ME, **MYSELF** AND I

A conversation about individualism and the effects thereof on culture and the church.

AN **ECHURCH** TREND REPORT

COMPILED BY **PIERRE ENGELBRECHT**

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Introduction

We see signs of a growing culture of individualism in people everywhere. Whether it is about selfies, iPhones or other phenomena in arts and culture, the individual is playing an ever-growing role in our understanding of the world. What is a thorough, Biblical understanding of the self? How can the Church help with this? These are the questions that this trend report about Me, Myself and I will try to answer.

Some of the world's biggest challenges are the trio of individualism, racism and consumer mentality (Sweet 2014:158). In this trend report, we will focus on the concepts of individualism, self-love, and self-care.

Self-love and self-care are rearing their ugly heads more often in society these days. Perhaps you have heard some of the following statements recently: "I don't read the newspapers anymore. It makes me depressed. I'd rather keep my nose out of others' business and feign ignorance." Or: "If I read the news, I instantly feel negative. I don't need that in my life." Or:

"I don't really use Facebook anymore because everyone posts such negative things all the time." Or: "I'm looking for a new job. It's too stressful where I am now and I don't need that in my life right now." And another one: "I'm just not seeing eye to eye with my husband/wife in this marriage. I don't need that right now." The concepts of self-love and self-care are extensions of these types of statements. "I" don't want to hear negative things anymore. "I" don't want to think about our country. "I" have to find myself. Decisions aren't made with consideration for society or humankind anymore, but rather with individual happiness in mind (I can't/don't want to deal with this.) The concept behind this is that individuals would rather keep themselves "deaf" and "blind" to the reality of South Africa and the world, because "I don't need that in my life right now. I need to take care of myself and I need to ensure that reality doesn't touch me. I'm the central figure in my own world."

The concepts of self-love and self-care is a world of selfies, selfie sticks, the best possible pictures as your Facebook profile, and a world that soon revolves only around yourself.

This is what individualism sounds like...

As seen in the introduction above, a central theme of this trend report is the individual and the relationship of the individual with others. It might be good to start with a definition of individualism. This trend report sees individualism as a moral way of thinking, an ideology or social view that the "I" presents as central and primary. Individualism promotes the gratification of the individual's needs. With this outlook, the individual strives towards independence and his or her needs are placed it above those of the government, the state or any other social group. (See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Individualism).

That perfect Facebook profile

Research shows that user spends 21% of their time updating and maintaining their profiles (Joubert 2014:86). 21% of their time is spent making sure that they have the best possible profile of themselves. Another study followed 555 Facebook users to find the "Big Five personality traits – extroversion, neuroticism, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness – as well as self-esteem and narcissism".

They found the following :

- People with low self-esteem post more updates about their romantic relationships.

- Narcissists post more about their accomplishments, which is driven by their need for attention and acknowledgement by the Facebook community. These updates also get more Likes and comments, which shows that narcissists' self-centred behaviour is strengthened by the attention they crave.

- Narcissists also post more status updates about their diet and exercise regimes, which shows that they use Facebook to broadcast that they make an effort with their physical appearance.

It seems that many people tend to use Facebook as a place of self-expression where they can hide the embarrassing parts of their lives. A result, we actually only see the polished sides of many people's lives. This distorts people's idea of reality and can lead to jealousy and feelings of inadequacy or even grudges being held by others (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dainius-runkevicius/facebook-is-just-a-place-_b_5730570.html). This is why The Economist published an article in 2013 that mentioned how social media actually makes us feel miserable and depressed (http://www.economist.com/news/science-and-technology/21583593-using-social-network-seems-make-people-more-miserable-get-life).

Selfies, social media, and video challenges are only a few examples in our society where this trend of Me, Myself and I is busy overtaking us. Do you remember the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge? Or the current 29 Hotpad Yoga Challenge? Or the #22pushups22days challenge that aims to create awareness of post-traumatic stress disorder? In these challenges, someone challenges you to do something for a certain period of time. The intention may be to create awareness about a cause, but the trend of "focussing on myself while I do something and show it to the world" is present very strongly in these challenges (https://turbofuture.com/internet/10-YouTube-Challenges-You-Cant-Miss). And then we're not even talking about the selfie trend yet. Ekerk wrote about this trend in 2013 already (http://media.wix.com/ugd/d6fab7_1a56de80668848bfafa7502da873205e.pdf).

How old is this trend?

Judging by the popularity of selfies and self-centred status updates, we might think that the Me, Myself and I trend is a new arrival in the neighbourhood. A few researchers have actually realised that people have gradually become more self-centred over the past hundred years or so. In this regard they investigated unique baby names, as well as birth and mortality rates, together with the words "Me" and "I" in the titles of books, which points to the said trend (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2942561/Think-Generation-new-Think-Society-began-shifting-individualism-CENTURY-ago.html). These researchers think one of the reasons for this trend is the gradual movement away from hard labour towards office word, where people become richer and are trained better. The researchers saw that the number of single-parent families, and also single-child families, have increased. At the same time, the uniqueness of baby names has also increased drastically. Take the current trend amongst superstars: Gwyneth Paltrow named her daughter Apple, and Kate Winslet named her son Bear. Research shows that the strive towards uniqueness may be a driving force behind individualism . This research stands directly opposite the popular belief that the Millennials, also sometimes called Generation Y (they were born between 1982 and 1999), are the face and biggest driving force behind the individualistic culture in the world (http://www.npr.org/2014/10/14/352979540/getting-some-me-time-why-millennials-are-so-individualistic). And we won't even mention the individualism of Generation Z! (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/18/fashion/how-to-spot-a-member-of-generation-z.html?_r=0) Twenge (2014) feels so strongly about this generation, that he calls them "Generation ME ME ME".

Millennials grew up in the era of the so-called "quantified self". They begin their routines with their FitBits, they "check in" on Facebook at every place that they visit, and the keep record of the health data on Strata or Wealthmate (http://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/).

PEW research of 2014 gives us insight into why the so-called Millennial generation is so self-centered. Their research shows that this age group of 18–29-year-olds don't really trust other people (only 19% shows trust in 2012). They are also the first modern generation to experience economic pressure, expensive study loans, and joblessness.

(Pew Research Center, March 2014:7–9) . A possible reason for this may be the disappointments that they experience, as well as a feeling of abandonment by older generations. One example of this is the BREXIT situation in England (http://indy100.independent.co.uk/article/how-old-people-have-screwed-over-the-younger-generationin-three-charts--W1AA_n4nEb).

What does this trend look like in South Africa?

At home, we have the #Feesmustfall movement, which is also a reaction (or counter-reaction?) to individualism. Robert Morrel thinks "South Africa needs this kind of movement to renew and regenerate itself. Such movements are a check on the kinds of individualism that flourish in societies where accumulation and profit become the yardstick for success." (http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-11-11-op-ed-treasure-or-curse-south-africas-university-vice-chancellors/#.V817YztWdg0).

Didn't the recent Pretoria Girls' High hair debate also start as a cry for individualism? "It's degrading," said one of the girls who indicated that this movement is about much more than simply rules about hair. She says: "[I]f we don't stick up for ourselves, no one's going to." Exactly because the society as collective expression doesn't do it anymore, they must stand up for themselves (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/protests-over-black-girls-hair-rekindle-debate-about-racism-in-south-africa/2016/09/02/27f445da-6ef4-11e6-993f-73c693a89820_story.html). These young people feel they can't trust other people or the government. They were left in the urge. They won't let it happen again. Now, it's every man or woman for him-/herself. Thus, individualism.

Twenge (2014:7) helps by focusing our attention on the fact that every older generation always feels that the younger generation is selfish. We should therefore not read this trend report as only being applicable to Millenials, Generation Y or Generation Z. In today's time, we can't put each other in generation classes and group everyone together anymore. One thing that this trend of individualism teaches us, is that the driving force behind this lifestyle is that every person should follow his or her own dreams. It is expected of them in society to not deny themselves the attainment of their full and unique potential (Twinge 2014:8).

The immediate Me!

Another possible cause of this Me, Myself and I trend is the so-called immediate satisfaction of instant gratification. Paul Roberts helps us by asking how we should handle a consumer culture that is simply too good to give us everything that we seek. This question reaches much further than only search engines and the speed at which Google can provide us with answers. Or that Netflix and Amazon can make suggestions based on our purchases or views. He then talks about the "entire edifice of the consumer economy, digital and actual" built around the consumer's own agenda, the image of the self and people's inner fantasies. This phenomenon allows people to move in the direction of a "personally customised life". It creates the ability and chance to customise your entire life to suit your own personal preferences. We create, choose and cook our meals around our allergies and ideologies. We choose a car with this wish for uniqueness. We move to an area that fits our social values. We only read news about places that share our political views. We worship at a church with a God image that matches our own. We create posts on social media and measure the success of them against the number of comments and likes that we get. Roberts concludes by saying that the world moves closer to us with every transaction, every update, every choice and click, so much so, the world becomes óúr world. (https://theamericanscholar.org/instant-gratification/#.V81p4TtWdg0).

Consumer mentality is characterised by the growth in advertising and marketing, and it is actively in the business of promoting pleasure. It is becoming a driving force that is steadily shaping our identities. Consumer mentality busies itself with the "immediate gratification of desire" (Jessup 2001:3) . Clapp (1998:21) says consumer mentality "implies foolishness, superficiality and triviality, and the destruction of personal and social relationships by means of selfishness, individualism, possessiveness, and covetousness."

Individualism and its consequences

Individualism is, therefore, a structure: it structures the way in which we think and acts socially. Ideas, behavioural patterns, and preconceived ideas structure reality. Individualism and the consumer culture can function as an immoral structure (Metzger 2007:59) . This may be why individualism and some forms of depressions interacted during the 1600s in Western societies (cf. Sweet 2014:591). Why? Well, we are brought up with the idea that we can do anything we want. We should just be ourselves. It may sound ideal, but it involves us growing up and continually measuring ourselves against others and whether we have reached our dreams yet. We can only be ourselves if we are unique if we have become an extraordinary something that corresponds with our childhood dreams about ourselves. Jesse Smith (http://tcat.tc/1AyFNDU) says it perfectly. He says this dream world can be summarised by the dominant cultural philosophy of our time – individualism. This word emphasises our differences over our unity. The need to recreate our lives from scratch. To believe that our successes and failings rest completely on our own shoulders. Our families, communities, and even our religion are strictly private. There is no part for a bigger power in our lives.

Instead, everything is just a small piece of the puzzle that helps to create what really matters – our self-created self. If a wrong puzzle piece is chosen in this world view, the puzzle becomes ugly, poor or wrongly put together. It means that you personally failed to create yourself. You chose the wrong pieces. Or you pieces them together in the wrong way. No-one can hep you with this. You are the cause of your own failure!

He goes even further by linking this world view to the incidence of depression. If you are so strictly individualistic, you'll never reach your goals. There will always be someone with a better or more unique job than yourself. There will always be someone with more Instagram followers than you. There will always be someone with a better Facebook profile photo than you. There will always be someone with a perfect tan and "six pack" abs while you stare down at your "love handles". In this way, you could easily become trapped in a whirlpool of depression. Researchers at the Northwestern University in Illinois showed that "a genetic vulnerability to depression is much more likely to be realised in a Western culture than an East-Asian culture that is more about us than me-me-me" (http://www.northwestern.edu/newscenter/stories/2009/10/chiao.html).

Entitlement

People caught in the Me, Myself and I trend is better known for the effects of narcissism: entitlement. David McCullough Jr., an English teacher at Wellesley High School, presented a 12-minute reality test during the school's graduation ceremony entitled: "You Are Not Special". The speech has been viewed on Youtube over 2 million times (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_lfxYhtf8o4). "Climb the mountain so you can see the world, not so the world can see you," McCullough tells the students (http://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation).

How adaptable are you as an individual?

So far we have looked at the possible phenomena linked to this trend. Let's now think about the possible consequences. One possible consequence of this trend is immediate satisfaction or instant gratification. It is the concept of personal customization. Netflix, a platform where you can view films online, arrived in South Africa in 2016. Their concept is to create a user profile. Every member of the family creates a profile on which they watch films and shows. If you use their services, you choose the profile that you created for viewing. This means that various suggestions and recommendations are compiled for this profile over time, based on what was watched before. The idea is that these suggestions are given according to what Netflix thinks the person behind the profile would like to watch. Every profile can be modified in this way. If we buy books from Amazon or Takealot, they remember our purchase history and use it as a profile according to which they determine our preferences. Some products are then suggested because the profile should like it. In this way, your online profile is given a number of preferences. Your online profile gets a life of its own!

In his TED speech, Dan Gilbert talks about the effect of instant gratification on the "bad choices" that we make in our lives. The need for instant gratification will override our logical and rational thoughts and cause us to make poor decisions in order to gain instant pleasure (https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_researches_happiness/transcript?language=en). Dan Gilbert's speech is about finding happiness and the effect of immediate satisfaction on the outcome of our happiness.

On the same note, Robert Waldinger talks about the question of what constitutes a good life – what does a happy life consist of? (https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness) He refers to research that shows that one of the millennials' biggest life goals are to become rich (80% wanted this) and to be famous (50% wanted this). We see here that the primary life goal is that of happiness. However, they translate happiness as riches and fame. This clearly shows us the culture in which we live today. A culture where we can easily weigh and judge each other on the Internet or social media as a model to follow.

The positive side of Me, Myself and I

As with any trend, it is easy to spot the negative side. This trend report also wants to highlight the positive side and potential in this trend.

Up to now, we saw that social media and the search for the perfect self-are rather large driving forces behind the trend. Social media could, however, also have a positive influence on the self if it isn't approached in a self-centred way. Hannah Schacter (http://www.psychologyinaction.org/2015/09/07/me-myselfie-and-i-the-psychological-impact-of-social-media-activity/) show us that Facebook specifically gives us opportunities to bigger social capital, social interaction with others, and identity development. In terms of social capital, studies about university campuses show that certain forms of Facebook use could help students to better serve the university community. It creates a place for sharing information about social events, as well as fostering social bonds with new classmates (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007) . Facebook could also maintain existing and old relationships and even close friendships and family ties are strengthened by new expressions of intimacy. (e.g. by sharing photos, wall posts, etc.; Watkins & Lee, 2010) .

In terms of identity development and psychological health, research shows that young users enjoy higher self-esteem and general wellbeing as a result of positive feedback on social networks (Valkenburg, Peter en Schouten, 2006) . Research on a 2009 survey of university students found that the heaviest Facebook users are also very happy with their lives and they are more involved in social and political causes (Valenzuela, Park, and Kee, 2009).

Studies even found that participants felt a considerable boost in self-esteem after viewing their own Facebook profiles for just a few minutes (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011 ; Toma & Hancock, 2013)! Facebook and related social networks give people the opportunity to think about their "best" moments, which in turn can promote self-confirmation (i.e., it makes a person aware of his or her own worth) if you view your own profile. These findings show that social networks could also promote the development of self-worth through the promotion of self-expression and the emphasis on social relationships with friends and family. (Toma & Hancock, 2013).

Another positive effect of this trend is raising awareness of certain issues. For example, think of the video challenges where someone is challenged to do something, record it and post it on a social platform. The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge (#ALSicebucketchallenge) is one of these video challenges and through this concept, people learn more about this horrible illness and its consequences (https://www.alifestoryfoundation.org/learn/?gclid=Cj0KEQjw6uO-BRDbzujwtuzAzfkBEiQAAnhJ0IcbIfvwZCqqoZ_xXNcn1Bnb0Um12uLtuOQAAavsgG8aAg6q8P8HAQ). If was such a big fundraising drive that the ALS association raised $115 million during the eight-week period of the challenge in 2014. This lead to research, which in turn discovered an important gene. Researchers of Project MinE's work in gene sequencing found a new ALS gene, NEK1.

This gene is one of the commonest genes that contribute to the illness, and it is a target for therapy development (http://www.marketwatch.com/story/the-als-ice-bucket-challenge-actually-worked-2016-07-27 & http://www.teenvogue.com/story/als-ice-bucket-challenge-worked).

In this trend report, we also looked at the concept of the "quantified self". One positive effect of this concept is that it has become much easier for some people to live healthier lives by tracking how they live in terms of their diet, exercise, and general health. One example is Alex Collins, who was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes. This means that he has to inject insulin before every meal. Physical activity is very important for him, but exercise increases the risk of low blood sugar, a paralysing condition that could be fatal in extreme cases. He talks about the positive effect that the quantified self has had on his life. He started tracking his data, which gives him the best chance to control his blood sugar so that he can exercise safely (http://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2015-03-27/the-quantified-self-how-cold-hard-data-improve-lives).

Another example is Gary Wolf's TED video about the positive effect that this measurement could have on your physical and spiritual health (https://www.ted.com/talks/gary_wolf_the_quantified_self/transcript?language=en).

Lastly, another positive effect of this trend could be that the true potential of people could be realised. We have seen that this trend's fundamental ideology is the structuring of self to be central to your own life. It begins by looking at yourself and asking yourself what your dream is. Who do you want to be one day? We have seen that a possible negative effect of this could be that you could look at this too critically and always see yourself as a failure if you measure yourself against others and then realise that you'll never "catch up". The positive side is that if the attainment of this goal happens in the community and with people who can help you on your journey if could unlock a lot of potentials. It could become a great driving force to become the person that God intended you to be. Other people that share your life journey could support you and through their relationship with you, they could help to shape a better "you".

Moving from me to we

The surprising results of the study of Robert Waldinger, which is applicable to this trend report, is that relationships lead to truly happy lives. Robert Waldinger is the director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development (http://www.hms.harvard.edu/psych/redbook/redbook-family-adult-01.htm). It is a study conducted over a period of 75 years. During this study, they have tracked the lives of 724 men. Each year they investigate their work, their families, and their lives. Everything to find the source of true happiness in their lives. And the end result? Relationships!

The trend of Me, Myself and I asks that we move away from a ME-life. A life where I'm central. And to move towards a WE-life. A life that is formed in the community.

The Me, Myself and I virus in the Church

"Those who are in love with the community, destroy community; those who love people, build community" – Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

In the real world, it is every man/woman for him-/herself. There are only three people: Me, Myself and I. People are only interested in the community when it gives the correct answer to the question: "What's in it for me?" As individuals gain no benefit from being with others, they lose interest.

Unfortunately, this selfish virus has infected some parts of the Church as well. Just listen to how people talk about churches that work for them: "I receive spiritual bread there." "There are so many good people there." "The leaders are friendly with me." "They greet me and care for me." Even though these statements sound lovely, they are all still linked to the question: "What's in it for me?"

Few Christians really have the guts to live a selfless life of to give their lives for others. The Me, Myself and I culture of the day has gobbled us up. We are all victims. We have turned out faith into a commodity with prayer as the best way to get everything we want from God. Our spiritual needs and wants are endless and focused only on ourselves. No wonder pure community in faith takes the backseat in such environments.

What can the Church do with this?

The purpose of this trend report is not only to show where this trend is rearing its head in the world and South Africa but also to ask what the Bible teaches us in terms of this trend. Another way of looking at this trend is to ask the question: How do I get to know myself thoroughly and how do I grow in a relationship with myself?

God gave us a big part of the answer when he made Eve – and Adam said:

This time, it is one from myself, one like me. There she will be called 'woman'; she was made from man (Gen 2:23).

This was a poetic way for Adam to say: "Through you, I get to know myself", "Some part of you is part of me, therefore you show something of me", "There are parts of myself that I can only understand in relation to my relationship with you. The "other" is, therefore, the "mirror" into which I look to see myself. This is not only valid for marriage, but for people in general.

Robert Waldinger's research found that people who are in good and healthy relationships are physically healthier, they are happier and their brains are also healthier. However, Waldinger warns that it is not the quantity time, but the quality time that makes the difference.

Do you have healthy, deep relationships with people through which you could get to know yourself?

Len Sweet (2014:location 621) says the first three principles of hell is the following: "You are your own", "You are what you own", and "You're on your own".

- We as followers of God as not on our own. 1 Cor 6:19 and Ps 100:3 remind us that we belong to God and that He created us.
- We own nothing, but everything that we have was a gift from God (Jac. 1:17).
- We are not alone because God will never leave us (Deut 3:16).

Beware superficial relationships!

The trend of Me, Myself and I promotes a greater measurement of personal freedom but falls back to egocentric versions of individualism that ignores the needs of others. The result is that a consumer mentality takes shape, which in turn promotes the glorification of the self in order to fill the hollow relationships of the postmodern culture. The result is a snowball-effect where these hollow, superficial relationships are patched with even more egocentric trends. (Jessup 2001:7).

Which story are you living?

The trend of Me, Myself and I teaches us about the race for "celebrity culture" of our time. To allow our lives to be steered and controlled in search of uniqueness and self-centeredness. That we are all programmed robots trained to live according to the projected "I". We are so afraid to be ourselves. We are so afraid to look at ourselves I the mirror, that we would rather put on a digital mask, or we will find our identity in what we wear, how my followers we have, how may Facebook friends we have. We shy away from the real world and in doing so, create a new life and new story that suits me better. A story where I am prettier and better than in reality.

We a Jesus followers have the chance to life the best story of all: the Jesus story!

Irritate each other!

Tom Smith (2014:96-99) helps us if we look at Heb. 10:23–25. This scripture can help us to move towards authentic (quality) and deep (not superficial or narcissistic) relationships and community. "Community can then be defined (v. 24) as the place where we're considering how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds. In other words, we 'consider one another unto an outburst of love and good works'."

Here are a few challenges by which we could practise deeper relationships and move away fro the Me, Myself and I culture.

(1) How to I listen without always knowing better? How could I be considerate towards others?

CHALLENGE:

• If someone says something that I don't agree with, don't react. Give 24-hours chance before I respond to him/her. Let my emotions calm down first.

• Practise listening to people so that we can learn to see each other and be considerate towards others.

• Ask God in your quiet time how you could learn to consider others ore often. How can God change me in order to understand other better?

(2) How do I "walk in others' shoes?" How do I learn to understand why they react the way they do? How to I study people with whom I have contact?

CHALLENGE:

• I will ask more questions than give answers. It will help me to study others and to try to understand them. Ask them why and how they experience God.

• This week I will consciously make time to pray for others. Ask God to help me to really get to know the people whom I come into contact with, better and to understand them better too. The prayer teaches me that other people think like me too.

(3) How can I learn how other experience God? How van I get to know God better in these learning experiences? How to we stimulate and irritate each other to experience God? How should we irritate each other to be better people?

CHALLENGE:

• Who are the people that I allow to irritate me? And who allows me to irritate them?

• Write down how others irritate you to better experience God. How does my God experience grow?

• Find someone with whom you can sit down and talk about how he/she experiences God (focus on how it happens through your personal interactions. Ask people how you could irritate them to get to know God better through your own irritations.

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