

# SPIRITUALITY: THE SOUTH SEA EVANGELICAL CHURCH IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

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## INTRODUCTION

During the last ten years or so, the South Sea Evangelical church (SSEC) in the Solomon Islands has been going through difficult trials and hardships. The tension created by the fighting between the Guadalcanal<sup>1</sup> and Malaita<sup>2</sup> people from 1998 to 2003 is one example. In that occurrence, the unity of the church was severely shaken, and the church itself was almost brought to its knees. The confusion brought about by the movement, closely connected with the South Pacific Prayer Assembly movement,<sup>3</sup> is another example of an incident causing disunity and conflict within the church. The latest example is the needless perplexity triggered by the inception of a new movement, known as “the Kingdom Movement” into certain churches in Malaita and Honiara,<sup>4</sup> a little less than two years ago.

The SSEC has had its own spiritual hurdles over the years, but these latest experiences show that spiritual solidarity and, to a certain extent, leadership credibility within the church, are somewhat lacking. The apparently immature Christianity, demonstrated by many SSEC members

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<sup>1</sup> Guadalcanal is one of the biggest of the islands within the Solomon Islands. It is very much the centre of development in the country, and is where the nation's capital is located.

<sup>2</sup> Malaita is also one of the biggest islands within the Solomon Islands. About 47 per cent of the total members of the SSEC come from this island.

<sup>3</sup> The movement was instigated by Revd Michael Maeliau from North Malaita.

<sup>4</sup> Honiara is the capital of the Solomon Islands.

(including leaders), in response to the recent occurrences, seriously brings into question the level of spiritual maturity the church has attained over the years. It is a sure sign that, although the church has been steadily progressing, in terms of its spiritual development, there is still a lot of room for improvement.

This article will attempt to evaluate the spiritual progress of the SSEC, up to this point, and suggest ways it can achieve maximum spiritual growth, in the light of what the Bible says about spiritual life, and its growth to maturity. To do this, the article will introduce the historical progression and spiritual upbringing of the SSEC, and identify where the church is today. It will also examine where the church should have been in its spiritual development. Furthermore, the article will determine the causes of spiritual immaturity within the church, and recommend practical steps it should take, in order to achieve the spiritual status it ought to have achieved by this time. It is the aim of this article to help the SSEC re-examine its own spirituality, in the light of what the scripture says about the subject matter, and to take the necessary actions, in order to move itself away from what appears to be a false Christianity, existing within the church today.

## **1. HISTORICAL PROGRESSION**

### **THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

During the 19th century, many people from nations around the Pacific were taken to work in plantations in Australia, New Zealand, and some other countries. Many white men engaged in what was known as “blackbirding”, forcing people to work in sugar cane, pineapple, and coconut plantations in exchange for food, clothes, guns, money, and other valuables. Oliver states that many of those people were actually kidnapped, while others went of their own choice.<sup>5</sup> Among those who were taken to work in Queensland, Australia, were a number of Solomon Islanders who were contracted to work for a number of years in a sugar cane plantation in Fairymead. By the time these men were due to return

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<sup>5</sup> Douglas L. Oliver, *The Pacific Islands*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1951, pp. 92-94.

home, some of them had become Christians, and began to share their faith with their own people. Two of these men were Peter Abuofa, of North Malaita, and Samson Jacko, from Guadalcanal. Both returned home about 1894.<sup>6</sup> This simple sharing of faith by these men led to what is known as the South Sea Evangelical Church in the Solomon Islands today.

## BIRTH AND DEVELOPMENT

The SSEC is an offshoot of a mission organisation known as “Queensland Kanaka Mission” (QKM), formed in Bundaberg, Queensland, in 1886. The QKM initially grew out of a Sunday evening class program started by Florence Young in 1882, with ten of the kidnapped plantation workers and a house-girl.<sup>7</sup> In time, many of the workers, including some Solomon Islanders, became Christians, and decided to return to their own people to share their newfound life with them. Not without many difficulties, the gospel then began to spread across the Solomon Islands. This led to the formation of the Solomon Islands branch of the QKM, in January 1904, known as the “South Sea Evangelical Mission” (SSEM), based in Sydney, Australia. The body, which was made up mostly of missionaries, was to oversee missionary tasks, as the gospel continued to spread, and local churches were planted across the islands.<sup>8</sup>

The idea of having the indigenous people of the Solomon Islands take on the full responsibility for running their own church was behind the establishment of the SSEM. This came to fruition in March, 1964, at Ambu, in Malaita when a total of 53 delegates from around the islands met together with a group of missionaries, for the first time, for a week-long conference. During the conference, a constitution for an indigenous church was adopted and inaugurated under the name “South Sea Evangelical Church (SSEC)”<sup>9</sup>. By this time, about 300 spiritually-vibrant local churches had been established across the islands.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Alison Griffiths, *Fire in the Islands*, Wheaton IL: Harold Shaw, 1977, pp. 27, 77.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Florence S. H. Young, *Pearls from the Pacific*, London UK: Marshall Brothers, nd, p. 142.

<sup>9</sup> Griffiths, *Fire in the Islands*, p. 165.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

## **SPIRITUAL UPBRINGING**

The SSEC is coloured with a beautiful spiritual heritage, brought about by a number of factors, some of which are the influence of missionaries, revival experiences, and sound theological teaching, through the establishment of Bible schools within the islands. This section is included here to validate the main argument of this article – that the SSEC should have progressed further in its spiritual growth than it has to date.

### ***Missionary Input***

Missionaries played a very important role in the spiritual development of the SSEC. Before its inauguration, the church was governed by missionaries, through the SSEM base in Australia. Their tasks included administering the process of becoming a member of the church, and setting standards regarding practices and behaviours within the church. This vital missionary support moved the church forward, as it helped to shape the needed neutrality and effective governance of the church as it proceeded towards an indigenous denomination.

Much of what the missionaries introduced and established within the SSEC, especially with regard to doctrines, rules, and regulations concerning church life and order, set the right footing for the church to move away from its primitive state to a much higher standard of spirituality. For example, one will hardly find a case of polygamy within the SSEC today, because of its outright condemnation by the church from the outset. The same is true of the use of alcoholic substances, and practices that have strong animistic connections, such as honouring the dead, and the use of traditional magic and charms. Syncretism may be seen within the SSEC churches in some form, even today. However, it is clear that the SSEC, as a result of what God has been doing within the church through the missionaries, condemns almost all forms of practices that are syncretistic in nature.

### ***Revival Experiences***

Several years after its inauguration, the SSEC went into new heights, in its spiritual experience, with a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the infant church. This happened in August, 1970, after much prayer and deep

desire in the hearts of the church's newly-elected leaders, and Christians throughout the islands, to see spiritual transformation take place within the church. Beginning from Malaita, revival quickly spread throughout the islands, and, through the mighty working of the Holy Spirit, many people were convicted of the spiritual condition of their lives, and were able to make a clear decision for the Lord for the first time. A brand new outlook on life dawned, as many were restored from the power and fear of demons, through the ministry of prayer, and clear and powerful teaching of the Word of God. Reconciliation among individuals and groups took place, and a wave missionary movement was evident throughout the islands. This resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of people coming into the church.<sup>11</sup>

Revival also added greater meaning to the Christianity of the then-existing members of the church, many of whom were still living in a Christianity deeply mixed with their animistic religion. It is obvious that the SSEC had moved a long way from its primal state, as a result of continuous revival, and in-depth working by the Holy Spirit within the lives of its members. Consequently, the church today is not the same, numerically and spiritually, as it was 40 years ago.

### ***Establishment of Theological Institutions***

One of the vital developments that took place, as the SSEC endeavoured to attain spiritual formation, was the establishment of theological schools during the early 1960s, or earlier in some of the islands. Theological training has long been the greatest need of the SSEC as a young church. These institutions played a major role in the contextualisation of Christianity into the local culture by training leaders and local pastors, both in their roles of leading the church, and preaching and teaching the Word of God in the way that people could understand and apply to their local context.

Onepusu Institute, established in Malaita in 1905, was one of the first schools run by the missionaries. The institution taught the pastors how to govern the church, handle its finances, and helped to keep the rapidly-

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 169-176.

expanding number of local churches together.<sup>12</sup> Over the years, more Bible schools were established; some being upgraded to institute level. Onepusu Institute was elevated to college level, offering a Diploma in Ministry for pastors, and a Certificate in Women' Ministry for women, to cater for the changing demands of the fast-growing church. In giving several reasons for the continuance of the revival movement in the Solomon Islands, Strachan made the following comments:

Firstly, from its beginning, the church (SSEC) had been steeped in God's Word. The vital place of the Bible in the life of the Christian has been stressed, through to the present day. Early missionaries concentrated on producing simple Bible literature. Students were taught to read from books with a Bible background, and Bible study books were written to form the basis of messages given at Sunday services and daily Bible classes. These studies, with later additions, laid a firm foundation for the church. When revival came, national leaders were able to give a strong scriptural lead. This has largely accounted for the continuance of the movement.<sup>13</sup>

This quotation shows that the Word of God was an important component of the spiritual upbringing of the SSEC. To a certain extent, this is true of the church today. In fact, in the SSEC's almost 120-year history, God has been blessing the church in tremendous ways.

## **2. SPIRITUAL GROWTH POSSIBILITIES WITHIN THE SSEC**

Taking the above line of reasoning into consideration, the question that follows is: where is the SSEC today, with regard to spiritual growth?

### **THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF SPIRITUAL LIFE AND ITS GROWTH TO MATURITY**

In order to make a fair assessment of what should have been possible today, in terms of spiritual growth within the SSEC, it is important to begin

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 153-154.

<sup>13</sup> George Strachan, *Revival: Its Blessing and Battles*, Lawson NSW: Mission Publications of Australia, 1984, pp. 2-3.

this section by dealing with what the Bible says about spiritual life and its growth to maturity.

### ***Spiritual Life***

The word “spiritual”, according to *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, “refers to non-material things, including a spiritual body (1 Cor 15:44–46), and spiritual things, as distinct from earthly goods (Rom 15:27; 1 Cor 9:11)”.<sup>14</sup> Essentially, “spiritual life”, as it is used in the Christian sense, has to do with God, and His ultimate purpose for one’s life. According to Keating, it is “the sum total of responses, which one makes to what is perceived as the inner call of God”.<sup>15</sup> This definition by Keating is probably the best description of spiritual life, and implies two things.

Firstly, spiritual life, as indicated by the term “spiritual”, is an “inner” relationship with God, meaning that it is something of the heart. Contrary to those who are not Christians, every believer in Christ has an inner relationship with God. This speaks of the relationship that believers have with Him, through Christ, not only as His own chosen people (Eph 1:4), but also as His children (Gal 3:26). This relationship is important, because believers have all that God has in store for His children (Gal 4:7). This enables them to live a life that is worthy of His calling and purpose for their lives (Eph 4:1). Without this relationship, there is no such thing as “spiritual life” in Christianity.

Secondly, this spiritual life does not confine itself only in the inner being of a person; it also shows itself in his/her behaviour towards other people, and the world around. This relationship is actually the basis of all Christian relationships (1 John 4:20-21). So, the Christian life, in this respect, is actually an inner, devoted relationship with God, showing itself out in godly relationships with other people, and in living for His glory in this sinful world (1 John 5:3-4). Thus, a spiritual person may be defined as someone who has a relationship with God in Christ, and seeks to make

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<sup>14</sup> “Spiritual”, in *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (1995), np, Ronald F. Youngblood, ed., Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, [CD-ROM]; Available from the Logos Library System Software.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Keating, *The Heart of the World*, New York NY: Crossroad, 1981, p. 13.

God's call and purpose the centre of the daily choices and activities of his/her life.

### ***Spiritual Growth***

One of the truths about spiritual life is that it is a process. This means that it begins at a certain point and grows to certain levels of spirituality. Schaeffer makes it clear that "it is impossible even to begin living the Christian life, or to know anything of true spirituality, before one is a Christian".<sup>16</sup> The Bible makes it clear that the Christian life begins when a person puts his trust in Christ and accepts Him into his life through faith.<sup>17</sup> In discipleship, this is called "conversion", and, according to Malins, it makes up only five percent of one's entire Christian life. The other 95 percent is the process of spiritual growth, known as discipleship.<sup>18</sup> This section of the article is concerned with the second and larger portion of the Christian life.

What is involved in spiritual growth? Firstly, God is the cause of all spiritual growth. One of the passages that clearly speaks of growth in Christianity in the New Testament (NT) is 1 Cor 3:7. Paul says, "The one who plants and the one who waters really do not matter. It is God who matters, because He makes the plant grow" (GNB).<sup>19</sup> In this regard, Gill says, "He gives them their abilities, assists them in the exercise of their gifts, makes their ministrations useful, and He has, as He ought to have, all the glory."<sup>20</sup> Since God Himself is the source of spiritual life, He is essentially the One who can cause it to grow, because, out of Him, comes all the essentials for Christian growth (Gal 5:22-23). As Richards puts it, "God is the source and initiator of each positive quality in the believer."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality*, London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1972, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> John 5:24; 6:40; Acts 16: 31; Rom 1:17; Gal 2:16.

<sup>18</sup> Ian Malins, "Studies in Discipleship Part 1: Come Follow Me" (class notes, CLTC, 1977), p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> All scripture quotations are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>20</sup> John Gill, *John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible* (1690-1771), [CD-ROM]; Available from e-Sword Software.

<sup>21</sup> Lawrence O. Richards, *A Practical Theology of Spirituality*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1987, p. 29.

According to this statement, no spiritual growth can take place without God's divine provision and enabling.

Secondly, Christians have a part to play in the growth of their own spiritual lives. With regard to this, Richards says, "Spirituality engages every human capacity, and call for an active commitment to God's ways. In this sense, we are each responsible for our own spiritual development."<sup>22</sup> Richard's assertion of spiritual growth here can be understood in the light of a number of verbs used by the scriptures with regard to the believer's spiritual life. Among other things, believers are required to yield themselves to God, abide in Him, submit to His authority, obey the truth, seek those things which are above, deny themselves and take up their cross daily, endure hardship, and, above all, be filled with the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup> These actions may be costly, and are yet required of all believers, if they are to progress to spiritual maturity.

### ***Spiritual Maturity***

One's spiritual life ought to grow to spiritual maturity. What does it mean to be spiritually mature? Probably, the easiest way to understand this is to find out its opposite, or, by comparison, what spiritual immaturity is all about. The NT speaks, to a considerable extent, about spiritual immaturity. In 1 Cor 3:1-2, as a result of the problem of division in the church in Corinth, Paul addresses the Corinthian Christians as infants in the Christian faith, or as those who are unable to understand deep spiritual truths. In addressing the problem of spiritual gifts in the church, he urges them to stop thinking like children (1 Cor 14:20).<sup>24</sup> The author of Hebrews speaks of those who were only able to understand the elementary lessons of God's Word as spiritual infants (Heb 5:12). So, the opposite of spiritual maturity, according to these verses, is being unable to understand the deep spiritual truths of the Word of God, as a result of an untransformed worldview. Gill describes those who are spiritually mature as follows:

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Rom 16:13; 1 Cor 7:24; James 4:7; Gal 3:1; Col 3:1; Matt 16:24; 1 Tim 2:3; Eph 5:18 (KJV).

<sup>24</sup> Thinking of spiritual gifts as something to impress other people.

Such who have their understandings enlightened by the Spirit of wisdom and revelation; who have their senses exercised to discern between divine and human wisdom; and who are perfect in a comparative sense, having more spiritual knowledge and understanding than others.<sup>25</sup>

However, spiritual maturity is more than just being able to understand spiritual truths, and having a God-centred worldview; it is also a state of life, showing itself out in daily God-centred living. In Eph 4:2, Paul speaks of spiritual maturity as living in humility, gentleness, patience, love, and tolerance with one another. In Eph 4:13-14, spiritual maturity is referred to as believers being united in the faith and knowledge of Christ, and not being easily led astray by deceitful doctrines. Spiritual maturity involves being grounded in the scriptures, through consistent study and examination of its truth, as the Bereans demonstrated in Acts 17:11. In Col 1:11, it means endurance, and giving thanks in all circumstances. So, in essence, spiritual maturity is well summarised by Paul in Rom 12:2. It means to conform oneself to God's standard of life, through the renewal of the mind, or a transformed worldview.

## **AN EVALUATION OF THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE SSEC AS IT IS TODAY**

This section will give an assessment of the spirituality of the SSEC, as it is today, as compared to the definition of spiritual life, and growth to maturity, given above. The discussion in this section will cover four main areas.

### ***Knowledge of the Truth***

Recently, the theological foothold of the SSEC was tested, and proved to be rather shaky, with the rise of movements, such as the “Kingdom Movement” in Malaita, and another movement, purported to be headed by Revd Michael Maeliau. The Kingdom Movement, which is very much like a cargo cult, has been the cause of much confusion within a number of churches in Malaita and Honiara. According to Dauara, the movement has literally split a particular local church in Honiara, and destabilised several

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<sup>25</sup> Gill, *John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible* [CD-ROM].

others.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the Maeliau movement, whose vision is the bringing of the gospel, in the glory of the Lord, from the uttermost part of the earth (believed to be the Solomon Islands) back to Jerusalem, is also threatening the unity of the church. According to Florence Uiga, in north Malaita, the SSEC churches are divided into groups of conservative SSEC and members of the Maeliau movement.<sup>27</sup>

The argument here is not about who is right and who is wrong; it is simply to point out that many SSEC adherents are biblically illiterate, as demonstrated by the way they have reacted to these latest developments. There is no doubt that many follow their spiritual convictions, probably as a result of a certain amount of spiritual manipulation by movement leaders, rather than reacting according to what they know to be the truth. The fact that the SSEC had been exposed to numerous biblical teachings, by the establishment of Bible schools throughout the islands, and sound the theological groundwork laid by the early missionaries,<sup>28</sup> should have put Christians into a state of uniformity and solidarity in their doctrinal position. In contrast, some church members have been easily led astray by incoming movements. Observing the reaction of some SSEC Christians to these recent developments, it is not safe to assume that the SSEC is in a spiritually-mature state. To say the least, this is a sign of an immature church, one that is still living on the elementary teachings of the Word of God (Heb 5:11-14).

### ***Spiritual Unity***

After all these years, the SSEC should have reached a state of being a true body of Christ. Paul's use of the term "one body" in Eph 4:4 (KJV), as a definition of unity within the church, shows that the body of Christ is made up of believers, who come from different places, races, cultural, and educational backgrounds, speaking different languages, and having different gifts. It consists of people with various personal differences, yet

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<sup>26</sup> Jeremiah Dauara, CLTC first-year student from Central Malaita, interview by author, CLTC, July 14, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Florence Uiga, CLTC third-year student wife from North Malaita, interview by author, CLTC, July 13, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Strachan, *Revival*, pp. 2-3.

they function together as a harmonious whole. Even as it is important for Christians to maintain their own distinctiveness, their first loyalty must be to the body of Christ.

The SSEC, as a multi-racial denomination, should have been able to, at this point, clearly demonstrate unity-in-diversity within itself. Now, being a fourth-generation church, its members should be able to place their primary loyalty in being members of the body of Christ, rather than in their racial uniqueness and individual differences. However, the opposite is often the case, as reflected in the reaction of many SSEC members during recent ethnic tensions in the Solomon Islands. There was clear evidence of disharmony among many SSEC Christians. While it is important to acknowledge the fact that the church played an important role in the reconciliation process of the nation after the crisis, deep within people's hearts, there was an obvious sense of resentment and hard feelings.

Another example of the presence of spiritual disunity within the SSEC is seen in church membership preferences. In some places, the local church is more like a federation, where people prefer to become members of the church, containing people of their own language, or family group, or those with whom they share the same spiritual values. This is true, both in rural and urban settings. According to Raoiasi,<sup>29</sup> this is actually the case with many churches in Honiara, and even in his West Areare Associations. This is to say, that, within the SSEC itself, people have different spiritual values and religious preferences. This paints a bad picture of Christianity, as it is not to be expected of a church, known for being deeply rooted in the Word of God, and having numerous revival experiences.

### ***A Mature Attitude***

The concept of endurance ( $\alpha\nu\epsilon\xi\omega = anechō$ ), as it was used by Paul in 2 Thess 1:4 and 2 Tim 4:3, means “to hold oneself up against”,<sup>30</sup> or “to put up with difficult situations”. One way a church demonstrates maturity is by enduring hardships. Suffering and hardship are common and inevitable

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<sup>29</sup> Micah Raoiasi, CLTC fourth-year student from West Areare, interview by the author, CLTC, July 14, 2009.

in Christianity, but it is expected that all Christians should put up with these unpleasant circumstances (2 Tim 2:3).

After many years of church presence in the Solomon Islands, the SSEC, by now, should be able to demonstrate a mature attitude, by showing endurance in difficult situations. As has been cited above, many SSEC Christians would naturally resort to hostility, and even violence, during a political crisis. But this is just one of many examples of an immature attitude, demonstrated by many so-called Christians within the SSEC. Another example may be seen in Christians deserting the church for other denominations, or forming themselves into some form of Christian movement. Continuous backsliding, and demonstration of nominal Christianity, by members of the church may be seen as other examples. While it is true that there are many mature and enduring Christians within the SSEC, to say that many more would demonstrate immaturity during trying times is also a fair assessment of the spirituality of the church. This is to say that there are an excessively high number of immature Christians within the SSEC.

### **Purity**

Youngblood defines purity as “the quality or state of being free from mixture, pollution, or other foreign elements”.<sup>31</sup> As it refers to Christianity, it means being free from worldly contamination (1 Tim 4:7; Titus 2:12). The SSEC, at this stage, has been entrenched long enough to embrace the noble things of life, things that are worthy of acceptance within the Christian circle. Christians, especially the so-called mature Christians, should now be able to keep themselves from being contaminated by any form of immoral practice. They should now know where they stand, in terms of the activities, in which they are involved, stories they tell or listen to, materials they read, movies and pictures they

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<sup>30</sup> James Strong, “Endure”, in *Strong’s Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries* (1890), np [CD-ROM]; Available from e-Sword Software.

<sup>31</sup> “Purity”, in *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Ronald F. Youngblood, ed., Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson [CD-ROM]; Available from Logos Library System Software.

watch, companions they choose, and their business dealings, among other things.

It is worth noting here that the SSEC has quite a high standard of church life, order, and disciplinary procedures. However, the sad reality is that many Christians are still finding it difficult to put away some habits of the old life. Some are still struggling with avoiding dirty jokes and stories, pornography, bad companions, and dishonest business dealings, just to name a few. Many are still striving to quit certain habits that are closely connected with their animistic practices. In Guadalcanal, some Christians, including pastors, still practise their traditional means of obtaining luck, when taking hunting or fishing trips. According to Sibia,<sup>32</sup> a traditional practice, still entertained by some Christians within his area, involves taking a certain type of plant or tree bark, believed to contain some form of magic, and giving them to the hunting dogs. Traditionally, it is believed that chances for successful hunting depend very much on this. This practice shows a mixture of animism and Christianity in the Christian's belief system. These are just hints of a number of impure habits that are still bothering many Christians within the SSEC today.

### **3. CASE STUDY: HYPOCRISY IN CHRISTIANITY (REV 3:14-22)**

In trying to find out how God would have felt about the spiritual condition of the SSEC, in the light of the assessment made in the previous section, this section will introduce an exegetical case study on the life of the church in Laodicea, as seen in Rev 3:14-22. Laodicea, an important trade location during the time of the Romans, was known for its wealth and religion. According to the passage, the church received only condemnation, and no commendation, from Christ, as a result of the hypocritical Christianity that was prevalent among the believers. The aim of this case study is not to assume the worst of SSEC, but to draw the attention of its adherents to what God would have thought of the church, should it find its own spirituality somehow similar to that of the church in Laodicea.

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<sup>32</sup> Boaz Sibia, CLTC fourth-year student from Central Guadalcanal, interview by the author, CLTC, July 22, 2009.

The word “hypocrisy” comes from its noun, “hypocrite”, and, according to Orr, it means, “an actor”, taking the idea of someone playing the role of another in a drama or movie. Hypocrisy, in this sense, means “deceptive”, or “outwardly righteous and good, but inwardly insincere, unrighteous, or evil”.<sup>33</sup> Hypocrisy in Christianity was clearly highlighted by Christ, when He said of the Pharisees, in Matt 23:28, “In the same way, on the outside, you appear good to everybody, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and sin” (GNB). It is a Christianity that appears genuine from the outside, but is really not so on the inside. This case study will look at hypocrisy, under the following headings: The Nature of Hypocrisy, The Reality of Hypocrisy, and The Danger of Hypocrisy.

### THE NATURE OF HYPOCRISY (REV 3:15-16A)

In Rev 3:15-16, the Lord repeatedly describes the spiritual life of the Laodicean Christians as “neither cold nor hot”. According to Keener, this description had contextual relevance to Laodicea, as there was no natural water supply. The only supply available was that piped in from hot springs, about six miles to the east, and, like any cold water that could be obtained from anywhere within the same distance, the water would be “neither cold nor hot” by the time it reached Laodicea. Because of its neither-cold-nor-hot condition, the water was often the cause of ill health for the Laodiceans. This lack of safe drinking water in Laodicea had long been the standard complaint of its residents, many of whom were wealthy, and, no doubt, lived a sophisticated lifestyle.<sup>34</sup> The Lord used this as a fitting example of how He was feeling about the spiritual condition of the church in Laodicea. He said, “Thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot” (KJV). But what does He really mean by this? Gill puts it this way:

A lukewarm professor is one that serves God and mammon; that halts between two opinions, and knows not what religion is best, and cares little for any, yet keeps, in a round of duty, though indifferent to it, and contents himself with it; and is unconcerned about the life

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<sup>33</sup> John Orr Sr, ed., “Hypocrisy”, in *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, nd [CD-ROM]; Available from e-Sword Software.

<sup>34</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 1993, p. 774.

and power of godliness, and takes up with the external form of it; and has no thought about the glory of God, the interest of Christ and truth.<sup>35</sup>

This description of the nature of hypocrisy shows what was true of the church in Laodicea would fit into what is known as “nominal Christianity” in many churches, including the SSEC, today. Hughes regards such religion as good for nothing, as far as Christ is concerned.<sup>36</sup> Should God feel comfortable with the current level of spirituality within the SSEC today? This is a question that the SSEC, as a church, needs to seriously consider.

### **THE REALITY OF HYPOCRISY (REV 3: 17)**

The second thing to be discussed here is the true condition of those who profess to be Christians, but have nothing in their lives to show that they have been transformed by a relationship with Christ.

#### ***Miserable and Pitiful***

In Rev 3:17, the Laodicean Christians boasted of being rich.<sup>37</sup> In their blindness, they saw themselves as having been sufficiently religious. Of this, the Lord says, “you do not know how *miserable and pitiful* you are!” This statement gives a picture of someone in desperate need, and portrays the reality of the Laodicean hypocrisy. Even though they claimed to be richly religious, the reality was that they were miserably and pitifully poor. The word “miserable”, in the King James Version, is “wretched”, and carries the idea of someone being “sunk into deep affliction or distress”, either from want, anxiety, or grief.<sup>38</sup> The true spiritual condition of the Laodicean church is not what they have persuaded themselves to believe; it is that they have actually sunk deeply into an affliction in their spiritual lives, without being conscious of it. It is hoped that the SSEC is not like this.

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<sup>35</sup> Gill, *John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible* [CD-ROM].

<sup>36</sup> Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of the Revelation*, London UK: IVP, 1990, p. 65.

<sup>37</sup> Scholars have different opinions as to whether this refers to material or spiritual riches.

<sup>38</sup> Noah Webster, “Miserable”, in *Webster's 1828 Dictionary of American English* (1828), [CD-ROM]; Available from e-Sword Software.

### **Poor, Naked, and Blind**

In the same verse (17), in response to the Laodiceans' boastfulness, the Lord says, "you are poor, naked, and blind" (GNB). The term "poor" takes on the idea of what a Jew would call "poor in the Law", a reference to the Laodiceans' poverty in "purity and spiritual insight".<sup>39</sup> The word "blind", here, may refer to their being unable to see their own imperfections, and to figure out in which direction they are heading as Christians. The term "naked" has to do with unrighteousness. Sin stripped mankind of God's righteousness (Rom 6:20; 1 Pet 2:24).<sup>40</sup>

Hypocrisy is a state of spiritual nakedness, and poverty in life. By comparison, what is the true condition of the spirituality of the SSEC? How would God look at the church today?

### **THE DANGER OF HYPOCRISY (REV 3: 16B)**

Why is it dangerous for the body of Christ to live a hypocritical life? In Rev 3:16b, the Lord says; "So, because you are lukewarm . . . I am about to 'spit' you out of My mouth" (GNB). Wall says that spitting symbolises God's negative verdict of those who are unfaithful to Christ, who is the standard of His (God's) future judgment.<sup>41</sup> The word "spit", here, literally means "to vomit",<sup>42</sup> and speaks of destruction, or the literal removal, of Laodicea as a church. Interestingly, Smith tells of how the Mohammedan invaders destroyed the city sometime later, making it a "scene of utter desolation".<sup>43</sup> This shows how uncomfortable Christ was with the spiritual condition of Laodicean church.

A church that does not live up to Christ's expectations is a disgrace to Him, and faces the danger of being rejected, and removed from its status as a

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<sup>39</sup> Onesimus Ngundu, "Revelation", in *Africa Bible Commentary*, Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., Nairobi: World Alive Publishers, 2006, p. 1554.

<sup>40</sup> Albert Barnes, *Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible* [CD-ROM]; Available from e-Sword Software.

<sup>41</sup> Robert W. Wall, *New International Biblical Commentary: Revelation*, Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1991, p. 86.

<sup>42</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1995, p. 1929.

<sup>43</sup> William Smith, ed., *Smith's Bible Dictionary*, Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997, [CD-ROM]; Available from Logos Library System Software.

church. The reason for this is simple: God does not take pleasure in, and will remove His presence from, those who dishonour His name. While it is true that God is full of love for His people, it must also be understood that He is holy, and this holiness does not allow Him to compromise with sin.

What is the condition of the relationship that exists between God and the SSEC at present? As is obvious in what the Lord did to the church in Laodicea, a church will continue to remain as a church, only if it continues to maintain the level of spirituality required of it. The SSEC, as a church, needs to be careful that it does not become *an organisation*, just like any other secular entity in the world today.

#### **4. THE CAUSES OF SPIRITUAL IMMATURITY WITHIN THE SSEC**

There are a number of reasons why the SSEC is yet to fully achieve the desired spiritual status it always has had the potential to achieve. This section will discuss five examples.

##### **TRADITIONAL INFLUENCES**

As a Melanesian church, the SSEC has been greatly influenced by the traditional Melanesian upbringing of its members. This section will cover two factors.

###### ***The Melanesian Wantok System*<sup>44</sup>**

The initial idea behind the setting up of the South Sea Evangelical Mission was, “to bring into being churches, which, from the outset, are self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating”,<sup>45</sup> a process known as indigenisation. But, while the idea to have the indigenous people of the Solomon Islands take over the full responsibility of their own church is honourable, the process itself has its own weakness, as it often clashes with the Melanesian *wantok* system. According to Arua and Eka, “the *wantok*

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<sup>44</sup> A system that places high value on people who are closest biologically, linguistically, culturally, regionally, etc. When dealing with others, especially in making decisions and choices, preferential treatment will always be given to *wantoks*.

<sup>45</sup> Griffiths, *Fire in the Islands*, p. 159.

system is a way of life for the Melanesian people".<sup>46</sup> It is a way of showing unity among a certain group of people.

As it relates to the growth of the SSEC, the sad reality is that it often undermines the neutrality of the administrative and leadership functions of the church. This is true, not only within the local level, but also within the regional and the national levels of church government. This is often the case when one person, family, or ethnic group of people happens to control most, sometimes all, of the key leadership positions within the church. It sets the multi-racial denomination back, especially when it comes to equal opportunities in ministry, training, and other aspects of church life, as the system becomes characterised by the spirit of domination, and elements of discrimination and nepotism. This makes the church seem like a business entity, as the decision-making processes would often be monopolised by its dominant figure(s). This situation has sometimes been the cause of infighting, backsliding, and division, resulting in breakaways by some factions of the church to other denominations, or to form alternative ministerial movements.

### ***Syncretism***

Another undermining factor of spiritual growth within the SSEC, in connection with Melanesian tradition, is the problem of syncretism within the church. Because of the strong past-animistic experiences of many of its members, the SSEC, like other Melanesian churches, struggles with this problem. Some of them are converts from pure animism, whose former lives have been very much part of their animistic belief system – where gardening, fishing, hunting, and other aspects of life are all part of their religion. Tippett gave the following account about the spiritual encounter that took place when Christianity first came into the Solomon Islands:

When Christianity arrived, the religious encounter was not between a pagan deity and the Christian God, Creator, and ruler of the Universe, and Father of Mankind. The encounter had to take place on the level of daily life, against those powers which dealt with the

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<sup>46</sup> Daniel Ako Arua and John Eka, "Wantok System", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 18-1 (2002), p. 7.

relevant problems of gardening, fishing, war, security, food supply, and the personal-life crises.<sup>47</sup>

According to Tippett, the spiritual encounter that took place in converting Solomon Islanders to Christianity had to do with the elements concerning their daily human livelihood, an encounter that is still bothering many SSEC Christians, even now. Murray affirms that many Christians from his area are still holding on to some of their animistic fears today. Some do not eat certain types of fish or animals, believed to be the emblem of their tribes. Some still live in fear of, or are practising, witchcraft and sorcery,<sup>48</sup> even as Christians. Many still believe in protection by traditional means.<sup>49</sup> Ruhia also confirms having seen similar practices among Christians in his church. For example, he claims that if a person is sick, and is taken to the hospital for treatment, or to a pastor to be prayed for, and no healing occurs, the next natural option is to go to witchdoctors for healing.<sup>50</sup> As mentioned earlier in this article, some Christians are still holding to their traditional ways of obtaining success in hunting and fishing.<sup>50</sup> These examples illustrate the existence of syncretism within the SSEC today.

## **FOREIGN INFLUENCES**

In addition to the influences of the people's own traditions, the spiritual growth of the SSEC, to a certain extent, has also been hampered by influences from outside the people's traditional way of life. The most-common example of this is the unavoidable adoption of the Western way of life into the people's local culture. The Solomon Islands, like other developing countries of the world, is quickly changing its society today, for better or worse, because of this influence. White men brought with them their own way of life, introducing things, such as education, health services, transportation, communication, their style of clothing, and much

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<sup>47</sup> Allan R. Tippett, *Solomon Islands Christianity*, London UK: Lutterworth Press, 1967, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Thomson Murray, CLTC third-year student from East Malaita. Interview by author, CLTC, August 30, 2008.

<sup>49</sup> Nicholas Ruhia, CLTC fourth-year student from East Central Guadalcanal. Interview by author, CLTC, July 21, 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Refer to p. 18, above.

more. Many of these things, although completely strange to the people's way of life, are good and beneficial to them.

Some aspects of Westernisation clearly have negative influences. However, there are still other, which are subtle and difficult to discern. One of these is Western formalism. For example, in the SSEC, marriage is commonly considered to be holy, when it is held formally inside a church building, and the newly-wedded couple wears Western clothing.<sup>51</sup> An unholy marriage is considered to be one held outside of the church, for couples who have been living together for some time before their wedding. In this type of marriage, the couple wears ordinary clothes. While the idea behind this is noble, in that it discourages people from living together before marriage, it also promotes the notion that religious activities, which are done in a formal way, or inside the church, are more Christian, and holier, than those that are not. Consequently, this creates in people the idea that Christianity is more a formal in-church activity than an inward change of heart, and a daily demonstration of the life of Christ, through activities in the home, school, workplace, or playing field. Furthermore, it makes Christianity irrelevant to many people, as they prefer to remain within their own cultural setting. In other words, one has to add a certain amount of Western influence to faith, in order to become a true Christian. This issue is a real problem within the SSEC today, as many Christians tend to believe that they become more spiritual and holier in this way, while, really, they are only becoming more formal and Westernised in their lifestyle. Certainly this is not Christianity.

## **NOMINALISM**

Nominalism is yet another factor that is detrimental to the spiritual development of Christians within the SSEC. A nominalist, as described by Kendi, is "one, who professes faith and membership to a particular denomination, but fails to live according to his/her profession of faith".<sup>52</sup> Agosautu observed, during the recent ethnic tension in the Solomon

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<sup>51</sup> This marriage is normally held between couples, who have not lived together prior to marriage.

<sup>52</sup> Wayne Kendi, "The Doctrine of Justification: The Remedy to the Ills of the Melanesian Church", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 21-2 (2005), p. 83.

Islands, that many SSEC Christians, including some senior pastors, were either directly or indirectly involved in the crisis. Some even died as a result of it.<sup>53</sup> In another example, Uiga asserts that gambling is quite a concern in the church, where he once served as a pastor. Some Christians would join fraudulent money schemes almost without hesitation.<sup>54</sup> These are classic evidences of the existence of nominalism within the SSEC, making it one of the biggest hindrances to the spiritual growth of its members.

### **THE OVERLAP BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP**

In many local churches within the SSEC, there is often a leadership overlap between the church and the traditional community. For example, a church elder may also be the chief or an elder of the community. The same may be true of the pastor and the other leaders of the local church. This overlap in leadership between the church and the community is largely because of the strong influence of Christianity within the wider community. While there is a need to promote Christian values in society, people feel that it is also important to maintain some aspects of their traditional values, so as not to lose their heritage and identity. Because of this, the church often runs into the situation of having leaders, who are leaders of the community as well.

#### ***Strengths***

There are good things about having church leaders, who are also leaders of the traditional community. Some of these are: it unites the church with the general community; avoids having too many different leaders within the same community; and may minimise suspicion and misunderstanding between the church and the wider community. It may also promote unity and common understanding, bringing the needed support of the larger community into the church. On the spiritual side of things, this so-called leadership overlap gives the opportunity for Christians to impact their own culture. Community leaders, who are Christians or leaders of the church,

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<sup>53</sup> Venasio Agosautu, CLTC fifth-year student from South Guadalcanal. Interview by author, CLTC, August 30, 2008.

<sup>54</sup> Pastor Jessie Uiga, CLTC third-year student from Malaita. Interview by author, CLTC, August 30, 2008.

are the best people to be used in dialogues that will see the truth of the scriptures contextualised into the traditional culture and belief system of the people.

### ***Weaknesses***

While the overlap in leadership between the church and the community has some advantages, it has some weaknesses, also. Firstly, it undermines the sanctity of Christian leadership, because a Christian leader is called of God, only for His holy purpose (1 Tim 6:11, 20). Secondly, it weakens leadership in general, as there will often be conflicts of interest, resulting in compromises for, or against, the values of either side of one's leadership responsibilities. According to Taku,<sup>55</sup> this is true of some churches in Guadalcanal, where pastors and elders have often compromised their stand as church leaders in order to give prominence to traditional values. Another reason why this style of leadership is not helpful is that, it will see Christian leaders working in partnership with unbelievers. Furthermore, this overlap in leadership often leads to the abuse of power within the church. Community leaders, who are also leaders of the church, may be tempted to take into the church their "big-man" mentality,<sup>56</sup> using it to promote their own status and reputation. Even though church leaders must maintain some control over God's people, they really are the servants of the church, for true leadership requires an attitude of servanthood (Matt 3:11).

It is obvious, by looking at the above discussion, that the weaknesses of the overlap in leadership between the church and the traditional community outweighs its strengths, thus, it is one of the contributing factors to the slow progress of the spiritual development of the SSEC.

### **LACK OF SPIRITUAL APPETITE**

Another factor that contributes to the slow progress of spiritual growth of the SSEC is that many members of the church do not have the desire for

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<sup>55</sup> Hezekiah Taku, CLTC fifth-year student from Guadalcanal. Interview by author, CLTC, July 5, 2009.

<sup>56</sup> A term used of the act of assuming very important status within the society or community.

spiritual things, such as the Word of God, prayer, personal time with God, fellowship with other believers, and telling others about Christ. Their value system is largely based on worldly things, rather than on those things that will make them grow spiritually. There are two major reasons for this.

### ***Lack of Proper Teaching***

Firstly, some Christians do not have an appetite for spiritual things, because they have very little or no idea about their value, resulting from a lack of proper teaching within the churches. Despite having a strong theological foundation, it seems that the Word of God has neither been consistently, nor systematically, taught within many SSEC churches for many years. It appears that Christians have rarely been taught facts about their own spiritual life, and their growth to maturity, making the process of Christian growth not well understood. Consequently, Christians do not take time to see if they are progressing spiritually, because, to them, it is not an issue at all.

### ***Preoccupied With Other Things***

A story, adapted from Michael Green's *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, goes something like this:

One night, a mother fixed a special meal for her family: It was everyone's favourite meal. The aroma filled the house, and, as the children came in from playing, they could hardly wait for dinner to begin. The last child appeared only a few minutes before dinner time, and sat through the meal without eating, even though he especially loved those foods. Why? Because he had filled himself up on peanut butter at a friend's house. In settling for something good, he had lost his appetite for the best.<sup>57</sup>

This story illustrates what seems to be true of many SSEC Christians today. They prefer to settle for some seemingly good things, such as sport, business, land issues, and current affairs; and, as a result, they do not have the desire for what is best for their spiritual development.

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<sup>57</sup> Michael P. Green, "Appetite", in *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1989, CD-ROM available from Logos Library System Software.

## 5. HOW CAN THE SSEC ACHIEVE THE DESIRED SPIRITUAL STATUS?

The discussion made of the spirituality of the SSEC in this article shows that the church is still trailing behind its age, insofar as spiritual growth is concerned. While the fact that the SSEC has demonstrated quite a desirable spiritual progress over the years must be acknowledged, it seems clear that it has never fully achieved its potential, due to reasons discussed previously. In this section, a number of suggestions will be given as to the measures SSEC can take, in order to achieve this growth.

### REPENTANCE FROM DEAD RELIGION – CASE STUDY (REV: 3:18)

This section of the article features the last part of the case study given under point three: Hypocrisy in Christianity – the solution to hypocrisy. In reference to Rev 3:18, repentance was the solution to the problem of hypocrisy in Laodicea. Since the problem dealt with in this article is basically a spiritual one, the first and foremost solution to it must also be a spiritual one.

In this verse, Rev 3:18, the Lord said to the church in Laodicea, “I counsel you to buy from Me *gold* refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and *white clothes* to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness, and *salve* to put on your eyes, so you can see”. Barnes elucidates that gold is a symbol of true religion, white cloth is the emblem of purity and salvation, and salve speaks of the gospel, which enables people to clearly see the beauty of God, and the way of salvation.<sup>58</sup> All along, as observed by Tenney, the Laodiceans had been putting their trust and confidence in their own goodness and riches,<sup>59</sup> putting them into a dangerous position in life. However, as in His grace, the Lord summons them to buy from Him the riches they ought to have possessed.<sup>60</sup> In fact, the Lord’s rebuke, according to Wilcock, is a sign of His love for the church.<sup>61</sup> Since God Himself is the author of true religion, He is the only one who can mend

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<sup>58</sup> Barnes, *Albert Barnes’ Notes on the Bible* [CD-ROM].

<sup>59</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1963, p. 6.

<sup>60</sup> Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of the Revelation*, London UK: IVP, 1990, p. 66.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1975, p 57.

lives, even if they seem beyond repair. All that was required of the Laodiceans was to recognise it, and turn from their hypocrisy, and call to God for spiritual healing and restoration.

If the SSEC is to reach its desired spiritual status, and to fully achieve the mission that God has intended it to accomplish, there is a need for Christians to repent and turn away from anything that is not of God, and ask for His forgiveness, healing, and restoration.

### **IN-DEPTH THEOLOGICAL TEACHING**

Part of what is hindering the spiritual progress of the SSEC today is attributed to the fact that many of its members are biblically illiterate. Many have fallen victim to strange movements coming into the church, simply because of their inability to distinguish right from wrong. While the fault could be placed upon individual Christians, the SSEC, as the body responsible for their spiritual well-being, must assume a certain amount of the blame. It must see to it that its members are well acquainted with the truth. In order to achieve this, the following needs to be done.

#### ***Clear Biblical Statement of Beliefs***

Firstly, the SSEC should have a clear biblical statement of beliefs for its members. This statement should clearly stipulate the doctrines and beliefs held by the church, with clear biblical backing. The statement would serve, not only as the standard for behaviour and practices within the church, but also as a guard against beliefs and practices that are foreign in nature, from creeping into, and destabilising, the unity and stability of the church. All SSEC pastors should have access to this statement, and should teach it to their local congregations on a regular basis. This will help members know the theological basis of their faith, and what is expected of them, as adherents of their particular church. It will subsequently promote uniformity, and minimise the variety of beliefs and practices within the church itself. Such material must be developed to also cater for the inevitable changes that are forcing their way into the church today.

#### ***Upgrade Theological Institutions***

Secondly, there is a pressing need for the SSEC to upgrade the theological training given in its Bible institutions to Diploma of Theology (Dip.Th.)

and Bachelor of Theology degree (B.Th.) levels. At the moment, students have to spend enormous amounts of money to attend overseas training, in order to acquire these qualifications. The need for the SSEC to upgrade the level of training given in its current institutions lies in the fact that the church needs to have as many qualified pastors as possible serving in its local churches. Many pastors currently have very little or no theological training at all, as indicated by the increasingly high level of biblically-illiterate Christians within the churches today. As Stott says, “For the health of the church depends very largely on the quality, faithfulness, and teachings of its ordained ministers.”<sup>62</sup> The SSEC needs to ensure that its pastors are intellectually and spiritually equipped, if it is to expect good results.

## **CONTEXTUALISATION**

As the traditional customs and cultural values of the people are very much the cause of syncretism within the SSEC, the church would do better, in alleviating this problem, with the assistance of adequate contextualisation. Contextualisation, according to Hitchen, is the art of applying the message of the scriptures into the contemporary life setting. It involves a careful study, and clear understanding, of what the scriptures say and mean to their original hearers, and explaining it in such a way that it will have the same impact in the lives of its modern hearers, without taking away valuable aspects of their cultural values and identity.<sup>63</sup> While it is true that many Melanesian traditions and values cannot be merged with Christian values, it is feared that some of the practices, presumed within the SSEC to be biblical, are really a Western way of doing things.

An example of this is the way people ought to dress as Christians. While it is important for Christians to dress decently, there also exists the danger that Christianity may be confused with Westernisation. In this case, the notion would be that those in the urban centres are more Christian than those in the remote villages, as they would almost always be in a better position to dress in a Western style. This is a form of deception, which

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<sup>62</sup> John Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus*, Leicester UK: IVP, 2006, p. 89.

<sup>63</sup> John Hitchen, “Culture and the Bible: The Question of Contextualisation”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 8-2 (1992), p. 30.

creates the impression in some people, that they can never be good Christians because of their comparatively uncivilised state of living. Both extremes are erroneous notions of the Christian faith, and contribute, to some extent, to the misunderstanding about Christianity within the SSEC. Christianity must be relevant to people, in their culture. One must feel as good a Christian in his own cultural setting as others do in their cultural settings. He must be able to understand and apply the Word of God, as he is, without having to become like someone in another culture (Gal 3:6). This can only come about through proper contextualisation.

## **RELEVANT APPROACH**

Another thing the SSEC needs to do, in order to move forward spiritually, is to take into consideration the unavoidable changes the church is facing today in its leadership and pastoral approaches. Life, and its challenges, is different today from what it was 40, or even 20, years ago. The two extremes must be avoided to ensure that the church is both relevant and strong in the world today.

### ***Too Conservative*<sup>64</sup>**

Churches need to avoid dwelling too much on the past way of doing things. Some leaders within the SSEC do not readily accept changes in their local churches, believing that the only right way of doing things is what was introduced into the church by the early missionaries. Some of the things, introduced by the missionaries, who seemed like absolutes in the SSEC churches, today, are: singing from the SSEC hymn book, teaching from the SSEC Bible Outline and Lesson Help materials, and church programs being run on Thursdays and Sundays only. Some churches feel that using modern musical instruments, and praise and worship songs, during times of worship, or introducing other activities, such as cooking and sewing in the women's program, are not the SSEC way of doing things, and therefore, must not be encouraged. Some people even believe that *Thursday* is the only legitimate day for the women's program, because it has always been associated with that day since the missionary era. Others feel that

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<sup>64</sup> The term “conservative”, as it is used here, carries the idea of being too traditional in practices, or wanting to stick to the ways of doing things that are irrelevant in today’s world.

activities, such as sports and businesses, are not good for Christians to be involved.

However, just because something has been done a certain way in the past, does not necessarily mean that it is the absolute, or the only correct, way of doing it. On the other hand, just because something was not done in the past, is not an adequate reason to prevent it from being introduced today, if it is relevant and helpful to the church's growth. While the ways things were done in the past were not bad, some of them may not be suitable in today's world. The SSEC must ensure that the necessary changes be allowed into the church, in order to effectively address the changing needs of the people under its pastoral obligation.

### ***Too Progressive***

The other extreme that the SSEC needs to avoid is the tendency to get carried away by changes. Some changes are good, but others can be detrimental to the church. For instance, while it may be acceptable to use modern musical instruments, and sing new praise songs, during worship, the SSEC hymns must not be altogether discarded. Furthermore, young people must be encouraged not to use musical instruments in church, as though they are using them during social activities, or in a nightclub. Similarly, while it may be courteous for Christians to wear a certain type of dress at home, work, or during sports, it may not be very modest for ladies to wear men's clothing, or excessively fancy clothes, during church services, or other religious gatherings. It is important that the SSEC has its own standards regarding issues affecting the life of the church, so that changes do not take people by surprise, or go to extremes. Moreover, it is also important to note that the SSEC is a Melanesian church; church rules and practices must meld themselves with the Melanesian way of life.

## **CONCLUSION**

Even though the SSEC has been steadily progressing, in terms of its spiritual development over the years, there is still a lot of room for improvement. Due to a number of reasons, the church is yet to reach the level of maturity it ought to have reached at this point. Historically, the SSEC has had the benefit of much missionary input into the church, which

includes clear fundamental teaching of the Word of God, through the establishment of Bible schools throughout the islands, and the adoption of a very high standard of church life and order. The church has also experienced inward changes, brought about by continuous revival over the years – just to mention a few of many blessings the Lord has bestowed on the church.

However, the evaluation made of the spirituality of the church shows that the SSEC is still struggling spiritually, as reflected in the inability of many of its members to cope with the real tests of life. Recent spiritual struggles, which the church has experienced, seem to indicate that many Christians within the SSEC are still unable to distinguish truth from error, or show endurance and loyalty to the true body of Christ, especially during a crisis. These signs indicate the need for the church to do more, in order to move itself forward to where it should be, as one of the major agents of spiritual change in the Solomon Islands. The recommendations given in this article may be seen as a roadmap to what the church has not been able to achieve over the years. They are not exhaustive, but can help improve the situation, if given due attention. Long live SSEC!

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