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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%).

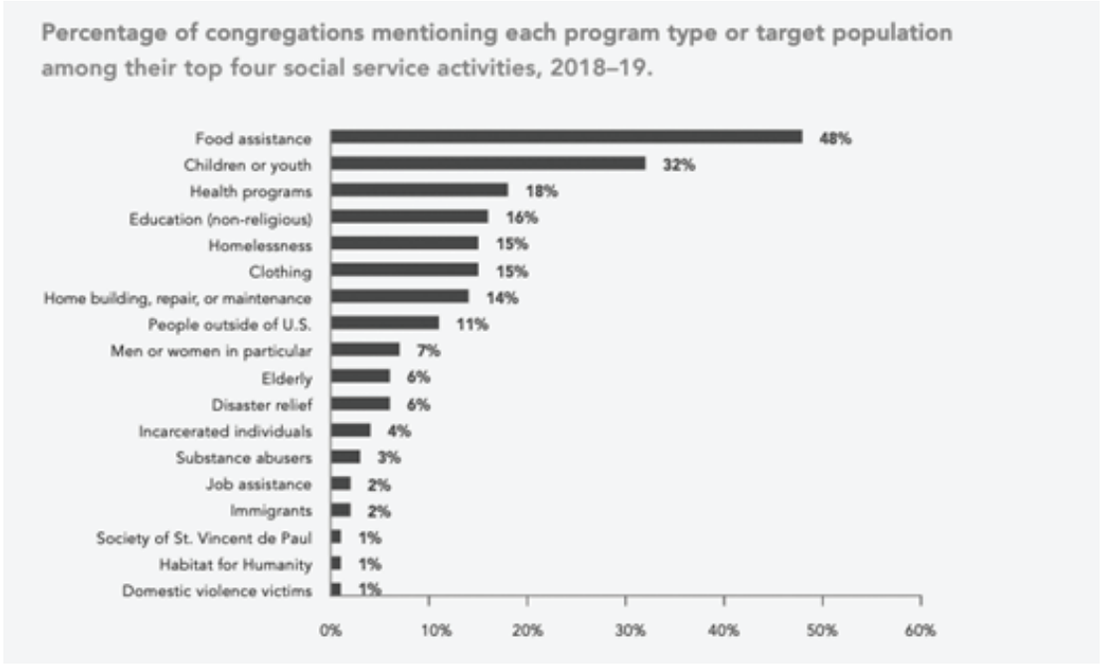
Congregations in the NCS reported being largely self-funded in their outreach efforts, with only 4% applying for government funding. Although the median amount congregations spent on social services in 2018 was only $2,640, this amount did not include donations to local or global organizations doing 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.

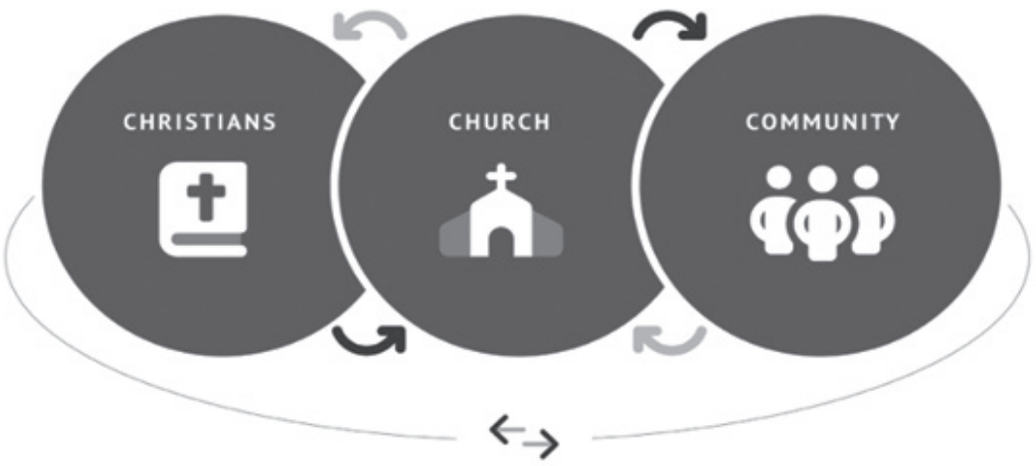
Building on these scriptures, numerous Christian Saints from Augustine of Hippo, to Basil of Caesarea, to Catherine of Siena taught and embodied the practice of care for the poor (Holman, 2009; Schaff, 2009; Undset, 2009). The Christian use of the term "charity" often operates in two ways. The first 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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