How Faith Promotes Thriving

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Congregations and various parachurch and mission organizations are experiencing radical shifts—whether due to technology, secularization, or COVID-19. As our world changes, many traditional institutions have declined, and new platforms regularly emerge to replace them. This shift causes disruption as people operate in fluid networks often lacking clear beliefs, intimacy, accountability, rituals, and formative practices. A lack of grounding in clear beliefs and relationships creates challenges around making meaning and identifying purpose, which are essential to thriving. Empirical research indicates that faith and religion provide effective resources for human thriving in the face of these changes (Hardy & King 2019; King & Boyatzis, 2015). We summarize psychological findings and identify how faith contributes to thriving in this guide. We define thriving as 1) growing and adapting vigorously toward purpose, 2) developing in authenticity with and for others, and 3) being fueled by faith, love and meaning.

Religion and Spirituality

Systems and relationships (Lerner et al., 2015), as well as experiences of transcendence, are important qualities of healthy environments and act as sources of resilience and thriving. Initially, psychology treated religiosity and spirituality as the same construct (James, 1987), but as the study of these fields developed, religion and spirituality developed as distinct and overlapping concepts. Religiosity involves engaging in the doctrines, communities, and rituals of a religious traditions, and religious development occurs as one's capacity to engage in these facets grows (King & Boyatzis, 2015). Research shows that religion can be a multi-dimensional resource for development through offering belief systems, relationships, and ritual practices, helping form a
sense of identity, belonging, meaning, and purpose (King et al., 2013, King, 2003). Religion can also be an effective vehicle for spirituality, defined as practices linked to experiences beyond the self, or transcendence. While evidence indicates that religion and spirituality are important for well-being, ironically rates of religious participation and church attendance have been in steady decline in western cultures over the last several decades (Pew Research Center, 2018). Scholars and practitioners are researching how spirituality outside of formal religious contexts is experienced, and asking what unique qualities spirituality offers to human thriving.

Transcendence
Perhaps the most important feature of spirituality is the potential for experiences of transcendence. An individual might experience transcendence when she feels a connection with God or other people during a worship service, when confronted with natural beauty or art, or while helping others in need. When experiencing transcendence, one’s awareness is shifted from one’s self and the mundane towards something bigger, providing a more expansive perspective and meaning. Spirituality offers opportunities for people to explore how they fit in a broader sense of reality, and it provides opportunities for self-exploration and identity formation. Spiritual experiences can inspire devotion to beliefs, encourage complex social emotions like admiration, compassion, and moral elevation, and serve to motivate prosocial behavior. People develop spiritually through growing in their capacity to cognitively and affectively have transcendent experiences, impacting how they understand themselves and the world, and leading to value-aligned behaviors (King et al., 2014; King et al., in press). Christian spiritual practices—particularly some forms of prayer and meditation that support experiences of silence and attuning to the Holy Spirit—are especially helpful for growing our capacity to experience God. In addition, faith practices provide “coordinates” to help individuals locate themselves within their communities and develop their ideals, values, and ideas of how to live them out.

Community
More often than not, spirituality is practiced within a community or alongside others. It can be practiced in a congregation’s youth group, worship, or small group, and these unique social contexts give people the chance to interact with like-minded and supportive people, providing opportunities to cultivate meaningful relationships. Evidence shows that people need meaningful relationships and to feel known and loved. Connection with others is crucial for well-being. As individuals move away from formal religious institutions, the exploration of spirituality and spiritual practices serve to orient them within communities with similar beliefs. Community support and role models, people who actually live out the ideals and values of belief systems, are vital contributors to the orienting and directing power of spirituality in people’s lives. Spiritual communities and contexts provide avenues for altruistic social experiences that nurture morality and compassion. Spiritual communities or organizations often motivate people to serve others, while also equipping people with the skills and competencies to do so.

Leaders can encourage the exploration of faith and spirituality, even outside their formal religious communities, by helping others clarify their beliefs, personal narratives, and sense of identity within their contexts. Leaders should be mindful that people need role models and useful resources to support their explorations. Support from like-minded communities provides a sense of belonging, assisting in the quest for meaning, and opportunities to lead and serve. Leaders may equip people with various spiritual practices—they can teach, practice, and hold people accountable in their explorations. Relationships matter! Additionally, leaders may provide individuals with specific resources and faith practices to assist their explorations and development of such practices. Many resources are available online and at www.thethrivecenter.org.
References


