

The Evolution of Religious Institutions

At Common Ground Interspiritual Fellowship (CGI Fellowship) we are interested in meeting the needs of two groups of people. The first group consists of the “Spiritual but not Religious” sometimes referred to as the “nones” (when asked religious affiliation the response is “none”). For these folks, we want to provide a spiritual community. The other group includes people who are members of traditional churches but don’t experience the freedom to speak out and question beliefs or practices “at home.” For this group as well as the first group, we want to provide an opportunity to freely, honestly, and safely explore their inner questions, doubts, and emerging wisdom in a community of listeners and fellow explorers.

We see CGI Fellowship as a new and emerging form of spiritual fellowship, one that does not have a shared doctrine, fixed text, or professional leader who articulates and interprets the doctrine and texts. We value dialogue, mutual exploration, and empowerment more than preaching, ritual, or creed. We see this new form of spiritual fellowship as a next step emerging from traditional churches and even beyond interfaith approaches to worship.

The following is a short summary of how we see the recent evolution of spiritual communities in the United States—and the contribution we offer at CGI Fellowship. For convenience the following discussion uses the word “churches” as a generic placeholder for churches, temples, synagogues, and sanctuaries of all kinds. We also want to acknowledge up front that there are certainly many exceptions to the broad brush characterizations that follow. However, we feel it is helpful to share our view of the big picture and recognize you will be aware of exceptions.

Traditional Churches

If you have grown up in the United States, you are likely to be at least somewhat familiar with traditional western “churches.” Worship services are typically held on Fridays, Saturdays, or Sundays depending upon the belief system. Services are typically 60 to 90 minutes comprised of various rituals (e.g. call to worship, scripture reading, shared music, reciting creeds) and usually includes a “talk” (i.e. sermon, homily, etc.). The purpose of the talk is to teach a particular perspective based on the church theology, dogma, doctrine, and cosmology which is understood to be the truth. In most cases the talk is delivered to the congregation by the recognized religious authority who has been trained to accurately interpret the holy text and doctrine according to the belief system of the church. Historically this person is easily identifiable by a robe, stole, or some other symbol of authority. The members of the church typically listen to the authority and repeat written or memorized words to prayers, songs, holy texts, or responsive readings. The traditional model is so pervasive that even religions based in more recent New

Thought philosophies, as well as Hindu, Buddhist, and other eastern religions transplanted for western congregations, will often use the traditional western format.

Traditional churches usually teach a set of rules or rituals for behavior, practices for worship, and shared values that ensure the followers a sense of belonging, peace of mind, and rightness with a deity or society. Traditional churches provide a valuable spiritual home for many people. If the belief system of the church “fits” the individual’s beliefs, then traditional churches can meet the spiritual needs of security, clarity, understanding, community, and meaning.

However, if the individual begins to doubt or deviate from the belief system of the church, the traditional church may become a source of deep inner anxiety, external judgment, and even expulsion from the church community. An individual may feel unsafe to express doubts or points of view that are at odds with the teaching of the church. Opportunities for dialogue may be unavailable or limited to the “party line,” so to speak. For these people, their traditional church may become uncomfortable to the point where they choose to leave the church in search of another traditional church that feels like a better fit.

For many years now there has been a decrease in membership of traditional mainline protestant churches while membership in evangelical churches has been on the rise.¹ While evangelical churches have changed some aspects of the traditional church format, such as using modern bands to lead the music instead of organs as well as using more modern songs and big projection screens instead of the old hymnals, the basic structure of authority still persists. Some traditional churches have been hearing congregants who say “the language just doesn’t speak to me anymore.” They have responded by adjusting their language, celebrating a sense of Spirit, reflecting acceptance of all, and creating a sense of peace when coming together. In addition, some ministers in traditional churches have given up the role of authority and “preaching” and instead help people to answer their own questions.

In spite of these changes in many traditional churches, according to the statistics, the fastest growing “religion” has been the “spiritual but not religious” group. According to a Pew Research Center study² in 2014 twenty-three percent of the adult population now describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated—up from sixteen percent in 2007. Further, seventy-two percent of these “nones” say they seldom or never attend church services. Certainly for many of the “nones” religion or spirituality is simply not important; they are not looking for a spiritual community. But eighty percent of these “nones” do say that churches and other religious institutions bring people together and strengthen community bonds.

This statistic would seem to support the conclusion that a growing number of people in the United States are not able to find a traditional church that meets their needs. However, many of them apparently still see the value of spiritual community. We are guessing that the “nones” may feel the loss of spiritual community in their own lives as a result of their choice to leave the traditional church.

Interfaith Churches

A somewhat recent development over the last 30-40 years is the interfaith movement. The movement seems to have at least two kinds of expressions within itself. One group within the overall movement recognizes many valid spiritual paths to “Ultimate Reality”—which of course is, in itself, a particular cosmology or belief system. Rather than being simply eclectic, this movement seems to see itself as another brand of church. For example, the Interfaith Community Sanctuary in Seattle includes in its statement of beliefs (!) “We consider all faith and spiritual traditions as paths toward One God.”³ While being very broad, even this expansive belief system may occur to some as exclusive (e.g. Buddhists commonly either don’t have or don’t discuss a God concept).

Another expression of interfaith is described by a statement something like “I respect your right to determine your own spiritual path and I appreciate you allowing me to determine my own spiritual path.” This approach says nothing about the validity or “falseness” of any religion and/or spiritual path.

The interfaith movement has focused on dialogue across existing faith traditions, shared social action activities, and more recently shared participation in worship services. One example of an interfaith service is to include a little from this tradition and a little from that tradition in a smorgasbord type approach.

The beneficial contribution of interfaith is that it initiated dialogue and acknowledgement across religious lines: among various Christian denominations including Catholics, between Jews and Christians, and now among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Interfaith ministers have served an important need in performing marriages, funerals, and other rituals for couples and families of mixed religious traditions. Interfaith ministers serve as chaplains in hospitals, assisted living centers, and the military where there are people of multiple religious traditions. Interfaith ministers are generally not promoting a particular religious belief system and are respectful of the faith tradition of the people they serve. They can be, to some extent, religiously “multi-lingual.” The interfaith movement has supported the growth of the idea that people of different faith traditions can come together, join in spiritual fellowship, learn from each other, and grow together.

However, both of these definitions create somewhat of a problem for creating an interfaith church. What particular theology, dogma, or doctrine is taught? The answer is usually “all valid truths.” It’s easy to see how this approach can manifest in identifying common spiritual values (e.g. love, forgiveness, compassion) and creating worship services that draw from the wisdom of several faiths. Some interfaith church services rotate through theme-related scripture from the Jewish Testament, the Christian New Testament, and Islam’s Quran for example. Unfortunately, this approach to interfaith runs the risk of misinterpreting each of the source texts due to a lack of deep knowledge of the context, language, and understandings of the original faith tradition. It can be seen as disrespectful by appropriating what is seen as sacred by the followers of each path. Further, this type of worship service continues to follow the traditional “authoritarian” model of theology prevalent in traditional churches. In other words, the

interfaith minister is still up front in a leadership role selecting, teaching, and interpreting the “truth” for the community.

For those who do not want to “follow the leader,” most traditional and interfaith churches are simply not workable. Many “spiritual but not religious” individuals simply have few options where their needs for pursuing individual spiritual beliefs *and* community can be fully met. They can choose to not participate in church (meeting their need for individuality) but that comes at the expense of not sharing a church community. On the other hand they can attend a church where they really don’t share some/many/all of the beliefs—and are not authentically empowered to speak their truth—but they do have a spiritual “community” of sorts. We think there must be another alternative.

Emerging Church Movement

Gaining visibility since the late 20th century, the emerging church is now a major grassroots movement in Christianity. It is sometimes referred to as postmodern, evangelical, or post-evangelical among other terms. While specific examples can be quite varied, this movement tends to be a reaction against traditional, centralized, bureaucratic, building-focused, stale, dogmatized Christian religion. In contrast, the emerging church is characterized by the absence of centralized planning, stemming from bottom-up, informal relationships and independent groups.

The term “emergent church” can be applied to a broad spectrum from huge mega-churches to a small gathering in someone’s living room. One common element that most forms of the emerging church would agree on is disdain for traditional, organized religion. Due to its independence from traditional Christian church denominations, the emerging church movement is highly diverse in beliefs and practices. Some emergent churches draw from ancient rituals, liturgies, and practices from a variety of Christian traditions, including the more contemplative and mystical traditions, consistent with a shift from religious dogma and sectarianism to a broader spirituality. Smaller gatherings may encourage questioning standard interpretations and exploring for personal truth.

As a postmodern movement, emergent churches may take a more historical or metaphorical approach to the Bible, preferring to find the relevance to living in a postmodern world. They are more likely to acknowledge the diverse perspectives within the Christian community and to value dialogue, personal relationship with God, and application of scripture to living a life of faith, above proclamations of absolutisms from professional clerical “authority.” Some emerging churches create safe environments for sharing opinions and points of view that are generally shunned in traditional, conservative churches, even including interfaith dialogue in order to learn from the narratives of other faith traditions. Aggressive, confrontational evangelism and messages about eternal damnation have been replaced with more personal sharing of experiences, prayer, group Bible reading, and meals in Christian fellowship, believing that this will lead people to a personal relationship with Jesus on their own terms.

Spiritual Fellowships

For the growing number of “nones,” there still seems to be an unmet need for spiritual community beyond that provided by traditional churches, interfaith churches, or emergent churches. We see a need for a new type of spiritual fellowship, a grand experiment, which steps beyond the traditional model we have known as “church.” We see the need for potentially two types of gatherings—both with the goal of supporting spiritual community while at the same time supporting the empowerment of individuals to follow their own spiritual paths.

The first type of gathering we are calling *Authentic Spiritual Conversations*. This is a group for anyone interested in sharing their unique spiritual journey with open-minded friends. Authentic Spiritual Conversations offer a loose structure and gathering space for individuals to be and express their authentic self in the company of others. In these groups, we create a safe space where members can explore what feels spiritually real, core, and alive in fellowship with other spiritual seekers and practitioners from a variety of spiritual paths. Members are free to explore their spiritual questions, doubts, practices, and deepest longings in a space where everyone’s needs are gently held as important and sacred.

In addition, there may be other “nones” who appreciate the value of spiritual rituals to create a sense of shared sacred space. We envision that this type of gathering would be somewhat analogous to a traditional church service—and at the same time radically different. The difference starts with the group of individuals collectively creating or adopting rituals that support sacred space for them. For example, the group may choose to use the practices of lighting candles at the beginning of a service, beginning with a short quiet time to become present within, including chanting or other uplifting music. The important difference is that designing rituals is a shared activity that includes the opportunity for input from everyone in a conversation about what is effective and meaningful for each person. Since there is no authority figure or church tradition to draw from, the group may need to talk about how to make decisions on what to include and even how to start a conversation when someone would like something changed or deleted.

Another “radical difference” in this second type of gathering is switching the sermon/talk to a dialogue. A dialogue requires each person to remain self-responsible rather than holding only the authorized leader responsible for selecting, interpreting and applying whatever wisdom is shared and received. The dialogue may be structured around a different theme at each meeting. Members would have some way to provide input into the themes so that they are relevant for their interests and needs.

The challenge for dialogue in a group that does not share the same belief systems or points of view is to create a safe environment where people feel comfortable being vulnerable and diving into deep exploration rather than surface conversations. It may be necessary for the group to adopt some shared values that everyone agrees will help to support authentic dialogue, to have a designated facilitator for each meeting, and perhaps identify some probing questions that help to stimulate deep thinking about relevant sources of wisdom, interpretation, and application of the topic. Such a shared exploration

requires individuals to draw from their own sources of “authority” and to listen openly to what each other person contributes.

Obviously a dialogue works best with a reasonably small group. However, there are models for dialogue that work in larger settings. Possibly a facilitator could propose the topic for dialogue and then the large group could break into smaller dialogue groups of from two to six people. To bring people back together the facilitator could ask each subgroup to share insights and discoveries back to the larger assembly for a short time. The service could then resume with concluding rituals/music. There are a variety of models to promote meaningful discussion and abundant opportunities for individual participation. One thing is certain: pews or chairs arranged in rows facing a podium will not support discussion or participation. Clearly, attention must be given to the quality of the space and arrangement of seating to support the kind of dialogue we envision.

Conclusion

Both traditional churches of all types and interfaith churches meet important needs for many people. Both types of churches make valuable contributions to society as well as to human development of spiritual values and consciousness. What we are proposing in this new model is based on a recently emerging group of people whose needs are not being met by traditional or interfaith churches. We see an opportunity to support this new group of people who have removed themselves from traditional churches, essentially providing them with a new option for expressing and sharing their spiritual journeys. By providing an opportunity for spiritual fellowship that is not defined by a particular belief system, we hope to include the “nones” in an ongoing spiritual conversation which will expand their opportunity for inclusion and continued spiritual development.



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¹ Earls, A. (2015). The growth of evangelicals and decline of mainline protestants. Retrieved from <http://factsandtrends.net/2015/05/19/the-growth-of-evangelicals-and-decline-of-mainline-protestants/>

² Pew Research Center. (2015). *U.S. public becoming less religious*, from http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/11/201.11.03_RLS_II_full_report.pdf

³ <http://interfaithcommunitysanctuary.org/index.php/about-ics/icc-vision-and-mission/>