

Seeker Churches, by Kimon Howland Sargeant

Reviewed by [Wade Clark Roof](#) in the [March 7, 2001](#) issue

Just about everyone by now has heard of seeker churches, and many Americans have visited or joined them. Thousands of pastors across the country each year flock to seminars to learn more about these churches' approach to ministry and to gain insight into why the movement is rapidly growing. Kimon Howland Sargeant's sociological analysis of the movement is the first systematic attempt to try to make some sense of it historically and culturally. This nicely written and timely book addresses, in Sargeant's words, the fundamental question, "What does it mean to be religious, especially to be an evangelical, at this moment in history?" More specifically, How well can seeker churches, entrepreneurial and innovative yet also traditional and conservative, navigate the tensions between translation and tradition?

Sargeant surveyed pastors in the Willow Creek Association, analyzed sermons and other religious discourse, attended conferences, and interviewed two dozen pastors of seeker churches. He learned that seeker church pastors are traditional in theological commitments, that attendance at seeker church services is growing, that churches offering separate seeker services are growing faster than those that do not and that a growing number of these churches are nondenominational. Most of the "Unchurched Harrys" targeted by the seeker movement are church-shoppers, people who have also attended other churches recently. Seeker church growth appears to have more to do with the "circulation of the saints" than with converting the hard-core unchurched.

Seeker churches are responding to a religious environment characterized by subjectivism, expanding religious choice, eclectic spirituality and anti-institutionalism. Their success lies in casting the evangelical message in creative, culturally appealing ways while remaining faithful to core elements of evangelical theology. The assumption is that churches that offer an exciting, vital experience of the sacred can win the loyalty of seekers. To this end, they make use of contemporary music, multimedia presentations, screens and drama. They downplay moral judgments and instead emphasize the subjective rewards of faith. They

introduce joy and humor as a part of religious life, privilege experience over doctrine and provide user-friendly rituals in an atmosphere of relaxed informality and casualness.

Crosses and other historic symbols, considered peripheral to the early phases of the seeker's encounter with the religious message, are relegated to the sidelines. Seeker churches stress personal authenticity as a moral virtue, encourage spiritual exploration as an honest and healthy undertaking, recognize the importance of emotions and affirm the human body as a feeling, sensing self.

Sargeant argues that for a relatively young movement, seeker churches have been pretty even-handed at zeroing in on the "majors" of the faith (affirming the existence, love and forgiveness of God and the centrality of faith in Christ) and downplaying the "minors" (the corruption of the world, the damnation that comes to the unrepentant, holier-than-thou attitudes or insistence upon rigid, authoritarian views on gender). These churches, he says, try to make "orthodox theology less offensive and more civil for a pluralistic society. Seeker church proponents do not abandon the 'gospel truth' but repackage it in a kinder, gentler format."

Sargeant has some nagging worries about the movement. Concerned about religious authority, he wonders whether, in their selective appropriation of religious tradition based on individual needs, seeker churches may be undermining themselves. And he worries whether the very genius of seeker churches, their synthesis of traditional doctrine with contemporary therapeutic and individualistic sensibilities, may be creating a new kind of religious rhetoric that breaks too much with Christian tradition, history and sense of commitment and obligation. To what extent are the innovative forms of the seeker church also reshaping the content of what is taught? Are church leaders aware of the paradox of unintended consequences--aware that the goals they seek might get lost in a runaway movement? In throwing out the bathwater might they be throwing out the baby as well?

So aligned with the baby boom generation are the seeker churches that Sargeant might also have asked, "What will happen as aging boomers begin to retire?" Will a spiritual diet based upon cultural relevancy and a focus on the self, but lacking grounding in tradition and memory, still hold their loyalty? Will a religious style aimed primarily at connecting with life also sustain lives of old people?

Only time can answer such questions. We know remarkably little about how well people make the transition from seeking to believing, or whether seekers will remain

in the churches that first attract them. But Sargeant provides a good introduction to these churches and raises the critical sociological and theological issues.