A much debated question within EC circles is the relationship of this expression of postmodernism to the megachurch movement and the seeker-friendly movement of the 1990s. It is variously posed that the present conversation is a reaction to, a continuation of or the interior church version of these earlier attempts to harmonize Christian faith and contemporary culture.

The EC is not without its critics who take exception to varied aspects of it. Commonly the absence of propositional theology (or at least its lack of prominence) is bothersome to those vested in systematic approaches. Some sharp criticism has come from those who view the hallmark openness of the EC to other faith traditions as, at best, a drift toward syncretism, and at worst, a betrayal of the unique truth of the Lordship of Christ.

So significant has the EC become within evangelical circles that there is an entire track devoted to it at the National Pastors Conference sponsored by Zondervan and InterVarsity. Leading evangelicals like Tony Campolo, while not identified as an EC leader, is clearly friendly to its aspirations.

The very energy generated by the Emergent Church, whether seen as a conversation or a movement, justifies a closer look by those interested in American religious culture. The EC is not the only expression of a new generation of Christians, but is one that has captured the religious imagination of more than a few of them. It may become an enduring topographical feature of the American religious landscape or prove to be a transitory place of Christianity’s long trajectory. Much more research needs to be done to better understand and quantify the implications of the EC for American Christianity. Sometimes referred to as the “liquid church” the EC will challenge both the assumptions and methodologies of church researchers and sociologists. The resistance to institutional forms and authority will make this a more difficult task but the passionate quality of the discourse and fresh encounter of Christ and culture will make it more rewarding. Our guess is the emergent church, in all its dimensions, is a harbinger of things to come in 21st century Christianity.

5) Summary and implications for Ecumenism

The four emerging patterns briefly outlined here, as well several others, testify to the fluidity and dynamism of American church life. The very primacy of congregationalism challenges the enduring patterns and methodologies of the modern ecumenism movement.

A cautionary note however is warranted. While local congregations often have extensive interdenominational engagement in local mission or in relation to theological affinity groups and/or parachurch organizations, such encounters ought not automatically be

viewed as ecumenical encounters. Sometimes referred to as “functional ecumenism” many interdenominational activities do little to promote deeper understandings of unique perspectives of diverse theological traditions or promote authentic Christian unity. Indeed, denominations may, in time, reclaim some role in enabling congregations to discover the means to infuse interdenominational contacts with deeper ecumenical meaning in the quest for Christian unity.

The emerging patterns outlined above hold a number of implications for the various expressions of ecumenism in which the PCUSA and other communions have historically been engaged. In large measure, it appears that some recalibration of existing ecumenical approaches may be warranted.

Bilateral ecumenical dialogue approaches may wish to consider engagement, for example, with proponents of the EC movement. Because these have historically been understood as church-to-church encounters without recalibration, such a dialogue would stand outside existing parameters for what constitutes “church.”

Conciliar ecumenism which has long relied upon the continued existence of strong denominational structures (or at the state levels, middle judicatories) may well find it efficacious to recalibrate to congregations. In implementing such recalibration, ironically, denominational structures may find the kinds of strengthening that several parachurch organizations have discovered.

Many other forms of recalibration may be envisioned as creative and innovative approaches to ecumenism are explored within the changing topography of church institutional life. Faith and Order discussions, theological education and a host of other ecumenical initiatives are likely to be transformed in responding to emerging ecclesiologies.

A final cautionary note might be drawn particularly by mainline denominations. The oikumene has been understood as the whole household of God not a protestant intramural or a magisterial church prerogative. Many of the post-modern adaptations have been less visible among historic African American churches, Orthodox communions, Thomist traditions, historic peace churches and others whose history and tradition have not drawn them to such approaches. Effective to ecumenical planning will best be guided by a wide sympathy for both the rapidly changing as well as the long-enduring expressions of Christian faith and witness. Too rapid and thorough-going a response to emerging patterns risks marginalizing some. The gift of Christian unity conveyed in the sacrament of baptism and the goal of Christian unity best expressed in Jesus’ priestly prayer (John 17) that we might “be one that the world might believe” still animates the best in our ecumenical strivings.

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