Journal of Psychology & Christianity

Special Issue
The Science of
Christian Flourishing

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DEDICATION

Dr. Paul T. P. Wong (1937 - 2024)

This special issue—Christian Flourishing Science—is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Paul T. P. Wang, who not only wrote on suffering but walked through it with unwavering faith. His life was a living model of the very truths he sought to understand—how pain and endurance shape the human soul, how faith grows in affliction, and how true Christian flourishing is found not in escaping suffering, but in meeting it with grace. Even in his own physical pain, he bore witness to a hope that does not waver and a joy that suffering cannot steal. His legacy remains, reminding us that the deepest truths of our faith are often written in the language of endurance.

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An Introduction to the Science of Christian Flourishing: A Domain-Based Approach

Victor Counted

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The field of Christian flourishing science remains an emerging yet essential field of interdisciplinary inquiry, integrating empirical insights from psychology, theology, sociology, and public health. This special issue advances a domain-based approach to the empirical science of Christian flourishing, recognizing that well-being in Christian life is not solely an individual pursuit but also tethered to congregational and community life. In this special issue of the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, we introduce three key domains of Christian flourishing—individual, congregational, and community—examining their unique contributions while highlighting the need for empirical rigor and theological depth. Contributions include new conceptual foundations and measurement templates for assessing the individual domain of Christian flourishing, review of decade-long empirical studies on congregational well-being and clergy resilience, and discussions on the outward-facing societal impact of faith-based initiatives that transform the community-domain of Christian flourishing. This special issue is the first strategic step to lay the foundation for a holistic and empirically grounded understanding of Christian flourishing as a scientific field of study. This issue invites further research and reflection to expand the scope of Christian flourishing science and its real-world applications.

The study of human flourishing has gained significant traction in recent decades, with interdisciplinary research exploring the psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions of well-being (Diener et al., 2010; Janicke-Bowles et al., 2023; Keyes et al., 2008; VanderWeele et al., 2021). However, the unique contours of Christian flourishing—rooted in theological virtues (Long & VanderWeele, 2023), communal life, and denominational contexts—remain underexplored within the empirical scientific literature. This special issue, "Empirical Science of Christian Flourishing," seeks to address this gap by presenting an interdisciplinary framework for conceptualizing and operationalizing flourishing within Christian communities.

The journey toward this special issue is part of a broader scholarly effort that has unfolded over more than a decade. It began with conversations—over coffee, in crowded seminar rooms, at roundtables, and in quiet academic offices—shaped by a growing recognition that the science of Christian flourishing needed a more empirical approach.

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In early 2023, shortly after moving from Sydney to Virginia, I sat in Tyler VanderWeele's office at Harvard, discussing an idea that had been forming in my mind for some time: Could we develop a scientific approach to Christian flourishing as rigorous as the Harvard Human Flourishing Program's framework, yet attuned to the distinct dimensions of Christian life? In many ways, this conversation was an extension of earlier debates—ones that VanderWeele himself had been immersed in for over a decade. A key turning point came in 2011, when VanderWeele and his colleague Michael Balboni began discussions on responding to Jeffrey Bishop's (2009) critique of quantitative empirical research on religion and spirituality. Bishop had argued that such research often reduces religion to a utilitarian or functional role—treating it as a coping mechanism rather than recognizing its own theological and existential dimensions. Bishop pointed specifically to Ken Pargament's RCOPE measure (Pargament et al., 2000), which categorizes religious engagement in terms of stress

management rather than as a pursuit of transcendent truth. In doing so, Bishop suggested, the medical and psychological sciences risked absorbing religion into a secular framework that ultimately reshaped it to fit their own aims.

VanderWeele and Balboni believed that one way to counter Bishop's critique was to introduce tradition-specific (e.g., explicitly Christian) measures of spiritual well-being—ones that accounted for the intrinsic goods and theological aims of religious life. VanderWeele made this case in a 2014 panel debate with Bishop at the Conference on Medicine and Religion, and some of those reflections were included in his "Religion and Health" synthesis book chapter in 2017 (VanderWeele, 2017b). That same year, he and Balboni began developing such assessments in earnest. Kate Long soon joined their efforts, conducting cognitive interviews and focus groups within various church communities. Their work culminated in a 2021 publication proposing a measure of Christian spiritual well-being (VanderWeele et al., 2021).

Over the years, VanderWeele had seen the field evolve first-hand through his pioneering work on human flourishing (e.g., Global Flourishing Study; VanderWeele et al., in press). We both agreed that while broad flourishing models were useful, they often lacked the theological depth and contextual sensitivity necessary for understanding Christian life. I left Harvard that day convinced that this was not only a worthy pursuit—it was the next step in my life's work on advancing cross-cultural approaches to human flourishing. I was not alone in this vision. Over the next several months, I reached out to colleagues across different universities, pulling together what I affectionately called the "12 Apostles" of Christian flourishing—a diverse group of scholars, scientists, and practitioners, who had been working on related themes, often in isolation. Some were psychologists, others theologians, sociologists, and epidemiologists. They came from Regent University, Harvard University, Baylor University, Biola University, Fuller Theological Seminary, and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU)—some of whom are co-authors in my paper contribution to this special issue. Each brought a unique perspective, and together, we started to form a blueprint for what would eventually become the Christian Flourishing Science field.

The Birth of a Christian Flourishing Science Lab

Shortly after my meeting with Tyler, we launched a Christian Flourishing science lab (known as the Abundant Life Flourishing Program) at Regent University to investigate what flourishing looks like within Christian communities. Our goal was simple but ambitious: to study and promote flourishing in over two billion Christians worldwide. To do this, we needed first to develop a robust scientific framework for conceptualizing and operationalizing Christian flourishing, one that accounted for the lived experiences of believers across different denominational contexts.

The first step was to gather scholars who had already been thinking about these issues. We hosted monthly webinars featuring colleagues such as Pamela King, Kate Long, Matthew T. Lee, Elizabeth Hall, Chris Adams, Loren Toussaint, Laura Upenieks, Robert Emmons, Brandon Vaidyanathan, John Swinton, Donnie Davis, Steven Standage, and many others who had done pioneering work in the field. These discussions were lively, often spilling over into email threads and follow-up Zoom meetings where we debated definitions, measures, and methodologies.

By the summer of 2024, we were ready to take things to the next level. We organized the first-ever Christian Flourishing Summer School at Regent University, an inward facing workshop-type event designed to communicate pockets of research in this emerging field. In hindsight, calling it a "Summer School" rather than a "Conference" may not have been the best marketing decision. The turnout was modest, but the intellectual caliber of the attendees was impressive. Scholars from Harvard, Baylor, Biola, Duke, VCU, and institutions in Canada, England, and Germany joined us for intensive roundtable discussions, presentations, and workshops on faith, well-being, and the future of Christian flourishing science.

One of the most meaningful aspects of this event was the presence—both in spirit and scholarship—of Paul T. P. Wang, a dear colleague and supporter of the Abundant Life Flourishing Program. Though he had registered for the Summer School, health issues prevented him from attending, and shortly after the event, we received the heartbreaking news of his passing. This special issue is dedicated to

his memory. He not only wrote on suffering but walked through it with unwavering faith. His legacy and vision of a flourishing life continues to inspire this work.

Flourishing and the Church: A Collaborative Vision

While the planning for our summer school was taking shape, parallel discussions were happening at Harvard and Baylor, culminating in the launch of a joint initiative between our three universities: "Flourishing and the Church" (Long et al., 2024). This project sought to bridge the gap between empirical research and the lived experiences of Christian congregations. The goal of the project was to "build on the work of many existing programs and initiatives to explore multidimensional aspects of Flourishing and the Church with the aim to promote growth and flourishing of the Church in the 21st century and beyond" (Long et al., 2024, p. 5).

But there is a part of this story I have not told yet. My friend and colleague, Kate Long, was instrumental to the development of this nascent field. VanderWeele introduced us, knowing her interests and previous work with faith organizations. Upon our initial Zoom introductions and meetings, I realized that her heart for a flourishing Universal Church was not only driven by her passion for research as a public health researcher but also her sacred calling to "serve the Church" in her words. We had grown up in the Church, seeing its challenges and triumphs up close. That shared experience shaped us. We did not just want to serve the Church; we wanted to tell its story—the story of its lasting impact, of faith meeting science in a powerful way. That passion gave birth to "Flourishing and the Church" initiative, and subsequent developments, including but not limited to taking a domain-based approach to the work. As a psychologist, I had been trained to focus on the individual as the object of scientific inquiry. But Long opened my eyes. She helped me see that Christian flourishing is not just experienced at the individual level alone—a common limitation in much of the existing psychological literature—there are congregational and community levels to the phenomenon. And with that realization, our work expanded in ways I had never imagined. And so, we took a domain-based approach that recognized the interconnected roles of individuals, congregations, and communities in shaping a thriving Christian life.

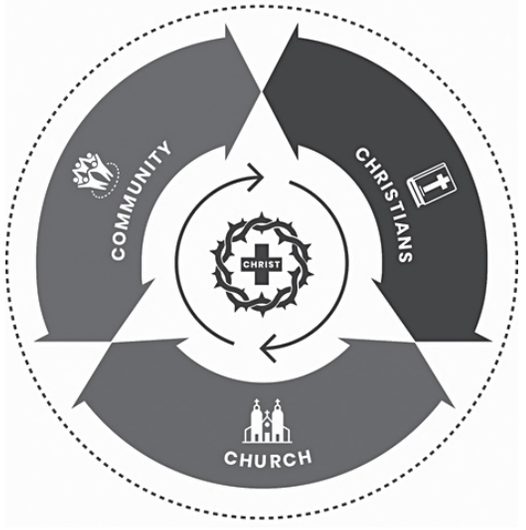
Domains of Christian Flourishing

Flourishing is often discussed in broad, secular terms—happiness, life satisfaction, mental and physical health (e.g., Butler & Kern, 2016; Diener et al., 2010; Janicke-Bowles et al., 2023; Keyes et al., 2008; Rautenbach & Rothmann, 2017; VanderWeele, 2017a). But Christian flourishing goes beyond this. It is embedded in theological, social, and cultural contexts that define and sustain it (Long et al., 2024; VanderWeele et al., 2021). There have been notable attempts to engage with the concept of Christian flourishing from a theological perspective (e.g., Kapic et al., 2023; Pennington, 2017; Pennington & Hackney, 2017; Messer, 2013; VanderWeele, 2024; Volf & Blair, 2016; Volf & Croasmun, 2019), or ideas closely related to flourishing such as integral human development (e.g., Maritain 1936/1996; Paul VI, 1967; Benedict XVI, 2009), or more classically grounded notions of happiness in God as the end of human life (e.g., Aquinas, 1274/1948), offering valuable contributions to this nascent field. These scholarly works have provided rich theological insights on human flourishing. However, while these contributions lay important conceptual foundations, they often remain theological reflections rather than operationalized for empirical investigations, thus, limiting their broader academic and applied impact. Scientific progress hinges on the ability to measure constructs reliably—without measurement, even the most profound ideas remain largely theoretical. I commend these above-mentioned theologians for laying the groundwork and planting the seeds that will continue to grow into a more evidence-based science of Christian flourishing. This special issue marks a strategic step in advancing these efforts by grounding empirical research in theological perspectives, ensuring that Christian flourishing is not only a theological ideal but also a scientifically measurable and operationalizable construct.

Therefore, to truly capture the Christian experience, we must consider the domains through which the Christian life flourishes. A domain-based approach to Christian flourishing recognizes its multidimensional nature, providing a structured framework for examining Christian flourishing as distinct but interconnected domains across individual, congregational, and community levels (Figure 1). This requires moving beyond individualistic and secular well-being models of flourishing to consider the interconnected roles of the multiple flourishing domains in shaping a thriving Christian life. As such, Christian flourishing is tethered to the contextual antecedent conditions, shaped largely by culture, community, and theology—all of which cannot be fully captured through universalized, etic metrics alone (VanderWeele et al., 2023).

Figure 1

Domains of Christian Flourishing



Individual Domain

At the individual level, human flourishing has traditionally been studied through universal frameworks that apply to all humans, regardless of culture or religion (e.g., Diener et al., 2010; Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011; VanderWeele, 2017a). While useful, these models often miss the uniquely Christian dimensions of well-being. Christian flourishing must be understood through the values and lived experiences of Christian individuals rather than imposed external criteria. Existing well-being frameworks (e.g., PERMA, self determination theory, etc.) often emphasize autonomy, personal fulfilment, and subjective well-being, which, while important, may not fully resonate with Christian worldviews where community, service, and spiritual richness take precedence over self-actualization (Markus, 1991). Instead, Christian individuals often view flourishing as an interdependent pursuit, where meaning is derived from relationships, spiritual commitment, and a sense of divine purpose rather than purely personal achievement (King & Boyatzis, 2004). For Christians, flourishing is about joy in suffering, meaning through service, and resilience through faith (Counted et al., 2025; Long & VanderWeele, 2023). While health and financial well-being are key components of secular flourishing frameworks (e.g., VanderWeele, 2017), their significance may differ for Christians, particularly in contexts where material hardship does not necessarily equate to a diminished sense of purpose or joy. Research suggests that chronically ill Christian adults, for example, often experience heightened spiritual struggles but also draw on religious coping mechanisms to sustain their well-being amidst suffering (Cowden et al., 2022; Kent et al., 2022).

The individual domain of Christian flourishing has been explored through two complementary contributions—Counted et al. (2025) and Park et al. (2025)—each offering distinct yet interconnected perspectives. Both papers provide conceptual clarity and measurement templates, one emphasizing an emic approach rooted in theological virtues and the other an etic approach grounded in psychological theory. Counted et al. (2025) took an emic approach by grounding their individual flourishing model in a Christian biblical framework, emphasizing the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love as the foundational spiritual strengths or anchors that sustain and support six key dimensions of a flourishing Christian life: contentment, health, meaning, character, relationships, and stewardship (see Counted et al., 2025).

The model in Counted et al. (2025) is particularly important because it reflects an insider perspective on Christian flourishing, recognizing that these theological virtues are not merely independent constructs but rather work in tandem as an interdependent constellation shaping human flourishing. Their contribution includes both a context-sensitive framework of the Abundant Life and a 12-item measure (Christian Flourishing Index) designed to assess this individual domain of Christian flourishing.

Complementing this emic framework of Abundant Life, Park et al. (2025) adopted a deductive approach, offering a psychometrically validated items of 3 x 4 matrix of Christian flourishing framework at the individual domain (see Park et al., 2025). This model is deduced around the affective-behavioral-cognitive (ABC) framework, where agapic love serves as the central organizing principle. According to Park et al. (2025), agapic love orientates the Christian individual toward "doing the right thing (behavior), for the right reason (cognitive/worldview), while experiencing the right emotions (emotion)" (p. __). This approach aligns with psychological models of well-being, making it broadly applicable across contexts.

Both measures (i.e., 12 items, Counted et al., 2025; 20 items, Park et al., 2025) could be used alongside VanderWeele's (2017a) 12-item measure of temporal flourishing for comparative purposes, opening avenues for further research on how Christian flourishing interacts with broader conceptualizations of well-being. A key distinction between these two measures lies in their theological emphasis and epistemology. First, Counted et al. (2025) conceptualized the individual domain as a constellation of faith, hope, and love—three theological virtues that actively transform the six dimensions of Christian flourishing: contentment, health, meaning, character, relationships, and stewardship. In contrast, Park et al. (2025) centered their model around a single theological virtue—love—integrated within the ABC psychological framework, emphasizing affect, behavior, and cognition as core elements of Christian flourishing. This focus does not diminish the broader scope of theological virtues, as Aquinas (1274/1948) regarded love as the form of all virtues, the virtue that perfects and animates the others. However, Counted et al.'s approach reflects an emic biblical articulation, whereas Park et al.'s model offers a more universal psychological lens. And despite their different emphases, both frameworks remain sensitive to the context of the Christian faith. Counted et al. (2025) adopted a theologically holistic, multidimensional approach, integrating multiple Christian virtues to demonstrate their collective impact on Christian flourishing. Park et al. (2025), on the other hand, took a targeted, virtue-specific approach, using love as a focal point within a structured psychological framework. Rather than being competing perspectives, these models function in an "and/both" fashion—each offering unique strengths that, when used together in various contexts, provide a more comprehensive understanding and measurement of Christian flourishing at the individual domain.

Congregational Domain

Beyond individual experiences, Christian flourishing is shaped by congregational life, where faith communities serve as important sites of social, spiritual, and moral development (Long et al., 2024). Churches are not merely places of worship; they function as support networks, educational institutions, and moral communities that profoundly influence the well-being of believers (Lim & Putnam, 2010). While existing research on flourishing positions close social relationships as a determinant of well-being (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2025a, 2025b), Christian flourishing requires a broader conceptualization—one that includes fellowship, corporate worship, and pastoral care as key relational dimensions (Long et al., 2024; VanderWeele et al., 2021).

Congregations also play a formative role in shaping moral character, reinforcing virtues that sustain both individual and community flourishing (Dahlsgaard et al., 2005). Unlike Aristotelian moral frameworks that emphasize individual virtue ethics, Christian moral development is often tied to community stories, shared rituals, and theological teachings that transcend personal moral reasoning (Miller, 2017). This community-oriented shaping of virtue aligns with research suggesting that religious institutions foster social capital and moral cohesion (Singh et al., 2020), strengthening believers' resilience and commitment to prosocial behaviors (Umberson & Montez, 2010). And there is no better person to comment on the congregational-domain than Leslie J. Francis, with his over four decades of psychological research on congregational studies. He provided his own research perspective on the congregational domain of Christian flourishing, integrating empirical theology and social science to explore how faith communities sustain well-being.

Francis (2025) defined the congregational domain as "the local physical presence of the Body of Christ within the community," (p. __), suggesting that flourishing churches must balance spiritual vitality (ministry of the Word and sacrament) with social engagement. His "multiplex church" model challenges rigid congregational structures, advocating for different entry points into faith communities to prevent disengagement (e.g., through activities, events, relationships, place). His decades-long empirical work on church-leaving has identified 15 key reasons why individuals exit congregational life, with more emphasis on the need for inclusive, adaptable, and socially connected churches. The multiplex model encourages church-switching rather than leaving, guiding individuals to congregations that better aligns with their spiritual needs. This requires churches to see each other as collaborators rather than competitors, referring potential church-leavers to partner churches. Ultimately, Francis has called for interdisciplinary and multiplex approaches to congregational flourishing that are sensitive to generational and demographic differences, ensuring that congregations remain both spiritually vibrant and socially relevant.

Complementing this perspective, Adams et al. (2025) examined clergy well-being as an essential aspect of the congregational domain. Drawing on their flourishing in ministry framework and current ongoing work through the Mental Health and the Church Initiative, Adam et al. reviewed the resilience of clergy, a group often overburdened by role complexity and high expectations within the congregational domain. Adams et al. (2025) argued that flourishing clergy sustain their well-being through a strong professional identity, purpose-driven work, and supportive relationships within their faith communities. However, they also highlighted the significant challenges that threaten clergy sustainability, including role overload, social isolation, and self-sacrificial tendencies that can lead to burnout. Their review of their extensive program of research on flourishing in ministry showed the importance of resilience-building practices, such as job crafting, contemplative reflection, and mentoring, as essential tools for clergy well-being. These practices not only help clergy maintain their own flourishing but also directly impact the health and vitality of the congregations they lead.

Both Francis (2025) and Adams et al. (2025) have made it clear that congregational flourishing extends beyond worship and doctrine; it is intricately tethered to the well-being of its leaders and the social structures that sustain community life. Their work has emphasized that a flourishing congregation is not simply a product of sound theology but also of healthy relational dynamics, leadership sustainability, and the availability of social and spiritual resources. This simply means that flourishing within the congregational domain cannot be detached from the structural conditions from which it unfolds, including access to resources, opportunities for spiritual transformation, good leadership, good liturgy or doctrine, and structural stability—echoing VanderWeele's (2019) community well-being framework.

Community Domain

Christian flourishing does not happen in isolation. It extends into the wider community, where believers engage with social, economic, and political structures that shape their ability to thrive (Levin, 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Willen, 2022). This is how the local church interacts with the broader environment. The Christian tradition has long recognized the reciprocal relationship between faith and society, where individuals and congregations serve as agents of transformation within their broader communities (Heuerwas & Willimon, 1989; Long et al., 2024). Flourishing must account for questions of power, justice, and resource distribution, as these external factors substantially impact human well-being. As such, Christian flourishing is not merely about individual and congregational domains of well-being but also about how Christian communities contribute to societal flourishing through acts of justice, service, and advocacy.

Long et al. (2025) showed how Christian communities contribute to public health, social services, and economic support in ways that shape societal flourishing. Their paper highlighted the practical role of churches and faith-based organizations in meeting basic needs, mobilizing volunteers, and advocating for policies that improve well-being. Christian flourishing is not just about individual faith or spiritual transformation but also about creating tangible, lasting change in the world. The authors argued that churches and religious groups act as powerful forces for social change by addressing healthcare, education, and poverty, citing examples of faith-based hos-

pitals, food assistance programs, and housing initiatives that serve millions each year (Chaves & Eagle, 2016; Feeding America, 2025; Habitat for Humanity, 2025). Long and colleagues demonstrated that Christian flourishing is not an isolated individual or congregational experience but a shared reality that depends on strong community bonds and practical acts of service. The authors challenged the idea that faith communities exist only for worship and spiritual development. Instead, they presented them as essential partners in building healthier, more just societies. While partnerships are important, Long et al. emphasized that the inclusion of community flourishing as a core domain of Christian Flourishing takes seriously the idea that community flourishing is not an "optional extra" for Christians to consider when possible but, rather, an essential component of what it means for the Church to flourish in the 21st century.

Christian flourishing within the community domain requires envisioning how the Church participates in God's mission in the world to bring about a transformed creation (Bosch, 2011)—one that culminates in the new heaven and new earth, described in Revelation 21 as perfectly proportioned in height, breadth, and length. The New Jerusalem's three dimensions (length, breadth, height) symbolize the three domains of Christian flourishing—individual, congregational, and communal. The length represents personal faith (Philippians 3:14) as believers journey toward Christlikeness through spiritual disciplines of faith, hope, and love. The breadth reflects the Church as a body (Ephesians 4:16), where worship and fellowship shape discipleship (Volf & Croasmun, 2019). The height points to community flourishing, where faith transforms society (Jeremiah 29:7). Like the cube-shaped Holy of Holies (1 Kings 6:20), true flourishing happens in God's presence when faith moves beyond self to church and society, forming a full expression of shalom (Nessan, 2010). This vision suggests that the flourishing of Christian communities is not merely about adapting to cultural shifts or securing well-being in present circumstances but about aligning with the eschatological reality of God's kingdom (Revelations 21).

Cultural differences also shape how Christian communities conceptualize and pursue societal flourishing through the Church's engagement with its surrounding culture (Bosch, 2011). Yet, this engagement is not passive; the Church is neither called to retreat nor to conform but to transform culture in light of God's redemptive purposes. This transformation is not solely individual or even loosely communal—it is tethered to ecclesial and missional undertaking (see Bosch, 2011). The Church forms communities of discipleship, sustains them through sacramental life, and sends them forth in an intergenerational mission that participates in God's restoration of creation. Revelation 21's description of the new Jerusalem as a city of equal dimensions suggests a theological vision of flourishing that is holistic, just, and complete. The height, breadth, and length being equal signify a perfected order, one in which human flourishing is not fragmented by cultural, social, or economic inequalities but is made whole in God's presence. This biblical image calls Christian communities to embody a form of flourishing that resists the distortions of individualism and self-determination found in secular paradigms (Counted et al., 2025; Francis et al., 2025; Kim, 2024; Long et al., 2025; VanderWeele, 2017a). Instead, it envisions a flourishing that is context-sensitive to individual Christians, structured by congregational practices of the Church and its leadership, and embedded in the community from which the Christian life unfolds. Thus, Christian flourishing must be understood within an ecclesial-missional framework—one where the Church's role in shaping culture is not merely about moral influence but about anticipating and reflecting the new creation. The Church is not only a gathering of believers but a foretaste of God's coming kingdom, where human flourishing is fully realized in perfect justice, reconciliation, and divine communion.

Moving Forward: A Call for Interdisciplinary Engagement

A domain-based approach to Christian flourishing requires moving beyond individualistic and secular well-being models to consider the interconnected roles of individuals, congregations, and communities. This contextualized approach ensures that flourishing is not reduced to individual happiness, material wealth, or subjective well-being, but is, instead, understood in relation to the community structures and theology that define and sustain the Christian vision of a good life.

Because Christian flourishing is multi-dimensional, its study must also be interdisciplinary. The individual domain of flourishing, for example, is best understood through a framework that centers on individual faith experiences, emotional well-being, meaning-making, and virtue development. Psychology, for example, provides some of the tools to measure and analyze these individual differences (e.g., Counted et al., 2025; Park et al., 2025), helping us understand how Christian spiritual strengths operate within an individual's affective-behavioral-cognitive framework. However, a psychological perspective alone risks reducing Christian flourishing to internal states or subjective individual well-being (e.g. presence of positive affect; absence of negative affect), overlooking the Christo-centric theological foundation that shapes Christian life. The congregational domain, on the other hand, requires a sociological approach, as congregations are inherently social entities shaped by group dynamics, cultural contexts, and institutional structures. Sociologists can help us understand how congregational belonging sustains well-being, how leadership and community structures support or hinder flourishing, and how social cohesion within faith communities contributes to broader societal well-being. However, focusing solely on sociological metrics—such as church attendance or social capital—without theological depth may lead to an incomplete picture, as one treats the Church as just another social institution rather than a spiritually transformative body.

If approached without sensitivity to theological and ethical concerns, there is a risk of instrumentalizing faith communities—viewing them merely as service providers rather than recognizing their spiritual and moral contributions to human flourishing (Long et al., 2024). The community domain extends beyond church walls and into broader society, which necessitates engagement with the world. Throughout modern history, Christian initiatives have long played a role in promoting population health, from providing healthcare services to addressing social determinants of health such as poverty, housing, education, and other material and social needs. Public health and other social science research can provide robust empirical insights into how religious communities strengthen well-being at a societal level (Long et al., 2025), while policy studies may help translate these findings into action. However, the community dimension of Christian flourishing is not merely about outward-facing advocacy—showcasing good works—but is, at its core, an essential part of how we understand our own flourishing as Christians and congregations, as love for others—both neighbors and enemies—lies at the heart of the Christian life.

This special issue marks an important step in the development of Christian flourishing science, but it is just the beginning. The interdisciplinarity of this field is both its greatest strength and its greatest challenge. If we are to truly understand what it means for Christians to flourish, we must bring together psychology, theology, sociology, and public health, doing so with scientific rigor, theological depth, and a respect for the lived experiences of believers. Flourishing is not just an academic concept; it is the heartbeat of Christian life. It is the abundant life that Christ promised (John 10:10). And as we continue to study this spiritual phenomenon, we invite scholars, scientists, pastors, and practitioners to join us in exploring what it means for the Church (i.e., individuals, congregations, communities) to flourish in Christ.

In conclusion, I am reminded in this very moment of Psalm 1:3: That the believer is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prosper. This image of deep-rooted growth and fruitfulness reflects the essence of Christian flourishing—grounded in faith, sustained by the love of community, and anchored in hope (Long & VanderWeele, 2023). May this work serve as fertile ground for future inquiry, ensuring that the Church continues to grow, thrive, and bear witness to the fullness of life in Christ.

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The Individual Domain of Christian Flourishing: Conceptual Foundations and Measurement Template

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This paper presents an emic approach to the science of Christian flourishing, focusing on the individual domain as a foundational element for broader congregational and community well-being. While VanderWeele's universal etic approach to human flourishing, involving six domains, provides valuable insights, it may not fully capture the nuances of flourishing within Christian contexts. Christian flourishing can be conceptualized through three interconnected domains: individual Christians, their congregations, and the communities they influence. The rationale for adopting an emic approach lies in the recognition that flourishing is a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good, including the contexts in which they live. Religious communities, as a significant context for human existence, serve as both a setting and a pathway for flourishing. Given that Christianity represents the largest religious group globally, focusing on the Christian context offers a critical lens for understanding how faith communities contribute to human flourishing. Therefore, we introduce a new construct and corresponding measure—the Christian Flourishing Index—that reflects individual flourishing in alignment with the values of the Christian "abundant life," the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, communion with God, and a stewardship approach to material resources. While the conceptual framing and measurement template of the individual Christian flourishing broadly aligns within the original dimensions of VanderWeele, the proposed dimensions might be better framed as—contentment, health, meaning, character, relationships, and stewardship—reflecting the transformative influence of the Christian faith to anchor temporal conceptions of the good life to that which is pointed towards eternal ends in God. Although this paper centers on the individual domain, we invite further scholarly engagement on other domains (e.g., congregational, community) of flourishing within the Christian context.

Interest in studying human well-being has surged in recent years across psychology and the social sciences (Rasmussen, 1999; Seligman, 2011). This interest stems from the potential to identify factors that enhance well-being and apply them across different contexts and communities (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). A notable approach (e.g., VanderWeele, 2017) outlines six temporal dimensions of flourishing—happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, purpose and meaning, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial and material stability—intersecting with work, education, family life, and religious communities. This model has been extensively used to guide research (e.g., The Global Flourishing Study; VanderWeele et al., (in press)), and inform interventions aimed at supporting well-being (Węziak-Białowolska et al., 2019; VanderWeele, 2022).

Despite its broad applicability, VanderWeele's universal etic approach may not fully capture the complex nature of flourishing within specif-

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ic cultural and religious contexts, and, indeed, he himself has called for supplementation with tradition-specific understandings of spiritual well-being in such contexts (VanderWeele, 2024; VanderWeele et al., 2021). Human flourishing, defined as "a relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good, including the context in which that person lives" (VanderWeele et al., 2023, p.3), highlights the importance of the individual context in shaping well-being. A contextual approach to studying flourishing recognizes that well-being depends on the conditions in which people live. For example, flourishing is not a Christian term until it is lived out in a Christian faith context. In the Christian faith, flourishing is understood in relation to a life oriented toward God, community, and character (Pennington, 2017; Volf & Croasmun, 2019). In this Christian context, flourishing is not the absence of illness or suffering but a value orientation to experience "shalom" (i.e., peace, righteousness, holiness) through the connection with and discovering of God, often in the context of adversity, ultimately leading to the transformation (not replacement) of the "body" in the present into a "glorious body" in the life to come (Philippians 3:20-21). The Christian tradition values the spiritual transformation of the believer through a life lived out in love, that pursues truth and justice, and where one loves both one's neighbor and enemy, all of which is nurtured within a communal and spiritual context of the Church. Therefore, studying Christian flourishing requires attention to the contexts that shape believers' well-being, as flourishing extends beyond individual attainment to include congregational, community, and biblical dimensions (Counted, 2025a; Long, Counted, et al., 2024); VanderWeele et al., 2021). For Christians, who represent nearly a third of the global population (World Population Review, 2023), this context of a flourishing life is largely informed by their faith.

Christians often interpret a flourishing life through an abundant life perspective described in John 10:10, where Jesus tells his disciples that he has come so that they may have life and have it to the full. In other New Testament texts, Christians are also reminded that following Christ is a costly endeavor that may often involve the experience of suffering (see 1 Peter 4; 2 Corinthins 4; Philippians 3). The paradox of the Christian life—living in the abundance of Christ even amidst the experience of suffering and hardship—is often difficult to grasp. And yet, we see how such things are possible through spiritual richness born out of a deep faith (Hebrews 11:1), an enduring love (1 Corinthians 13:7), and an audacious hope (Romans 5:3-5), even amidst material and spiritual scarcity. While socio-political and economic conditions—such as freedom, persecution, prosperity, or hardship—may shape how Christians experience flourishing (see Margolis et al., 2021; Messer, 2021), there are often other dynamics at play within the Christian life that may help contextualize how Christians experience flourishing in the present. For example, during times of persecution, underground churches have often strengthened faith through shared suffering, encouraged hope by focusing on God's eternal promises, and cultivated love through acts of sacrificial care within the community (Halik, 2019). In more prosperous contexts, churches may nurture flourishing by equipping believers to steward their resources for the benefit of others, sustaining faith, hope, and love through service and generosity. Through spiritual formation practices, such as prayer, worship, and mutual support, the Church also becomes a source of encouragement, enabling believers to flourish even amidst life's challenges (Witvliet et al., 2022, 2023). Unlike secular models, Christian flourishing embraces suffering and redemptive hope, revealing how faith sustains believers through adversity (Cowden et al., 2022; Kent et al., 2022). The abundant life perspective offers a unique framework for understanding flourishing in a Christian context while also integrating several important dimensions of spiritual well-being (see Figure 1). Yet, the Christian context remains largely underexplored in the flourishing science literature, creating a gap that this paper seeks to address by exploring what flourishing look like within the individual domain of Christian life and how it can be conceptualized and measured as a social scientific construct that aligns with Christian values, spiritual strengths, and spiritual richness of the Christian faith.

As a basic foundation, this paper intersects positive psychology and Christian theology, offering a distinctively emic social scientific framework through which to examine human flourishing. This framework can help to better understand how Christians experience and pursue flourishing, infusing dimensions such as joy, health, meaning, character, relationships, and stewardship with a distinctly Christian ethos. Recognizing that no social science research is value- or worldview-neutral (Slife et al., 2017), this framework embraces a distinctly Christian biblical vision that reflects specific beliefs and values about human nature and ultimate purpose (Christopher, 1999). This emic approach is worthwhile because it complements the etic perspective on human flourishing (e.g., VanderWeele, 2017), which focuses on universal, temporal dimensions of well-being. While etic frameworks provide valuable insights into shared aspects of flourishing across cultures (VanderWeele et al., in press), they often overlook the unique spiritual and communal dimensions that shape flourishing within specific religious contexts. As we ground the construct of Christian flourishing in the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love (1 Corinthians 13:13), this paper highlights the dynamism of different Christian dimensions that define the individual domain of Christian flourishing. This focus not only enriches the understanding of flourishing within the Christian context but also bridges the gap between universal etic frameworks and the specificities of Christian spirituality. While recognizing the three interconnected domains of Christian flourishing—individual Christians, congregations, and communities (Counted, 2025a; Long, Counted, et al., 2024)—this paper will focus on the individual domain. The focus on individual Christian flourishing provides both the social scientific and domain-specific understandings that advance both scholarly discussions and practical efforts to support, sustain, and strengthen well-being within Christian contexts. It also addresses the broader need for an emic-oriented cultural and contextual specificity in flourishing research and may serve as a model for other faith traditions to explore similar emic approaches.

Contextualizing the Individual Domain of Christian Flourishing

Flourishing is "the relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good, including the contexts in which that person lives" (VanderWeele et al., 2023, p.3). This definition highlights the importance of context in shaping flourishing, distinguishing it from well-being, which focuses more narrowly on the individual's internal state (Diener et al., 2018; White, 2017). For Christians, flourishing is contextual, shaped by their faith in Christ, their participation in congregational life, and their engagement with the wider community. In other words, flourishing includes not just personal experiences of well-being but also the context in which an individual is embedded, such as congregations, religious teachings, and broader communal structures (Counted, 2025a; Long, Counted, et al., 2024). This context begins with an open invitation to a relationship with Jesus Christ and the abundant life He offers (John 10:10)—a life marked by spiritual richness that is accessible to all, regardless of circumstances, even in the midst of scarcity (see Figure 1). Therefore, Christian flourishing must be understood within the theological, moral, cultural, and social frameworks that shape Christian identity and lived experience.

VanderWeele (2017) provided a valuable foundation for understanding temporal flourishing through dimensions such as happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial and material

Figure 1

The Invitation to the Abundant Life Starts with a Relationship with Jesus Christ

stability, given that they are universally desired and an end in themselves. However, the etic nature of these dimensions means that they may not fully capture the dimensions that define flourishing within Christian contexts. Christian flourishing must incorporate emic dimensions that reflect the distinct ways in which the Christian faith shapes a believer's pursuit of a flourishing life within their respective context. Christian flourishing, therefore, cannot be assessed in purely etic terms but must also include how individuals experience purpose, virtue, and fulfillment within the broader Christian faith tradition (Geertz, 1973; King & Boyatzis, 2004).

Contrasting Christian Flourishing with Temporal Flourishing

In many secular frameworks, happiness and life satisfaction are defined through hedonic well-being—the presence of positive emotions and the absence of suffering (Diener et al., 2018). However, for Christians, these temporal emotions are often secondary to the enduring states of joy/peace, which is rooted in a relationship with God (Emmons, 2020; Xi et al., 2021). For example, joy is not dependent on external circumstances (Emmons, 2020; Philippians 4:4) but is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Peace transcends worldly understanding (Philippians 4:7), reflecting a spiritual resilience that sustains believers even in adversity (Xi et al., 2021). When a believer embraces contentment, they relinquish striving for more and rest in God's sufficiency, which creates the conditions for joy and peace to flourish (Philippians 4:11-13; Hebrews 13:5). These Christian characteristics honor the context of faith, where flourishing is not merely about feeling "happy or satisfied" but about experiencing God's presence and promises (Xi et al., 2021), which suggest that alongside these dimensions of flourishing, Christian should also consider aspects of joy and peace as markers that reflect a deep-seated sense of contentment that transcends circumstances (Cowden et al., 2022; Kent et al., 2022).

VanderWeele's (2017) framework includes mental and physical health as essential components of flourishing. While Christians are, likewise, called to care for the mind and body, they are also called to pursue these aims through the lens of stewardship. The body is seen as a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), and caring for it is an act of worship and responsibility. VanderWeele's model, like most etic approaches, does not explore the reasons one may seek mental or physical health but treats health as its own end (VanderWeele, 2017), as an instrumental good (Steptoe et al., 2015) and an intrinsic good (VanderWeele, 2024). Religious coping mechanisms, communal prayer, and trust in divine providence shape how Christians interpret and navigate illness and suffering (Kent et al., 2022). While good health is valued and should be pursued, for Christians, it is not an ultimate determinant of flourishing. At various times in a Christian's life, faith may help a person navigate or even transform the experience of physical suffering into an opportunity for spiritual growth (Cowden et al., 2022).

In secular well-being models, meaning and purpose are often indexed as various aspects of career achievement, personal goals, and social contributions (Steger et al., 2009). However, for Christians, purpose is not primarily self-defined but is rooted in God's will and work in the world (Counted et al., 2024; King & Boyatzis, 2004). Believers find meaning in their identity as children of God and their participation in His redemptive work (Ephesians 2:10). Christian meaning is often collective rather than purely individualistic, focusing on service, worship, and the fulfillment of God's will rather than personal ambitions alone (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This is particularly striking amidst broader cultural distinctions, wherein Western well-being models often prioritize autonomy, while Christian meaning-making often emphasizes relational dependence on God and community (Christopher, 1999). The spiritual dimension of purpose transcends individual aspirations, connecting personal flourishing to a larger, eternal narrative (King & Boyatzis, 2004).

One of the most striking features of VanderWeele's temporal flourishing model is the inclusion of character and virtue, the internal formation of the human person. While these are, indeed, values that many Christian would endorse as important, in their global application, the particular character or virtue traits of focus are those that have broad resonance across traditions and ethical frameworks (e.g., kindness, promoting the good, forgoing immediate gratification; Dahlsgaard et al., 2005). Christian character is more fundamentally shaped by theological virtues and spiritual formation within the faith community. For Christians, character is not merely about moral excellence but about Christlike transformation. The goal is to reflect the image of Christ (Romans 8:29), embodying virtues such as sacrificial love for the sake of others, other-oriented humility, and forgiveness to account for human fallenness. This process of spiritual formation is central to Christian flourishing, as it shapes how individuals relate to God, others, and the world. Thus, the development of Christian character is not just an ethical pursuit, but a lifelong spiritual transformation, often cultivated through sacramental participation, scriptural engagement, and communal practices (Miller, 2006). Compared to secular moral development, which often emphasizes individual rationality, the Christian virtue is embedded in communal narratives, liturgical traditions, and embodied spiritual practices (Geertz, 1973; Smith, 2016).

VanderWeele's framework prioritizes close relationships as an important social determinant of well-being, with emphasis on strong family and friendship networks (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017). In addition to kinship relationships, Christians also experience relationships within the context of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27) and the world (John 3:16). Fellowship is not limited to personal connections but extends to the communal life of the church, where believers are united by their shared faith and mission (Lim & Putnam, 2010). This communal dimension of relationships reflects the Christian value of unity and mutual edification. Christian relationships are often covenantal rather than transactional, rooted in spiritual kinship (e.g., agape love) and communal worship rather than merely emotional or instrumental support (Triandis, 2018). Unlike secular friendship models that prioritize reciprocity and personal benefit, Christian relationships are ideally shaped by commitments to grace, sacrifice, and unconditional love (King & Boyatzis, 2004).

Finally, while financial and material stability are important components of secure flourishing, this dimension has nuance within the Christian tradition. For Christians, financial well-being is framed as stewardship and generosity (Briggs & Reiss, 2021; Francis, 2015; McFague, 2008). Resources are seen as gifts from God to be managed wisely and shared generously (2 Corinthians 9:6-8). This perspective shifts the focus from accumulation to contribution, in such a way that aligns financial practices with the values of the Kingdom.

Spiritual Strengths and Pillars of Christian Flourishing

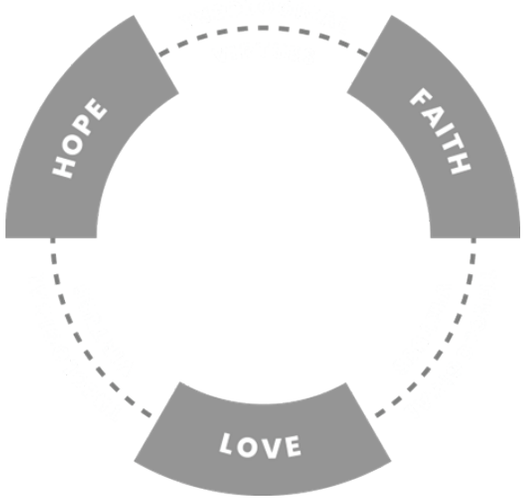
The concept of the abundant life in John 10:10 is central to the Christian understanding of flourishing. Jesus declared, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, John 10:10). This "fullness of life" is not merely about material prosperity or temporal happiness but includes a holistic state of well-being that integrates all dimensions. The abundant life reflects Christ's vision for full human flourishing, where individuals experience deep communion with God, meaningful relationships with others, and purposeful engagement with the world.

It is important to remember the socio-historical context of Jesus' words in John 10:10, which was proclaimed within a society burdened by religious, political, and socio-economic divisions. Many of Jesus' followers were under Roman rule, living amidst religious legalism, political oppression, and socio-economic hardships (Wright, 2018). This lack of "fullness" and flourishing in their lives would have resonated with Jesus' promise of an abundant life. To fully appreciate Jesus' message, one must understand that He was not merely promising an improvement in material conditions but was offering a transformation of life in its entirety (Hays, 2013). This abundant life is not confined to the material or temporal but is holistic. At the heart of this vision are the theological virtues—faith, hope, and love—which sustain and animate the Christian life (Figure 2). These virtues, though propelled by God's Spirit in the believer and directed toward Him, influenced how believers relate to God, others, and the world. They provided the spiritual foundation for flourishing, enabling Christians to navigate the challenges of life and live fully in Christ (Long & VanderWeele, 2023; Romanus-Cessario, 2008).

The abundant life is not a fixed state but an ongoing process of spiritual transformation, made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit, whose fruit is manifested in our faith, love, and hope. These theological virtues are central to the Christian life across traditions and are essential for sustaining the Abundant

Figure 2

Theological Virtues



Life. These virtues—faith, hope, and love—are means by which believers appropriate and experience the fullness of life that Christ promises (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Faith is the virtue by which Christians believe in God and all that He has revealed. It involves trust in God's promises and a commitment to live in accordance with His will (Hebrews 11:1). Faith enables believers to see beyond temporal circumstances and embrace spiritual realities, providing a sense of security and purpose even in the midst of adversity. Empirical studies have shown that faith plays a significant role in promoting well-being. Religious faith is associated with greater resilience, lower levels of depression, and improved coping strategies in the face of stress (Koenig et al., 2012, 2023). Faith provides a framework for meaning-making, helping individuals interpret their experiences in light of God's promises and purposes (Park et al., 2025). In the context of the abundant life, faith sustains believers by anchoring them in the reality of God's love and faithfulness (Hebrews 10:23). It enables them to trust in God's provision, even when material resources are scarce, and to find joy and peace in His presence.

Hope is the virtue by which Christians desire and expect full and eternal life with God (Witvliet et al., 2022). It is rooted in the confidence of God's faithfulness and the promises of Scripture (Rueger et al., 2022; Romans 5:3-5). Hope sustains believers in times of trial, reminding them of the ultimate fulfillment of God's Kingdom. Several studies have established the strong connection between hope and well-being (Counted et al., 2022; Long, Wilkinson et al., 2024; Pleeging et al., 2021), with recent findings highlighting a strong correlation between regular religious service attendance and heightened levels of hope (Counted et al., 2024, 2025). While many positive psychologists and social scientists have developed operational measures of hope within the general population (e.g., Long, Wilkinson et al., 2024; Pleeging, 2022; Rueger et al., 2022; Snyder et al., 1991; Witvliet et al., 2022), n the Christian context, hope is not merely about achieving temporal goals powered by one's own agency, but about anticipating the fulfillment of God's promises, both in this life and the next (Romans 8:24-25). The abundant life is sustained by hope, which enables believers to persevere in the face of challenges and to live with a sense of purpose and direction. Hope transforms suffering into an opportunity for growth, and empowers us to act, while trusting in God's redemptive purposes and look forward to the ultimate restoration of all things (Romans 5:3-5).

Love is the greatest of the theological virtues (1 Corinthians 13:13), not only because it embodies selfless (agape) love for God and others—both desiring union with the beloved and contributing to their good (VanderWeele, 2023)—but also because of its eternal nature. While faith and hope are essential in this life, the Apostle Paul argued that they will become unnecessary when we see Jesus face to face; faith will give way to sight, and hope will be fulfilled (1 Corinthians 13:12). Yet love will endure forever, making it the greatest of all virtues. Love is the foundational principle of Christian life, motivating acts of worship to God because of who God is, and self-giving compassion, and service to our neighbors. Research on altruism and prosocial behavior has shown that love and compassion are associated with greater well-being and life satisfaction (Kahana et al., 2021; Wilkinson et al., in press). In the Christian context, love is not merely an emotion but a deliberate choice to seek the good of others, even at personal cost. This selfless love (with both unitive and contributive attributes) reflects the character of Christ and is a hallmark of the abundant life.

Love sustains the abundant life by sustaining meaningful relationships and creating a sense of belonging and community. It enables believers to experience the joy of giving and receiving love (Lee & Wellinghoff, 2024), both within the church and in the wider world. Love also motivates believers to engage in acts of justice and mercy, contributing to the flourishing of others and the transformation of society.

The abundant life and the theological virtues provide a rich and holistic framework for understanding the individual domain of Christian flourishing. The abundant life is sustained by the operation of faith, hope, and love in the believer's life by providing the spiritual foundation for flourishing and enabling Christians to experience the fullness of life that Christ promises. This virtuous cycle cannot only enhance the well-being of the individual Christian, but also contribute to the well-being of the broader community, as individual believers embody these virtues in action.

Conceptualizing Dimensions of Individual Domain of Christian Flourishing: A Value-Oriented Approach

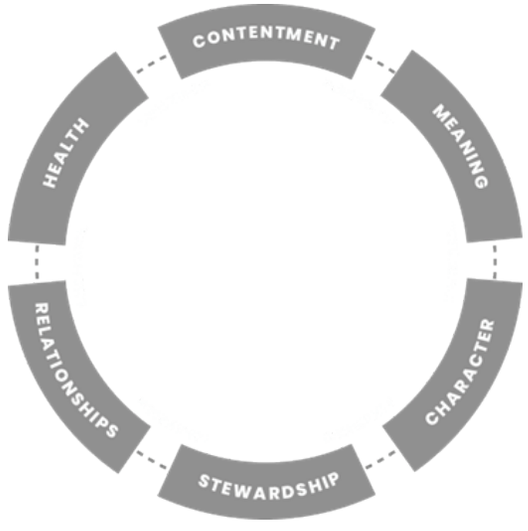
Understanding Christian flourishing at the individual level requires methodologies that reflect an emic approach that can shed light on the values and commitments of believers. Etic, secular, generic, or more universal approaches to measurement, which prioritizes standardized metrics such as happiness and life satisfaction, will, by design, miss context-sensitive and faith-centered dimensions of flourishing that are central to the Christian experience. To provide a more accurate and meaningful framework, research must also incorporate tradition-specific perspectives. For many Christian populations, this will include the values of faith, hope, love, and the pursuit of the abundant life proposed by Christ (see Figure 2). This approach ensures that the measurement of flourishing is not merely a reflection of general ideals of happiness and well-being but can be complemented by biblical and communal aspects of well-being that anchor the Christian life (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Kapic et al., 2023).

Christian flourishing is fundamentally shaped by value orientation—the priorities, beliefs, and practices that define what it means to live a good life aligned with God's purposes (Razin, 1996). For Christians, flourishing is not primarily about individual achievement or material prosperity but about living in relationship with God, embodying Christlike character, and contributing to the well-being of others. For example, while secular frameworks might measure happiness through self-reported life satisfaction, Christians often prioritize constructs like contentment from which precedes joy and peace—emotions that transcend circumstances and are rooted in a deep trust in God's promises. Where secular models might focus on financial stability as a marker of well-being, Christians view resources through the lens of stewardship and generosity, seeing them as tools for serving God and others rather than ends in themselves. These value-driven distinctions highlight the need for a contextualized framework and emic measurement tools that honor the Christian understanding of flourishing.

As we move forward, we will explore the individual domain by building on VanderWeele's dimensions that align with more distinctly Christian conceptualizations of flourishing, while integrating the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love into each aspect. This *both/and* approach (using the general measure alongside the Christian-specific measure) will allow for the assessment of flourishing, broadly defined,

Figure 3

Dimensions of the Individual Domain



as well as flourishing that is rooted in what Christians hold as essential and meaningful, offering a contextually sensitive framework for understanding well-being within Christian life.

Contentment/Happiness

While believers across denominations seek joy as a mark of spiritual well-being (Nyquist, 2018), true joy is sustained only when rooted in contentment—a settled confidence in God's provision and sufficiency, even in the midst of adversity (Philippians 4:11-13). This joy is not dependent on external circumstances but is rooted in the unchanging character of God (Psalm 16:11). Thus, contentment flows from a heart at peace with God, trusting in His providence and resting in His presence (Philippians 4:6-7). Peace, in turn, is enriched by contentment, as the assurance of God's goodness and this faithfulness brings stability to the human spirit, allowing for an enduring sense of well-being. Together, contentment, joy, and peace permeate every aspect of Christian life as ends in themselves—from work and family to education and church involvement—creating a vision of flourishing that is uniquely Christian (Lim & Putnam, 2010). Complementing the general dimension of happiness/life satisfaction (see VanderWeele, 2017), contentment is a central dimension of Christian flourishing and a spiritual posture that reflects a heart at rest, free from the anxieties of striving and comparison. However, contentment is also portrayed as a learned spiritual discipline, a state of inner stability that transcends external conditions (see Philippians 4:11-13). This stability creates the conditions for joy and peace to flourish, as the believer is no longer tossed about by the uncertainties of life but rests securely in God's providence. Within the abundant life framework, contentment is not merely a passive acceptance of one's circumstances but an active trust in God's sovereignty, made possible through one's faith in God, hope in the future, and an invitation to love one's neighbor and enemy. In other words, it is not about passive resignation but an active trust in God's promises (Hebrews 13:5), recognizing that true sufficiency is found not in material abundance but in the unchanging presence of God.

Faith Grounds Contentment in God's Sufficiency

Contentment arises from the virtue of faith, which anchors believers in the assurance of God's presence and provision. Hebrews 11:1 defined faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016, Hebrews 11:1). This assurance allows believers to rest in God's provision, even when circumstances are uncertain. Unlike hedonic forms of happiness, which often depend on external circumstances, Christian contentment is a deep-seated trust that God's grace is sufficient in every situation (2 Corinthians 12:9). This confidence produces joy—not as a fleeting emotion but as an enduring response to God's enduring faithfulness. Faith shifts the focus from what is lacking to what is already given—the abundant grace and love of God (John 10:10). As faith grows, so does the believer's capacity for contentment, even in adversity, which in turn nurtures joy and peace.

Hope Sustains Contentment in Trials

The virtue of hope sustains contentment, particularly in times of suffering and uncertainty. Hope looks beyond present difficulties and directs the believer's gaze toward the future fulfillment of God's promises and the ultimate restoration of all things. Romans 8:24-25 noted, "For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016, Romans 8:24–25). This forward-looking perspective allows believers to remain content, knowing that their present, even profound, struggles, cannot undermine their eternal security in Christ (Romans 8:18). Hope not only preserves joy in trials but also reinforces peace, as it reassures believers of God's sovereign care, even in life's most challenging moments (Romans 8:28). A Christian who embraces hope finds contentment "in the waiting," knowing that God's purposes will unfold in His perfect timing.

Love as the Expression of Shared Contentment

Contentment is expressed and sustained through the virtue of love, particularly within Christian community (see 1 John 4:16). In close-knit agapic relationships characterized by mutual care and self-giving love, believers experience the richness of contentment—a satisfaction that comes not from possessions or achievements but from belonging to the body of Christ (Acts 2:46-47). Love amplifies joy through acts of generosity, kindness, and service, while also nurturing peace by fostering reconciliation and unity within the body (Colossians 3:14-15). Contentment in Christ is never a solitary pursuit; it is cultivated and multiplied within a community of God's people reflecting and modeling the love of God. That reflects God's love.

Health

Within the abundant life framework, health is understood as a holistic integration of mental, physical, and spiritual well-being, which points to the multidimensional nature of the Christian life as a psychosomatic unity (Böttigheimer & Kamp, 2024; Hoekema, 1986; 1 Corinthians 15:44). Theologically, psychosomatic unity reflects the biblical understanding that humans are created as whole beings, where the body (soma), soul (psyche), and spirit are interconnected and inseparable in their flourishing (VanderWeele, 2024). This concept emphasizes that care for the physical body, emotional well-being, and spiritual life cannot be compartmentalized, as each dimension affects the others. Christian health is perceived as an engagement between the vertical dimension (relationship with God) and the horizontal dimension (relationships with others and the material world), with Christ at the center. Health is universally desired across Christian denominations, as it reflects the biblical vision of shalom—a state of wholeness, harmony, and flourishing (Jeremiah 33:6). While specific practices and emphases may vary among traditions, the pursuit of health as a component of Christian flourishing is a shared goal. Health is not merely a means to an end but is also an end in itself, as it reflects the goodness of God's creation and the believer's participation in His redemptive work. When Christians care for their bodies, minds, and spirits, they bear witness to the transformative power of the gospel and the hope of resurrection (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Rooted in the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, health is a tangible expression of a life lived in alignment with God's purposes.

Faith as the Foundation of Holistic Health

Faith is the cornerstone of good health within the Christian framework and shapes how believers understand and care for their bodies, minds, and spirits. The vertical dimension of health—the relationship with God—is nourished through foundational spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and scripture study. These practices have been shown to positively influence mental health, reducing stress, anxiety, and depression while enhancing well-being and life satisfaction (Bradshaw et al., 2024; Laird et al., 2004; Oman, 2018). Faith also supports resilience, providing believers with the mental fortitude and trust in God's providence, even in the face of adversity (Park, 2005). By viewing the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), faith encourages stewardship of physical health through healthy lifestyle choices, such as regular exercise, balanced nutrition, and sufficient rest (Koenig & Cohen, 2002; Pargament et al., 2005). This holistic approach to health reflects the Christian belief that caring for oneself is an act of worship and gratitude to God.

Hope Sustains Health Through Challenges

The virtue of hope plays an important role in sustaining health, particularly during times of physical or mental struggle (Counted et al., 2022). In the Christian context, hope looks forward to the ultimate restoration of all things, including the healing and wholeness promised in God's redemptive plan. This forward-looking perspective provides believers with the strength to endure illness, pain, or emotional distress, knowing that their present suffering is temporary and that God is actively working for their good (Romans 8:28). Hope also encourages proactive engagement with mental and physical health care, recognizing that seeking professional help is not a sign of weak faith but an expression of trust in God's provision of resources and wisdom (Aten et al., 2011; Counted, 2025b).

Love as the Social Expression of Health

Love is the driving force behind the social (e.g., communal, relational) aspects of health within the abundant life framework. The horizontal dimension of health—relationships with others—is nurtured through the love and support of Christian communities. Robust social connections provide emotional, practical, and spiritual support, which are essential for both mental and physical well-being (Hill et al., 2006; Krause, 2008). Acts of love, such as serving others, offering forgiveness, and fostering reconciliation, contribute to a sense of belonging and purpose, which are critical for mental health. Love also motivates believers to care for their bodies as an expression of gratitude for God's

gift of life and as a means of serving others effectively. The Christian emphasis on moderation, self-discipline, and respect for the body (1 Corinthians 9:25-27; Philippians 4:5) reflects a love-driven commitment to holistic health. Health and the body itself are an important means to love others (John Paul II, 2006).

Meaning

Central to the abundant life framework is the cultivation of a profound sense of meaning that is deeply grounded in one's relationship with God and in alignment with God's purpose (Park, 2005; Park et al., 2025). The pursuit of meaning and purpose is a universal human longing (VanderWeele, 2017), and within the Christian context, it takes on a distinctive character: Christians find ultimate meaning not in personal achievement or societal approval but in their identity as beloved children of God and participants in His redemptive work. This perspective transcends denominational differences, uniting believers in a shared vision of life centered in Christ. Meaning and purpose are, therefore, not merely individual pursuits but are cultivated within the community of faith, where relationships, service, and worship intertwine to create a holistic experience of flourishing. This dimension of flourishing can be understood within the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, which together shape how Christians understand their lives as part of God's greater story (Counted et al., 2024).

Faith Grounds Meaning in God's Eternal Plan

Faith provides the foundation for a Christian's sense of meaning and purpose. It anchors believers in the assurance that their lives are part of God's redemptive plan, even when circumstances are unclear or challenging. This eternal perspective (Alcorn, 1999) shifts the focus beyond temporary achievements to lasting significance, while emphasizing that true purpose is found in alignment with God's will. Faith enables believers to see their unique gifts and talents as divine endowments meant to be used for His glory and the good of others (1 Peter 4:10). Whether through education, work, family, or church involvement, faith transforms ordinary activities into meaningful expressions of worship and service.

Hope Sustains Purpose Through Life's Struggles

The Christian understanding of hope is not wishful pollyannaish thinking but a fixed attention to God's promises and ultimate restoration, particularly in the midst of hardship and struggles. This hope sustains believers as they navigate the challenges of life, reminding themselves that their efforts—no matter how small—contribute to God's greater plan (Romans 8:28). Hope also inspires a forward-looking vision, encouraging Christians to engage in purposeful work and redemptive work in the world today. Even in difficult seasons, hope assures believers that their lives have meaning because they are part of a story much larger than themselves.

Purpose is Expressed Through Loving Service and Relationships

Love compels believers to use their gifts and talents in service to others. This function reflects the self-giving love of Christ. Within the Christian life, purpose is not to be self-centered but others-oriented, flowing from the "horizontal" dimension of relationships with others and the world. Meaningful work, for example, becomes a calling when it is motivated by love and aligned with one's faith and values (Duffy & Dik, 2013). Active participation in church communities and nurturing family relationships are expressions of love that also foster a deep sense of belonging and purpose (Lim & Putnam, 2010; Mahoney, 2010). Love transforms everyday actions into opportunities to glorify God and bless others, imbuing life with profound significance.

Character

The development of character and virtue is central to Christian flourishing (VanderWeel et al., 2021). The cultivation of virtue is an aspiration across religious traditions, but within the Christian context, it takes on a distinctive character. Christian virtues are not merely about personal improvement but are expressions of a life transformed by the gospel. Virtues such as love, kindness, patience, and self-control (or the fruit of the Spirit; Galatians 5:22-23) are not abstract ideals but lived realities that emerge from a life empowered by the Holy Spirit and expressed through relationships, work, and service (Counted et al., in press). These virtues are cultivated within the multidimensional conditions of the Christian life—relationship with God, relationships with others, and engagement with the world—and are nurtured through various pathways of flourishing, including education, work, family, and church communities. Christian virtues reflect the character of Christ and contribute to the common good, enabling flourishing not only for individuals but also for their communities. Virtues like agape love—selfless, sacrificial love for others—are central to the Christian vision of flourishing, as they embody the heart of the gospel and its call to serve others (Lewis, 2001; 1 John 4:7-8).

Faith as the Foundation of Godly Character

Faith serves as the foundation for the cultivation of Christian character and virtues. It is through faith that believers are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, which enables them to embody the character of Christ. Spiritual habits such as prayer, Scripture reading, and communal worship provide opportunities for reflection, moral development, and spiritual formation (Park, 2005). These practices strengthen believers' relationship with God, grounding their character in His truth and grace. Faith also inspires a commitment to ethical behavior and moral integrity, as believers seek to honor God in every aspect of their lives.

Hope Sustains Character Through Challenges

Hope sustains the pursuit of character and virtue, particularly in the face of adversity or temptation. The Christian virtue of hope is rooted in the assurance of God's promises and the ultimate fulfillment of His kingdom. This eternal perspective enables believers to practice delayed gratification, prioritizing spiritual growth and eternal rewards over immediate pleasures (Hebrews 12:1-2; Ortberg, 2015). Hope also fosters resilience, empowering believers to persevere in living out virtues like patience and self-control, even when it is difficult. By fixing their eyes on Christ (Hebrews 12:2), believers are motivated to cultivate character that reflects His likeness.

Love and the Expression of Virtue in Community

Love is the highest virtue and the driving force behind all others (1 Corinthians 13:13). For Christians, love prompts a desire to be united to God and others and to contribute to God's work in the world as an outpouring of that love. The love of God leads us to pray for God's work in the world as an outpouring of that love. The love of God leads us to pray for God's work to be done in the world and to invite God's work in our own character to shape it to be ever more like Christ. In this way, Christians invite the Holy Spirit to cultivate many virtues, including the infamous list sent to the Christians in ancient Galatia (Galatians 5:22-23): love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These virtues are most often made manifest in community—for it is in community that Christian virtues are tested, practiced, and perfected. Aquinas (1274/1948) understood the theological virtue of love as the form of all the virtues and that by which the other virtues were themselves perfected.

Relationships

At the heart of Christian flourishing is the recognition that flourishing is relational. For Christians, relationships reflect the gospel's call to love one another as Christ has loved us (John 13:34), creating communities where individuals can experience the fullness of life promised in Him. Across Christian denominations, healthy relationships with others are recognized as a key component of the spiritual life and the flourishing of both individuals and communities (VanderWeele et al., 2021).

Relationships Grounded by Faith

Faith serves as the foundation for discipling relationships, anchored in a shared commitment to Christ and His mission. Within Christian communities, faith is nurtured through shared practices (e.g., worship, prayer, the sacraments, Bible studies, support groups), which create spaces for spiritual growth and mutual encouragement (Lim & Putnam, 2010). These practices not only strengthen individuals' relationship with God but also strengthen their bonds with one another. Faith also inspires believers to invest in the spiritual journeys of one another, offering guidance, accountability, and support as they seek to live out their calling.

Hope Sustains Relationships

The Christian virtue of hope assures believers that their efforts to build and maintain relationships are part of God's redemptive plan. Christian hope expands far beyond our own future joy in God to include the redemption of others and the restoration of the world. Hope, in the Christian context, motivates communal participation marked by authentic relationships with others—in our own homes, in our congregations, and in our communities (Wright, 2018).

Love is at the Heart of Relationships

Love is the defining feature of Christian relationships. Christians are called to not only love their neighbors, but to love our enemies and pray for those who cause us harm (Matthew 5:44). Christians are also called to love one another (John 13:34-35). Whether in ministry groups, workplaces, or families, love motivates believers to prioritize the well-being of others, creating environments where individuals can thrive (Post, 2003). In families, for example, love is expressed through nurturing relationships, shared religious practices, and the cultivation of a faith-filled home environment (Mahoney, 2010). In church communities, love is demonstrated through acts of service, forgiveness and reconciliation, mentorship or discipleship, and mutual care, which reinforce the bonds of fellowship and contribute to the flourishing of the broader community of believers (Krause, 2008).

Stewardship/Financial

Stewardship reflects the Christian belief that all resources—time, talents, material possessions, and our bodies—are entrusted to individuals by God and are to be managed responsibly for His glory and the good of others. The practice of stewardship is valued across Christian traditions, as it reflects a shared commitment to honor God with one's resources. While specific practices may vary, the underlying principles of generosity, honor, and gratitude to God are central to the Christian vision of flourishing with regard to material resources (2 Corinthians 9:11). However, stewardship extends beyond financial management and includes the responsible use and appreciation of talents (1 Peter 4:10; Matthew 25:14-30), resources (Proverbs 3:9; Luke 16:10-11), time (Ephesians 5:15-16; Psalm 90:12), relationships (Romans 12:10), the environment (Genesis 2:15; Psalm 24:1), and one's health (1 Corinthians 6:19-20; Philippians 4:6-7). Faithfulness in these areas contributes to experiencing divine provision, including financial stability or material security which is an important dimension of temporal flourishing (VanderWeele, 2017). Stewardship, therefore, transcends cultural and denominational boundaries and unites believers in a common commitment to use their resources for God's glory and the good of others.

Faith as Trusting in God's Ultimate Provision

Faith is the foundation of stewardship, shaping how Christians view and manage their resources. It begins with the recognition that everything belongs to God and is given as a trust (Psalm 24:1). This perspective shifts the focus from personal accumulation to responsible management, as stewards seek to honor God with what they have been given. Faith also fosters trust in God's provision, freeing individuals from anxiety over material needs (Matthew 6:25-34). By trusting in God's faithfulness, believers are empowered to use their resources generously and wisely, reflecting their dependence on Him and their commitment to His kingdom.

Christian Hope as Investing in Eternal Treasures

Hope infuses stewardship with an eternal perspective, reminding believers that their actions have lasting significance. The Christian virtue of hope looks beyond temporary material gains or losses to the eternal rewards of investing in God's kingdom (Matthew 6:19-21). This hope motivates Christians to prioritize generosity, service, and the good of others over personal prosperity. Whether through tithing, charitable giving, or voluntary service, hope inspires individuals to use their resources in ways that reflect God's redemptive purposes. By focusing on eternal treasures, stewardship becomes an expression of hope, demonstrating a confident expectation in God's promises and the ultimate fulfillment of His plan.

Loving and Serving Generously

Love is the driving force behind stewardship, compelling believers to use their resources for the benefit of others. For Christians, stewardship is not only about responsible management but about expressing Christlike love through acts of generosity and service. Love transforms stewardship into a tangible expression of care for others, whether through sharing knowledge, offering time, or providing financial support. In education, a Christian teacher might generously invest in their students' growth. In the workplace, a believer might use their skills to improve their community. And in families, stewardship is expressed through cultivating gratitude, contentment, and a spirit of sharing (Francis, 2016). Love also extends to the broader church community, where acts of service and charitable giving strengthen relationships and contribute to the collective flourishing of the body of Christ (1 Peter 4:10).

Development and Measurement Template of the Individual Domain of Christian Flourishing

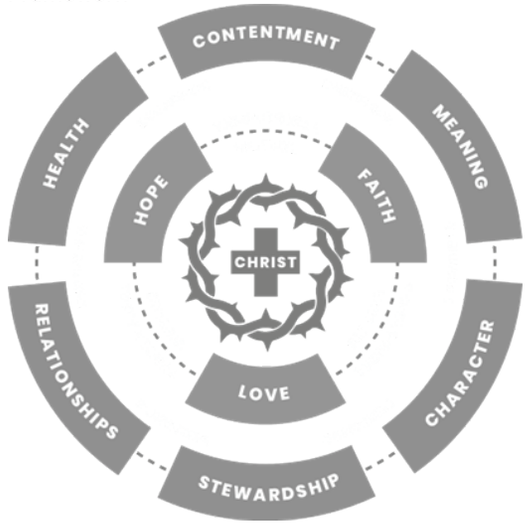
While VanderWeele's (2017) temporal flourishing measure provides a valuable etic and intentionally broad perspective on well-being, it does not, by design, fully capture a distinctively Christian understanding of flourishing, which is rooted in a relationship with Christ and shaped by the teachings of Scripture. For example, the Christian experience of contentment transcends hedonic forms of happiness, as it is grounded in the assurance of God's love and the hope of a better future. The concept of stewardship reframes material well-being, pointing to responsible resource management and generosity rather than personal accumulation of material wealth.

Unlike temporal measures of human flourishing (e.g., Butler & Kern, 2016; Diener et al., 2010; Janicke-Bowles et al., 2023; Keyes et al., 2008; Rautenbach & Rothmann, 2017; VanderWeele, 2017), the proposed measurement template builds on the six domains of VanderWeele to capture individual dimensions of flourishing in ways that align with the Christian tradition. First, it positions the relationship with Jesus Christ at the center of a flourishing Christian life—a connection from which spiritual richness is assured. Second, it integrates the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, ensuring the measure reflects core Christian values and practices that are broadly shared across Christian traditions, including Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox traditions (Aquinas, 1274/1948; John Paul II, 1984). We focused faith, hope, and love as pillars of Christian flourishing (see Figure 1), tailoring the measure to reflect the theological and cultural nuances of the Christian faith. For example, faith anchors flourishing in a relationship with God, grounding well-being in His presence and promises, and transforming how individuals view resources, relationships, and challenges. Hope infuses flourishing with an eternal perspective, enabling endurance through suffering and inspiring generosity, resilience, and a commitment to God's kingdom. Theologically, love is the foundation of the virtues and of Christian flourishing more broadly, grounding Christian identity in the love of God and others. This grounding flows into all aspects of life, including how we love and care for our families, our churches, our neighbors, our communities, and, importantly, even our enemies. This love reflects Christ's self-giving love and fostering interconnectedness and mutual care. These virtues are not abstract ideals but lived realities that permeate every dimension of the Christian life. Third, the template employs Christian-oriented language, using terms like "contentment" and "stewardship" to reflect the distinctively Christian understanding of well-being (VanderWeele et al., 2021; John 10:10). However, our framing of contentment may be analogous to Aquinas' conception of happiness, which he defines as the ultimate end of human life (beatitudo), achieved not through temporal goods but in the perfect fulfillment found in the beatific vision of God (Aquinas, 1274/1948). Just as Aquinas distinguished between imperfect happiness—found in worldly success—and perfect happiness—found only in God—contentment can be understood as a foretaste of this ultimate fulfillment, allowing one to experience peace amid life's uncertainties by resting in divine sufficiency.

Fourth, the measurement template adopts a holistic perspective, addressing spiritual formation, relational aspects of Christian well-being, and responsible resource management, which are central to the Abundant Life (see Figure 4). Finally, it demonstrates contextual sensitivity by respecting the diversity of Christian traditions while providing a unified framework

Figure 4

Individual Domain of Christian Flourishing Framework



for understanding flourishing. This approach ensures the measure resonates with Christian communities, offering a tool that is both biblically grounded and scientifically relevant. This approach is anchored in the abundant life, which positions flourishing as a holistic integration of spiritual, relational, and material dimensions, all centered in Christ.

The process of developing and refining the proposed measure benefited from the critical feedback of an interdisciplinary and ecumenical team of scholars for over two years. The team carefully selected and evaluated six dimensions of the individual domain of Christian flourishing, based on historic Christian documents (e.g., Aquinas, 1274/1948; John Paul II, 1984; Westminster 1647/2014), spiritual practices, and service traditions, coupled with an important assessment of theological virtues (Aquinas, 1274/1948; Long & VanderWeele, 2023; Pieper, 2011; Romanus-Cessario, 2008), as well as comparisons to existing Christian-specific measures of well-being (e.g., VanderWeele et al., 2021). In the last two years, the measure benefited from several rounds of feedback and roundtable discussions from various theologians, pastors, scientists, and scholars from various Christian traditions. The measure was refined through multiple rounds of revisions, with careful attention to denominational nuances and theological diversity. While the goal was to create an emic measure broadly applicable across Christian traditions, we recognized that certain items might require adaptation for specific contexts.

The effort to develop a universally applicable measure of flourishing that could be applicable across Christian traditions posed challenges to the group. The authors respectfully navigated this process through healthy discussions, deliberations, roundtables, and compromises; ultimately avoiding wordings that elicited persistent confusion. Despite these efforts, we recognize that the measure might not be appropriate in certain denominational contexts, and that some items may not be seen as part of flourishing in every group that self-identifies as Christian. However, given the extraordinary diversity within Christianity and the denominational diversity of the authors, the proposed measure should be useful and suitable for a substantial portion of those who identify with the Christian faith. Modifications can be made to make the measure more relevant to specific settings.

We propose a new set of items that complement VanderWeele's (2017) temporal flourishing measure while taking a distinctively emic approach. These items are designed to reflect the unique values, theology, and traditions of the Christian faith. Unlike generic measures, these items are rooted in the multidimensional conditions of the Christian life—relationship with God, relationships with others, and engagement with the material world—and are infused with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. The proposed measure consists of 12 items, two for each of the six domains: contentment, health, meaning, character, relationships, and stewardship. Each item is scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Never true of me*; 5 = *Always true of me*), allowing participants to reflect on their subjective Christian experience. This approach is supported by research on memory and decision-making, which suggests that individuals rely on vivid, subjective memories when evaluating their experiences (Fandakova et al., 2021). Below is a summary of the items and instructions on how they might be scored, with specific anchors (see Table 1).

The items can of course also be classified in other ways as well. Items 2b, 3a and 3b might be combined as an assessment of faith; items 1b, 4a, and 4b as an assessment of hope; items 1a, 5a, and 5b as an assessment of love. Or alternatively, in the domains of Christian spiritual well-being earlier put forward by VanderWeele et al. (2021): 1a and 2b as communion; 2a and 6b as practices; 3a and 3b as beliefs; 1b and 4b as character; 5a and 5b as relationships; and 6a and 4a as service.

Discussion and Research Agenda: Advancing the Science of Christian Flourishing

The pursuit of an abundant life offers a transformative vision of human flourishing that transcends secular and temporal interpretations of well-being. Christian individuals who immerse themselves in this pursuit not only nurture their personal growth but also become catalysts for positive change within their congregations and communities. Christian flourishing unfolds across three interconnected domains: the individual, the congregational, and the communal (Counted, 2025a; Long, Counted, et al., 2024).

Table 1

Christian Flourishing Index

	Never true of me (1)	*Rarely true of me* (2)	*Sometimes true of me* (3)	*Often true of me* (4)	*Always true of me* (5)
			OR		
	Never true of me (0)				*Always true of me* (10)

Dimensions	Items
Contentment	1. My love for God is greater than my love for everything else in my life. 2. My hope for being with God is always stronger than all of my earthly desires.
Health	3. I take care of my body because it is a gift from God. 4. I trust in God's faithful love at all times, even in the midst of severe suffering.
Meaning	5. Because I trust God, I will believe all that God has revealed. 6. I trust in God even when I don't understand his purposes.
Character	7. I fervently pray for the establishing of God's kingdom. 8. My confidence in eternal life shapes how I live in the present.
Relationships	9. I love my neighbor as myself. 10. I am fully committed to doing good to those who might consider me their enemy.
Stewardship	11. Every resource I have is used in ways that I believe are pleasing to God. 12. I willingly give up everything God asks of me because of my love for Christ.

Note. Items may be scored using either a 5-point or 11-point response format. 5-point scale: 1 = *Never true of me*, 2 = *Rarely true of me*, 3 = *Sometimes true of me*, 4 = *Often true of me*, 5 = *Always true of me*. 11-point scale: 0 = *Never true of me* to 10 = *Always true of me* (anchor points only).

These domains are not isolated spheres but rather interdependent experiences of a dynamic and cyclical process, where the flourishing of one domain strengthens and sustains the others, and vice versa. The individual domain is the foundation of this cycle. As believers cultivate their faith, strengthen their hope, and embody love, they are transformed into agents of renewal within their faith communities and beyond. A flourishing congregation, in turn, fosters collective worship, discipling relationships, and mutual edification, reinforcing the individual's Christian flourishing while also equipping the church to engage meaningfully with the broader community. When a community is shaped by congregations steeped in the pursuit of the abundant life, it experiences a ripple effect of spiritual and social transformation, extending the impact of Christian flourishing beyond the walls of the church.

While all three domains are essential, this paper focuses on the first—individual domain of Christian flourishing—because it serves as the bedrock upon which the others stand. Without mature and sincere faith among individual Christians, collective expressions of faith can become hollow or easily swayed, and community engagement may lose its transformative power. Christian flourishing at the individual level is best understood through the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, which serve as the scaffolding for a life rooted in the abundant life (Long & VanderWeele, 2023; Romanus-Cessario, 2008). For example, faith anchors the believer in God's promises, providing the spiritual resilience necessary to navigate trials and uncertainties (Koenig et al., 2012, 2023). It orients the heart toward trust in divine providence, shaping an identity that is secure in God's unchanging nature rather than the shifting circumstances of the world (Hebrews 10:23). Hope propels the individual Christian forward to have a vision of God's redemptive missional work in both personal and communal dimensions

(Counted et al., 2022, 2024). It prevents stagnation, urging believers to live with expectancy and purpose (Romans 5:3-5). Love, the greatest of the virtues (1 Corinthians 13:13), compels the individual Christian upward and outward—it is the force that binds the believer to God and to others, transforming personal devotion into self-giving service (Lee & Wellinghoff, 2024; VanderWeele, 2023). These theological virtues form the essence of the abundant life, a life not marked merely by personal contentment but by an ever-deepening participation in God's redemptive work in the world (Bosch, 2011).

Centering our discussion on the individual domain of Christian flourishing is a recognition that true transformation begins within. It is the transformed individual who enriches the congregation and the flourishing congregation that ignites renewal within the broader community. Thus, a theology of Christian flourishing science must first ask: How does the pursuit of the abundant life shape the mind, body, and soul of the believer? The answer to this question will ultimately shape the path forward, not only for personal discipleship but for the flourishing of the church and the world beyond it. However, like all conceptual models, it comes with its own set of advantages and challenges, which we explore below.

Supplemental Versus Replacement Approaches

One of the central discussions emerging from this framework is the choice between a supplemental or a replacement approach to envisioning Christian flourishing. VanderWeele et al. (2021), for instance, recommended a supplemental path in their Christian-specific spiritual well-being measure, augmenting temporal flourishing assessments with distinctively Christian elements. This method allows for comparisons across different samples while acknowledging the relevance of temporal aspects within Christian flourishing, albeit with a nuanced subordination to spiritually oriented components when necessary. Another approach would be to replace general measures of flourishing with distinctively Christian items, like those listed above; for example, by replacing VanderWeele's (2019) 12-item temporal flourishing measure with a new set of 12 items designed to assess Christian flourishing at the individual level. A replacement model allows for measurement that more closely aligns with the biblical realities of the Christian life but does not allow for comparisons outside the Christian context. We anticipate that researchers may also use our measure for either purpose, at times supplementary and at times as a replacement to other measures of flourishing or well-being. These choices will likely depend on several factors, including (a) the need for comparative work, (b) whether a project is taking place across religious or secular populations, or (c) if it aims to explore variation in flourishing within Christian communities themselves. While we acknowledge the value of a both/and approach, particularly for projects that seek to integrate multiple frameworks, we also recognize that further psychometric validation will help determine whether these measures load similarly within Christian populations. In the meantime, we want to provide researchers with two viable options so they can use what best aligns with their project's goals. Ultimately, we hope that the flourishing framework outlined in this paper, along with the items themselves, will serve as meaningful tools for those seeking to better understand and assess flourishing in Christian contexts.

Research Agenda

In our quest to better understand human flourishing, specifically within Christian communities, we propose a research agenda on how to study and measure Christian flourishing, mindful of criticism that empirical work on Christianity risks simplifying or operationalizing religion (Bishop, 2009). Understanding Christian flourishing requires a focused examination of the individual domain (Counted, 2025a; Long, Counted, et al., 2024). This domain serves as the foundation for broader flourishing within congregational and communal settings. The first step in our research agenda is to validate and adapt the individual domain measure across different Christian communities. Establishing its relevance in different denominational contexts will allow for the development of targeted interventions and applications that promote Christian flourishing. This validation ensures that the framework remains applicable and useful for various faith traditions. Second, larger samples and longitudinal research are necessary to examine how the proposed measure evolves across different life stages and transitions. For example, understanding how faith, hope, and love develop over time as pillars of Christian flourishing may provide valuable insights for pastoral care and congregational support. Such studies could highlight the resilience of Christian flourishing amid personal challenges and societal changes. The third research agenda includes investigating how specific religious practices, such as prayer, worship, and acts of service, contribute to Christian flourishing. Research should identify the mechanisms through which spiritual engagement nurtures faith, strengthens hope, and cultivates love. These scientific insights will help optimize religious practices to support holistic well-being within Christian communities (Koenig et al., 2012, 2023). Fourth, comparative studies could explore how different religious traditions conceptualize and experience flourishing. Doing this would enable researchers to identify universal and tradition-specific pathways to well-being, which could bring further clarity to the flourishing-religion framework. Such studies will not only contribute to research but can foster interfaith dialogue and collaboration in promoting human flourishing on a broader scale.

To bridge theory and practice, targeted interventions will be developed and evaluated across multiple dimensions of the individual domain of Christian flourishing. These interventions will provide practical guidance for individuals and faith leaders seeking to enhance Christian flourishing. Recognizing the complexity of human experience, research should examine how factors like gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation intersect with the individual domain. A better understanding of these intersections will ensure that Christian flourishing is accessible and inclusive amidst the diverse realities of believers worldwide. Other, perhaps more novel, areas of research would be the link between technology and Christian flourishing. Digital platforms and tools influence spiritual practices, community engagement, and personal well-being (Dein & Watts, 2023). Investigating the potential benefits and challenges of technology (e.g., artificial intelligence [AI], virtual workshop services) within Christian communities will provide insights into how digital resources can support or hinder the pursuit of Christian flourishing in a rapidly changing world. Finally, comparative analyses are needed of the individual domain of Christian flourishing (emic) and temporal flourishing (etic). These analyses will help clarify how features of Christian flourishing intersect with broader temporal dimensions of flourishing (e.g., VanderWeele's flourishing measure). This methodological approach will not only contextualize biblical insights and sacred strivings within a wider discourse on flourishing but also can refine existing models of well-being by introducing spiritual dimensions often overlooked in mainstream psychology (Emmons, 2005; Vieten & Lukoff, 2022).

Limitations and Considerations

While the emic approach to Christian flourishing provides a promising direction for understanding well-being in Christian contexts, several challenges must be addressed. As an emic construct, the abundant life concept may not resonate equally with all Christian communities or individuals, particularly those who interpret scripture differently or prioritize different aspects of their faith. Theological issues could arise in applying the framework. For instance, the *dark night of the soul* phenomenon (Dura-Vila & Dein, 2009)—where individuals feel distant from God but are, in fact, deepening their spirituality—could lead to misinterpretation of low scores on some domains (e.g., meaning and purpose, peace and joy). Certain theological traditions that are uncomfortable with the concept of suffering may inadvertently lead to overreporting joy, potentially introducing response bias as a form of spiritual bypass, where genuine struggles are overlooked or minimized. To address these issues, cross-denominational validation of the emic measure is needed to ensure its relevance and adaptability across different Christian contexts.

Second, a further challenge may arise from the tension between the paper's advocacy for an emic approach and its presentation, which at times takes on an etic tone. Some readers might see a limitation in the paper's approach, as it does not adopt an anthropological stance that allows Christianity to disclose its own self-understanding. Instead, it takes an insider perspective, which may create methodological ambiguity. However, this is an intentional choice, as the paper is written from a Christian biblical context-sensitive standpoint rather than a Christian anthropological outlook. Rather than merely describing Christian flourishing as a cultural construct, the paper develops a Christian view of flourishing that is sensitive to the abun-

dant life perspective grounded in theological virtues. This approach prioritizes the application of Christian theological commitments to human well-being, integrating psychology and theology to articulate a distinct framework for flourishing rather than offering a detached, descriptive account of Christian self-understanding.

The third concern arises from the perceived ambiguity in the use of the term theological, which stems from our disciplinary approach rather than a lack of clarity in our framework. Rather than engaging theology in a systematic or doctrinal sense, we developed a Christian biblical account of flourishing grounded in theological virtues. The goal is not to construct a theological framework that fits within the remit of traditional theological scholarship but to conceptualize a biblically informed model of flourishing. Taking a fully theologized approach often leads to denominational disagreements, making it difficult to present a universally applicable perspective across Christian traditions (McGrath, 2016). Since our aim is not to engage in doctrinal debate or theological system-building, we deliberately avoid positioning this as a theological paper. Instead, we integrate theological virtues into an emic scientific paradigm that is accessible and applicable across Christian contexts without requiring adherence to any specific theological tradition. Rather than a limitation, this approach ensures the framework remains relevant for Christian flourishing and well-being research without encountering theological exclusivity or denominational barriers.

Finally, the Christian-specific focus of our flourishing framework may be limited in pluralistic societies where diverse religious and spiritual traditions coexist. This challenge also presents an opportunity for other religious communities to develop their own emic instruments in order to foster a more genuine inclusivity than reliance on etic measures alone (Knabb et al., 2024). Future research and discourse are necessary to refine the current framework, establish its validity and reliability across different Christian communities, and clarify its theological underpinnings to enhance its scholarly and practical contributions.

Conclusion

This paper presents a robust and context-sensitive approach to understand and study flourishing within the Christian context. We integrated the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love into our multidimensional framework of individual Christian flourishing, providing a foundation for both academic research and practical interventions. As we continue to refine and validate this framework, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of human flourishing that honors the unique values and experiences of Christian communities while fostering collaboration across different denominational contexts. Specifically, we have demonstrated how many individualized Christian values and practices can be understood and fostered within each dimension and how these dimensions intersect with one another to promote overall well-being and flourishing. For example, we have highlighted the importance of joy and peace in the context of Christian flourishing, emphasizing the role of faith, spiritual practices, and supportive communities in cultivating these positive emotional states. We have also discussed the significance of mental and physical health, drawing on Christian teachings and practices that promote holistic well-being, such as meditation and bodily discipline. Furthermore, we have explored the meaning and purpose dimension, demonstrating how the abundant life provides a unique perspective on the ultimate eternal goals and values that underpin Christian flourishing. We have also examined the role of character and virtue development, highlighting the importance of spiritual practices, virtuous living, and Christian discipleship relationships in nurturing these qualities. Lastly, we have discussed the importance of stewardship as an important dimension of individual Christian flourishing that reorients a Christian's posture towards material and other resources to one of generosity and honor. Our proposal of an emic construct of Christian flourishing contributes to the growing body of scientific literature on human flourishing, providing a contextually relevant and denominationally sensitive framework for understanding and promoting well-being within Christian communities. This perspective can also serve as a starting point for further research into the unique values, practices, and pathways to flourishing in other religious and cultural contexts.

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A Religious Tradition-Specific Perspective on Wellbeing: The Construct and Measurement of Christian Flourishing

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Given the increased recognition of flourishing as a component of wellbeing, the construct of tradition-specific religious flourishing provides a promising direction for expanding this work. To address this need for an emic understanding of flourishing from a Christian perspective, we drew upon philosophy, Christian theology, and psychology to create a flourishing framework-centered on agapic love (love of God for humans and humans for God) and based on biblical text. We developed the construct and an 81-item pool through extensive theological and philosophical input and conducted cognitive interviews with a diverse sample of Christians. We then conducted an EFA of the items in an online sample of 277 Christian adults, resulting in strong one-factor and acceptable three-factor solutions. In an online study of 336 Christians, this structure was supported and preliminary evidence of reliability and validity were provided. This newly-developed Christian Flourishing Scale represents an important advance in understanding religious wellbeing and provides a useful tool for future research.

Human flourishing refers to "social–psychological prosperity" (Diener et al., 2010, p. 52), or generally doing well—feeling good and functioning effectively—across the various domains of one's life (Vanderweele et al., 2021). Interest in flourishing has surged over the past few decades as researchers and policy makers have increasingly recognized that assessing subjective well-being provides an important complement to more traditional objective measures of wellbeing such as economic or educational indicators (National Research Council, 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013).

While research on flourishing burgeons, consensus on how to best conceptualize and measure it remains lacking (see Forgeard et al., 2011, and Hone et al., 2014, for reviews). For example, some scholars have considered flourishing to be synonymous with high levels of mental well-being, essentially a reflection of mental health (e.g., Huppert & So, 2013). Others aver that flourishing is a broader concept that also includes physical health and other aspects of functioning (e.g., sufficient resources to meet basic needs, opportunities for education; (VanderWeele, 2017).

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Across these diverse ways of conceptualizing flourishing, religiousness is given little attention. This omission is surprising, given that religiousness is important to many people around the world. The vast majority of people worldwide (84%) identify with a particular religious tradition (Pew, 2017a) and 68% consider religion an important—or even the most important—aspect of their lives (Diener et al., 2011). Furthermore, the proportion of people with a religious identification is expected to increase due to higher fertility rates among religious individuals (Pew, 2017b).

Separate from the flourishing literature, the notion that the spiritual realm is an important domain of wellbeing has given rise to several measures of "spiritual wellbeing." This approach acknowledges the widespread significance of religious and spiritual life, but the specific measures developed have tended to conceptualize spiritual flourishing overly-broadly. For instance, one widely used spiritual wellbeing scale includes items such as "I find comfort in my faith or spiritual beliefs" (Peterman et al., 2002). These types of spiritual assessments are not only generic but have also been criticized on the grounds they principally tap psychological rather than spiritual well-being thereby conflating the two (Koenig, 2008).

Some measures contain items with somewhat more theologically specific content (e.g., "I believe that God is concerned about my problems"; Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982), while others go the other way, comprising primarily non-theological items (e.g., "oneness with nature"; Fisher, 2010). The extant corpus of spiritual wellbeing scales has been criticized as being too broad and lacking in both specificity and theoretical or theological foundations (Vanderweele et al., 2021). Being able to use these sorts of measures in a wide range of populations is a strength, but the lack of specificity leaves much to be interpreted by both participants and researchers. Thus, existing flourishing measures—even those focusing specifically on religious wellbeing—do not adequately assess this key construct.

Recently, some researchers have argued that religious constructs such as spiritual flourishing may be best assessed with measures that are faith-tradition-specific, given the differences among religious traditions, such as in their specific definitions of spiritual flourishing (Vanderweele et al., 2021). One effort to create such a measure of spiritual flourishing specific to Christians (Vanderweele et al., 2021) assessed six domains of Christian faith (i.e., beliefs, practices, service, communion with God, Christian character, and relationships). This measure appears to hew closely to key pillars of Christian faith (e.g., items such as "I believe Jesus will return to fully bring life everlasting"). However, by mingling aspects of what might be considered pure *wellbeing* (e.g., communion with God) with beliefs and behaviors (e.g., religious practices) that might be *conditions that lead to* spiritual flourishing rather than flourishing per se, this scale may inadvertently produce a measure of a broader Christian orthodoxy or religiousness rather than specifically tapping flourishing or wellbeing. This measure moves assessment in the right direction in that it provides greater religious context, but still falls short in sorting out confounding constructs.

Thus, the need for tradition-specific measures of religious wellbeing or flourishing remains unfulfilled. To address this gap specifically for Christians, we drew upon philosophy, Christian theology, and positive psychology to create a Christian-specific framework of flourishing. Within the Christian tradition, we sought to make a measure general enough to encompass the vast majority of Christian denominations by working within the theological affirmations of the Nicea-Constantinople creed, which unites the eastern and western branches of Christianity (World Council of Churches, 2010). We aimed to create a measure consistent with prevailing notions of Christian flourishing as defined by and centered on receiving and extending God's love, based on the biblical text, and with a long theological tradition stemming from Augustine (Volf, 2013, pp. 27-28; Williams, 2016, pp. 191-206). While Augustine is most representative of the Western Christian tradition, including Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, his views on the centrality of love to a Christian conception of flourishing are also consistent with Eastern Orthodoxy (e.g., Louth, 2002).

Our starting point was Jesus' identification of love of God and love of neighbor as the two greatest commands (Matthew 22:35-40). Augustine drew on Romans 5:5 to argue that this agapic love reorients self-love and repositions one's relation to the earth in love (Canning, 1993). We created a framework by combining four contexts of love (of God, neighbor, self, and creation) with Aristotle's components of virtuous dispositional activity, which might be summarized as consistently doing the right thing (behavior), for the right reason (cognitive/worldview), while experiencing the right emotions (emotion; Kahm, 2019, p. 7). Thus, we included three domains of this love—cognitive, behavioral and emotional—to create a matrix of 12 different areas of Christian flourishing (see Figure 1; based on Kapic et al., 2023). We then used this framework to systematically create a measure and conduct a series of three studies to develop and refine it.

Study One: Item Development and Cognitive Interviewing

The first study aimed to create an initial pool of items and evaluate and refine them, then evaluate initial item content validity through cognitive interviews. We used the conceptual framework described above to generate 84 items representing each of the twelve aspects of Christian Flourishing identified (see Table 1).

Items were evaluated for face validity, construct fidelity, and clarity of wording by five experts who held terminal degrees in philosophy or theology with expertise in flourishing and related areas from a Christian perspective. These experts also provided open-ended feedback about the items and suggested additional items. After revisions, 81 items were retained and subjected to cognitive interviewing (see Appendix). Item clarity was evaluated by focusing on the cognitive processes engaged in responding to items: comprehension, recall, judgment, and response. An additional purpose was to ascertain whether the interpretations associated with the evaluated items were acceptably common enough between diverse Christian groups (i.e., semantic equivalence; Daouk-Oyry & McDowal, 2013).

Method

Cognitive interview sampling aims for varied perspectives rather than representativeness. Striving to include diverse Christian traditions, we recruited two participants from each of the following groups: conservative Protestant, mainline Protestant, Pentecostal, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox. Our resulting sample of 10 is within the recommended size for cognitive interviews (Peterson et al., 2017). After receiving IRB approval, practitioners who were religiously committed, self-reflective, and verbal and who had faced a life challenge in the recent past were recruited using personal contacts and snowball sampling. Attempts were made to have

Table 1

3 x 4 Matrix of Spiritual Flourishing Framework with Sample Items

	Love of God	Love of neighbor	Love of self	Love of creation
Behavior	I try to represent Christ well in my daily life.	As a reflection of God's gentleness, I am gentle with others.	To honor God, I avoid temptation.	I care for God's creation (e.g., resources, plants, animals).
Cognition	I recognize that my actions might affect how people think of God.	I desire to use more of my time to help others.	I see the difference between sin and my personality.	I recognize my interdependence with creation.
Emotion	I sense God's approval.	I delight in someone else's good news or good fortune as a gift from God.	I accept myself even as I fight sin.	I enjoy God's goodness as I seek the good of the earth/culture/environment.

ethnic, age, and gender diversity. Interviews for this scale (and others not described here) were conducted using Zoom and lasted approximately 1.5 hours. Participants were compensated with a $50 gift card. Both think-aloud and verbal probe procedures were used for each item (Peterson et al., 2017), as is normative in cross-cultural cognitive interviewing (Willis, 2015). All interviews were audio-recorded. The resulting sample comprised 4 men and 6 women ranging in age from 22 to 68 years (M = 35.7, SD = 16.89). With respect to ethnicity, 6 were White/European American (non-Hispanic), 3 were Hispanic/Latino/a, and 1 was Asian-American.

Results and Discussion

Two researchers reviewed the qualitative data gathered and assessed each item for difficulties in comprehension, recall, judgment, and response. They also evaluated any comprehension differences between religious groups. Only one item was found to be difficult to comprehend and was flagged for re-evaluation after conducting the EFA. No problems emerged with respect to differences in comprehension between religious groups.

Overall, Study 1 provided the foundation for developing a psychometrically-sound measure of Christian flourishing. Input from Christian philosophers and theologians supported the notion and helped shape the framework underlying the construct and set of items to tap into it. Cognitive interview results suggested that across Christian traditions, the items were well-understood and meaningful. Based on Study 1 results, we proceeded with Studies 2 and 3 to examine psychometric properties of this new Christian Flourishing Scale.

Study Two: Item Reduction and Factor Analysis

Study 2 was conducted to reduce the number of items via principal components analysis (PCA), evaluate the factor structure of the reduced set of items with exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and determine internal consistency reliability with Cronbach's alpha.

Method

Participants and Procedure

After receiving IRB approval, participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and provided an incentive of $2.50. MTurk workers are more diverse than typical student or online forum samples and fairly representative of larger populations, including the United States (Huff & Tingley, 2015; Sheehan, 2018). Evaluations of MTurk data have found data to be high-quality, replicable, and valid across comparisons with frequently used academic platforms and student and professional samples (Kees et al., 2017; Sheehan, 2018; Zhang & Gearhart, 2020).

Eligible participants were at least 18 years old, resided in the United States, had at least a 95% MTurk approval rating, and had completed at least 500 tasks on MTurk successfully. The project was advertised as an anonymous survey for Christians active in their faith who have experienced a serious stressor that caused substantial suffering in the past six months. On the Spiritual Flourishing Scale, participants rated each of the items with the instructions, "As a result of God's grace or love, to what extent is each of the following items true for you?" rated as 1 (*Not at all*), 2 (*A small extent*), 3 (*A moderate extent*), and 4 (*A very large extent*). In addition to the flourishing items, the measure set included additional scales as part of another study, which required the suffering inclusion criterion.

Of 587 participants who completed the Christian Flourishing Scale, 72 were duplicates or empty, 90 gave invalid responses to stressful events, and 34 failed attention checks. Of the remaining 391 valid cases, data from the 277 participants who fully completed the Christian Flourishing Scale (70.8%) were analyzed for the current study.

Our final sample had a mean age of 37.7 years (SD = 10.73). More than half identified as male (147, 53.1%), and 128 (46.2%) were female. Few reported as non-binary (1, 0.4%) and other (1, 0.4%). The majority of participants were White (207, 74.7%), followed by Black or African American (38, 13.7%), Asian or Asian American (17, 6.1%), American Indian or Alaska Native (4, 1.4%), and multi-racial or other (8, 2.8%), and 49 (17.7%) were Hispanic or Latinx. Most participants were married or cohabitating (197, 71.1%), and the remaining were single (65, 23.5%), divorced or separated (12, 4.3%), or widowed (3, 1.1%). Median annual income was $60,000 – $79,999. The sample is fairly highly educated: More than half (145) reported having a bachelor's degree (68, 24.5%) or master's degree (or other higher education), and 32 (11.6% had some college), whereas 26 (9.4%) reported an associate degree, and only six (2.2%) a high school diploma (or GED). As for religious affiliation, most participants identified as "Christian" (183, 54.1%), followed by Roman Catholic (25, 9.0%), Baptist (23, 8.3%), Protestant (13, 4.7%), Christian Missionary Alliance (11, 4.0%;), and Methodist (9, 3.2%).

Results

Item Screening

Principal component analyses (PCAs) with Oblimin rotation (Delta = 0) were performed on the 81 items to investigate the most appropriate items and factors to describe Christian flourishing in the item pool, using eigenvalue greater than or equal to 1. The protocol required items with loadings less than .50 or cross-loading on multiple factors more than .50 were deleted. After all items excluded based on these criteria were removed, another PCA was performed.

Five rounds of item exclusion were performed to obtain a statistically stable solution. The first round of PCA extracted 17 components and deleted 20 items due to a lower loading in general or higher cross-loadings. The second round extracted 11 components and deleted 21 items; the third round extracted seven components and deleted 12 items; the fourth round extracted four components and deleted eight items; the final round extracted three components, and no items met the item exclusion criteria. The item flagged during cognitive interviewing was among those deleted during the PCA process.

After the last PCA indicated no more items were to be deleted, the authors discussed the theoretical meaning and/or redundancy of the remaining items. An additional PCA was performed to investigate the revised item list if the authors added or removed any items. If no items met the exclusion criteria, that solution was maintained. However, if items were found that met criteria, we continued the item exclusion process.

Factor Analysis

After the item removal process was completed, we employed exploratory factor analyses (EFAs) based on principal axis factoring to detect any fundamental factors in the scale. In the first EFA, consistent with the PCA results, a three-factor solution with 20 items was shown (see Table 2). The three factors included items representing the three conceptual domains of Christian Flourishing, Emotion, Behavior, and Cognition. The adequacy of sampling and item correlation were excellent: KMO = 0.92, χ^2 [190] = 1930.9, $p < .001$. The lowest item-total correlation (.47) and the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) for single measures (.33) were acceptable. As for subscales, the reliability of Emotion was good ($\alpha = .86$), and both the lowest item-total correlation (.49) and the ICC (.37) were acceptable. The internal consistency reliability of Behavior was $\alpha = .76$, and the lowest item-total correlation (.48) and the ICC (.39) were also acceptable. The reliability of Cognition was acceptable ($\alpha = .79$), the lowest item-total correlation (.52) was good, and the ICC (.43) was acceptable as well.

To determine whether a total score was supported statistically, an EFA with a one-factor solution was examined (see Table 2). Most loadings were greater than .50; only one item was (slightly) lower than .50. Considering these results, the one-factor solution for overall Christian Flourishing was also acceptable, indicating that a total score for the scale is also appropriate. Internal consistency reliability for the total scale was also good, $\alpha = .86$.

Discussion

Results of Study 2 suggest the reduced set of items derived through multiple iterations of consideration and removal formed a Christian Flourishing Scale with reasonably good psychometric properties. While the scale's three subscales, reflecting the dimensions of Emotion, Behavior, and Cognition, also demonstrated reasonable psychometric properties, the one-factor solution appeared to be a stronger measure. However, future work on the subscales may demonstrate their relative utility in some circumstances. Given the promising results for the overall Christian Flourishing scores in the present study, an additional study was conducted to further examine the psychometric properties of the new scale.

Study 3: Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Construct Validity Analyses

Study 3 aimed to confirm the factor structure of the Christian Flourishing Scale. In addition,

we evaluated its utility through a series of validity analyses and computed test-retest reliability. With respect to convergent validity, we hypothesized that Christian flourishing would correlate strongly with intimacy with God (Hall et al., in press), moderately and positively with intrinsic religiosity, and less strongly and positively with extrinsic religiosity, as both motivations may successfully lead to Christian flourishing, However, links of intrinsic religiosity with positive wellbeing (e.g., lower levels of anxiety and depression) are generally much stronger (e.g., Bravo et al., 2016; Park, 2021). We anticipated Christian flourishing would relate moderately strongly with religious behavior, given theoretical and empirical links in the literature regarding religious behavior and wellbeing (e.g., Park et al., 2024). We also hypothesized Christian flourishing would be related to general spiritual wellbeing (Peterman et al., 2002) at moderate levels, and of spiritual wellbeing's three subcomponents (meaning, peace, faith), it would relate strongest to faith-based spiritual wellbeing. We further hypothesized that Christian flourishing would relate favorably to positive and negative affect. Regarding discriminant validity, we expected that Christian flourishing would be distinct from and, thus, only modestly correlated with aspects of secular flourishing (i.e. life satisfaction, overall flourishing) and

Table 2

Items and Factor Loadings of the Three Factor Solution from Study 2 (EFA) and Study 3 (CFA)

	Factor loadings					
	EFA			CFA		
Items	1	2	3	1	2	3
Factor 1: Emotion						
Because I feel loved by God, I am less self-absorbed.	**.66**			.52		
Because of God's patience with me, I am more patient with others.	**.66**			.67		
As a reflection of God's gentleness, I am gentle with others.	**.64**		.51	.73		
Because of God's love, I seek peace with those I would normally be separated from.	**.64**		.50	.75		
As God's child, I am becoming slower to anger.	**.62**			.65		
Because of God's love, I forgive others who have hurt me.	**.61**			.68		
I think about the poor/ vulnerable/ needy/ marginalized because God loves them.	**.61**			.66		
I seek to help other people that God brings into my life.	**.58**			.72		
I care for God's creation (resources, plants, animals, etc.).	**.54**			.65		
I see aspects of my personality as gifts from God.	**.53**			.67		
Factor 2: Behavior						
Because of God's love, I give materially to the church.		**.74**			.76	
Because of God's love, I respond to opportunities to serve in my local church.		**.68**			.81	
I recognize that my actions might affect how people think of God.		**.58**			.68	
I appreciate or depend on sacred writings/tradition/guidance.	.50	**.56**			.65	
To honor God, I avoid temptation.		**.53**			.70	
Factor 3: Cognition						
I think about God.			**.74**			.66
I enjoy the beauty of God's natural world.	.50		**.68**			.64
I feel grateful to God for the goodness in the world.	.50		**.67**			.72
I confess my sins to God.			**.61**			.67
I desire to be used for God's purposes.	.53		**.56**			.78

Note. Factor loadings less than .50 was not included in the table. Bolded factor loadings indicate the largest loading for that row.

with standard measures of distress including depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress symptoms in response to the event with which they reported suffering. Finally, because the presence of suffering is one of the few variables that distinguishes between affect-based (hedonic) versions of happiness and meaning-based (eudaimonic) forms of happiness, we were interested in how our measure of Christian flourishing compared to secular flourishing in the context of suffering.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Our procedure for Study 3 was the same as Study 2 except that we used a different data source, Prolific. Our Prolific data contained participant validity checks such that we did not include attention checks to detect automated responses (i.e., "bots"). We identified automated responses using two independent raters' codes of participants' reports about their stressful event; 14 of the 350 participants who responded were deleted. Three weeks after initial administration, all participants were sent an invitation to participate in a follow-up intended to evaluate test-retest reliability. The survey was closed after responses were received from 100 participants.

Of the remaining 336 participants, average age was 32.87 years (*SD* = 8.18, Range = 18 – 75). A majority of participants were male (72.0%, *n* = 242). Less than one third of participants were female (27.7%, *n* = 93), and 0.3% reported as non-binary (*n* = 1). Slightly more than half were White (55.4%; *n* = 186), followed by Black or African American (34.8%; *n* = 117), Asian or Asian American (4.5%; *n* = 15), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (1.2%; *n* = 4), mixed (0.6%; *n* = 2), and Middle Eastern (0.3%; *n* = 1); 3.3% (*n*=11) was missing. Fifteen were Hispanic or Latinx (4.5%). A majority were married or cohabitating (74.0%; *n* = 247), 82 were single (24.6%), four were divorced or separated (1.2%) and one was widowed (0.3%). Median annual household income was $40,000 – $59,999. As for participants' highest education attainment, 134 had a master's degree (39.9%), 105 had a bachelor's degree (31.3%), and less than 10% had some college education (8.3%; *n* = 28), high school diploma or GED (7.4%; *n* = 25), associate degree (5.7%; *n* = 19), doctoral degree (5.4%; *n* = 18), or professional degree (2.1%; *n* = 7). As for religious affiliation, less than half of participants reported "Roman Catholic" (40.8%; *n* = 137), followed by simply "Christian" (18.8%; *n* = 63), Baptist (7.1%; *n* = 24), Protestant (7.1%; *n* = 24), Pentecostal (4.8%; *n* = 16), or Methodist (3.6%; *n* = 12).

Measures

Intimacy with God was assessed with the Intimacy with God Scale (Hall et al., in press), a 10-item scale that assesses a sense of awareness of, closeness to, and intersubjectivity with God, rated from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). A sample item is "There are no topics that are 'off limits' between me and God." The scale has demonstrated good psychometric properties (Hall et al., in press), with a Cronbach's alpha of .89 in the present sample.

Spiritual well-being was assessed with the FACIT-Sp (Non-Illness version), a 12-item measure of spirituality with 4-item subscales for meaning (e.g., "I have a reason for living"), peace (e.g., "I feel a sense of harmony in myself"), and faith (e.g., "I find strength in my faith beliefs"; Peterman et al., 2002). Responses are scored on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much*). The measure has good internal reliability and convergent validity with other measures of religion and spirituality (Canada et al., 2008). Cronbach's alpha in the current sample was .90 for the scale total and .75, .76, and .89 for the meaning, peace, and faith subscales, respectively.

Intrinsic/extrinsic religiosity was measured using the Intrinsic/Extrinsic Scales-Revised (I/E-R; Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989). The I/E-R consists of 14 items with subscales for intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for religious activities. A sample intrinsic item is "I enjoy reading about my religion," while a sample extrinsic item is "I pray mainly to gain relief and protection." Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach's alphas in the present sample were .62 for intrinsic religiosity and .74 for extrinsic religiosity.

Religious participation was measured using the six-item religious participation measure from Exline et al. (2022). Each item is a religious activity that participants rate from 0 (*not at all*) to 5 (*more than once a day*) according to how often they performed them in the previous

week: prayed or meditated, read religious/spiritual books (including sacred texts from your faith tradition), watched/listened to programs on religious/spiritual topics, attended religious/spiritual services or meetings, thought about religious/spiritual issues, and talked to others about religious/spiritual issues. Cronbach's alpha was .86 in the current sample.

Positive and negative feelings were measured using the Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE; Diener et al., 2010). The SPANE consists of 12 items, half of which are negative and half of which are positive. These subscales produce separate scores for positive feelings and negative feelings. Participants are directed to indicate how often they experienced 12 feelings, described by adjectives (e.g., positive, negative, good, bad), in the previous four weeks using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very rarely or never*) to 5 (*very often or always*). Cronbach's alphas were .93 for positive feelings and .90 for negative feelings.

Satisfaction with life was measured using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985), which includes 5 items for which participants indicate their level of agreement such as "In most ways my life is close to my ideal," using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha was .92.

Secular flourishing was assessed using the Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010), an eight-item measure of different aspects of social-psychological prosperity such as relationships, optimism, and purpose. Participants were given instructions to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of positive statements such as "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life" from a range of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha was .97.

Depression was measured using the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CESD; Radloff, 1977). Participants rate each of 20 symptoms of depression according to how often they experienced them in the past week using the following options: *Not at all or less than 1 day, 1–2 days, 3–4 days, 5–7 days, or nearly every day for 2 weeks*. Cronbach's alpha was .96.

Anxiety was assessed using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Screener (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006). Participants reported how often they had been bothered by anxiety-related problems in the past two weeks. The scale has seven items, including "Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge." Each item is rated using a four-point scale: 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*nearly every day*). Cronbach's alpha was .92.

PTSD symptoms were assessed using the PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5; Weathers et al., 2013). Participants indicated how much they were bothered in the last month, in response to their stated stressful experience, by each of 20 PTSD symptoms from the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*extremely*). Cronbach's alpha was .96.

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We performed an EFA to investigate whether the factor solution proposed in Study 2 would be preserved in a new sample. Study 2 did not conduct item screening, so in Study 3, we examined whether some items showed higher missingness to consider excluding those items; however, no items demonstrated higher missing values than others. EFA results showed a similar factor solution to Study 2 in that three factors were loaded by identical items. Sampling adequacy and item correlations (i.e., the item-total correlation and intraclass correlation) were good: KMO = 0.95, χ^2 [190] = 3428.48, p < .001, respectively. The total variance explained was 57.6%. Cronbach's alpha was .94. The lowest item-total correlation was .49, and the intraclass correlation for the single factor was .42, indicating the item correlations were acceptable. Moreover, when we examined a one-factor solution, all items loaded acceptably.

We performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to estimate the fit between the data and the factor structures proposed by the EFA, using the lavaan package, version 0.6-9 (Rosseel, 2012) in R (version 4.0.2; R Core Team, 2020). To assess model fit, we used the following criteria: CFI values greater than or equal to 0.90 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) values less than or equal to 0.10 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) values less than 0.10 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1982; Weston & Gore, 2006). In the present study, the CFA model fit the data well: χ^2[167] = 421.02, p < .001, CFI = .92, RMSEA = .07 [0.06, 0.08], SRMR = .05. The range of each loading was 0.52 – 0.81 (see Table 3).

A one-factor CFA was performed to investigate fit indices. The CFA model fit, χ^2[167] = 421.01, p <. 001, CFI = .92, RMSEA = .07 [0.06, 0.08], SRMR = .05, remained acceptable (see Table 3).

Construct Validity

Correlations with Theoretically Related Measures. Convergent validity tests indicated that Christian flourishing was positively correlated with intimacy with God (r = .81, p < .001) and all three indicators of spiritual well-being: meaning (r = .44, p < .001), peace (r = .47, p < .001), and faith (r = .67, p < .001). Christian flourishing was also associated with intrinsic religiosity (r = .59, p < .001), extrinsic religiosity (r = .26, p < .001), and religious behaviors (r = .61, p < .001). As hypothesized, Christian flourishing was positively associated with positive affect (r = .55, p< .001) and negatively associated with negative affect (r = -.36, p < .001). See Table 4 for correlations of all study variables.

Correlations with Theoretically Unrelated Measures (Discriminant Validity). As hypothesized, Christian flourishing was significantly associated with secular flourishing but at modest strength: it correlated with both satisfaction with life (r = .36, p < .001) and secular flourishing (r = .17, p < .001). Christian flourishing was negatively correlated with distress at fairly low strength (i.e., depression [r = -.28, p < .001], anxiety [r = -.26, p < .001], and PTSD symptoms [r = -.12, p < .001]).

Test-Retest Correlations. The test-retest reliability of Christian flourishing was acceptable over three weeks (n = 84; r = .66, p < .001).

Discussion

In Study 3, we confirmed the factor structure found in Study 2 and confirmed the use of both subscale and total scores. Convergent and discriminant validity values were also generally consistent with our predictions. Cronbach's alphas for both subscales and total scores were strong, and test-retest scores were acceptable.

General Discussion

Despite the fact that the vast majority of the world's population identifies with a religious tradition, spiritual well-being is often overlooked as a key aspect of overall well-being. Further,

Table 3

Items and Factor Loadings of the One-Factor Solution from Study 2 (EFA) and Study 3 (CFA)

Items	Factor loadings EFA	CFA
Because of God's love, I seek peace with those I would normally be separated from.	.64	.73
As a reflection of God's gentleness, I am gentle with others.	.63	.73
I think about God.	.61	.59
Because I feel loved by God, I am less self-absorbed.	.60	.51
I desire to be used for God's purposes.	.60	.75
Because of God's patience with me, I am more patient with others.	.60	.65
I think about the poor/vulnerable/needy/marginalized because God loves them.	.60	.65
Because of God's love, I forgive others who have hurt me.	.59	.67
I enjoy the beauty of God's natural world.	.58	.57
I feel grateful to God for the goodness in the world.	.58	.65
I see aspects of my personality as gifts from God.	.57	.67
As God's child, I am becoming slower to anger.	.57	.64
I seek to help other people that God brings into my life.	.57	.71
I recognize that my actions might affect how people think of God.	.57	.64
I confess my sins to God.	.57	.65
I appreciate or depend on sacred writings/tradition/guidance.	.57	.61
I care for God's creation (resources, plants, animals, etc.).	.56	.64
To honor God, I avoid temptation.	.55	.67
Because of God's love, I give materially to the church.	.51	.63
Because of God's love, I respond to opportunities to serve in my local church.	.48	.68

existing generic measures of spiritual well-being lack religious tradition specificity and, thus, fail to capture the principal ends and concerns of any given faith tradition. Thus, more specific wellbeing scales based on the foundational values of specific religious traditions, such as our new Christian Flourishing Scale, are necessary to advance our understanding of individuals' wellbeing in the context of their ultimate concerns (Emmons, 2005).

Table 4

Correlations for All Variables in Study 3 (N = 336)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1, Christian flourishing								
2. Intimacy	.81***							
3. Spiritual well-being	.59***	.60***						
4. Spiritual well-being: Meaning	.44***	.48***	.91***					
5. Spiritual well-being: Peace	.47***	.50***	.89***	.77***				
6. Spiritual well-being: Faith	.67***	.64***	.84***	.65***	.59***			
7. Intrinsic religiosity	.59***	.48***	.36***	.28***	.18**	.48***		
8. Extrinsic religiosity	.26***	.32***	.24***	.15**	.24***	.23***	-.06	
9. Religious participation	.61***	.50***	.42***	.31***	.35***	.46***	.40***	.33***
10. Positive feelings	.55***	.56***	.75***	.64***	.75***	.60***	.20***	.40***
11. Negative feelings	-.36***	-.41***	-.60***	-.52***	-.65***	-.41***	-.11*	-.29***
12. Satisfaction with life	.36***	.40***	.62***	.58***	.63***	.45***	.16**	.39***
13. Secular flourishing	.17**	.17***	.35***	.36***	.32***	.27***	.19***	.11
14. Depression	-.28***	-.34***	-.61***	-.60***	-.63***	-.42***	-.15**	-.17**
15. Anxiety	-.26***	-.33***	-.63***	-.59***	-.66***	-.43***	-.14*	-.14*
16. PTSD symptoms	-.12*	-.18**	-.48***	-.51***	-.49***	-.30***	-.12*	-.04

	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1, Christian flourishing							
2. Intimacy							
3. Spiritual well-being							
4. Spiritual well-being: Meaning							
5. Spiritual well-being: Peace							
6. Spiritual well-being: Faith							
7. Intrinsic religiosity							
8. Extrinsic religiosity							
9. Religious participation							
10. Positive feelings	.47***						
11. Negative feelings	-.34***	-.73***					
12. Satisfaction with life	.41***	.64***	-.56***				
13. Secular flourishing	.06	.22***	-.23***	.17**			
14. Depression	-.20***	-.52***	.65***	-.47***	-.30***		
15. Anxiety	-.20***	-.51***	.61***	-.43***	-.32***	.81***	
16. PTSD symptoms	-.02	-.34***	.50***	-.33***	-.25***	.80***	.74***

Note. ***$p < .001$. **$p < .01$. *$p < .05$.

The results of our three studies provide evidence of the psychometric soundness of a new measure of Christian flourishing and, thus, open the door to future research on this important construct. With this scale in hand, research can fruitfully begin to address additional questions, such as how one's upbringing, relationships, life experiences, personality, and strivings lead to Christian flourishing; how Christian flourishing leads to subsequent behavior, decision-making, and mental and physical health; and whether there are developmental or lifespan differences in the determinants or consequences of Christian flourishing. Further, many questions can be raised about specific Christian flourishing relative to more generic measures of flourishing and, if there are discrepancies between them, which is more consequential in which situations?

Positive psychology has been critiqued for failing to recognize foundational worldview assumptions underlying diverse cultural and religious perspectives (Hill & Hall, 2018). In seeking knowledge that is descriptive, objective, and value-free (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001), much early work in the field was limited to broad generalizations regarding concepts such as flourishing that intended to capture dimensions common across diverse groups. Despite these limitations, these efforts played an important role in sparking interests among researchers on topics related to ultimate concerns. Our goal was to advance the existing body of scientific knowledge through greater cultural contextualization. That is, our work situates itself within an emerging trend pushing the field of positive psychology forward through greater cultural sensitivity along with greater awareness of the complexity in constructs central to positive psychology such as flourishing.

While the studies presented here demonstrate support for the measure, their limitations must be noted. Our samples for Studies 2 and 3 were obtained through online platforms that, while reasonable, were likely not entirely representative of Christians living in the U.S. with respect to ethnicity, age, and education. In particular, our samples had fairly higher levels of education. We did not assess the influence of social desirability on this measure. Research indicates that some, though not all, measures of religiosity are influenced by this kind of bias (Jones & Elliott, 2017); the susceptibility of the current measure to bias should be assessed in future studies.

Our scale is specific to Christians, and these studies demonstrate its specific utility for people practicing this faith. As an emic measure of the broad Christian tradition, as delineated in the Nicea-Constantinople Creed in 381 A.D., the items on this measure were developed to be relevant to the three major Christian groups worldwide: Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy. This approach maximized the potential use of our measure but may not apply to the small number of people from traditions that do not embrace this creed. The cognitive interviewing confirmed their applicability to these three major groups, and our factor structure was confirmed in a sample containing proportions of Protestants and Roman Catholics similar to those in the U.S. population. Given our intent to develop a measure that is applicable across Christian groups worldwide, further research is needed to ensure that the psychometric properties of the scale remain sound in Eastern Orthodox groups and in groups of Christians outside of the U.S.

Given the centrality of expressing love to other Christians in our theological formulation, our measure also assumes that flourishing involves involvement with Christian community, as reflected in items that reference the church. While emic to Christianity broadly conceptualized, the measure may not target additional criteria for flourishing that are central to more specific groups of Christians. In other words, the broadly emic nature of this measure does not preclude the desirability of developing additional emic measures of flourishing for more specific groups that include items referencing theological particularities of those groups. For example, while our measure is relevant to groups embracing womanist theology or to groups of practicing Mennonites, those groups may, in addition to the items we have developed, value applications of love that are emphasized in their contexts.

These findings suggest that faith-specific flourishing measures are promising because they allow us to assess the extent to which individuals are flourishing in those ways most important to their faith (VanderWeele, 2021), their central meaning systems (Park, 2005). However,

to be maximally useful, a similar developmental process building up from the core tenets of the faith is required for each specific faith for culture-centered scholarship. In spite of the intensive measurement development work required by this approach, it represents an important step for better measuring and understanding spiritual wellbeing from the perspective of the individuals under study.

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Appendix

Christian Flourishing Scale

Not at all (1)	*A small extent* (2)	*A moderate extent* (3)	*A very large extent* (4)

As a result of God's grace or love, to what extent is each of the following items true for you?	Subscale
1. Because I feel loved by God, I am less self-absorbed.	Emotion
2. Because of God's patience with me, I am more patient with others.	Emotion
3. Because of God's love, I give materially to the church.	Behavior
4. I think about God.	Cognition
5. Because of God's love, I seek peace with those I would normally be separated from.	Emotion
6. Because of God's love, I respond to opportunities to serve in my local church.	Behavior
7. As a reflection of God's gentleness, I am gentle with others.	Emotion
8. As God's child, I am becoming slower to anger.	Emotion
9. I enjoy the beauty of God's natural world.	Cognition
10. Because of God's love, I forgive others who have hurt me.	Emotion
11. I think about the poor/vulnerable/needy/marginalized because God loves them.	Emotion
12. I feel grateful to God for the goodness in the world.	Cognition
13. I confess my sins to God.	Cognition
14. I seek to help other people that God brings into my life.	Emotion
15. I care for God's creation (resources, plants, animals, etc.).	Emotion
16. I recognize that my actions might affect how people think of God.	Behavior
17. I appreciate or depend on sacred writings/tradition/guidance.	Behavior
18. I see aspects of my personality as gifts from God.	Emotion
19. To honor God, I avoid temptation.	Behavior
20. I desire to be used for God's purposes.	Cognition

Note. To calculate the Emotion, Behavior, and Cognition subscale scores, calculate the average of items. The total Christian Flourishing score is presented by the average of the Emotion, Behavior, and Cognition scores.

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The Congregational Domain of Christian Flourishing: A Research Perspective

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This paper profiles the contribution to the science of the congregational domain of Christian flourishing made by a research group working in England and Wales and shaped by the perspective of empirical theology. In this context, the congregational domain is defined as "the local physical presence of the Body of Christ" and concerned with the twin aims of nurturing disciples and serving the local community. Attention is given to three strands of research undertaken by this research group: listening to church-leavers; listening to churchgoers; and researching the wider ministry and mission of cathedrals. Each of these three strands combines quantitative and qualitative approaches and draws on the three disciplines of theology, psychology, and sociology.

Introduction

In this paper, I have been invited to focus on the "congregational domain" of Christian flourishing and to do so from the distinctive perspective of my research group working within the field of empirical theology. What sets the empirical theologian apart within faculties of theology is the clear commitment to deal with theories and methods shaped by the social sciences. There is nothing in principle strange or unusual in theologians borrowing tools shaped within other faculties. Both biblical studies and systematic theology have set the precedent for this, but what is novel is turning to the social sciences. Within empirical theology, this venture has been characterised as either intra-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary (Cartledge, 1999). The Nijmegen school of empirical theology under van der Ven has favoured the intra-disciplinary approach (see van der Ven, 1998), while the British approach has preferred the two-way traffic of the inter-disciplinary approach. Taking this latter approach, Francis and Village (2015) anchored their commitment to empirical theology in the dominical invitation to observe the sower, employing both qualitative analyses appertaining to the types of soil and quantitative analyses to the variability of the yield (Mark 4:1-9). What sets the empirical theologians apart within faculties of social science is the clear commitment to deal with theological issues and theological categories. In this paper, I propose to raise theological issues first in terms of clarifying (or complexifying) the notion of the "congregational domain" and then to examine different ways in which social science perspective may set about researching flourishing within this domain.

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The Congregational Domain

My working definition of the congregational domain is "the local physical presence of the Body of Christ within the community." In other words, I am locating my interest in the science of congregation studies, as encapsulated and documented by Francis and Lankshear (2021a). How we go about defining flourishing in this context rests on biblical, theological, and ecclesiological understanding. It is here that my positionality comes into play as an Anglican priest. The defining characteristic of Anglican ecclesiology is that it is an episcopal Church, and this carries implications for nuancing congregational flourishing. Local congregations are neither autonomous nor isolated, and their clergy serve in collaboration with and under licence from the diocesan bishop. In principle, congregational flourishing and diocesan flourishing are linked. The defining characteristic of Anglican theology is that this Church is rooted in both the Catholic tradition and the Reformed tradition, and

this, too, carries implications for nuancing congregational flourishing. For local congregations to flourish, they need a thriving ministry of the Word and a thriving ministry of the sacrament. The third defining characteristic of the Anglican tradition as encapsulated in England (where I am based) concerns the purpose of the parish church to serve the local community, and this carries further implications for nuancing congregational flourishing. For local congregations to flourish, they need to meet the twin aims of nurturing the 12 disciples and of feeding the 5,000. The one without the other just will not count as flourishing.

Against this background, I plan to draw attention to three strands of research undertaken by my research group, concerning listening to church-leavers, the science of congregation studies, and the science of cathedral studies.

Listening to Church-Leavers

An interesting starting point from which to anchor a social scientific exploration of Christian flourishing within the congregational domain is to take seriously the views of those who have exited this domain and become church-leavers. Although an important starting point, researching church-leavers raises key conceptual and methodological problems. Conceptually, who counts as a church-leaver? Methodologically, how can such people be contacted and encouraged to participate in research concerning an area of life that they have abandoned (churchgoing)? The Church Leaving Applied Research Project addressed both of these issues (see Francis & Richter, 2007; Richter & Francis, 1998). From a conceptual perspective, for its operational definition of churchgoers and church-leavers the Church Leaving Applied Research Project built on the pioneering work of Dean R. Hoge (see Hoge et al., 1993). The operational definition defined churchgoers as individuals who attended church at least six times a year, not including Christmas, Easter, weddings, and funerals. Then church-leavers were defined as individuals who had formerly engaged in this level of religious practice and subsequently reduced their practice below that level.

Methods

From a methodological perspective, the Church Leaving Applied Research Project opted to employ a two-stage process. Stage 1 was designed to map the range of reasons associated with church-leaving by means of a qualitative approach. This stage began with 27 in-depth interviews with church-leavers themselves. These interviews were supplemented by interviews with 11 clergy, exploring their perspectives on why people leave church, and by 37 shorter interviews with young people. The qualitative data derived from these 75 interviews comprised over 200,000 words of transcribed text. The recurrent themes and categories derived from this text formed the basis for key parts of stage two, a quantitative survey.

Stage 2 was designed as a postal survey of church-leavers in the general population. The content of the survey was based on the qualitative interviews and on items from previous surveys among church-leavers conducted in Britain and in the United States of America. As well as eliciting demographic details and information about people's previous churchgoing and disengagement, it included a battery of nearly 200 possible reasons for their church-leaving, to which they were asked to express their agreement or disagreement on a five-point Likert scale.

Stage 2 began with a random telephone survey focused on three areas: London (50%), Exeter (25%), and York (25%). The primary aim of the survey was to identify 1,600 individuals living within these three areas, who would be willing to receive postal questionnaires, and who met the following two criteria: that they had once attended any denomination of church at least six times a year (not including Christmas and Easter); and that they had subsequently lapsed to less than six times a year. For some, these two criteria meant that currently they were not classified as regular churchgoers. Others, however, may have resumed regular church attendance after a period of lapsing from attendance.

People were phoned on an entirely random basis. The phone numbers used were taken at regular sampling intervals from the latest edition of the relevant postal area residential phone books. Altogether, 7,195 live calls were made, not including calls to unobtainable numbers and unattended answerphones. Callers were carefully supervised and a log kept of the numbers called. The survey continued until 1,611 questionnaire recipients had been identified. While 3,149 telephone subscribers declined to take part in the telephone survey, 4,046 agreed to take part. Of these 4,046 telephone interviewees, 2,437 either fell outside the categories in which we were interested or declined to take a questionnaire. A wide social mix was achieved. The only age category that was underrepresented was those under 20 years old. The questionnaire recipients comprised 40% males and 60% females, which is quite similar to the sex ratio of churchgoers at that time, as measured by the survey undertaken by Brierley (1991). A total of 1,604 questionnaires were successfully mailed. Thanks to telephone follow-up of tardy respondents, a response rate of 56% was achieved.

Findings

Analysis of these quantitative data identified 15 main causes for church-leaving that were classified as follows. Matters of belief and unbelief included *losing faith*, e.g., 32% said that they had lost their faith; *life experiences*, e.g., 10% felt that God had let them down; *problems with belief*, e.g., 48% found it increasingly difficult to believe Christianity is the only true faith; and *responding to doubt*, e.g., 29% found that a questioning faith did not seem acceptable to the Church.

Consequences of growing up and changing included *growing up*, e.g., for 29% the Church was no longer helping them to grow; *parents and children*, e.g., 25% said that they were made to go to church by their parents and it put them off; and *changing priorities*, e.g., 69% said that they got out of the habit of going to church.

Implications of life transitions and life changes included *going away from home*, e.g., 16% said they went to higher education; *moving to a new area*, e.g., 16% said they moved home and did not find a church they liked in their new area; *growing family commitments*, e.g., 11% said they needed to visit their (or their spouse's) parents on Sundays; and *changing status*, e.g., 8% said that their marriage broke up.

Shaping alternative lives and alternative meanings included *tensions with work*, e.g., 25% said they had to work on Sundays; *tensions with relationships*, e.g., 32% said their partner was not attending church; and *tensions with time*, e.g., 52% said they were too busy.

Adopting incompatible lifestyles included *growing self-awareness*, e.g., 29% said they could not keep going to church and be true to themselves; *clash of values*, e.g., 39% said that their lifestyle was not compatible with participation in church; *clash of teaching*, e.g., 30% disagreed with the Church's stance on key moral issues; and *lifestyle issues*, e.g., 3% said they were taking illegal drugs.

The sense of not belonging and not fitting in included *social exclusion*, e.g., 25% said there were cliques or "in groups" from which they felt excluded; *personal marginalisation*, e.g., 25% said they felt powerless to bring about change in the Church; *personal visibility*, e.g., 22% said there were not enough people of their age; and *tensions and conflicts*, e.g., 3% said there was tension between them and a church leader.

The benefits not justifying the costs included *not meeting my needs*, e.g., 40% said the Church did not meet their needs; *not helping my spiritual growth*, e.g., 36% said the Church was not meeting their spiritual needs; and *too many demands and too little return*, e.g., 6% said that the Church was making increasing demands on their time.

Growing disillusionment with the Church included *the fragmented vision*, e.g., 32% were disillusioned by the Church's failure to live up to its ideals; *the local church*, e.g., 21% were disillusioned by local factions within the Church; issues *of justice and power*, e.g., 28% were disillusioned by the Church's abuse of power; and issues *of sex and sexuality*, e.g., 24% were disillusioned by churchgoers' attitudes to homosexuality.

Feeling let down by the Church included *lack of care and support*, e.g., 14% had felt let down by the Church when they needed its support; *lack of professionalism*, e.g., 4% said that the Church's pastoral care for them was unprofessional; and abusive, e.g., 4% said the Church's pastoral care was psychologically *abusive* to them.

Problems with relevance included *irrelevance*, e.g., 38% found sermons were irrelevant to their everyday life; *on another planet*, e.g., for 23% the Church felt like "another planet"; and *de-institutionalised faith*, e.g., 75% believed that they did not need to go to Church to be a Christian.

Problems with change included *the global direction*, e.g., 21% did not like the direction in which the Church was going; *worship and liturgy*, e.g., 18% did not like the new hymns; and *local church*, e.g., 5% did not like the new seating arrangements.

Problems with worship included *matters of style*, e.g., 26% felt the worship was too formal; *matters of taste*, e.g., 22% felt there was not enough variety in worship to suit different tastes; and *matters of level*, e.g., 17% felt the Church's teaching was too simplified and unchallenging.

Problems with the leadership included *matters of style*, e.g., 22% considered the leadership style of the Church was too authoritarian; *matters of status*, e.g., 22% considered the Church did not allow women their rightful place in decision-making; and *matters of direction*, e.g., 17% considered the Church leadership was not giving a clear enough sense of direction.

Problems with conservatism included *problems with theology*, e.g., 32% were tired of being told what to believe by the Church; and *problems with morality*, e.g., 37% considered the Church's approach to morality was too "black and white."

Problems with liberalism included *lack of clear boundaries*, e.g., 22% considered there should be a clearer line between Christian values and the values of the "outside world"; and l*ack of clear teaching*, e.g., 22% complained that the Church's teaching did not give the certainty they were seeking.

Further analyses explored each of these 15 themes in terms of sex differences, generational differences, cohort differences, age at leaving, denomination, sudden or gradual leaving, and likelihood of returning.

Reflection

Reflecting on these data, Francis and Richter (2007) offered a model for Christian flourishing in the congregational domain that is rooted in a theology of individual differences (see Francis & Village, 2015) that respects diversity and difference in Christian expression. Their vision of the church of the future is that of the "multiplex" church. The multiplex church offers different perspectives on the same faith and different perspectives on the same eternal truths. Seekers after the kingdom of God will be able to enter this multiplex church through many different doors and celebrate their participation within the kingdom of God in many different ways. Just as there are many front doors leading the way into this multiplex church, so there are many back doors leading the way out. While some of these back doors properly lead directly into the "outside world," others lead directly into different expressions of church. The study of church-leavers suggested that within the current model of church many have searched for the back door away from their own congregation and have been, perhaps, surprised to find that this back door only leads away from church altogether. Some such church-leavers soon grow content living flourishing lives and keeping their distance from the church. Others see themselves as potential returners but, nonetheless, find it hard to discover the door that leads them back to the inside. Within the multiplex church, church-switching may begin to replace church-leaving.

The multiplex church model is more ambitious than the "multiple and midweek congregations" model outlined in *Mission-Shaped Church* (Archbishops' Council, 2004, pp. 59-62). This model potentially embraces much more diversity and, unlike the "multiple and midweek congregations" model, does not necessarily presuppose that the multiplex church occupies a single building. First and foremost, it is a new mindset that encourages churches to play to their strengths and to be aware of the niche markets for which their congregations can and cannot cater. It encourages churches in a given locality to think of each other not as competitors but as collaborators, referring potential church-leavers on to other partner churches who can better engage with their perceived needs at the time. In a church context, "multiplex" can refer to a multiplicity of separate congregations within the same premises, as well as a multiplicity of different styles of church in a given locality. On this basis, the congregational domain of Christian flourishing is conceptualised more widely than within any one given "congregation."

The Science of Congregation Studies

While church-leavers are elusive both to define and to capture in a survey, churchgoers are in principle easier to define and to capture. By very definition, here are people who come together in congregations. The long-running Australian National Church Life Survey provides a good example of the quality of data that congregation surveys can gather across a wide geographical area, across denominations, and across time (see, for example, Kaldor & McLean, 2009; Kaldor et al., 1992, 1995, 1997; Kaldor, Bellamy, et al., 1999; Kaldor, Dixon, et al. 1999; Pepper et al., 2018; Powell et al., 2012). The Signs of Growth congregation survey, as summarised by Francis and Lankshear (2021a), is in one sense much more limited than the venture of the Australian National Church Life Survey. The Signs of Growth project has been (so far) conducted only once, and that within one denomination (Church of England) across one diocese (Diocese of Southwark). These limitations need, however, to be placed against a set of distinctive strengths.

Method

Of key importance was the relationship between the research group and the Diocese. The Diocese commissioned the research and was actively engaged in designing the research. Within the research group, David Lankshear (academic and former central church officer) became immersed in the life of the Diocese over a four-year period. Because the Diocese of Southwark is a large diocese operating as three episcopal areas, each of these three areas was surveyed in sequential years. At the beginning of the project, David met with Area Deans to design and orchestrate the survey. The survey was administered on one specified Sunday and throughout the following weekdays at all the services conducted within the episcopal area. Individuals attending these services were invited to complete the survey within the context of the service. The survey was designed to be inclusive of young participants from the age of eleven upwards and was strategically integrated within the worship event.

When the data became available, individual reports were prepared for each participating church. David assisted churches in evaluating their reports. Toward the close of the project, the data were discussed by a residential diocesan conference. The distinctive strength of the Signs of Growth project was that the Diocese had the potential for becoming a research-engaged community. From an academic perspective, this was reflected in a very high level of participation: 97% of the churches took part and delivered over 30,000 thoroughly completed surveys. The closing analysis worked with 31,521 responses, while the average Sunday attendance for the Diocese was reported as 43,450 participants.

Initial Findings

The demographic profile of congregations identified 65% as female, 44% as aged 60 or over, 76% as White, 57% as married, 36% in full-time employment, 65% as weekly attenders, and 64% as belonging to the same congregation for more than five years. The quantitative attitudinal components of the survey explored the following themes:

- A sense of belonging to their congregation, e.g., 87% reported a strong sense of belonging to their church.
- A sense of not belonging, e.g,. 24% said that their relationships were fairly superficial within their church.
- A sense of feeling at home, e.g., 72% said that members of their church care deeply for one another.
- A sense of drifting away, e.g., 17% said that they feel less close to God than they used to.
- A sense of connection with daily life, e.g., 60% said that their church is directly connected to their daily life.
- A vision for the future, e.g., 41% considered that their church would grow in the next 12 months.
- A vision for growing in faith, e.g., 68% would welcome the opportunity to learn more about Christianity.
- Preferences for forms of services, e.g., 30% preferred services that use older forms of English, while 49% preferred services that use up-to-date forms of English.
- Preferences for content in services, e.g., 70% reported that they are helped in their faith by periods of silence in services.
- Preferences for reading materials, e.g., 63% reported that they are helped in their faith by reading the Bible.
- Preferences for prayer and contemplation, e.g., 79% reported that they are helped in their faith by praying by themselves.
- Support received from others, e.g., 62% reported that they are helped in their faith by discussions with others.
- Support received from groups, e.g., 39% reported that they are helped in their faith by Bible study groups.

As well as the quantitative components, the Signs of Growth survey also included four questions for open-ended narrative responses: "What

encourages you to attend this church?"; "The things I like best in this church are..."; "The things I do not like in this church are..."; and "The things I would like to see happen in this church are..."

Further Analyses

Alongside providing a thorough profile of the Diocese of Southwark as a whole, this rich source of data enabled a series of focused questions to be addressed that are of core importance for the wider Anglican Church and for other denominations. Lankshear and Francis (2021) drew on the quantitative data to profile what they styled as "the missing generation," young people in their 20s. By examining the experience of 1,343 churchgoers in this age category, they profiled how these young churchgoers were fitting in or not fitting into church life alongside the much larger numbers of more mature churchgoers who comprise the backbone of Anglican congregations. Rolph, Francis, and Rolph (2021) complemented this quantitative analysis by drawing on the qualitative data provided by churchgoers in their 20s. The key theme identified by this analysis was reflected in the title of their chapter, "The People are Friendly."

Jewell et al. (2021) turned attention from the missing generation of churchgoers to what they styled "the greying generation" of churchgoers. In this analysis, they compared the quantitative data provided by 3,773 churchgoers in their 70s and the data provided by 2,141 churchgoers in their 80s. This distinction between churchgoers in their 70s and churchgoers in their 80s is illuminating. While those in their 70s generally felt strong and confident in shaping the life of their local church, some of those in their 80s were beginning to feel marginalised and left behind within an ever-changing culture. Rolph, Rolph, and Francis (2021a) complemented the quantitative analyses by drawing on the qualitative data provided by churchgoers in their 80s. The key theme identified by their analysis was reflected in the title of their chapter, "I Don't Need Encouraging, It's Part of My Life." Although sometimes feeling let down and marginalised by their church, many older churchgoers remained rooted in their life-long commitment.

Bishop David Walker (2017) has held a long interest in the different ways in which people sense and express their belonging to the Anglican Church. For Walker, there is not just one way of belonging (through weekly attendance). For him, it is important also to listen to occasional attenders. The Signs of Growth project gave Walker (2021) the opportunity to focus specifically on comparing the responses of the 632 individuals who identified as being in their 20s and as attending church at least once a week, with the responses of the 91 individuals in the same age group who claimed to attend church five times a year or fewer. This is an important group for the Church to take seriously for three reasons. Some individuals in this category are likely to be on their journey away from more frequent attendance into becoming church-leavers. Some of this category may be on the edge of church life and trying to find a way into more active engagement with the church. Other individuals in the category may be quite content to see their level of attendance as displaying a sincere commitment to belonging to the church. Building on Walker's analysis, Rolph, Rolph, and Francis (2021b), working in the qualitative tradition, took a wider look at occasional attenders across the full age range. The key theme identified in this analysis was reflected in the title to their chapter, "The Church is Very Welcoming Even Though I Don't Attend Often."

Lankshear et al. (2021) drew on quantitative data from the Signs of Growth project to examine the connection between marital status and frequency of church attendance. Since traditional church teaching on sex, marriage, and family life has tended to discourage cohabitation, this chapter tested the hypotheses that frequent churchgoers may be less likely to embrace cohabitation as a life-style choice, and that cohabitees who are churchgoers may be less strongly committed to frequent attendance. Given growth in cohabitation this may be an important area for investigation within the science of congregation studies. The data demonstrated that, within the churchgoers surveyed, 47% of those who cohabit attend church at least once a week, compared with 61% of those who are married, and 72% of those who are single.

Francis and Lankshear (2021b) drew on quantitative data to construct a scale of bonding social capital. They employed this scale to explore the personal predictors of congregational bonding social capital in terms of frequency of attendance, membership status, age, sex, marital status, employment status, ethnic background, and time taken to travel to church. The data demonstrated that bonding social capital is strongest among weekly attenders and slightly less strong among fortnightly attenders. Those who attend less frequently than once a month are much less connected with congregational bonding social capital. Congregational bonding social capital is stronger among those in their 50s and beyond, among the retired, among those who live within 20 minutes traveling time to their church, and among Black Africans.

Village (2021a) drew on quantitative data to construct a scale of congregational belonging. He employed this scale to explore two contrasting hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that religious organisations may inhibit social cohesion because of the tendency for ethnic groups to worship in their own homogeneous congregations. The second hypothesis is that where congregations are ethnically mixed, they may promote integration rather than isolation. These two contrasting hypotheses were tested by examining the individual and congregational level factors that promoted a sense of congregational belonging. Although this analysis found some evidence of lower levels of congregational bonding social capital and sense of belonging among some ethnic minorities in some circumstances, the overall picture is that the Diocese of Southwark includes many ethnically diverse congregations that seem as able, or perhaps more able, to generate a sense of belonging than those that are uniformly White British. In ethnically diverse congregations, developing relationships within the congregation seems to be one way in which churchgoers belonging to ethnic minority groups can generate ties with those from the majority or other ethnic groups. In this context, this implies that the Anglican Church may be a force for social cohesion rather than a force for ethnic isolation.

Village (2021b) linked data from the congregation survey with data collected by the Diocese for the usual Sunday attendance over a nine-year period to see if the average change from one year to the next could be explained by the profile of the congregations or by the sort of neighbourhood in which they were located. It is in this way that the science of congregation studies may contribute to an informed understanding about how and why some churches may grow or decline more quickly than others. Overall, the two factors most closely associated with growth in the Diocese of Southwark were the age profile of the congregation and the ethnic profile of the neighbourhood. Growing congregations tended to have younger adults and to be in areas with a high proportion of black Africans.

Francis and Lankshear (2021c) drew specific attention to the responses of young people between the ages of 11 and 16 years who participated in the general congregational survey. The specific research questions explored by this analysis examined whether attending a church secondary school has any measurable impact on the attitudes of young churchgoers toward their church and Christian life. Two main findings emerged from their analysis. The first finding is that, after controlling for individual differences in sex, ethnicity, deprivation, and frequency of church attendance, attendance at a church school neither enhanced nor depressed attitude scores. The second finding is that among 11- to 16-year-old churchgoers, it is those students from not White backgrounds and attending churches in deprived areas who are most likely to be attending church schools. This is an interesting and important finding in light of an accusation often leveled against church schools that they tend to prioritise students from White and privileged backgrounds (see Berkeley, 2008). The finding that church schools in the Diocese of Southwark are in fact tending to prioritise students from not White and from deprived backgrounds provides new evidence of ways in which these schools may be giving expression to their general function in education.

Comparing Church and Cathedral Congregations

While the foregoing analyses have all concentrated on the data provided by church congregations, a unique opportunity offered by the Signs of Growth survey was that it also included the congregations from Southwark Cathedral. Lankshear, Francis, and Ipgrave (2015) compared the responses of 263 adults aged 20 or over who completed the survey within the cathedral with the responses of 6,042 adults who completed the survey within churches within the Woolwich Episcopal Area (where the Cathedral is located). Four main conclusions were drawn from this analysis.

First, the demographic profile of the cathedral congregation is different. The cathedral congregation attracts a higher proportion of men (51% compared with 34%), and higher proportions of people who are White (88% compared with 61%), single or in non-married relationships (50% compared with 37%), and in full-time employment (53% compared with 40%). The cathedral congregation is a little younger. This demographic profile suggests that the cathedral may be reaching some people whom the parish churches may find it more difficult to reach.

Second, the religious profile of the cathedral congregation is different. The cathedral congregation is more likely to comprise cradle Christians and nurtured Anglicans. The cathedral congregation contains more visitors (15% compared with 6%), a higher proportion of newcomers (33% compared with 25%) to the congregation, and more people who have dual allegiance with another congregation. Members of the cathedral congregation are more likely to live at a distance from the place where they worship. The cathedral can expect most of its participants to feel at home in the Anglican family but needs to be alert to welcoming visitors and to nurturing newcomers. A congregation that lives at a distance may be more difficult to involve in the life of the cathedral.

Third, the strength of attachment among the cathedral congregation is different. Those who worship in the cathedral feel less strongly attached to and less strongly bonded with their congregation. The congregation is less important to their social life, and they are less likely to be involved in the decision-making and operation of the congregation. This greater sense of detachment is not, however, to be read as indicating less commitment to or greater discontent with the congregation. The cathedral can anticipate that some people feel and express their belonging to the cathedral congregation in ways different from how they would act in a parish church congregation.

Fourth, the way in which faith for the future is expressed is different in the cathedral congregation. Those who worship in the cathedral seem to have less time to invest in building up the congregation or in developing their own understanding of the Christian faith. Once again, this greater sense of detachment is not to be misread as indicating less personal commitment to taking their faith seriously. Those who worship in the cathedral are just as committed as those who worship in the parish churches to allowing the Gospel to shape their daily lives. The cathedral can anticipate a congregation of committed people who may just not have the time to take on some of the expectations associated with worshipping in the parish church.

The Science of Cathedral Studies

Within the Church of England, in recent years cathedrals have puzzled church statisticians. While for a number of years attendances at parish churches have been declining, attendances at cathedrals have been either resisting decline or increasing. This enigma has given rise to the "Science of Cathedral Studies," the subtitle I selected for my book *Anglican Cathedrals in Modern Life* (Francis, 2015). Since publishing that book, I have also edited two special issues of *Journal of Beliefs and Values* on cathedral studies (Francis & Parker, 2023, 2024). Like these two special issues, the 2015 book is an edited collection of contributions from a growing network of practitioners and academics who are concerned with conceptual and empirical contributions to documenting and to understanding emerging signs of Christian flourishing within the congregational domain of cathedrals.

Conceptual Frameworks

The science of cathedral studies has been located within four conceptual frameworks. The first conceptual framework has been shaped by Judith Muskett's (2016, 2019) analysis of the power of metaphor for illuminating an understanding of the distinctive capacity of cathedrals. The five metaphors privileged for special attention in Muskett's book all illustrate the capacity of cathedrals for engaging with diverse publics. *Shop windows* arouse curiosity and enhance footfall in the marketplace; *flagships* indicate the serious intention of their operators to be effective in their mission; *beacons* shine out in darkness, symbolise timeless stability, and serve as a secure reference point; *magnets* draw people in, generate tourism, and bring economic prosperity; and *sacred space and common ground* finely captures "the vocation of cathedrals to be both a spiritual and community utility" (Muskett, 2019, p. 86).

Of these five metaphors, the notion of cathedrals as sacred space *and* common ground may prove to be the most powerful for exploring the capacity of cathedrals to engage the wider community in the sense of connecting the Christian presence with those who may be less inclined to engage with, or to cross the threshold into, parish churches. The first part of this compound metaphor was discussed by Carr (1992, pp. 63-71). Carr argued that "Cathedrals are a specific and accessible example of 'common ground,' an idea with many resonances of common land and common rights intended for a variety of different groups" (p. 66). This metaphor of sacred space and common ground draws attention to the ways in which cathedrals may draw in multiple congregations, engaging with God and flourishing in multiple ways.

The second conceptual framework has been shaped by Edward Bailey's (1997, 1998) concept of implicit religion. This concept was introduced to cathedral studies by Hammond (2007). Subsequently, McKenna et al. (2022) focused on two specific insights from the theory of implicit religion for analysing how the range of installations, events, and exhibitions that their survey found promoted within Anglican cathedrals attract and engage diverse publics. First, the notion of implicit religion softens the boundaries between the sacred and the secular and gives substance to the idea of cathedrals as "sacred space and common ground." Second, the notion of implicit religion draws attention to the themes and activities that generate meaning and purpose and that, by so doing, hold the capacity to direct and enhance human flourishing. Events, exhibitions, and installations not only have the capacity to draw diverse publics into the common ground, but within the sacred space they have the capacity to offer experiences that may generate meaning and purpose and enhance human flourishing. This theory of implicit religion draws attention to the diverse ways in which Christian flourishing may be nurtured within this congregational space.

The third conceptual framework draws on Anglican ecclesiology to explore the purpose of cathedrals. This framework has been shaped by Dean Gary Hall's (2014) analysis of "the purpose of cathedrals." Hall's argument is that cathedrals derive their very name and their unique character from being the special location of the bishop's chair (cathedra). Cathedrals are places that locate and focus the ministry of their bishop. In that sense, cathedrals are uniquely episcopal, and, if cathedrals are uniquely episcopal, their ministries should exemplify the salient characteristics of a bishop's ministry. Recognizing that Anglican theology and Anglican ecclesiology tend to be rooted in liturgical texts, Hall turned to the ordinal, the form of ordaining or consecrating bishops, in order to identify the distinctive features of cathedrals: Cathedrals are mandated to do what bishops are called to be (see, further, Francis, 2023). Just as Anglican parish priests work alongside the bishop in their parochial ministry, so cathedrals are called to work alongside parish churches. In turn flourishing cathedrals should support and inspire flourishing parishes.

The fourth conceptual framework has been shaped by Bishop David Walker's analysis of the multiple ways in which people may express their belonging to God within the Anglican Church. Walker's model of four ways of belonging was developed initially in a series of theoretical and empirical studies (Walker, 2006, 2009, 2010a, 2010b) and was then summarised in his book, *God's Belongers* (Walker, 2017). The four ways of belonging are characterised as belonging through activities, through events, through people, and through places. Each of these ways of belonging may be reflected in different understandings of "congregational participation" and in different expressions of flourishing.

In Walker's model, church activities, like Sunday services, take place on a regular basis. People who belong through activities are committed to attending week in and week out. Church events, like Christmas carol services and summer fêtes, punctuate the year. People who belong through events make a point of turning up on these occasions. People who belong through relationships connect with people who are rooted in the local church. Through these relationships, they can access a real sense of connection. People who belong through place may hold a deep affection for a church that they do not regularly attend but with which they can feel deep connections.

Foundation Studies

Rooted in these four conceptual frameworks, my original foray into the science of cathedral

studies drew together 11 papers, each of which defined a specific research question and assembled empirical data to address that question (see Francis, 2015). Edwards and ap Siôn (2015) focused on the engagement of cathedrals across England and Wales with young people. Drawing on data from cathedral websites, they identified four primary areas of activity, characterised as concerning school-related education, faith-related education, visitor-related education, and music-related education. Each of these four areas was illustrated by a case study profiling current practice and celebrating signs of flourishing. Building on this study, McKenna, Francis, and Jones (2024) have profiled Anglican cathedral educational provision for schools, and Francis, McKenna, and Jones (2024) have profiled provision for faith education and community education. Cathedrals are vibrant hubs for learning.

Drawing on sociological theory, Francis and Williams (2015a) focused on the distinctive dynamics of personal, social, religious, and spiritual capitals generated within one particular cathedral congregation. Data provided by 269 people during the morning services demonstrated that these congregations were not escapees from the commitment demanded by local churches (as suggested by some commentators) and that being members of a cathedral congregation has a positive impact on the development of social, personal, and spiritual capitals. These congregations were seen to flourish by contributing significantly to the well-being of their local area.

In a second paper, drawing on psychological theory, Francis and Williams (2015b) examined the motivational styles of three different cathedral congregations through the lens of religious orientation theory, applying the New Indices of Religious Orientation (NIRO; Francis, 2007). This theory distinguishes among three motivational styles: intrinsic orientation where religious faith itself is the motivator; extrinsic orientation where other social or personal ends are more important; and quest motivation where religious questions become more important than answers. These motivational styles are reflected in different signs of flourishing. Two main conclusions emerged from the data provided by 592 participants during the morning services in these three cathedrals. First, the motivational style most frequently endorsed was that of intrinsic religiosity, followed by quest religiosity in second place and extrinsic religiosity in third place. Second, there were statistically significant differences in motivational styles among the three cathedrals. One cathedral seemed particularly welcoming to the quest style.

Walker (2015) profiled two congregations attending the carol services held in two cathedrals before Christmas. Drawing on data provided by 1,151 participants, the following issues are explored: attitudes and opinions regarding Christmas and carol services, motivations for attending the cathedral service, and the broader context of religious belonging, believing, and practicing. The profile of those attending the cathedral carol service was compared and contrasted with other studies of Anglican churchgoers. This enabled a distinctive picture to be drawn of a population for whom their Christian faith and belonging are important but who sit more loosely to church attendance and dogmatic statements, preferring the notions of mystery and of faith as a lived life. They were found to be liberal in their sexual ethics and pluralist towards other faiths; and they strongly supported the corporate and public dimensions of faith, a faith engaged in society both as political commentator and service provider. Different styles of service foster different expressions of flourishing.

Drawing on her series of earlier studies (ap Siôn, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2015a) of prayers left in churches, cathedrals, hospital chapels, or posted online, ap Siôn (2015b) presented an analysis of one thousand prayer requests posted on the prayer board in one cathedral. Drawing on Astley's (2002) notion of ordinary theology, ap Siôn was interested in uncovering and valuing the spiritual quest of those who chose to use the prayer board in this way. In so doing, her attention was drawn to the ongoing conversations set up by anonymous participants directly with God and directly with the praying community within that cathedral. These conversations suggested to ap Siôn an invisible congregation flourishing within the cathedral's walls. Here were a group of people coming regularly to the cathedral to post prayers on the prayer board without making themselves known to the cathedral clergy. This field of research continues (ap Siôn, 2024).

Also drawing on Astley's notion of ordinary theology, Burton (2015) turned attention to a careful analysis of the visitors' book in one cathedral, a resource that is often overlooked. Drawing on 1,278 signed comments, Burton concluded that for these visitors the cathedral served a double function, both as an historical attraction to secular tourists and as a source of religious experience and spiritual insight. This double function is revealed through a secular response to the building and its contents and a spiritual response to the ambience which the cathedral creates. In secular terms, the comments show positive and negative reactions to what visitors experience and therefore are a means of feedback to the cathedral authorities. In spiritual terms, the comments show that visitors see the cathedral as a holy place, a place of calm from their experience of busy lives, a place for prayer, a place that creates inspiring thoughts, and a place that stimulates reflection on their personal beliefs. The results of the enquiry demonstrate that cathedral visitors-books provide valuable information about the flourishing of ordinary visitors.

Francis, Robbins, and Annis (2015) applied psychographic segmentation theory to cathedral visitors, drawing on psychological type theory. Over the course of one summer, 2,412 visitors to St Davids Cathedral in South West Wales completed the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005). The profile of these visitors was set alongside the U.K. norms published by Kendall (1998). Comparison with the population norms demonstrated that extraverts and perceiving types were significantly underrepresented among cathedral visitors. Francis, Robbins, and Annis (2015) discussed the implications of these findings both for maximising the cathedrals' response to the psychological type preferences of those currently visiting and for ways of promoting the cathedral to be more attractive to extraverts and to perceiving types. These findings were subsequently replicated by Francis and Mansfield (2022) among 1,082 visitors to four cathedrals.

In a second study employing the same data set, Francis, Annis, and Robbins (2015) drew on the notion of the spiritual revolution as articulated by Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) analysis of the changing spiritual landscape of the town Kendal that they studied in North West England. Their aim was to explore the extent to which this notion may illuminate the spiritual quest of visitors to St Davids Cathedral. Their data demonstrated that, although the religious identity of visitors to this cathedral was not strongly shaped by the Christian tradition, evidence for the growth of the spiritual revolution among these visitors was also quite thin. Against this background, they concluded that visitors were open to be engaged by the Christian narrative so strongly built into the fabric of the Cathedral.

Muskett (2015) turned attention to the work of the Friends' associations of Anglican cathedrals in England. A survey of the official websites of Anglican cathedrals in England revealed that all have formal associations of Friends in the same way as other institutions in the heritage sector (such as libraries and museums). Muskett's analysis assessed the significance of the Friends' associations for cathedrals today, especially in terms of their capacity to generate money, prayer and volunteers for cathedrals, and opportunities for social networking and learning opportunities for members. Muskett's insights into the flourishing of cathedral Friends was augmented by her own survey among 923 members (see Muskett, 2012, 2013).

Applying Cathedral Research

Having thought about cathedrals and having published on cathedrals, I was pleased in 2019 to be invited to serve as a Canon Theologian in Liverpool Cathedral, working alongside the Dean, who has experience of working in the university sector and who has also published in the field of cathedral studies. Our vision was to enable the Cathedral to develop as a research-engaged and research-informed community. The first step was to draw into the Cathedral a vibrant postgraduate learning community of academics who would meet over a two-day period three times a year to discuss research and to take a full part in the liturgical life of the Cathedral over those two days. The second step was to conduct research among the various communities and congregations within the Cathedral. The third step was to engage the wider cathedral staff in drawing on the insights of research and to shape policy and practice. The fourth step was to shape a bid to U.K. Research and Innovation, the national funding agency investing in science and research, to fund a Knowledge

Transfer Partnership by which a full-time academic appointment through a university could be located within the Cathedral for a three-year period to consolidate this link between church and academy. The bid was successful, and the appointment was made in January 2023.

I conclude by citing two strands of research that have flourished in Liverpool Cathedral since 2019. Both strands have focused on the Cathedral's ministry over the Christmas period: one looking at participants attending carol services, and the other looking at participants attending a pre-Christmas *son et lumiere*.

During Christmas 2019, a congregation survey was conducted during the afternoon Holly Bough service on the Fourth Sunday of Advent and at the two afternoon carol services on Christmas Eve. Initially, three papers were published on different aspects of the data from the Holly Bough service. First, Francis, Jones, et al. (2020) reported on the demographic profile, motivational intention drawing on religious orientation theory (see Francis, 2007), and perceived impact on spiritual wellbeing drawing on Fisher's four dimensional model (see Fisher, 2010, 2016). The data demonstrated a mix of ages, a sense of Anglican commitment to this form of event-belonging by those who return year-on-year and invite friends to join them, and a perceived beneficial impact on all four dimensions of spiritual wellbeing. Second, Francis and Jones (2020) tested the thesis that services of this nature act as agents of psychological wellbeing within secular societies. A total of 383 participants completed a recognised measure of psychological wellbeing (the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire) while waiting for the service to begin and again during a five-minute organ improvisation just before the close of the service. The data demonstrated a significantly higher score on the Oxford Happiness Inventory at time two than at time one. Third, Francis, Jones, and McKenna (2020) employed psychographic segmentation theory to test the hypothesis that services of this nature reach the kind of people church congregations find it hard to reach. Psychological type profiling of church congregations has demonstrated that Anglican churches have particular difficulty in reaching those whose Jungian preference is for thinking rather than feeling (Francis, Robbins, & Craig, 2011). A total of 441 participants completed a recognised measure of psychological type (the Francis Psychological Type Scales). The data demonstrated a significantly higher proportion of thinking types among these participants.

The three analyses conducted on the Holly Bough participants were replicated among the Christmas Eve carol service participants: demographic profile and motivation (Francis, Jones, et al., 2021), impact on psychological wellbeing (Francis, Jones, & McKenna, 2021a), and inclusion of more thinking types (Francis, Jones, & McKenna, 2021b). Further analyses from the two data sets, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, were published by Francis, McKenna, and Stewart (2024) and by Pike (2023, 2024).

During the beginning of Advent 2022, 2023, and 2024, Liverpool Cathedral hosted the Luxmuralis *son et lumiere*, "The Light Before Christmas." Each year the theme was different, focusing, in turn, on the angels, the manger, and starlight. Each year, a survey has been conducted among participants, leading to a series of papers including Village and Francis (2024), McKenna, Francis, and Village (2024), McKenna, Francis, Village, and Stewart (2024), and Francis (2024). A key motivation in organising the Advent *son et lumiere*, in addition to income generation, was the potential missional impact of the event. The data demonstrated that many of the visitors were unchurched and unaccustomed with entering churches. The *son et lumiere* had enticed them across the threshold, but were they likely to come back? Nearly two-fifths (39%) of the participants surveyed at the 2023 event said that their experience made them more likely to attend a carol service in the Cathedral and nearly one-fifth (18%) said they were more likely to attend a Christmas Eve/Day service. By coincidence, the 4,749 attendance at the Christmas Eve Carol services was a 21% uplift on the pre-COVID 2019 attendance; and the 1,232 attendance at Midnight Mass was a 73% uplift on the 2019 attendance. There is a sense in which engagement with wider publics through events and installations may lead to growing and flourishing congregations.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have responded to the invitation to focus on the "congregational domain" of Christian flourishing from the distinctive perspective of my research group working within the field of empirical theology. Reflecting on three decades of research, what would I wish to say to the next generation of scholars working in this field? There are some important principles arising from this experience. Co-creation between the Church and the academic community is crucial for the design of research, for ensuring participation in research, and for creating pathways from evidence to policy and practice. Collaboration among different disciplines enriches research: In particular, I have found dialogues engaging theology, psychology, and sociology to be fundamental. Effective research builds on and extends existing bodies of knowledge but also remains alert to new and disrupting insights. Quantitative and qualitative approaches are capable of testing different theories and of generating different insights: the methodological perspectives are complementary not competitive. A strong Church is one that is research active and research engaged.

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Flourishing in Ministry: A Meta-Model for Clergy Wellbeing Research

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While research on clergy is limited, past research has focused on mental and physical illness of clergy. More recent research is focusing on clergy positive mental health. The Flourishing in Ministry project provides a comprehensive framework for clergy wellbeing in which to organize and expand a literature review of recent clergy wellbeing research. The five dimensions of daily wellbeing, resilience, thriving, authenticity, and a flourishing relational ecosystem serve as an empirically based meta-model in which to locate a synthesis of other clergy wellbeing research. Consensus among researchers emphasizes the importance of a sustainable rhythm of key practices that accumulate over time, creating a virtuous cycle. Future directions for research are discussed, including the need for more longitudinal research with diverse clergy populations.

Human beings were designed to flourish. God's original design and intent in the Genesis narrative of creation was for human beings to flourish in relationship with God, intimacy with one another, and even in work God had given them to do. God called human beings to flourish in their work before the Fall. If we read the Genesis narrative carefully, human beings were called to work before the Fall. A theology of human flourishing, therefore, must include a robust theology of work. And our relationships and work are reconciled and redeemed through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, who is working in and through us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Flourishing in our vocation is central to our identity in Christ, and no one lives out their lives and work as a calling more than ministry leaders. The Flourishing in Ministry project was designed to delve more carefully and specifically into the factors, conditions, and practices that promote wellbeing at work among clergy.

The Flourishing in Ministry (FiM) project originated within the University of Notre Dame's Wellbeing at Work initiative under Matt Bloom's leadership before transitioning to Rosemead School of Psychology under the leadership of Chris Adams. Building upon Adams and Bloom's (2017) initial publication in the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* (JPC), this article expands their framework while incorporating insights from Bloom's (2019) book. Given its comprehensive scope, the FiM model serves as an ideal framework for synthesizing existing clergy wellbeing research, as it both encompasses and extends previous work in the field. As an ongoing research initiative, the FiM project continues to evolve, with future directions discussed in subsequent sections.

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The Flourishing in Ministry Model

FiM is a translational research project that explores the practices and conditions that promote flourishing in ministry. FiM studies healthy ministry leaders to learn how they construct and sustain a positive pastoral identity and serve with longevity and joy. The project offers insights and recommendations for clergy to not only remain fulfilled in their work, but to flourish in all of life (Bloom, 2019). The FiM research team began by reviewing the leading models of human flourishing, including Martin Seligman's (2011) positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments (PERMA) model, Michael Bishop's (2012) network theory, and a model by Ted White (2015), among others. The research team then analyzed the convergence of these models, examining their applicability to occupational wellbeing across helping professions, with particular emphasis on clergy. A model was then developed through a mixed-methodology approach. The qualitative portion of the study was comprised of over 200 semi-structured interviews of clergy, using a phenomenological, grounded-theory approach. The quantitative portion was a survey that was refined over time. Most of the items were taken from established measures that had been published in at least 50 top-tier, peer-reviewed journal articles. The survey was refined over time in conversation with the qualitative research, resulting in a shorter instrument while maintaining reliability. Correlational, multiple regression, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were utilized with a convenience sample of 10,000 clergy from 20 denominations (Evangelical, Mainline, and Catholic) to arrive at the final model (see Appendix A). The resulting flourishing in ministry model highlights the key dimensions that we have found contribute to flourishing in ministry: daily wellbeing, resilience, thriving, authenticity, and a flourishing ecosystem. It is worth noting that in positive psychology literature, terms like flourishing, resilience, and thriving are used interchangeably. However, we have come to understand the research to use flourishing as the umbrella term, with subdimensions. Our research supports that these five dimensions are empirically distinct. It is also important to note that, while in some respects a practical theology of flourishing and Christian spirituality is woven throughout the FiM model, spiritual vitality will be discussed primarily under the thriving dimension below. Bloom also categorized the existing human flourishing research evidence-based practices into seven categories, which map onto one or more of the flourishing in ministry dimensions: tranquil, receptive, engaged, joyful, confident, dedicated, and connecting practices (Bloom, 2019). In other words, it is possible for a given flourishing practice to boost wellbeing in more than one dimension of the FiM model (even though the dimensions themselves are discrete). The Flourishing in Ministry assessment tool and coaching program help clergy to construct a personalized rule of life for sustainable, flourishing ministry (www.flourishinginministry.org).

Our ongoing research indicates that these dimensions are interrelated. Ministry leaders can engage in practices that boost their own wellbeing in one or more of these dimensions. When wellbeing increases in one area, it has a positive impact on other areas as well. The more they experience daily wellbeing, the more resilient they become—which leads to higher levels of thriving and authenticity, which, in turn, increases daily wellbeing and so on. Clergy can engage in practices that create a virtuous cycle of wellbeing (Bloom, 2019). We have learned that small steps make a big difference, if practiced frequently and consistently. We also know that wellbeing for ministry leaders accumulates. There is a wonderful afterlife to the joy stemming from the great days in ministry, which lasts for several days (Bloom, 2019). Unfortunately, there are also cycles of ill-being that can become a downward spiral. The impact of the difficult days in ministry also has an afterlife that may last for the better part of a week, lasting longer than the afterlife of the joy-filled days.

Clergy are often focused on the next, urgent task in ministry and are unaware of the stress that is accumulating internally. We have found that simply the process of pausing to take a step back from the flow of life and ministry to reflect can yield significant benefits (Bloom, 2019). We also know that flourishing in ministry happens in a relational ecosystem. Clergy are embedded in concentric circles of relationships. While we do need to take care of ourselves, our wellbeing is impacted by the health of the larger ecosystem in which we function (and vice versa). Creating a rhythm of practices in order to flourish in ministry is also best accomplished in community. Having others who are lovingly supportive, and yet hold us accountable to our goals, makes a big difference to wellbeing (Bloom, 2019).

In addition to Bloom's work, this observation follows from Scripture as well as a wealth of psychological research affirming the overarching importance of social support. It is widely recognized that social support provides two primary benefits: (a) buffering (mitigation) in the context of stressful life events, and (b) direct benefits in the form of enhanced wellbeing. Interestingly, and perhaps particularly pertinent to clergy well-being, is the finding that perceived social support is most strongly correlated with psychological adjustment (Zell & Stockus, 2025). In

other words, while the actual care, availability, and practical support of others is important to our wellbeing, our narratives about the nature, quality, and acceptability of social support available to us are an essential consideration and an important target for enhancing engagement with social support to bolster wellbeing. The unique role that clergy have in a social ecosystem can present complex challenges and resources with regard to both the actual and perceived social support of pastors.

In systematic literature review of clergy wellbeing research, Hydinger et al. (2024) noted that there does not appear to be a meta-framework or model that comprehensively addresses clergy wellbeing in the existing published academic journal research. Consequently, in the following sections we synthesize recent clergy wellbeing research using the FiM framework as a scientific, coherent, and accessible format: daily wellbeing, resilience, thriving, authenticity, and a flourishing ecosystem.

Thriving

Thriving is defined as experiencing meaning and purpose, having inspirational beliefs that guide us morally, and having deep, positive connections to God and other people. Ministry leaders typically have a strong sense of meaning and purpose in life and a strong belief system (Bloom, 2019). Ministry leaders are able to live out their deepest convictions in life as part of their work, which is a privilege. Ministry leaders also often report a strong connection to God, except perhaps when experiencing more severe depression and burnout. However, the connection to others is often an area of difficulty for pastors—although our research also indicates that female clergy are more adept at staying connected to important relationships than male clergy (Bloom, 2019). Our research suggests three categories of relationships with both significant others and similar others that ministry leaders need in order to thrive using the metaphor: front stage, backstage, and offstage relationships (Bloom, 2019). Ministry leaders occupy a very public role—they are often on the front stage. In order to flourish, pastors need allies who share the front stage in a mutually respectful and supportive manner. Leaders also need backstage relationships, such as supportive supervisors, a community of practice, team relationships, and mentors. And all ministry leaders need to have an off-stage—a place to just be a person and be fully known and loved. Guarding off-stage time and space for family relationships and close, personal friendships (often outside of one's ministry context) are key practices.

Meek et al. (2003) engaged the issue of well-being among clergy members from a positive psychology standpoint, looking at ways that religious leaders can potentially maintain healthy functioning. Two important themes emerged from their work: (a) the importance of being intentional in creating a work-life balance and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships—that is, setting good boundaries; and (b) the importance of vitality in their spiritual lives, including assurance of God's calling and awareness of His grace in the presence of hardship. Other research appears to confirm these two categories.

Spiritual Vitality

The flourishing in ministry research suggests that contemplative spiritual practices are particularly important for clergy flourishing. These practices include lectio divina, Ignatian spiritual practices, Christian mindfulness and meditation, centering prayer, Sabbath, solitude, and silence (Bloom, 2019). These practices not only focus more on being with God than on ministry performance, but they also contribute to daily wellbeing by calming down a person's stress response system (see daily wellbeing below). In a systematic review of the literature, Hydinger et al. (2024) identified several individual clergy wellbeing enhancers, including maintaining an active spiritual life through positive religious coping, secure attachment to God, spiritual practices (including Sabbath-keeping), and understanding one's calling as sharing in ministry with God. This spiritual orientation to ministry was further supported by Case et al. (2020), who found that a "participating in God's work" perspective promoted thriving, emphasizing ministry as working in concert with God rather than focusing on achieving specific results. Their research confirmed that regular participation in spiritual practices helped maintain this perspective. In other words, beginning with the theological assumption that God is already at work before anyone engages in vocational ministry leads to a healthier theology and psychology of vocational ministry. Bickerton et al. (2015) investigated spiritual resources through the job demands-resources model, finding that spiritual resources (including attachment to God, collaborative religious coping, and divine calling) longitudinally predicted work engagement and reduced turnover intention, suggesting that enhancing clergy's spiritual resources directly impacts ministry sustainability. Burns et al. (2013) identified specific spiritual practices that support flourishing clergy, including prayer (especially contemplative practices), accountability partnerships, practicing lament, repentance, and both personal and corporate worship. Sielaff et al. (2021) similarly emphasized the importance of spiritual practices and peer group participation for clergy thriving. Terry and Cunningham (2021) also found that spiritual disciplines alone or with others were important recovery practices for clergy.

Healthy Relational Boundaries

Research consistently demonstrates the importance of establishing and maintaining healthy relational boundaries for clergy wellbeing. Rowatt (2001) found that ministry satisfaction stemmed from two primary sources: interpersonal relationships (including staff, congregants, and the larger Christian community) and family satisfaction (encompassing family support, positive family environment, and shared vocation with spouse). Burns et al. (2013) discovered that flourishing clergy effectively distinguished between "allies" and "confidants" in their ministry lives, while maintaining positive, mutually supportive relationships with pastoral staff, clergy peer groups, and personal friendships, often outside their congregation. Their research particularly emphasized the importance of caring for clergy families, recommending specific practices such as honoring spouses (both publicly and privately) and children for their shared role in ministry, protecting family members from ministry-related emotional and relational stresses, modeling adaptability, and establishing additional relational support outside the congregation (Burns et al., 2013).

Hill et al. (2003) identified several positive coping strategies for boundary-related stressors, including finding social support within the congregation, securing mentorship outside the congregation, building community connections, and establishing firm boundaries around family time. Jackson-Jordan (2013) recommended specific professional development activities to support boundary-setting, including participation in peer groups and mentoring relationships, conflict management training, training in healthy interpersonal boundaries, and Clinical Pastoral Education. Case et al. (2020) found that proactive boundary-setting between work and home/family life was crucial for flourishing clergy, enabling them to fulfill family obligations and engage in daily wellbeing practices. This finding aligns with Clarke et al.'s (2022) identification of work/life balance and boundaries as essential personal resources for wellbeing and Sielaff et al.'s (2021) emphasis on boundary-setting as a key practice for clergy wellbeing. Creating and maintaining healthy relational boundaries helps clergy to create healthier work/life balance and time management boundaries (see daily wellbeing below).

The research literature strongly supports and extends Bloom's (2019) conceptualization of thriving, which emphasizes the integration of meaning, purpose, inspirational beliefs, and deep connections with God and others. While clergy generally demonstrate strong spiritual foundations through meaning, purpose, and divine connection, the relational aspect often proves challenging. Studies consistently validate Bloom's "stage" metaphor for understanding clergy relationships (front stage, backstage, and offstage) while offering specific strategies for maintaining these boundaries (Burns et al., 2013; Hill et al., 2013). Recent research has particularly illuminated how spiritual vitality and healthy boundaries interact to promote thriving: Spiritual practices foster a "participating in God's work" orientation (Case et al., 2020) while simultaneously supporting work engagement (Bickerton et al., 2015), and intentional boundary-setting creates space for both spiritual renewal and relationship cultivation (Clarke et al., 2022; Meek et al., 2003). This growing body of evidence suggests that clergy thriving, as Bloom theorized, requires both deep spiritual rootedness and intentional relationship management across all "stages" of ministry life.

Authenticity

Authenticity emerged in the FiM research as a critical dimension of clergy flourishing, though

research indicates that many ministry leaders find it challenging to navigate ministry demands while maintaining their authentic self. According to Bloom (2019), authenticity is comprised of two key dimensions: dignity (experiencing respect and feeling inherently valued) and self-integrity (maintaining a positive, stable sense of self-worth grounded in Christian humility that embraces both strengths and vulnerabilities). FiM research indicates that, while 30% of clergy report high levels of authenticity, another 50% experience moderate authenticity levels. These findings suggest that there is work to do in helping clergy cultivate a stronger sense of authenticity in a very complex, multifaceted, and demanding role.

Authenticity in ministry inherently connects to the formation of a positive pastoral identity, which is development of a pastoral self that can genuinely express both personal values and vocational calling (Bloom, 2019). The experience of being valued (dignity) and maintaining stable self-worth (self-integrity) creates the psychological foundation upon which clergy can build an authentic pastoral identity that integrates their personal selfhood with the demands of an expert-generalist professional role. This integration becomes particularly crucial given the public nature of pastoral ministry, where the boundaries between personal and professional life often blur.

Developing and sustaining a positive pastoral identity proves essential to flourishing in ministry, requiring the construction of a complex yet integrated personal narrative. A flourishing personal narrative includes awareness and self-acceptance of one's strengths, as well as one's growing edges and vulnerabilities (Bloom, 2019). This identity formation likely requires years of development, with mentoring playing a crucial role in helping clergy navigate the process. The FiM research emphasizes that long-term flourishing also depends on achieving goodness of fit in two dimensions: between person and role (competencies) and between pastor and context (needs and values) (Bloom, 2019). Key practices supporting authenticity include job crafting aligned with pastoral strengths, practicing self-compassion, regularly engaging in "restorative niche" activities or hobbies, and developing clarity around personal theology. Our research further suggests that female clergy are more skilled in maintaining a sense of identity as a person, over and above their ministry role, than male clergy (Bloom, 2019).

Recent research has expanded our understanding of how workplace conditions and personal resources contribute to authentic ministry. Stewart-Sicking et al. (2011) identified three crucial workplace conditions: meaningfulness (experiencing work as personally worthwhile), safety (feeling comfortable expressing opinions and being oneself), and psychological availability (confidence in one's cognitive, physical, and emotional capacity for work). Their research revealed that, while meaningfulness most strongly predicted overall clergy well-being, safety particularly influenced women's career satisfaction. Hydinger et al.'s (2024) literature review found that individual clergy wellbeing was enhanced by realistic role expectations, goal-orientation, and the ability to live out one's values through work. This aligns with Rowatt's (2001) findings that ministry satisfaction encompasses both intrapersonal elements (freedom, personal growth, vocational satisfaction) and work satisfaction (including preaching, leading worship, counseling, crisis intervention, sacramental administration, education, leadership, and missions).

The integration of personal and professional authenticity requires intentional development and maintenance. Clarke et al. (2022) identified lifelong learning and theological and organizational alignment with congregation/denomination as crucial personal resources for wellbeing. Burns et al. (2013) expanded on this, emphasizing that flourishing clergy must distinguish between leadership and management while developing competencies in both areas. Their research highlighted specific practices of flourishing clergy, including systems thinking, organizational leadership reflection, understanding power dynamics, assertive management of role expectations, and modeling appropriate vulnerability. Significantly, Burns et al. (2013) emphasized that maintaining identity apart from ministry work, particularly through hobbies, proves essential for clergy flourishing, supporting Bloom's (2019) emphasis on the importance of authentic self-expression in ministry.

Daily Wellbeing

Daily wellbeing refers to the quality of our daily lives in a holistic sense—physically, emotionally, cognitively, relationally, spiritually, and vocationally. It includes how often we experience happiness, or more positive emotions than negative emotions. Daily wellbeing includes having a generally positive evaluation of the quality of one's life over time, such that we experience a sustained positivity (Bloom, 2019). The daily stress and strain of ministry can have an impact on our physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual health. FiM's research suggests approximately 50% of clergy appear to be experiencing both high daily wellbeing and overall happiness in life and ministry (Bloom, 2019). Flourishing practices that promote daily wellbeing include exercise, healthy nutrition, and adequate sleep as essential. Our research suggests that flourishing pastors practice daily and extended relaxation and daily and extended detachment from ministry work. Key practices that promote daily and extended relaxation and detachment include Sabbath, solitude, silence, and sabbaticals. Other examples of practices that promote daily wellbeing and overall flourishing include gratitude practices, deep breathing, and relaxation exercises. We have also found that the practice of "ending on a high note" can significantly increase daily wellbeing—simply returning to one of the work activities that really matters to a given pastor's church and that brings them joy for at least 15 minutes at the end of the workday (Bloom, 2019).

Hydinger et al. (2024) published an elegant, systematic, and critical literature review of research on burnout, trauma impacts, and well-being among clergy. They categorized studies into three categories: risk factors, protective factors, and wellbeing enhancers on individual relational, and institutional levels. Interestingly, 26% of their identified studies focused on clergy wellbeing enhancers as factors that promote flourishing distinct from reduction of negative mental health outcomes. Individual wellbeing enhancers included gratitude, self-efficacy, perspective-taking, hope, and optimism. Stewart-Sicking (2012) noted that research indicates that clergy have high degrees of burnout and report high degrees of stress, yet studies also find that clergy report very high scores on scales of positive feelings and emotional health. In order to bring clarity to this situation, he examined clergy well-being through the well-established lens of subjective well-being, which includes positive affect, negative affect, and satisfaction with life. He found much more positive affect, moderately more negative affect, and moderately more satisfaction with life than norms from nonclinical samples. Emotional well-being was multidimensional, in that correlations among the three elements of the model were small or moderate. Different variables predicted the three components. These results highlight the importance of conceptualizing well-being in nuanced and multidimensional ways.

While mental health and mental illness are distinct though connected concepts, Keyes et al.'s (2020) mental health promotion and protection (MHPP) hypotheses are that population mental health can be addressed by elevating levels of positive mental health and protecting against their loss. This is because the risk of common mental disorders declines when levels of positive mental health increase and increases when levels of positive mental health decrease. Keyes and colleagues found that a high percentage (7 out of 10) of their clergy sample were flourishing, consistent with the view of ministry being a calling and a source of meaning. The results indicated the independence of mental health and mental illness, in that measures of flourishing and of depression did not show the same patterns longitudinally. The results also indicated that the absence of flourishing led to increased risk of depression, and that the presence of flourishing prevented depression. Implications for treatment are that flourishing, and not just resolution of mental illness symptoms, should be targeted, including fostering positive emotions, opportunities for personal growth and meaning, and opportunities to contribute to society.

In a study by Clarke et al. (2022), clergy personal resources that promoted wellbeing included work/life balance and caring for physical health. Case et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study to identify factors that enable clergy to flourish in the face of occupational stressors. Consensual grounded theory analysis resulted in key themes that appeared to distinguish clergy with better versus worse mental health. Key themes included being intentional about health

and well-being promotion, engaging in physical exercise, and participating in leisurely activities on a regular basis. Burns et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative study and found that flourishing pastors were intentional about exercise, healthy nutrition, having boundaries around personal and family time, taking a weekly day off/practicing Sabbat, taking vacations, and taking sabbaticals. Hill et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative focus group study to gain a more in-depth understanding of boundary-related stress and coping resources of clergy and their spouses. In order to cope with boundary-related stressors, clergy and their families reported that they used a variety of coping methods to buffer the impact of boundary intrusions. These included taking time away, time management, and sabbaticals. Terry and Cunningham (2021) explored the issue of setting boundaries in more detail. Their research found key recovery strategies among clergy and their families: spending personal time on hobbies, physical activity, and time with friends and family, setting aside time or space for self-care practices.

In summary, research consistently demonstrates that clergy daily wellbeing is multidimensional and requires intentional cultivation across multiple domains. Studies indicate that, while clergy often experience high levels of occupational stress, those who flourish typically engage in deliberate self-care practices, including physical exercise, adequate rest, and boundary-setting (Burns et al., 2013; Case et al., 2020). The distinction between mental health and mental illness is particularly relevant, as Keyes et al. (2020) found that fostering positive mental health not only promotes flourishing but also serves as a protective factor against depression. Flourishing appears to stem from a comprehensive approach that addresses both individual and institutional factors (Clarke et al., 2022), incorporating personal resources such as work-life balance while leveraging organizational support through policies and professional development opportunities (see flourishing ecosystems below). Notably, clergy who maintain their wellbeing often employ specific recovery strategies, including dedicated time for hobbies, spiritual disciplines, and relationship cultivation (Terry & Cunningham, 2021), suggesting that sustainable ministry requires a holistic approach to personal and professional flourishing.

Resilience

Resilience is defined as the capacity to adapt to the inevitable changes and challenges in life, achieve goals, and continue to grow. Resilience also includes the capacity to bounce back after experiencing adversity. Our results suggest that approximately 30% of ministry leaders, mostly in mid-career, are highly resilient and able to positively cope well with the stresses and strains of ministry leadership. Our capacity for resilience is dynamic and fluctuates over time, benefiting from adaptive mindsets, behaviors, and resources (Baldwin et al., 2020). Psychologist Ann Masten has a great phrase for resilience, "ordinary magic," which makes the insightful point that resilience is more ordinary than extraordinary (Masten, 2014). As humans and Divine image bearers, we have been endowed with a remarkable capacity for personal and social resilience.

According to the FiM model, resilience is composed of four main competencies: (a) self-awareness, (b) self-reflection, (c) self-control, and (d) healthy life dynamics (Bloom, 2019). Self-awareness is the capacity to pause and think about our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Self-reflection is the capacity to reflect on the nature and source of our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and the impact they are having on ourselves and other people. Self-control, which is a fruit of the Spirit, is the capacity to respond in a spiritually mature fashion based on our self-awareness and self-reflection. Self-control includes the ability to change something about ourselves, set goals, and adjust to changing circumstances (Bloom, 2019). Self-control is enhanced by a growth mindset, which emphasizes learning and improving, as opposed to a fixed mindset that focuses on proving and performing (Dweck, 2006). The fourth aspect of resilience is life dynamics, which refers to how many daily activities and responsibilities we have, the quality of our social interaction, and our daily highs and lows (Bloom, 2019).

Stress is unavoidable, and research indicates that complicated work is good for wellbeing—up to a point. There is a point of diminishing returns when there can be too much workload and challenge, which then has a negative impact on wellbeing. Ministry certainly involves sacrifice and even suffering. However, our research suggests that ministry leaders can easily shift from healthy forms of ministry engagement to unhealthy over-functioning without even realizing they are doing so (Bloom, 2019). The flourishing in ministry research further indicates that important resilience practices include gratitude practices, Christian mindfulness practices, structured expressive writing exercises, and Ignatian examen, among others.

Recent research has deepened our understanding of the role of self-awareness and personal growth in clergy resilience. Clarke et al. (2022) identified self-awareness as a crucial personal resource for wellbeing, while Sielaff et al. (2021) developed a model defining resilience as a process of growth amid adversity that results in long-term increased wellbeing, emphasizing self-awareness as a fundamental principle. Burns et al. (2013) further elaborated on this theme, highlighting the importance of clergy growing in self-awareness about their personality, family of origin formation, strengths, and shadow side. Their research emphasized emotional and relational intelligence as core competencies, recommending specific practices such as learning to identify feelings, using a genogram to explore family of origin formation, and seeking interpersonal feedback from trusted relationships.

Studies examining psychological and spiritual resources have revealed additional dimensions of clergy resilience. Hydinger et al. (2024) identified individual clergy wellbeing enhancers including humility, self-compassion, extraversion, emotional intelligence, and differentiation. Jankowski et al. (2022) specifically investigated humility's role, hypothesizing it could serve a protective function by helping clergy acknowledge limitations, share power, work through disappointments and conflicts, and seek help and support. Their research confirmed that humility protected against the harmful influence of vulnerable narcissism on wellbeing by moderating affect dysregulation. Proffitt et al. (2007) explored how spiritual resources facilitated posttraumatic growth and wellbeing, finding that both positive and negative religious coping predicted increased growth. Unlike research with other populations, this suggests clergy's unique ability to see benefits in crisis even when holding negative appraisals, such as viewing challenges as divine tests. Their study also found posttraumatic growth was mildly associated with wellbeing.

Other more intricate frameworks for understanding clergy resilience have also emerged from recent research. Clarke (2023) conceptualized clergy resilience as an interactive process between global meaning-making, adversity, and resources, including spiritual life, relational supports, personal aspects, and organizational supports. Burns et al. (2013) extended this understanding by emphasizing the importance of conflict management skills and intercultural competence, demonstrating how cultivating a posture of cultural humility and curiosity in diverse community helps form these essential competencies for sustainable ministry. These findings align with and expand upon Bloom's (2019) foundational framework, particularly in how self-awareness, self-reflection, self-control, and healthy life dynamics manifest in specific ministry contexts. The subsequent research validates Bloom's model while offering additional practical applications and insights into how resilience competencies develop and operate within the unique challenges of pastoral ministry.

Flourishing Ecosystem

The flourishing in ministry research has underscored the importance of thinking about ecosystem wellbeing for clergy, rather than just individual clergy wellbeing (Bloom, 2019). In fact, having a positive, mutually supportive, reciprocal relationship between pastor and congregational leadership appears to be a major predictor of long-term flourishing in ministry. Recent research has validated and expanded this ecological understanding of clergy wellbeing. Proeschold-Bell et al. (2011) and Hydinger et al. (2024) both emphasized the importance of examining clergy stressors and resources through an ecological lens, with Hydinger et al. specifically advocating for Bronfenbrenner's model of microsystem (clergy and immediate family), mesosystem (church staff, congregational leadership, clergy peer mentors), exosystem (congregation, denomination) and macrosystem (community, society). This multi-level approach aligns with Bloom's ecosystem perspective while providing a structured framework for understanding various support mechanisms.

Bloom (2019) recommended that congregational leaders educate themselves on the nature of pastoral leadership and stress, provide financially for clergy, encourage and resource

restoration and renewal of clergy, and foster a mutually supportive community environment. At the congregational level, several key factors emerge as crucial for clergy flourishing. Rowatt (2001) identified interpersonal relationships (with staff, congregants, and the larger Christian community) and congregational support as central to ministry satisfaction. Hill et al. (2013) found that clergy and their families actively cope with boundary-related stressors through congregational social support and community connections. Jackson and Jordan (2013) emphasized the importance of congregational accountability and support, particularly in providing time and resources for spiritual direction, retreats, clergy peer groups, and external worship experiences.

At the institutional level, research identifies several organizational resources that support clergy wellbeing. Denominations can implement thorough discernment practices in ordination, facilitate thoughtful placement of clergy in particular contexts, and intervene when congregations are abusive to clergy (Bloom, 2019). Clarke et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of financial and policy support, role flexibility, thorough preordination discernment processes, early career support, and skill-specific training. Hydinger et al. (2024) emphasized the role of supportive guidance from denominational supervisors and the creation of positive congregational systems that ensure psychological safety, reasonable role expectations, and appropriate workload management. This aligns with Bloom's emphasis on denominational responsibility in clergy placement and support. Hydinger et al. (2024) also found that institutional clergy wellbeing enhancers included paid leave or sabbaticals and continuing education opportunities. Clarke et al. (2022) found that lifelong learning and theological alignment with congregation/denomination are key considerations for clergy wellbeing. Organizational resources also included financial and policy support to incentivize clergy wellbeing, role flexibility, thorough preordination discernment process, early career support, skill-specific training, and other relational support (Clarke et al, 2022).

The research also points to specific strategies for implementing ecosystem support. Sielaff et al. (2021) advocated for equipping both congregations and supervisors to create supportive cultures that promote clergy flourishing rather than mere survival. Burns et al. (2013) emphasized the importance of systems thinking training for clergy, enabling them to better navigate their complex ecosystem. These findings reinforce Bloom's (2019) emphasis on the reciprocal nature of clergy-congregation relationships and the need for comprehensive support structures at multiple levels.

Summary and Conclusions

The flourishing in ministry model offers a comprehensive framework for understanding and promoting clergy wellbeing that has been consistently validated and expanded by recent research. By integrating five key dimensions—daily wellbeing, resilience, thriving, authenticity, and flourishing ecosystem—the model captures the complexity of pastoral ministry while providing practical pathways toward supporting the flourishing of ministry leaders. Particularly significant is the model's recognition that these dimensions are deeply interconnected, with growth in one area often catalyzing positive change in others. As noted earlier, this creates the potential for virtuous cycles of wellbeing, where intentional practice in any dimension can initiate broader flourishing.

Several key insights emerge from the integration of recent research with Bloom's (2019) framework. First, clergy flourishing requires attention to both individual practices and systemic factors. Neither personal initiatives nor institutional support alone is sufficient for sustainable ministry. Second, the relationship between mental health and flourishing is nuanced and complex, with flourishing serving not only as an indicator of wellbeing but as a protective factor against mental health challenges. Third, the critical role of boundaries emerges across all dimensions, suggesting that the ability to establish and maintain healthy limitations may be foundational to clergy flourishing. Fourth, relationships appear central to each dimension, though they manifest differently, ranging from the daily support of family and friends to the systemic support of congregations and denominations.

Perhaps most significantly, this research demonstrates that clergy flourishing is not merely the absence of burnout or the management of stress but, rather, the positive presence of wellbeing across multiple dimensions. The FiM model's emphasis on flourishing, rather than merely surviving, represents a crucial shift in how we conceptualize clergy wellness. This orientation toward positive development, combined with practical strategies for implementation, offers hope for both individual clergy and the institutions that support them.

Limitations and Future Directions

Clergy wellbeing research should continue to keep pace with developments and discoveries in the larger human flourishing research, particularly wellbeing at work in helping professions. While the statistical analyses were outside of the scope of this commissioned article, the FiM project should continue to publish validity, reliability, and factor analysis results, and how the dimensions of the model are interrelated, to further establish the model in the published journal research. More research is needed utilizing more diverse samples, with more pastors of color, female clergy, church planters, bi-vocational clergy, and cross-cultural missionaries. Future research should also include longitudinal designs to track how clergy wellbeing changes over time. More research is needed to understand how the different dimensions of clergy flourishing are interrelated and to track the sequence of positive wellbeing spirals. Future research should also explore the effect sizes of specific practices on specific subdimensions of clergy flourishing. The reciprocal relationship between the wellbeing of the surrounding ecosystem and clergy wellbeing needs to be further studied in order to further establish organizational recommendations for congregations and denominations. And, finally, research on clergy wellbeing interventions is needed in order to develop best practices for this population.

As research in clergy well-being continues to develop, the FiM model's comprehensive approach to clergy flourishing remains highly relevant. The model's emphasis on positive development provides a robust foundation for supporting clergy wellbeing in an increasingly challenging ministry landscape. It is our hope that this overview will assist in identifying gaps in the literature and encourage further work to support these important spiritual leaders.

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Appendix

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Flourishing Communities: The Role of Faith Communities in the Promotion of Flourishing and the Common Good

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The purpose of this paper is to provide a narrative review of many aspects of the outward facing work of congregations and faith-based organizations. While the majority of the paper is spent on the review, the final portion of the paper outlines the importance of equipping faith communities to better describe and assess the impact of their *own* work and the value of establishing common metrics such that congregations and faith-based organizations can facilitate greater learning about best practices within and between themselves. We further suggest that efforts to understand how churches flourish must include the outward facing work of faith communities to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how faith motivates and sustains care for the larger community. Finally, while many of these suggestions are put forward for the benefit of faith communities and organizations themselves, we point to important ways in which such efforts can make a meaningful contribution to broader policy discussions about the role of faith communities as partners in the promotion of community health and well-being.

On a hot Tuesday morning in September 2024, in the East Bay of Northern California, a small group of people moved around a modest church parking lot busily setting up tables, moving boxes, and connecting trailers to water and power. On this Tuesday, like most Tuesdays before it, pavement was transformed into place—a place for care, a place for refuge, and a place for connection. At the back of the lot, a collection of local nonprofits and church groups distributed boxes of fresh food and bags of clean clothes to low-income families. In the middle of the lot, tables and chairs were available for representatives from various social services to make in-person connections with those who needed support. Near the street, two large trailers were parked. One was a mobile medical trailer run by county healthcare professionals providing free medical and mental health services. Across from the medical unit was a refurbished trailer, run by another church up the road, with four mini bathrooms that offered hot showers and a few moments of privacy to unsheltered members of the community.

When set-up was complete, small groups gathered in circles and said prayers for grace and strength for the day ahead, and especially for those in the community who needed love. As late morning spilled into early afternoon, guests came: mothers with young children who had cars to drive but no food in their home, senior citizens who needed conversation as much as they needed fresh clothes, and those experiencing homelessness who toggled between the medical and shower trailers—some walking away looking refreshed from a hot shower and cleaned wounds. The group of volunteers who worked shoulder to shoulder throughout the day spanned a striking array of backgrounds: different racial and ethnic identities, socioeconomic statuses, and political preferences. Many were people of faith, but not all. The congregations represented were not connected by denomination but were united by the belief that faith should be lived out in tangible acts of love and service. The display of practical unity was nothing short of miraculous during an election season marked by expanding social fault lines. Yet, the scene was also mundane enough to be easily missed by the dozens of cars that whizzed by each hour enroute to busy days in the Bay Area. By mid-afternoon, the lot was empty again, with only a few scraps of paper as evidence of the activity that had played out on that hot strip of concrete.

The scene described above is real. It happens every week in the East Bay of Northern California—and similar scenes unfold every day among thousands of faith communities who engage in community-facing activities pointed towards the common good. Such scenes are occasionally described anecdotally or as case studies, and most often not at all, limiting the ability to describe or synthesize these activities from a broader vantage.

The purpose of this paper is to review, both topically and empirically, many aspects of the outward facing work of congregations and faith-based organizations. While the majority of the paper is spent on a narrative review, the final portion of the paper outlines the importance of equipping faith communities to better describe and assess the impact of their *own* work, and the value of establishing common metrics such that congregations and faith-based organizations can facilitate greater learning about best practices within and between themselves. We further suggest that efforts to understand how churches flourish must include the outward facing work of faith communities in order to get a more comprehensive understanding of how faith motivates and sustains care for the larger community. Finally, while many of these suggestions are put forward for the benefit of faith communities and organizations themselves, we point to important ways in which such efforts can make a meaningful contribution to broader policy discussions about the role of faith communities as partners in the promotion of community health and well-being.

Faith Communities and Social Services: Preliminary Landscape and Empirical Review

Parameters and Definitions

In the following section, we review some of the most commonly documented ways that faith communities contribute to flourishing and the common good. Before we begin, a few parameters and definitions are useful. First, the content of the review is only focused on the United States (U.S.). While there are many efforts underway to better describe the activities and impact of faith-based organizations around the world (for an example, see Christian Connections for International Health 30x30 Health Systems Initiative, 2025), the global context is beyond the scope of this paper.

Second, while the review attempts to focus on the most common service expressions of congregations and faith-based organizations and the strongest empirical evidence of impact, these efforts are limited by a number of factors. First, there are seemingly endless ways that congregations and faith-based groups engage their local communities. While we focus on many of the most common areas of engagement, these are, in many ways, the tip of the iceberg. Consequentially, attempting to synthesize "empirical evidence" about the social impact of faith communities is is simultaneously constrained by a lack of evidence on one hand and the highly scattered nature of existing empirical evidence on the other. For example, empirical evidence about faith community impact may exist in journals that touch on education, health, public health, healthcare systems, food insecurity, criminology, climate studies, racial reconciliation and justice seeking efforts, and several other disciplines. In their review of faith communities as the most common type of service organization in the United States, Cnaan and Milofsky commented that trying to map the type and extent of local congregations' outward facing services is like

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looking at a map of flight patterns for the entire airline industry (Cnaan & Milofsky, 2018); a rather dizzying array of intersections, activities, and outcomes. Others have noted how, despite the substantial contributions of faith communities to the common good, there remains a startling paucity of knowledge about the extent and prevalence of faith-based social services (Johnson, 2019). Amidst the scatteredness and scarcity, we gave priority to published empirical or impact studies and where needed included other types of evidence such as case reports or descriptive analyses to shed further light on the work of faith communities.

Third, this paper aims to explore the contributions of faith communities and organizations to flourishing and the common good. Both of these terms are used colloquially as well as technically, and a full review of definitions and distinctions is beyond the scope of this paper. Here, we rely on a broad and inclusive definition of flourishing as "the relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good, including the contexts in which that person lives" (Lomas & VanderWeele, 2023, p. 37), which includes, at minimum, the domains of physical and mental health, happiness and life satisfaction, character and virtue, close social relationships, meaning and purpose, and material and financial security, and would be inclusive of such goods both for the individual and for all those in the community. The "common good" is a phrase with rich history in classical and contemporary philosophy and is, likewise, beyond the scope of the current paper to review and summarize. For the purpose of this paper, we describe the common good as "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily" (Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace, 2005).

Finally, while we somewhat interchangeably use terms like "congregations" and "faith communities," given the focus on the United States, the data emerge from predominately Christian samples. For example, the National Congregations Study (NCS; National Congregations Study, 2019), a repeated cross-sectional nationally representative survey of religious congregations, is composed of congregations that are over 90% Christian affiliated. The review also includes the work of faith-based organizations, as these groups often work in parallel or even directly with congregations. Others have distinguished congregations and faith-based organizations as "caring communities" and "service organizations" (Costoya, 2021; Wuthnow, 2004), and, in the section below, we further describe the distinctive features of these two groups.

Congregations

There are over 350,000 congregations in the United States (U.S. Religion Census, 2023), a figure which may, in fact, be a substantial underestimate given the difficulty of capturing emerging religious movements and informal church networks (Melton et al., 2023). Congregations, as communities of faith, share a number of common features. First, they are grounded in a substantial set of shared beliefs, values, and practices. Second, they are forged from a network of relationships that have matured over a long period of time. Third, they work together across a wide range of both inward and outward facing activities (Chaves & Eagle, 2016; Costoya, 2021). Because these communities are formed primarily as communities of worship, they are not always equipped to provide highly specialized services or scale their programs to achieve policy change; however, they have an extraordinary capacity to organize volunteers, address local needs, and marshal both formal and informal resources (Costoya, 2021; Wuthnow, 2004). In the most recent wave of the NCS conducted in 2018-2019, 84% of US congregations reported some involvement in social or human services, community development, or other projects and activities intended to help people outside the congregation, including sending small groups of their members to assist people in need, either within the U.S. or internationally (Chaves et al., 2021; Figure 1). Nearly half (48%) of congregations reported involvement with food assistance. Other top areas of service included programs for children or youth (32%), health (18%), education and job training (16%), serving the homeless (15%), providing clothing or blankets (15%), and building or repairing homes (14%). Social services that required longer term commitments or more intensive interaction such as substance use recovery or immigrant services were mentioned less frequently (e.g., less than 5%).

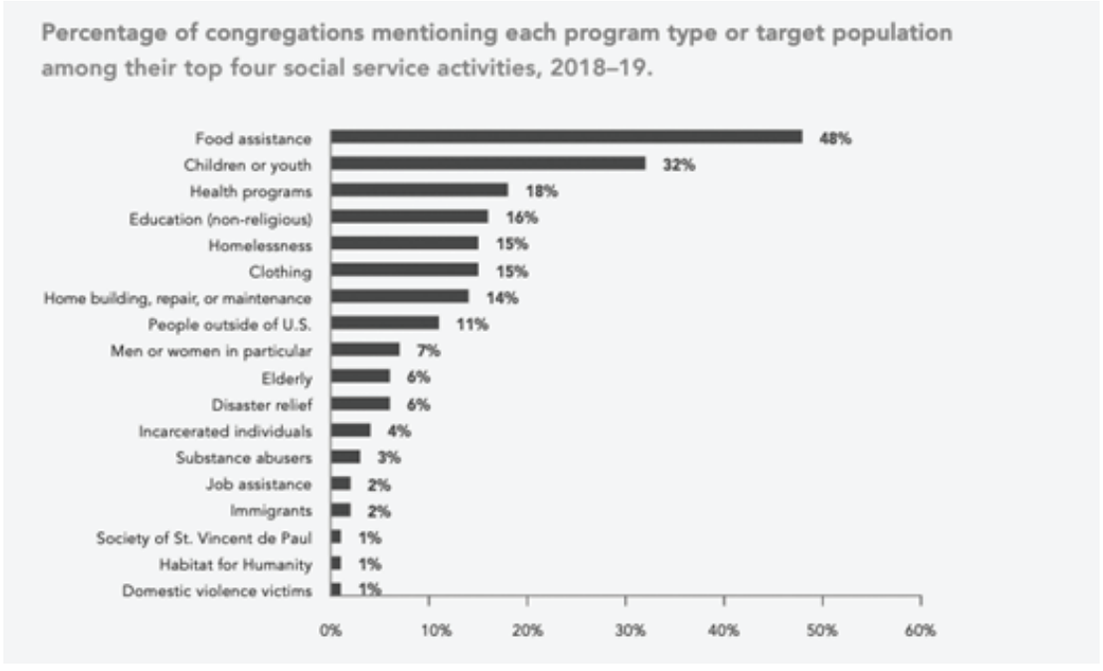
Congregations in the NCS reported being largely self-funded in their outreach efforts, with only 4% applying for government funding. Although the median amount congregations spent on social services in 2018 was only $2,640, this amount did not include donations to local or global organizations doing service work or the dollar value of volunteer and staff time invested on social service projects (Chaves et al., 2021). Another way of understanding the financial investment of congregations is looking at overall budget allocations. While churches continue to receive the highest level of charitable giving in the U.S. (e.g., over $124 billion in 2018), the latest study on the economic giving patterns of U.S. congregations found that nearly three quarters of these funds are spent on facilities and salaries, with an average of 28% going towards events and programs for mission and outreach, broadly defined (King et al., 2019). The same study found that almost all (98%) of congregations that did provide social services collaborated with another organization, religious group, or government entity. Further, the majority (61%) of congregations' mission, service, and benevolence resources were dedicated to their local community, followed by outreach to other U.S. communities (20%), and finally to international outreach (19%). Regarding the purpose of outreach funds, nearly all congregations reported higher spending on addressing physical needs compared to spiritual needs (King et al., 2019).

Faith-Based Organizations

Where congregations may be less equipped to engage in more technical or longer-term assistance, faith-based organizations often can. In the United States, this includes a range of religious organizations like Jewish Family Services, Tzu Chi USA, Sewa USA, Catholic Charities, Islamic Relief, and Salvation Army. These groups often engage in a wide range of social services inspired by their faith but simultaneously use language and structures of secular non-profit organizations (Costoya, 2021). While these groups are often lumped under the banner of "faith-based organizations," there is a great degree of heterogeneity among them. Some are large, national, or even international organizations, while others are local, grass-roots entities. Some are directly connected to specific re-

Figure 1

National Congregations Study 2018-2019 Top Areas of Congregational Service (Chaves et al. 2021; reprinted with permission)



ligious denominations; others are freestanding entities. In terms of faith emphasis, one typology developed by Unruh and Sider suggests that these organizations can range from "faith-permeated," where religion is explicitly emphasized at every level of the organization, to "faith-secular partnership," where religion is incorporated in far more subtle ways, often in the background rather than the foreground of activities (Unruh & Sider, 2005). Some estimate that there are at least 6,500 faith-based service agencies across the U.S., which contribute approximately one-fifth of all private, non-government service provision (Costoya, 2021; Wuthnow, 2004). A paper exploring the distinct financial contributions of faith-based organizations in the U.S. estimated an annual $25 billion expenditure (in 2006 dollars) on social services, noting that the estimate may be conservative given the fact that smaller faith-based service providers may not file with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) due to exemption for religious organizations (Stritt, 2008).

Given the contribution of faith-based service organizations, a natural question is whether or not these organizations are effective in their work, or at least as effective as secular agencies. One study exploring the effectiveness of faith-based organizations found a paucity of well-designed studies and even expressed disappointment that even large faith-based organizations had yet to conduct routine, rigorous, well-controlled studies of the effectiveness of their outreach (Johnson et al., 2008). Among 766 candidate studies, only 25 met inclusion criteria, yielding a modest combined sample of size of 1,517 individuals served by faith-based organizations. Of the well-designed studies using multivariate analysis, all but one found faith-based services to be more effective than non-faith based services or programs; however, given the highly limited nature of the evidence, the authors concluded that their review yielded only preliminary evidence that faith-based social services led to improved outcomes and that far more evidence was needed to make any robust claims (Johnson et al., 2008).

To further explore the contributions of both congregations and faith-based organizations, the following sections examine the most frequent domains of social service outreach and explore some of the known impacts on human health and well-being.

Food Assistance

Nearly half of U.S. congregations mention feeding the hungry as one of their most important service initiatives (Chaves et al., 2021), leading some researchers to describe food provision from faith communities as a "second social safety net" (Cnaan, 2009). Food-related activities include participating in or donating money to a community food bank, supplying volunteers who serve meals, or operating a food pantry, food market, or soup kitchen (Chaves & Eagle, 2016). Food service is likely the largest area of activity given the way it fits within the capacities of many religious communities by focusing on immediate needs that can be addressed by small groups of volunteers focused on bounded tasks (Chaves & Eagle, 2016). In a 2021 landscape analysis of the intersection between food and faith organizations, the Duke University World Food Policy Center found many faith communities and organizations were transitioning from short-term response to a longer view of food security, chronic hunger, economic opportunity, and alternative food systems, as well as land interventions focused on access, preservation, and healing connections (Treyz et al., 2021). Feeding America, an organization started over 40 years ago by a devout Roman Catholic, is currently the largest hunger-relief organization in the U.S., serving one in seven Americans through a network of 200 local food banks and 60,000 food pantries, approximately two thirds of which are affiliated with faith communities (Feeding America, 2025; Martin, 2005; Riediger et al., 2022). Beyond quantification, rigorous analyses focused on evaluation and impact of faith-based food assistance programs are scarce. Much of the literature focuses on the various models and theologies that inform food service or small qualitative case studies of particular organizations or faith communities. Many descriptions of faith-based food assistance are incorporated into larger discussions around faith-based health interventions. In a 2022 descriptive analysis of food pantries in 12 U.S. states, the authors found that a higher proportion of urban food pantries were faith-based compared to rural food pantries, 65.1% vs. 57.4% ($p < .0001$; Riediger et al., 2022), though both proportions are of course quite high. The same study found that, in terms of hours of operation, faith-based and rural pantries were open less frequently than non-faith based and urban pantries. The authors posited that it is perhaps the reliance on a volunteer workforce that leads faith-based pantries to operate fewer times each week. Despite limited hours, given the large role of faith-based pantries in U.S., the authors expressed concern about the potential impact on faith-based food assistance amidst declining rates of religious participation (Riediger et al., 2022).

Health Facilities and Programs

Healthcare Facilities and Services

In the United States, many religious organizations are engaged in direct medical provision, including hospitals, clinics, and long and short-term health facilities such as nursing homes or end-of-life facilities. The exact market share for each type of faith-based medical provision can be difficult to pinpoint. The National Association of Free and Charitable Clinics stated that there are more than 1,400 charitable clinics and pharmacies in the United States, of which 36% (more than 500) are distinctively faith-based (National Association of Free & Charitable Clinics, 2024). In 2016, there were 5,534 hospitals in the United States, of which 726 (13.1%) were faith-based (Statista, 2017). In 2021, Catholic hospitals alone accounted for approximately 10% of all hospitals in the United States and one in six hospital beds (Catholic Health Association of the United States, 2013, 2021). Quality standards of both religious and non-religious health facilities are most commonly upheld through a variety of mechanisms including the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, which accredits hospitals, nursing care centers, and home care providers and enables these facilities to receive payment from federally funded Medicare and Medicaid programs as well as other private insurance companies (The Joint Commission, 2022).

While many scholars have outlined various ways that religion intersects with health facilities and institutions (Idler & Kellehear, 2017; Levin, 2016, 2020), studies explicitly exploring the outcomes of patient care in religious compared to non-religious institutions are quite limited in scope. One study examining the relationship between organizational affiliation and infant mortality across five states found that government hospitals had significantly higher mortality rates than not-for-profit non-religious hospitals, but that mortality differences among other types of affiliation (including Catholic and not-for-profit religious hospitals) were not statistically significant (Garrido et al., 2012). Over the past 16 years, inspired in part by faith and health work located at Emory University (Idler & Kiser, 2018), two large initiatives in Tennessee and North Carolina aimed to blend the health promotion assets of local congregations with the health delivery aims of faith-based hospitals. In the Memphis model, 604 congregations partnered with Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare to facilitate enhanced care for congregation members who were hospitalized by connecting them with health navigators and volunteer trained health ministers from the congregations. The project demonstrated $4 million dollars in savings for network members compared to non-network members matched on age, sex, race, and diagnostic related groups, as well as significantly longer time to readmission compared to matched controls. Gross mortality levels were roughly half that of non-network members (Cutts & Gunderson, 2018). In North Carolina, Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center decided to change course from write-offs for bills patients could not pay, to a "proactive mercy" model, which would invest in expanded care networks for the most vulnerable patients across the state. The resulting program partnered with 311 congregations across 19 counties to help bridge the gap for patients between local communities and medical centers. For example, when hospitals identified non-medical needs for vulnerable patients such as transportation challenges or the need for food-preparation, they would reach out to the congregations to help meet those needs so that patients would not be forced to return to the hospital prematurely. Although the project initially increased the investment of the hospital, it ultimately demonstrated $2.5 million in savings from previous annual charity care spending (Cutts & Gunderson, 2018).

Health Programs

In the latest wave of the NCS, 18% of congregations reported addressing health needs as one of their top four social service programs. However, when NCS researchers asked congregations in a more direct way about health programs,

65% reported engaging in at least one of eleven types of health promotion activities (Chaves et al., 2021). The most common activities reported were groups, classes or events for people struggling with substance use (43%), exercise classes (36%), support for people with mental illness (26%), blood pressure checks (25%), and educating people about nutrition (23%). Four out of five (82%) predominantly Black congregations offered at least one of these activities, compared to 60% of predominantly White congregations (Chaves et al., 2021).

While the literature focused on religious health programs and interventions is substantial, not all studies use rigorous methodology to determine whether or not a program achieved its intended aims. In one systematic review examining the effectiveness of 53 health programs in religious organizations, researchers found that 24.5% were faith-based (integrating faith themes) compared to 43.4% that were faith-placed (taking place at a religious institution; DeHaven et al., 2004). Only half of the programs reported clear outcome data, with faith-placed programs being more likely to report outcome measurements. Among reported effects, which were likely skewed towards programs that were "successful," there were significant reductions in cholesterol and blood pressure levels, weight, and disease symptoms, as well as an increase in the use of mammography and breast self-examination (DeHaven et al., 2004). A 2007 systematic review included 13 studies that were almost exclusively focused on African American adult populations (Campbell et al., 2007). The programs included in the review were largely collaborative in nature, with church member volunteers operating as lay health advisors or facilitators to deliver the health intervention. Standardized effect sizes were calculated for five studies that had sufficient data, with small to moderate impact on fruit and vegetable consumption as well as improved physical activity (Campbell et al., 2007).

A 2008 systematic review of the effectiveness of faith-based programs on physical health found that, while many showed improvements in awareness and knowledge, not all successfully demonstrated lower rates of health risk factors (Johnson et al., 2008). A more recent systematic review of 20 studies examining faith-based cancer prevention programs among racial/ethnic minority groups found similarly mixed evidence. Programs included in the review were a collection of faith-placed and collaborative programs predominantly focused on breast cancer. The studies similarly demonstrated effectiveness in changing knowledge, but not always increasing screening utilization (Hou & Cao, 2017). In each of these systematic reviews, researchers called for faith-based health programs and interventions to be examined more routinely and rigorously.

A few recent studies have met the call for increased rigor. For example, a group-randomized trial of an evidenced-based program called "Faith, Activity, Nutrition" was designed to help churches make policy, systems, and environmental change to support physical activity and healthy eating (Wilcox et al., 2020). The study took place among 59 predominately Black churches in South Carolina and was conducted using collaborative model whereby church leaders participated throughout the design and execution of the study. While physical activity and healthy eating were higher among members of intervention churches, the gains were not statistically significant compared to control churches. When examining the extent to which program components were maintained by church leaders across the two-year study period, most churches maintained at least one aspect of the program two years after initiation. Another cluster-randomized controlled trail randomized 16 churches in San Diego County, California, to receive a physical activity intervention lead by faith-based community health workers called promotoras (n = 436; Arredondo et al., 2017). Mixed effects analysis showed evidence of increases in moderate-to-vigorous activity levels among participants in the intervention groups. Intervention group participants also had much higher odds of meeting physical activity guidelines and reduced body mass index and reported more strategies for engaging in physical activity (Arredondo et al., 2017). Other studies such as "The Church Challenge," a community-based multilevel cluster randomized controlled trial to improve blood pressure and wellness in African American churches in Flint, Michigan (Johnson-Lawrence et al., 2019), are currently underway and hold promise for more in-depth understanding of the impact of faith-based programs on health as well as the mechanisms by which faith may or may not impact outcomes.

Training Programs and School Support

In the U.S., faith communities support a variety of employment and educational initiatives including the provision of private religious education from daycares to universities. For example, approximately 21% of all U.S. colleges are religiously affiliated, with generally increasing enrollment rates between 1980-2021 (Digest of Education Statistics 2022), while approximately 18% of daycares are in faith-based facilities (Borton, 2022). As this review focuses on outward facing activities of faith communities rather than programs run internally for congregation members or tuition-paying families, we consider activities and programs that offer support to external local schools as well as non-religious training and employment programs for community members. Examples include mentoring programs and classroom support for reading or other forms of tutoring, as well as programs that might provide skills training or other programs to enhance workforce participation. In the most recent wave of the NCS, 32% of congregations reported that they participated in programs focused on youth or children and 16% reported offering education or training other than religious education among one of their four most important social service programs (Chaves et al., 2021).

Training Programs

In 2007, researchers from the University of California, Davis, conducted an evaluation of the California Community and Faith-Based Initiative (CFBI). The CFBI was a five-year program run by the Employment Education Department that allocated $17 million dollars to 40 community and faith-based groups, with the goal of expanding access to workforce development among hard-to-employ populations (Campbell & Lemp, 2007). The evaluation, which included surveys, site visits, and over 400 interviews, concluded that both secular and faith-based groups played valuable but limited roles in workforce development networks, particularly among hard-to-reach populations. The researchers found fewer differences than expected between secular and faith-based groups, particularly in terms of organizational style and service delivery. Among participants who participated in training at faith-centered organizations, only two of 30 interviewees voiced complaints about religious content, one of which was a request for *more* content. The authors stated that they were not able to determine the true impact of the "faith influence" in impacting the lives of participants, but did note that faith-based groups, in particular, seemed to form personally meaningful and often longer-term relationships with individual clients (Campbell & Lemp, 2007).

A review conducted by the Urban Institute explored contracts between workforce investment agencies and faith-based organizations and congregations in five U.S. cities: Baltimore, Fort Worth, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, and San Diego. The review found that all agencies contracted with faith-based groups, although these contracts represented a small percentage of overall budgets. Most congregations in these cities reported supporting employment through informal or case by case approaches. A few congregations reported robust employment training programs such as language training or job search assistance. Faith-based nonprofits were fairly similar to secular counterparts in terms of size and scope of programming, although only half received federal funding. The authors of the report estimated that local congregations and faith-based non-profits in these cities spent a range of $2.4-$6.9 million a year on employment related services, which, at the time, was comparable to a range between under 10%-20% of public funds spent in the same cities on employment activities (Kramer et al., 2007).

School Support

Faith-based support of local schools exists in a variety of ways. One common approach is for faith communities to partner with local schools to provide mentoring and tutoring for students who may struggle in different academic areas, as well as provide additional classroom support for teachers. Evaluations of these programs are not very common, but one recent study closely examined the effects of a faith-based-school-family-community (FBSFC) partnership on reading achievement in a high-poverty urban elementary school over a three-year period (Henry et al., 2017). The authors compared reading outcomes of students in 3rd through 5th grade with those

at a matching control school. They also examined within school differences between classrooms that did and did not receive support and students who did and did not receive direct mentoring. Compared with students in the control school, reading scores for students in the FBSFC school were lower in first trimester and higher in third trimester in the two years following initial implementation of the partnership. The final year of the program demonstrated a significant difference between the case and control schools. Students in the FBSFC had improved reading scores regardless of whether or not they received direct mentoring or were in an adopted classroom, leading the authors to conclude that the FBSFC may have contributed to school-wide gains in reading achievement (Henry et al., 2017).

In another study, the education research group Research for Action conducted interviews and surveys among principals in the Philadelphia school district regarding partnerships with faith-based groups (Maluk et al., 2008). At the time of the study, 44% of schools reported having a faith partner and another 10% were in the process of creating a partnership. The most commonly reported partnership was the use of facilities (69%), followed by monetary donations (59%). Among schools with active partnerships, 56% received mentoring services, 55% received help engaging parents, and 54% received tutoring services. Most principals with active partnerships reported appreciating the services and believing that the partnership led to positive outcomes for the school and students, although these were largely based on anecdotal evidence from the principal's observation. When asked about challenges, the principal described logistical issues like staffing to support the partnership and lack of time to receive services but did not mention concerns about violations related to faith-sharing (Maluk et al., 2008). This last finding aligns with a large qualitative study of 37 religious organizations that collectively worked with 23,000 at-risk youth throughout the U.S. (Loconte & Fantuzzo, 2002). One key finding of this study was that, while religious organizations considered faith commitment an important, if not vital aspect to their work, religious volunteers were often able to respect church-state boundaries, protecting the rights of the people they served and preserving their own religious identity.

Homeless Care, Housing Support, and Clothing

Among the top four social services provided by U.S. congregations, 15% serve the homeless, 15% provide clothing or blankets to people in need, and 14% build or repair homes (Chaves et al., 2021). While each of these activities can operate distinctly, they often overlap in multi-faceted care for people facing homelessness or other forms of insecurity related to food, shelter, and clothing. Given this overlap, the following section will describe efforts in all three domains.

In a focused review of the faith sector, The National Alliance to End Homelessness concluded that faith-based organizations provide, at minimum, 30% of emergency shelter beds for families and children. The Alliance concluded that "...without faith-based partners at the table, communities will not be able to truly envision an end to homelessness" (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2017). A separate study using Housing and Urban Development data in 11 U.S. cities found that collectively, faith-based organizations contributed nearly 60% of emergency shelter beds. At the city level, there was wider variation; Omaha (90%) and Houston (78%) had much larger proportions of beds provided by faith-based organizations compared to cities like San Diego (37%) and Portland (33%) with smaller proportions (Johnson et al., 2017).

One way to reduce homelessness is to provide affordable housing. One of the largest housing organizations in the United States, Habitat for Humanity, is a Christian organization, founded by Millard and Linda Fuller, who were inspired by their work on a community farm in Georgia where they worked with Clarence Jordan, a farmer and a biblical scholar. Together, the group developed the concept of "partnership housing" where those in need of shelter work side by side with volunteers to build affordable housing. Early iterations of the idea in the 1970s grew into an organization that has now helped 59 million people with safe, decent, affordable shelter in all 50 U.S. States and internationally (Habitat for Humanity, 2025). One evaluation of Habitat for Humanity found a positive relationship between the organization's overhead costs and effectiveness in terms of houses built and revenue raised (Berrett, 2021), while another large qualitative study found that the organization's management structure, which is decentralized at the local level and hierarchical at the national level, allowed access to robust feedback mechanisms and lead to more effective housing for those in need (Haeffele & Storr, 2019).

Clothing collection and distribution have long been mainstay activities of religious communities in the United States, most notably through initiatives like clothing drives for local shelters or schools. Faith-based organizations also play a major role in clothing collection and distribution through thrift stores operated by groups like Salvation Army and St. Vincent de Paul. Evaluations of these types of faith-based enterprises are often small qualitative or case studies that explore various aspects of leadership, theology, and power structures (e.g., Wolf-Branigin & Hirtz Bingaman, 2017) but do not offer clear evaluation of the impact of clothing collection and related social services, leaving a large gap in understanding the social impact of large faith-based clothing organizations beyond their own annual reporting.

There is a similar lack of robust empirical evidence about the impact of faith-based shelter services on long-term health and well-being, either as stand-alone analyses or compared to secular facilities. One exception is a 2012 longitudinal study supported by the Department of Veterans Affairs that examined data on 1,271 clients in three residential care services. The study examined how religiously oriented residential care programs differed from programs that were (a) secular or (b) currently secular but religious in the past. The results showed that participants in religious programs reported greater program clarity, such as daily routines and expectations, while participants in secular programs reported more supportive environments such as active learning and emotional expression. Participants in religiously oriented programs did not report an increase in religious faith or participation over time, but greater religious participation (from clients in any of the three facilities) was associated with greater improvement in housing, mental health, lower substance abuse, and increased quality of life (Tsai et al., 2012). Another ethnographic study, published as a book in 2022, examined three faith-based homeless shelters that were faith-permeated, faith-affiliated, and largely secular with a faith-background (Jindra, 2022). The authors commented on the way that the faith-permeated shelter, although more religious in content and compulsory in programming, also had a more comprehensive idea of human flourishing that involved strong relationships with others and the self. They also stated that faith-permeated shelters seemed to move beyond the rhetoric of self-sufficiency to strengthening a wider network of reciprocities, interdependencies, and exchanges, where everyone had something to contribute. The 11-city Housing and Urban Development study mentioned above also found that successful graduation from faith-based recovery programs generated an estimated $119 million in taxpayer savings during the three years following program exit (Johnson et al., 2017). Qualitatively, the same study found that many faith-based groups saw the root causes of homelessness as a lack of supportive relationships. Qualitative interviews also highlighted missed opportunities for the government to effectively engage with ongoing faith-based homeless outreach and housing efforts aimed at common goals.

Disaster Relief

According to the NCS, only 6% of U.S. congregations reported disaster relief among their top four outreach focus areas. However, when asked explicitly about helping people respond to or recover from natural disasters, 58.2% of congregations reported doing so by raising or contributing money to disaster relief (82.0%), donating food, clothing, or furniture (57.4%), sending a team to a disaster area (27.1%), and providing temporary shelter (7.2%) (Chaves et al., 2021). In addition to the support that individual congregations provide during times of disaster, faith-based service organizations also play a considerable role within the broader disaster relief landscape. For example, the organization National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD), which helps coordinate disaster response efforts in the United States, listed over 70 member organizations in 2025, over half of which were faith-affiliated or faith-based (National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, 2025). Organizations such as Catholic Relief Services, Tzu Chi USA, Convoy of Hope, and Samaritan's Purse are large faith-based service organizations that are actively involved in ongoing emergency response across the United States.

A 2010 analysis sponsored by the Institute for Homeland Security Solutions assessed

emergency preparedness and response activities of faith-based and community organizations (Joshi, 2010). The analysis included an empirical review of 17 policy research reports peer-reviewed journal articles. The majority focused on the response to Hurricane Katrina, followed other hurricanes in Florida, September 11th response, and general preparedness and service capacity. The summary was limited by the cross-sectional nature of the reports and studies, as well as an exclusive focus on descriptions of services instead of effectiveness. Despite these limitations, the report pointed to several strengths and weaknesses of faith-based engagement in disaster response. In terms of strengths, faith communities were often very quick to respond to disaster situations, deeply connected to the local community, allowing them to develop tailored responses in moments of crisis, willing and able to build on personal and professional relationships to galvanize energy and local resources, and able to rapidly develop emergency response plans based on existing commitments to help those in need. Limits included the lack of capacity to engage in long-term recovery, limited budgets and paid-staff positions, and limited formal and advanced preparation for disasters. The report ended with the recommendation that faith communities and service organizations be better integrated with federal, state, and local funding and technical assistance, provided with more specialized training opportunities, connected with coordinating organizations such as NVOAD, and be introduced to management systems that can help track efforts in times of disaster (Joshi, 2010).

While the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has since developed guidelines for emergency managers to engage faith communities (Department of Homeland Security, 2024), a recent analysis of the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) engagement with community and faith-based organizations during public health emergencies, echoed many of the recommendations laid out by Joshi (2010; Santibañez et al., 2019). The authors reiterated the need to include faith groups as a standard part of CDC Emergency Operations Center exercises and activations. They also encouraged federal planners to develop the science around integrating faith groups into emergency preparedness and response, and, finally, to maintain local relationships between public health leadership and the faith community that can be built upon in times of crisis, rather than developed de novo in crisis (Santibañez et al., 2019).

How might such intersectoral relationships be fostered? One study more closely examined facilitators and barriers to successful partnerships between public agencies and community and faith organizations (CFBOs) by surveying 73 disaster preparedness coordinators working at local health departments across the United States (Adams et al., 2018). This study found that when it was perceived that CFBOs trusted their local health departments, there was more successful partnership planning ($\beta = 0.63$; $p = 0.02$) and capacity building ($\beta = 0.61$; $p = 0.01$). When a local health department faced employee layoffs or was located in an urban setting, there was a higher rate of resource sharing with CFBOs ($\beta = 0.41$; $p = 0.001$; and $\beta = 0.41$; $p = 0.005$, respectively). Successful communication and outreach were characterized by having one to three full-time employees at the department ($\beta = 0.33$; $p = 0.05$) as well as positive attitudes towards CFBOs ($\beta = 0.16$; $p = 0.03$). This study and others reiterate the way the trust, capacity, and felt need often facilitate partnership in difficult times (Adams et al., 2018; Shinn & Caretta, 2020). Of course, religious faith operates in a number of ways during times of crisis. While too extensive to fully summarize here, we simply point to one recent systematic review of 51 studies exploring religious coping amidst disaster (Aten et al., 2019). The review found that positive religious or spiritual coping appeared to lead to positive outcomes among disaster survivors, including the way a person engages with their faith and accesses resources through faith communities (Aten et al., 2019).

Given the current contributions of faith communities and faith-based organizations to emergency response, the calls for continued coordination between sectors, and the pressing spiritual needs in times of tragedy, religious organizations will likely continue to have a meaningful role to play in disaster relief.

Prison Outreach

Four percent of U.S. congregations work with incarcerated individuals as one of their top four social service activities (Chaves et al., 2021), which may include visiting prisoners or supporting religious organizations that operate within prisons. Nationally, prison wardens collaborate with religious educators and faith-based organizations in over 50 maximum-security prisons in 29 states (Hallett et al., 2021). In 2012, a 50-state survey of U.S. prison chaplains conducted by the Pew Research Center reported that almost all of the nation's state and federal prisons had at least one paid chaplain or religious services coordinator, employing (at the time) approximately 1,600 professional chaplains (Pew Research Center, 2012). The majority (85%) of chaplains in the study were Christian, and, indeed, a majority of the volunteers who visited prisons were also Christian. The report noted that the high rate of incarceration in the U.S. alongside high rates of recidivism (repeat offense and imprisonment) resulted in a higher burden placed on chaplains and other religious workers and volunteers to provide counseling, connection with social services, job training, substance abuse treatment, education, and other assistance before and after release (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Much has been written about the relationship between religious communities and the U.S. prison system from historical, theological, and sociological perspectives. Empirically, a number of studies have sought to explore the impact of religious activities, particularly that of congregation member visits and religious activities on inmate recidivism and well-being. A 2016 study in Minnesota explored the impact of clergy and mentor prison visits on recidivism among 836 offenders (Duwe & Johnson, 2016). The study found visits reduced rates of rearrest by 25%, reconviction by 20%, and reincarceration for a new sentence by 31%. As the proportion of visits from mentors and clergy increased, positive effects on recidivism grew, leading the researchers to suggest that this form of visitation might be a resource among high-risk offenders who lack other forms of social support (Duwe & Johnson, 2016). Another study using propensity score modeling found that inmates who participated in a faith-based program had reduced serious misconduct during the program, but that less-serious misconduct was left unchanged, leading the authors to conclude that, while faith-based programming seemed to lead to positive change, more research was needed to understand the mechanisms of change (Camp et al., 2008).

One striking difference of religious community contribution to prison outreach is that much of the outreach happens from "within" the prison; inmates providing spiritual care for other inmates, or who start their own congregations or spiritual gatherings, or who attend seminary classes to become licensed ministers. Some researchers and criminologists have called this trend "offender-led religious movements" or an expression of "positive criminology" (Johnson, 2021). Beginning in 2012, a series of empirical studies were conducted at Louisiana State Penitentiary, commonly referred to as "Angola," to understand the impact of one of the first robust prison seminary programs in the United States among maximum security inmates. Over a five-year period, survey data from 2,200 inmates and 100 life-histories from both inmates and staff were collected and analyzed. Qualitatively, these studies found that inmate ministers not only led formal religious gatherings for their fellow inmates but also operated in a number of capacities including hospice care, cellblock visitation, conducting funerals, and using finances from their churches to support inmates in need (Johnson, 2021; Johnson et al., 2021). Survey data found effects of participation in the prison seminary and inmate-led churches on lower disciplinary convictions, reduction in crime, improved rehabilitation, and prosocial behavior within the prison environment (Hallett et al., 2016). Another study from 2020 among male prisoners in three maximum security prisons in Texas, explored the impact of inmates who had graduated from seminary programs (called "field ministers") among their fellow inmates. Those exposed to field ministers more frequently or for longer durations reported higher levels of religiosity, less negative attitudes towards the law ($\beta = -0.047$, $p < 0.05$), lower depression ($\beta = -0.060$, $p < 0.1$), and higher meaning and purpose ($\beta = 0.138$, $p < 0.05$; Jang et al., 2019).

Amidst the growth of prison ministries in the U.S., there are also critiques of the predominately Protestant Christian involvement in prison ministries (Erzen, 2017; Griffith, 2020), as well as the complicated set of incentives and motivations that may underlie prisoner participation in religious activities (Hallett & Johnson,

2014). Researchers have also highlighted the drift towards "structural charity" in correctional budgeting amidst financially strapped prison systems (Hallett et al., 2019). The same authors pointed to ways that such programming needs to operate within the proper bounds of the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment stating that "prisons must remain accessible to the full range of both secular and religious stakeholders for the broadest successful impact upon inmates" (Hallett et al., 2019, p. 166).

Substance Use Recovery

In the latest wave of the NCS study, only 3% of U.S. congregations listed programs to address substance abuse as one of their top four areas of focus. However, when asked directly about health-related programming, 43% of congregations reported having a group, class, or event for people struggling with drug or alcohol addiction (Chaves et al., 2021). In addition to congregational support, faith-based organizations also play a large role in substance use recovery throughout the United States. A 2019 landscape study of faith-based substance abuse prevention and recovery found that 73% of addiction treatment programs in the U.S. included a spirituality-based element, the vast majority of which emphasized reliance on God or a Higher Power to stay sober (Grim & Grim, 2019). In the second half of the study, the authors estimated the financial contribution of congregation-based substance abuse recovery programs and calculated that such groups contribute between $151 billion (lower bound) and $316.6 billion (upper bound) in savings to the U.S. economy every year at no cost to taxpayers. The paper concluded by noting that, while negative experiences with religion (e.g. clergy sexual abuse, conflict, and other forms of violence) have been contributing factors to substance use among some victims, the vast majority of more rigorous scientific studies to date demonstrate that faith operates as a positive factor in addition prevention and recovery and would likely remain an integral component in the treatment landscape (Grim & Grim, 2019; Koenig et al., 2023).

One of the largest recovery programs in the United States is Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which is a 12-step program with many broadly spiritual principles (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2025). Many researchers have explored the religious and spiritual aspects of AA to examine whether or not these aspects of the program enhance or impede its effectiveness. One set of studies among 195 adolescents in court-ordered 12-step recovery programs found spiritual virtues, such as higher service to others and an experience of divine love, had better outcomes 12 months post-treatment related to reduced relapse, greater humility, and lower incarnation (Lee et al., 2016, 2017). A 2017 review examined 25 years of research on AA's effectiveness and mechanisms of behavior change (Kelly, 2017). The study summarized effectiveness research in the following way:

> Results from RCTs, quasi-experiments, instrumental variables and propensity score-matching studies, as well as numerous statistically controlled naturalistic longitudinal studies provide consistent results pointing towards clinically meaningful benefit and cost-effectiveness resulting from AA participation. Given… the fact that AA is ubiquitous, effective, and free of charge, AA might be the closest thing we have to a free lunch in public health. (p. 931)

In exploring mechanisms of change, spirituality had small or non-significant mediational effects, except for participants with severe addiction problems, leading the authors to posit that AA ultimately works for different types of people in different ways. With a stroke of good humor, the study concluded that to the question of whether or not AA was spiritual, religious, or neither, the answer appeared to be "yes" (Kelly, 2017). Building on AA's 12-step program, many religious groups have added their own content to deepen spiritual themes, including Jewish, Islamic, Christian, Native American, and Buddhist spiritual traditions (Grim & Grim, 2019).

Rigorous qualitative work has also examined the comparative effectiveness of faith-based and secular residential treatment programs. For example, a 2018 book exploring sacred and secular welfare service provision (Bartkowski, 2018) offered an in-depth qualitative examination of faith-based vs. secular drug treatment programs in the Pacific Northwest. In the fifth chapter of the book, Smith and Menashe compared 10 secular, five faith-intensive, and two faith-related residential treatment programs. The authors noted a number of differences in the programs; secular and faith-related programs had greater organizational capacity and infrastructure than faith-intensive programs, allowing the former to offer more extensive services and treatment plans for a wider array of patients with a wider array of motivations. Faith-intensive programs, given their lack of comparable resources, tended to appeal to people who were motivated to change, who desired a religious component to their recovery, or who were out of other options. The study found that faith-intensive facilities had clients who were disproportionally poor or had lengthy histories of addiction. Given the fact that these facilities were free of charge, the authors posited that they would continue to operate as a buffer for those unable to afford treatment in other places (Smith & Menashe, 2018).

Regardless of whether or not faith communities facilitate classes or support groups for recovery, many have members struggling with substance use. A 2022 study examining data from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions-III concluded that one quarter of adults with substance-use disorder attend religious services monthly and do not receive treatment. Although people at this intersection tended to have fewer adversities than people who received treatment, the authors concluded that religious institutions continue to be an important link in facilitating care for those with untreated substance use disorder (Heikkila et al., 2022).

Narrative Review Summary and Limitations

This narrative review highlighted a number of domains in which U.S. congregations and faith-based organizations contribute to the common good. The review often mentioned the number of congregations or faith-based organizations who participated in particular activities, along with a summary of known impact. Where possible, we noted the overall proportion of services provided by faith communities and faith organizations as together they function as a second social safety net for food insecurity (Cnaan, 2009), provide one in six hospital beds through the Catholic Health System alone (Catholic Health Association of the United States, 2013), operate at least 30% of shelter beds for families and children in the U.S. (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2017), and support the widespread spiritual aspects of recovery programs (Grim & Grim, 2019). Frequently, the review highlighted the way that congregations themselves may underreport their own activities. For example, only 6% of NCS congregations reported disaster relief as a main outreach activity, but, when asked differently, over half of congregations reported helping in times of emergency.

Due to the limits of space, this review did not include several social areas in which congregations and faith-based service organizations are actively involved. These include (but are not limited to) domestic violence recovery, foster care support, homes and programs for the elderly, immigrant support, and care and healing initiatives for those abused by religious leaders, as well as programs that promote racial reconciliation and interfaith dialogue.

The review also did not fully describe or quantify the negative impact of religion. While we are not aware of any robust studies that economically or empirically assess the net negative impact of religious social programs in the United States, countless studies have explored deleterious aspects and mixed outcomes of religious social work, particularly in the domain of power dynamics (Costoya, 2021; Erzen, 2017; Griffith, 2020). In addition to scholarly critique, there is also critique within religious communities themselves about the nature and proper conveyance of social services, which is not always visible to external researchers or fully considered in academic literature (Corbett & Fikkert, 2014; Lupton, 2011). Despite the beauty and nobility embedded in religious teachings on gift, charity, compassion, and generosity, tragically, history is replete with examples of abuse done by religious communities, often under the guise of "service," for example, forced conversions, discrimination, and various forms of misplaced paternalism, where basic services are used as a means to coerce individuals or whole communities into submission. Such exploitation leads many to suspect that those who serve because of their faith are incapable of "keeping their views to themselves" and, even with well-crafted language or programs, will ultimately promote their personal beliefs over against all else.

To avoid these risks, some suggest that acts of religious service should be done without inclusion of spiritual or religious themes or teaching. This is an understandable view, especially for those who have personally witnessed or

experienced abuse of religious actors. Ongoing vigilance remains essential to protect against abuse of religious power, particularly in community-facing activities. Paradoxically, alongside vigilance against many forms of exploitation, there may be the simultaneous need to guard against over-correction that altogether removes religious voices and views from services provided by religious communities. For, in truth, it is the particulars of religious ethics, metaphysics, and anthropologies that inspire action for many people of faith. To ask religious groups to pretend these beliefs do not exist is not only impractical, but it may also reflect a different bias against those who hold religiously grounded truth claims. In fact, some argue that religious people may be uniquely equipped to inhabit a world with "multiple universalisms" because they are more clear eyed about the universes of competing claims (Volf & Croasmun, 2019). In other words, religious communities may be distinctively adept at holding their views with utmost sincerity while embracing the reality that their views are not, and in many cases will never be, shared by others in the larger community or the people they serve.

The review was further limited by a focus on program domains (e.g., food security, emergency response) and did not address broader social contributions that stem from religious communities. In their book exploring the impact of faith in church-based social ministry, Unruh and Sider (2005) described four indirect contributions of congregations to social well-being. First, they pointed to the individual contribution of members to social welfare, for example, through increased volunteerism and charitable giving efforts outside the congregation. Second, is the internal care that congregations provide to other members who experience the loss of a loved one, unemployment, or who accompaniment through hard times. Third, is the way that congregations help educate and mobilize members to stay engaged with the needs of their communities and around the world; and, fourth, is the way religious participation enhances well-being of the individual (Unruh & Sider, 2005).

While much remains to be explored, all of these domains are areas where existing research can help further illuminate the impact of religious communities. For example, a number of researchers have attempted to appraise the socio-economic impact of religious communities both regionally (Cnaan, 2009; Cnaan et al., 2013) and nationally (Grim & Grim, 2016), with estimates on the order of billions of dollars each year in net economic contribution. Others have explored the type of "bridging" social capital that is fostered by religious communities and its attendant spillover effects (Cnaan & Milofsky, 2018; Putnam, 2020; Putnam & Campbell, 2012) and the scale and impact of volunteerism and charitable giving that emanates from religious communities (Brooks, 2007; Johnson, 2021; Lipka, 2016; Nakamura et al., 2022; Son & Wilson, 2021; Upenieks & Schafer, 2024). Another substantial body of empirical research focuses on the individual impact of religious community participation on health and well-being (Balboni et al., 2022; VanderWeele et al., 2022).

Consequentially, much remains to be explored and synthesized to better understand the full scope of religious community contribution to the common good. With the above limitations in mind, the evidence presented in this review lends itself to three claims: (a) Congregations and faith-based organizations in the United States continue to play a large, and sometimes outsized, role in addressing a wide range of pressing social challenges; (b) Much of the existing empirical evidence to date points to generally positive outcomes for those who participate in programs and activities facilitated by religious entities; and (c) A great deal remains inadequately defined, measured, and ultimately understood with regard to faith communities and faith-based organizations and their composite impact on human and societal flourishing. It is to this last point that we now turn.

Future Directions

In 1977, American musician Johnny Cash released a song titled *No Earthly Good* (Cash, 1977), calling out those who are so "heavenly minded" they are of no earthly good. In his quintessential style, Cash captured a sentiment held by many, perhaps particularly those outside of faith communities, who wonder if religion, religious people, or religious communities do things of objective earthly good amidst all their claims and bluster. People of faith may, likewise, wonder if all the activities in which they engage through their faith community really makes a positive, long-term impact. This review highlights a wide range of ways that faith communities do, in fact, promote earthly good in a number of social areas. Yet, work remains to delve deeper into existing evidence and to better understand where faith-based efforts are or are not making a positive impact. This section highlights three mutually reinforcing pathways that would enrich future study of congregations and faith-based organizations.

First, there is a need to improve existing measurement and evaluation efforts. This is a repeated call made by those working at the forefront of research on faith-based social services and, unfortunately, continues to be salient (Long, Symons, et al., 2024). Such improvement would include better descriptions and quantification of services provided by religious communities. Quantification should not only include scope and scale of programs but should also consider other outputs such as the number of volunteer hours invested or the number of resources donated by congregation members to make programs possible. Improved measurement should also include expanded use of quantitative methodology to compliment the much larger body of qualitative research. This would include randomized or longitudinal approaches that follow people over time, control for other factors that may impact subsequent outcomes, and measure the impact of programs on human health and well-being. Wherever possible, common metrics and measurement will allow for greater comparisons across programs, which will, in turn, allow for more robust policy discussions regarding support for and partnership with faith-based communities and organizations.

Second, and relatedly, existing and new efforts to measure the impact of faith-based social services should include outcomes that matter to faith communities themselves. Most faith communities want to address acute physical and social needs, but they also hope to convey other goods in the process of care. Future research would, therefore, be enriched by assessment of a wider array of outcomes including topics like flourishing, hope, love, loneliness, social connectedness, forgiveness, and reconciliation (Long et al., 2024; VanderWeele et al., 2021). Not only will inclusion of these factors make the work more meaningful to faith-communities, it may also help "fill the gap" in understanding the mechanisms by which faith-based social services do or do not lead to improved outcomes.

Finally, there is a need for more systematic reviews and synthesis of evidence related to faith-based social services. The vast literature related to these topics lives among a plethora of annual reports, unpublished databases, journals, disciplines, and publications. Harkening back to the quote about mapping air travel—the collective evidence is dizzying and will only become more so amidst expanded research efforts. For a set of signals to rise out of the noise, robust institutional leadership is needed to guide, gather, and grapple with the evidence. Such institutions would need to engage scholars and researchers from a variety of disciplines and faith perspectives in order to facilitate balanced interpretation of composite data and interdisciplinary dialogue and to avoid reductionism in its many forms. Such content would be useful for policy makers but, importantly, would also be a gift to faith-based organizations and religious communities themselves as it would help support learning, improvement, and growth.

On Flourishing and the Church—The Community Dimension

Here, we make a comment to Christian communities in particular, given their large role in faith-based service provision to date in the U.S. and in light of ongoing and emerging efforts to better study how congregations thrive and flourish (see, for example, Long et al., 2024; State of the Church, 2025; Thriving Congregations Coordination Program, 2025). Within the Christian tradition, care for the poor is strongly emphasized throughout the scriptures, and, during his ministry, Jesus Christ continually underlined the importance of care and love for one's neighbor. In the Gospel of Matthew, Christ said that whatever is done for the least of these is done unto Him (*English Standard Version*, 2006, Matthew 25:45). In the Gospel of Luke, He told the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate what is meant by the love of neighbor, which includes the love of the stranger and even those that one might consider an enemy (Luke 10:25-37). In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus identified two commandments from the Hebrew Bible as the most important of all: to love God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love one's neigh-

bor as oneself (Mark 12:29-31; see also Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18). The Gospels also emphasize that service is not only to be rendered to those who are materially poor but to those who have spiritual poverty as well.

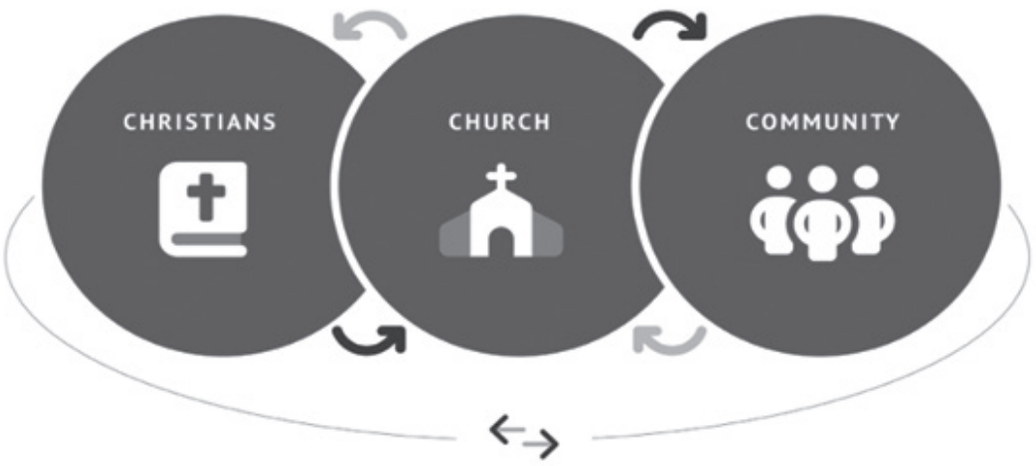
Building on these scriptures, numerous Christian Saints from Augustine of Hippo, to Basil of Caesarea, to Catherine of Siena taught and embodied the practice of care for the poor (Holman, 2009; Schaff, 2009; Undset, 2009). The Christian use of the term "charity" often operates in two ways. The first use of Charity means "the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for His own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1997). Writing about the potential confusion of having two objects to which Charity points—God and neighbor—St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "God is the principle object of charity, while our neighbor is loved out of charity for God's sake" (Aquinas, 1948, II-II, Q23, A5). A second, and perhaps more common, use of the word "charity" often describes the act of care or love for one's neighbor. However, Christian doctrine does not separate external acts of love for others from the love of God. In his book on the history of Christian charity, Gary Anderson wrote: "...giving to one's neighbor is not just a Kantian 'duty' but a declaration about the metaphysical structure of the world itself. [Christian] charity, in short, is not just a good deed but a declaration of belief about the world and the God who created it" (Anderson, 2014, p. 4). In other words, for Christians, to be made in God's image means that humankind should display generosity and charity not simply as an act, but as a basic mode of being.

Often, research done within and among Christian congregations focuses on two key things: the personal faith commitments and practices of the parishioners and the sociological features of the congregation on the whole. Both of these dimensions are critically important, but we suggest that a third—the community dimension—be included to develop a comprehensive picture of what it means for Christians to flourish (Figure 2).

While individual faith and congregational health matter enormously, without consideration of the outward facing actions of Christians, there is a risk of missing the important ways in which faith communities operate in society more broadly and the ways they do (or do not) contribute to communal flourishing and the common good. We further suggest that such work would also help understand the nature of connection between individual, congregational, and community flourishing by examining the way each domain relates to the other. While it is likely that strong individual Christian faith

Figure 2

The Cyclical Model of Christian Flourishing



has a positive relationship with congregational well-being, and that healthy congregations are likely more able to love and serve their communities, even this rather "linear" relationship is not well understood empirically. Further, it is not known if there might be more complex relationships between the three domains. For example, might it be the case that service in one's community might impact one's faith and perhaps compel one to ask deeper questions about the nature of God's work in the world? How might congregational life be impacted when more or less members of the congregation volunteer in the church's community-facing work? Or, put rather crudely, are churches making an impact in their local communities in such a way that the church would be missed if it ceased to exist? Would anyone notice? Without consideration of all three aspects in Christian communities—individual, congregational, and community—such questions will remain underexplored.

Of course, congregations will need support to develop the right metrics and undertake evaluation of their outward facing work, including the impact on volunteers and community members alike. Partnership with those trained in both quantitative and qualitative assessment will be vital in this task. Despite the challenges of "widening the frame" to include the community domain, such efforts will enrich the conversation about how flourishing operates within and through Christian communities and may become an important resource for academics, theologians, and importantly, faith communities themselves.

Conclusion

In the mid-20th century, many predicted that religion was in an unstoppable tailspin towards secularization. Reality turned out to be more complicated as religion continued to persist—and even grow—well into the 21st century, albeit unevenly across the globe. Amidst debates about whether religious participation will continue to decline in the United States, or if perhaps there is resurging interest in faith (Douthat, 2025) and openness to the spiritual life (Smith et al., 2025), religious communities and faith-inspired work will continue to play an important role in modern life. To that end, the exploration of faith communities and their attendant impact on the common good and human flourishing remains an ever-relevant task. In this article, we provided an overview of the many ways that congregations and faith-based organizations provide outward facing social services and, where possible, described evidence of impact. We then outlined a number of ways that future work on the impact of congregations and faith-based organizations could improve and deepen. We closed by suggesting ways that Christian communities, in particular, might include their work and impact in the community as an essential component of understanding their own flourishing.

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