

The Emergent Church: Self-Identity Construction Through Conversation

Dean Alley advised by Dr. Steven Fink ◦ Religious Studies ◦ University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire



Abstract

Our research looks at a Christian movement called the “Emergent” or “Emerging” Church and the identity they construct of themselves through books and online writings such as blogs. In the spirit of post-modernism, the Emergent Church is difficult to define, but there are important factors that each representation of the Emergent Church has in common: an embrace of post-modern ideas; a distrust of hierarchies; a tendency towards spiritualism rather than organized religion; and, at the core of our research, an important emphasis on “conversation.” Nearly every book, blog and video in our content analysis mentions initiating or contributing to a conversation, which reflects the Emergent Church’s post-modern critiques of absolute truth and centralized authority. Because the body of research on this new movement is small, our research will hopefully be a foundation for future examination of the Emergent Church.

Areas of Analysis

- Books
- Blogs
 - Comment(s) section
- Videos

Construction of their Identity

- Deliberate construction of identity
 - Content in books and blogs is a conscious display of the identity they wish to construct of themselves
- Relational approach to ministry and evangelism
- Desire to redefine the definition of “church”
 - This redefinition happens through their “conversation”
- Use of technology to display this identity
 - Social Networking

Key Elements of their Identity

- Emphasis on conversation
- Post-Modern ideas
- Spiritualism over organized religion
- Distrust of hierarchies

Emphasis on Conversation

Conversation is the preferred style of communication in the Emergent Church. This decentralized form of communication welcomes the input of many different people from many different walks of life. These conversations happen across many different books, blogs, and comment sections within blogs. Sometimes the conversations are never fully brought together, but this does not minimize their importance; rather this is an integral part of the Emergent Church’s identity.

- Post-Modern in principle
- Enabling each member to contribute to the conversation with their own interpretation(s)
 - Non-members and critics are seen as legitimate as well
 - Other denominations join the conversation
- Redefinition of who they are and what some would consider an integral part to their identity
 - This changes the meaning of the word “church” and traditional views of worship

Post-Modern Ideas

- Distinct lack of absolute truth claims
- Partial acceptance of modernism
- No **one** way to run a successful Emergent Church

Distrust of Hierarchies

- Rejection of the “corporate chain church” trend
- Special awareness that criticisms of modern churches do not become a model for their churches
- Non-traditional styles of worship
- Relational approach to ministry
 - This is opposed to top-down ministry in more modern churches

Spiritualism Over Organized Religion

- Reflection of common contemporary mentality “I am spiritual, but not religious”
- Marketplace of Religions
 - People pick and choose different parts from many religions
- Use of spiritual conversation with others as evangelism
- Rejection of “dogmatic religious practices”

EmergentVillage.com is the main website for the online presence of the emergent church. They link to blogs of Emergent Church leaders and they also link to the many different meeting places for the Emergent church called Cohorts.

