



# INFORMAL RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

**eKERK**

Jesus - sigbaar, voelbaar, verstaanbaar

## “People are leaving the Church!”<sup>1</sup>

There was a huge commotion when Rapport of 18 February 2012 reported that the NG Church had lost more than 20 000 members in one year. Must we believe it or not? Is there a reason for this decline in numbers? Does it mean South Africa has fewer believers? Or do the faithful find other ways of living out their faith than in the traditional church? These are a few of the questions being asked when we look at faith here in South Africa.

Numerous new informal and alternative religious communities are forming (or as we would like to call it “faith communities”) below the radar. Some of these informal communities exist separately from the traditional expressions of ‘being church’ (e.g. NG Church, Presbyterian Church, Reformed Church, Dutch Reformed Church, AGS, Methodist Church etc.). Such movements could be described as alternative because they find their own identity in the fact that they do not want to be another general church, or try to offer a “spiritual one stop service” to a broad religious community with diverse needs. It is noticeable that all leaders of these movements in our investigation emphasise that their faith communities are not in competition with existing churches. All these “faith communities” have a clear demarcated identity around one or two aspects of ‘being church’ that they feel God has called them for. Their identity continuously takes on the form of what they time and again describe as a few simple values or norms that finds expression in the distinctive organising of their meetings and their ‘being there’ in the word. Most of these “faith communities” have regular gatherings. This happens on Sundays or other days of the week.

A second group of “faith communities” that we identified in our investigation are those movements that regard and organise themselves as an additional option for people’s existing spiritual experiences. Meaning,

such “faith communities” have no intention to form an alternative grouping that lay claim to people’s exclusive membership. These are rather open, kingdom-of-God gatherings where everyone is welcome and everyone shares the community’s values. These kinds of faith communities are more informal movements that gather at random places and occasions to give organised expression to their understanding of their faith and specific way of ‘being church’. They don’t identify with the common denominator of: “I go to church on a Sunday” at all, but with a more missionary view of “I am the church where I am every day”.

*Why do these various faith communities exist? Is it the youth that can no longer live out their faith in the traditional church and feel much more at home in these communities? Put another way, is age a factor? Or is it the church politics that let people walk away from existing churches and establish their own faith communities? Are certain of these faith communities tired of the how the traditional church works with their contributions, or how effectively they work in the kingdom?*

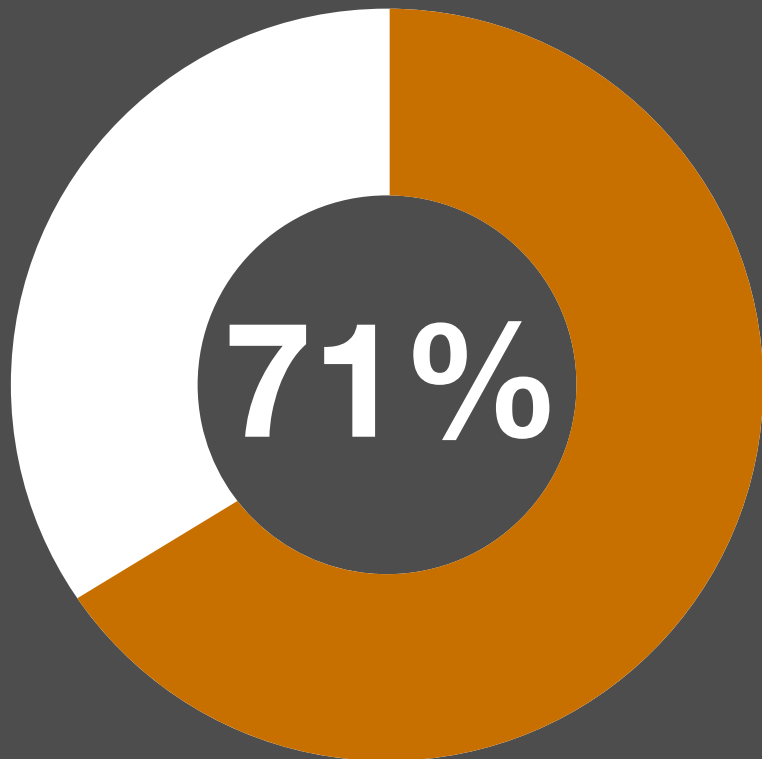
In this short study we shall look at the possible reasons for the development of new faith movements, or as we would like to call them FAITH COMMUNITIES, in the South African context.

In conclusion we want to find out if we can learn something from them. Do these faith communities have a purpose and legitimate new role and place if we look at the impact of the Kingdom of God?

**Welcome to the era of faith communities!**

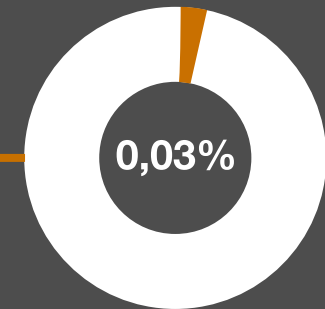
1. <http://www.rapport.co.za/Suid-Afrika/Nuus/NGK-lidmate-20-000-minder-in-een-jaar-20120218>

# IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT IS THE **ROLE** AND **FUNCTION** OF THE **INFORMAL** RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY? \*

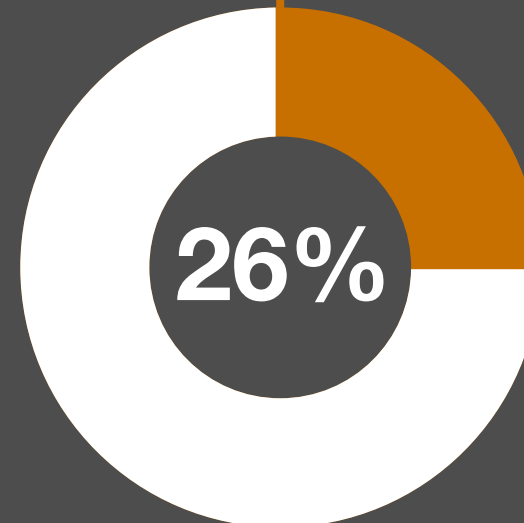


It **contributes to my spiritual journey**, but I still feel that it is important to take part at your local community.

My local community is solely responsible for my personal growth in my faith. Informal religious communities play **no significant role.**



This is my definition of church and **all that I need.**



\* This statistic is the result of a quick survey that was done during June/July 2012 by 85 Ekerk members

# LOCAL TRENDS

Numerous communities have a huge impact in local context. A number of faith communities have for the purposes of our short study been demarcated as active and present in Pretoria, Johannesburg and Cape Town. These faith communities are mainly regarded as alternatives (note: not antagonistic) to existing churches. A short description of these groupings follows.

## **3RD PLACE<sup>2</sup>**

3rd Place is a community in Hatfield, Pretoria area. Their primary premise is “love Jesus, love others”. Their values as faith community are genuineness, creativity and simplicity and they try to love God and each other by living these character qualities. What makes 3rd Place different from traditional churches is the fact that they welcome and accommodate people from a wide spectrum of groupings and convictions. Their openness is emphasised by the unique organisation of the social space where they gather weekly. This includes a graffiti wall, as well as simple wooden benches where people sit around tables with cups of coffee in their hands when they have the faith meetings. This simplicity is exactly the idea behind genuineness for 3rd Place. They want everyone to be genuine in this community. People are welcome as they are as part of their profession of faith and ethos to love God and each other without frills of religious formalities. In the gatherings of this community the Bible plays a crucial role, as it resonates strongly in the hearts of the leadership. They also place a high premium on creativity and the role of art. They encourage the use of art in their community through art exhibitions and the generous use of art in an interactive manner during their meetings.

## **OMNI**

Another faith community in Pretoria is OMNI. They gather on Church Square in the city centre of Pretoria every Sunday morning. Their aim is to make people who live and sleep in the vicinity of Church Square part of the community. They often bring food and clothes for those who regard Church Square as their home. This aim of this faith community is not to bring food and clothes to the “poor”. They just attend meetings and bring along clothes that they give away to those who need it and bring food that they eat with people in need. They invite everyone who would like to share their experiences and talk about the Bible (specific Bible verses are copied and distributed to everyone who attends). They eat with all the guests that attend their meeting.

## **KRUISPAD<sup>3</sup>**

Kruispad is a faith community that has a weekly gathering Hazeldene, Pretoria East. Compared to the more organised nature of traditional churches this faith community finds its identity in its gatherings on Sundays, as well as a Bible school and a youth cell group. Their dream is to be a faith community where Jesus Christ is the Head. However, there are not outreach actions or formal programme where “members” formally “reach the world”.

2. <http://3rdplace.co.za/love/>

3. <http://www.kruispadhazeldean.co.za/p/169379/kruispad-dna>  
<http://www.kruispadhazeldean.co.za/p/169278/droom-vir-die-gemeente>

The premise is that everyone involved is fulltime church and as such live out a testimony every day. Their services are informal, but are strongly based in the Word of God, and they have a large ministry to children and teenagers.

#### **DIALOOG<sup>4</sup>**

Dialoog is situated in Pretoria East. They are a faith community that finds its identity in a dialogic association with the Bible with a view of enabling Christians to bring about meaningful interaction with post-Christians and non-believers. They have regular meetings on Sundays where persons are encouraged to bring their sceptic friends with them. Dialoog creates a thought-provoking environment where the Bible is accepted undiluted and where believers are equipped to express their faith in a responsible manner, and if possible, defend within a post-Christian culture.

#### **ECHO<sup>5</sup>**

“Echo Youth Development is a care community that has a special focus on young people in need with little or no support basis.” They are a community consisting of 5 houses (of places of hope for young people in need). This community has a consulting room and social services at schools to support the children. They are much more than an aid organisation, and they have weekly group meetings, which also involves an ECHO Bash, and their alternative service is on Sundays.

4. <http://www.dialoog.co.za/index.php/wie-is-dialoog>

5. <http://www.echoyouth.co.za/>

6. <http://theicontribe.co.za/>

7. <http://enroute.org.za/>

8. <http://www.invia.org.za/>

9. <http://www.nuwehart.com/gemeenskap.htm>

#### **ICON TRIBE<sup>6</sup>**

The Icon Tribe is a faith community in the heart of Johannesburg. They try to bring people together in order to notice immediate need in their own context, and then to mobilise the church to address said need. The Icon Tribe do not regard themselves as a church, but as a launch platform for the church. They try to create opportunities in and around Johannesburg where people can make a difference.

#### **ENROUTE<sup>7</sup>**

Enroute is a faith community in Kempton Park. Their very DNA is an integral part of the faith community: they as faith community have been sent into the world, and they must make a difference where they have been sent to, the home and work, among friends and strangers, places of recreation and even in traffic. They gather on Sundays where they talk about where and how Jesus triune is busy in their lives, and how they as community exist of a variety of people.

#### **INVIA<sup>8</sup>**

This is a faith community in Cape Town which facilitates a journey of faith through dialogue and contemplative exercises. They endeavour to give each person who is part of Invia the potential to read the world that they are placed in, notice God in this world, empathise with the pain of the world and tell stories to each other.

#### **NUWE HART STIGTING<sup>9</sup>**

The Nuwe Hart Stigting is an initiative to support new faith communities by making a contribution by addressing morality (norms and values) in the South African society. Their aim is to make believers on grassroots level aware of the challenges to act with credibility and integrity. Their strategy is to have ministers and faith communities buy in for this purpose.



## **CMA<sup>10</sup>**

The CMA (Christian Motorcycle Association) has one purpose: it is to reach out to motor cycle riders or bikers. Bikers are sometimes classified as troublemakers. The CMA reaches out to them and tries to make Jesus's love visible to them.

## **HOUSE CHURCHES / CELL GROUPS**

The reason why house churches and cell groups are mentioned here is because of the fact that both these faith communities entail that people meet at a venue or home to grow spiritually as a small group. There are numerous cell groups that came into being through and part of a local church or faith community where the congregation encourages members to grow spiritually. They are encouraged to support each other pastorally and allow strong relationships to grow in their congregation. The aim of such cell groups is primarily to grow spiritually with regards to equipping themselves and Bible study. Many of these cell groups eventually form such an important aspect of an individual's spiritual life that it takes over the role of the local community in their lives.

In the same breath independent house churches also play a similar role in believers' lives. The reasons why house churches are established vary from "tired of the local congregation," to a cell group that functions more like a house church. The biggest difference between the house church and the cell groups is that house churches replace the role of the local congregation in totality. The house church's meetings are enhanced by singing, prayer and all the other aspects of a local congregation's service (here the differentiation does become difficult because some cell groups have this format).

10. <http://www.cmasa.org.za/>

# IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH

In today's digital, postmodern, post-Christian, globalised world<sup>12</sup> we can no longer reduce 'being church' or 'being believers' to membership at one congregation. In the modern era it was believed and we were taught by our parents (those of us that are millennials) that we have to get good grades in school; go to university immediately after school where we study in one field; finish our studies as quickly as possible so that we can join the world of work where we work for a company for the rest of our lives. This school of thought to a large degree belongs to the past. Today we live in an era of slashies<sup>13</sup> (people that have a lot of different part-time jobs) and Career Kaizan<sup>14</sup> (a constant improvement in live which means that people study various fields and obtain various degrees to improve their lives.) It is no longer about a career in a single company or field. In today's era quality of life is important. People easily change jobs and careers with a better quality of live in mind. This change is because of the new digital era that is characterised by new relationships and connections. It entails that believers today do not join a single church or local congregation and do everything at this congregation (in the sense of a one stop spiritual service).

It means that people attending church in the NG Church on Sundays are also involved in an outreach with the CMA on Saturdays. During the week they attend the Bible school at another faith community. The result of this trend of faith communities is that people do become involved with entities that they agree and resonate with. Believers will not get involved with faith communities if they do not concur with the way the congregation handles its budget. They might attend the services

because they concur with the preaching, but that does not mean that they will join as members and they are expected to become part of the Bible study groups etc. They would rather become part of another faith community's Bible school where they feel more at home.

Some of the spiritual leaders who start a faith community saw a gap in the ministry that the institutional congregation has not noticed or is working on. This spiritual leader is then not afforded the opportunity to be supported by the institutional church and they will 'easily' establish a faith community where these gaps are addressed. It can be to make more creative people part of the faith community or to create a place where the faith community is organised in such a way that they are encouraged to ask questions and talk to each other about issues of faith.

The reason why a faith community is established can be that the person is tired of the rules and regulations of the institutional church where the feeling is sometimes created that these rules and regulations want to limit the expansion and manifestation of the Kingdom to work according to their requirements. Certain of these faith communities therefore focus primarily on the expansion of the Kingdom, without the limitations of human rules and commissions and regulations. These faith communities then measure growth and impact by the awareness of the community in which they find themselves, and start seeing and acknowledging the impact of the faith community – that the faith community makes a real difference in the community.

12. Kyk na die boek van Nelus Niemandt, 2007, Nuwe Drome vir Nuwe Werklikhede: Geloofgemeenskappe in Pas met 'n Postmoderne Wêreld.

13. Dankie Dion Chang, The Future of Work. Fluxtrends briefing van 18 April 2012 te Melrose Arch, Johannesburg.

14. Dankie Dion Chang, The Future of Work. Fluxtrends briefing van 18 April 2012 te Melrose Arch, Johannesburg.



If we have a look at the day to day existence of these faith communities the majority of them is not committed to buildings, structures, positions, formularies, documents, hymns, fixed meetings, fixed venues, minister 'bond'. The reason is that they find their existence in who they are in God and what they learn from the Bible. Therefore the church building and the structures do not define the faith community, but who they as community in Christ. Faith communities see that certain traditional churches are trying to please everyone. They have Bible study for the teenagers, the young working people, the families with primary school children, with secondary school children and seniors, church services for children, teenagers and seniors etc. These faith communities realise that God has called them to love God's will by equipping people in the faith community to be church during the week when they walk out of the church building. It therefore isn't a user mentality that was created where everyone gets what they expect and want. They are there with one purpose only.

We are increasingly living in a world where we live in a fragmented manner. This entails that we do not join one institution or congregation and live out our total religious life there. The institutional church must not regard these faith communities as a threat.

It is an additional unique way that the church serves and spiritually teaches its members, and the expansion of the Kingdom of God should be the aim and purpose of every congregation and faith community. We as spiritual leaders should always keep in mind that God called each one of us to expand the Kingdom of God. The NG Church in your community and the faith community in your community does it equally well. Each one does it with the emphasis on something else.

We should always keep in mind to join hands over structures and commissions to persevere in this primary purpose.

## LAST QUESTIONS AND REMARKS

When one notices that informal faith communities and structured congregations work side by side in the Kingdom, it becomes much easier to differentiate where the various incarnations of 'being church' can learn from one another.

Here are a few statements about 'being human' from the average individual, who would rather join a variety of informal faith communities than a structured congregation:

1. I prefer to put together a collection of religious experiences myself, rather than joining one specific place.
2. I prefer to arrange my religious experiences around the world I live in and the things I am interested in.
3. I prefer to share my religious experiences with people that share my personality, talents and stage of life.
4. I do not want to limit my religious experiences to only one day, or even one specific day of the week.
5. I want to discuss, experience and live my faith on each level of my being.

Given the abovementioned statements, there are a few urgent questions that any structured congregation may ask themselves, in order to incorporate the trend of informal faith communities in their existing ministries:

1. Which informal faith communities already exist in our sphere of influence, and how can we support and expand it?
2. In our community, which interests and talents stand out that could be the basis for a possible future faith community?
3. How can we encourage members of congregation and members of our community to join certain faith communities, without expecting that they should join everywhere?
4. How can we catalyse new, informal faith communities without oppressing control measures?
5. Where can we collect all the stories and witnesses of established informal faith communities and tell them to others?



© Ekerk 2012

Research by Stephan Joubert, Pierre Engelbrecht & Mynhardt van Pletsen.

For more information about Ekerk Research, please visit [www.ekerk.org](http://www.ekerk.org). To have this content presented in the form of a seminar, please contact [pierre@ekerk.org](mailto:pierre@ekerk.org)

Thank You for reading!

