

Devoutly unchurched

There's a lot more to the 'spiritual but not religious' than Oprah and sunsets. Churchgoers, take note.

BY ANNE BOKMA

In an attempt to reach out to the ever-growing group that defines itself as “spiritual but not religious” (so popular it’s known by the acronym SBNR), First United in Salmon Arm, B.C., launched a three-month promotional campaign two years ago that included an ad asking, “Is there a church that gets being Spiritual but not Religious? Check us out.” It was targeted to those who think Christians are judgmental and expect you “to believe a bunch of stuff that’s unbelievable,” says Kim MacMillan, a member of the church and a consultant on the campaign. “Many of those perceptions don’t apply to us, but people don’t know that.”

Call it a case of “if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em.” The 2011 National Household Survey found that about one in four Canadians are “religiously unaffiliated,” up from just four percent in 1971. The United Church, with its emphasis on progressive social values and liberal theology, may be uniquely positioned to attract this “unchurched” demographic. MacMillan says it’s hard to tell if First United’s campaign was effective — the church’s membership is holding steady at 150 — but the effort did get some positive feedback. One woman wrote on the church’s website, “I am thrilled that one of the traditional religions is bold enough to make a distinction between spirituality and religion.”

Is it possible to entice the SBNR to church life? Or are there better ways to engage with them? Spiritual practices that appeal to the SBNR include drumming circles, pagan rituals, meditation, nature clubs, singing groups, yoga, pilgrimages, reiki, gratitude exercises, volunteering, retreats and self-help groups. In his book *A Religion of One’s Own: A Guide to Creating a Personal Spirituality in a Secular World*, Thomas Moore, a psychotherapist and former monk in New

England, describes this new individualized spirituality as one that relies on an internal compass rather than an authoritative faith. “Every day, I add another piece to the religion that is my own,” he writes. “It’s built on years of meditation, chanting, theological study and the practice of therapy — to me a sacred activity.”

Many church leaders have written off the SBNR as narcissists who’ve embraced the trinity of me, myself and I, along with their triumvirate of feel-good gurus: Eckhart Tolle, Deepak Chopra and Oprah. Rev. Lillian Daniel, a minister at the First Congregational Church in Illinois and author of *When “Spiritual But Not Religious” Is Not Enough*, ridicules those who, she claims, are inventing their own idea of God and creating their own forms of worship. “These people always find God in the sunsets,” she wrote in a 2011 blog post. “There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.”

It may be tempting for those in organized religions to scoff, but there’s no denying church attendance is dwindling while other forms of spirituality, however loosely defined they may be, are flourishing.

Over the next year, this column will explore how the SBNR are attempting to seek the divine in ways that have nothing to do with pews, pulpits and preaching. Does this group have something to teach

churchgoers about finding purpose, meaning and community? “It’s easy to get hung up on the fact that we need more people in our churches in order to pay the bills,” says MacMillan. “But maybe God doesn’t need us in that way anymore. Maybe our spiritual expression is taking on a whole new shape. We may need to morph into a new shape or, at the very least, be really listening to these folks.”

The growing tide of the SBNR proves one thing hasn’t changed — people remain eager for a sense of the spiritual on this mortal plane. The need to understand our human experience and gain a sense of inner peace hasn’t gone away. Nor has the desire for those moments of transcendence when people feel filled with something beyond themselves — whether that’s experienced in a vigorous drum circle, at a solstice celebration or, yes, even while admiring the sunset.

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