Introduction

*Conceptualizing Emerging Evangelicalism*

“This is the way it’s supposed to be,” Larry averred from the top of the stairs. I turned to offer an appreciative nod. His face was beaming, framed by a neatly kept white beard.

It was 4:30 p.m., mid-June 2009, and I had just finished a three-hour interview, preceded by two hours of talk, food, and coffee. The day had started with no anticipation of anything unexpected. I was to interview Aaron, a campus pastor in his late thirties. We had arranged to meet for lunch in Newport, Kentucky, just across the state line from Cincinnati. Aaron suggested a change of plan via email late the previous day, which I received the next morning:

James,

Not to throw a wrench in our plans, but I got to thinking about our topic of conversation and thought it might be a good idea to meet at a place that embodies what I think we might be discussing more than a restaurant. Can we meet in Norwood instead of Newport? There’s a great place [called] 1801 Mills . . .

Along with the change of venue, he added that others might join us. And so it was: instead of interviewing one individual about the Emerging Church movement, I interviewed four. The typical two-hour event became five.

1801 Mills is in Norwood, Ohio—a Cincinnati neighborhood that is both struggling and lively. It is struggling because the local economy still suffers from the 1987 closing of a General Motors automotive factory. The outward aesthetic bares this impress. Houses are run down: crooked and broken fences, chipping paint, cracked windows, few attempts at outward beautification. Streets are uninviting: trash scattered along curbs, rusty and bent road signs, potholes, and eroding asphalt. Cars are categorically tattered, modest,
and older; nothing glitzy or ostentatious. It is lively because Norwood is a lived-in place. Children play on sidewalks when days are not dampened by rain. Mothers push strollers. Older men and women sit in expired lawn chairs, idling or observing. Men congregate on corner pub stoops to smoke and talk.

Norwood is home to St. Elizabeth’s cathedral, property of Vineyard Central since 1995. “VC” is a congregation of house churches and they use “St. E” as a multipurpose venue. Built in 1880, the former Catholic church has its own problems: leaking roof, outdated wiring, crumbling plaster, decaying wood, and plumbing that emits high-pitched screeches in between clanging jolts. Yet it is lovely. Its towering steeple makes the surrounding buildings appear slight. The stone exterior is prominent and handsome. The broad entry stairs are backed by intricately engraved columns. If you harbor even the meekest curiosity for what occurs inside, it beckons. Directly across the narrow neighborhood street from St. E is 1801 Mills.

“1801” is Larry’s creation. He completed renovations on the battered structure and opened it for use in 2007. He calls the nonprofit venture a “Third Place,” somewhere to gather and be in community that is not home or office. It has hosted numerous groups: VC house church meetings, neighborhood film showings, and exhibits by local artists. Group and event facilitators are furnished with keys and security codes, encouraging a come-and-go-as-you-please attitude.

I arrived at 11:40 that June morning. It was a gorgeously sunny day. I had been to 1801 once before, and knew the way through the back metal gate, up the red wooden stairs, inside, and up the steep, narrow staircase to the third floor. Four floors in all, 1801 is a thin, deep rectangular building with ample windows. It is not particularly attractive from the outside, an assessment amplified by the neighboring St. E.

When I arrived Larry was concluding a casual chat with a middle-aged woman. He was expecting me. Several hours earlier he had accepted Aaron’s invitation to join our interview. D.G. and Becky, he informed me, would also join us. Larry looked delightfully disheveled. His hair, also a thick white and gray, was slightly sloppy with stray curls. Smaller, tightly curled white locks snuck out the top of his navy summer linen shirt, which stayed half-tucked into baggy khakis, an arrangement to which he seemed gleefully oblivious.

The third floor is corridor-like, with four rooms separated by open door frames. The walls are painted with light pastels, each room a different hue. Candles are scattered generously along window frames. There are couches and chairs, most sumptuously comfortable. It is all a cluttered neatness—full, inhabited, a touch chaotic, organized, and functional.
The décor ranges in seriousness. There are medieval-style portraits, framed prayers by Patristic saints, and a painted etching that reads:

. . . True Evangelical faith
It clothes the naked
It feeds the hungry
It comforts the sorrowful
It shelters the destitute
It serves those that harm it
It binds up that which is wounded
It has become all things to all men

—Menno Simons, 1539

These pious, earnest moments are interspersed with stuffed animals, a flat screen TV, and a collection of hopefully witty paraphernalia. A coffee mug reads:

Jesus Loves You
But everyone else thinks you’re stupid!

A bumper sticker suggests:

God Must Love Stupid People. . .
Look How Many He Created!

And there is a veritable library of books. They are engulfing, and make a definitive claim on the space. A take-away, glossy pamphlet boasts that there are “over 10,000” available books at 1801. They range in subject from Christian theology to comparative religion, sociology of religion, church history, devotionals, Bibles, Bible commentaries, Christian biographies, Christian memoirs, poems, and novels.

Larry began by giving me a full tour of 1801. When we returned upstairs D.G. was plating his lunch. He and Larry shared a large, crunching hug, and I introduced myself. D.G. is a United Methodist church planter, then in his mid-thirties. Standing about 5’ 9”, he was large, not overweight, but rotund and stocky. A tattoo of a shamrock embedded in a Celtic cross dominated his right inside forearm. A silver Celtic cross with the Greek letters for alpha and omega hung midway down his chest. His hair was trimmed near to bald, and he wore a half-shaven beard with a long, narrow goatee that curled under his chin. A West Texas accent marked his speech.
As I introduced myself to D.G. the echo-y stairwell let on that we had company. I rose from my chair, prepared to meet Aaron, but in walked a woman in her mid-thirties. Becky’s loud, carrying, voice greeted Larry and D.G., followed by a round of vigorous hugs. They were the kind of hugs that mock sadness, defer worry, and advertise hope. Becky was a flurry of energy and peppered me with interested questions. The day before, she had driven nearly twelve hundred miles from Denver and was moving into 1801’s fourth-floor apartment. She is a church consultant and was in Cincinnati for the sole purpose of organizing a conference for the coming November. “Navigate,” a follow up to 2008’s “The Emerging Church for the Existing Church,” was intended to educate Mainline Protestant church leaders about the Emerging movement.

We talked with little purpose for several minutes when the stairs returned to announcing, this time in a more kabooming fashion. Aaron seemed to barely fit through the door frame. His big, thick hand dwarfed mine and he smiled at me with a large face and dark goatee. His demeanor softened an easily intimidating physicality: he spoke with agonizingly intentional, nearly breathy, and stuttering thoughtfulness.

I began the interview in the same way as those I had done previously, with an explanation of my fieldwork. I concluded by voicing an off-the-cuff, hopeless wish for a tape-recorder. Handwritten notes would be difficult to manage with four people. No problem. A self-proclaimed technophile, D.G. immediately retrieved a digital recorder from his backpack, placed it at the center of the table, and hit “Record.” No questions asked. There are times when I feel like a very competent ethnographer; this was not one of them.

The next three hours moved from each individual introducing themselves to my asking questions and their responding in turn and collaboratively. There were numerous, quick back-and-forth exchanges, as well as lengthy individual explanations laced with a constant use of illustrative story. They overflowed with talk and eagerness; I was only able to ask five questions in three hours. They were funny, candid, and clearly familiar with one another. Larry was frequently on the move, in and out of the adjoining kitchen with food and drink: coffee, homemade biscotti, unsalted cashews, black cherries, grapes, water. They made frequent use of the enveloping books: locating texts being referenced in conversation, pulling them off the shelf, and passing them around. It was a dizzying experience.

At the time, and still today, my afternoon at 1801 seemed like a very “Emerging” event. After all, for Larry and others: “This is the way it’s supposed to be.”

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This book is about American Evangelicals. More precisely, it explores how some Evangelicals are consuming and enacting knowledge produced as part of the Emerging Church movement. Even more precisely, it is an ethnographic analysis of identities fashioned, practices performed, discourses articulated, histories claimed, institutions created, and ideas interrogated in this cultural field. Emerging Evangelicalism, we will come to see, is a movement organized by cultural critique, a desire for change, and grounded in the conditions of both modernity and late modernity.

The fieldwork encounter recounted above occurred twenty months into my research and captures numerous themes we pursue in the following chapters: sense of place, urbanism, dialogue, improvisation, irony, embodiment, narrative, textuality, community, ecclesiology, spiritual biography, church planting, social memory, denominationalism, and everyday religious subjectivity. As we traverse these themes a religious movement will be revealed, from the inner spiritual lives of adherents to their outer practices and institutions, and their relationship to American social conditions. My examination of Emerging Evangelicalism seeks to integrate multiple theoretical vantages: a Verstehen view of religious identity; the coupling of religious life to social structures; the mediating roles of language, text, body, materiality, memory, place, and the senses in religious experience; and the fostering of mental and bodily dispositions through participation in shared institutions.

To prepare the ground, we focus on three questions in this introductory chapter: What is Emerging Evangelicalism? Why is “authenticity” our organizing theme? And, as an ethnography, what kinds of fieldwork produced Emerging Evangelicals?

Emerging Evangelicalism: Context, Genealogy, Dialogue

“The Emerging Church” is a label, created by movement insiders, to mark a dual assumption: that contemporary Evangelicalism is undergoing profound change, and that the Christian Church always has and always will be changing. The label itself is increasingly of little interest to adherents as a meaningful self-identifier, but the movement it was intended to capture continues to thrive. Emerging Evangelicalism is, fundamentally, a movement of cultural critique. It materialized in the mid-1990s, with initial voicings from white, male, middle-class, well-educated, urban, Gen-X pastors, church planters, church consultants, and concerned laity. Their binding commitment was a severe disenchantment with America’s con-
servative Christian subculture. Frustrations varied from Evangelicalism’s image in the public sphere to the religious subjectivity being encouraged and the kinds of institutions being fostered. Emerging Evangelicalism is a diverse cultural field, but the cultural conditions that Emerging Evangelicals respond to are much the same. To be an Emerging Evangelical is to be someone taking the cultural critique of conservative Evangelicalism seriously, and attempting to live a response.

The Emerging Church is undoubtedly a transnational movement in the Anglophone world (Drane 2006). However, our ethnographic interest here is devoted only to its North American incarnations. Some ten years after its appearance, social scientists have begun piecing together empirically informed interpretations of the Emerging movement. Sociologists Poloma and Hood (2008) document a single inner-city Atlanta church that self-consciously affiliates as Emerging. While offering a detailed ethnography of everyday life in this congregation, Poloma and Hood misconstrue the movement writ large (for example, they uncritically adopt movement claims to “postmodernity” and reduce the Emerging Church to an iteration of Pentecostalism). Lee and Sinitiere (2009), a sociologist and a historian respectively, include the Emerging Church as one among several popular examples of religious innovation in the contemporary Christian marketplace. They focus on one widely cited author, Brian McLaren, who was an early outspoken voice on behalf of the movement. Apart from the difficulties of treating one author as representative, and the difficulty of equating knowledge produced with knowledge consumed, Lee and Sinitiere do not unpack, decode, or analytically translate the language and cultural categories used by Emerging Evangelicals. Anthropologist Susan Harding (2009, 2010) reckons the Emerging Church as a “revoicing” of traditional American Evangelicalism. Harding’s theoretical vantage is spot on, but she marshals only a small sample of empirical evidence. Sociologist Gerardo Marti (2005) provides a well-researched ethnography of a single congregation in southern California whose pastor, like McLaren, was an early, nationally prominent voice on behalf of the Emerging Church. Marti emphasizes the relationship between religious and social change, focusing on how the church maintains a multiethnic identity. Emerging Evangelicals begins where this existing work leaves off: by providing a multisite, multimodal ethnographic analysis of how Evangelicals have consumed and enacted the kinds of knowledge produced under the moniker of the Emerging Church.
An Evangelical Primer

To understand the appearance of the Emerging Church on the American religious landscape we must address the historic development of Evangelicalism. Since the late 1970s many shelves of many libraries have been filled with accounts of the histories and varieties of Evangelical culture (Warner 1979). Noll (2003) dates the birth of American Evangelicalism to the early-eighteenth-century spirit of revivalism among Methodists, Baptists, and other homegrown denominations. The congealing of American Evangelicalism in the nineteenth century was fueled by a congeries of cultural forces: for example, biblical hermeneutic differences between “liberal” and “conservative” Protestants that ensued from the German Enlightenment (Engelke 2007: 22–24); debates over the Revised Bible translation (Theusen 1999); and materialist interpretations of human history sparked by interest in Darwinian evolutionary theory (Menand 2001: 121).

Conservative Protestant identity thrice-diverged between the early and mid-twentieth century. Fundamentalists sought to distinguish themselves from Pentecostals, and the label “Evangelical” entered popular use in the 1940s as an attempt to separate from the cultural separatism of Fundamentalists (Harding 2000). Neo-charismatics emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, drawing theological and cultural influence from all three of these precursors (Miller 1997). In the late 1970s and early 1980s conservative Christians from across theological and denominational spectrums mobilized politically and culturally as born-agains: “avowedly not militant and not separatist . . . committed to a more nuanced understanding of biblical truth” (Harding 2000: 17). Even in this overly cursory history a crucial dynamic of Christian cultural formation is evident: it is a history defined by cultural critique leading to schisms and the creation of distinct Evangelical identities. Emerging Evangelicals continue this dialogic tradition (cf. Garriott and O’Neill 2008).

What was happening in the Evangelical mainstream at the end of the twentieth century? Between 1995 and 1999 the first six novels of the massively popular Left Behind series were published, igniting Evangelicals’ apocalyptic fervor. Rick Warren, who would later give the invocation at Barack Obama’s presidential inauguration, entered Evangelical celebrity in 1995 with his first book. The iconic megachurch, Willow Creek Community Church located in Chicago’s south suburbs, hosted its first Leadership Summit in 1995 (an event that would later headline everyone from Colin Powell to Bono). The
creation-evolution controversy waged in public schools and courts. Christian Right and Christian Coalition politicians seated a majority in the U.S. Congress, previewing the two-term presidential election of George W. Bush. The Promise Keepers, an Evangelical parachurch for men, held their largest gathering on the Washington Mall in October 1997. Joel Osteen, who would popularize Prosperity Theology anew and whose Houston megachurch would later record the largest congregational membership in the United States, was nationally televised for the first time in 1999. At least in the public sphere, Evangelicals were born-again, culturally savvy, politically conservative, suburban, corporate-friendly, megachurch-attending, unapologetic proselytizers.

An Emerging History

As highly visible incarnations like the Promise Keepers consumed widespread attention, a popular institution for Evangelical leaders, Leadership Network, launched a project in 1995 called Young Leaders Network (YLN). Many of my consultants, as well as movement chroniclers (Gibbs and Bolger 2005), consider 1995 to be a turning point year. YLN—consisting of demographically similar pastors, youth ministers, church planters, and church consultants—organized around three convictions. First, they voiced an adamant critique of conservative Evangelicalism, evincing frustration with politics, theology, worship, evangelism, ecclesiology, and capitalist-consumer impulses. Second, they diagnosed what they considered a detrimental problem facing the future of American Christianity: a cultural dissonance between Gen-Xers and Millennials and the organization, style, priorities, and assumptions of twentieth-century Evangelicals. Third, they were convinced that American society had shifted from being “modern” to “postmodern.” They defined postmodernism largely in epistemological terms, asserting that America’s youngest generations doubt the human ability to know absolute truth with absolute certainty. In 2000 a small number of YLN members branched off to create Terra Nova, which became Emergent Village a year later: an “online generative friendship” that functions as a resource sharing network and is known among movement advocates and critics for its ecumenical, boundary-pushing theology. In 2002 the first international Emerging Church conference was held in San Diego in conjunction with the National Pastors Conference (one of Evangelicalism’s most widely attended annual meetings).
We can also use Evangelical book publishing to situate the movement’s appearance. Anyone paying attention will affirm that books are important in Evangelical culture (though some stress the role of texts in the formation of religious subjectivity, while others stress the industry’s political economy) (Bielo 2009; Fisher 2003). The first self-consciously “Emerging” books appeared slowly between 1997 and 2000. My consultants often named two as early, influential texts: *The Church on the Other Side* (McLaren 1998) and *Soul Tsunami* (Sweet 1999). Since 2001—in a trend that shows no signs of slowing down—books advocating and criticizing the movement have flooded the market. Five of the most commonly cited by my consultants appeared in 2003: *The Post-Evangelical* (Tomlinson), *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (McLaren), *Blue Like Jazz* (Miller), *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Frost and Hirsch), and *The Emerging Church* (Kimball). As a clear sign of institutionalization, book series were established with major Evangelical publishers: Zondervan’s “Emergent Youth Specialties” in 2000, Baker’s “Emersion” in 2005, and Baker Academic’s “Church and Postmodern Culture” in 2005.


In short, between 1995 and 2005 a new, viable, amorphous form of Evangelical identity appeared. This timeline matches the religious biographies of my consultants, all of whom encountered the movement during this ten year
period. Of course, Emerging Evangelicalism did not spontaneously generate. There were numerous twentieth-century precursors that made the movement possible.

**Emerging Genealogies**

The appearance of Emerging Evangelicalism can be traced to five intersecting points of dialogue, a division that shapes the contours of the movement: theology, missiology, ecclesiology, liturgy, and politics.

(1) The theological lineage of the Emerging movement is grounded in an epistemological critique. Their organizing claim is that conservative Protestant theology developed within the cultural context of philosophical modernism. As a result, conservative beliefs and methods are said to carry deeply rooted, questionable assumptions about formulating doctrine, interpreting the Bible, obtaining knowledge of God, and communicating that knowledge.

The premier example cited by Emerging Evangelicals is the hermeneutic method of systematic theology. In 1872 Charles Hodge, a Princeton Seminary theologian, published his seminal work, *Systematic Theology*. His idea of what constituted proper theology was explicit: “Nothing but the facts and truths of the Bible arranged in their natural order and exhibited in their natural relations” (quoted in Turner 2003: 47). Hodge accepted the tenets of Scottish Common Sense Philosophy: reality is objective and immanently knowable; the human mind successfully discerns that reality; and the faculty of language dutifully conveys that reality via factual propositions (Keane 2007: 63). Systematic theology, like the natural sciences, is said to be made of rational argument, certainty, proof, and logical apologetics.

Projects like systematic theology function as a conceptual and rhetorical foil for theologians who are critical of modernism. I asked all my consultants to discuss the theologians who had the greatest influence on their thought and practice. Their answers never became completely predictable, but a typical list would include: Walter Brueggeman (*The Prophetic Imagination* 1978); George Lindbeck (*The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* 1984); Thomas Oden (*After Modernity...What? Agenda for Theology* 1990); MiroslavVolf (*Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* 1996); Nancey Murphy (*Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* 1996); Dallas Willard (*The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* 1998); Stanley Grenz and John Franke (*Beyond...* 1999).
In some ways, this list is diverse. Denominationally, it includes Lutherans (Lindbeck), Southern Baptists (Willard), and Anglicans (Wright). Their objections to modernist thought vary, from the negative influence of Descartes (Grenze) to the neglect of linguistic performativity (Lindbeck) and the disinterest in power and colonialism (Volf). In other ways, they are quite similar. All but one are male. All but one are white Westerners. All wrote in the latter half of the twentieth century (and circulated their writings through established publishing houses). Most are thoroughly academic in nature. But what binds them, what makes them attractive to Emerging Evangelicals, is their attempt to theologize against the grain of modernist principles. This will be evident in numerous ways throughout this book: the aversion to dogmatic certainty in chapter 1; the suspicion of epistemological clarity in chapter 2, and the dethroning of doctrinal belief as the key signifier of Christian identity in chapter 4.

(2) The missiological foundation of the Emerging Church is much more direct than its theological lineage. It is defined by the idea of being a missionary in one’s own society. Even after three years of fieldwork it is still remarkable that, in spite of difference at so many other turns, my consultants uniformly affirmed the desire to be “missional.”

More than any other source, Emerging Evangelicals trace the origins of “missional” to Lesslie Newbigin (1909–1998), a British Anglican priest who spent most of his life as a missionary in India. In the early 1980s he began speaking and writing on the challenges of evangelizing in the West. Newbigin attributed this difficulty to the epistemological suspicions about religion produced by the Enlightenment’s colonizing scientific worldview. He concluded that all Christians are missionaries and that successful mission work in the West meant learning the language and culture of the local mission field, wherever that might be and however familiar it might seem. He first articulated this missiology in two treatises: *The Other Side of 1984* (1983) and *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986), the latter being more influential in the United States (Goheen 2000). He describes “modern Western culture” against a Weberian grain: “The result is not, as we once imagined, a secular society. It is a pagan society, and its paganism, having been born out of the rejection of Christianity, is far more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganism with which cross-cultural missions have been familiar” (1986: 20). Newbigin’s organizing logic is that Christianity is no longer the
default worldview among Westerners. Quite the opposite, it is widely considered to be anachronistic, irrelevant, destructive, or worse.

Emerging Evangelicals have applied Newbigin’s missiology as a methodological critique of conservative Christian evangelism. They decry a wide range of common witnessing practices: street preaching, handing out Bible tracts, delivering finely tuned conversion speeches, using hyperlogical apologetics, and using weekly congregational events as the entrée to church. For those self-consciously striving to be missional, these methods suffer from several problems: a failure to understand the shift in American public consciousness from modernity to postmodernity; an inability to effectively use the mediums and idioms attractive to a postmodern audience; and the lack of meaningful, lasting personal commitments. Being missional means seriously cultivating relationships—not before or after conversion attempts, but in place of them. To accomplish this goal, they advocate mimicking the acculturating foreign missionary: settling into a locale and becoming intimately familiar with a place and its people. Chapters 5 and 6 explore how “being missional” has been internalized, and the kinds of institutions it inspires.

(3) Ecclesiology—or, the structure and organization of local church life—is also part of Emerging Evangelicals’ history. This part of their genealogical story has encouraged the adoption of two main congregational forms: church planting and house churches.

When Evangelicals talk about “planting churches,” they mean the process of starting a new congregational ministry. This is not about schism, where aggravated, dissatisfied, or otherwise hurt individuals leave one church to start another. This is about a small collection of people (in my fieldwork, anywhere between six and twenty individuals) starting their own church because they share a common sense of purpose and identity. Church plants are often, but not always, sponsored by an existing congregation, and the founding members typically come from that “home church.” Churches are often, but not always, planted near the home church—for example, in a different neighborhood of the same city. The “vision” of many church planters is to create a “network” of “satellite” churches throughout a city. Church plants are often, but not always, sponsored by a denomination. Many denominations have created institutions devoted solely to church planting—for example, the Southern Baptist Convention’s Nehemiah Project (1998) and the Presbyterian Church of America’s Mission to North America (1973). There are paradenominational organizations designed to be resource networks for like-minded church planters—for example, the ecumenical Gospel and Our Culture Network (1987) and the strict Reformed theology of Acts 29 (2000).
There is nothing new about church planting for Evangelicals or for Christendom at large. Almost every church planter I interviewed reads the New Testament’s “Acts of the Apostles” as the best model for planting new churches. The Vineyard Fellowship—a neo-charismatic denomination officially founded in 1982 (Bialecki 2009)—has always described itself as a “church planting movement.” What is new about church planting among Emerging Evangelicals is the degree to which it has become institutionally organized—a phenomenon to be mastered through books, podcasts, blogs, conferences, and other resources of knowledge production—and how being a “church planter” has become an organizing identity. Chapters 7 and 8 explore the effects of church planting for religious subjectivity and institutional formation.

Emerging Evangelicals, far more than the born-again Christians who flourished in the late twentieth century, favor house churches. When they talk about house churches they mean a congregation that performs nearly all of collective religious life in members’ homes. The house church communities I observed were diverse in many respects (though they all recognized one individual as the lead pastor). Some were affiliated with a denomination, others were not. Some had two or three groups that met weekly, some had eight or nine. Some weekly groups had five members, some had twenty. Some weekly groups were shifting and fluid, others were stable. Some house churches met monthly for a collective worship gathering, some never did. Some owned a church building, using it for regular events and/or renting it out to a community organization as a missional act. Others owned no building and spoke vehemently against the practice of churches owning buildings (for example, because the money used to maintain a building could be better used for mission work).

The Emerging Evangelical attraction to church planting and house churches follows from their cultural critique of the conservative Evangelical church growth and megachurch movements (Sargeant 2000). My consultants articulated no shortage of objections to the megachurch, describing it as:

- **Tenuous.** The money and resources needed to keep megachurches running is massive. They require distractingly constant maintenance and financial support from congregants.
- **Exaggerated.** Size matters. The bigness and expansiveness of megachurches falls prey to the same logic of overkill that produced Wal-Mart and civilian Hummers.
Commodified. Megachurches are yet another example of conspicuous consumption. They fail to reject a pervasive social ill: the never-ending impulse to brand, package, mass produce, and generally plot everything in terms of buying and selling.

Isolating. Intentionally set in suburbia, adherents are removed from urban conditions of social unrest. This removal is tantamount to racial and class confinement, and a gradual disappearance of non-mainstream experiences from everyday consciousness.

Impersonal. The size and easy anonymity of the megachurch is at odds with a hallmark of Evangelicalism: the desire to cultivate spiritual intimacy (Bielo 2009:73–92).

Spectacle. The epicenter of megachurch life, the weekly worship event, is a mass-produced production for the masses. It is a show, in the worst sense of the word. It plays into America’s cult of fame by turning singers, musicians, and pastors into celebrities.

These ecclesiological critiques provide a binding thread for other issues of identity and practice. As my consultants continually reminded me, their objections to mainstream Evangelicalism always come back to matters of “community,” and ecclesiology is the structural expression of how community is understood.

(4) The liturgical branch of the Emerging genealogy focuses on a desire to meaningfully connect with church history. This desire has been captured by the trope “ancient-future.” As with theology and missiology, Emerging Evangelicals suggest an unfortunate entanglement with recent Western history. Here, the unwelcome modern influence appears as a regrettable disposition toward worshiping God: too much disconnection with past Christianities; too much emphasis on the power of the spoken sermon to convince and convert; too little emphasis on the power of nonverbal senses; and no integration of embodiment with mental comprehension.

Ancient-future was introduced by Robert Webber (1933–2007): an Episcopalian and a former professor of theology at Wheaton College (Evangelicalism’s flagship university). He spoke in ancient-future terms as early as 1976 when he helped author a public confession: “The Chicago Call: An Appeal to Evangelicals.” The document emphasized two major themes about Evangelical worship: ahistoricism (“We believe that today evangelicals are hindered from achieving full maturity by a reduction of the historic faith”) and sacramentalism (“The historic church has affirmed that God’s activity is manifested in a material way”). Webber’s formulation of ancient-future casts
worship as a communicative event between the religious subject and God. This communication should occur bodily, with all senses, not solely through the limited cognitive assent to meaningful words.

In his later work (1999), Webber connected the need to be ancient-future with America’s generational shift. This was partly a matter of technology and communication, the shift “from a print-oriented society to an audiovisual society” (96). Webber argued, in concert with some scholars of American ethnopsychology (Luhrmann 2004), that the everyday flood of images and sounds resulting from late-twentieth-century media saturation has altered Americans’ perceptual and cognitive sensibilities. We have shorter attention spans. We are more inclined to learn from sensory experience than exegetical reasoning. Our Internet/MTV/iPod-infused lives have created an unprecedented experience of intra- and intersubjectivity. Webber extends this dynamic to religious life. Different forms of worship are required from those that satisfied previous generations.

Ancient-future also carries an implicit critique of linguistic clarity. The modern Protestant language ideology, the same that buttresses Systematic Theology, has been described at length by the anthropologist Webb Keane (2007): words are trustworthy vehicles of interior states of knowledge and emotion; speakers use this relatively transparent relationship to pursue ideals of honesty, truth, and sincerity; and listeners focus on the referential qualities of language to properly interpret propositional content. These assumptions helped elevate the oratorical sermon as central to the Protestant worship experience. Ancient-future advocates insist that part of America’s generational shift entails a rethinking of this posture toward language and the kinds of worship it encourages.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore how Emerging Evangelicals perform being ancient-future. This ideal of staying connected to church history takes a variety of forms: closer attention to the annual church calendar than conservative Evangelicals have required; designing multisensory worship experiences; performing monastic disciplines; integrating pre-Reformation theologians into public and private reading rituals; and rethinking the role of materiality in worship events. These chapters conceptualize ancient-future in terms of mediation, lived religion, and social memory.

Lastly, Emerging Evangelicals continue the conservative Christian tradition of mobilizing in support of political causes. This genealogy begins in the early 1970s with the formation of Progressive Evangelicalism (C. Hall 1997; cf. Bialecki 2009). Like their conservative counterparts, Progressive Evangelicals are convinced that part of being Christian is being actively
involved with the political process in an effort to see policy reflect their interpretation of biblical tradition and scripture. Institutionally, Progressive Evangelicalism was born with the start of Sojourners in 1971 and November 1973’s “The Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Concern.” The latter was the effort of forty Evangelical leaders who signed and publicly released a brief confessional that addressed social justice, consumerism, and “a national pathology of war and violence.” Since its origins in the early 1970s three individuals have been recognized as most outspoken on behalf of Progressive Evangelicalism: Jim Wallis (e.g., *The Soul of Politics: Beyond “Religious Right” and Secular Left* 1994), Tony Campolo (e.g., *20 Hot Potatoes Christians Are Afraid to Touch* 1988), and Ron Sider (e.g., *Good News and Good Works: A Theology for the Whole Gospel* 1993).

Progressive Evangelicalism has transpired largely in dialogue with the political motions of conservative Evangelicals. Beginning in the same period, and arriving in force with the Moral Majority in 1979, conservative Evangelical leaders like Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, Pat Robertson, and Tim LaHaye managed to sustain a more vocal presence in America’s public sphere. The overt difference between these Evangelical blocs is the Religious Right’s emphasis on a small range of issues (for example—abortion, homosexuality) and left-leaning Evangelicals’ wider set of concerns (for example—health care, welfare, environment, trade, foreign policy, war, housing). With very few exceptions, the individuals and communities that comprise this ethnography affiliate as Progressive Evangelicals.

At the risk of taking brevity too seriously, we might say that Emerging Evangelicals are those who have internalized and seek to enact most or all of these genealogies. Words like “missional” and “ancient-future” are not currently part of our lexicon—the way, say, “conversion” and “born-again” are. But given their significance in contemporary Evangelical debates about proper religious subjectivity, they need to be.

**Authenticity: Modernity, Late Modernity, Christianity**

During three years of fieldwork with Emerging Evangelicals, when I asked them to talk about their existing and desired religious lives, they repeatedly returned to one word: authentic. They spoke earnestly about wanting to have authentic lives, faith, community, relationships, experience, worship, tradition, and spirituality. This is not just about discursive circulation. Authenticity is an organizing trope for Emerging Evangelicals. At first glance, there is abso-
olutely nothing astonishing about a Christian movement prizing authenticity. As the historian Paul Conkin (1997) observed: “In some sense, almost all new Christian movements have advertised their return to an early or pure New Testament church” (1). But, taking a second glance, there is very good reason to think more deeply about Emerging Evangelicalism’s attraction to authenticity.

A central argument that carries throughout this book is that Emerging Evangelicals are religious subjects reflecting and responding to the cultural conditions of modernity and late modernity. While Emerging Church discourses are rife with references to “modern” and “postmodern,” the emic dimensions of these terms are not our primary interest. A more fruitful orientation follows the lead of scholars who argue that the eras of modernity and late modernity instill action-generating dispositions. Authenticity provides an entry into that analysis.

The anthropologist Charles Lindholm (2008) observed that authenticity has become “taken for granted as an absolute value in contemporary life” (1). His book, Culture and Authenticity, is an ethnological survey that invites readers to question what might unite an unlikely group of phenomena: country music, national cuisines, the tango, skydiving, mountain climbing, bungee jumping, slow food, tourism, and art, to name a few. His answer is authenticity, that which is “original, real, and pure” (ibid.: 2). But why do we value authenticity so intensely? Is it a by-product of being human?

Lindholm does not think so. He suggests that authenticity’s rise to prominence owed to the nature of urban industrialism, namely, the effects of alienation and estrangement: “[the] irreversible plunge into modernity, which can be succinctly defined as the condition of living among strangers” (ibid.: 3). He highlights a variety of developments that fueled our obsession with all things authentic: the discourse of sincerity among Protestants, the scientific revolution, and European encounters with “the primitive” in the age of exploration. His argument is not that modernity invented authenticity, only that authenticity became invested with unprecedented importance.

The anthropologist Steven Parish (2009), in an extremely favorable review of Lindholm’s book, challenges urban industrialism as authenticity’s root cause. He suggests an alternative: “Modernity is more than the condition of living among strangers; it is also a particular way of living among symbols” (143). The problem is one of semiotic mediation: “The plunge into modernity involves seeing symbols as subject to rational and instrumental manipulation, as having an arbitrary basis and no inherent connection to self” (ibid.). Parish argues that we value authenticity because our symbolic acts leave us wondering what is “really real” (ibid.), and not simply a product of arbitrary social convention.
Lindholm and Parish both agree and disagree. They disagree on the historical origins of authenticity, but agree that finding authenticity extremely attractive is a very modern disposition. A quick tour through contemporary ethnography affirms their agreement. Graham (2002), an anthropologist of indigenous Amazonia, demonstrates how judgments of authenticity confront Native Americans as they make motions in the global public sphere. Semiotic codes of language, dress, and bodily adornment become the Western litmus test for “real” Indians and strategic resources for natives. Katherine Frank (2002), in let us just say a somewhat different setting, illustrates how strip club regulars manage the tensions posed by tourism, commodification, and voyeurism to find an experience that is not just pleasurable, but “real.” Ethnographers of global Hip Hop insist that authenticity is a dilemma faced by all nonurban African American rappers (Condry 2006). In the same spirit as these other authenticity seekers, Emerging Evangelicals bear the impress of modernity by a deep-seeded desire to be authentic.

Grounding authenticity in modernity recalls what Webb Keane (2007) calls the primary moral narrative of the modern era: “a story of human liberation from a host of false beliefs and fetishisms that undermine freedom” (5). But modernity is not simply a moral project, it “is a dynamic relationship between economy, polity, society, and culture” (Madsen et al. 2002: xiv). Modern dispositions trace to the urban industrial revolution, the spread of depersonalized bureaucratic structures, and the philosophical devotion to reason. As a result, there are multiple ways to be modern and multiple modernities in which to live. Along with the constant of authenticity, we will see numerous ways that Emerging Evangelicals reproduce modern cultural conditions.

Much like modernity, the origins of the late modern era are diverse. Philosophically, we could point to the critique of epistemological objectivity bobbing in the wake of Thomas Kuhn’s theory of scientific paradigms (Lee and Sinitiere 2009), or the influence of poststructural theory on American intellectual life (Cusset 2008). Economically, late modernity was signaled by the shift to postindustrialism, in particular the post-Fordist foci of service-oriented labor, new information technologies, and mass consumption (Harvey 1989). Writing about the relationship between religion and late modernity, Lee and Ackerman (2002) characterize this cultural era as “a world marked by political upheavals, ethnic conflicts, economic uncertainties, ecological and gender crises” (vii). For many scholarly interpreters, the cultural conditions of late modernity are just this: political economies defined by fragmentation, rapid movement, and expendable labor forces, and emotional
psychologies defined by anxiety, alienation, and dislocation (Allison 2006). The Insecure American (Gusterman and Besteman, eds. 2010) is a collection of essays that applies this view of late modernity to contemporary life in the United States. This volume plots gated communities, war making, mass incarceration, deindustrialization, commercialism, immigration, health care, homelessness, and religion as acts in the same drama. That drama is the prevailing mood of America’s social climate: insecure, anxious, discontent, suspicious, and generally a psychological-emotional-physiological-economic-moral-social mess.

Emerging Evangelicalism needs to be understood vis-a-vis modern and late modern cultural conditions. Each of the chapters in this book addresses this dynamic: for example, chapters 1’s analysis of the deconversion narrative and its ties to modern authenticity (Barbour 1994), and chapter 8’s analysis of sense of place as a response to the late modern crisis of “de-territorialization” (Appadurai 1996). By situating Emerging Evangelicalism as a religious movement alive within and across these two cultural eras I join a thriving tradition among anthropologists of Christianity.

The anthropology of Christianity is a relatively recent invention, if by this we mean “a community of scholarship in which those who study Christian societies formulate common problems, read each other’s works, and recognize themselves as contributors to a coherent body of research” (Robbins 2007: 5). Since early calls by Robbins (2003) and Cannell (2005), a productive and fast-growing comparative enterprise has materialized. One of the “common problems” ethnographers have posed concerns the relationship between Christianity and modernity. As Cannell (2006) observed, “The history of modernity is inextricably bound up with the history of Christianity” (38), and I would add the continuation of late modernity. This entanglement has a long history if we consider Weber’s famous interrogation of Calvinism’s influence on the rise of capitalism. (Although Cannell and many others have rejected Weber’s secularization thesis of modern disenchantment, arguing instead that the unfolding of modernity has led, if anything, to a widespread spiritual-religious reenchantment.) Precursors to an established anthropology of Christianity also took up this question. Most notably, in her historical-ethnographic analysis of American Fundamentalists, Harding (2000) argued that born-again Christians achieved a “cultural alchemy,” combining conservative Protestant theology with multiple discourses of secular modernity: for example—counseling, journalism, and youth cosmopolitanism. Bialecki, Haynes, and Robbins (2008) have given the most complete review of how anthropologists of Christianity have figured the intersection of Chris-
tian and modern subjectivities. With respect to the value of individualism, they observe: “[A] hierarchical relationship with a transcendent other foregrounds the dependent and contingent nature of the individual in relation to that authority. This latter, equally Christian formulation, stands in sharp contrast with the self-identical heroic subject valued in many streams of modernity” (1152). They ultimately conclude that “Christianity can serve at once as a vector for modernity and as counter-narrative to modernity” (1151). While they intend this as a cross-cultural observation about the heterogeneity of Christianity “as an anthropological object” (ibid.), it resonates loudly in my ethnographic work with Emerging Evangelicals. The following chapters will show that this dual relation to modernity is not only possible across Christianities, but that it occurs within the same movement, same community, and same individual life.

Why call such explicit attention to Emerging Evangelicals’ status as modern and late modern religious subjects? First, the anthropology of Christianity has followed a broader social science trend of bifurcating modernity and late modernity. While distinct, these two cultural eras are not discrete and they work together to shape everyday life in societies across the globe. In turn, the interpretation of Christianities should look for the combined presence of both modern and late modern dispositions, and the kinds of subjectivities and institution-making that result from this dual identity. Second, talking of “modernity” in the abstract (as we have just done) works well for contextualizing discussions. But, thinking empirically about how modernity informs everyday life requires that we talk of concrete cultural conditions, not just the abstraction of “modern (or, late modern) culture.” All too often modernity exists as an amorphous, hard-to-locate historical object that Christians are said to interact with. Throughout this book, whenever we speak of Emerging Evangelicals reflecting modern or late modern conditions, we will speak of specific discourses pertaining to those cultural eras and how the individual and collective lives of my consultants bear them out. Modernity, after all, ultimately exists as a set of lived realities, and they must be attended to as such. Third, the Christian-modern nexus is often investigated with respect to religious conversion (Keane 2007). While this is certainly a worthwhile effort, conversion is not the only aspect of Christian life impacted by modern and late modern dispositions. These cultural conditions are reflected throughout the entirety of Christian experience. This observation echoes Eva Keller (2005), who argued that the anthropology of Christianity must seek to understand not only the process of conversion but “the process of religious commitment” (7); that is, “what makes [adherents]
remain committed to [their faith]” (6) long after they first felt transformed. Fourth, viewing Emerging Evangelicals as bearers of modern and late modern conditions opens a productive space to think about tensions in religious life. Be they tensions of practice or identity, thinking of Emerging Evangelicalism as a religious movement with a foot in two historical cultural periods makes it easier to see what tensions they struggle to resolve. Finally, placing Emerging Evangelicalism in this historical scope invites comparative opportunities with what the anthropologist Michael Fischer called “emergent forms of life generated under late modernities” (1999: 472). Fischer was suggesting that the twenty-first century will see numerous responses to “the reconstruction of society in the wake of social trauma” (457). As cultural critics of their social and religious climates, Emerging Evangelicals can certainly be understood as cultural architects, actively responding to a world deemed awry.

**Fieldwork: Scope, Decisions, Priorities**

I first encountered the Emerging Church on May 31, 2005 when doing fieldwork on the practice of Evangelical Bible study (Bielo 2009). This included a United Methodist men’s group that met every Tuesday morning. The pastor, Bill, was the facilitator. That morning in late May the group was discussing chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles. One of the study guide questions asked them to “Describe the fellowship of the believers in [the first century] church.” After others responded, Bill added:

> I’ve been even thinking in some radical ways, wondering whether a church ought to exist longer than about ten or fifteen years... I think some places are beginning to discover that. Some of the stuff I’ve been reading on the Emerging Church really talks about new congregations, it’s a different model, it’s kind of the model we’re looking at [in Acts], where new congregations spring up almost as new churches inside the boundary of an existing church. And, there’s this new congregation, and as another need arises there’s, start another one. And, just different ways of looking at things and different ways of reaching people.

Bill’s comment meant little to me at the time. I do not recall giving the slightest pause to the words “Emerging Church.” As their study of Acts continued, Bill kept making these references. When he returned from the 2005 National Pastors Convention in San Diego, he referenced panels he attended on the “postmodern generation.” The authors and books he seemed so enthralled
with were ones I had never heard of: Rob Bell’s *Velvet Elvis* (2005), Brian McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian* (2001), Dan Kimball’s *The Emerging Church* (2003), and Chris Seay’s *The Gospel according to Tony Soprano* (2002). I became increasingly intrigued.

By mid-2007 my analysis of Bible study data was over. It was time for new ethnography, and in October 2007 the fieldwork for *Emerging Evangelicals* began. I was living in Lansing, Michigan, teaching at Michigan State University, and so I began where I had left off. I interviewed Bill about his ongoing attraction to the Emerging Church. I then located other congregations in Lansing that, like Bill, were consuming and enacting knowledge produced by the Emerging movement. In August 2008 I moved to southwestern Ohio to teach at Miami University. From then until October 2010 I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with individuals and communities throughout the Dayton-Cincinnati corridor. This ethnography results from the data amassed during these three years.

My fieldwork was patterned on the idea of “multi-sited ethnography” (Marcus 1995), a methodological posture that

examines the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space. This mode defines for itself an object of study that cannot be accounted for ethnographically by remaining focused on a single site of intensive investigation. This mobile ethnography takes unexpected trajectories in tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity. . . Just as this mode investigates and ethnographically constructs the lifeworlds of variously situated subjects, it also ethnographically constructs aspects of the system itself through the associations and connections it suggests among sites. (ibid.: 96)

The three theoretical points raised by this definition helped shape this book: the “circulation” of cultural material, the phenomenological “lifeworlds” of subjects, and the structural conditions that frame everyday performances. Marcus rightly distinguishes this approach of looking “across and within multiple sites of activity” from the familiar model of being immersed in one field site. Rather than focus on a single Emerging congregation I followed the presence of the movement across multiple locales. Within this methodological frame, I relied most heavily on four forms of data collection: interviewing, participant observation, collaborative ethnography, and textual archiving.

(1) I devoted significant energy to “informal” and “semi-structured” interviewing (Bernard 2006: 211–12). I sat in homes, coffee shops, restaurants,
pubs, and other public sites—sometimes with a tape recorder, sometimes not—with ninety Emerging Evangelicals. With the vast majority of this sample I conducted multiple interviews. The first meeting always combined a spiritual-religious life history with questions about what aspects of the Emerging Church attracted them and the details of their church community. Follow-up interviews explored key themes like “missional” and “ancient-future,” and further explored their individual and collective Christian lives. The appendix surveys my Emerging Evangelical consultants.

As the following chapters progress, most of these individuals will become more than an Appendix entry. What is complex, intriguing, and revealing about their stories will become evident. In the meantime, consider some relevant observations about this sample. Emerging Evangelicals pulls together the experiences of individuals, and by extension the experiences of the church communities they are part of. Through these 90 individuals, 40 communities are represented. Through these 40 communities, 11 denominations are represented (United Methodist, Reformed Church of America, General Baptist Conference, Southern Baptist Convention, Vineyard Fellowship, Presbyterian Church of America, Presbyterian Church-USA, Church of Christ, Episcopalian, Anglican, and Church of the Nazarene). Because church planting and house churches are important in the Emerging movement, this sample includes 27 church planters and 24 house church members. As with American religion more generally, the book publishing industry is a significant mode of knowledge circulation for Emerging Evangelicals: this sample includes three editors representing two of the largest Christian publishers in America (Baker and Zondervan, both located in Grand Rapids, Michigan). The urban-suburban divide—foregrounded in chapters 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7—is an important structuring condition for Emerging Evangelicalism: this sample includes 56 urban dwellers and 34 suburbanites. In terms of social class, all 90 consultants are solidly middle-class, many with undergraduate and graduate degrees. All but two are white (one a Korean American male Anglican pastor, and one an African American female Vineyard worship director). Finally, all were born between 1952 and 1989, most between 1970 and 1980. Their ages of maturation help contextualize the argument that Emerging Evangelicals are both modern and late modern religious subjects.

(2) An ethnographer cannot live on interviews alone. In most cases interviews led to observations of place and collective religious practice. Some were exceedingly common for a fieldworker among American Christians: worship services, small group meetings, and informal gatherings. Others were closely linked to this particular project: missional practices, national
and regional Emerging Church conferences, ancient-future worship workshops, book promotion tours, and “pre-launch” meetings for new church plants.

These observations were valuable for many reasons. They allowed me to see the discourses of Emerging Evangelicalism performed. For example, reading and interviewing about being a missionary to your own society is one thing, but documenting how adherents go about doing this is another. Less obviously, because I conducted repeat interviews with most consultants, group observations generated useful questions for individuals who participated in those events; as well as for others, for whom I used an explanation of the event as an elicitation tool. These ethnographic observations provide an account of subject formation in process. To say that this book is about identity is not simply a claim about how Evangelicals talk about themselves; it is also about their lived subjectivity (Ortner 2005). Identity is not simply an ongoing discursive construction; it is an everyday, embodied, felt, and experienced self. The events I present are very much phenomenological rituals of religious becoming.

(3) My fieldwork included multiple forms of collaborative ethnography, where the anthropologist attempts some remove from authority by involving consultants in the making of research activities (Lassiter 2004). Consider an example that appears in chapter 8.

From early in my fieldwork it was apparent that “being missional” was closely linked with an attachment to place. The more I interviewed Emerging Evangelicals about their strivings to be missional, the more I heard about the localities they were in, and the more I realized interviews in abstracted contexts would not suffice. Hearing about a sense of place was not enough; I wanted them to show me. Moreover, I wanted them to control what they showed me, rather than me controlling the questions being asked. The result was a series of guided tours. Consultants created their own itineraries as they led me through the places they called their mission fields, told me stories, explained local history, took me to significant landmarks and street corners, navigated neighborhoods, and, ultimately, performed the link between being missional and being in a particular place.

(4) Lastly, this fieldwork included the compilation of a textual archive: published texts, virtual interactions, and items of material culture. Some were given without solicitation or recommended, others were publicly available, and others were found through my own investigative efforts. This archive includes books; articles and interviews from Christian media; articles and interviews from secular media; YouTube posts; personal, congre-
gational, seminary, and media podcasts; blogs; public flyers; conference and congregational handouts; small group study resources; pardenominational materials; and church planting resources. This diverse body of materials was a necessary complement for analyzing Emerging Evangelical knowledge production. One example, which appears in chapter 7, centers on the observation that planting new churches is nothing if not highly organized. Potential planters must typically convince several different sponsoring bodies that they are qualified, that a new church is necessary in the proposed context, and that they have definitive plans to make the church successful. To capture this reality I collected ten Church Plant Proposals (produced and used for fund-raising, among other reasons). As fashioned artifacts, they are revealing cultural documents.

The arguments and observations we consider in this book derive from my ethnographic work, but they address a movement active throughout the United States. However, accounting for the distribution of Emerging Evangelicals is difficult. How do you quantify a movement that does not exist under any umbrella institution(s)? Denominations and parachurch organizations are much more convenient in this way: they keep updated listings and provide a relatively clear sense of who is represented. What follows is, at best, a very rough mapping of the movement’s widespread presence.

We can begin by establishing that there are about 100 million Evangelicals in America (Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals, Wheaton College). In theory, almost every Evangelical has at least been exposed to any umbrella institution(s)? Denominations and parachurch organizations are much more convenient in this way: they keep updated listings and provide a relatively clear sense of who is represented. What follows is, at best, a very rough mapping of the movement’s widespread presence.

Aaron Flores (2005) completed a Master’s thesis in the Department of Religion at Vanguard University, a private, charismatic college in southern California. He assessed the Emerging movement from a missiological perspective, but as part of this work he identified 181 American congregations as definitely Emerging. Unfortunately, this count struggles on several fronts. It employs a far too restrictive criteria list. It does not include Emerging constituents in established congregations. It does not measure the number of practitioners in those 181 places. And it focuses only on the local, congregational model of religious belonging (excluding, for instance, online communities).

Michael Morrell is an Emerging Evangelical and the webmaster for an online resource hub that chronicles the movement. The site provides a state-
by-state listing of “uncommon communities of faith” that are, by Morrell’s and/or the community’s designation, Emerging. As of March 2010 he had listed 724 congregations in 46 states. Morrell’s effort is impressive and, in cases where the communities included in my ethnographic work are listed, he is accurate. However, this listing also has several problems (apart from being the subjective, voluntary effort of one individual). As with Flores, there is no measure of the number of practitioners in these communities, nor is there an account of Emerging constituents in established congregations.

Emergent Village, as an institution that Emerging Evangelicals connect and share resources through, lists communities that are self-consciously Emerging. The local gatherings organized under the Emergent Village name are called “cohorts” and the website lists 103 in 36 states. All these cohorts are included in Morrell’s count. The debilitating problem with taking this listing as paramount is that it only includes Emergent Village cohorts, and most Emerging communities have no affiliation with this institution.

Acts 29, an interdenominational church planting network, also provides a state-by-state listing of its missional churches (210 in 42 states as of October 2010). Morrell excludes most of these congregations because of their strict theological requirements for admission into the network. As with Emergent Village, these communities are Emerging because they affiliate with an institution founded on Emerging priorities (namely, the desire to be missional). But again, the list is limited to that institution and provides no data on how many individuals are active in these communities.

While these listings cannot offer any percentage of American Evangelicals who identify as “Emerging” or who consume knowledge from Emerging Church institutions, they do allow some confidence. They provide some quantitative evidence to support what I am asserting qualitatively in this book—Emerging Evangelicalism is a viable form of identity on the American religious landscape and is present in nearly every region of the United States. And given the home cities of these communities, the Emerging movement seems to remain as it began, concentrated in urban and suburban America. Taken together, these listings help contextualize the ethnographic analyses in this book.

Postscript: Person-Centered Ethnography

I end this introduction with a reminder. For me, it is a crucial reminder and vital for theorizing. I stated upfront that this is a book about America’s Emerging Evangelicals. Beginning with the opening vignette involving Larry,
Aaron, Becky, and D.G., and continuing through the remaining chapters, I hope one thing will be clear: there is no Evangelicalism without Evangeli-
cals. In short, this book is a person-centered ethnography—an ethnography focused on individual lives and intersubjective gatherings, not on any super-
organic version of Evangelicalism. I offer this reminder in the spirit of other
anthropologists who have responded to a nonhumanist (antihumanist?) ten-
dency among ethnographers and social scientists.

Writing as a phenomenological anthropologist, Michael Jackson (1989)
argues for an ethnographic approach modeled in the spirit of William James’s
radical empiricism. He warns against treating conceptual abstractions as the
end goal: “I do not want to risk dissolving the lived experience of the subject
into the anonymous field of discourse” (1, italics in original); “Concepts do
not transcend this life-world, mirroring its essence or revealing its underly-
ing laws. They cannot get us above or outside experience, only move us from
one domain to another” (1); “to investigate beliefs or ‘belief systems’ apart
from actual human activity is absurd” (65). While this ethnography is not
strictly phenomenological, I do take seriously the call to prioritize the lived
realities of people over conceptual abstractions.

Writing toward a different theoretical standpoint, namely, the location
and attribution of agency, Brenda Farnell (2000) echoes Jackson. She argues
against a long scholarly history of assigning the ability to think, feel, act,
make decisions, and mobilize to intangible, ineffable, and (ironically) unlo-
catable forces. Farnell places Freud’s unconscious, Durkheim’s social structure,
and Bourdieu’s habitus in the same pile (and we might add other favored
concepts such as culture, society, infrastructure, ideology, model, ritual, and
system). All these abstractions are treated as having “causal powers separate
from the joint activity of persons” (406–7). She rightly concludes that such
extrahuman forces “have no causal efficacy. Only people do” (404). In other
words, things happen in the world because people produce, consume, cir-
culate, and enact knowledge. Cultures do not act; people, individually and
collectively, do.

This posture shaped both my fieldwork and my writing of this book. I
work to illustrate several arguments about Emerging Evangelicalism in the
chapters that follow, and I hope to do so without losing track of the Evangeli-
cals who actually make this movement a reality.