



# Transforming Church for North America's Evolving Spiritual Ecosystem

Mainline protestant denominations and local churches in Canada and the United States are facing a profound transition as more and more spiritually hungry individuals find ways of meeting their needs without joining traditional churches. Motivated by questions about institutional credibility and focus and by differences of opinion about what it means to follow Jesus and what practices best support spiritual growth, many spiritual seekers are finding or creating new ways of being together in Christian community. Increasingly, people are seeking religious or spiritual experiences that seem authentic in meeting them where they are.

As new forms of religious and spiritual practice are emerging, so are new forms of ministry. These changes signal the emergence of a new spiritual ecosystem, the recombinant church,<sup>1</sup> in which individuals are increasingly able to combine religious experiences, resources, and supports in customized ways that meet their needs and reflect their interests. Looking ten years out, it will no longer be necessary for an individual to adapt to the institutional church. Joining a traditional church might be the right answer for some people. But it might not be the only one, and engagement with that church might look quite different than church involvement typically looks today. For some people, a traditional church might not be part of the spiritual journey at all.

As individuals increasingly put the pieces of the spiritual ecosystem — some long-established and some new — together in new sequences, the recombinant church promises to adapt to each person on a spiritual journey, creating a diverse spiritual ecosystem that extends beyond the bounds of institutional constraints. This spiritual ecosystem has the potential to become a living system that can keep evolving as people's needs and the world that we inhabit change.

## Why Look Ahead?

Looking ahead ten years to explore changes in the spiritual domain can help mainline protestant denominations and local churches look beyond their current realities and envision where they might want to be in ten years. Taking this long view can help reframe current challenges and debates in the context of emerging trends and can help people make sense of changes that might at first seem destabilizing. By engaging in the practice of strategic foresight, mainline protestant denominations and local churches can explore strategic possibilities for contributing to the process of adaptive change while also effectively managing their organizations through it.

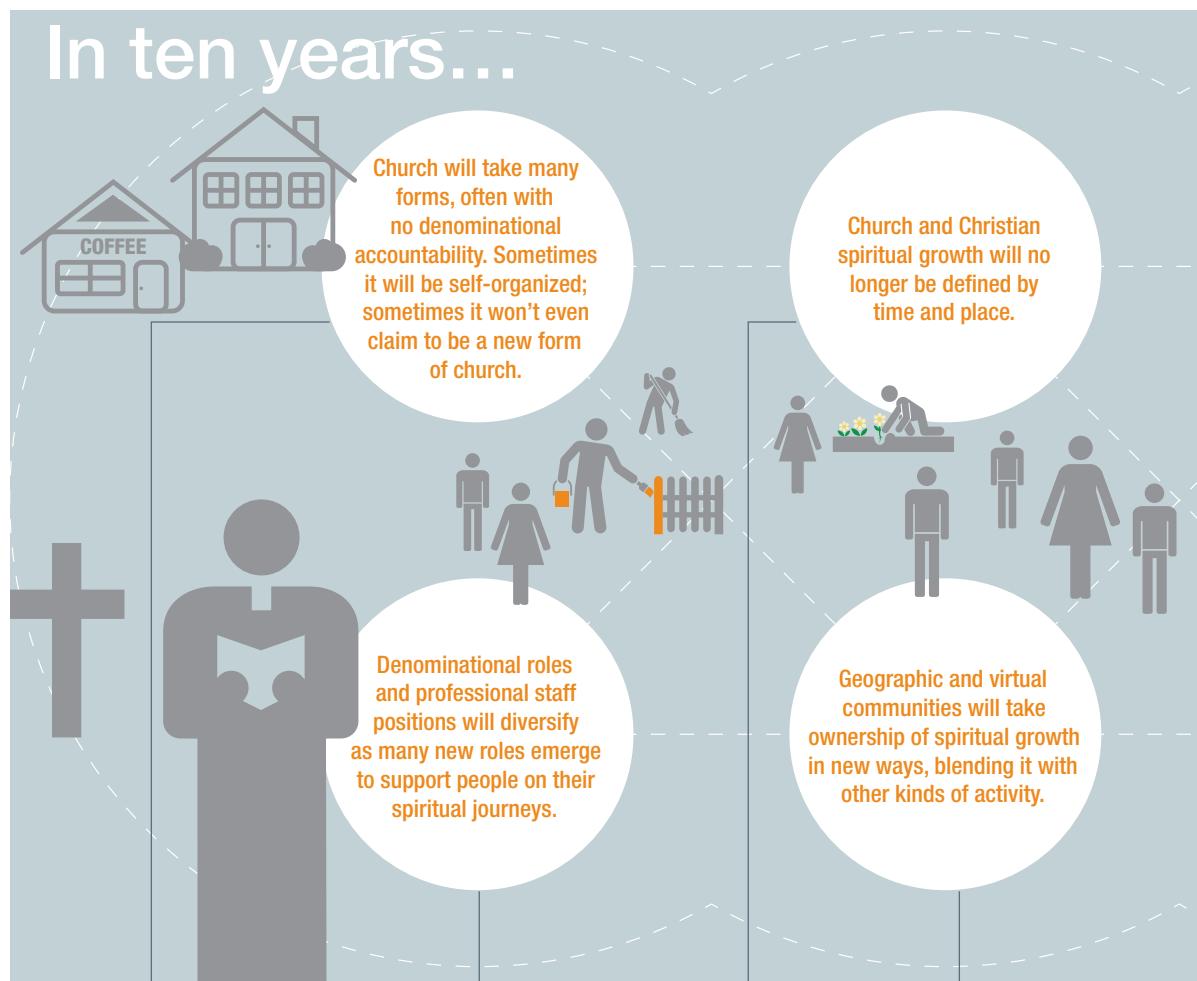
### About This Piece

This piece was written by Katherine Prince of KnowledgeWorks and Rev. George Meier of The United Church of Canada as part of his project exploring microfinance as a way of fostering experimental and entrepreneurial ministries outside traditional church governance structures. The project was funded by The Louisville Institute through a 2013 award under its Pastoral Study Project Grant program. For more information and a version of this piece with access to the embedded links, see [heartsrest.com/uprisings/post-christendom-stewardship-and-micro-finance](http://heartsrest.com/uprisings/post-christendom-stewardship-and-micro-finance).

<sup>1</sup> This phrase and much of the discussion of socio-cultural changes derive from KnowledgeWorks' ten-year forecast on the future of learning, *Recombinant Education: Regenerating the Learning Ecosystem* (2012). © 2015 Creative Commons License Attribution Share Alike 4.0 International, George Meier and Katherine Prince. Some rights reserved. To view a copy of this license, visit [creativecommons.org](http://creativecommons.org).

# Exploring the Expanding Spiritual Ecosystem

Informed by KnowledgeWorks' "A Glimpse into the Future of Learning," the forecast below describes an expanding spiritual landscape that in ten years promises to look very different from traditional religious structures. Each dimension of this forecast includes signals of change illustrating how the spiritual domain is beginning to evolve.



## signals of change

### **Silicon Valley Progressive Faith Community:**

A new church that started with no denominational affiliation or accountability but whose minister is trained and held accountable to a traditional protestant denomination.

### **Momastery:**

An AA- and Jesus-grounded blog with a related service organization that offers a place of deep connection and reflection and a vehicle for being of service in the wider community but which would never claim to be a church.

### **Glennon Doyle Melton:**

The founder and leader of Momastery is a New York Times bestselling author and a TEDx speaker; in recovery and unabashedly Jesus-centered, she tells the truth about herself, knows how to swear, and does not take herself too seriously.

### **Kelly Bean:**

This self-described "minister-at-large" has founded intentional communities and authored *How to be a Christian without Going to Church*.

### **Into the Wilderness:**

An online spiritual learning and meditation platform with pop-up opportunities for face-to-face gatherings, including worship, study, prayer, and meditation.

### **Center for Action and Contemplation:**

An online and physical gathering place led by Richard Rohr and offering spiritual resources, retreats, and programs.

### **Jacob's Well:**

A Vancouver, BC ecumenical Christian community seeking mutually transformative friendship with those on the margins of society and equipping others to do the same in their own contexts.

### **New Way Community:**

An inclusive intentional community located at the margins of Vancouver, BC, which welcomes people of all faiths and circumstances and is informed by a Christian lens.

Persons on a Christian spiritual journey will create individual spiritual playlists reflecting their interests, goals, and values.

Those spiritual playlists might include traditional churches but could also include a wide variety of digitally-mediated or place-based spiritual growth experiences.

Radical personalization will be the norm, with spiritual supports and approaches being tailored to each person regardless of setting.

A wide variety of digital and other networks, platforms, and content resources will support the spiritual journey.

As more people take it upon themselves to find solutions, a new wave of social innovation will help address resource constraints and other challenges.

Diverse forms of credentials, certificates, and reputation markers will reflect the many ways in which people support and pursue the spiritual journey.

**Spirituality and Practice:**

An Internet-based spiritual resource collection organized around 37 essential practices of the spiritual life, with links to spiritual coaches, workshop leaders, and retreat leaders.

**How to Be a Christian without Going to Church:**

This 2014 book by Kelly Bean, the founder of the Urban Abbey intentional community in Portland, Oregon, serves as a guide to alternative forms of Christian community.

**Redeem the Commute:**

A mobile app and website offering free courses on personal and spiritual growth as a gift for busy families living the commuting lifestyle.

**The Contemplative Society:**

A non-profit organization and online spiritual resource that offers trainings, workshops, retreats, and books by Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest and hermit ministering at the edge of her denomination.

**Heart's Rest:**

A for-profit tent ministry offering spiritual retreats and direction, along with a spiritual lending library in a local community gift store, that is led by an ordained minister outside denominational accountability structures.

**Darkwood Brew:**

An interactive web television program and spiritual gathering that follows progressive Christian principles and is quietly associated with a denomination through the affiliation of its hosts.

**Together Rising:**

This non-profit service offshoot of Momastery uses crowdsourcing and corporate partnerships to address community needs.

**Cahaba River Society Faith-Based Initiatives:**

A non-profit organization seeking to restore a river system in Alabama reached out to faith communities for support.

**A Religion of One's Own: A Guide to Creating a Personal Spirituality in a Secular World:**

This 2014 book by Thomas Moore provides a guide to creating authentic personal spirituality from a variety of sources.

**Fresh Expressions Course:**

This training course for pioneering ministries encourages fresh expressions of church coming alongside people on their personal journeys.

**Certificate of Spirituality and Social Change:**

This certificate offered by the Pacific School of Religion offers specialized training for the work of social changemaking for people from a variety of paths.

**Seminary of the Street:**

An alternative form of theological training focused on critiquing current systems and transforming community life by embodying God's love in the world.



# Creating the Recombinant Church

In this time of spiritual awakening, people are increasingly pursuing customized spiritual playlists that may or may not include church as we have traditionally known and defined it. The four pathways below suggest strategies that could help mainline protestant denominations and local churches contribute to transformational community life and the creation of the recombinant church.

## Spiritual Cultures

**Cultivate spiritual cultures that support individuals in pursuing authenticity and spiritual awakening.**

- Put individuals, not institutions, at the center.
- Foster interest-driven collaboration for supporting the spiritual journey.
- Cultivate cultures of innovation, information sharing, and continuous learning.
- Facilitate experience-based religious and spiritual experiences.
- Create the foundations and supports that will make radically personalized spirituality viable for everyone who seeks it.

## Organizational Structures and Roles

**Support the development of diverse spiritual structures and professional roles.**

- Simplify existing organizational structures and processes so as to free up attention and resources for theological work.
- Create new organizational structures, including new unit definitions and requirements, appropriate to the expanding spiritual ecosystem.
- Establish new governance structures that support a focus on the needs of individuals versus the maintenance of institutions.
- Develop professional roles appropriate to the expanding spiritual ecosystem.
- Create new professional preparation, certification, and development approaches appropriate to diverse spiritual support roles.
- Establish new accountability structures appropriate to the expanding spiritual ecosystem.
- Support other kinds of communities in developing vibrant spiritual structures (for example, use microfinance to support ministries outside traditional authority and accountability structures).

## Church Offerings

**Recast church offerings to extend beyond institutional boundaries and support individuals in pursuing customized spiritual journeys.**

- Develop, or partner to provide, spiritual resources for use in many settings.

- Develop new online and in-person community-based platforms for the spiritual journey.
- Curate resources for use in individuals' personal spiritual playlists, regardless of whether those individuals are members of the institutional church.
- Share and host practices that support a variety of pathways toward spiritual growth, partnering beyond the institutional church.
- Facilitate engagements wherein people go beyond the church walls to help each other and improve their communities.
- Expand and intensify collaboration with unaffiliated people to heal the world and enact love and justice.
- Support easily recognizable church communities while also contributing to the development of new forms of worship and community.

## Transformational Leadership

**Lead toward the creation of a flexible and radically personalized spiritual ecosystem.**

- Broker connections with people involved in spiritual practice in other settings.
- Guide the values of the established church in migrating to new forms.
- Take the lead in helping people develop shared definitions of, and approaches to, spiritual authenticity.
- Engage broad stakeholder groups in creating and extending transformational visions for the spiritual journey.
- Treat the spiritual journey as a shared community asset among many spiritual guides, coaches, directors, communities, traditions, and cultural contexts.
- Create new connections among those supporting the spiritual journey who teach and act in accord with the institution's values.
- Explore innovative ways of funding ministries and other spiritual supports, such as using microfinance to support new ministries beyond traditional denominational accountability structures.
- Use policy to spark innovation and remove barriers to meaningful spiritual growth.

The expanding spiritual landscape invites mainline protestant denominations and local churches to move beyond renewal, church plants, organizational efficiency, and implementation of known best practices and engage in adaptive change. Spiritual awakening in an age of authenticity calls for leaving the building, moving outside traditional authority and accountability structures, and being present with the Holy Spirit to find new ways of living the Gospel in all its fullness.