

The submergent church: "The unseen leaven in society"

by [James Choate-Munitz](#) in the [February 6, 2007](#) issue

A man in his mid-30s sits in a recliner in a dark room. Bursts of light from an episode of *Dancing with the Stars* flash on the walls and furniture. He grasps a cold beer, and a bag of potato chips is in his lap. This man is a pastor, and he is—at this very moment—leading his flock.

When most people think of ministry, they conjure up images of prayers with upraised hands, bold marches for peace and justice, praise songs to a rockin' beat, or fiery sermons. "That's just not me," says Michael Bunglebottom. "My congregation understands that and even appreciates it. We're not your ordinary church."

Bunglebottom refers to the Master's Playhouse in Toledo. The congregation is affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), but you would have a hard time figuring that out if you wandered into one of their worship services on a Sunday morning. "We understand that people don't go for labels anymore," notes Martha Edwards, one of the church's assistant directors, a position that is roughly equivalent to a deacon in other congregations.

Actually, you would have a hard time even getting to one of these services. This congregation does not advertise—not even in the yellow pages—and its telephone number is unlisted. The denominational office has only a post office box on file for the church, not even a street address. In order to attend one of their "Plays," as members call worship services, I had to be blindfolded and driven on a circuitous route through Toledo by one of the Cast Members, as church members are called.

"We try to eliminate the temptations inherent in most ministries, the pride, power and politics of what they do. That especially applies to the fascination with numbers," said Bunglebottom in an interview conducted on the Playhouse's Main Stage, an exquisite mahogany platform with the latest in audio, visual and lighting equipment. The stage is framed by a set of giant maroon velour curtains edged in

gold stitching. “We don’t worry about the ego that comes with being a church of huge numbers because most people don’t even know we exist,” he said.

Despite the wealth of theater images, it is the intentional invisibility that is the identifying mark of the Master’s Playhouse and similar groups in what is called the Submergent Church movement. The core theological distinction of Submergents is that they see their faith lives as “hid with God.”

“We stay put in our prayer closets. With all the violence in the world driven by religious fervor, we don’t feel the need to show off,” said Bunglebottom. “Besides, we’re comfortable here with our close friends and family. If strangers came into our midst, it would throw off the delicate balance of fellowship.”

For all the subdued praise that Bunglebottom and his Cast Members give to the Submergent Church movement, there are detractors. “What about the call to make disciples?” asked Violet Long, Bunglebottom’s presiding elder in the Presbyterian Church’s Northwest Ohio District. “What about ministries that strive for God’s peace, justice and mercy?” Long seems to be suggesting that advocates of the Submergent Church movement are simply lazy.

Johnson Clinebell, chair of the national board of the Submergent Church Dialogue Team, says Long and others like her do not understand the movement. “With respect to God’s grace,” he says, “less is more. It is not something that should be received in large doses. Nor should we show it off like some expensive pearl.”

This theological approach means that in most Submergent churches, worship seldom lasts longer than 15 minutes and, apart from the service, there are no other activities. Instead, Cast Members believe that faith is lived out in the ordinary moments of life. That means that while Bunglebottom is watching television alone at home, eating potato chips and drinking beer, he is feeding his own soul and setting a good example for the congregation.

“What we have found,” said Clinebell, “is that people are eager to put a lot more in the offering plate if they don’t have to sit through long sermons or serve on committees.” The Master’s Playhouse is a prime example. The congregation generates so much revenue from its weekly offering that the church could purchase and completely renovate—with cash—a historic downtown Toledo theater. Bunglebottom is also able to farm out all administrative work to contractors. In fact, he works only about an hour and a half each week for his full-time salary, and that

includes his commute time.

Many people, Clinebell says, have a hard time picturing a 15-minute worship service. “Most Submergent congregations have great sound systems and will listen to a praise song on CD. Then, if they can find a Bible, someone might read something. After that, the pastor will say what’s on his mind. Then they go home.”

Clinebell admits that most people “just don’t get” the Submergent Church movement. “That’s OK. That’s just the way we like it—off the radar. We’re the unseen leaven in society.”

A Submergent Church may be coming to a neighborhood near you soon. But you won’t know about it.