Public Abstract

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Title:Emerging Faith Boundaries: Bridge-building, Inclusion, and the Emerging Church Movement in America

This is a study of a nascent Christian movement called the Emerging Church Movement, and its broader significance to religious boundaries in America. The movement seeks to build relational bridges with other faiths, and to be inclusive of people marginalized along lines of race, class, gender and sexuality. Through observing meetings and conferences, conducting in-depth interviews, and through examining published and online data, I analyze how the movement accomplishes their goals.

I examine the cognitive maps they use to think about their relationships with diverse others and how they reconceptualize us versus them boundaries to facilitate encounters across difference. Next, I focus on culture and look critically at how the movement fosters inclusiveness through a set of customs and practices. I examine the challenges the movement faces in its quest to be inclusive and highlight the implicit lines of exclusion that belie their ideals.

I also explore how the Emerging Church builds relational bridges with diverse others to foster relationships across difference. I examine their strategies for bridge-building with Jewish and Muslim groups, and even their harshest critics. I outline how they manage perplexing interactions with the other, and evaluate their efforts to build relational bridges in order to socially spiral outwards.

Drawing theoretical resources from the sociology of religion, the sociology of culture, social cognition and boundaries theories, this project seeks to contribute to a generalized understanding of how social groups can work together across differences.