

Hipster churches in Silicon Valley: evangelicalism's unlikely new home

Netflix fasts, coffee vouchers, plaid-wearing worshippers is what it takes for 'church transplants' to make their home in the affluent Bay Area

Annie Gaus

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Like many San Franciscans, overpriced coffee is a considerable portion of my weekly budget. One day in Soma, the industrial district home to many start-ups, I came across a flier advertising a free gift card to Philz, a nearby coffee shop. All that was required was to show up for service at a local church called [Epic](#). I hadn't been to church in months, and decided to give it a try.

The Bay Area has never been perceived as religious: a 2012 Gallup poll [found](#) that fewer than a quarter of residents identify as "very religious" (defined as going to church weekly), as opposed to 40% of the nation as a whole. High salaries have drawn droves of well-educated millennials to the booming tech sector, which [correlates](#) with lower religious sentiment. So far afield from the Bible belt, the region is in fact seen as hospitable to all forms of old testament abominations: fornication, paganism – even sodomy.

If you look around, however, you'll notice a bumper crop of newer Christian ministries that, upon superficial glance, could pass for any other Bay Area start-up: glossy [web design](#), well-curated [social accounts](#) and yes, free coffee promotions. County-level statistics substantiate this: numbers from the Association of Religion Data Archives show that several large Protestant denominations have [grown](#) in San Francisco County in recent years.

How does one even start a church in the land of \$3,000 studio apartments, transient tech workers and rationalist tendencies? The answer lies in a mix of organized efforts by large religious bodies, coupled with messaging that speaks to the tastes, needs and neuroses of ambitious young Bay Area residents.

The Sunday following my flier discovery, I made my way to Epic. The church's home is in a modest commercial space sharing a street with a marijuana dispensary, a few small tech firms and a homeless encampment.

I grabbed a free bagel and was quickly welcomed by a young pastor named Tim. We were then ushered into the basement, where a three-piece band played a gentle song about keeping promises. Following announcements – Epic would soon be moving to a new, larger venue closer to downtown – lead pastor Ben Pilgreen began a sermon on the idea of resurrection that mixed self-deprecating humor with notes on the ruthlessness of the corporate ladder, as well as occasional asides about processed food: “Have you ever looked at the ingredients in a McRib? What are pig innards?” “You don't want to know!” called out a scientist in the second row, to rippling laughter.

Pilgreen's resurrection talk was shrewdly adapted to the worries that would keep any ambitious professional up at night: what happens after a failed project, a faded dream, or even a lost sense of humility following the kind of dizzying financial success that many San Franciscans have sought ever since the tech boom days.

Off the pulpit, Pilgreen is softer-spoken but no less accessible. He, along with his family and a missionary group of about 20, relocated from Louisiana to what has been long considered rocky terrain for “planting” – missionary parlance for starting up new churches in an appointed city. The church is now in its fifth year, and boasts a growing and diverse attendance.

Missionaries sometimes describe a personal call from God to take on the task of launching and growing a ministry, often far from home. But on a practical level, church plants are brought to life through complex systems of financial and logistical support that scale up to the largest religious bodies in the world, like the [Southern Baptist Convention](#). Epic was founded through the 10-10-10 initiative, a Southern Baptist Convention-supported program to plant 10 new churches in the Bay Area in 2010.

Linda Bergquist was the lead Bay Area catalyst for the initiative, helping to guide new pastors through the spiritual and logistical process of starting a church in one of the most expensive and dense metro areas in the country. When I ask her about traits that make a successful planter in the Bay Area, she offers an anecdote about Pilgreen's group:

When Ben and his original team came out here for the first time, it was during Obama's inauguration. The first thing we did was to go down to Civic Center. People were throwing shoes at what I think was a picture of George Bush. Rick Warren came on screen, and people would boo him. It was just so insanely [San Francisco](#). I wanted to watch how Ben and his team related to it, and I hadn't even told them about Soma ... But I asked afterwards, 'How was it?' And they really liked being there. They loved it.

It was this level of comfort with San Francisco's rebellious spirit, Bergquist told me, that assured her this was the right group to plant in the [sometimes bawdy](#) Soma district.

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Regardless, it should come as little surprise that the challenges of planting a church in San Francisco are less ideological than logistical. "It's difficult finding a place to rent," Bergquist says. "And depending on where it is, you've got to rethink space – what's walkable, what's bikeable, what's hikeable, knowing transportation lines, knowing whether people have cars – that's just something you have to get used to."

Material support is another matter: as 501(c)(3) exempt charities, churches are not bound by financial transparency, but generally benefit from what Bergquist describes as greatly improved support systems from both official denominations and non-denominational missionary groups. These groups assist with coaching, personnel and of course financial means during the crucial first years of a church plant's existence.

Some planters are even more candid about the necessity of behaving just like any other start-up in the nation's technology hub. Troy Wilson, the Presbyterian-ordained pastor of The Table, a [brand-new ministry](#) now operating out of Hayes Valley, described to me a multi-year solvency plan – that is, achieving 100% revenue derived internally as opposed to outside, private boosters. Churches are the original crowdfunders, as it turns out: "We are starting a corporation – a non-profit corporation, but we have to see it that way." Presently, Wilson says, most of The Table's outreach comes in the form of organizing community events like art shows, performances and parties, in the hopes of gradually building a stable congregation through creative enrichment.

This is perhaps the core challenge for start-up churches like Wilson's: the pace of change, and the transience of the younger demographic. Dani Scoville, program director at a Christian center that ministers to younger adults in the Bay Area, describes a population of "believers moving from community to community based on life stage. You might be in a certain church when you're single and looking for a partner, and in another when you're married and looking for a church with a good children's ministry."

As for successful ministries in the Bay Area, she muses: "What are the needs and aches of the place we're living in, and how do we respond to that?" In Scoville's work, this can include anything from Netflix fasts to making a budget and limiting coffee to manage anxiety.

When raising the issue of how to reach younger Bay Areans, one ministry in particular came up several times: [Reality SF](#), which makes its Sunday home in a middle school auditorium in the Castro district. Reality's website features a group of shiny young millennials lounging gaily in picturesque Dolores Park (marijuana truffles and beer not pictured). Its teachings, which are published online, address subjects like "re-imagining singleness", "tech in spirituality" and "[wisdom for charity](#)" in a blend of CS Lewis quotes, TED Talk references, and occasional guests from groups like [Praxis](#), a "kingdom-centered" business accelerator.

To borrow the words of one Yelp reviewer, walking into Reality itself feels "like a Decemberists concert": at least 25% of the congregation is dressed in plaid, and the couple next to me thumbs through Facebook throughout an extended version of John Mark Mcmillan's How He Loves, which everyone but me seems to know the lyrics to:

Heaven meets earth like a sloppy wet kiss ...

Noting its majority single congregation, Reality's extracurricular panels offer guidance on Christian dating while mostly avoiding hard-boiled doctrine on issues like homosexuality and premarital sex. Correspondingly, the church also boasts "eat-ups", [classifieds](#) and dozens of community groups, providing an instant friend circle (and maybe more!) for the population of young transplants who find everything they need in San Francisco, except a stable community. Reality's lead pastor, Dave Lomas, politely declined to be interviewed, but it's clear that Reality understands its

congregation: it accepts tithing in the form of [stock](#), and reported a budget of \$2.3m in 2014.

However you might define the spiritual needs of the modern, hipster-leaning young professional, those may be even more pronounced outside the density of San Francisco's social environment.

Forty miles south in Palo Alto, I went to C3SV ([C3 Silicon Valley](#)), which declares prominently on its website: "Not religious? Neither are we!"

The distinction, says pastor Adam Smallcombe, is in what the government expects of a church and what people are really seeking. Smallcombe, who is originally from Australia, emphasized the "community void" in Silicon Valley: "People are desperate for community. Everyone's moving in, and tech companies are trying to provide that community as much as possible, so that we all never leave work. But there's a community and relationships that people are looking for outside – for doing life, and going beyond just attending a service."

Not unlike Reality SF's community groups, C3 offers mountain biking, hiking and other physical and charitable activities for its members, in addition to a mobile app, [shuttle bus](#) service for its San Francisco branch, and sermon livestreams coming soon.

Smallcombe acknowledges openly that the community he serves – affluent and immersed in opportunity – wants for little. His aim, rather, is to "leverage the optimism" in [Silicon Valley](#) to help people find fulfillment in life outside of the corporate ladder. "You rule over Silicon Valley!" one of the pastors urged energetically during the sermon. "It is not in Google's hands, or Facebook's hands, or Yahoo!'s hands – the kingdom is in your hands!" After a performance by what I can only describe as a modestly dressed version of the Cheetah Girls, he reminds his congregation to "believe in the tithe".

Smallcombe aims to shepherd the church fully out of "start-up" mode by 2020, he explains, at which point he hopes to have helped establish hundreds of new C3 ministries across the globe.

Ambitious as this may sound, for some start-up churches, nothing seems out of reach. Provided they meet people where they are – on phones, at Dolores

Park, or at work – they can successfully serve the unique, sometimes evasive needs of their communities. Or at the very least, a good cup of coffee.