

**A Response to Bill Dogterom's "Living From the Inside Out:
The Necessity of Holistic Spiritual Formation for Mission in a Driven Culture"**

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Professor Bill Dogterom's paper in highlighting the challenges of journeying through the classic Threefold Path of the Christian journey from purgation through illumination to union¹ is relevant in light of the busyness of life in our Asian urban societies. Reflecting on the pervasive "hurry sickness" that resulted in a penchant for convenience, he makes a compelling argument that discipleship in church has consequently been reduced to mere adherence of beliefs or active participation in alleviating societal ills, bypassing the need "to address the individual and systemic brokenness that has produced them."² He added that the neglect, or may I suggest, *the lack* of understanding of spiritual formation has led Christians and even ministers to go astray from the original intent of "work[ing] *from* identity rather than *to* work *for* identity."³ Without a healthy image of God as our source or foundation, the urban fast-paced demand and competitive culture will inevitably overwhelm us into abuse, restlessness, and exhaustion to the detriment of our relationships and spiritual lives.

This is not a biased claim. Adding on his findings from the Cigna Healthcare study,⁴ Professor was also perceptive in recognizing the urban "pathological busyness, distraction, and restlessness as major blocks."⁵ He suggested the incorporation of "Sabbath keeping", "the daily office", and "formative Scripture reading along with relational prayer" in our daily schedule as the spiritual act of "redeeming the time" or "practicing the presence."⁶ These spiritual practices that make us more aware of the need for reliance and the Spirit's formative work in our daily

¹ Bill Dogterom, "Living From the Inside Out: The Necessity of Holistic Spiritual Formation for Mission in a Driven Culture", paper presented at Asia Pentecostal Summit, July 22–26, 2026, 1.

² Dogterom, "Living From the Inside Out," 2.

³ Dogterom, "Living From the Inside Out," 6.

⁴ Renald Loh, "S'poreans More Stressed Than Global Average; 16% Say Their Stress Is "Not Manageable": Study," Channel News Asia, updated November 24, 2023, accessed May 30, 2026, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/sporeans-more-stressed-global-average-16-say-their-stress-not-manageable-study-5603471>.

⁵ Dogterom, "Living From the Inside Out," 9.

⁶ Dogterom, "Living From the Inside Out," 10–17.

activities, can simultaneously bridge the need for discipleship and address the challenges driven by the relentless and demanding culture. In summary, Professor Dogterom's strong argument that Christians must consider the value of inner life transformation and its practices is pertinent and critical.

The challenge I want to draw attention to in this response is how then Asian Pentecostal churches can effectively bring this critical observation from an awareness to an adaptive response that practically inspires believers to embrace spiritual formation as a lifestyle of discipleship. Professor Dogterom has rightly defined that discipleship is essentially “transformation into the likeness of Christ.”⁷ Christlikeness is not just conformity to an abstract ideal but to Jesus who took on flesh and gives us a model and way of life for us to follow. This points to the theological ground of praxis for spiritual formation.

The adoption of spiritual formation within Asian churches is not a foreign concept. Home to a rich diversity of religious traditions and philosophical systems, many of which have long embraced contemplative and ascetic practices as pathways to psychological well-being and inner transformation. In this sense, inviting Asian Christians to engage in intentional spiritual practices for the purpose of personal growth and transformation is likely to resonate deeply within the cultural consciousness of the region. The familiarity of such disciplines within Asian culture makes the call to spiritual formation both acceptable and meaningful for Asian Christian communities. However, this cultural receptivity may present some challenges that would require theological thoughtfulness. Because spiritual formation occupies a conceptual space that can easily be conflated with broader Eastern traditions of self-cultivation and contemplative practice, its introduction into Asian church life must be approached with careful theological intentionality.

⁷ Dogterom, “Living From the Inside Out,” 3.

As Curt Thompson, in his book *the Anatomy of the Soul* explains, “engaging in spiritual disciplines simply for the sake of becoming more mindful is not the equivalent of having the mind of Christ. Plenty of people who are drawn to the idea of mindfulness will not necessarily like the idea of a King who demands their uncompromising allegiance.”⁸ It is against this backdrop that I would argue there are two important concerns that Asian churches must address as they seek to promote and practice Christian spiritual formation. If left unexamined, these concerns risk undermining both the theological integrity and the transformative potential of the formational journey.

First, in a success-oriented urban Asian cultural landscape, the promotion of wholeness through spiritual disciplines can be interpreted in functional or utilitarian terms: as a means to enhance personal growth, resilience and vocational effectiveness. This perspective is not inherently wrong, or without merit, but church leaders nevertheless must remain cautious and vigilant. If spirituality is defined in terms of its utility or usefulness, then spiritual practices such as Sabbath keeping, the Daily Office, and centering prayer can become instruments of enhanced productivity and performance rather than practices that nurture communion with God and openness to divine love or the means of grace. In this regard, a concern arises from the broader cultural landscape in which Asian Pentecostal churches are situated. With the proliferation of Eastern wellness traditions and philosophies—such as yoga meditation, Confucian self-cultivation, and various forms of folk spirituality—that also promise psychological well-being and inner balance, the introduction of Christian spiritual formation practices risks becoming subsumed within this wider set of transformative frameworks. The theological distinctiveness of Christian formation, with its focus on Spirit-empowered personal transformation, may thus be

⁸ Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships* (SaltRiver, 2010), 199.

rendered implicit rather than explicit—hidden by its surface-level similarities with non-Christian contemplative and self-cultivation traditions. This conflation produces a serious ecclesiological problem because it risks diluting the characteristic Christocentric and pneumatological foundations upon which Christian discipleship and spiritual formation are built.

The essence of spiritual formation is primarily centered not on the enhancement of self but on the denial of self, as expressed by Jesus in Luke 9: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” (v. 23) This reorientation is not primarily a therapeutic achievement but a participatory one. The disciple does not manage the self into submission but yields it, through cooperation with the Spirit and an increased awareness of His transforming work of grace (c.f. Eph. 4:22-24). Therefore, spiritual formation, rightly understood, does not just equip the self to cope with the pressures of existence from a position of greater inner strength; rather, it dismantles the inner self's claim to sovereign agency, creating the conditions in which Christ truly becomes Lord. However, in losing or purging our autonomous selves, Scripture informs us that only then, we become open to the love and lordship of Christ to surrender ourselves wholeheartedly, set free from the need and insistence of our controlled outcome. As Jesus’ loving claim for us states, “whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.” (Matt. 16:25)

Without an intentional Biblically grounded discipleship, the increasing pressures of urban life—characterized by pervasive busyness and psychological stress—render Asian Christians vulnerable to modern wellness frameworks that superficially blend Christian contemplative language while drawing their metaphysical roots from Eastern mysticism, pantheism, or the so-called “law of attraction.”⁹ Such blended spiritual remedies may offer the semblance of relief, yet

⁹ Douglas C Youvan, “Integrative Theologies: Exploring the Convergence of Pantheism, Christianity, and DEI Principles in Contemporary Religious Practices,” May 2024,

they remain fundamentally void of the Christoform life that authentic Christian spiritual formation entails. As such, within Asia densely pluralistic, multi-religious spiritual landscape, the call to spiritual formation must be deliberately and explicitly Christocentric instead of being assimilated into the broader cultural collection of self-cultivation and self-improvement traditions, ensuring that the call to inner transformation is uniquely pneumatological, because only the Spirit can change us into Christ's image (2 Cor. 3:18).

Second, a significant challenge to the call for spiritual formation is the tendency for churches to approach it as a technical problem rather than an adaptive one.¹⁰ In response to the pressures of busyness and the difficulty of sustaining spiritual disciplines, church leaders may lean towards technical solutions such as time-management strategies, curated ministry programs, or organizational frameworks with spiritual directives targeting mainly on enhancing the individual's decision-making and prioritization. While these interventions may provide short-term result, they often fail to address the deeper issues of desire, identity, and spiritual transformation that lie beneath the struggle. As a result, spiritual formation risks being reduced to a matter of measuring efficiency and behavior modification, rather than embracing the practices as a means of grace, drawing the believers into a lifelong process of inner renewal and conformity to the image of Christ. As Heifetz and Linsky observed in their book *Leadership on*

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/DouglasYouvan/publication/380467336_Integrative_Theologies_Exploring_the_Convergence_of_Pantheism_Christianity_and_DEI_Principles_in_Contemporary_Religious_Practice/links/663e0d4006ea3d0b74585c68/Integrative-Theologies-Exploring-the-Convergence-of-Pantheism-Christianity-and-DEI-Principles-in-Contemporary-Religious-Practice.pdf. An example this paper proposed is the integration of Pantheism into Christian doctrine and presents it as an opportunity for people to adopt a more inclusive worldview such as collective salvation and a wider inclusive understanding of divine justice such DEI concept.

¹⁰ Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Change* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2017), 14. Embracing spiritual formation practices into our daily living requires adjustment, new experiments with spiritual practices that suit our lifestyle and schedule, and new discoveries. Distinguishing Technical from Adaptive Challenges: Technical solution approach—apply the organization's current know-how or repertoire and is mostly initiated and addressed by the leadership or established hierarchy. Adaptive solution approach—requires new learning and creativity while the people are also empowered to solve the problems.

the Line, “the sustainability of change depends on having the people with the problem internalize the change itself.”¹¹

Drawing from the adaptive change strategy framework,¹² I would suggest that church leaders who desire to see spiritual formation become a way of life—both institutionally and individually—must begin by identifying the practical challenge and its ecclesiological implementation. This requires contextualizing the approach in a way that speaks directly to the general Asian cultural mindset that equate busyness with virtue and identity. In many Asian societies, the cultural values of collectivism and filial responsibility have historically shaped many Asian mindsets, including Asian Christian communities, to emphasize diligence, achievement, and upward social mobility for the benefit of the individual, family, and society. Within this cultural framework, becoming virtuous is not pursued through withdrawal from the world, but through diligence and intentional engagement within it. This implicit cultural orientation means that popular Western models of spiritual formation—which often assume private withdrawal or disengagement as the primary mode of practice—may feel too idealistic and culturally disconnected as a withdrawal from relational responsibilities, and could be quietly resisted even by those who are otherwise open to spiritual formation. This is not to suggest that the classical spiritual disciplines are irrelevant in the Asian context. Contextualization is not a barrier to genuine formation—it is a necessary condition for its genuine reception. It is at this point that ecclesiology is crucial. The answer to the adoption of spiritual formation as a way of life is not a better curriculum delivered individually but the practice of the disciplines discerned together as a community of the Spirit. Without the need for accountability and the sharing of our

¹¹ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 13.

¹² Peter G. Northouse et al., *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (SAGE, 2026), 412. Part of the six leader behaviours that play a major role in the adaptive process is to identify adaptive challenges and give the work back to the people. These two points are what I am proposing in this paper.

lives with another, our own personal practices may lead to a privatized, individualized understanding of spirituality that makes us more self-centred instead of others-centred¹³.

Therefore, the church becomes the essential environment in which healthy spiritual formation can occur, as modelled for us in Acts 2 (v.42-47). This corporate perspective of formation resonates in Asian cultures because it coincides with the relational anthropology of collectivist and familial values. Through the collective spirituality formed by the community, it assumes a self that is constitutively entrenched in others and molded by its participation into the wholesome image of Christ.

A compelling adaptive example of this can be seen in City Harvest Church, Singapore, where the introduction of spiritual formation and its practices were met with sustained enthusiasm when church leadership chose to create formation communities rather than programs.¹⁴ By leaning into the Asian cultural value of the relational self, the church facilitated formation practices together—through regular silent retreats, conducted in small groups and among ministry teams, facilitated by experienced spiritual directors. Within the adaptive change framework, this is the central piece of the need to create a holding environment where people can feel secure as they navigate the adaptive process of change and challenge.¹⁵ Instead of simply passing on the directives to individuals or over the pulpit, participants were able to discover their true selves before God as a community, as well as personally experience how these practices enriched their relationships and contributed to their own human flourishing. At the same time, in

¹³ M. Robert Mulholland and Ruth Haley Barton, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (InterVarsity Press, 2016), 126.

¹⁴ According to CHC's internal records, the number of participants in their Silence & Solitude retreats from 2024 to 2026 are 218, 539, and 459 respectively.

¹⁵ Northouse et al., *Leadership*, 412. Central to adaptive work is awareness of the need for creating a holding environment, and skill in creating holding environments when needed. A holding environment is a space created and maintained by adaptive leaders where people can feel secure as they confront and resolve difficult life challenges.

those meetings when leaders modelled vulnerability by openly shared their own struggles and acknowledged the need for Sabbath, silence, and detachment, it created a permission structure for emotional vulnerability and authenticity—promptly dismantling the honour-shame culture that often inhibit formation in Asian cultural settings. Over time, with more participating in these group formation activities, those who had personally benefited from these communal formation experiences began to explore and practice various spiritual disciplines on their own as a lifestyle. This outcome powerfully affirms the adaptive change principle of “giving the work back to the people”—demonstrating that sustainable, lasting transformation is most effectively evoked not through top-down programming or enforced directives, but through adapting and empowering individuals to own their personal formational journey and making space for the Spirit to shape them.

In closing, as mentioned above, Asian Pentecostal churches, with its emphasis on individual union with God and collective spirituality, are uniquely and opportunely positioned to bring spiritual formation into the mainstream of Christian life and practice. Their history in contextualization, their communal structures, and their vibrant experiential worship culture¹⁶ form qualities that make the reception and embodiment of spiritual formation not only possible, but sustainable. The church today stands indebted to the Desert Fathers of the early church, as well as to the prominent Western practitioners and theologians who have faithfully preserved and transmitted this vital tradition to the broader body of Christ. Asia—home to the world's largest

¹⁶ Terence Chong and Daniel Goh, “Asian Pentecostalism: Revivals, Mega-Churches, and Social Engagement,” in *Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia*, eds. Bryan S. Turner and Oscar Saleminak (Routledge, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315758534-39>, 403. Asian Pentecostalism involves “indigenizing and transnationalizing ... spearheaded by prophetic preachers and ... contextual theologies grappling with specific social and cultural conditions... and at the same time promotes close discipling and disciplining in small groups.” Taken together, these three features — contextual instinct, communal structure, and experiential worship—position Asian Pentecostal churches as uniquely suited for the kind of adaptive, contextualized spiritual formation this paper proposes.

megachurch pastors and marked by rapid economic growth and expanding social influence—stands in critical need of this truth for the sake of its long-term spiritual health and gospel faithfulness. The sheer scale and rapid growth of the Asian church’s influence demand a corresponding depth of interior formation. Without it, growth in size and influence risks outpacing growth in Christlikeness. Moreover, Mulholland’s insistence that spiritual formation is never intended to cultivate a privatized or individualistic religion—but rather to shape us for other’s sake¹⁷—resonates profoundly with Asia’s deeply held values of the relational self and communal belonging. Spiritual formation, if properly understood, is not a retreat from community but a deepening and healthy engagement for it.

Professor Dogterom’s closing analogy of Mary and Martha is meaningful—reminding us that both gifts, from the West and the East, are needed, each arising from and contributing to an ever-deepening intimacy with Jesus. The contemplative depths of the Western tradition, with its emphasis on *theosis*, and the relational, contextual vitality of the Asian church are complementary offerings that we can lay at the feet of Jesus for his glory and for the sake of others.

¹⁷ Mulholland and Barton, *Invitation to a Journey*, 30. “All of God’s work to conform us to the image of Christ has as its sole purpose that we might become what God created us to be in relationship with God and with others.”