# New Psychological and Spiritual Paradigms for Small Spiritual Communities

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The growth of small spiritual communities is a hallmark of our contemporary historical era.

My brief paper discusses this phenomenon from a historical and interfaith perspective. It also attempts to show the interface between one's spiritual and social identity and the complementary role played by a small spiritual community that expands our identity and purpose in our life journey. We are witnessing today the decline of more traditional religious institutions but also the growth of small spiritual communities that may transcend the boundaries of formal religious bodies. These communities often draw from multiple scientific and spiritual viewpoints and traditions. I will begin with the Catholic spiritual tradition.

Small spiritual communities were common in the first few centuries of Christianity. Since Christianity was considered an alien religion in the Roman Empire, Christians had to find refuge in household gatherings rather than large public buildings. The clerical structure of Catholicism largely developed in the fourth century after the conversion of Constantine. The resurgence and growth of small spiritual communities within Catholicism has largely evolved with the current theological and sociological changes brought about by Vatican Council II (1962-1965). The teachings of Vatican II provided an opening for new structures to emerge, which gave credence to the role of the laity in the life of the church and society at large. The alienation of many people in Western societies from traditional religious organizations and the decline of vocations to the priesthood and religious life in Roman Catholicism has led to new spiritual groups emphasizing psychological and spiritual growth and support for each other's life challenges and crises. Most of these groups are now led by lay people given the decline of men and women entering the priesthood or religious life.

Further developments in these small communities include opening to diverse spiritual paradigms drawn from multiple cultural and humanistic paradigms that have roots in the scientific studies of spiritual experience. Some of these groups have drawn from the meditative experience of Buddhism and Hinduism, emphasizing that there are many paths to enlightenment and human solidarity. In our age, the proliferation of false and delusional states of consciousness have proliferated through social media leading to the breakdown of human connections. Recent studies in the neurological sciences indicate that meditative practices can help to break these delusional states of consciousness. "Enlightenment consists in transforming delusions into wisdom that is the realization of Buddhahood in everyday life."

´Chan Consciousness and Enlightenment and the Spiritual; Dimension of Humans: Jijimon Alakkalam Joseph, **The Human Soul in a World of the Neurological Sciences**, page 214)

Recent studies on the nature of the soul in human experience indicate that the soul stands at the center of spiritual experience. "Following the insights from neurosciences and from (the) narrative self, we may hold that the soul is the center of our spiritual experiences. From a spiritual perspective, the soul may be considered as the narrative of our spiritual story." (**Neurology and the Soul: Exploring the Story of Spiritual Dimension of Human Existence.** page 140, **Ibid).**

One of the key roles of the small spiritual communities could be to help the participants remove false states of consciousness that have proliferated in the modern world of social media and attain a new consciousness that connects us with the cosmic spiritual wholeness of the universe. S9ee **Hymn of the Universe and Mass on the World**: (Summary in **Google Books** online)

The concept of the Basic Christian Community **( Comunidad de base**) first emerged in Latin America in the 1960s under the influence of progressive theologians such as Gustavo Guttierez in Peru and Leonardo Boff.in Brazil. This movement embraced a social justice philosophy that threatened the established hierarchical structures of society in Latin America,

Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was one of the leading prelates in Latin America, emphasizing social justice, who became the target of political assassins in 1980. The Roman Catholic Church canonized him on October 14, 2018. In the past month Sister Dorothy Stang,

a Catholic nun working among the poor in Brazil has been recognized as the first ecological martyr in the Catholic church tradition. Pope Francis has stressed a movement of the Roman Catholic Church toward less hierarchical structures based on the theology of synodality in which everyone will have a voice in Church governance. Pope Francis has also embraced a theology of inclusivity in which no one is left outside the church or human community. Pope Francis has embraced a new model of socially engaged spirituality around the issues of climate justice and Interfaith dialogue, which are found in his key encyclicals , **Laudato Si** and **Fratelli Tutti**. The prevalence of disinformation and authoritarian ideologies in the contemporary world requires a new paradigm for adult spiritual development. The Basic spiritual community can clarify and promote a search for Truth in an era of the commercialization of many social platforms. Basic Spiritual communities can help participants to live more clearly in accord with Gospel values.

The leadership of small spiritual communities in the Western world is often led by women who have felt ostracized from prominent leadership roles in Roman Catholicism. These groups have had to find new philosophical and theological meanings within the new paradigm of the Basic Spiritual Community. Viktor Frankel's development of Logotherapy during World War II provides an existential context for how members of a historical, spiritual tradition can transform an outdated social and religious structure. The intimacy of the small spiritual human community allows freedom of expression and integration of new psychological and spiritual insights into the modern context of life in our emerging technological era. The patriarchal structures of the monotheistic religions have limited the roles for women in these religious bodies. Basic Spiritual or Familial Communities function more like a household, allowing men and women to interact more equally, challenging patriarchal assumptions. I have been a member of several small household communities for over 40 years. They have provided me with an existential context for the sharing of my life journey across a wide spectrum of human experiences and the challenges posed to my spiritual journey. Most of these communities encourage equal participation and leadership by women and men. For an analysis of the global scope of Small Christian Communities, see **The Catholic Review** for October 29, 2023, **Small Christian Communities prominent in Asia, and Latin America are seen as a model for the whole church.(OSV news online by Barb Fraze)**

The small spiritual community movement has grown exponentially in parts of Africa where Catholicism is thriving. Father Joseph Healey, MM, a Maryknoll missionary priest, has traced and supported the development of Small Christian Communities for over 50 years. ( Father Healey and Jeanne Hinton co-authored **Small Christian Communities Today, Orbis books, 2005)** On October 5, 2024, over 50,000 pilgrims came to a Marian Shrine in Subukia, Kenya to celebrate the Closing of the Golden Jubilee of Small Christian Communities (SCCs). Representatives of this movement of SCCs came from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Malawi, Tanzania, and Uganda. The Small Christian Community (SCC) movement in India has fostered Neighborhood Human Communities (NHCS) in the West Bengal region of India. Hundreds of these human communities have formed in West Bengal, India." The aim of NHCs is to promote neighborhood communities with people of all religions and castes and thus promote interreligious harmony." (**Small Christian Communities.org**)

Some of these small spiritual communities now exist in an online format. **(HTTP: Small Christian Communities.org**)This allows these communities to transcend local, regional, or national boundaries. For people who live in isolated regions and find it difficult to travel, the virtual online community can provide an important connection and support their mental and spiritual health. Many studies on the existential context of seniors indicate that loneliness is one of the most important factors in the decline of their mental and physical health. Infrequent social contact is often correlated with poor mental health, (**National Poll on Healthy Aging from the University of Michigan).** During the Pandemic the level of social isolation reached record levels in American society. "Particularly notable are the high rates of measure of loneliness among older adults with fair or poor physical health. Feelings of social

isolation and lack of companionship were reported by more than seven in ten with fair or poor physical health." (**National Poll of Healthy Aging, University of Michigan- Healthy Aging poll.org)**

In the nation of Kenya, we have established the first interfaith Small Spiritual Community with Christian and Muslim participants. This community meets monthly online via Zoom. It has helped to foster a sense of solidarity among Christians and Muslims in the coastal region of Kenya. This movement toward human solidarity fulfills the vision of Pope Francis in his encyclical, **Fratelli Tutti**. Recently one of the members of the small faith community was kidnapped and unlawfully returned to Turkey. Those of us in the USA are working for his release through our US Congress. Authoritarian political movements have continued to grow

throughout the world. These political ideologies seek to control or marginalize those movements they view as not under their domination. For this reason, small spiritual communities are less susceptible to control by political or ideological forces. They can enhance and preserve their identity in societies that are hostile to freedom of expression or alternative points of view.

The Basic Spiritual Community can be a vehicle for the integration of universal social values that transcend any one society or ethnic background. The Hizmet educational model, first developed in Turkey by Fethullah Gulen (now deceased), has spread to diverse parts of the world and continues to inspire his legion of followers. This model can facilitate the growth of basic spiritual communities that are interfaith models of solidarity and transcend any ideology. For humanity to prosper in the present ecological crisis, we need to see ourselves as members of one earth-bound community. The recent tragic fires in California require the formation of new forms of solidarity across a spectrum of needs created by these catastrophic fires. Other forms of ecological disasters are occurring around the globe without respect to religion, political affiliation or ideology. Basic spiritual communities can take diverse forms, but they are most successful when they are flexible, open, and organic. The collapse of rigid patriarchal structures is a sign for our times to reimagine the nature of identity on this planet earth. Science and Religion together can play a key role in this reconceptualization... Both Science and Religion need to adapt to the existential crises of our era. The Small Spiritual Community Movement can be considered a new platform for experimentation with new expressions for people of all religious traditions or universal human values. Given the challenges of secularization for all spiritual communities we need new ways to embody spiritual movements into more personalistic relationships and social expressions that transcend existing barriers to peace and solidarity.

This form of social and spiritual solidarity could be considered a new spiritual platform for scientific research on the role of spirituality in promoting both mental and spiritual health.

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