

CHURCHLESS SPIRITUALITY: RECOVERING THE ESSENCE OF THE COMMUNITY

(I) Church-leavers: the challenge of individualistic spirituality

1. Emerging trend: 'churchless spirituality'

What: a term describing those who have left communities of faith, yet remained believers;

When: in the last two decades;

Where: the Christian community, globally and cross-denominationally;

Effects: churches taken by surprise; ill prepared to face the challenge constructively; poses a threat to the existing forms of believers' communal life.

2. Characteristics and possible cause

Characteristics: individualistic, celebrating the enlightenment notions of independence and the autonomous human self; accompanied by the growing postmodern anti-institutional sentiment;

Possible cause: can be understood as a protest against formalism, traditionalism, uniformity and long-term social commitments, which these church-leavers believe to dominate the current institutionalized Christian community.

3. Responses and reactions

Traditional churches: resistance and prejudice; perceived as a dangerous threat to the existing forms of ecclesial life, which should be uprooted with urgency;

Alternative: interpreted as a wake-up call to traditional churches demonstrating that something fundamental is missing. In its attempt to be relevant to a world that is constantly changing, the church has lost something of essence without even noticing it.

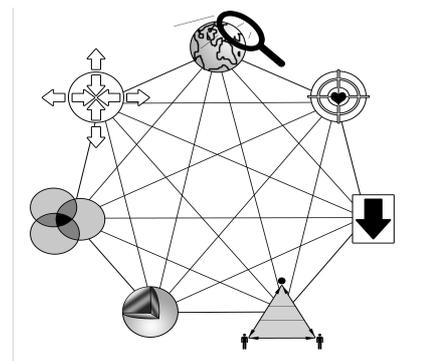
4. New opportunity

The crucial questions: how are we as the members of the Seventh-day Adventist church to react to this ever-increasing tendency? Are we to ignore it? Are we to fight against it? Are we to escape from it? Are we to consent to it? Or, are we to engage this phenomenon constructively by using it as a new opportunity to deepen, strengthen and achieve a more complete manifestation of the church's multidimensional relational nature?

(II) The relational spirituality: Recovering the apostolic vision of the essence of community

The Greek term *koinonia* is used in NT to describe the community of believers. Six statements summarize the underlying assumptions of the NT apostolic vision of the thoroughly communal nature of the church's nature:

1. *Koinonia* is divinely initiated reality.
2. *Koinonia* represents a multi-directional dynamic interaction.
3. *Koinonia* involves a holistic participation of human beings.
4. *Koinonia* is best realized in an interdependent relational structure.
5. *Koinonia* is always accompanied by an inward and outward growth.
6. *Koinonia* has an important cosmic role.
7. *Koinonia* is the heart of apostolic message.



(III) Being as community: Towards a fuller manifestation of church's communal nature

1. Conclusion: the church is not peripheral or accidental for Christian identity, but an essential (ontological) part of it. Being Christian means being a *person-in-relation*.

2. Suggestions:

(a) In relation to God, the church needs to maintain its radical openness to the totality of self-disclosing, community-constitutive initiatives of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

(b) In relation to other fellow believers, we need to learn how to live in close-knit unity, while at the same time embracing the cultural, ethnic, racial and gender differences. The depth of the experience of *koinonia* ultimately depends on how fully we immerse ourselves in the process of sharing our whole life with other members of the body of Christ.

(c) In relation to the world, the church must decide not only to proclaim the gospel, but also to embody it by demonstrating what it means to be human, that is, person-in-relation. As such, the church will become a true sign or a foretaste of the coming kingdom of God.

3. An appeal: Martin Luther once said that 'the gospel is like a caged lion that does not need to be defended - only released.' It is the same with the church. The church does not need to defend itself against rampant individualism. It just has to be the church. Its power to attract the church-leavers directly depends on how fully it demonstrates its multidimensional communal nature (*koinonia*).

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