Flourishing & THE CHURCH

STUDYING AND PROMOTING THE FLOURISHING OF THE CHURCH IN THE 21ST CENTURY AND BEYOND

A COLLECTIVE EFFORT

HUMAN FLOURISHING PROGRAM
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES OF RELIGION
BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

ABUNDANT LIFE FLOURISHING PROGRAM
REGENT UNIVERSITY

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR A CHURCH TO FLOURISH IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

WHAT DOES SUCH A CHURCH COMMUNITY LOOK LIKE?

WHAT FACTORS LEAD TO ITS FLOURISHING?

These are questions on the minds and hearts of many
amidst cultural shifts and changing patterns of affiliation and engagement.

FLOURISHING & THE CHURCH

Studying and Promoting the Flourishing of the Church
in the 21st Century and Beyond

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Baylor University
INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES OF RELIGION

FLOURISHING & THE CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION 5

BACKGROUND & RATIONALE 7

Growth and Decline

Current Initiatives

THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF FLOURISHING & THE CHURCH 11

Flourishing Christians: Personal Flourishing

Flourishing Congregations: Collective Flourishing

Flourishing Communities: Societal Flourishing

A CYCLICAL MODEL OF CHRISTIAN FLOURISHING 13

Interrelationships Between These Dimensions

WHY EMPIRICAL MEASUREMENT MATTERS FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH 14

Telling A Better Story

Bridge-Building

NEW HORIZONS IN PRACTICE AND RESEARCH 16

Focus 1: Synthesis of Current Knowledge

Focus 2: New Research Efforts

Initial Timeline for Activities

INVITATION TO PARTNER 22

CONCLUDING REMARKS 23

REFERENCES 25

ENDNOTES 27

ABOUT THE AUTHORS 28

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A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH AROUND THE WORLD

To study and strengthen God's work
in the world today and in days to come.

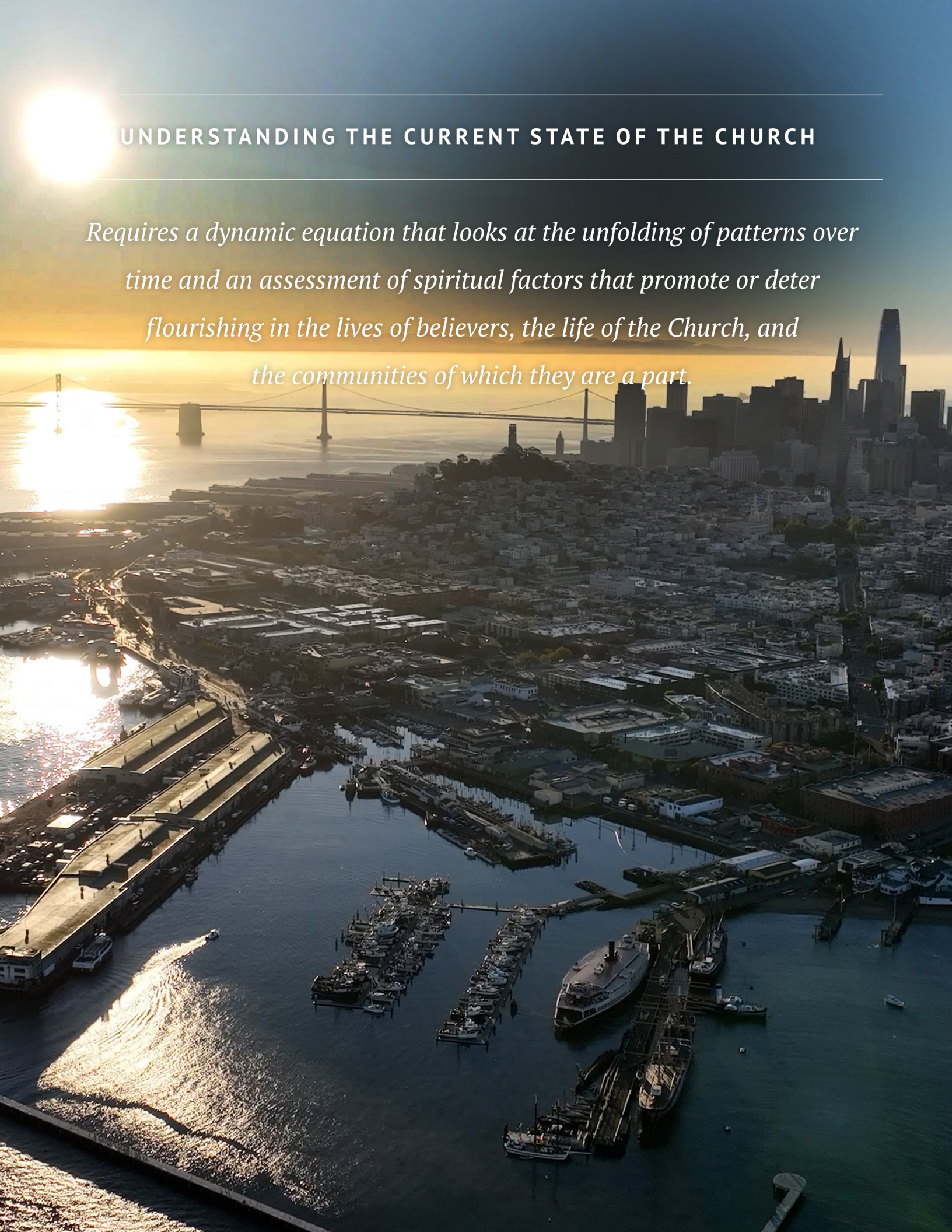
Introduction

What does it mean for the Church to flourish in the 21st Century? What does such a church community look like? What factors lead to its flourishing? These are questions on the minds and hearts of many amidst cultural shifts and changing patterns of affiliation and engagement. To explore these questions, we embark on a journey to empirically study *Flourishing and the Church*, with deep and sustained interdisciplinary and theological reflection. This collective effort—spanning across three institutions (the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University, and the Abundant Life Flourishing Program at Regent University)—will 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.

Work on *Flourishing and the Church* requires careful consideration of flourishing at three levels:

1. Individual Christians
2. Congregations
3. Communities Surrounding Congregations

In this booklet, we present a rationale for this initiative and highlight a range of existing projects that have faithfully explored the challenges and opportunities facing the modern church. Second, we highlight new opportunities for research on *Flourishing and the Church* and expand upon our three-fold model that will frame this initiative. Finally, we lay out an initial 5-year plan for interdisciplinary work centered on *Flourishing and the Church*. We believe that investment in this work - both financially and through direct participation - will result in deeper understanding of the Church around the world and, by extension, strengthen efforts to support and strengthen God's work in the world today and in days to come.



UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT STATE OF THE CHURCH

Requires a dynamic equation that looks at the unfolding of patterns over time and an assessment of spiritual factors that promote or deter flourishing in the lives of believers, the life of the Church, and the communities of which they are a part.

Background and Rationale

To better understand current realities within the Church, we look to data gleaned from recent surveys and studies that shed light on its condition. One of the most commonly used indicators of church health is religious service attendance. A notable range of empirical work has found that those who attend religious services most frequently are more likely, among other benefits, to live longer, to have less depression, to remain married, and are less likely to commit suicide.[1] Scholars and church leaders alike, however, recognize that service attendance data alone cannot tell the full story of faith and flourishing in the life of a believer or congregation. Instead, more holistic metrics are needed to explore what it means for Christians and Christian communities to flourish in the 21st century.

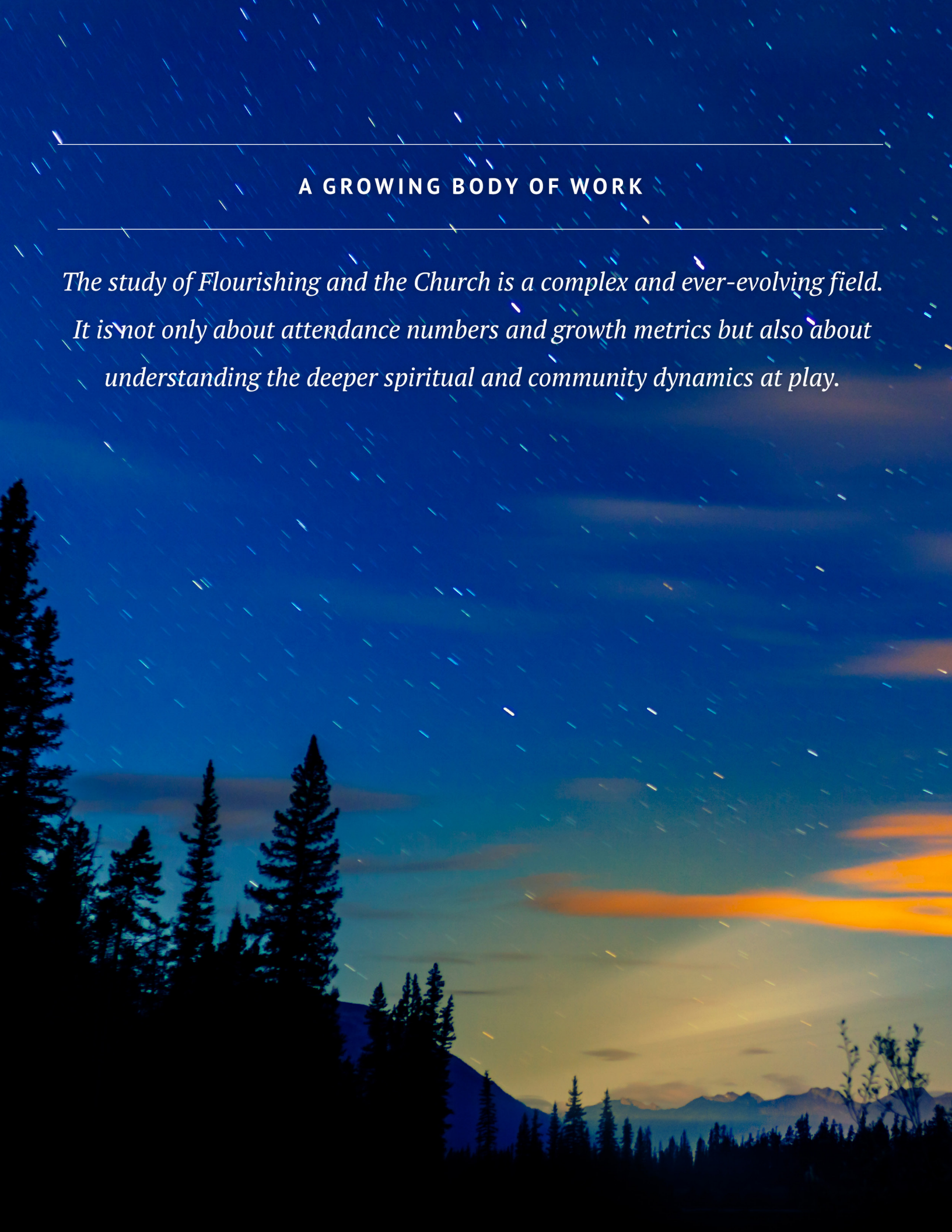
Growth and Decline

Increasingly, news headlines and popular books highlight declining rates of religious service attendance and disaffiliation patterns, particularly among Christian congregations. Some of the most common reasons given for these trends are changing demographic factors, incompatibility of Church participation with hectic modern schedules, disillusionment from church scandals, and disagreement with social and political activities.[2] Some scholars point out that attendance data does not fully capture all the ways churches experience growth and vitality and also highlight the possibility that those who currently identify as "unaffiliated" or "none" may have been only marginally religious in the past and now feel less social pressure to select a religious affiliation on surveys due to changing social norms.[3] While it is true that rates of religious service attendance are in decline, there are also reasons to look more closely at data that explores religious and spiritual trends. For example, a 2022 study that analyzed data from five recent U.S. population surveys found that atheists, agnostics, and those that reported no religious affiliation (e.g., "nones") reported a wide range of religious and spiritual practices and beliefs including regularly attending religious services, praying, professing belief in God, heaven, hell, miracles, and having religious experiences.[4] Studies like this highlight the need to carefully examine data (both popular polling data and scholarly data) that report on religious and spiritual trends and consider ways that future work might achieve greater precision and clarity in measurement.

Among church-based research, similar considerations are warranted. Understanding the current state of the Church is not only a matter of analyzing attendance patterns, but will require a dynamic equation that looks at the unfolding of patterns over time and an assessment of spiritual factors that promote or deter flourishing in the lives of believers, the life of the Church, and the communities of which they are a part. These efforts require a discerning eye on the part of church leaders, scientists, and scholars to interpret data within the broader context of societal changes and consideration of how the Church might advance its mission and methods to meet the spiritual needs of the present age.

A GROWING BODY OF WORK

The study of Flourishing and the Church is a complex and ever-evolving field. It is not only about attendance numbers and growth metrics but also about understanding the deeper spiritual and community dynamics at play.



Current Initiatives

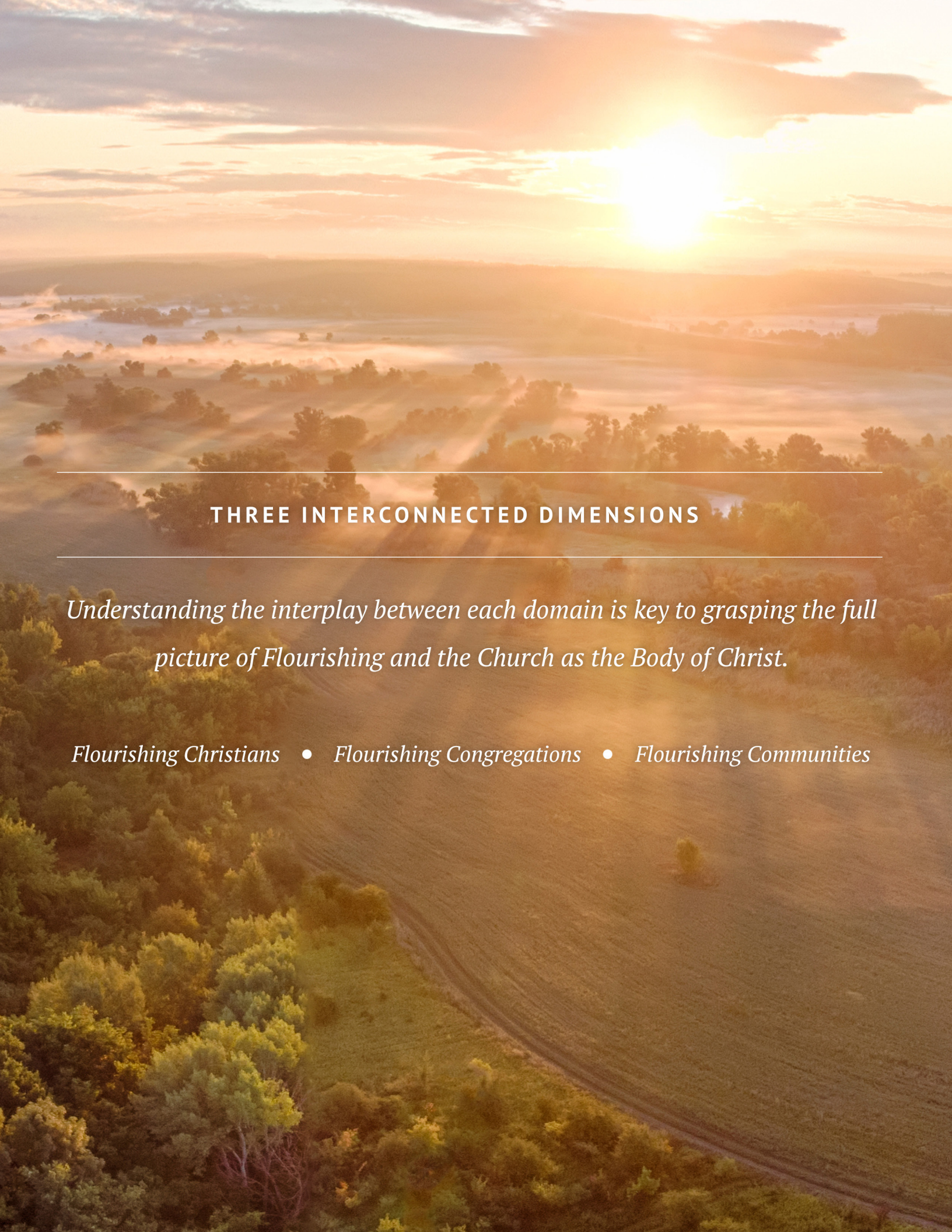
In recent decades there have been a number of efforts aimed at understanding what it means for churches and congregations to truly flourish. The Lilly Endowment Thriving Congregations Initiative[5] stands out for its commitment to providing resources that empower churches to explore new avenues for growth and relevance in their communities. The National Congregations Study[6] is a nationally representative study that takes a broader sweep at the practices and shifting trends in American houses of worship. It gives context to the more focused insights from studies led by Christian data companies like Barna[7] and Gloo[8] that help pastors and ministry leaders understand the state of their church by measuring flourishing and other ministry factors, as well as the American Bible Society's[9] annual surveys, which explore the role of scripture and flourishing in people's lives. These survey efforts, alongside decades of research on congregations led by initiatives such as the Congregation Development Program[10], REVEAL[11] research, and Faith Communities Today[12] surveys, reveal a multifaceted picture of church life in North America and beyond. Other organizations like the Fetzer Institute[13] have led research on a broader sense of spirituality in the United States with recent studies showing while spirituality declined among many Americans during the aftermath of the pandemic, those who continued to identify as spiritual or religious had a greater sense of resilience to pandemic-related challenges.[14]

Alongside congregational studies is a growing body of work exploring specific facets of Christian ministry and leadership. For example, the Flourishing in Ministry Program at Biola University[15] and Thrive Center at Fuller Seminary[16] explore the well-being of Christian leaders based on empirical research and best practices. These insights are complemented by work that focuses on flourishing among specific segments of the Church, like those living with disability. Outside of church walls, a number of research initiatives are aimed at describing and assessing the impact of Christian ministries among specific groups like inmates[17], those living with food or housing insecurity, and those struggling with substance use.[18] Here too, the research is vast, yet scattered through the use of various methods and publication outlets that do not always tell a cohesive story.

To better understand the empirical, theological, and philosophical relationships between the faith and flourishing, a number of centers and institutions are emerging in the United States, including the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, the Abundant Life Flourishing Program and summer school program at Regent University, and focused efforts at Baylor University's Institute for Studies of Religion.

The conversation around church vitality is not confined to North America. Anglican, Catholic, and Orthodox initiatives globally, alongside the ecumenical efforts of the World Council of Churches[19] and the Lausanne Movement[20], are tackling questions of what flourishing looks like on an international and interdenominational scale. All of this work points to a clear need for synthesis—a way to bring together these various strands of research and practice into a cohesive understanding that can inform the future direction of the church. It is a task that calls for careful consideration of data, a listening ear to the diverse voices within the church, and a commitment to applying these insights in a way that truly serves the needs of congregations and their wider communities.

The study of Flourishing and the Church is a complex and ever-evolving field. It is not only about attendance numbers and growth metrics but also about understanding the deeper spiritual and community dynamics at play. As the Church looks to its future, the body of work across disciplines and cultures serves as both a foundation and a guidepost for its ongoing journey.



THREE INTERCONNECTED DIMENSIONS

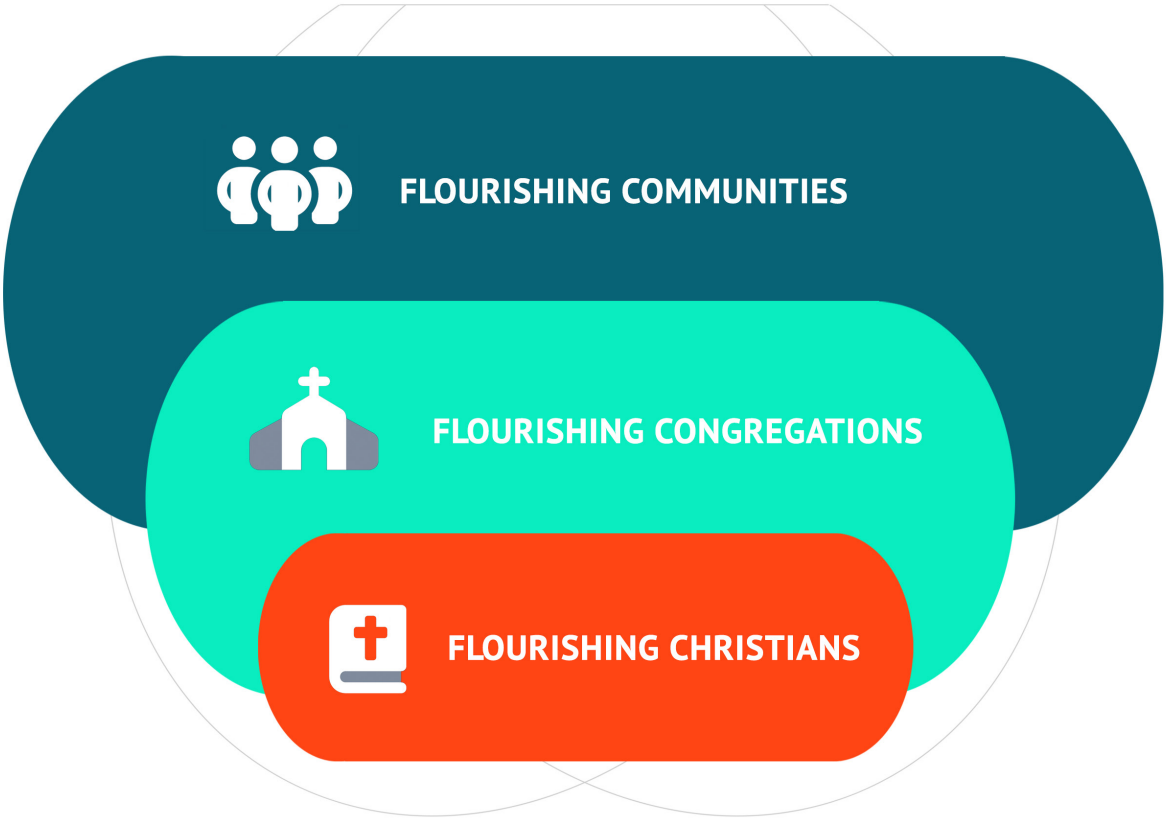
Understanding the interplay between each domain is key to grasping the full picture of Flourishing and the Church as the Body of Christ.

Flourishing Christians • *Flourishing Congregations* • *Flourishing Communities*

Three Dimensions of Flourishing and the Church

We propose a framework of Flourishing and the Church can be envisioned through three interconnected dimensions: individual Christians, the congregations they form, and the communities they inhabit and influence. Each of these dimensions offers a unique perspective on what it means to thrive and flourish in a Christian context. Understanding the interplay between each domain is key to grasping the full picture of Flourishing and the Church as the Body of Christ.

Figure 1. Dimensions of Christian Flourishing



Flourishing Christians: Personal Flourishing

Flourishing, a state in which all aspects of a person's life, including spiritual well-being, are good,[21] includes flourishing among individual believers. This dimension is deeply theological, as it pertains to the individual's relationship with God, their embrace of Christian scriptures and teachings, their embodiment of Christian practices and virtues in daily life, and their experiences of suffering.

Flourishing Congregations: Collective Flourishing

The second dimension extends to congregations, which are the communal expressions of individual believers coming together. Here, congregational flourishing might be understood as a state in which all aspects of congregational life are good.[22] Congregational flourishing can be observed in the health of church life, which includes worship, the well-being of church leaders, the state of community bonds and relationships, and engagement in ministry and mission. Congregations serve as the nexus where personal faith journeys intersect and are impacted through communal worship and teaching.

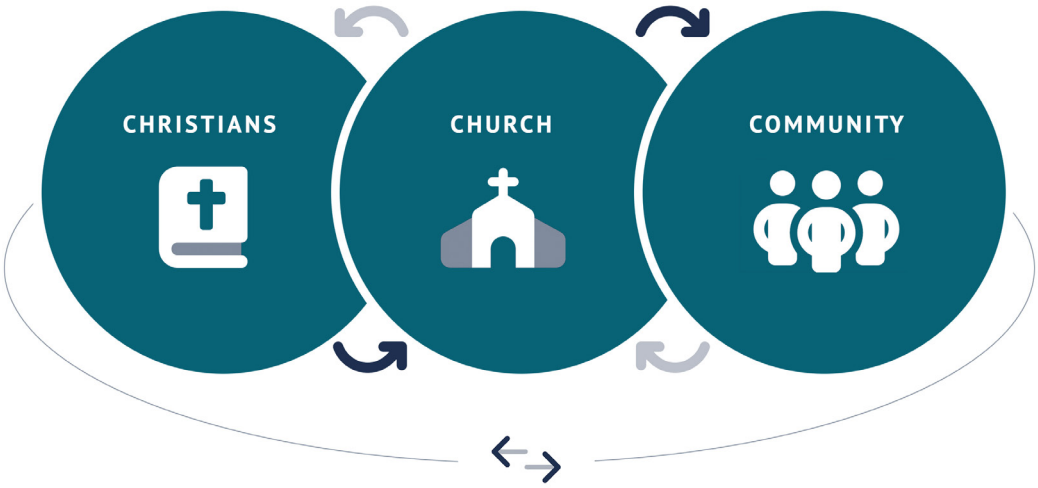
Flourishing Communities: Societal Flourishing

The third dimension expands further to the flourishing of communities that surround and are served by churches. This dimension, understood as a state in which all aspects of community life are good,[23] considers the social, economic, and cultural well-being of the neighborhoods, cities, and societies in which churches are situated.[24] Flourishing communities within the Flourishing and the Church framework integrates the Church's mission to be a transformative agent in the public square. Theologically, flourishing churches reflect the manifestation of the Kingdom of God on earth. Through engaging its surrounding community, the Church becomes a beacon of hope, reconciliation, and peace.

A Cyclical Model of Christian Flourishing

Figure 2 presents a dynamic model of how flourishing Christians, congregations, and communities relate to one another.

Figure 2. The Cyclical Model of Christan Flourishing



Interraltionships Between These Dimensions

The relationship between individuals, congregations, and communities is dynamic and reciprocal. For example, the spiritual maturity of individual Christians feeds into the vitality of congregations. In turn, healthy congregations are better equipped to make positive impacts on their communities. As communities are influenced by the Church, they become environments that can further nurture the flourishing of individuals and congregations. This holistic approach ensures that the evaluation of Flourishing and the Church is not only academically rigorous but also resonates with a full Christian vision that innately involves individuals, congregations, and communities.

In this model, the well-being of individuals, congregations, and the broader community are not seen as isolated components but as parts of a continuous loop of mutual reinforcement. Congregations, made robust by the flourishing of their members, become more than just assemblies of individuals; they transform into thriving and flourishing communities of faith. In turn, these congregations extend beyond the confines of church walls, touching the lives of those in the surrounding community. A church's outreach, whether through social programs, educational initiatives, or being a steadfast presence, can have a transformative effect on the community, contributing to the common good, and opening new pathways for faith formation among those who have no faith or who have left the faith.

This cyclical model is not a static process but a dynamic and ongoing journey of growth and exchange. It is a cycle that continually evolves, with each part—individual Christians, congregations, and the community—contributing to and benefiting from the others. In this way, the model encapsulates the essence of a Flourishing and the Church in a theological sense as the Body of Christ; deeply interconnected with individual faith in Christ, collective worship with other believers, and communal engagement within broader society.

Why Empirical Measurement Matters for the Local Church

Too often, there is a yawning gap in communication between ministry-based and academic-based efforts to understand the current state of the Church. These divides are typically due to a lack of awareness of the work taking place in different spheres along with reluctance to engage a wider range of partners in the work of the Church. Can pastors trust researchers to do work that will help the church in practical ways? Can researchers rely on pastoral accounts real-life ministry to help shape their research questions and methods? Do different stakeholders have the humility and capacity to share insights with one another and glean meaningful conclusions? We here lay out two key reasons why bridging divides between faith-based and empirical research matters for the 21st century Church:

Telling A Better Story

The challenges of the current moment require new approaches, including an honest assessment of the stories being told about the church in the modern era. Far too often, the narrative of the Christian Church is one that speaks of weakness or failure. While these criticisms are often valid, they do not always convey a full picture of the church. The use of empirical data is one way of communicating a more comprehensive story about the modern church – one with more nuance, depth, and perhaps, more balance. To do this in a way that even skeptical audiences may consider, there is value in approaching the use of data with a high degree of excellence and an appropriate use of scientific rigor. While the use of data may be new to some pastors and leaders, the use of story is a deeply Christian mode of thought, mirrored after Jesus' approach in teaching the multitudes. In the 21st century, data is a way of storytelling, a form of communication relevant to both the spiritual and the skeptical. When church networks use a common set of measures to explore what it means to flourish, a new form of storytelling becomes possible, based on empirically supported pathways of flourishing, which creates a robust sense of identity and shared purpose that extends beyond the walls of the church.

One concrete example of what might be possible is the way churches describe their community-based efforts including food and clothing ministries, support of local schools, care for the homeless, and the promotion of justice in numerous social spheres. Traditionally, churches engage in these programs without closely tracking data or other outcomes, making it difficult to tell a collective story of the modern Church's work in the world. Yet, the Church's engagement with social issues is deep and long-lasting, with the potential to demonstrate impactful models of care for some of the most pressing issues of our time. Moreover, Christian work in the community does not happen in isolation – it is fueled by individual Christians and congregations that take seriously their faith and Christian commitment. Telling collective stories about the work and action of the church within local communities through the use of data would highlight the vital role of the Church in advancing the common good. It would also foster new forms of dialogue and engagement with community and government partners joining other community and government partners to pursue a more just and compassionate world.

Bridge-Building

The challenges and opportunities facing the Church open new pathways of partnership and new ways of engaging the world that hold promise to build bridges across long-standing divides. When churches expand their use of data and research methodologies, it will require engagement with a wider range of stakeholders who may or may not be traditionally included in "church building" efforts. This includes scientists, data analysts, academics, writers, and others who often exist fairly quietly in pews around the world yet have much to offer to the current and future work of the church. Further, as church leaders and congregants grow in the use of empirical work that is informed by a range of disciplines, they become more equipped to contribute meaningfully to the Church and society.

Finally, when the Church is willing to step out and explore new approaches to understanding itself, its work in the world, and its future, and is willing to share those findings with the wider world, new bridges are formed with those who may discount the Church due to skepticism, cynicism, or a lack of awareness. For example, when empirical studies began to examine the impact of attending church services more frequently and found important associations with health and well-being, major academic journals and secular newspapers took note. Moreover, church leaders themselves were encouraged to see that the simple but demanding practice of attending services really did result in health and well-being in the lives of congregants, encouraging many to "not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing" (Hebrews 10:25). What more can be learned empirically that would encourage the Church and build bridges to new audiences both within and outside of the Church? The wise use of data and research can help the church to move beyond insularity, engaging with the world in a way that is open, expansive, and impactful.

TELLING COLLECTIVE STORIES

The work and action of the church within local communities through the use of data would highlight the vital role of the Church in advancing the common good and efforts to pursue a more just and compassionate world.

New Horizons in Practice and Research

Building on these themes we outline a number of steps to advance work on Flourishing and the Church.

Focus 1: Synthesis of Current Knowledge

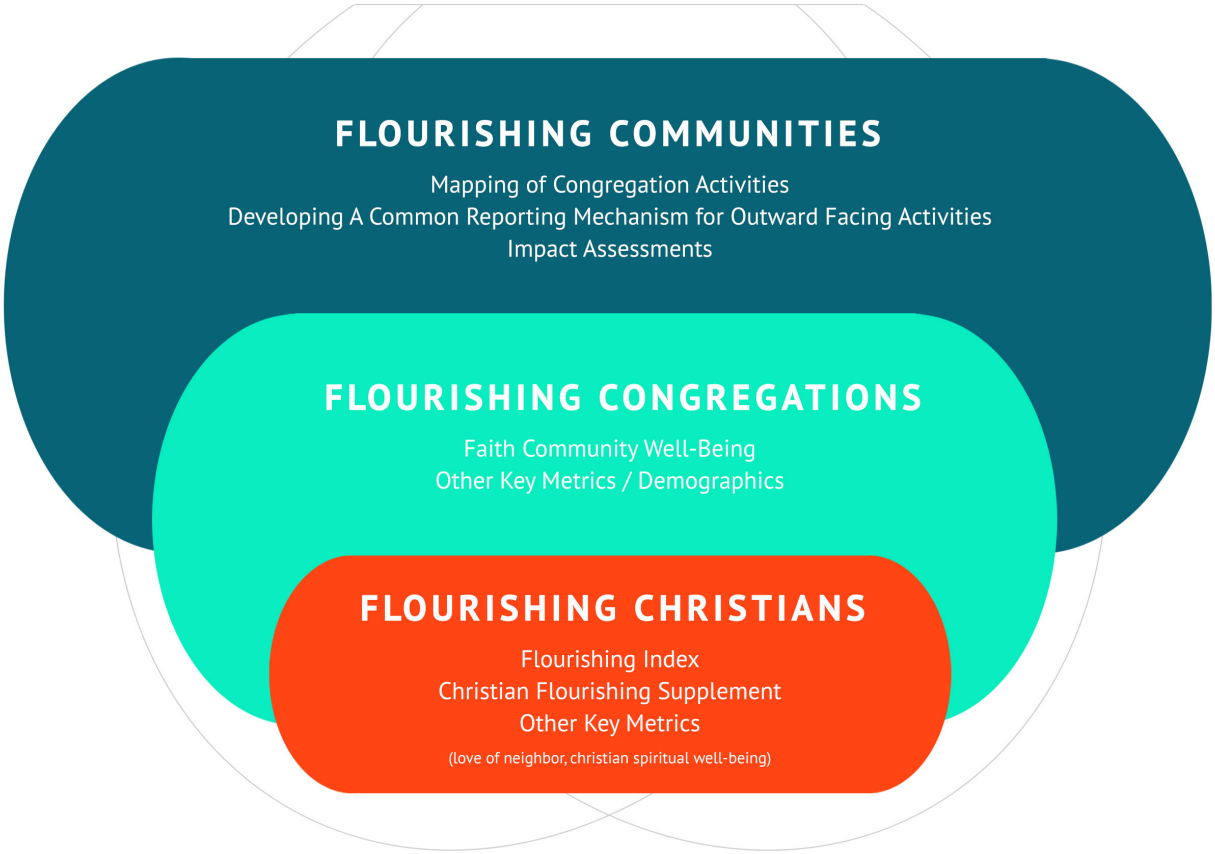
1.1 Analyze Existing Data & Synthesize Current Knowledge

Current studies exploring the state of church are akin to an archipelago of isolated islands of knowledge. Individual studies, rich in data and insight, are published within their academic or denominational spheres, often failing to interconnect in a meaningful dialogue. The consequence is a fragmented understanding of the Church's reality. The crucial need, then, is for a synthesis of this existing work—a concerted effort to bridge these 'isolated islands' into a single, accessible landmass of knowledge. Such a synthesis (e.g., through the use of meta-analysis, systematic reviews, conceptual analysis) ensures that new research efforts are not redundant but build upon the solid groundwork already laid. Synthesized analysis could yield peer-reviewed publications that would elevate the academic conversation on Flourishing and the Church and give meaningful insight to Church leaders. By leveraging underutilized datasets, researchers could uncover existing relationships and trends that inform the development of ministry and the direction of new empirical efforts.

1.2 Working Groups and Conceptual Clarity

Conceptual clarity is essential when discussing flourishing within the Church context. Terms like "flourishing," "well-being," "wholeness," and "abundance" can have different connotations theologically (both historically and at present) as well as in social science discourse. Developing definitions of Flourishing and the Church that reflect theological richness and empirical validity is vital. For example, careful consideration of the role of suffering in the Christian life and distinctions between temporal and eternal flourishing are required for measurement of flourishing in a Christian context. Conceptual work will lead to the development of research tools and methodologies that will more accurately reflect a Christian conception of flourishing and build on the expertise of diverse stakeholders invested in Flourishing and the Church, including pastors, theologians, social scientists, and the laity.

As a practical approach to interdisciplinary dialogue, a proposed working group, hosted by our institutions (i.e., the Harvard's Human Flourishing Program, Regent's Abundant Life Flourishing Program, and Baylor's Institute for Studies of Religion) will bring together social scientists and theologians with the express purpose of critically assessing existing measures of flourishing and, where necessary, adapt or develop new measures aligned with Christian concepts of flourishing at the individual, congregational, and community levels. Preliminary indices that will be closely examined will include The Human Flourishing Index, Christian Spiritual Well-being Measure, Abundant Life Christian Flourishing Survey, the Community Well-Being Measure, and a number of measures used in existing surveys to help synthesize and analyze existing research on congregations and Christian populations.



1.3 Theology of Measurement

One of the challenges in church-focused empirical research is the perceived gap between spiritual objectives and quantitative measures. Christian business leaders, for example, would rarely invest in for-profit ventures without a profitable Return-on-Investment. Under the guise of storing up heavenly rather than earthly treasures, however, it is all too common for wealthy Christians to donate large amounts of money to charitable and faith-based organizations that steward money poorly or do not make any measurable social impact. The working group might thus explore a theology of measurement, making a case for how empirical methods align with Christian principles such as stewardship, accountability, and faithful witness. Such a framework could help bridge the gap between the empirical and the theological, demonstrating how data can be a rich resource to serve the Church's mission.

Focus 2: New Research Efforts

The goal of new research efforts is to assess the three dimensions of Flourishing and the Church noted above - individual, congregational, and community - using methods that are both relevant to the practical aspects of ministry and feasible for implementation within the church setting and in the context of larger cohort studies.

2.1 Pilot Work with existing Church Networks

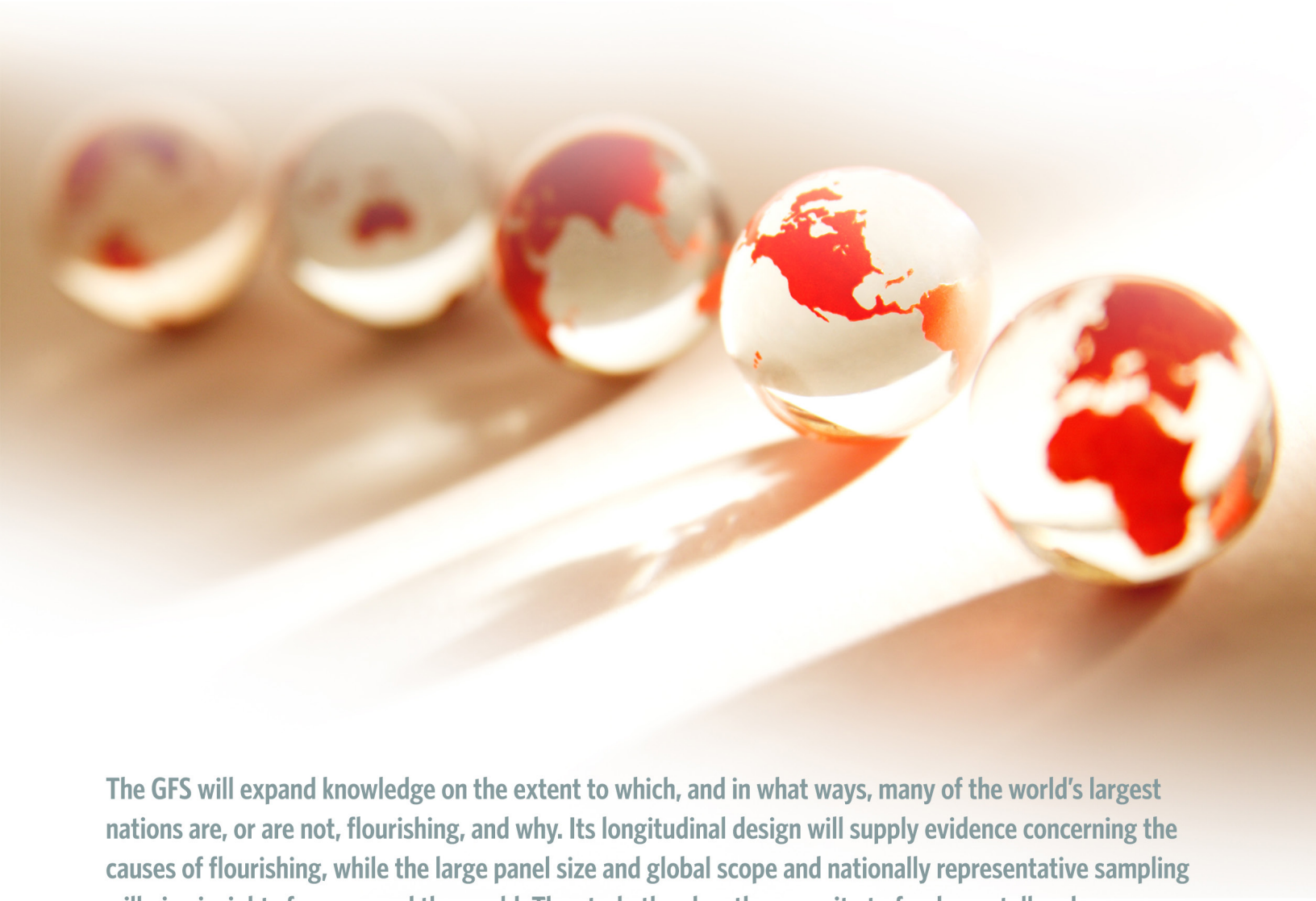
Here the initiative will work closely with 2-3 existing church networks (that work within or between denominations) in geographically diverse contexts to help collect data on Flourishing and the Church. This effort will utilize content from the working group to help church networks establish ways to sample congregations for assessment at all three levels of Flourishing and the Church, providing practical support and guidance through the particulars of data collection efforts. This will include examining the extent to which these church networks can report on common metrics for outward facing activities and explore opportunities for longitudinal data collection or other methods that move beyond cross-sectional, descriptive analysis. Following initial data collection efforts, the Flourishing and the Church initiative will help church networks co-produce content that is relevant for both ministry and empirical audiences, and explore the use of qualitative methods to unpack emerging themes and contextual nuance.

2.2 Longitudinal data collection

Given the need for more rigorous methodologies in work pertaining to Flourishing and the Church, the initiative will seek to partner with existing longitudinal studies to study dynamics of flourishing over time. This may include working with existing panels of data (data that is already collected) to conduct stratified analysis (e.g., only examining data relevant to Christian participants or communities) or developing a set of supplemental items that might be used among those who identify as Christian (currently or in the past).

One possible source of longitudinal data analysis is within the Global Flourishing Study (GFS), which was co-launched in 2022 by Gallup, the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University, the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, and the Center for Open Science.[25] The GFS (www.globalflourishingstudy.com) includes over 200,000 participants living in 22 countries around the world and is initially slated for five years of annual data colelction. The study includes items on religious affiliation and spiritual practices,[26] allowing analysis that can examine the state of well-being and flourishing of Christians around the world over many years (called a stratified analysis). In addition, there may be opportunities for additional mid-year studies with subsets of GFS participants which would allow for additional survey items related to the flourishing of Christians, congregations, and communities. The GFS is unprecedented in its longitudinal approach to studying flourishing around the world; its additional potential to analyze the well-being of Christian populations in 22 diverse countries is a once in a generation opportunity worthy of sustained investment of time and resources.

Global Flourishing Study



The GFS will expand knowledge on the extent to which, and in what ways, many of the world's largest nations are, or are not, flourishing, and why. Its longitudinal design will supply evidence concerning the causes of flourishing, while the large panel size and global scope and nationally representative sampling will give insights from around the world. The study thus has the capacity to fundamentally advance our understanding of the societal determinants of human flourishing, and to deeply enrich our knowledge concerning how this might vary by cultural context, and what might be universal.

The Human Flourishing Program
at Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science

Baylor University
INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES OF RELIGION

GALLUP

CENTER FOR OPEN SCIENCE

Initial Timeline for Activities

Each step in the aforementioned process builds on the previous one, creating a comprehensive approach to enhancing understanding of Flourishing and the Church in a methodical and interdisciplinary manner. The ultimate aim is to provide church leaders with tools and knowledge that are both theologically sound and empirically validated, thus bridging the gap between faith and science in the pursuit of thriving Church communities.

To pursue this work, we propose an initial 5-year plan:

Year 1 - 2024: Foundation and Launch

- Convene the working group on Flourishing and the Church.
- Deepen relationships with 2-3 church networks for focused engagement.
- Host first gathering of stakeholders in June 2024.
- Recruit post-doctoral or research fellows (with backgrounds in public health, theology, and psychology) to help.
- Explore opportunities for longitudinal data collection vis-a-vis the Global Flourishing Study.

Year 2 - 2025: Pilot Initiation

- Officially launch the initiative with selected church networks and partners ensuring all tools and metrics are in place for data collection.
- Analyze pilot data including psychometric analysis of any new or adapted measures.
- Continue analysis and synthesis of existing church-related datasets and Global Flourishing Study Data.
- Publish first annual report.

Years 3 and 4 - 2026-27: Expanded Data Collection, Analysis, and Publication

- Continue data collection across church networks to ensure a robust process that captures both quantitative and qualitative data.
- Increase sophistication in the way in which community flourishing is measured, e.g., the outcomes and impacts of social activities beyond the Church walls.
- Ongoing publication efforts in both peer-reviewed and ministry-based outlets, including annual reports of the Flourishing and Church Initiative.

Year 5 - 2028: Reporting and Future Planning

- Compile materials that present the key findings of existing and new data. Disseminate the results to all stakeholders and publish in relevant academic and church platforms.
- Host workshops and forums with church networks to discuss the outcomes of pilot work. Use insights gained to plan for the scaling of successful measures and to outline future research and the practical implications for ministry leaders.
- Collate insights from the initiative for an edited volume on "Flourishing and the Church" (e.g., Cambridge University Press or Springer Nature) or book monograph on "Christian Flourishing" (Baylor University Press).

A SHARED VISION AND COLLECTIVE EFFORT

An inter-institutional effort that seeks not only to understand but to catalyze flourishing within the Church.

This five-year timeline allows for a methodical and reflective approach to each phase of the initiative, ensuring that every stage—from the conception of the working group to the final reporting—is executed with precision and depth, ultimately leading to impactful outcomes for the church and the world at large.

Invitation to Partner

In the heart of every flourishing community lies a shared vision and a collective effort. We stand at the threshold of a transformative collaboration—an inter-institutional effort that seeks not only to understand but to catalyze flourishing within the Church. Harvard University's Human Flourishing Program, Regent University's Abundant Life Flourishing Program, and Baylor University's Institute for Studies of Religion have come together in this pursuit, but we cannot do this work alone. We need partners who share the vision for how the union of empirical research and rich theological reflection might serve the church in unprecedented ways. Partnership is needed in three key areas:

Academic Talent

This project will require academics trained in theology, sociology, empirical methodology, psychology, philosophy, and other fields to bring the best of their craft to bear in work that aims to serve the Church. In the early stages of this project, we are especially in need of analysts who are trained in advanced empirical methods to help collate and analyze existing data sources as well as new data. We are also in need of those with writing and communication gifts to help publish findings in a variety of outlets including academic peer-reviewed outlets and publications read by those engaged in Christian ministry.

Financial Investment

Transformative work does not happen without transformative investment. Investment in this work will support our growing team as we design, collect, analyze, and report on data described above. Financial investment will unlock unprecedented opportunities embedded in the Global Flourishing Study and will open the doors to additional studies that allow for deeper understanding of Christian communities around the world. For those looking to finance Christian work that addresses real-world challenges, investing seed money in this work will allow for new ways of understanding the footprint and impact of church communities and Christian social programs around the world, which in turn, will help guide future investment towards Christian work that has the greatest impact on some of the world's most intractable challenges. Join us in stewarding well all that God has given in time, talent, and resources.

Ministry Partners

The lessons learned throughout this project will only serve the church if this Initiative is linked to ministry partners who are able to contextualize key results and successfully communicate to those on the front lines of Church leadership and day-to-day ministry. This partnership begins now, before the "results are in", to ensure that the work progresses in ways that are attentive to modern church realities and responsive to the questions and needs of ministers and lay leaders around the world. This can only happen with ministry partners who have expertise that academics lack, especially with regard to the faithful, practical connection and communication with those on the frontlines of Christian ministry.

Concluding Remarks

The Flourishing and the Church initiative seeks to integrate empirical rigor with a heart for Christian service. This initiative honors and utilizes the strengths of faith communities and science with a call to embrace a "both/and" approach to study and engage the 21st century Church.

Empirical research in the context of the Church must navigate complex waters, balancing the objectivity and precision of scientific inquiry with the theological and deeply contextual nature of faith. The Church is not an institution to be dissected under a microscope but a living community with a heart that pulsates with hope, purpose, and love. The methodologies and tools we employ in our research must be sensitive to this reality, striving not to reduce the Church to data points but to illuminate the rich tapestry of lives, stories, and transformations that it represents.

The initiative will synthesize current knowledge, pursue conceptual clarity, and develop new tools and methods for understanding Flourishing and the Church. This work will not only contribute to the academic understanding of the modern Church, but will also provide actionable insights for Church leaders and congregations. This balance ensures that the research is not just theoretically sound but also practically valuable, such that it guides the Church in its mission to nurture flourishing Christians and communities.

This "both/and" approach also extends to the interdisciplinary nature of the work. As we bring together theologians, social scientists, and practitioners, we can harness a wealth of perspectives and expertise. The resulting dialogue is one that enriches our understanding, challenges our preconceptions, and sparks innovation. It is through such collaboration that we can develop measures and strategies that are deeply rooted in the Christian tradition while being informed by the latest research and best practices from various fields.

Furthermore, the initiative acknowledges the importance of measuring not just the internal health of the Church but also its external impact. The Church does not exist in a vacuum; it is a part of the larger social fabric, contributing to the well-being of communities and society at large. Therefore, our research must also consider how the Church interacts with and influences the world around it, and how, in turn, societal changes affect the Church.

This body of work is not the end but a beginning—a foundation upon which the future of Church research and practice can be built. It is an invitation to participate in the *missio Dei*—the mission of God—to remain open to new insights, and to be willing to adapt and change. The Church, as the body of Christ, is called to be both ancient and new, rooted in tradition and responsive to the present. Our research initiative must reflect this dynamic and embody a spirit of humility, curiosity, and a deep commitment to serve.

In the end, the true measure of this work's success will be its capacity to empower the Church to live out its calling more fully—to be a place where individuals find transformative faith, meaning, purpose, and community, where congregations thrive in unity and service, and where surrounding communities are transformed by the love of Christ.

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FLOURISHING & THE CHURCH

Studying and Promoting the Flourishing of the Church in the 21st Century and Beyond

A Collective Effort

OUR MISSION

Founded in 2016, the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science aims to study and promote human flourishing, and to develop systematic approaches to the synthesis of knowledge across disciplines.

Many topics that are fundamental to human well-being such as happiness itself, virtue, religious community, meaning, and purpose have traditionally been viewed as principally falling within the purview of the humanities, often of philosophy or theology. However, a robust empirical research literature on these topics has now developed from sociology, political science, economics, education, psychology, medicine, public health, and other empirical sciences. The program's research contributes to the broad question of how knowledge from the quantitative social sciences can be integrated with that of the humanities on questions of human flourishing and how best to carry out this synthesis of knowledge across disciplines. The program hopes to bring greater unity to the empirical social sciences and the humanities.

The program produces research publications and sponsors educational activities, such as courses, seminars, and conferences, for the Harvard University community all aimed at bringing knowledge together across disciplines and reflecting upon how knowledge from different disciplines might form a coherent whole.

Baylor University
INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES OF RELIGION

OUR MISSION

Launched in August 2004, The Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion (ISR) exists to initiate, support, and conduct research on religion, involving scholars and projects spanning the intellectual spectrum: history, psychology, sociology, economics, anthropology, political science, philosophy, epidemiology, theology, and religious studies. Our mandate extends to all religions, everywhere, and throughout history. It also embraces the study of religious effects on such things as prosocial behavior, family life, population health, economic development, and social conflict. While always striving for appropriate scientific objectivity, our scholars treat religion with the respect that sacred matters require and deserve.

OUR MISSION

Established in 2022, The Abundant Life Flourishing Program is hosted at Regent University's School of Psychology and Counseling. This program was inspired by the successful work of the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science and Baylor University's Institute for the Studies of Religion. The Abundant Life Flourishing Program is dedicated to studying and advancing human flourishing, with a particular emphasis on the science of Christian flourishing. Its goal is to create systematic methodologies for integrating knowledge in Psychology and Christianity to promote the understanding of human flourishing.

The Abundant Life Flourishing Program engages in producing research publications and educational activities for the Regent University community. These activities include courses, seminars, conferences, and summer schools, all with the intention of fostering interdisciplinary dialogue and reflection. We aim to bring together knowledge from diverse fields and explore how psychology and different disciplines (e.g., Theology, Philosophy, Public Health) can form a coherent whole when studying and promoting the science of Christian flourishing.

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