LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

Boundless Community: A Virtual Platform Designed for Collaborative Development of Emotional Well-Being

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Doctor of Ministry

by

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT REPORT ABSTRACT
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This research aims to apply the US Army concept of spiritual readiness to help Christians manage emotional stress in a civilian context through an online community. This project invites disconnected Christians to join an online community where they can address negative emotions by developing self-awareness of their maladaptive thinking and embody the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. This approach assists individuals in building emotional resilience, a concept emphasized in the military. This project addresses five negative emotions (anger, shame, sadness, fear, and loneliness) by replacing them with positive emotions taught in the Bible. The project consists of eight weekly sessions, each addressing one of the five negative emotions and three theological virtues. Through engaging discussions and a connection with God, participants develop their coping mechanisms. Each session will involve collaborative discussions on familiar subjects, encouraging self-reflection and a deeper understanding of the topics. Through fostering spirituality within a group environment, individuals can learn from one another to develop coping strategies for negative emotions linked to challenging situations. This research project has two primary implications. Firstly, it develops a virtual program to overcome the geographical limitations that disconnect Christians so they can experience deep fellowship without the need for in-person interaction. Secondly, it pioneers the use of a non-traditional approach to spirituality, focusing on the practical aspects of biblical teachings.

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Abbreviations

AGR   *Active Guard Reserve*

AR   *Army Regulation*

AT   *Annual Training*

BA   *Battle Assembly*

BLC   *Blessed Life Church*

CBT   *Cognitive Behavior Therapy*

CHBOLC   *Chaplain Basic Officer Leader Course*

DOD   *Department of Defense*

FM   *Field Manual*

FMS-SF   *Faith Maturity Scale-Short Form*

H2F   *Holistic Health and Fitness*

ICARING   *Importance, Community, Assets and Resources Influence, Needs, Goals*

IRB   *Institutional Review Board*

ISS   *Intrinsic Spirituality Scale*

MBCT   *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy*

MBSR   *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction*

MDiv   *Master of Divinity*

MRT   *Master Resilience Training*

NIV   *New International Version*

PCHP   *Personal Connection to a Higher Power*

PCS   *Permanent Change of Station*

PMPV   *Pursuing Meaning, Purpose, and Value*

RCOPE   *Brief Religious Coping*

SICPT   *Spirituality Integrated Cognitive Processing Therapy*

SRA   *Spiritual Readiness Assessment*

SRI   *Spiritual Readiness Initiative*

SSGG   *Service and Sacrifice for the Greater Good*

THS   *Trait Hope Scale*

TPU   *Troop Program Unit*

US   *The United States*

UMT   *Unit Ministry Team*

USAR   *United States Army Reserves*

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to investigate the feasibility of utilizing the spiritual

readiness concept, originally developed by the United States Army, to enhance the spiritual well-

being of Christians in a civilian context through a virtual platform. Unlike traditional methods

such as in-person Bible studies, this study aims to explore the potential of fostering an

individual's spiritual health from psychological and theological perspectives, without the need

for physical interaction. The researcher leading this study is an experienced pastor and has

served as a chaplain in the US Army Reserve for over thirteen years. Drawing from his dual-

professional background, this research project is crafted to apply the spiritual principles of the

US Army within a civilian context. Adopting the Army's approach offers notable advantages,

including its measurable and practical nature. Over the past decade, the US Army has

collaborated with major universities to establish a scientific framework for nurturing and

evaluating spirituality, providing valuable knowledge for conducting this research. The

practicality of this approach gives the study a clear direction, treating spirituality as a distinct

quality, attribute, or characteristic similar to emotional intelligence, which can be taught to

enhance an individual's resilience in the face of adversity by teaching the individual to cope with

negative emotions and cultivating a sense of connectedness.

While the military and civilian contexts may differ, spirituality holds relevance in both

realms. The apostle Paul frequently employs military symbolism to depict the Christian life and

the trials believers encounter. In Ephesians 6:10-18, he draws upon the analogy of a Soldier's

armor, urging Christians to don the "full armor of God" (New International Version) in order to

stand strong against spiritual battles.[1] Paul elucidates the various components of a Soldier's gear—the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit—to underscore the significance of spiritual preparedness and equipping oneself for spiritual warfare. Additionally, in Philippians 2:25, Paul refers to Epaphroditus, a fellow worker in the faith, as "my brother, co-worker, and fellow Soldier" (NIV), implying that Paul regarded Epaphroditus as a comrade in the spiritual battle and a companion in ministry, and accentuating the camaraderie and unity among Christians who collaborate in spreading the gospel. There exist notable parallels between military life and the Christian life, such as discipline, commitment, sacrifice, camaraderie, and mission. Among these similarities, camaraderie or spiritual fellowship serves as a foundation for this research study. Both military life and Christianity foster a sense of cohesion among their adherents. In the military, Soldiers often forge strong bonds with their comrades, relying on one another for support and protection. Similarly, Christianity underscores the importance of community and fellowship among believers, promoting mutual assistance, encouragement, and accountability. Therefore, although this research study does not aim to train Christians as Soldiers, certain spiritual readiness objectives from the military, such as resilience in the face of adversity and connectedness, serve as guiding principles in this research.

Ministry Context

Ministry in the Military Context

Chaplains serve as spiritual leaders within the Army, entrusted with the task of fostering the well-being of the living, tending to the wounded, and honoring the fallen. To qualify as an

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[1] In this research project, the capitalization rules are following the Army convention. For example, "Soldier" and "Family" are capitalized when referring to US Soldiers and their Families. More information can be found at https://www.army.mil/core/support/best-practices/ap/commonly_used_terms.html

Army chaplain, certain educational, religious, and personal prerequisites must be met. These include obtaining a Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree from an accredited seminary or theological school, being a full-time minister for at least two years, and securing an ecclesiastical endorsement from a recognized religious organization possessing established ecclesiastical authority. Upon completion of the Chaplain Basic Officer Leader Course (CHBOLC) and acceptance by the Chief of the Chaplains office, Army Reserve chaplains are assigned to units, enabling them to put their acquired knowledge into practice within their own ministries. They collaborate with Soldiers and their Families, offering spiritual guidance, counseling, and various forms of pastoral care as necessary. Additionally, Army Reserve chaplains engage in continuous training and development to ensure they remain current with the latest techniques and practices in the realm of pastoral care. Serving as a chaplain in the Army Reserve allows individuals to maintain their civilian ministries while receiving additional training in spiritual care, which they can apply on a monthly, if not more frequent, basis.

The most recent doctrine regarding readiness in the Army is called Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F). According to Field Manuel 7-22, published in 2020, the Army introduces the doctrine of Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) to train and assess Soldiers' readiness, which applies to three components: Active-Duty Soldiers, Reserves, and National Guards. Regardless of its components, the training program needs to address five domains including physical readiness, nutritional readiness, spiritual readiness, mental readiness, and sleep readiness.[2] Since the publication of the FM 7-22, the Chief of Chaplains in the Army has been promoting the Spiritual Readiness Initiative (SRI), which was designed to help Soldiers and their Families build

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[2] Department of the Army, *Holistic Health and Fitness, FM 7-22* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2020), 3-6, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN30964-FM_7-22-001-WEB-4.pdf.

spiritual resilience, including the ability to cope with stress, adversity, and trauma through spiritual and religious practices. The SRI includes a variety of resources and programs aimed at promoting spiritual well-being among military personnel, focusing on spiritual readiness assessment and spiritual readiness development. The Army defines spiritual readiness as "the ability to endure and overcome times of stress, hardship, and tragedy by making meaning of life experiences. Individuals find meaning as they exercise beliefs, principles, ethics, and morals arising from religious, philosophical, and human values."[3] Undoubtedly, this concept holds relevance for both Soldiers and civilians alike. Spiritual readiness training encompasses programs aimed at equipping Soldiers and their families with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate the challenges inherent in military life. These training initiatives concentrate on areas such as stress management, fostering relationships, and self-care. The training provided through the SRI places emphasis on essential skills like active listening, empathy, and effective communication, which hold intrinsic value in any pastoral care or counseling environment. While the SRI is tailored specifically for the distinct circumstances of military life, this research asserts that the skills and knowledge acquired through FM 7-22 and SRI training can be thoughtfully adapted to and applied within a civilian setting, based on specific needs and contexts.

<center>Ministry in the Civilian Context</center>

The focus of this research is Blessed Life Church (BLC), a congregation that caters to individuals of Chinese descent. The establishment of Blessed Life Church dates back to 2010, when a group of church leaders from the Chinese Baptist Church in Seattle, Washington envisioned spreading the Christian message specifically to the Cantonese-speaking community

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[3] Department of the Army, *Holistic Health and Fitness*, 10-28.

residing in the suburbs of Seattle, particularly Bellevue. Subsequently, in 2010, Blessed Life Church was formally established as a member church within the American Baptist Churches USA. BLC embraces conservative Evangelicalism, emphasizing traditional beliefs and practices rooted in evangelical theology. It places a strong emphasis on the authority and inerrancy of the Bible, salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, the need for personal conversion, and the importance of sharing the Christian faith with others. These beliefs form the foundation of the church's teachings and shape its doctrinal framework. The researcher conducting this study has been serving as the pastor of BLC since its inception, while also holding a part-time role as a chaplain in the Army Reserve. Within the church, one of the researcher's primary responsibilities revolves around ministering to individuals aged 16 to 55, providing them with opportunities for fellowship and a range of programs, including Bible studies, prayer meetings, and mentorship initiatives, all tailored to address the diverse needs of this age group. Within this age range, four small groups convene on a regular basis, either weekly or bi-weekly. These small groups comprise both Christians and non-Christians, including newly-arrived immigrants from Hong Kong and young professionals hailing from different cities across the United States.

In the small group ministry of Blessed Life Church, a distinctive characteristic is its knowledge-driven approach. Members of small groups often anticipate short-term participation rather than committing to the long term. This trend is particularly prominent in the college student and young professionals groups. Many members stay for a few years at most without intending to remain for an extended period. As a result, the small groups primarily function in a manner similar to book clubs or Bible study groups. The primary objective is centered around acquiring knowledge, such as studying the Bible or engaging in discussions on specific topics. Additionally, this knowledge-driven characteristic is influenced by the church's focus on

educating new believers. By actively reaching out to non-Christians, Blessed Life Church encourages new believers to join small groups. Given that individuals who are new to the Christian faith may desire to explore and learn more, it is natural for Bible studies and other knowledge-driven discipleship programs to be a significant part of the small group calendar. To cater to the needs of acquiring biblical knowledge, all small groups within the church embrace the inductive Bible study approach when delving into Scripture.

Problem Presented

Blessed Life Church is currently facing the challenge of ministering to Christians who have relocated from Seattle, particularly those who were baptized in BLC and actively involved in ministry. Immigrant churches often encounter difficulties due to the mobility of their congregations. Firstly, many immigrants come to the US for temporary work or study opportunities, knowing that their stay may be limited before they return to their home country. Similarly, foreign students who come to Seattle for college usually do not anticipate staying in the same location for an extended period. As a result, relocation is a common experience for Chinese immigrant churches in the US, which can lead to a lack of long-term commitment to a specific church or religious community. Secondly, the likelihood of relocation creates hesitations among existing BLC members to form deeper relationships with newcomers. Likewise, newcomers may find it challenging to maintain strong connections with fellow believers. Consequently, when these Christians are physically distant from their previous community, they may also feel a sense of being "out of mind" and not receive the same level of support, encouragement, or accountability they had before. These challenges stem from the transient nature of the immigrant church population and the impact it has on relationships within the

community. BLC faces the task of navigating these complexities to ensure that individuals who have relocated continue to feel connected and supported in their faith journeys.

The relocation of Chinese Christians presents a second challenge: They often find themselves without a church. The pastor at BLC recognizes the responsibility to support these departing Christians until they can find new faith communities. However, it seems to be a significant challenge for them to locate another suitable church, whether in the United States or their home country. Language barriers and cultural differences pose obstacles to their full integration into a new church in the States, especially when there is a scarcity of Chinese churches in the area. Even for those returning to Hong Kong or mainland China, their situation may not necessarily be better than those staying in the United States. They have incorporated certain elements of American culture, such as egalitarianism, which can potentially clash with the traditional Chinese notion of seniority within church settings. While this observation represents a general trend, seniority does remain a significant aspect among Chinese Christians. A study examining Chinese churches in Indonesia highlights that the organizational characteristics of these churches often reflect a "Chinese-oriented" approach, characterized by hierarchical leadership, a patriarchal structure, male predominance, and a strong emphasis on seniority.[4] Either the presence of language barriers or cultural incompatibility further complicates the process of finding a suitable faith community for these individuals.

BLC currently focuses its primary discipleship program on Bible study groups that employ an inductive Bible study approach. While this method encourages a comprehensive understanding of the Bible, it does not adequately equip Christians to navigate adversity or negative emotions in challenging situations such as relocation. The inductive Bible study

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[4] Chang-Yau Hoon, "Mapping Chineseness on the Landscape of Christian Churches in Indonesia," *Asian Ethnicity* 17, no. 2 (2016): 232.

approach involves a meticulous examination of the text, including careful observation of details, identification of recurring words or phrases, analysis of key themes, and appreciation of literary devices used in the passage. It suggests readers should read the Bible without emotions. As it states, "The *psychological fallacy occurs when one interprets a passage on the basis of emotional* or psychological considerations when such data or indications are lacking within the passage or its context."[5] This approach has gained favor among small groups at BLC, as it fosters biblical knowledge and allows members to share insights. However, the researcher has observed that members often hesitate to openly share their personal struggles, joys, and experiences, preferring more intellectual discussions that lack depth and meaningful connections. The focus tends to prioritize intellectual understanding of the Bible, neglecting teachings on emotional and spiritual well-being emphasized in this research project. Therefore, there is an urgent need to develop a new program that addresses practical challenges faced in daily life, particularly for those who had to leave BLC because of relocation. This program should integrate Bible study with self-understanding, encouraging members to explore their relationships with others and with God. Practical methods for applying faith to everyday situations become crucial in this context. By providing teachings and resources that prioritize practical application and address relevant issues such as emotional well-being and resilience in the face of adversity, individuals can experience genuine growth in their faith and authentically live out their beliefs, even in environments where Christian values may not be prevalent.

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[5] David R. Bauer, and Robert A. Traina, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), chapter 16, eBook.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this DMIN action research project is to create an eight-week online program led by a pastor via Zoom, with the aim of enhancing the spiritual well-being of Christians. The program will comprise one session per week, lasting approximately one to one and a half hours, facilitating real-time dialogues among participants on the session's topic of discussion. Alongside the eight sessions, participants will be encouraged to engage in discussions and connect with each other through a chat group on their mobile phones. This chat group will serve not only as a platform to discuss the session topics, but also foster a sense of community by sharing updates on their lives. All participants will be either currently or previously involved in Christian ministry, with some having prior experience working with the researcher, who was their former pastor or ministry teammate. Throughout the eight-week virtual fellowship, the researcher will provide guidance and training materials based on FM 7-22, the CCH SRI handbook, as well as psychological and biblical references. The program will adopt an interdisciplinary approach to spiritual health, emphasizing self-awareness, emotional well-being, and incorporating relevant biblical teachings into the discussions. The eight sessions will be divided into two parts. The first part will focus on addressing five negative emotions: anger, shame, fear, sadness, and loneliness, enabling participants to understand these emotions' origins and providing biblical perspectives on how to cope with them. The second part aims to deepen participants' relationships with God and each other through a greater understanding of faith, hope, and love within a communal context.

The emotional well-being of individuals plays a significant role in their spiritual wellness. This program aims to delve into how biblical teachings can nurture and cultivate emotional health. Each session will explore topics and facilitate guided discussions that deepen

participants' connection with the divine, enhance their capacity for joy and gratitude, and provide solace during challenging times. Participants will be empowered through the cultivation of self-awareness, which involves recognizing, understanding, and accepting their emotions without judgment. This self-awareness enables the identification of patterns, triggers, and areas that require healing or transformation. Emotional resilience will also be a focus, equipping participants with the ability to bounce back from adversity, maintain a positive outlook, and navigate difficult emotions, including developing coping mechanisms, establishing healthy boundaries, and honing effective communication skills. Furthermore, fostering healthy and meaningful connections with others and building a sense of belonging, support, and understanding within relationships and communities is a crucial aspect of emotional well-being. Compassionate and empathetic communication will create a safe space for emotional expression, validation, and growth. All of these practices will be guided by incorporating relevant spiritual teachings from the Bible, such as compassion, forgiveness, and gratitude, as well as drawing from participants' own spiritual experiences. It is important to note that this program does not replace traditional inductive Bible studies; instead, it complements them. By addressing emotions, this program aims to provide ongoing support for individuals who are relocating from Seattle, ensuring continuous ministry and meeting their emotional needs until they find their new spiritual communities.

The project's second objective is to offer communal support to participants, recognizing its vital role in cultivating their spiritual well-being. Communal support is fostered through horizontal connections among participants during and between sessions. Each session, lasting approximately one hour, encourages round-robin sharing and enables participants to express their thoughts and receive positive feedback. Guided by ground rules, discussions emphasize a non-

judgmental atmosphere where only encouragement is provided. The aim is for members of the project to experience an enhancement in their spiritual health. To cultivate a sense of community, a chat group will be established via cell phones as an integral part of the program. Participants will be actively encouraged to join and engage in the group, promoting communication and connection between sessions. This chat group will serve as a virtual gathering space, allowing participants to interact, share updates, discuss session topics, and provide mutual support. It will serve as a platform for ongoing conversations, fostering a sense of belonging that extends beyond the scheduled program sessions. Within this chat group, participants can develop relationships, offer encouragement, exchange ideas, and provide emotional support. It will be a space where individuals feel heard, understood, and valued within a community of like-minded believers. Regular participation in the chat group will strengthen the sense of community and foster a supportive environment throughout the program. Participants will be encouraged to maintain contact with one another through messaging, utilizing the chat group for sharing devotional passages, prayers, songs, and any form of encouragement. The leading pastor will take an active role in motivating each participant to engage in the chat group, initiating new discussions daily.

Basic Assumptions

The underlying assumption of this project is that the participants are Evangelical Christians who share common foundational beliefs and are motivated to develop their spiritual health through this virtual platform. While participants will possess a basic understanding of key Christian teachings such as the Bible, the life and teachings of Jesus, salvation, grace, and forgiveness, their individual knowledge and interpretations may vary. However, they should all share a common desire to deepen their spiritual lives and actively seek opportunities for growth.

Participants must be open to exploring and discussing various aspects of their faith, drawing from their personal experiences with God. Given their involvement in Evangelical churches, participants will regard the Bible as a central authority, seeking to align their beliefs and practices with its teachings. Moreover, there should be a general consensus among participants on moral values derived from their Christian faith, including love, compassion, honesty, and integrity, which serve as a basis for respectful interactions and discussions. Participants must also highly value prayer as an integral part of their spiritual journey. As brothers and sisters in Christ, they should foster an environment of respect where diverse perspectives are welcomed, even in the presence of theological differences. Lastly, it is expected that participants share a common aspiration to explore the practical implications of their faith in everyday life, eagerly seeking practical insights and guidance to embody their Christian beliefs in various contexts such as relationships, work, and personal decision-making.

Similar to the initial assumption, it is assumed that participants will actively engage in the process. The success of the eight-week training program hinges on individual commitment, which includes attending each session, actively participating in idea exchange during sessions and in the chat room between sessions, setting aside time for reflection on provided questions, and completing assigned tasks such as listening to online sermons or TED Talks. While these requirements may initially seem demanding, it is estimated that participants will need approximately two to three hours per week to fulfill these obligations. Prior to joining the program, prospective participants will receive detailed information about the expectations and purpose of these requirements, ensuring they can make an informed decision about whether to participate.

The third assumption in this research project is that it has been designed to minimize the impact on participants' normal lives. To achieve this, the group will meet once a week for one hour per session. The meeting schedule will adhere to clear start and end times, allowing participants to plan their day accordingly and ensuring that the meetings do not encroach upon their other responsibilities or personal time. The facilitator will strive to maintain a reasonable and appropriate duration for the online small group meetings, avoiding overly long sessions that could overwhelm participants. The goal is to facilitate meaningful engagement within a concise, focused, and respectful timeframe. While one hour per session has been found to be a reasonable duration for conveying a topic in an online small group gathering based on the researcher's experiences during the pandemic lockdown from 2020 to 2022, there is flexibility in the duration. In certain cases, the sessions may be extended to one and a half hours, taking into consideration factors such as content, engagement level, and participant feedback. The facilitator will adapt the meeting length accordingly to ensure an effective and engaging online experience for all participants.

The fourth assumption is that the eight-week period of this program is sufficient to have a meaningful impact on the participants' spiritual development. This assumption is based on the commonly recommended duration of many cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) programs, which typically last around eight weeks. This timeframe strikes a balance between allowing for a comprehensive treatment approach and being manageable for both the participants and the facilitators. During the eight-week period, participants will engage in regular sessions where they receive guidance and support from the researcher. The researcher has utilized elements from cognitive-behavioral therapy exercises, mindfulness exercises, as well as references such as FM 7-22 and the SRI handbook to develop the content for this virtual community-building program.

It is important to acknowledge that the eight-week duration represents the best-case scenario, assuming that all participants will complete the program without any interruptions. However, it is realistic to expect that some participants may miss a session or need to drop out midway through the training period. The eight-week timeframe allows for some flexibility, accommodating participants who may miss one or two sessions, as some CBT only requires seven weeks to complete.[6] While these absences may slightly impact the outcome of the training program, efforts will be made to support participants who encounter scheduling challenges. Overall, the eight-week period should provide a framework for participants to engage in a substantial and transformative journey, although adjustments may be made to accommodate individual circumstances and ensure the best possible experience for all participants.

The fifth assumption revolves around determining the ideal number of participants in each group. It is assumed that having four to five members, in addition to the facilitator, is the optimal size for each group in this study. This size facilitates more intimate and interactive discussions, especially with the implementation of regular round-robin sharing throughout the sessions. During each one-hour session, participants are allocated a sharing time of ten to fifteen minutes. This timeframe allows for meaningful sharing, active participation, and ample opportunity for individuals to express themselves. It promotes a sense of intimacy and connection among group members, while also embracing diverse perspectives and experiences. Ensuring that each participant's voice is heard and that the facilitator can effectively manage the discussion is crucial. The smaller size of four to five members per group contributes to more manageable group dynamics, enabling participants to feel comfortable expressing themselves within a tightly-knit setting. Furthermore, this group size allows for a sufficient number of

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[6]Seth Gillihan, *Retrain Your Brain: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in 7 Weeks* (Berkeley, STATE ABBREVIATION: Althea Press, 2016), Introduction, eBook.

individuals to engage in meaningful discussions and maintain the flow of conversation, even if one or two members are absent. The presence of multiple active participants helps to sustain a dynamic and engaging atmosphere in the group. Overall, by adhering to a group size of four to five members alongside the facilitator, this study aims to create an environment that fosters productive discussions, encourages active participation, and allows for the exploration of diverse perspectives while accommodating potential absences within the group.

Definitions

The aim of this project is to foster spiritual well-being within an online community. It is essential to approach spiritual concepts with careful consideration, as their meanings can vary depending on different contexts. In this study, a unique approach is taken by combining the military's understanding of spirituality with key concepts from Christian theology and tradition. While the military may have distinct definitions for certain terms compared to the civilian world, there should be a fundamental understanding regarding human psychology and mental health that aligns across both contexts. Additionally, certain terminologies may be interchangeable, despite their specific context. The purpose of this section is to highlight the intricacies of using certain terminology and provide definitions based on Army Reserve publications unless those terms have not been explicitly defined by the military. Furthermore, where applicable, the researcher will explore the interchangeability of these terms with similar ones, as people often use similar terms to describe the same spiritual phenomena.

Spirituality. According to FM 7-22, "Spirituality is often described as a sense of connection that gives meaning and purpose to a person's life."[7] A similar understanding is also found in describing spiritual health. "Spiritual health is about the connection with self (personal

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[7] Department of the Army, *Holistic Health and Fitness*, 10-2.

dimension), others (social dimension), nature (the environment), and God (transcendental dimension). The basic characteristics of spiritual health are as follows: proper lifestyle, connection with others, asking about the meaning and purpose of life, and transcendence."[8] In a religious context, the concept of spirituality can be applied in a more action-driven sense. For example, Michael Haykin defines true spirituality as the activities in a believer's life that are intimately bound up with the Holy Spirit and His work.[9] Within this research project, spirituality is understood as a journey that involves nurturing a sense of connection through diverse activities. It is worth highlighting that these activities are not limited to religious practices. The primary focus is on exploring and fostering personal growth and establishing a deeper connection to a broader sense of existence.

Spiritual fitness. In AR 600-63 *Army Health Promotion*, spiritual fitness is defined as "[t]he development of the personal qualities needed to sustain a person in times of stress, hardship, and tragedy. These qualities come from religious, philosophical, or human values and form the basis for a character, disposition, decision-making, and integrity."[10] The same definition is also used in FM 7-22 to describe spiritual readiness.[11] In the military context, spiritual fitness and spiritual readiness are interchangeable, and from the definition, one can further infer that this quality is also related to the resilience of a person. This concept is applicable in both military and civilian contexts. It encompasses an individual's readiness and capacity to navigate the challenges of life, discover purpose and meaning, and uphold their overall well-being. It involves

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[8] Ahmad Ghaderi et al., "Explanatory Definition of the Concept of Spiritual Health: A Qualitative Study in Iran," *Journal of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine* 11, no. 3 (April 2018): 1.

[9] Michael Haykin, *The God Who Draws Near: An Introduction to Biblical Spirituality* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2007), xix.

[10] Department of the Army, *Army Health Promotion, AR 600-63, Terms* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2015), https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/r2/policydocs/r600_63.pdf.

[11] Department of the Army, *Holistic Health and Fitness,* 10-2.

fostering inner strength, establishing connections, and cultivating resilience, which empower individuals to effectively cope with stress, experience fulfillment, and lead lives driven by purpose.

Spiritual friendship. This is a social network that serves as a platform where members support one another in their spiritual journeys and facilitate each other's growth. It is akin to a friendship that encompasses spiritual support and camaraderie. In this research project, terms such as "spiritual support network," "spiritual camaraderie," and "spiritual friendship" are used interchangeably. There are five characters of this friendship, and "they are love, honesty, intimacy, mutuality and accompaniment."[12] Among these five characters, intimacy is particularly worth mentioning for this research. David Benner states, "Friends who enjoy soul intimacy never settle for gossip or simple information exchange. Instead, they use the data of events as springboards for the sharing of feelings, perceptions, values, ideas and opinions…. Spiritual intimacy demands this attentiveness to the inner world."[13] The benefit of having a spiritual friendship is vividly described by Benner as well. "In caring for me, my friends support my emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and physical development. They do not simply want me to stay as I am. Rather, they seek my growth. They want me to become all I can be."[14]

Virtual fellowship. A collective of individuals convenes through a face-to-face online platform such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. The concept of fellowship is apprehended through the Greek term "koinonia." "*Koinonia,* in its different grammatical forms, is actually translated several ways in the New Testament: for example, *participation, partnership, sharing,* and of

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[12] David Benner, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship Direction* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 7.

[13] Ibid., 8.

[14] Ibid., 12.

course *fellowship.*"[15] To elaborate further, the notions of active involvement, collaborative partnership, and communal sharing are encompassed when referring to virtual fellowship. It is important to note that the terms "online community" and "virtual fellowship" are used interchangeably within the scope of this research project.

Emotion. It is hard to define emotion. "From a cognitive perspective, emotions are conscious feelings about self and objects in the environment. From a cultural perspective, emotions are the words and labels that humans give to particular physiological states of arousal."[16] Therefore, emotion can be defined as a multifaceted state encompassing both psychological and physiological aspects triggered by a particular event, circumstance, or stimulus. It encompasses subjective feelings, bodily responses, and behavioral reactions. This definition aligns with the James-Lange theory, as proposed by William James, who stated that "the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion."[17] The researcher is aware of other theories of emotions. For example, Cannon-Bard theory suggests that emotional experiences occur simultaneously with physiological responses, rather than emotions being caused by bodily changes alone.[18] Schachter-Singer theory posits that emotions are the result of a combination of physiological arousal and cognitive interpretation and emphasizes that physiological arousal is a nonspecific response, while the specific emotion experienced is determined by the individual's cognitive

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[15] Jerry Bridge, *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia* (Colorado Springs, CO: NAVpress, 2018), 10.

[16] Jonathan Turner, *Human Emotions: A Sociological Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 2.

[17] Michael Brady, *Emotion: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 17.

[18] Ibid., 21.

appraisal and interpretation of the situation.[19] While there are other theories of emotion, the James-Lange theory remains valid and influential in the field of psychology. It has made significant contributions to the understanding of emotions, and its foundational ideas continue to inform ongoing research and discussions. Therefore, this research project adheres to the James-Lange theory as its theoretical framework.

Emotional health. Emotional health refers to the state of a person's overall well-being in relation to their emotional and psychological functioning. It encompasses the ability to effectively manage and regulate emotions, cope with stress and adversity, maintain positive relationships, and experience a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction in life.[20] Emotional health involves having a range of emotional experiences, from positive emotions like happiness, joy, and love, to negative emotions such as sadness, anger, and fear. It also includes the ability to recognize, understand, and appropriately express emotions, as well as being able to empathize with others and understand their emotional experiences.

Limitations

The first limitation of this research project is the uncertain participation rate. Online small group meetings can experience fluctuations in attendance, and it is not guaranteed that all participants will be able to attend every session. Several factors can contribute to the level of participation, including individual availability, personal commitments, and unexpected events such as family emergencies. Among all factors, the most significant factor that can affect participation is participant availability. Conflicting schedules, work commitments, family

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[19] Brady, 22.

[20] Lawrence Howells, *Understanding Your 7 Emotions: CBT for Everyday Emotions and Common Mental Health Problems* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 16.

responsibilities, or personal obligations may restrict participants' ability to attend meetings regularly. Additionally, post-pandemic work travel has resumed, and professionals may have business-related trips that coincide with the scheduled meeting times. While this research project does not require in-person meetings, travel plans can still impact participant attendance rate. It is important to recognize that not all members will be able to attend every meeting due to these reasons. Despite efforts to establish a consistent meeting schedule and promote engagement, the fluctuating nature of participants' availability may result in varying levels of attendance throughout the research project. This limitation should be taken into account when analyzing and interpreting the data, and alternative methods such as providing recordings or summaries of missed sessions may be considered to ensure all participants can benefit from the research project to the best extent possible.

Another limitation to consider is the potential impact of age differences within the group, particularly in relation to the seniority norms prevalent in Chinese culture. As the eligibility for participation in the small group is restricted to individuals who have had a previous relationship with BLC or the researcher, grouping participants based on their ages is impractical. The age range could hinder participants in discussing topics openly. Chinese culture places a strong emphasis on respecting authority and showing deference to elders, which can influence how people interact within a small group setting, especially when the participants are not personally acquainted. The seniority norms rooted in Chinese culture may result in a hierarchical structure within the group, where the opinions and input of senior figures carry more weight. This dynamic can create a challenge for younger members who may feel less inclined to actively participate or express their own opinions.

The conventional Evangelical perspective on psychology may hinder participants from fully recognizing and embracing the value of a psychological approach to spiritual well-being. Participants who have been raised in Evangelical churches may approach secular psychology with skepticism, as they may perceive certain psychological concepts as contradictory or challenging to their faith. While this project focuses on spiritual development rather than religion, it is important to acknowledge that in some Evangelical Christian traditions, true spirituality is believed to be attained through the work of the Holy Spirit and the study of the Bible. As a result, there may be a tendency to diminish the value of positive psychology or self-help psychology. Some individuals may be cautious about the potential for self-help psychology to become an idol, where excessive trust is placed in one's own efforts and abilities rather than relying on God. From their perspective, a secular or scientific approach to spirituality that emphasizes the self may be considered incompatible with their Christian beliefs. Michael Haykin, a British theologian, states, "Self-centered spirituality is the prime characteristic of pagan culture, be it ancient or modern."[21]

Additionally, in certain traditional Evangelical circles, there exists a stigma surrounding emotional health issues. This stigma can lead individuals to be hesitant in opening up about their own emotional struggles, attributing them more to spiritual causes such as sin, lack of faith, or spiritual warfare than recognizing potential psychological factors. Within these circles, there is a preference for spiritual solutions such as prayer, repentance, and seeking spiritual guidance. This emphasis on spiritual remedies may result in the underemphasis or disregard of psychological factors and interventions, which are integral components of the online community building program being introduced.

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[21] Michael Haykin, *The God Who Draws Near: An Introduction to Biblical Spirituality* (Welwyn Garden City, UK: Evangelical Press. 2020), 11.

Another limitation to consider is the potential frustration caused by online video communication technology. This frustration may stem from various factors, including technical difficulties, limited non-verbal cues, and the overall adjustment to communicating through a screen. Technical issues such as poor video quality, audio glitches, or unreliable internet connections can disrupt the flow of communication and lead to frustration. These issues can interrupt conversations, cause delays, or even result in dropped calls, which can be particularly bothersome when important discussions or presentations are taking place. Also, non-verbal cues such as body language, facial expressions, and eye contact are essential for effective communication, but they may be diminished or lost entirely in a virtual setting, particularly if participants decide to turn off their cameras and remain unseen. Finally, online video communication can also contribute to a sense of fatigue or burnout, commonly known as "Zoom fatigue." Constantly being on camera, attending back-to-back virtual meetings, and staring at screens for extended periods can be mentally and physically draining.

Delimitations

In order to maintain participants' enthusiasm and prioritize their commitment to this program, it is essential that the program does not become a burden. To ensure manageability, participants should not be required to invest extra time in studying or preparing for meetings. Drawing inspiration from military training, where Soldiers receive training on topics like suicide prevention or Master Resilience Training (MRT) without prior preparation and still achieve effective results, the key lies in designing training materials that facilitate discussion and enable participants to become familiar with the information shared by the facilitator. For instance, within the SRI training materials, a compelling practical exercise called "Storytelling, witness, reflection" encourages participants to reflect on their personal understanding of goodness and

share memorable experiences of kindness shown towards them.[22] As each participant shares their story, others respond, relating to the narrative and offering appropriate challenges. The training materials provide a range of example questions to facilitate reflection and response. This training format differs from traditional book clubs or Bible study groups as it does not require participants to possess prior knowledge or engage in extensive pre-meeting preparation. In the research project at hand, a similar approach is adopted, involving the collection of personal stories from participants and the creation of hypothetical scenarios that explore their emotions. This approach aims to foster meaningful and productive discussions, much like the training methods employed in the military. By adopting this military style of teaching, the burden of pre-study for participants can be effectively reduced, ensuring that the program remains engaging and accessible.

Similar to military training, this program will be thoughtfully structured and focused. By providing a well-defined program, participants can rely on the training materials and resources provided, alleviating the need for extensive individual pre-study. Each session in the program will revolve around a central topic, such as anger management in session one. The sessions will follow a consistent format, incorporating standardized content delivery methods like lectures, demonstrations, and practical exercises. This uniformity ensures that all participants receive the same foundational knowledge and skills, eliminating the necessity for pre-study to address gaps in understanding. Drawing inspiration from military-style training, emphasis will be placed on experiential learning. Participants will actively engage in hands-on activities and simulations, allowing them to learn through practical experience and reflection. This approach aims to prevent participants from becoming overwhelmed by theoretical concepts and instead helps them

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[22] Chief's Initiatives Group, *H2F Spiritual Readiness Handbook* (unpublished handbook, April 2022), 47, eBook.

connect the training directly to their daily lives. By fostering a practical and relatable learning environment, participants can grasp the relevance and applicability of the concepts discussed.

This program is not trying to challenge or replace participants' understanding of their Christian faith, but to complement their spiritual health with psychological references. One spiritual exercise in this program is mindfulness practice designed by the researcher in this project. It demonstrates that spiritual exercise can be practiced without religious references. Mindfulness can be a controversial topic among conservative Christians regarding its legitimacy as a spiritual exercise and not a religious practice from Buddhism and Hinduism. Through this program, one will realize the differences between spirituality and religion, and one should not confuse spirituality with religion. With a broader understanding of spirituality and its functionality, one should be able to take advantage of it to become more resilient to adversity by seeking help and receiving support from others.

Another delimitation is the flexibility of the meeting time and day for each online gathering. While the sessions are intended to last for approximately one hour, strict adherence to fixed meeting durations may not be necessary. This approach allows discussions to unfold naturally, giving participants the flexibility to delve deeper into topics when needed. The specific gathering schedule will be determined by each group, taking into account the diverse work schedules of participants. Accommodating their availability and work commitments is essential to encourage maximum participation in the program. A flexible schedule may involve adjusting the frequency of meetings based on the participants' needs and availability. Open and regular communication among participants is crucial to maintaining a flexible meeting schedule. Participants should be encouraged to openly share their availability, preferences, and any scheduling conflicts they may have. This collaborative approach will help build consensus and ensure a schedule that works for everyone involved.

Thesis Statement

According to FM 7-22, in terms of spiritual growth, there are six areas in which Soldiers demonstrate their spiritual maturity: personhood, identity, growth orientation, personal agency, coping strategies, and connection.[23] This should be applicable to civilians as well. After these eight sessions, participants should see their growth in each area mentioned above. In the area of personhood, participants should be able to perceive their inherent values, and the meaning and purpose of their life. Regarding identity, participants should recognize their worldviews and associated beliefs as well as how they are related to these beliefs to develop a better understanding of who they are. Growth orientation is about what mindset one uses to progress in life, and this program will help participants recognize their mindset and make progress in reinforcing it. Personal agency helps participants know over what they could exercise control and what aspects of their lives are completely out of their control. In addition, personal agency teaches individuals how to handle guilt and shame. In the area of coping strategies, participants become aware of how they typically respond when experiencing adversity. After these eight sessions, participants should demonstrate their improvement in coping with adversity. The final area is about connection. Hopefully, participants participating in the same fellowship will develop a sense of spiritual camaraderie. Besides the cohort, participants should also know to what and whom they feel most connected, as well as how they can healthfully disconnect from those causing significant distress. These six areas will be incorporated into the spiritual assessment test conducted at the beginning and the end of the eight sessions.

The eight sessions serve a dual purpose: They fulfill the need for a community-based and spiritually-focused platform for Christians while also augmenting their emotional well-being.

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[23] Department of the Army, *Holistic Health and Fitness*, 10-12.

According to FM 7-22, "Mental health benefits: [I]ncorporating religious and spiritual perspectives into Soldiers' lives can decrease their risk of posttraumatic stress, major depressive disorder, alcohol-related problems, and suicidal ideation."[24] The introduction of this virtual fellowship platform should open up new avenues for the development of a spiritual support network. It is highly likely that the positive outcomes of this platform will be reflected in the participants' spiritual assessment scores, which can serve as an incentive to expand and share this idea with other Christians in BLC. The aim is to provide a comprehensive approach to their Christian faith by combining Biblical knowledge and self-care practices. This program is designed as a transformative journey, where each participant is encouraged to become a companion to others and collectively grow spiritually. By actively engaging in this eight-week spiritual journey, participants will have the opportunity to foster a robust spiritual support network and enhance their overall spiritual preparedness. Through the active participation and collaboration of participants, this program aims to cultivate a sense of unity and interconnectedness. It provides a platform where individuals can come together, supporting and inspiring one another and ultimately leading to a more holistic approach to the Christian faith. In summary, active participation in this eight-week spiritual journey enables participants to develop a strong spiritual support network and enhance their spiritual readiness. By embracing this opportunity to grow together, participants can foster a deeper sense of spiritual connection and improve their overall well-being.

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[24] Department of the Army, *Holistic Health and Fitness*, 13-6.

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research project explores an innovative approach to cultivating spiritual health through a virtual platform, which gained popularity in 2020 due to the COVID-19 lockdowns. As this method of developing small groups within a church setting is relatively new, there is limited research available on virtual meetings and their impact on spiritual health. Additionally, the publication FM 7-22 does not explicitly address the option of virtual meetings for enhancing Soldiers' spiritual readiness. While the virtual platform has some technological limitations as discussed in Chapter 1, it still offers a valuable means of bringing people together. Being part of a group is a foundational element in fostering spiritual readiness, which includes emotional well-being. The purpose of this chapter is to establish a conceptual framework that guides this research project from both theological and psychological perspectives. It aims to address fundamental questions and provide a solid foundation for the study.

Literature Review

This literature review is guided by five central questions. Firstly, how can spirituality be understood and integrated into individuals' daily lives? Secondly, what is the significance of spirituality in their overall well-being? Thirdly, what approaches exist for measuring spirituality? Fourthly, to what extent does communal support contribute to the development of an individual's spiritual health? Fifthly, how can spiritual exercises be incorporated into the lives of participants who lack pastoral support following relocation? By addressing these five questions, this literature review aims to provide valuable insights into understanding spirituality and its relevance in daily life. It specifically focuses on coping with negative emotions, measuring spirituality, the role of communal support in fostering spiritual well-being, and practical methods

for implementing spiritual exercises. It is worth noting that FM 7-22 recognizes the importance of spiritual health as a vital component of a Soldier's overall holistic wellness within the Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) model, establishing a correlation between spiritual health and mental well-being. This recognition suggests that civilians can also benefit from developing their spiritual well-being. By answering the five questions, four discussion points emerge: the function of spirituality, assessment of spirituality, spirituality as well as community, and implementation of spiritual exercises, which result in the necessity of this research project. The answers to these questions will be presented in the following sections.

<div align="center">The Function of Spirituality</div>

Spirituality can be understood as a transcendent feeling connected to "something greater than one's self—a purpose, a movement, an organization, a mission, a belief system, a family— that is experienced through intentionally developing relationships with self, others, one's environment, and an individual's source of ultimate meaning."[25] Instead of defining "spirituality," FM 7-55 describes it as "a sense of connection that gives meaning and purpose to a person's life."[26] The lack of a fixed definition for spirituality arises from the fact that it is inherently subjective and varies from person to person. Each individual defines spirituality in a way that aligns with their personal, philosophical, psychological, and faith traditions, regardless of whether they are religious or non-religious. This subjective nature allows for a diverse range of interpretations and expressions of spirituality, reflecting the unique perspectives and beliefs of individuals.[27] In these two descriptions, the word "connection" occurs twice. The concept of

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[25] Kate H. Thomas et al. "Spiritual Fitness for Military Veterans: A Curriculum Review and Impact Evaluation Using the Duke Religion Index (DUREL)." *Journal of Religion and Health* 57, no. 3 (Jun 2018): 1169.

[26] Department of the Army, *Holistic Health and Fitness*, 10-2.

[27] Ibid.

connectedness is crucial, particularly in suicide prevention, and it makes spirituality matter.

Throughout the 2021fiscal year, one of the themes that the Department of Defense focused on

regarding suicide prevention was "Connect to Protect," promoting connectedness and preventing

suicide in the military community.[28] When concluding on the relationship between suicide and

spirituality, one study states that although there is no universal definition of spirituality, "it often

involves, for example, constructs such as self-transcendence, self-forgetful experiences,

transpersonal identification, or transcendental connectedness (to others, nature, god)."[29] The

absence of a sense of transcendental connectedness or spirituality in one's life increases one's

susceptibility to suicidal ideations. Research examining the factors contributing to suicide reveals

that individuals contemplating suicide often experience impaired capacity for meaningful

thought. Instead, their thinking becomes excessively focused on concrete details, lacking the

abstract thinking that would typically generate spiritual or other protective ideas. For instance,

the ability to find hidden purpose in suffering may be alarmingly absent.[30] According to Lisa

Miller, the attenuation of spiritual support partially contributes to the elevated risk of suicide,

addiction, mental illness, and degraded performance within the US military. Miller highlights the

importance of spiritual support in mitigating these risks and promoting overall well-being among

military personnel.[31]

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[28] "CY 2020 Annual Suicide Report," accessed April 20, year, https://www.dspo.mil/Portals/113/Documents/CY20%20Suicide%20Report/CY%202020%20Annual%20Suicide%20Report.pdf

[29] Martin Plöderl, Sabine Kunrath, and Clemens Fartacek, "God Bless You? The Association of Religion and Spirituality with Reduction of Suicide Ideation and Length of Hospital Stay Among Psychiatric Patients at Risk for Suicide." *Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior* 50, no. 1 (Feb 2020): 97.

[30] Jesse Bering, *Suicidal: Why We Kill Ourselves* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 112.

[31] Lisa Miller, *H2F Spiritual Readiness Handbook* (unpublished handbook, April 2022), 2, eBook.

Spirituality is widely acknowledged as a valuable intervention for addressing mental health concerns. An example of such an intervention is spirituality integrated cognitive processing therapy (SICPT), a twelve-session psychotherapy treatment that specifically focuses on addressing moral injuries commonly experienced by military personnel. Within SICPT, the first nine sessions are particularly dedicated to exploring and utilizing the patient's spiritual beliefs as a means to address and transform maladaptive thought patterns. This integration of spirituality helps in promoting healing and recovery within the therapeutic process.[32] In addition to emphasizing the exploration of spiritual beliefs, SICPT also encourages patients to seek support from their faith communities. This aspect of the therapy reinforces the central theme of this research project, which underscores the significance of a faith community in fostering spiritual health. Recognizing the value of a supportive faith community, SICPT recognizes the potential benefits and resources that can be derived from engaging with and leaning on one's religious or spiritual community for additional support and guidance.

While SICPT is not inherently religious, the assignments given to patients prior to each session reflect elements of Christianity. For instance, in session one, patients are asked to write a statement detailing the effects of moral injuries on their beliefs concerning God, themselves, others, and the world. They are also prompted to reflect on how the trauma may have infringed upon their conscience or caused moral distress. These assignments touch on themes that resonate with Christian perspectives and values, providing patients with an opportunity to explore their experiences through that lens.[33] During sessions two and three of the therapy, patients are tasked with creating a comprehensive list of spiritual resources and delving into their personal

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[32] Michelle Pearce, Natalia R. Rivera, and Harold G. Koenig, "Spiritually Integrated Cognitive Processing Therapy: A New Treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder That Targets Moral Injury," *Global Advances in Health and Medicine* 7 (2018): 2.

[33] Pearce, 4.

understanding of faith within their religious tradition. These sessions provide patients with an opportunity to identify and explore the various spiritual tools, practices, and beliefs that they can draw upon for support, guidance, and strength. By examining their own understanding of faith within their religious context, patients can further enrich their spiritual journeys and foster a deeper connection to their religious traditions. In session four, patients are assigned to complete "the Spiritually Integrated Challenging Questions worksheets, read the Spiritual Reactions to Trauma and moral injury worksheet, and write a lament." [34] For someone versed in the Bible, the word "lament" is recognizable. The Bible contains numerous Psalms of Lament, with Psalm 22 being particularly well-known as it includes a verse that Jesus recited while on the Cross. Sessions six, seven, and eight of the therapy program focus on the themes of confession and forgiveness, which are significant aspects that differentiate Christianity from other religions. The inclusion of these sessions highlights the importance of confession and forgiveness within the treatment process and aligns with the principles of Christianity. Confession holds a prominent place in the Roman Catholic tradition, and while some Protestant traditions, such as the Baptists, may not have a formal ritual of confession, they encourage confession to God as a meaningful practice in the Christian life. Confession allows individuals to experience God's love and forgiveness. The aim of the eight-week program outlined in this research project is to cultivate spiritual friendships where participants can experience genuine vulnerability and transparency.

As mentioned above, spirituality helps increase the occurrence of positive emotions. In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis among evangelical pastors on the vital link between spiritual well-being and emotional well-being. They acknowledge the interconnectedness of emotional and spiritual health. Peter Scazzero, the founder of New Life

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[34] Pearce, 4.

Fellowship Church in Queens, New York and the co-founder of the Emotionally Healthy

Discipleship ministry, said, "You can't be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally

immature."[35] Christians should be encouraged to acknowledge that emotional struggles such as

anxiety, depression, or unresolved trauma can have a significant impact on their spiritual well-

being. Rick Warren further emphasizes the integration of emotional and spiritual practices in

one's personal spiritual journey stating, "It means facing our fear of exposure, rejection, and

being hurt again. Why would anyone take such a risk? Because it is the only way to grow

spiritually and be emotionally healthy."[36] Like Rick Warren and Peter Scazzero, many pastors

encourage individuals to be emotionally vulnerable and open with one another, creating a safe

space within the church community to express emotions, share struggles, and receive support.

This fosters an environment of authenticity and promotes emotional well-being.

Maintaining good emotional health is important for overall well-being and can positively

impact various aspects of life, including relationships, work performance, physical health, and

spiritual fitness. It involves developing emotional resilience, which is the ability to bounce back

from setbacks and effectively cope with stressors. This may include practicing self-awareness,

seeking support from others, engaging in activities that promote emotional well-being, and

developing healthy coping strategies.[37] Emotional health is a dynamic process that requires

ongoing attention and self-reflection. It involves nurturing positive emotional experiences,

addressing and processing negative emotions, and seeking help or professional support when

needed. By prioritizing emotional well-being and taking steps to enhance emotional health,

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[35] Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 17.

[36] Rick Warren*, The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 140.

[37] Scazzero, 45.

individuals can experience greater life satisfaction, improved relationships, and a greater sense of overall fulfillment. [38]

Assessment of Spirituality

How can spirituality be measured? Determining the measurement of spirituality poses a challenge in its study. In the context of the military, various methods have been employed to assess the spiritual well-being of Soldiers. The most extensive endeavor to gauge spiritual fitness has been the creation of the Global Assessment Tool (GAT), which was specifically crafted to support the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program.[39] Recently, the Army has made progress in developing more advanced scales to assess the spiritual well-being of Soldiers. These scales include the Personal Connection to a Higher Power (PCHP) scale, which measures vertical spirituality within the framework of spiritual fitness. Additionally, the Service and Sacrifice for the Greater Good (SSGG) scale measures horizontal or altruistic spirituality. Lastly, the Pursuing Meaning, Purpose, and Value (PMPV) scale measures a composite spiritual construct that encompasses transcendent meaning and principles, whether influenced by a theistic worldview or not.[40] FM 7-22 introduces a spiritual assessment framework consisting of six key areas: personhood, identity, growth orientation, personal agency, coping strategies, and connection. However, it does not include a specific scale or measurement tool to quantify spiritual well-being. The reason is that "[s]piritual readiness assessments can come across as artificial,

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[38] Francis Stevens, *Affective Neuroscience in Psychotherapy A Clinician's Guide for Working with Emotions* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 25.

[39] D. W. Alexander, Zainah Abulhawa, and Josh B. Kazman. "The SOCOM Spiritual Fitness Scale: Measuring 'Vertical' and 'Horizontal' Spirituality in the Human Performance Domain," *Journal of Pastoral Care Counsel* 74, no. 4 (Dec 2020): 270.

[40] Ibid., 273.

judgmental, rigid, and subjective. For this reason, each Soldier creates an assessment based on personal aspect and perception of spirituality."[41]

However, there is currently no specialized spiritual assessment specifically tailored to evaluate the spiritual fitness of Christian Soldiers in the military. Catering to the pluralistic context in the military, the Chief of Chaplains has been actively implementing spiritual readiness training and has provided handbooks for training Soldiers in enhancing their spiritual fitness. As an example, a recent spiritual core development handbook, issued to participants in February 2022, includes a spiritual readiness assessment (SRA) for Soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division. This assessment prompts Soldiers to indicate their level of agreement with a set of statements. One of the statements is "I am prepared to justly take the life of another human being in combat."[42] Obviously, this question is not applicable to civilians like the participants in this research. The H2F spiritual readiness handbook, issued to the Soldiers for spiritual readiness training in April 2022, has eighteen statements corresponding to PCHP, SSGG, and PMPV respectively in the SRA. It is a Likert scale survey. A participant responds to each statement with a score ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree).[43] The handbook also provides a formula to determine an individual's spiritual readiness level. Although civilians and Soldiers reside in different contexts, the fundamental aspects of spirituality, namely PCHP, SSGG, and PMPV are applicable to both groups. However, the SRA questions may need to be rephrased to suit the civilian context. This research project will use the military SRA as its starting point, making necessary modifications to align with similar assessment scales utilized in the civilian world.

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[41] Department of the Army, *Holistic Health and Fitness*, 10-29.

[42] Chief's Initiatives Group, *Spiritual Core Development Handbook* (unpublished handbook, February 2022), 31, eBook.

[43] Chief's Initiatives Group, *H2F Spiritual Readiness Handbook*, 21, eBook.

In the civilian realm, there exist numerous spiritual assessment scales. One such scale is the Post-Christian Spirituality Scale, where participants indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with seven statements. For example, statement number one reads, "Personal spirituality is more important than allegiance to a religious tradition."[44] In the clinical field, several tools are employed to evaluate spiritual wellness. The iCARING brief assessment, for instance, encompasses six domains (importance, community, assets and resources, influence, needs, and goals) to assess a patient's spiritual health.[45] This assessment provides insight into various aspects of an individual's spirituality and helps in assessing their overall well-being in a spiritual context. Besides iCARING, there are short, quantitative instruments that can also be used to assess spiritual engagement, such as the six-item Intrinsic Spirituality Scale (ISS), the ten-item Religious Commitment Inventory, and the fourteen-item Brief Religious Coping (RCOPE).[46] In a recent thesis project on spiritual maturity, the researcher examined three different assessment tools, one of which was the Brief RCOPE. The researcher opted for the Brief RCOPE because it effectively distinguishes between religion and spirituality.[47] The other two methods examined by the researcher to measure spiritual maturity were the Faith Maturity Scale-Short Form (FMS-SF) and the Trait Hope Scale (THS). The FMS-SF consists of "12 self-reported items measuring the individualized experience of closeness to God via a vertical faith maturity subscale as well as social altruism and relational commitment via a horizontal faith

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[44] Amy L. Ai et al., *Assessing Spirituality in a Diverse World* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2021), 53.

[45] David R. Hodge, *Spiritual Assessment in Social Work and Mental Health Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 33.

[46] Hodge, 151.

[47] Clark D. Thomas, "Effect of Religious Coping on Faith Maturity as Moderated by Hope" (EdD thesis, Liberty University, 2020), 26, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

maturity subscale."[48] THS also consists of twelve self-reported items "inclusive of four items each relating to agency, pathways, and distracters by which responding participants imagine their levels of hope contextually across time and situations using an 8-point (1= Definitely False, 8 = Definitely True) Likert scale."[49] From the aforementioned discussion, it is evident that numerous tools are available to measure spirituality. These tools will be further explored and utilized to develop a specific Spiritual Readiness Assessment (SRA) for this research project.

<div align="center">Community and Spirituality</div>

Numerous passages in the Bible, such as Hebrews 10:25, emphasize the importance of Christians being in relationship with other believers to foster spiritual growth. However, one might question why being alone does not fulfill the same purpose. When contemplating spiritual formation, concepts such as silence, contemplation, and solitude often come to mind. In discussions about loneliness as a social issue, Keming Yang highlights the perspective of certain religious individuals who advocate for the benefits of "the spiritual version of loneliness," suggesting that there are two spiritual benefits of loneliness: "the privacy of praying and the reflection on one's humanity, particularly the desire of being with others, and the relationship with God, with the second being obviously more important."[50] Therefore, while physical detachment from others may serve as a potential avenue for cultivating spiritual readiness, its effectiveness relies on ensuring that emotional isolation does not occur. Thomas Merton aptly expresses this idea, stating that detachment should not be mistaken for insensibility. The failure of numerous ascetics to attain great sainthood can be attributed to their adherence to rigid rules and ascetic practices that have merely suppressed their humanity, rather than allowing it to

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[48] Thomas, 40.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Keming Yang, *Loneliness: A Social Problem* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 128.

flourish and thrive in its entirety, guided by the transformative power of grace.[51] In this research project, it is proposed that being part of a community is the primary method for nurturing and fostering spirituality.

In fact, solitude is not explicitly mentioned as one of the general spiritual readiness practices in FM 7-22. This indicates that within the military context, it is emphasized that individuals should be part of a spiritual support network to cultivate their spiritual well-being, while the concept of solitude may not be as applicable. However, it is important to recognize that both being in a community and experiencing solitude can provide significant benefits to an individual, although engaging in solitude may require a deeper understanding of spirituality and the ability to discern the distinction between loneliness and being alone. "If being alone could lead to two opposite consequences, one painful—loneliness and the other desirable (or at least innocuous)—solitude, then it is important for us to find out how we could obtain the desirable situation (i.e. solitude)."[52] In the military context, the potential risks of isolation and being alone are widely recognized. Therefore, the concept of solitude may not be practical within the military environment, as it could undermine the essential sense of community and camaraderie that is fundamental to the military ethos. The negative consequences of prolonged solitude, such as being detached from the community, can pose a significant challenge and jeopardize the cohesion within the military. According to AR 600-63, a commander is responsible for promoting the "battle buddy system throughout the Army Force Generation cycle for all Soldiers regardless of rank, position, and organizational affiliation."[53] The battle buddy system is very important for Soldiers as it helps Soldiers hold each other accountable in combat as well as in

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[51] Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Rosetta Books, 2005), 7.

[52] Yang, 68.

[53] Department of the Army, *Army Health Promotion*, 1-31(i).

garrison. In civilian contexts where the potential issues of being alone may be less apparent, it is even more important to discourage the notion of being a "lone ranger."

However, merely being in close proximity to others does not guarantee that an individual will feel a genuine sense of connection either. Establishing meaningful friendships is essential for fostering a sense of connection with others. In the twelfth century AD, Aelred of Rievaulx (1100-1167 AD) advocated the importance of friendship in a feudal society, in which hierarchy and seniority were more rigid than in today's society. As he put it, "Therefore in friendship, which is the perfect gift of nature and grace alike, let the lofty descend, the lowly ascend; the rich be in want, the poor become rich; and thus, let each communicate his condition to the other, so that equality may be the result."[54] Friendship put its emphasis on relationships, not economic or social status. During the sixteenth century AD, when Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit missionary, aimed to establish connections with the literati, the esteemed members of ancient Chinese society, he took a unique approach. Ricci authored a book on friendship in Chinese, specifically tailored to resonate with the literati. Surprisingly, following the publication of his book, Ricci gained significant acceptance within the literati circle, despite the prevailing general aversion towards foreigners.[55] Friendship is an essential and universal human need. In understanding Ricci's motivation for writing his first book in Chinese. Michela Fontana states, "Ricci knew that friendship was considered one of the fundamental relationships for Confucian society and was regarded as equally important by the authors of the Western world, who had sung its praises since antiquity."[56] Recognizing this common ground, friendship becomes an ideal starting point

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[54] Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Mary E. Laker (Washington DC: Consortium Press, 1974), 115.

[55] Jonathan Spencer, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1984), 54.

[56] Michela Fontana, *Matteo Ricci: A Jesuit in the Ming Court* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 127.

for fostering relationships among Chinese Christians. By emphasizing the shared value of friendship, a strong foundation can be established for building connections within the Chinese Christian community.

In the context of spirituality, the Army places significant emphasis on the idea of connection, which is closely tied to the concept of friendship. Brenner writes about the ideals of spiritual friendship, saying, "The principal reason friendship is so undervalued is probably that too few people have ever experienced a significant, enduring friendship. All but the hermit have acquaintances. But such relationships involve no more than a passing connection."[57] In other words, to make a connection beneficial to one's spiritual health, one needs to explore deeper the relationship between connection and friendship. Being connected requires a sense of community or belonging. C. S. Lewis also shares valuable insight on friendship when discussing the four kinds of love mentioned in the Scripture. He states, "[W]e must notice that Friendship [sic] is very rarely the image under which Scripture represents the love between God and Man."[58] Although friendship seems to be an ordinary term describing a causal relationship between people, it is not. Friendship in fact represents the highest level of love, possessed by God for human beings, and human beings should not take it lightly. Some people do not enjoy having friends. Perhaps it is because the so-called friendship does not have a deeper sense of connection. Lewis gives his readers a vivid picture of what a deeper connection in friendship looks like. He writes, "Friendship, I have said, is born at the moment when one man says to another 'What! You too? I thought that no one but myself…'"[59] In a spiritual friendship, people can be honest

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[57] Benner, 76.

[58] C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1991), 72.

[59] Ibid.

with their feelings and thoughts without being afraid of shame, rejection, judgment, discrimination, and scorn.

Implementation of Spiritual Exercises

The objective of this research project is to assist Christians in cultivating their awareness of emotional health, leading to improved relationships with others and a deeper connection with God. The project's primary emphasis is not on imparting additional knowledge of spirituality. Because of this objective, participants will dedicate a significant portion of the eight sessions to engaging in spiritual exercises that facilitate greater self-awareness. Among all spiritual exercises, FM 7-22 suggests mindfulness as the way to build spiritual health. "Soldiers use some techniques, like meditation, to foster mindful awareness, but mindful awareness is really about an overall approach that goes wherever the Soldiers goes."[60] Mindfulness is a beneficial practice for Soldiers as it offers them the flexibility to engage in it regardless of time and space constraints. However, this practice leads to another question. Should Christians practice mindfulness, which is originally from Buddhism or Hinduism?

Mindfulness has been a popular intervention used by cognitive behavior therapists. As defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), "Mindfulness is awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally." [61] According to Siang-Yang Tan, a Christian psychologist, through engaging in daily mindfulness meditation sessions lasting approximately forty-five minutes. clients cultivate the ability to attentively observe their experiences, enabling them to cope with stress more effectively. Furthermore, this regular

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[60] Department of the Army, *Holistic Health and Fitness*, 13-8.

[61] Christiane Wolf, and Greg Serpa, *A Clinician's Guide to Teaching Mindfulness: The Comprehensive Session-by-Session Program for Mental Health Professionals and Health Care Providers* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 2015), chap. 1, eBook.

mindfulness practice has been observed to enhance their overall health.[62] Zindel Segal, Mark Williams, and John Teasdale developed Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) as an eight-week program for treating depression and preventing its recurrence. Built upon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), MBCT combines mindfulness training with cognitive-behavioral therapy. In this research project, participants will also engage in an eight-week program where they will be introduced to and practice mindfulness. The aim is to provide service members experiencing suicidal ideations with brief mindfulness exercises, helping them enhance focus and decrease cognitive reactivity to stressful thoughts and emotions. Additionally, a collaborative plan for regular practice between sessions will be established as part of their treatment.[63] According to a study, the eight-week sessions of MBCT yielded positive outcomes for participants. Not only did they decrease negative emotions such as stress and anxiety, but they also boosted positive feelings like happiness and self-esteem in participants.[64] This can be attributed to the practice's ability to enhance situational awareness, enabling participants to identify a broader range of coping mechanisms for challenging situations and preventing them from becoming overwhelmed. Additionally, MBCT facilitates a shift in participants' focus from past events to the present moment, promoting a healthier state of mind.

Is it appropriate for Christians to engage in mindfulness practice? There is a wide range of Christian mindfulness workbooks available that can assist individuals in cultivating this disciplined mindset and delving deeper into their sensory perceptions and thoughts. The practice of mindfulness was clearly imparted by Evagrius of Pontus (345–399 AD), who provided

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[62] Siang-Yang Tan, *Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 231.

[63] Craig J. Bryan, *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Preventing Suicide Attempts: A Guide to Brief Treatments Across Clinical Settings* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 117.

[64] Tim Clinton, and Ron Hawkins, *The Popular Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling: An Indispensable Tool for Helping People with Their Problems* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2011), 786.

valuable guidance to those aspiring to engage in contemplation. One of the key teachings involved maintaining a vigilant watch over one's thoughts, observing their intensity and attentively tracking their rise and fall. Evagrius emphasized the importance of cultivating a dispassionate awareness of thoughts and emotions, encouraging students to quietly observe them without becoming entangled or immersed in their contents.[65] This tradition of developing self-awareness by observing the mind was carried forward by Greek Orthodox Christian contemplatives. Within this framework, participants focus on nurturing qualities of watchfulness (*nepsis*) and discernment (*diakrisis*), enabling them to discern between good and evil thoughts. It is important to note that this process can sometimes be uncomfortable, as repressed material surfaces into conscious awareness.[66] Evagrius of Pontus is one of few examples in the early Christian tradition espousing mindfulness practice. In his discussion of mindfulness, Peter Tylor starts with "The Mindful Psychology of the Desert," in which he suggests that when Christianity emerged, so did desert spirituality.[67] Despite the popular belief that mindfulness originated from Buddhist philosophy, its roots can be traced back to the practices of early Christian figures, such as the Desert Fathers and Mothers.[68] This reveals that mindfulness is not only acceptable but also a preferred spiritual exercise for Christians. By engaging in mindfulness, Christians can direct their attention towards nurturing their relationship with others and deepening their connection with God. In this way, mindfulness becomes a valuable practice that enhances both interpersonal bonds and spiritual devotion within the Christian faith.

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[65] B. Alan Wallace, *Mind in the Balance Meditation in Science, Buddhism, and Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 56.

[66] Ibid., 57.

[67] Peter Tyler, *Christian Mindfulness, Theology and Practice* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2018), 19.

[68] Ibid., 28.

Theological Foundations

This section will explore two theological matters. The first pertains to the significance of community in Christian spiritual development, examining whether it is essential. The second matter delves into the reciprocal relationship between spiritual well-being and emotional well-being and seeks to understand their interconnectedness. While this research is structured around the military concept of spirituality, it remains aligned with the teachings found in the Bible concerning spirituality.

The previous section touched upon the potential risks of solitude and the need for a deeper understanding of spirituality. However, in the Gospel of Mark, one reads, "Jesus withdrew with His disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed" (Mark 3:7, NIV). According to the Bible, Jesus actively engaged in solitude. How should Christians interpret the concept of solitude within their faith? First of all, solitude does not mean loneliness, for as Henri Nouwen puts it, "Solitude is where community begins."[69] In other words, engaging in solitude is a prerequisite for being connected to a community. Although solitude can contribute to self-awareness and a deeper connection with God, it should not be seen as a replacement for community. Christians must exercise caution in isolating themselves and instead, proactively pursue the formation and active engagement in a community that supports and fosters their spiritual growth. Spiritual maturity gradually unfolds through meaningful interactions among individuals. "The breadth and depth of our formation are nourished in the environment of a congregation. We are formed *in* the congregation as we allow the ordinary life of this community—with its quirks and questions—to guide our own maturity in the gifts of the

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[69] Henri Nouwen, *Community* (New York: Orbis Books, 2021), 64.

Spirit."[70] Unlike solitude, engaging in a community is an essential step in the process of spiritual formation. Within the Christian tradition, the spiritual well-being of an individual is cultivated and nurtured within the context of community.

Stanley Grenz extensively delved into the connection between individuals and community, exploring this theme in a series of theological treatises before his untimely passing at 55 years old. Among his notable works is the book *Created for Community*, in which he establishes a profound link between personal salvation and active participation within the community of believers. As he puts it, "God's purpose is the salvation of individuals. But God saves us *together*, not in isolation. And he saves us *for* community, not *out of* it."[71] As a result of people's separation from God, their relationships with one another are also affected and damaged. God's plan of salvation goes beyond individual reconciliation and encompasses the restoration of all relationships. This is because humans are created in the likeness of a relational God, represented in the concept of the social Trinity—the loving community of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[72] Grenz suggests a new understanding of redemption, which no longer focuses on the individual alone but on the community as a whole. In this understanding, the community of believers is not a religious organization for the purpose of evangelism or worship, but as a part of salvation. Grenz puts it, "*As God's image we are a fellowshiping [sic] people*," which is "the community of salvation."[73] In support of his perspective, he references Ephesians 2:14-19, highlighting the significance of reconciliation and its purpose. "His purpose was to create in Himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both

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[70] Evan B. Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018), 138.

[71] Stanley J. Grenz, and Jay T. Smith, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), chap. 9, eBook.

[72] Grenz, chap. 9, eBook.

[73] Ibid.

of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility" (Eph 2:14b-17, NIV). The quality of Jesus Christ is exemplified in the harmonious community. Frank Thielman suggests that the identification of Christ with one's peace is remarkable, suggesting that those who are in Christ take on certain attributes of Christ Himself.[74] Redemption entails the restoration of a communal life in Christ, characterized by living in harmony with others. In essence, spiritual growth is a product of collective endeavor, rather than solely an individual pursuit.

This research project centers around the cultivation of spiritual readiness through online spiritual friendships, with a particular emphasis on the role of spiritual friendship as the foundation. The Epistle to the Philippians, written by the Apostle Paul, highlights the advantages of attaining spiritual readiness, which is fostered through a community of disciples.

> If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Phil 2:1-4, NIV)

There are four benefits to disciples: "encouragement from being united with Christ," "comfort from His love," "fellowship with the Spirit," and "tenderness and compassion." Active participation in a community marked by unity, humility, and servanthood is crucial for reaping these benefits. The subsequent paragraphs will delve into each of these qualities in detail.

First, Paul's understanding of unity is "being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose." Being like-minded can be understood as sharing the same mindset or thinking in alignment. The Greek word *phroneo*, used ten times in Philippians, means "to think,"

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[74] Frank Thielman, *Ephesians,* Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*,* eds. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids, MI*:* Baker Books, 2010), 164.

but "not only, or even primarily, in the intellectual sense. It equally involves one's emotions, attitudes, and will."[75] Indeed, it goes beyond mere intellectual alignment and involves cultivating empathy towards one another, treating people with equality, and moving in the same direction when it comes to taking action. It encompasses a holistic harmony of thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors that promote unity and cooperation within the community. In Greek, several words are used to describe different types of love, including *eros*, *storge*, *philia*, and *agape*. In his writings, Paul specifically emphasizes the concept of agape love. Agape love is often understood as "a love that rejoices in what is best for others… This kind of love will not result in selfish behavior that sinfully exploits others."[76] Paul not only emphasizes the concept of love, but also highlights the idea of the "same love," meaning "the mutuality of love that is to pervade the Christian community, identical with the self-sacrificing love of Christ for the church."[77] The nurturing and testing of this kind of love can only take place within a community. Being united in spirit and purpose implies that this community is not stagnant but actively and intentionally grows. In order for the community to flourish, its members must empower one another through the gifts of the Holy Spirit and share a collective affection, desire, passion, and sentiment for living harmoniously together.[78]

The second element of a community is humility. In verse 3, Paul speaks of doing "nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves." This is an idea of humility that people can find from the example of Jesus Christ, the so-called *kenosis* passage in Philippians 2:5-11. Jesus Christ humbly assumed human form

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[75] Gerald W. Hawthorne, and Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, vol. 43, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 175.

[76] James M. Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 485.

[77] Hawthorne and Martin, 176.

[78] Ibid.

through the mysterious process of kenosis, exemplifying the utmost act of humility. "This act of

kenosis is an act of obedience; obedience unto death, but a death that leads to new life."[79] Paul

employs the word *tapeinophrosyne*, "which alludes to the verb *phroneo*, as Chrysostom suggests:

'This virtue is called humble-mindedness, because it is the humbling of the mind

[*phronema*].'"[80] Humility stands as the foundational virtue, contrasting with selfishness and

conceit. Andrew Murray's work, *Humility*, presents a classical understanding of humility.

Embracing humility is the initial step towards comprehending the salvation bestowed by Jesus

and opening oneself to the grace of God. Murray defines humility as a mindset where individuals

prioritize God over themselves, addressing the root causes of conflicts with God and others.[81]

Interpersonal humility, coupled with unity and shared purpose, fosters the development of

reciprocal relationships. In these relationships, individuals mutually encourage and inspire one

another toward transformation, ultimately striving to emulate the qualities of Jesus. This pursuit

of Christ-likeness stands as the ultimate goal of Christian spirituality.

The third element is servanthood, which highlights a focus on the interests of others. It

embodies a selfless and altruistic attitude. The teaching of being a servant is pervasive

throughout the sayings of Jesus Christ, who serves as the exemplar, demonstrating through His

loving and humble actions how to serve others. "The notion that Jesus became a slave or servant

means that He became the Father's servant to carry out His will, even if that will mean death by

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[79] Markus Locker, "Seeing the Unseeable—Speaking the Unspeakable: From a Kenosis of Exegesis Toward a Spiritual Biblical Theology," *Journal of Biblical and Pneumatological Research* 4 (2012): 12.

[80] Moisés Silva, *Philippians,* Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, eds. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 131.

[81] Andrew Murray*, Humility: The Beauty of Holiness* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1895), 5.

crucifixion for the servant."[82] This concept of servanthood is a way to imitate Christ, who was willing to die for others at the expense of His own well-being. In this passage, Paul wants his readers at the Philippian church "to keep their eyes fixed on the good points of others rather than to concentrate on their own spiritual endowments."[83]

The Bible consistently highlights the significance of community, both within families and beyond. Examples of familial communities are readily found, such as the lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the book of Genesis, the family of Moses in the book of Exodus, and the descendants of David in First and Second Samuel. However, it is important to note that non-familial communities are also noteworthy in the biblical narrative. In the book of Daniel, one reads, "Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon" (Dan 2:17-18, NIV). This story demonstrates the importance of friendship in a crisis. In the New Testament, Jesus started His ministry by calling twelve disciples for the purpose of spiritual growth. "He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—t hat they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach" (Mark 3:14, NIV). Robert Stein explains why Jesus called His disciples. Jesus did not only want His friends to be with Him. "Rather, the Twelve are to accompany Jesus during His ministry. In so doing, they will learn from Him, witness His actions, and learn His teachings."[84]

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[82] Harold W. Hoehner, Philip W. Comfort, and Peter H. Davids, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Philemon*, vol. 16 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), 175.

[83] Hawthorne and Martin, 176.

[84] Robert Stein, *Mark,* Baker Exegetical Commentary *on the* New Testament, eds. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 170.

The focus of Jesus' teachings is on life in a community. In John's Gospel, we read, "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life" (John 5:39-40, NIV). First and foremost, Jesus extends an invitation for people to come to Him. Moreover, Jesus emphasizes that knowledge, while not devoid of value, does not hold primacy in one's relationship with Him for attaining eternal life. In his teachings, Paul also cautions against prioritizing knowledge over love. As he says, "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing" (1Cor 13:1-2, NIV). The significance of love surpasses that of knowledge, as previously mentioned. Jesus desires His disciples to be recognized by their love for one another. This research project focuses not on the acquisition of spiritual knowledge, but rather on exploring how individuals can be connected emotionally through love.

A community goes beyond being a mere gathering for disciples to connect and support one another; it serves as a space where believers can experience the advantages of spiritual readiness. It provides a safe and sacred environment for individuals to navigate and address negative emotions, fostering healing and growth. In the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, there is a provision for establishing six cities of refuge, referred to as "cities of intaking" or "cities of refuge" (מקלט ערי). These cities served as places of sanctuary for individuals who had unintentionally caused the death of another person. The establishment of these cities is mentioned in various passages, including Exodus 20:12–14, Numbers 35:9–28, Deuteronomy 4:41–43, Deuteronomy 19:1–13, Joshua 20, and 1 Chronicles 6. When commenting on Joshua

chapter 20, Richard Hess explains that it reveals God's provision of a designated place for unintentional killers to seek safety, particularly after being found not guilty of murder.[85] Although this passage does not explicitly address finding a safe place for emotional struggles, it underscores God's concern for the overall safety and emotional well-being of His people. However, a clearer understanding of God's concern for His people's emotional health can be found in the teachings of Jesus, who invites those who are weary and burdened to come to Him for rest (Matt 11:28, NIV). As the body of Christ, the community of Christians should serve as a refuge for the hurting. Paul emphasizes this by urging believers to bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ (Gal 6:2, NIV). The church is intended to be a community where believers support and uplift one another, creating a safe space where negative emotions can be shared and understood.

Finally, the emotional well-being of Christians serves as a means to glorify God and attract non-believers to become followers of Jesus. As John Piper's renowned quote suggests, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him."[86] When one examines the Bible as a whole, from the Old Testament to the New Testament, it becomes evident that the approach of being a model for others has a magnetic effect on people's transformation. In Exodus, an intriguing fact emerges regarding Moses' concern for the well-being of non-Israelites. "And you shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exod 22:21, NIV). Walter Kaiser connects the presence of non-Israelites with the blessing of Abraham, asserting that, "But the sweep of all the evidence makes it abundantly clear that God's gift of a blessing through the instrumentality of Abraham was to be experienced by nations,

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[85] Richard S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary,* Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 278.

[86] John Piper, "God Is Most Glorified in Us When We Are Most Satisfied in Him," accessed June 28, 2023, https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/god-is-most-glorified-in-us-when-we-are-most-satisfied-in-him.

clans, tribes, people groups, and individuals."[87] Richard Bauckham comments on God's mission

in the Old Testament, affirming that "[i]n order for the nations to be blessed Israel need only be

faithful to YHWH. Her life with YHWH will itself draw the nations to YHWH so that they too

may experience His blessing."[88] In other words, the notion of being a model to attract outsiders

goes back to the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. The Gospel of John presents the

following passage: "And Jesus turned, and beheld them following, and said to them, 'What do

you seek?' And they said to Him, 'Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are You

staying?' He said to them, 'Come, and you will see'" (John 1:38-39, NIV). Andreas J.

Kostenberger gives further meaning clarification to Jesus' words: "If you come—and I want you

to—you will see."[89] The initial step to becoming Jesus' disciple is to be in His presence.

Matthew's Gospel says, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden"

(Matt 5:14, NIV). From this passage, John Winthrop wrote his famous sermon, "We shall be as a

city upon a hill; the eyes of all people are upon us" in 1630.[90] This quote aligns with the

attractional model, drawing people to become Jesus' followers by being a shining city on a hill.

The Gospel of John declares, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have

love for one another" (John 13:35, NIV). From this Johannine passage, one can infer that

demonstrating and practicing agape love within the faith community was a strategy to draw non-

believers to Jesus.

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[87] Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 24.

[88] Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 32.

[89] John Köstenberger, *John,* Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, eds. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 47.

[90] Daniel T. Rodgers, *As a City on a Hill: The Story of America's Most Famous Lay Sermon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 43.

Theoretical Foundations

This research project adopts an integrative approach that considers the affective, behavioral, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions of an individual to cultivate spiritual well-being within a virtual fellowship. In recent years, Christian psychologists have sought to combine positive psychology, which forms the basis of Health to Flourish (H2F), with biblical teachings. Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) encompasses various psychotherapeutic approaches that integrate the fundamental principles of behavioral and cognitive psychology.[91] This approach places emphasis on repetition, allowing participants to gradually recognize their personal challenges and adopt new patterns of cognitive thinking. As Judith Beck suggests, "Through repeated experiences in which they gain relief by working at a more superficial level of cognition, patients become more open to evaluating the beliefs that underlie their dysfunctional thinking."[92] The core concept underlying this research is that participants can nurture their spiritual growth by engaging in consistent spiritual exercises over the course of eight weeks.

Among all Christian psychologists, Mark McMinn stands out as a prominent figure among Christian psychologists who embrace the integrative approach.[93] He not only practices cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), but also advocates for the integration of positive psychology and the Christian faith in counseling. CBT is a therapeutic framework that targets and adjusts a patient's maladaptive thinking through a range of activities. Positive psychology serves as a valuable tool in fostering spiritual well-being by dispelling the stigma associated with religious beliefs. For instance, individuals may hesitate to share their thoughts of suicide due to the perception that suicide is a grave sin or even an unforgivable one. McMinn emphasizes that sin

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[91] Judith S. Beck, *Cognitive Behavior Therapy: Basics and Beyond* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2011), 19.

[92] Beck, 35.

[93] Clinton and Hawkins, 827.

should be viewed as a condition of shared human brokenness, rather than a mere collection of specific actions or thoughts. He states, "If we reduce sin to a set of behaviors, then our tendency is to sit judgmentally with clients, especially those who have made a series of bad choices in their lives. But if we recognize sin as a state of brokenness—a shared condition that influences all humanity—then we sit with our clients as equals."[94] McMinn does not shy away from discussing sin in his CBT practice, but rather utilizes the language of CBT to interpret the significance of sin, redefining it as more than a series of individual misbehaviors or failures to meet certain standards. This approach provides a new avenue for caring for individuals such as Soldiers, without passing judgment on their behavior. Cultivating a non-judgmental and empathetic mindset serves as the initial step toward developing spiritual friendships.

Larry Crabb serves as another notable example of integrating psychology and theology. "His biblical counseling emphasizes the need to identify problem thinking and replace it with biblical thinking to deal with problem behavior and problem feelings."[95] Crabb's popular book *Inside Out,* first published in 1988, has been widely studied by Christians. In this book, Crabb highlights a foundational issue in cultivating spiritual friendships. He states, "We hate to be dependent because we have learned to trust no one, not fully. We know better. Everyone in whom we have placed our confidence has in some way disappointed us. To trust fully, we conclude, is suicide."[96] By incorporating psychological insights into the development of spiritual friendships, individuals gain a clearer understanding of their challenges and are better equipped to seek solutions.

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[94] Mark McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House, 2011), 146.

[95] Clinton and Hawkins, 826

[96] Larry Crabb, *Inside Out* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006), 17.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can be effectively integrated with biblical principles to transform individuals' maladaptive beliefs and align their lives with biblical teachings. As the Apostle Paul reminds Christians, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2, NIV). Chris Thurman, another Christian psychologist, helps people challenge irrational, unbiblical, and worldly beliefs in his book, *The Lies We Believe,* in which he lists 30 lies people believe. Thurman uses the Apostle Paul's paradox to challenge this thought. "In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul captured the paradox of it all when he said, 'For when I am weak, then I am strong.'"[97] Thurman emphasizes the importance of acknowledging weaknesses, flaws, and limitations, as it allows individuals to shift their focus away from themselves and recognize that God is working through humanity to accomplish great things. In his book, he provides a comprehensive twelve-week program designed to help readers reassess the lies they believe in comparison to biblical truth. As part of this research project, several of the lies identified by Thurman will be explored and discussed throughout the eight sessions, offering participants an opportunity to gain new insights and perspectives.

In Thurman's book, there is a "Growthwork" section at the end of each chapter to train readers to rethink the distorted thoughts they used to believe. He instructs his readers to use the A–B–C (Antecedent, Belief, and Consequence) model, to keep a record of the A-B-Cs they experience. First, readers write down the trigger events that happen ("A"), the lie or lies you tell yourself ("B"), and the unhealthy reactions that result ("C"). As his readers make each journal entry, they need to assess how big the trigger event ("A") was and how big their reaction ("C") was. Below is an example from his book:

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[97] Chris Thurman, *The Lies We Believe* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1994), chap. 6, eBook.

Table 1. Example of A-B-C model

"Antecedent" (Event)	"Belief" (Self-Talk)	"Consequence" (Response)
Waited for fifteen minutes in a long line, only to be told they were out of what I wanted.	Why don 't things ever go my way? I can't believe this! Life should be a lot easier than this! I shouldn't have to put up with this nonsense.	Muscles tensed; felt angry and resentful; let the guy at the counter "have it" and stormed out.

When recording their A-B-Cs, Thurman motivates his readers to understand that genuine transformation requires them to be vigilant about their self-talk and its influence on their daily responses.[98]

In addition to cognitive thinking exercises, this research project will incorporate mindfulness practice. During this spiritual exercise, individuals typically begin by focusing on a single object, being aware of their posture, and listening to calming music. Although mindfulness may not have been widely promoted in church settings, as indicated in FM 7-22, it holds benefits for developing spiritual readiness. Participants may feel disoriented initially, but with proper training, they will be able to practice mindfulness on their own. The essence of mindfulness lies not in organized thinking but in deepened sensory and cognitive awareness, which may pose a challenge to those accustomed to structured thinking. Therefore, individuals may need to consciously guide their minds toward embracing this mindfulness approach in the initial stages. Gradually cultivating a disciplined mindset and delving deeper into sensory perceptions and thoughts are key factors in yielding positive outcomes from mindfulness, as suggested by Richard Sears. In the early sessions, exercises may be shorter and more structured, but as the course progresses, individuals can comfortably engage in longer periods of silent practice with reduced need for detailed instruction.[99]

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[98] Thurman, chap. 1, eBook.

[99] Richard W. Sears, *Building Competence in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 60.

Conclusion

Fellowship serves as a force multiplier, helping personal development by establishing a spiritual support network. This network plays a crucial role in enhancing one's spiritual preparedness. Among its numerous advantages, fellowship fosters a profound sense of belonging and connection among its members, nurturing feelings of love and encouragement. Moreover, through mutual support and acceptance, individuals can experience spiritual growth, replacing negative and unproductive thoughts with healthier, more positive ones. Throughout these eight sessions, participants will receive a comprehensive curriculum that combines psychology and theology, focusing on cognitive abilities and incorporating spiritual exercises such as mindfulness.

Virtual communities provide relocated Christians a way to stay connected to their former churches, emphasizing spiritual well-being through support, interactions, and emotional growth, and ultimately fostering personalized coping mechanisms. The project primarily focuses on enriching discussions by incorporating supplementary biblical knowledge without requiring any pre-study. Each session will center around a topic with which participants have some familiarity. Through engaging discussions and exercises, participants will gain a deeper understanding of the chosen topic and strengthen their Christian faith, which can help address negative emotions. It is important to note that this research project does not aim to replace face-to-face gatherings with virtual communities, but rather acknowledges the necessity of an online platform due to geographic dispersion. The project serves as an experiment to explore the feasibility of meeting online and fostering spiritual readiness within a communal context. If the results of this experiment prove positive, indicating an improvement in participants' spiritual readiness,

organizations like BLC and the Army Reserve, which also face geographic dispersion

challenges, may greatly benefit from this innovative platform.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the researcher's design for the project. The main goal of this project is to enhance participants' spiritual connection to emotional well-being, while also fostering an enduring sense of community among them. In pursuit of this objective, this project draws upon concepts derived from cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) theories, the spirituality concept as embraced by the US Army, and teachings from the Bible. These guiding principles are considered when designing the details of each session in f this project. As the researcher is not a certified CBT counselor, the application of CBT principles in this project is approached from a non-professional standpoint. Additionally, while the sole facilitator in this project is a practicing pastor and chaplain, there is no explicit requirement for formal seminarian education or chaplain training to oversee the program designed within this project. Rather than focusing on imparting additional knowledge, participants' spiritual growth in the context of emotional health is nurtured through their discussions on the designated topics and the mutual support they provide to one another.

The program consists of eight online sessions for each group, with each session spanning one to one and a half hours per week. In addition to these sessions, each group members are actively encouraged to stay connected with one another through a WhatsApp chat group on their mobile devices in between the scheduled sessions. Participation in this project is entirely voluntary. The project is designed for individuals ages 21 to 55 who have previously collaborated with the researcher in ministry and are currently residing in various cities that are distant from Seattle. Aside from their prior connection with the researcher, participants will typically have limited existing relationships with one another, and some may not even be acquainted. The dynamics of the virtual fellowship are therefore predominantly shaped by the

facilitator, who takes on the responsibility of guiding and inspiring participants to engage actively in discussions during the sessions as well as in the chat group in between sessions.

The facilitator's core responsibility is to establish a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere, fostering respectful dialogues where each participant's voice is respected and heard. Encouraging personal reflection enables participants to deepen their connection with their spirituality and gain personal insights. Furthermore, the facilitator plays a crucial role in promoting a sense of community and support among participants throughout the virtual fellowship experience. It is called "cognitive connectedness." As Mary Chayko suggests, "Though people may be physically distant from one another, they can be very much cognitively present to one another."[100] It is important for the facilitator to encourage participants to connect and engage with each other outside of the scheduled sessions, utilizing the chat group as a platform for ongoing communication and connection. This creates an environment where participants can support and uplift one another on their spiritual journeys, which is the primary objective of this research project.

The quality of the discussions plays a pivotal role in the success of the virtual fellowship. These discussions primarily center on participants' personal experiences and their understanding of the relevant topics. To promote meaningful dialogues, scenarios are introduced in each session. These scenarios are based on real-life experiences but presented in a hypothetical context. Engaging in such discussions enables participants to actively learn from one another. This approach is particularly suitable for the target audience of 21 years or older, as they are likely to have some familiarity with the discussion topics based on their real-life experiences. The scenario-based discussions, along with the incorporation of self-reflection questions, are

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[100] Mary Chayko, *Portable Communities: The Social Dynamics of Online and Mobile Connectedness* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 37.

designed to encourage active participation from participants. This approach aligns with

assumptions about adult learning and creates a rewarding virtual fellowship experience. The

adult learning assumptions are listed below:

> 1. As a person matures, his or her self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality toward one of a self-directing human being.
> 2. An adult accumulates a growing reservoir of experience, which is a rich resource for learning.
> 3. The readiness of an adult to learn is closely related to the developmental tasks of his or her social role.
> 4. There is a change in time perspective as people mature—from the future application of knowledge to immediacy of application. Thus, an adult is more problem-centered than subject-centered in learning.
> 5. Adults are mostly driven by internal motivation rather than external motivators.
> 6. Adults need to know the reason for learning something.[101]

In this online program, the facilitator establishes an environment that caters to the

psychological needs of adult learners; namely, coping with negative emotions. Participants are

supposed to be ready and eager to actively participate in the learning process by collaborating

with the facilitator during sessions and participating in group chats. The researcher believes that

despite the constraints of online interactions, virtual fellowship has the potential to evolve into a

dynamic and meaningful space for participants to connect, acquire knowledge, and undergo

spiritual growth.

Intervention Design

The Overview of the Project

This research project consists of two phases. The initial phase involves recruiting eligible

candidates to participate in the project. The second phase is the program itself, which spans over

a period of eleven weeks. The program includes an introductory session in the first week,

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[101] Sharan B. Merriam, and Laura L. Bierema, *Adult Learning: Linking Theory and Practice* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 51.

followed by eight sessions in the following weeks, with one session per week. The final two weeks are set for collecting data and feedbacks from the participants.

The initial phase of this project is the recruitment phase, during which the researcher reaches out to former co-workers in ministry via emails and text messages. To participate, individuals must have prior experience as ministry workers but have discontinued their church service following their relocation. The email provides detailed information about the research's purpose, program content, and schedule. Attached to the email is an initial Spiritual Readiness Assessment (SRA) and a consent form. The consent form outlines the research's purpose and the reasons behind conducting it, explaining the procedures and activities that participants will engage in should they choose to take part in the study. Additionally, it highlights the potential benefits that participants might derive from their involvement in the research, as well as addresses any potential risks they might encounter while participating. If the candidate agrees to participate, they will provide their availability information to the researcher, along with the completed SRA and signed consent form. Upon receiving all responses, the researcher will organize the candidates into groups based on their locations, availability, and life status. Due to the researcher's time limitations, a maximum of three groups can be formed each week.

After the recruitment phase is the implementation phase, which is divided into three parts. Part 1 focuses on preparing participants for the eight-week online program. The first step involves assessing each participant's spiritual readiness level, which is done through the collection of the SRA survey and the consent form. Completing the SRA is essential to evaluate each individual's current understanding of their spiritual health before embarking on the eight-week program. Additionally, an introductory session is held where participants can introduce

themselves and address any questions or concerns they may have about the upcoming eight-week program.

Part 1 is designed to be completed within a week. Part 2 consists of an eight-week virtual fellowship, with one session held per week. Lastly, Part 3 focuses on the post-training assessment, which spans two weeks. Overall, this intervention is expected to be completed within an eleven-week timeframe.

Table 2. Schedule of research activity

Phase	Number of Weeks	Activities
Recruitment Phase	2 Weeks	• Distribution of invitation email • Candidates' response to the invitation • Candidates receive and return the consent form and initial SRA
Implementation Phase Part 1	1 Week	• Deadline for candidates to return their consent form and the SRA • Researcher reviews initial questionnaire data
Implementation Phase Part 2	8 Weeks	• Intervention: eight online sessions per group
Implementation Phase Part 3	2 Weeks	• Participants receive and complete the final Spiritual Readiness Assessment (SRA) • Interview with each participant • Researcher collects and analyzes the data

Part 2 of the implementation phase comprises the core program, which features eight sessions lasting one to one and a half hours each. The sessions will be conducted online via Zoom and are scheduled for Thursdays at 7:30 am PST, Fridays at 7:30 p.m. PST, and Sundays at 7:30 pm PST, corresponding to the three groups' availability. Each group may have a maximum of five members besides the facilitator. Randy Fujishin suggests that the ideal size of a

small group should be five to seven people.[102] In essence, the whole project can accommodate a

maximum of fifteen participants. While the sample size is small, it should not impede the

project's ability to yield valid findings. In fact, some proponents argue that smaller participant

numbers are advantageous in action research. "Sometimes, it is useful to have smaller breakout

groups in larger public spheres to ensure that many voices are heard."[103]

After the eight-week online program, participants will take the Spiritual Readiness

Assessment (SRA) again. Upon comparing the initial SRA with the final SRA, the researcher

will have the quantitative data to determine if the eight-week program can help participants grow

spiritually. The researcher will also have an interview with each participant, and the interview

questions are designed to explore their experiences related to the program. The interview will

take place via phone and will last for thirty minutes, with a focus on the provided guided

questions. The data collected from the pre-training survey, interviews, and post-training survey

will be analyzed to evaluate changes in participants' spiritual readiness and the development of

spiritual connections among them.

Two methods will be used to collect data on participants' spiritual readiness. As

mentioned before, each participant will complete the SRA twice. Taken during the recruitment

phase, the initial SRA consists of a Likert scale survey with 12 statements (Appendix B)

corresponding to the three core attributes: Pursuing Meaning, Purpose & Value (PMPV), Service

& Sacrifice for the Greater Good (SSGG), and Personal Connection to a Higher Power (PCHP).

Participants respond to each statement with a score, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10

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[102] Randy Fujishin, *Creating Effective Groups: The Art of Small Group Communication* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2013), 9.

[103] Stephen Kemmis, Robin McTaggart, and Rhonda Nixon, *The Action Research Planner: Doing Critical Participatory Action Research* (Singapore: Springer, 2014), 42.

(strongly agree). In Part 3 of the implementation phase, participants will complete the final SRA (Appendix C), which is the same as the one utilized during the recruitment phase.

The second method of data collection is an interview with each participant based on their experiences in the program. As this action research project involves a limited dataset, the final interview becomes a principal method for gathering qualitative data. Through these interviews, the researcher can obtain in-depth insight, diverse perspectives, and valuable personal experiences from participants who may not be fully represented in the quantitative data.[104] The interview questions can be found in Appendix D.

As mentioned before, the SRAs have three core attributes for evaluating participants' spiritual readiness. These three attributes form the basic criteria for evaluating the improvement of each participant's spiritual readiness. If over half of the participants have improved their spiritual readiness level in any one of these attributes, this research project will be considered a success in terms of individual spiritual readiness. Another mark of spiritual readiness set by this program is the spiritual friendship among participants. To evaluate this aspect, there will be an interview with each participant where each participant will be asked to reflect on the eight-week period and what changes took place in terms of their spiritual readiness and spiritual friendship with others. A verbal survey is conducted as part of the interview to assess how willing participants are to continue this fellowship on their own after the completion of the program, as well as how comfortable they feel sharing ideas in the fellowship. This interview will capture additional information such as how the program helps participants improve their spiritual readiness and what does not really help. If over half of the participants indicate their willingness to continue to meet and become more comfortable sharing their opinions, then this program

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[104] Irene S Rubin, and Herbert J. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012), 3.

successfully develops spiritual friendship among participants. The following is a table with the

twelve statements utilized in the SRA, along with their implications:

Table 3. 12 Statements in SRA and their implications

Statement	Implication
1. I know what my life is about.	This statement encourages introspection and self-reflection, urging individuals to ponder the significance and goals of their existence. It prompts them to evaluate their values, aspirations, and how they perceive their role in the world. The question challenges participants to assess whether they have a sense of purpose, a clear grasp of their passions, and a broader guiding principle that influences their choices and actions.
2. I can find meaning and purpose in my everyday experiences.	This statement explores participants' ability to derive significance and fulfillment from ordinary facets of life. This question prompts individuals to contemplate their outlook and mindset concerning the meaning they attribute to their everyday activities and interactions.
3. I can help people think positively when they are going through a difficult time.	This statement asks about participants' ability to provide support, encouragement, and guidance to others who are facing challenges or hardships. It suggests that the person asking recognizes the importance of maintaining a positive mindset and seeks assistance in fostering that positivity in others.
4. I've been able to prevent negative emotions from affecting my life.	This statement pertains to participants' capacity to effectively manage and regulate their emotions, thereby reducing the impact of negativity on their overall well-being and daily functioning. It indicates the ability to prevent negative emotions from significantly affecting one's life through development of emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and adaptive coping strategies that enable individuals to respond constructively and healthily to challenges.
5. Human value and respect should be the greatest social value.	This statement seeks participants' viewpoints on the foundational principles that should govern interactions and relationships within society. The question explores the importance they place on recognizing the intrinsic worth of individuals and treating others with dignity and respect. Regarding human value and respect as the greatest social value entails giving precedence to the well-being, rights, and dignity of every individual within a society.
6. Being of service to others is an important source of	This statement is about the value participants place on assisting and contributing to the well-being of others. It delves into their perception of the degree to which acts of service and making a positive impact on

meaning in my life.	others' lives bring them purpose, fulfillment, and a sense of meaning. Considering being of service to others as an important source of meaning indicates a value system that prioritizes selflessness, empathy, and a desire to improve the lives of others. It often reflects a belief in the interconnectedness of humanity and the belief that one's actions can have a positive influence on others and the world around them.
7. I feel God's love for me.	This statement is about participants' association with God and a profound connection to that spiritual entity. It indicates how the participant embraces the belief in God's providence and experiences a personal connection of being loved by the Divine. A high score means that the individual feels a deep and positive emotional bond with God, which may provide them with comfort, guidance, and a sense of purpose in their life.
8. I am grateful for all God has done for me.	When participants express gratitude for all that God has bestowed upon them, it signifies a profound sense of appreciation and recognition for the blessings, provisions, and positive experiences they attribute to the influence of God in their lives. It highlights their belief in the benevolence, guidance, and intervention of God.
9. Religious beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life.	The statement indicates that participants' religious beliefs have a profound influence on how they understand and navigate various aspects of life. It means their religious beliefs provide a moral foundation and ethical framework that guides their behavior, choices, and interactions with others. They see their faith as a source of guidance in determining what is right and wrong, offering them a sense of purpose, direction, and ultimate meaning in life. They also view their existence as part of a divine plan or seek to align their actions with religious teachings and principles.
10. I look to God for strength, support, and guidance.	This statement reveals participants' reliance on their faith and belief in God to provide them with inner resources, assistance, and direction in navigating life's challenges and decisions. A high score indicates that they perceive their relationship with God as a source of comfort, empowerment, and spiritual guidance. They turn to God as a wellspring of inner strength and resilience during difficult times. They have faith that their spiritual beliefs provide them with the emotional fortitude to confront challenges and triumph over adversity. They also depend on their belief in God for support and solace, trusting in God's presence and care during both joyful and difficult moments. They find solace in the knowledge that they are not alone, and that God is there to provide them with the support they need.
11. The relationship among my family	This statement pertains to the level of emotional connection, intimacy, and support within the participant's family unit. It explores the depth of

members is very close.	strong bonds, open communication, and mutual care perceived by the participants among their family members. A high score indicates a strong sense of emotional support, understanding, and empathy is evident within their family. They rely on one another during challenging times and share both joys and sorrows. Additionally, this closeness signifies the presence of mutual respect and trust among family members. They value each other's opinions, choices, and autonomy, creating an environment where everyone feels valued and safe to be themselves.
12. I live by a core set of beliefs, ethics, and values that give my life a sense of meaning and purpose.	This statement assesses whether participants possess a clear and guiding framework for their actions, choices, and overall approach to life. A high score indicates that they have identified a set of principles and convictions that deeply resonate with them and serve as a foundation for their sense of meaning and direction. It implies that they possess a strong sense of personal identity and integrity, aligning their actions and decisions with their deeply held beliefs and values. Their principles act as a compass for navigating various aspects of life. They view their actions as contributing to a larger purpose beyond themselves and aspire to make a positive impact in accordance with their convictions. .

Finally, if a participant chooses to withdraw from the project, they can contact the researcher at his email address or phone number listed in the consent form. Should a participant choose to withdraw after the first or second meeting, data collected from the participant will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. If a participant decides to drop out after the third meeting, the participant will be asked to take the SRA and the questionnaire as they would have done in Phase 3, and the data will still be used in this study. If the individual refuses to take the SRA again, data collected from the participant will be destroyed immediately and will not be used in this study.

Five Negative Emotions and Three Theological Virtues

This eight-week program is structured around five distinct emotions and three core theological virtues that hold central importance in Christian belief. Each of the eight sessions is

dedicated to exploring one of these emotions or virtues. These emotions encompass anger, shame, sadness, fear, and loneliness, while the theological virtues encompass faith, hope, and love. These specific topics have been carefully selected due to their relevance to spiritual preparedness, including the Pursuit of Meaning, Purpose, and Value (PMPV), Service and Sacrifice for the Greater Good (SSGG), and establishing a Personal Connection to a Higher Power (PCHP). Among the emotions discussed, anger, shame, and sadness are regarded as primary emotions.[105] The inclusion of shame and loneliness is particularly significant as shame holds prevalence within Chinese culture, and loneliness arises from disconnection from the community, which is precisely the problem this research project aims to address. Generally speaking, these five emotions tend to be considered negative, unpleasant or undesirable in nature. These feelings are commonly linked to distress, discomfort, or a general sense of unease, which will be elaborated on in subsequent discussions.

However, the researcher believes that these negative impacts can be addressed by changing one's perception through the reinforcement of the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. The three theological virtues have been linked to positive emotions, as suggested by William Mattison in his book, *Introducing Moral Theology, True Happiness and Virtues*. Mattison explains, "Emotional responses, and the actions toward which they prompt us, are intricately related and yet distinguishable. This point is crucial for developing good habits for our desires, or 'habituating' our emotional responses to become virtuous."[106] In his book, Mattison uses the term "virtuous emotions" to refer to positive emotions. In essence, positive emotional responses can be regulated through the practice of the theological virtues.

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[105] Turner, 3.

[106] William C. Mattison III, *Introducing Moral Theology, True Happiness and Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 85.

Anger has complex relationships with personal values and service to others. One feels angry when there is a perceived violation of personal values. When something or someone threatens or goes against what one holds dear, anger can be a natural response. [107] For example, if a person values honesty and someone lies to them, that person might feel angry. In this sense, anger can serve as a signal that the person's personal values have been compromised. Anger can be a negative emotion when it is not managed constructively. Uncontrolled or unresolved anger can hinder a person's ability to provide effective service to others. It can cloud the person's judgment, impair communication, and lead to impulsive or aggressive behavior. Since it is crucial to find healthy ways to express and manage anger to avoid it interfering with one's service-oriented efforts, this research starts with this emotion. Addressing the issue of anger in a positive manner is correlated with an improvement in the Pursuing Meaning, Purpose & Value (PMPV) score. In this project, participants are introduced to the concept of peace as described in the Bible as an antidote to the problem of anger.[108]

Shame has significant implications regarding personal values and service to others. Shame stems from a sense of inadequacy or unworthiness, where individuals feel that they have fallen short of their own expectations or the expectations of others.[109] This self-perceived failure can trigger shame and undermine one's personal values. Shame also erodes a person's self-worth and self-esteem, making it challenging to engage in service to others. Likewise, when individuals feel ashamed, they may believe they are undeserving of the assistance they could provide or fear that others will reject their efforts due to their perceived shortcomings. Shame frequently causes people to distance themselves or become isolated because they may dread judgment, rejection, or

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[107] Gary Chapman, *Anger: Taming a Powerful Emotion* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2015), chap. 1, eBook.

[108] David Eckman, *Becoming Who God Intended* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2005), 81.

[109] June Price Tangney, and Ronda L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2004), 18.

the exposure of their perceived flaws, fearing a loss of their self-worth. This emotion is the second topic of this research although it is usually not considered the primary emotion. To address shame, participants are encouraged to contemplate God's acceptance as a means of developing a sense of self-esteem.[110]

Sadness is an emotion that can sometimes lead people to question or doubt the existence of God. As Philip Yancey's popular book title suggests, "Where Is God When It Hurts?"[111] Sadness can also interfere with an individual's ability to function effectively in their daily life. It may lead to difficulties in concentration, reduced productivity, disrupted sleep patterns, and social withdrawal. In this project, addressing the issue of sadness is a way to enhance the sense of Personal Connection to a Higher Power (PCHP). While sadness is often considered a negative emotion, it can serve as a reminder of the fragility of human existence and the importance of making the most of each day. Effectively managing sadness can stem from a profound sense of empathy and compassion for the suffering or pain experienced by others. To address the issue of sadness, participants are encouraged to contemplate the emotion of joy as conveyed in the Bible and seek solace in the comfort of God.[112]

Fear is a complex and multifaceted emotion that can have both positive and negative aspects, depending on the context and how it is experienced or managed. Excessive fear and avoidance can limit personal growth, restrict opportunities, and hinder the pursuit of meaningful experiences.[113] Fear can also be considered as a protective mechanism, signaling that something or someone may be harmful. In terms of spirituality, fear is also a complex concept. On one

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[110]Kent Dunnington, *Humility, Pride, and Christian Virtue Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 42.

[111] Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 13.

[112] Eckman, 82.

[113] David H. Klemanski, and Joshua Curtiss, *Don't Let Your Anxiety Run Your Life: Using the Science of Emotion Regulation and Mindfulness to Overcome Fear and Worry* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 2016), 40.

hand, fear of God can instill a sense of reverence and awe, leading individuals to approach their faith with humility and respect. This fear acknowledges the Divine's immense power and majesty. Conversely, if a Christian primarily associates God with punishment and judgment, they may approach their faith with fear of divine retribution. This fear can create distance and hinder the development of a loving and trusting relationship with God. In the context of this project, the exploration of fear is directly linked to the development of Personal Connection to a Higher Power (PCHP). Participants are encouraged to contemplate how to hold a balanced reverence for God without slipping into excessive dread. They are guided to find equilibrium by drawing upon the teachings of love from the Bible and a sense of courage from God's presence. A pastor reminds his reader to lead their lives with courage, stating, "Individually and corporately as the body of Christ, we are facing and will face moments of opportunity to trust and partner with God and see Him move in incredible ways on our behalf."[114]

The final emotion that this program is designed to address is loneliness. Loneliness often emerges when individuals feel a lack of meaningful connection and belonging in their lives. "The roots of our human impulse for social connection run so deep that feeling isolated can undermine our ability to think clearly, an effect that has a certain poetic justice to it, given the role of social connection in shaping our intelligence."[115] Acknowledging one's experience of loneliness can actually enhance the individual's capacity for empathy and compassion towards others who may be going through similar feelings. When individuals have firsthand knowledge of the emotional pain and disconnection caused by loneliness, they may be more sensitive and understanding towards others who are experiencing it. This empathy can drive individuals to

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[114] Banning Liebscher, *The Three-Mile Walk: The Courage You Need to Live the Life God Wants for You* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), chap. 10, eBook.

[115] John T. Cacioppo, and William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: Norton, 2008), 11.

offer support, kindness, and service to those in need, fostering connection and alleviating loneliness in others. Addressing the issue of loneliness helps improve the sense of Service and Sacrifice for the Greater Good (SSGG). This project is designed to provide spiritual support to people after relocation. Participants will be introduced to the biblical concept of gratitude as an emotion and encouraged to cultivate a sense of appreciation for their communal life. Within the Bible, believers are frequently encouraged to express gratitude not only for one another, but also for the blessings they collectively experience as part of their community.

Faith, hope, and love are three theological virtues that play a significant role in fostering positive emotions and overall well-being in the context of Christian belief. Faith as a foundation for the theological virtues involves a deep trust and belief in God's existence and guidance. It provides a sense of security and purpose, helping individuals navigate life's challenges with confidence. When people have faith, they are more likely to experience positive emotions like peace, contentment, and joy even in the face of adversity.[116] Faith can provide a sense of meaning and hope, which contributes to emotional resilience. Hope is the confident expectation of positive outcomes, even in difficult circumstances. It can fuel optimism and resilience although hope itself does not guarantee emotional solace. "The fact that hope's consolation does not always bring emotional comfort provides a comfort of its own: namely, the belief that spiritual dryness is not proof of divine abandonment."[117] When individuals have hope, they are more likely to experience positive emotions such as happiness and optimism. Hope can be a source of motivation and the belief that better days are ahead, which can counteract feelings of despair and sadness. Love, often referred to as the greatest of virtues in Christian theology,

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[116] Julie Taylor, "The Effects of Faith on Personality Characteristics," accessed May 4, 2023, https://www.mckendree.edu/academics/scholars/issue1/taylor.htm.

[117] David Elliot, *Hope and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 154.

encompasses both love for God and love for others. Love cultivates positive emotions, including joy, gratitude, and compassion. David Eckman suggests that the opposite of fear is not only love, but "a mature love."[118] When individuals experience and express love, it brings them closer to God and strengthens their connection with others. The final three sessions of this project center on theological virtues with the aim of addressing individuals' maladaptive thought patterns that lead to negative emotions. In Mattison's discussion of his book on theological virtues and genuine happiness, he emphasizes that the book places its primary focus on virtues rather than mere external actions. This emphasis is due to the understanding that virtues, as habits with associated intentionality and desires, bring about transformative changes within a person.[119]

The primary objective of this research project is not to impart additional knowledge to the participants, as they are already well acquainted with negative emotions and theological virtues through their everyday experiences and Bible studies. Instead, the aim of this project is to assist them in acknowledging their negative emotions, comprehending the reasons behind these emotions, and cultivating effective techniques to regulate their emotions through discussions within a communal setting, using the adult learning model mentioned before.

Implementation of the Intervention Design

The eight sessions of this intervention are conducted via Zoom online meetings. Zoom is a video conferencing platform that enables users to host and participate in online meetings. Participants can join a meeting by clicking on the meeting link, which is provided in the chat group. Zoom offers features such as screen sharing, which allows the facilitator to present PowerPoint slides related to the session's topic. While participants are encouraged to turn on

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[118] Eckman, 84.

[119] Mattison, 206-207.

their cameras, it is not mandatory. The table below shows the breakdown of each Zoom meeting with duration information:

Table 4. Breakdown of a session

Duration	Activities
0:00 to 10:00	Opening prayer and definition discussion
10:00 to 20:00	Discussion of a related term or concept in comparison to the current topic
20:00 to 35:00	Discussion of either a scenario or a chosen biblical narrative
35:00 to 45:00	Reverse ABC framework exercise or mindfulness exercise
45:00 to 60:00	Reflection and discussion of biblical passages and closing prayer

At the beginning of each session, participants will start with a round-robin sharing activity where every participant will provide their own definition of the concept under discussion. This activity serves two purposes: to establish a comprehensive understanding of the term and to help participants break the ice and engage in conversation. Two days before the meeting, a text message will be sent to the chat group to serve as a reminder of the meeting time and topic. This will provide participants with ample time to contemplate and define the topic before the meeting. During the sharing activity, each participant will contribute an illustrative example to clarify their individual understanding of the concept. By using relatable or concrete examples, others will have a better grasp of the essence of the concept. The facilitator will collect and summarize these definitions, guiding participants in further comprehension of the subject.

Furthermore, there will be an examination of related concepts that can potentially lead to confusion. While active participation is encouraged, it is not mandatory for participants to express their understanding of the distinctions between these closely related yet distinct

concepts. To provide an example, during the discussion on anger, participants will delve into the nuances separating anger from hatred. Similarly, in session two, they will delve into the distinctions between shame and guilt. Session three will involve an examination of the differences between sadness and grief, while session four will concentrate on discerning the disparities between fear and worry. In session five, the focus will be on distinguishing between loneliness and solitude. Subsequently, session six will center on faith and certainty, while session seven will tackle the distinctions between hope and wish. Lastly, session eight will revolve around the differentiation of love and charity.

Once a solid understanding of the concept has been established, the session will progress to the examination of scenarios or biblical narratives for further discussion. The scenario discussions will primarily center on negative emotions. Each scenario will portray an individual grappling with a negative emotional state, prompting participants to engage in a dialogue regarding the underlying causes of these emotions. Additionally, participants will collectively explore alternative approaches and perspectives through which the individual in the scenario could potentially alleviate their negative emotions. These scenarios will be visually presented on the shared screen by the researcher, with the detailed content of each scenario available in Appendix A for reference.

The use of scenarios in the project involves crafting contexts closely resembling real-life situations while focusing on five negative emotions. During the initial session, the scenario will revolve around a father's anger towards his daughter due to her poor academic performance, leading to a strained relationship and demotivation on her part. In the subsequent session, the scenario centers on a college student experiencing shame in light of their grades compared to peers. The third session depicts a person grappling with sadness stemming from a personal

tragedy, which causes a crisis of faith in God. Session four delves into the fear of driving after a serious traffic accident, while the final session presents a scenario where an individual struggles to connect with a church, highlighting issues of loneliness. Each participant will be prompted to analyze the underlying causes of the negative emotion portrayed in the scenario and suggest potential strategies to alter their cognitive thought process, thereby mitigating the occurrence of those negative emotions.

During the final three sessions centered on the theological virtues, biblical narratives are employed as illustrative case studies for the discussions. The account of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis chapter 22 will serve as a platform for exploring the concept of faith. Participants may engage in discussions centered around the question of how individuals can maintain their faith in God when confronted with real-life adversity and challenges. The narrative of Joseph's reunion with his eleven brothers in the closing chapter of Genesis will be used to delve into the theme of hope, emphasizing God's ability to rectify challenging situations. This narrative emphasizes God's capacity to bring about resolution in challenging circumstances. During the discussion, participants will examine Joseph's belief in God's power to transform adversity into something positive, as well as engage in discussions regarding how they can cultivate a similar sense of hope when confronted with unfavorable events, whether they involve virtuous individuals, themselves, or others. Finally, the story of the Prodigal Son from the Gospel of Luke chapter 15 is utilized as a scenario to explore the profound nature of God's love.

After discussing the scenarios, each participant will practice a cognitive thinking exercise which reverses the direction of the original A–B–C (Antecedent, Belief, and Consequence) framework as mentioned in the previous chapter. The modification is illustrated in the diagram below:

Step 3: Antecedent (Event)

Step 1: Consequence

(Emotional Response)

Step 2: Belief (Self-Talk)
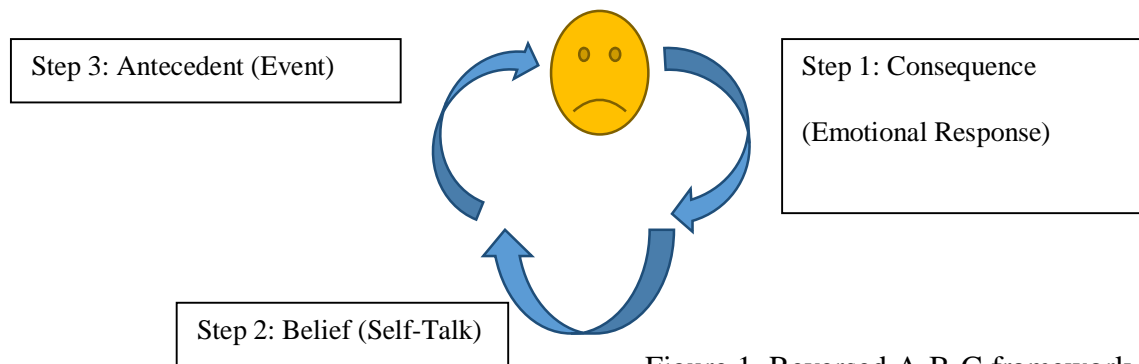
Figure 1. Reversed A-B-C framework at work.

As shown above, the original A-B-C framework is modified by focusing on emotions. Instead of starting with the antecedent, participants reflect on the specific moment when they experienced the emotion under discussion and then delve into the belief and event that acted as a trigger for that emotion. By engaging in this exercise, individuals cultivate self-awareness regarding the perceptions that influence their emotions. Each iteration of the exercise lasts two to three minutes, and following it, participants are encouraged to openly share the beliefs and event that led to their emotional experience. Following the sharing of a participant, others would respond if they have had similar experiences. There is one guiding rule when a participant responds to another's sharing, no judgmental comment is allowed.

For the last three sessions in which the theological virtues are discussed, participants do not practice the reverse A-B-C framework exercise. Instead, they practice a mindfulness exercise similar to the loving-kindness meditation. Participants are encouraged to watch a freely-available instructional video one day before the session. This video provides comprehensive guidance and is offered by the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley.[120] However, in the loving-kindness meditation, individuals focus on generating and directing positive intentions and well-wishes towards loved ones. In this research project, participants

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[120] "Loving-Kindness Meditation," accessed on June 19, 2022, https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/loving_kindness_meditation.

center their meditation on God as the primary object of their contemplation. They are instructed to assume a comfortable position, take deep breaths to calm their minds, and reflect upon God, who has bestowed kindness and support in their lives. Through their imaginative faculties, participants are encouraged to envision Jesus seated before them, radiating a warm smile and a sincere desire for their well-being and happiness. Additional details can be found in Appendix A. The second part of the practice involves shifting focus to a person, vividly imagining them right in front of the participant, and sincerely wishing them the same happiness and support. The practice guidance suggests, "And without too many stories, or thoughts, or ideas—just call upon this experience of wishing this person to be truly happy, fulfilled, joyful."[121] Throughout the practice, the participant pays attention to the sensations in their body associated with generating well-wishes and extending joy to others. After the second, the facilitator concludes the practice with three long inhales and three long exhales.

Each session concludes with a reflection on a biblical passage, addressing negative emotions or reinforcing theological virtues. The passages are carefully selected to either directly tackle the negative emotions in the session or to reinforce the theological virtues that can inspire positive emotions and attitudes. The passage will also be posted in the chat group a day after the session. In this research proposal, the researcher suggests that it is possible to alleviate negative emotions by replacing them with positive emotions through a shift in perception. One way to achieve it is to reflect on biblical passages which can bring perceptual changes. To sustain this change, the final three sessions are designed to reinforce positive thinking through an exploration of biblical teachings on faith, hope, and love. The facilitator initiates this segment by reading the chosen passage slowly and attentively. This approach allows participants to fully absorb the

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[121] "Loving-Kindness Meditation."

words and contemplate their meaning. Subsequently, participants are prompted to respond to a

question, which encourages them to consider how they can apply the message of the passage to

their own lives. The following table presents the biblical passage that corresponds to the

conclusion of each session:

Table 5. In-session biblical reflection

Session	Biblical Passage and Discussion Point
1	**Philippians 4:6-7 (NIV)**: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." This passage encourages believers to turn to prayer and gratitude when facing anxiety or challenges. It promises that the peace of God, which surpasses human understanding, will protect their hearts and minds through their faith in Christ Jesus. Participants will be asked where they find peace in their lives.
2	**Psalm 139:13-14 (NIV):** "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well." This passage acknowledges the idea that each individual is fearfully and wonderfully made by God. It emphasizes the uniqueness and value of each person's creation, which can be seen as promoting a sense of self-worth and appreciation for one's intrinsic value in the eyes of the Creator. Participants will be invited to identify one talent that they believe God has bestowed upon them.
3	**Psalm 104:14-15 (NIV):** "He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains their hearts." This passage celebrates God's providence in providing for both physical and spiritual needs. It mentions wine that gladdens human hearts, which can be seen as a symbol of joy derived from God's provisions. It emphasizes how God's provision brings joy and sustenance to human lives. Participants will be asked to reflect upon God's providence in their lives.
4	**Psalm 27:1 (NIV):** "The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?"

	This verse highlights the Lord's role as a source of light, salvation, and strength. It emphasizes that with God as one's stronghold, there is no need to fear or be afraid. The presence of the Lord is depicted as a powerful force that inspires courage and dispels fear. Participants will be invited to engage in reflection on moments when they have experienced God's assistance in overcoming challenges.
5	**Ephesians 5:19-20 (NIV):** "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." In this passage, believers are encouraged to engage in communal worship by speaking to one another with spiritual songs and hymns. This passage emphasizes the practice of gratitude as an integral part of worship within a faith community. Participants will be asked to reflect upon the joyful moments when they served with other fellow Christians.
6	**Hebrews 11:1 (NIV):** "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." This verse provides a concise definition of faith, describing it as the confidence in things hoped for and the assurance of things not seen. It emphasizes the aspect of trust and belief in the unseen, which is a fundamental aspect of faith in Christian theology. Participants will be asked to share their personal experiences of receiving a surprise gift and the excitement associated with such moments.
7	**Romans 5:5 (NIV):** "And hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." This verse from the book of Romans highlights that hope rooted in God's love does not disappoint or put believers to shame. It connects hope with the pouring out of God's love into the hearts of believers through the Holy Spirit. It underscores the idea that hope is intimately linked with God's love and presence. Participants will be asked to share their personal experiences of situations where initially low expectations or negative circumstances turned out to be positive or good outcomes.
8	**1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NIV):** "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

	This passage from the First Epistle to the Corinthians, often referred to as the "Love Chapter," provides a profound description of love in the Christian context. Participants will be encouraged to share their personal experiences of feeling loved according to the passage.

Between each session, participants will be encouraged to keep in touch with each other through messaging in a chat group, including posting personal updates, prayer requests, devotional readings and any form of encouragement. This will be done through WhatsApp chat groups. WhatsApp is a popular messaging application available on smartphones (iOS and Android) and other platforms. It supports text messages, voice and video calls, media sharing, and group chats. Each research group will have its own dedicated chat group where the researcher will share devotional messages and post discussion questions every two or three days. Participants are encouraged to actively engage in the conversations and respond to the discussion questions within the chat group. Although the conversations in the chat group vary, each group receives the same devotionals from the Bible for the week. There are at least two devotional messages per week. The devotional messages are listed in the table below:

Table 6. Biblical reflection between sessions

Sessions	Topic	Biblical Passages
1	Anger vs Peace from forgiveness	Ephesians 4:31-32 (NIV): "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." These verses urge believers to let go of negative emotions and attitudes and instead practice forgiveness, modeling Christ's forgiveness towards humanity. They remind participants to be kind and compassionate towards others, releasing them from their grievances. Colossians 3:13 (NIV): "Bear with each other and forgive one

		another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." This verse encourages believers to bear with one another and forgive, just as God forgave all people through Christ. It reminds participants the call to extend forgiveness, recognizing that they have been forgiven themselves.
2	Shame vs Self-Esteem from God's Acceptance	Ephesians 2:10 (NIV): "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Thise verse reminds participants that they are God's handiwork, created with purpose and intention. They are designed to carry out good works in alignment with God's plan. 1 Peter 2:9 (NIV): "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." This verse reminds participants of their acceptance by God and their identity as His special possession.
3	Sadness vs Joy from God's Providence	Nehemiah 8:10b (NIV): "Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." This passage encourages participants not to be weighed down by sorrow or despair. Instead, the joy of the Lord is their source of strength, enabling them to overcome challenges. 1 Peter 1:8-9 (NIV): "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls." These verses speak of the joy that believers experience as they trust in Jesus Christ, even though they have not seen Him. It reminds participants of the profound joy that comes from the assurance of salvation through faith.
4	Fear vs Courage from God's Presence	Joshua 1:9: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

		This verse reminds participants that courage comes from the assurance of God's presence and promises. Isaiah 41:10: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." This verse reminds participants that God's presence and support provide the strength and courage needed to overcome fear and face challenges.
5	Loneliness vs. Gratitude from Faith Community	Acts 2:42 (NIV): "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." This verse describes the early believers in the book of Acts, highlighting their commitment to fellowship as they gathered together, shared meals, and prayed. It reminds participants the central role of fellowship in the early Christian community. Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV): "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." These verses encourage believers to actively engage in fellowship and to gather together regularly. They stress the importance of spurring one another towards love, good deeds, and mutual encouragement.
6	Faith	Matthew 17:20 (NIV): "Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." Jesus speaks of the power of even a small amount of faith. This passage encourages believers to trust in God and His ability to work miracles in their lives. Romans 10:17 (NIV): "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ." This verse highlights the role of hearing and understanding

		the message of Christ as the foundation of faith. It suggests that through hearing and studying God's Word, people's faith can grow and be strengthened.
7	Hope	Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV): "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" This verse assures participants that God has good plans for their lives, filled with hope and a promising future. Romans 15:13 (NIV): "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." This verse reminds participants that God, who is the source of hope, can fill them with joy, peace, and an abundance of hope when they place their trust in Him.
8	Love	1 John 4:7-8 (NIV): "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God because God is love." These verses emphasize the connection between God and love. They encourage participants to love one another because love originates from God and reveals their relationship with Him. Romans 8:38-39 (NIV): "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." These verses affirm the unfailing nature of God's love. They assure participants that no circumstance or power can separate them from the love of God, providing comfort and reassurance.

This research project emphasizes learning through direct experiences and active engagement. Discussions play a significant role in facilitating the learning process by providing opportunities for reflection, analysis, and application of knowledge gained from the experience.

This approach is called experiential learning or experience-based learning, in which "the experience of the learner occupies a central place in all considerations of teaching and learning."[122] In discussions, participants can brainstorm ideas, develop action plans, and explore potential solutions or strategies based on the insights gained from the experience. They can share different perspectives, challenge assumptions, and collaborate on generating innovative approaches.

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[122] Cecilia Ka Yuk Chan, A*ssessment for Experiential Learning* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 2.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Participation Assessment

The research initiative consisted of three distinct online groups, each convening on different days and times throughout the week. Group 1 assembled on Thursdays at 7:30 a.m. PST, while Group 2 gathered on Sundays at 7:00 p.m. PST, and Group 3 held their sessions on Fridays at 7:30 p.m. PST. In total, there were 13 participants, out of which only two participated in all eight sessions. Meeting online for small group ministry offers several advantages. First and foremost, it provides greater flexibility in scheduling, enabling participants to connect from various locations without the need for physical travel. All members of Group 1 reside in Hong Kong, whereas those of Group 2 and Group 3 are spread across different cities in the state of Washington. Several instances arose where online meetings needed to be rescheduled, resulting in Group 1 and Group 2 extending their engagement to nine weeks to complete the stipulated eight sessions. In contrast, Group 3 successfully adhered to the original schedule, completing all sessions as planned. The outcomes of this eight-week program partially align with the research project's expectations. Most participants did not manage to attend all eight sessions or actively participate in the inter-session group discussions. Despite the virtual nature of the meetings and associated group chats, the full development of a sense of community remained somewhat elusive. Nevertheless, participants universally acknowledged the meetings' value in fostering self-awareness, encompassing both spiritual and emotional well-being.

Participation levels within the groups exhibit variation, and the tables below depict the attendance for each group.

Table 7.1. Group 1 attendance list (Hong Kong)

Group (G) 1: Participant (P)	Session 1 - Anger	Session 2 - Shame	Session 3 - Sadness	Session 4 - Fear	Session 5 - Loneliness	Session 6 - Faith	Session 7- Hope	Session 8 - Love	Total
G1-P-A	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	7
G1-P-B	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
G1-P-C	X	X	X			X	X	X	6
G1-P-D	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	7

Table 7.2. Group 2 attendance list (different cities in the state of Washington)

Group (G) 2: Participant (P)	Session 1 - Anger	Session 2 - Shame	Session 3 - Sadness	Session 4 - Fear	Session 5 - Loneliness	Session 6 - Faith	Session 7 - Hope	Session 8 - Love	Total
G2-P-A	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	7
G2-P-B	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	7
G2-P-C	X	X			X			X	4
G2-P-D	X		X					X	3
G2-P-E		X	X	X			X		4

Table 7.3. Group 3 attendance list (different cities in the state of Washington)

Group (G) 3: Participant (P)	Session 1 - Anger	Session 2 - Shame	Session 3 - Sadness	Session 4 - Fear	Session 5 - Loneliness	Session 6 - Faith	Session 7 - Hope	Session 8 - Love	Total
G3-P-A	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
G3-P-B	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	7
G3-P-C	X	X	X			X	X	X	6
G3-P-D	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	7

Upon closer examination of the three groups, a significant difference in attendance becomes apparent, particularly in the case of Group 2 when compared to the other two groups. What sets Group 2 apart is that four out of its five participants are parents, with the two individuals who frequently missed the meetings having children below the age of four. This explains why the researcher included a larger number of participants in Group 2, anticipating that low attendance might be a challenge. Conversely, the members of Groups 1 and 3 are either single or married without children. In the final interviews conducted for the research project, the two participants from Group 2 highlighted that childcare responsibilities served as the primary hindrance to their meeting participation. This disparity underscores the impact of demographic factors on each member's engagement. Presented below is a summary of the basic demographic details for each participant.

Table 8. Basic demographic information of each participant

		Basic Demographic Information			
	Age	Education Level	Number of Children Below the Age of 4	Marital Status	Number of Years as a Christian
G1-P-A	52	Master's Degree	0	Married	32
G1-P-B	32	Bachelor's Degree	0	Single	13
G1-P-C	34	Bachelor's Degree	0	Single	21
G1-P-D	22	Bachelor's Degree	0	Single	7
G2-P-A	55	Doctorate	0	Married	37
G2-P-B	52	Master's Degree	0	Married	35
G2-P-C	41	Master's Degree	2	Married	13
G2-P-D	43	Doctorate	0	Married	27
G2-P-E	45	Master's Degree	1	Married	31
G3-P-A	23	Bachelor's Degree	0	Single	5
G3-P-B	28	Bachelor's Degree	0	Single	7
G3-P-C	23	Bachelor's Degree	0	Single	2
G3-P-D	22	Bachelor's Degree	0	Single	2

While childcare certainly stands out as a significant factor hindering participants' active engagement in meetings, it is imperative to acknowledge that it is not the sole influential factor. The table above indicates that participants without children did not attend all meetings either. In the final interviews, each participant highlighted potential factors that could hinder their participation in meetings. Throughout the final interviews with all participants, the researcher observed recurrent reasons for their absence. Below is a table that compiles all the reasons participants provided for their non-attendance:

Table 9. Reasons for non-attendance

	Health Issues	Family Responsibilities	Work Obligations	Scheduling Conflicts[123]	Personal Priorities[124]
G1-P-A					Yes
G1-P-B					
G1-P-C	Yes		Yes		
G1-P-D			Yes		
G2-P-A				Yes	
G2-P-B				Yes	
G2-P-C		Yes			
G2-P-D			Yes	Yes	
G2-P-E		Yes			Yes
G3-P-A					
G3-P-B			Yes		
G3-P-C					Yes
G3-P-D					Yes

Participant G2-P-D serves as a notable example of placing personal and work commitments ahead of online meetings. Throughout the program's duration, he only participated in the online meetings on three occasions. His absence patterns consistently revolved around the same factors, citing "Work Obligations" and "Scheduling Conflicts" as primary causes. In fact, he often attributed his skipped meetings to work-related commitments. Despite his genuine interest in the group's discussions, Participant G2-P-D opted to maintain his initial decision and

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[123]The idea of "Scheduling Conflicts" means overlapping commitments and busy schedules can make it difficult for individuals to attend meetings regularly.

[124] The idea of "Personal Priorities" means personal projects, priorities, or urgent tasks may take precedence over regular meeting attendance.

attend a social event instead, a situation that had been communicated to the researcher beforehand. During the final interview, Participant G2-P-D expressed regret for his frequent absences from the online meetings. Nonetheless, he stressed that the social event presented him with invaluable networking opportunities and amplified exposure for his research and the potential for collaboration with experts in his field. He emphasized that these benefits outweighed the value he placed on the online meeting participation. Participants G2-P-C and G2-P-E serve as examples illustrating that "Family Responsibilities" overwhelmingly influence non-attendance. Both participants conveyed that their young children consumed all of their personal time, to the extent that they had to forego attending Sunday worship services, let alone participating in the online small group meetings. In light of this analysis, the researcher concluded that, in general, participation in online communities such as this project offers benefits for relationship-building and mutual learning. However, an individual's life status plays a pivotal role in determining their likelihood of engaging in such a community.

During the eight or nine weeks of the program, participants were expected to immerse themselves in discussions revolving around eight distinct topics. These discussions took place both within online meetings and a specially designated WhatsApp group chat. The purpose of utilizing the WhatsApp chat group was to reinforce participants' comprehension of the discussed topic from the online meeting through continued engagement and discussion. Within this group chat setting, participants were encouraged to share personal updates potentially connected to the aforementioned topics, actively engage with fellow participants' posts, and contribute their reflections on biblical quotations posted by the researcher.

In the first week, the theme revolved around the concept of anger. The following table provides an organized representation of the response count from each participant across the three

designated categories, outlined in three columns: Posting Personal Updates, Responding to

Others' Updates, and Responding to the Biblical Quotations as detailed in Chapter Three. This

identical table format will be consistently employed to depict the response counts for each

subsequent week.

Table 10.1. Participation in the chat group during week one

	Week 1 - Anger			
	Posting Personal Updates	Responding to Others' Updates	Responding to the Biblical Quotations	Total Number of Posts
G1-P-A	1	1	3	5
G1-P-B	1	2	4	7
G1-P-C	1	1	0	2
G1-P-D	0	0	1	1
G2-P-A	1	1	3	5
G2-P-B	1	2	2	5
G2-P-C	0	0	1	1
G2-P-D	0	0	0	0
G2-P-E	0	0	0	0
G3-P-A	0	0	2	2
G3-P-B	0	0	1	1
G3-P-C	0	0	0	0
G3-P-D	0	0	0	0

In the initial week, although participants had some familiarity with their group peers, a

discernible hesitancy was apparent when it came to engaging within the WhatsApp chat group.

This reservation was especially evident in Group 3, where none of the members shared personal

updates about moments during the week when they experienced anger, despite the researcher's

prompt to do so. In contrast, members of Group 1 displayed relatively higher involvement in the

group chat interactions. Notably, two members of Group 1 engaged in multiple dialogues when

responding to the biblical reflections.

During the second week, the focus was on the topic of shame. The table provided below illustrates the count of responses from each participant pertaining to the three previously mentioned areas:

Table 10.2. Participation in the chat group during week two

Week 2 - Shame			
	Posting Personal Updates	Responding to Others' Updates	Responding to the Biblical Quotations	Total Number of Posts
G1-P-A	1	2	4	7
G1-P-B	1	2	5	8
G1-P-C	0	1	1	2
G1-P-D	0	0	1	1
G2-P-A	0	0	2	2
G2-P-B	0	0	3	3
G2-P-C	0	0	1	1
G2-P-D	0	0	0	0
G2-P-E	0	0	0	0
G3-P-A	0	0	3	3
G3-P-B	0	0	1	1
G3-P-C	0	0	0	0
G3-P-D	0	0	1	1

During the second week, participants were tasked with sharing their personal experiences when they felt the emotions of anger and shame during that week. Surprisingly, only two out of the total thirteen participants chose to share their updates, and interestingly, their shared experiences did not revolve around the emotion of shame. This reticence towards discussing shame could indicate either a lack of familiarity with this negative emotion or a reluctance to expose their personal experiences of shame within a group setting.

This silence on the topic of shame might have been somewhat expected by the researcher, considering the tense discussions that had taken place during the online meeting sessions across all three groups. These discussions centered on distinguishing between shame and guilt, as well

as debating whether shame should be categorized as a negative emotion. Within this context, certain participants viewed shame as a motivational force. Although each group eventually arrived at their respective definitions of shame, some members still expressed confusion about the distinctions between guilt and shame.

Given the absence of a comprehensive grasp of the concept of shame, the silence exhibited by some participants did not come as a surprise to the researcher. This lack of clarity regarding shame likely contributed to their hesitancy in sharing their personal experiences related to this particular emotion.

In the third week, the focus shifted to the theme of sadness. The table presented below illustrates the count of responses from each participant:

Table 10.3. Participation in the chat group during week three

Week 3 - Sadness			
	Posting Personal Updates	Responding to Others' Updates	Responding to the Biblical Quotations	Total Number of Posts
G1-P-A	0	3	2	5
G1-P-B	1	2	4	7
G1-P-C	1	0	0	1
G1-P-D	0	1	0	1
G2-P-A	1	1	1	3
G2-P-B	2	3	1	6
G2-P-C	0	1	1	2
G2-P-D	1	1	1	3
G2-P-E	1	1	1	3
G3-P-A	1	2	1	4
G3-P-B	1	1	1	3
G3-P-C	1	1	1	3
G3-P-D	1	2	1	4

Week three exhibited a distinct shift in the volume of responses. During this period, each participant either shared personal updates related to moments of sadness in their lives or offered

solace to those who had shared such experiences. This change was partially prompted by the researcher's active encouragement of participants who had been less forthcoming in sharing since the program's commencement. Furthermore, the researcher adjusted the criteria, expanding it from experiences limited to the week to encompass a broader range of past encounters. This modification notably encouraged participants to contemplate their encounters with sadness on a more expansive scale.

The broadening of criteria undeniably played a role in spurring participants to consider their own experiences of sorrow. In conjunction with the intentional efforts to elicit responses, discussing experiences of sadness was less likely to evoke feelings of embarrassment. Indeed, the topic was particularly relevant within Group 3. One member of the group shared her poignant experience of witnessing her grandmother's suffering due to illness. Her candid and vulnerable sharing had a ripple effect, inspiring other group members to open up, share their own experiences, and respond empathetically.

During the fourth week, the theme centered around the concept of fear. The subsequent table provides an overview of the response count from each participant:

Table 10.4. Participation in the chat group during week four

	Week 4 – Fear			
	Posting Personal Updates	Responding to Others' Updates	Responding to the Biblical Quotations	Total Number of Posts
G1-P-A	1	2	3	6
G1-P-B	0	1	2	3
G1-P-C	1	1	1	3
G1-P-D	1	1	1	3
G2-P-A	1	1	1	3
G2-P-B	0	1	1	2
G2-P-C	0	0	0	0
G2-P-D	0	0	0	0
G2-P-E	0	0	0	0

G3-P-A	1	0	1	2
G3-P-B	0	1	1	2
G3-P-C	0	0	1	1
G3-P-D	0	0	1	1

Following the surge of responses observed in week three, a noteworthy decline in the

overall number of responses is noticeable, except in the case of Group 1 in week four. Distinct

differences distinguish Group 1 from the other two groups. Firstly, Group 1's members reside in

Hong Kong, a city marked by a politically charged atmosphere and instances of persecution that

triggered a significant wave of mass emigration after the 2019 riots.[125] The emotions of the

populace remain in tumult, and this research program evidently caters to their quest for coping

mechanisms and offers a platform to express their negative emotions.

Another noteworthy disparity lies in the diversity within Group 1. In contrast to Groups 2

and 3, which exhibited relative homogeneity in terms of age or marital status, Group 1 exhibited

remarkable diversity. This group spanned a considerable age range, with a 30-year gap between

the oldest and youngest members. Additionally, while four members were single, one was

married. This diversity undoubtedly served as a catalyst for fostering more extensive and varied

conversations among Group 1 participants.

In the fifth week, the focus shifted to the topic of loneliness. The table presented below

offers a breakdown of the response count attributed to each participant.

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[125] Monica Pitrelli, "Thousands Of People Are Leaving Hong Kong — And Now It's Clear Where They're Going," accessed July 25, 2023 https://www.cnbc.com/2022/05/27/people-are-leaving-hong-kong-and-here-is-where-they-are-going.html.

Table 10.5. Participation in the chat group during week five

	Posting Personal Updates	Responding to Others' Updates	Responding to the Biblical Quotations	Total Number of Posts
Week 5 – Loneliness				
G1-P-A	0	2	2	2
G1-P-B	1	1	1	3
G1-P-C	0	0	1	1
G1-P-D	1	1	1	3
G2-P-A	1	1	0	2
G2-P-B	1	0	1	2
G2-P-C	0	0	2	2
G2-P-D	0	0	0	0
G2-P-E	0	0	0	0
G3-P-A	0	1	1	2
G3-P-B	1	0	1	2
G3-P-C	0	1	1	2
G3-P-D	0	0	1	1

Week Five marks the concluding session on negative emotions. In contrast to prior

discussions, participants did not prominently identify loneliness as a prevailing negative emotion

significantly influencing their lives. This perspective becomes apparent through the

comparatively reduced response rate observed during this specific week. However, this

observation does not imply that instances of loneliness were entirely absent. The researcher

endeavored to elicit further engagement by posing a question to each group, inquiring if they had

someone in whom they could confide their secrets. Surprisingly, no responses were received.

This silence potentially indicates a lack of such a confidant among the participants. During the

final interviews conducted as part of the research project, the same question was posed to each

individual. A common response emerged, reflecting that the availability of someone to confide in

depends on the nature and impact of the secret. Also, participants candidly admitted that they

possess secrets that they are unable to share with anyone. The absence of a confidant with whom they can share their secrets might be indicative of their loneliness.

The onset of the sixth week introduced a fresh series centered around theological virtues, commencing with the exploration of faith. The table below shows the number of each participant's responses.

Table 10.6. Participation in the chat group during week six

Week 6 – Faith			
	Posting Personal Updates	Responding to Others' Updates	Responding to the Biblical Quotations	Total Number of Posts
G1-P-A	1	2	2	5
G1-P-B	1	1	3	5
G1-P-C	1	0	1	2
G1-P-D	0	0	0	0
G2-P-A	1	1	1	3
G2-P-B	1	1	3	5
G2-P-C	0	0	1	0
G2-P-D	0	0	0	0
G2-P-E	0	1	0	0
G3-P-A	1	1	1	3
G3-P-B	1	2	2	5
G3-P-C	1	1	1	3
G3-P-D	1	1	1	3

Similar to the week dedicated to exploring sadness, Group 3 exhibited increased activity within the chat group discussions surrounding the theme of faith. While it may not be categorized as highly active participation, their evident willingness to engage in this topic underscores its significance within the chat group's dynamics. The distinguishing characteristic of Group 3 was its predominantly young age range, spanning from 22 to 28. This demographic inclination towards youth is accompanied by a heightened interest in engaging in intellectual conversations concerning faith, rather than solely focusing on discussions revolving around

negative emotions. During the program's design phase, a member of Group 3 approached the researcher with a suggestion. This participant recommended a reduction in the emphasis on negative emotion topics and a greater focus on fundamental Christian teachings, a subject that held greater personal interest for him and his age group. The noticeable uptick in response numbers during that particular week appears to lend support to his proposal.

The seventh week was about hope. The table below shows the number of each participant's responses:

Table 10.7. Participation in the chat group during week seven

	Posting Personal Updates	Responding to Others' Updates	Responding to the Biblical Quotations	Total Number of Posts
		Week 7 - Hope		
G1-P-A	1	0	2	3
G1-P-B	1	0	1	2
G1-P-C	0	0	1	1
G1-P-D	0	1	0	1
G2-P-A	1	1	2	4
G2-P-B	1	2	2	5
G2-P-C	0	0	1	1
G2-P-D	0	0	0	0
G2-P-E	0	0	0	0
G3-P-A	1	1	1	3
G3-P-B	1	0	1	2
G3-P-C	0	0	0	0
G3-P-D	0	0	0	0

Throughout the online meetings of this particular week, a prevailing sense of confusion emerged concerning the concept of God's providence in individuals' lives. Among the group members, a subset voiced their perception that God's providence was not evident in their lives; they attributed their successes exclusively to their own endeavors. Additionally, some shared their sentiment that despite their prayers, they did not perceive divine assistance in resolving

their challenges. Undoubtedly, the theme of a hopeful God proved to be a challenging subject, especially for those who had been influenced by the philosophies of self-help.

Their hesitancy to actively engage in the group chat during that week might indicate the persistence of their confusion. In contrast to the previous week, which revolved around discussions of faith where participants openly shared the religious experiences and convictions that led them to embrace the Christian faith, the subject of hope appeared unfamiliar and distant.

In each online session throughout that week, the researcher introduced his definition of Christian hope: "Christian hope embodies the assurance of God's promises that will ultimately be realized within the lives of believers." He then invited participants to discuss the acceptability of this definition. Additionally, the group chat served as a platform for participants to delve into reflection on God's promises as conveyed in the Bible. However, this approach did not appear to effectively facilitate participants' grasp of the concept of Christian hope, subsequently resulting in a lower level of engagement in the group chat discussions. As expressed by a member during the final interview, the topic of hope necessitated a more in-depth exploration, along with a presentation of concrete examples of God's providence, rather than being centered solely on abstract ideas.

The eighth week was about God's love. The table below shows the number of each participant's responses.

Table 10.8. Participation in the chat group during week eight

Week 8 – Love			
	Posting Personal Updates	Responding to Others' Updates	Responding to the Biblical Quotations	Total Number of Posts
G1-P-A	1	1	3	5
G1-P-B	0	2	1	3
G1-P-C	1	1	0	2
G1-P-D	0	0	0	0

G2-P-A	1	2	3	6
G2-P-B	0	1	2	3
G2-P-C	1	1	1	3
G2-P-D	0	0	0	0
G2-P-E	0	0	0	0
G3-P-A	1	2	1	4
G3-P-B	1	1	1	3
G3-P-C	0	1	1	2
G3-P-D	1	2	1	4

Even though the theme of the week revolved around God's love for humanity, when asked to share their experiences with this type of love, a significant number of participants primarily discussed their experiences of romantic love with their spouses or the affection they receive from their parents. This trend could potentially reflect a prevalent Christian phenomenon where individuals possess a biblical understanding of God's love for people, yet struggle to truly experience and internalize this love in their day-to-day lives.

In an effort to delve into this topic, the researcher posed a question to each chat group, inquiring about how they perceive and feel God's love. Only a few participants responded, and their answers were largely drawn from biblical passages such as Romans 5:8 or John 3:16. These responses, while rooted in Scripture, did not stem from personal encounters or experiences of God's love in their own lives. For those who refrained from responding, it is plausible that they possess a means of sensing God's love but chose not to share it within the group chat. The Spiritual Readiness Assessments conducted as part of this research project did not yield any denials of God's love being present in participants' lives.

This eight-week experiment involving group chat sessions yielded valuable insights for the development of an engaging chat group platform. Over the course of eight weeks, certain topics garnered notably higher engagement from the three groups, namely Sadness, Faith, and Love. This experience underscores the pivotal role that the choice of discussion topics plays in

steering the trajectory and efficacy of conversations. One plausible conjecture behind the heightened popularity of these topics is their perceived relevance to participants' life stages and participants' familiarity with the subject matter. The sense of relevance and familiarity tended to capture participants' attention and draw their interest, consequently elevating their level of engagement. Genuine interest in a subject tends to drive more active and meaningful contributions to group discussion. Relevance and familiarity played a particularly important role

Figure 2. Group 3 Participation in Chat Group
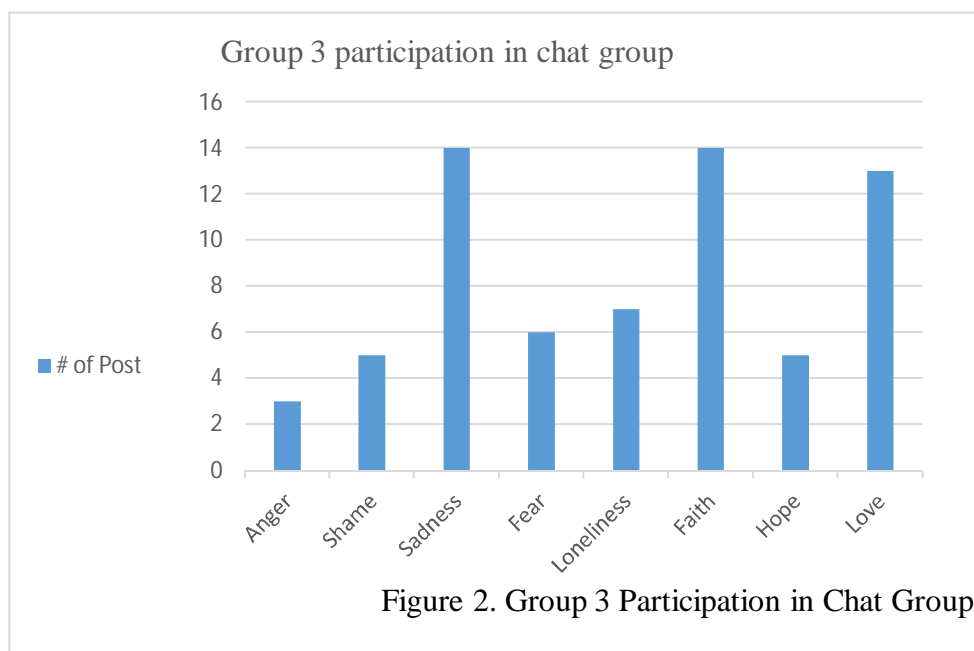
in the Group 3 chat group. Looking at the figure above, one can notice the difference between their responses to familiar and unfamiliar topics.

The data gathered from the chat group participation also hints at a potential correlation between attendance and engagement within the chat group. Upon scrutinizing all eight tables, an observable pattern emerged—certain participants exhibited a tendency to respond more frequently than their counterparts. Notably, these same participants also displayed a higher degree of regularity in attending the online meetings. While a correlation between attendance and engagement within the chat group was evident, it is important to acknowledge that there are

exceptions to this pattern. Various other factors may contribute to an individual's willingness to respond, such as the perceived relevance of and familiarity with a topic, as previously discussed. Additionally, some individuals may opt not to share their thoughts with relatively unfamiliar acquaintances, even if they share a common Christian faith. Conversely, a pattern emerged in the opposite direction: Individuals who attended online meetings less frequently were less inclined to actively participate in the chat group. As evident from the table below, it becomes apparent that the three participants who attended the online meetings four times or fewer contributed the fewest posts within the chat group.

Table 11. Attendance and participation in group chats

Member	Times Attended	Total Number of Posts
G1-P-A	7	39
G1-P-B	8	39
G1-P-C	6	29
G1-P-D	7	10
G2-P-A	7	27
G2-P-B	7	32
G2-P-C	4	14
G2-P-D	3	6
G2-P-E	4	3
G3-P-A	8	21
G3-P-B	7	18
G3-P-C	6	12
G3-P-D	7	16

While participation in the chat group was relatively limited, with the lowest number of posts occurring three times within the eight-week period, the online meetings witnessed highly engaged and active discussions, particularly when discussing scenario-based topics. Scenario discussions were strategically designed by the researcher to tackle the issue of dead air during group meetings. Based on the researcher's thirteen years of experience as a pastor in a Chinese community, one of the challenges identified in small group ministry is the occurrence of dead air

moments. Silent pauses may not present the same issue in American communication culture as they do in Chinese culture. Henry Kramer's book, *Game, Set, Match: Winning the Negotiations Game*, vividly portrays the fast-paced nature of American communication by stating, "When there is silence in a meeting, most people feel an overpowering need to rush in and fill the 'dead air.'"[126] It is highly likely that this dynamic would differ in a Chinese setting. The incorporation of scenario discussions into the project aimed to foster greater participation from Chinese participants during these gatherings. As observed by the researcher, participants readily engaged in conversation without undue concern about being correct, effectively breaking through the constraints associated with the Chinese face-saving culture.[127] Moreover, no individuals appeared hesitant to share their personal thoughts even in the presence of unfamiliar peers. Throughout the project, the hypothetical scenarios were thoughtfully tailored to align with the learning objectives and the shared experiences of the participants. Over the course of the eight online sessions, scenario discussions emerged as a highly effective and engaging avenue for online dialogues.

The anger scenario in the first session stands as a prime example illustrating the efficacy of scenario-driven discussions. Scenarios prompt participants to deconstruct intricate situations, consider myriad factors, and arrive at informed conclusions. In relation to the father's anger concerning his daughter's poor grades in the scenario, conjectures diverged. Some posited that the father displayed excessive criticism, whereas others surmised that he mistakenly wielded anger as a means to invigorate his daughter. A participant gave an interesting perspective: The father's anger might have stemmed from his personal apprehension about the future, stemming

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[126] Henry Kramer, *Game, Set, Match: Winning the Negotiations Game* (New York: ALM Publishing, 2001), 252.

[127] Angie Y. Chung, *Face. The Emotional Costs of the Asian Immigrant Family Myth* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 15-16.

from a worry that his daughter could become an encumbrance. The scenario discussions did promote collaboration among participants. Since participants may have different viewpoints on the hypothetical scenario, a space was created for them to share and learn from one another's perspectives while there were no right or wrong answers. In the end, participants recognized that their specific conjectures mostly mirrored their own upbringings and personal experiences involving their fathers or children. Similar outcomes were noted in other sessions where active engagement in discussions was prominent. As observed by the researcher, participants appeared to exhibit an increased awareness of the catalysts behind their negative emotions.

Scenarios successfully helped participants relate to the content and understand how theoretical concepts can be applied in practical settings. This approach helps connect the conceptual understanding of the topic with its practical application in real-life scenarios, thereby enhancing the discussion's relevance and significance. In all sessions, participants engaged actively in discussions and felt motivated to share their perspectives, opinions, and solutions, fostering a dynamic and interactive online environment.

SRA Assessment

Another goal of the research project was to improve the spiritual well-being of participants within the context of emotional health. The selection of topics for the initial sessions is grounded in the understanding that emotional well-being contributes substantially to the cultivation of spiritual health. The concluding three topics directly address theological virtues, with the potential to counterbalance and address negative emotions. This spiritual health encompasses elements such as Pursuing Meaning, Purpose, and Value (PMPV), Personal Connection to a Higher Power (PCHP) and Service and Sacrifice for the Greater Good (SSGG). Pursuing Meaning, Purpose, and Value (PMPV) primarily took center stage in the discussions on

Anger and Shame. Fear and Sadness were closely associated with the exploration of Personal

Connection to a Higher Power (PCHP). The topic of Loneliness revolved around the theme of

Service and Sacrifice for the Greater Good (SSGG).

Pursuing Meaning, Purpose, and Value (PMPV) is a psychological and philosophical

concept that emphasizes the importance of finding significance, direction, and intrinsic worth in

one's life and experiences. The emotion of anger is intricately tied to the infringement upon

one's values, while the emotion of shame is intertwined with diminished self-esteem and a

perception of lowered worth in the eyes of others. Gaining a deeper comprehension of the

triggers for anger and shame has the potential to help one find their values, meaning, and purpose

in life. The online program was strategically crafted to assist participants in comprehending

anger and shame through their individual lenses, empowering them to cultivate self-control over

anger and bolster self-esteem by drawing insights from biblical teachings. Below is the

comparative table encompassing the initial and final Spiritual Readiness Assessments (SRAs)

regarding PMPV, accompanied by the outcome of the T-Test analysis.

Table 12.1. Contrast between the initial and final SRAs regarding PMPV

Pursuing Meaning, Purpose, and Value (PMPV)		Initial SRA Score	Final SRA Score
1	Anonymous Participant	26	26
2	Anonymous Participant	28	28
3	Anonymous Participant	24	25
4	Anonymous Participant	22	26
5	Anonymous Participant	21	31
6	Anonymous Participant	27	27
7	Anonymous Participant	27	31
8	Anonymous Participant	20	20
9	Anonymous Participant	23	23
10	Anonymous Participant	18	22
11	Anonymous Participant	20	20

12	Anonymous Participant	12	22
13	Anonymous Participant	24	27
	Mean:	22.46154	25.23077
	One-tailed (paired) T-Test Result:	0.008818	P<0.05

The results of the T-Test analysis suggest that the online program holds the potential to instigate notable changes among its participants. It is noteworthy, however, that while some participants did not exhibit improvement in the targeted area based on the data, what is particularly striking is the significant improvement displayed by certain participants.

In relation to Personal Connection to a Higher Power (PCHP), this research project operated under the assumption that a deeper comprehension of sadness and fear allows for the potential to foster a stronger connection with a higher power. The experience of sadness and fear can serve as reminders of human limitations and vulnerability when confronting life's trials. This humility, in turn, can cultivate a heightened willingness to relinquish control and lean on a higher power for strength and guidance. In addition to delving into one's experiences with sadness and fear, this research project introduces the exploration of theological virtues and incorporates mindfulness exercises centered around faith, hope, and love. These elements were designed to fortify participants' connections with God. Presented below is a comparative table juxtaposing the initial and final results of the Spiritual Readiness Assessments (SRAs) concerning PCHP, alongside the outcomes of the T-Test analysis.

Table 12.2. Contrast between the initial and final SRAs regarding PCHP

Personal Connection to a Higher Power (PCHP)			
		Initial SRA	Final SRA
1	Anonymous Participant	24	26
2	Anonymous Participant	32	27
3	Anonymous Participant	24	26
4	Anonymous Participant	27	29

5	Anonymous Participant	34	34
6	Anonymous Participant	36	36
7	Anonymous Participant	20	20
8	Anonymous Participant	18	22
9	Anonymous Participant	21	23
10	Anonymous Participant	21	23
11	Anonymous Participant	18	21
12	Anonymous Participant	32	32
13	Anonymous Participant	24	23
	Mean:	25.46153846	26.30769231
	One-tailed (paired) T-Test Result:	0.10166257	p>0.05

While the T-Test analysis outcome may not overtly demonstrate the potential for significant changes in PCHP among participants through the online program, it does not necessarily negate the program's efficacy in fostering a connection with God. The final interviews revealed unanimous agreement among participants that the online program was beneficial. Several participants even indicated that the allotted one-hour online session felt insufficient due to the insightful discussions and their enthusiasm to learn from one another.

One potential explanation for the absence of substantial changes in the Spiritual Readiness Assessments (SRAs) could be that participants initially held high scores, making it relatively challenging to further elevate their spiritual health levels. The highest achievable score for PCHP is 40 points. Among the participants, four individuals scored above 30 points, while only two participants scored 18 points. Given that participants were selected based on their prior engagement in ministry activities, the prevalence of higher scores in this domain is unsurprising.

An intriguing observation is that two participants experienced a decrease in their scores between their initial and final SRAs. Given the anonymous nature of the assessments, the researcher lacks knowledge of the specific participants behind these changes. Had their identities

been known, the researcher would have had the opportunity to delve into the reasons for the decline in their scores.

The final aspect of spiritual health pertains to Service and Sacrifice for the Greater Good (SSGG). This research endeavor strategically employed the emotion of loneliness to facilitate a deeper comprehension of SSGG, aiming to heighten participants' awareness of this concept. The challenge in addressing loneliness lies in its elusive nature, often causing individuals to disregard its adverse impact on their lives. In response, this research project intentionally emphasizes loneliness as a pivotal factor. Loneliness has the potential to hinder individuals from cultivating meaningful connections and engaging in acts of service towards others. This research was undertaken in the aftermath of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which originated in 2019 and necessitated unprecedented worldwide lockdowns and social distancing measures to mitigate the virus's transmission. In fact, there were participants who initially showed limited enthusiasm for the project, causing delays in their responses. These delays prompted the researcher to become concerned about the potential development of acclimation to loneliness and an increasing indifference to the negative effects of isolation among these individuals.

In addition to raising awareness about loneliness during online meetings, the development of SSGG was intended to unfold through interactions among group members between sessions. Active engagement in collective prayers, encouraging one another via text messaging, and fostering a culture of support were envisaged as means to cultivate a compassionate and service-oriented mindset. By practicing these behaviors, participants were expected to develop a genuine inclination towards serving others and become attuned to the needs of those around them. Displayed here is a comparative table juxtaposing the initial and

final outcomes of the Spiritual Readiness Assessments (SRA) pertaining to Service and Sacrifice

for the Greater Good (SSGG), along with the findings from the T-Test analysis.

Table 12.3. Contrast between the initial and final SRAs regarding SSGG

	Service and Sacrifice for the Greater Good (SSGG)		
		Initial SRA Score	Final SRA Score
1	Anonymous Participant	27	28
2	Anonymous Participant	33	34
3	Anonymous Participant	27	24
4	Anonymous Participant	28	25
5	Anonymous Participant	29	28
6	Anonymous Participant	30	30
7	Anonymous Participant	28	28
8	Anonymous Participant	21	21
9	Anonymous Participant	33	33
10	Anonymous Participant	26	26
11	Anonymous Participant	26	29
12	Anonymous Participant	22	22
13	Anonymous Participant	30	29
	Mean:	27.69231	27.46154
	One tailed (paired) T-Test Result	0.30506	P>0.05

Similar to the T-Test analysis conducted for PCHP, the T-Test analysis carried out for

SSGG did not conclusively establish that the online program had the potential to produce

substantial changes among participants. However, this lack of significant change could be

attributed to the unique characteristics of the participants chosen for the research project. As

previously mentioned, all participants had prior involvement in ministry and were already well

acquainted with the importance of SSGG. Relying solely on the T-Test analysis might not

provide a comprehensive assessment of the program's ability to effectively encourage

participants to increase their contributions towards serving others or making sacrifices for the greater good.

A noteworthy observation gleaned from the data is worth highlighting here. The average score in the final Spiritual Readiness Assessments (SRAs) is lower than that of the initial SRAs. The anonymous nature of these assessments presents a challenge, as the researcher is unable to identify specific participants and further explore the reasons behind their lower self-assessment scores in the final SRAs. It is imperative to refrain from hastily concluding that the online program yielded negative impacts on the participants. Various explanations could potentially account for this phenomenon. It is conceivable that participants may have initially overestimated their awareness of Service and Sacrifice for the Greater Good (SSGG) in their initial SRAs, and that the online program contributed to a more accurate self-awareness in their final assessments.

Upon scrutinizing the gathered data, it becomes challenging to definitively ascertain whether the online program has effectively instilled a sense of community among participants, consequently fostering the development of their emotional well-being. In response to this uncertainty, the researcher conducted comprehensive final interviews with each participant, seeking to gauge their personal perspectives on the program's attainment of its initial objective. Portions of these interviews have been outlined in the preceding paragraphs. In a general sense, participants across the board expressed their gratitude for the program, highlighting the opportunity it provided for open discussions on religious and psychological subjects that seldom find their way into daily conversation. All participants acknowledged their acquisition of valuable insight from these discussions. Collectively, including participants who are juggling the responsibilities of parenthood, all expressed a unanimous willingness to sustain their engagement in the program, contingent upon their availability. In anticipation of future sessions, the

researcher presented two focused inquiries to the participants: their preferred frequency for upcoming meetings and their openness to assuming leadership roles within the program. Subsequently, four out of the thirteen participants expressed their readiness to take on program leadership roles, and a consensus emerged that the future sessions should ideally occur on a monthly basis. Based on these responses, it can be deduced that the online program has achieved a degree of success.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The goal of this project was for participants to cultivate a sense of community among themselves, fostering an environment where they felt comfortable and empowered to openly share their emotions and vulnerabilities. The sources of empowerment stem from participants' connections with God, nurtured through reflections on biblical passages and mindfulness exercises, as well as the mutual support, encouragement, and prayers exchanged among group members. Within this environment where participants openly confront their feelings of anger and shame, they can attain a deeper comprehension of the purpose and significance of their lives, as well as their core values. The core question in this research project remains focused on whether an online fellowship can truly cultivate and foster this sense of community. Beyond the central inquiry, the researcher is also interested in determining whether the discussions held during the meetings genuinely contribute to participants' improved comprehension of their emotional vulnerabilities and strengths.

The world is different after the COVID lockdown, and geographical barriers have become less impactful on people's lives. Cyberspace is providing increasing opportunities for Christians to connect and support each other spiritually as well as emotionally. However, this project is not claiming that online fellowship can replace fellowship in person. As mentioned, "Zoom fatigue" is a known fact.[128] Also, creating an online meeting that captures the same intimacy as a physical gathering can be challenging. During the final interviews, all participants emphasized their preference for in-person fellowship compared to online interactions. Despite the limitations of online fellowship, this research project leveraged the benefits of new online

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[128] Vignesh Ramachandran, "Stanford researchers identify four causes for 'Zoom fatigue' and their simple fixes," accessed June 25, 2023, https://news.stanford.edu/2021/02/23/four-causes-zoom-fatigue-solutions/.

technology to develop a specialized program for Christians undergoing church transitions, incorporating a theme that caters to their specific needs.

Research Implications

Ever since the emergence of the Internet in the mid-1990s, the concept of online churches and virtual small groups has been promoted.[129] In this research project, the researcher is not actively advocating the idea of online small groups over in-person fellowship. The online community is being viewed as a temporary solution to address church-related challenges arising from social mobility. The eight-week series of one-hour sessions covering five negative emotions and three theological virtues could also be applied within an in-person fellowship setting even though this project did not involve an in-person group. What makes this online program significant is its andragogy and distinctive approach to spirituality.

The project operated under the assumption that participants would come in with a certain level of familiarity regarding the subject, each individual already holding their unique, established viewpoints in response to the discussion questions. Instead of imparting canned answers to the participants, the researcher provided a general introduction along with a simple definition of the topic. This empowered participants to elaborate based on their own understanding. A comparison question involving a related term followed. This approach proved to be effective during the online meeting discussions. Conventional discipleship programs, such as catechism, often provide clear-cut solutions to various questions, including those related to passages in the Bible. While this method can be beneficial, it also runs the risk of becoming dull and one-sided, lacking interactive engagement. In essence, the goal of the discussions was not

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[129] Timothy Hutchings, *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media* (London: Routledge, 2017), 27.

providing participants the answer, but helping them become aware of what they have known and their way of handling their negative emotions.

The first session on anger provided a clear demonstration of how effective this andragogical approach can be (See Appendix A). The topic of anger prompted extensive discussion in all three groups, with Group 1 notably experiencing a particularly intense exchange right from the outset. Differing from the researcher's initial assumption that regarded anger predominantly as a negative emotion, some of the younger participants in Group 1 held the perspective that anger shouldn't necessarily be labeled as an entirely negative emotion. Group 1 consisted of individuals from Hong Kong, and their experiences were influenced by feelings of anger regarding the actions of the Hong Kong police during the 2019 protests and the subsequent persecution. They viewed their anger through the lens of a positive emotion rooted in the pursuit of justice. The researcher, without passing judgment on their perspective, steered the discourse forward by prompting participants to delineate between anger and hatred. On this point, consensus emerged that hatred is a negative sentiment characterized by resentment and an inclination towards ill will directed at a person or a group. As the segment of the discussion concluded, the researcher asked the question of whether anger could result in negative outcomes. One participant quoted Ephesians 4:26-27, suggesting that feeling anger is not inherently wrong, but acting on it in harmful ways or letting it fester can lead to negative outcomes. This approach succeeded in whetting participants' appetites for delving further into anger management while simultaneously encouraging them to uncover their existing knowledge. By exploring their own understanding of anger, participants became more conscious of how they derive meaning and value in their lives, elements that are interwoven with their spirituality.

Another significant aspect of this project is its practical application of spirituality to address negative emotions. This approach aligns with the Army's perspective on spirituality, which underscores its practicality in assisting individuals in coping with real-world adversities. As General George Casey, the Chief of Staff of the United States Army from 2007 to 2011, puts it, "I believe that psychological resilience development can become not just something we in the in the Army 'do,' but rather a critical component of our culture that will be integrated throughout our community to develop better Soldiers."[130] To adapt the concept of spirituality from the Army to a civilian context, it is essential to recognize the universal and practical dimensions of spirituality that can benefit individuals irrespective of their military background. This research is guided by the principles of universality and practicality, asserting that spirituality has evolved beyond being an abstract and subjective concept. Instead, it is a tangible and effective approach for addressing maladaptive thinking and fostering positive emotions in individuals from all walks of life.

The researcher asserts that spirituality can facilitate the cultivation of positive emotions, thereby enabling the substitution of negative emotions with positive counterparts. This assertion finds some support in the feedback provided by participants during the concluding interviews. Several participants disclosed that their sole method of dealing with negative emotions was suppression, though they acknowledged its inconsistent effectiveness. Upon being introduced to the concept of replacing negative emotions with positive ones, unanimous agreement arose among them that this approach was not only more viable but also more efficacious than the suppressive method.

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[130] George Casey, "Comprehensive Soldiers Fitness: A Vision for Psychological Resilience in the U.S. Army," *American Psychologist* 66, no. 1 (Jan 2011): 2.

Replacing negative emotions with positive emotions involves a combination of psychological strategies and mindfulness techniques. This notion is not novel. In his book, *Forgiveness and Reconcilliation Theory and Application*, Everett Worthington reaches the conclusion that "forgiveness reduces anger, depression, anxiety, and fear."[131] While it might not be feasible to entirely eradicate negative emotions, it is attainable to acquire skills to regulate and diminish their influence by nurturing positive emotional states. The crux of this method lies in the cultivation of positive emotions that can supplant the negative counterparts. For Christians, one pivotal approach to embodying this concept is by aligning with the emotional teachings outlined in the Bible.

In this project, the concluding segment of the first five sessions involved contemplation upon biblical passages that address the subject of positive emotions. Five positive emotions are introduced as antidotes to the five negative emotions discussed in the sessions: peacefulness as an antidote to anger, self-esteem to counter shame, joy to alleviate sadness, courage as a response to fear, and connectedness to counteract loneliness. The project's significance is underscored by its exploration of God's regard for emotions. By delving deeper into the biblical teachings related to nurturing positive emotions, individuals can develop stronger coping mechanisms that guard against succumbing to negative emotions and their subsequent actions.

Before joining this project, the majority of participants had not recognized the extent to which the Bible imparts teachings related to positive emotions. For example, in session four, the participants reflected on Joshua 1:8-9, which is God's instructions to Joshua, who was about to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land after the death of Moses. They generally interpreted it as a call to faithfully follow God's commandments, seek His guidance through continuous study

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[131] Everett Worthington, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation Theory and Application* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 272.

and reflection on His word, and find strength and courage in God's presence during times of challenge and uncertainty. They had not initially grasped that this passage could also be intended to nurture Joshua's courage and shape his character. With this newfound comprehension, they were guided to reflect on why a person can cultivate courage with the companionship of God. Upon contemplating the passage from this perspective, they gained a fresh understanding of courage's significance as a force capable of diminishing the impact of fear.

The process of substituting negative emotions with positive ones requires sustained time and effort. This project was realistic in its expectations, understanding that participants would not undergo rapid emotional transformations. In reality, experiencing a spectrum of emotions, including negative ones, is a natural occurrence. The objective lies in recognizing the causes for these emotions and managing them while nurturing a positive emotional bedrock, thereby enabling participants to adeptly navigate challenges. Additionally, the hope was for them to find a supportive community where they could openly express their emotional needs, which will be further discussed later in this manuscript.

Research Applications

One advantage of this online program is that it can be led by a layperson with a basic grasp of the Christian faith. Among the core tenets of Christianity, one that holds particular significance is God's profound concern for the well-being of believers, encompassing their spiritual, emotional, physical, and relational dimensions. This concern is expressed in Matthew's words: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28, NIV). Likewise, Philippians 4:6-7 urges believers: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by

prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (NIV). In addition to grasping these foundational Christian principles, a facilitator must also firmly believe in the importance of Christian community for nurturing deeper connections with God and fellow believers. In addition to theological comprehension, effective communication skills for facilitating online meetings and group discussions are equally vital. During interviews, some participants expressed their willingness to take on the role of hosts for future online gatherings. In essence, this online initiative can be successfully led without the presence of a pastor and is highly adaptable for use among Christians unable to convene in person.

During the project's execution, the researcher came to realize that the facilitator of this online program requires several crucial communication skills. Firstly, it is essential to attentively listen to participants' comments and questions, demonstrating active engagement and a genuine appreciation for their contributions. Given the program's emphasis on discussion, active participation by the attendees significantly enhances the overall benefits. Another effective strategy for encouraging discussion involves displaying empathy and understanding towards participants' viewpoints and concerns. The facilitator should remain attuned to emotional cues and offer feedback accordingly. Furthermore, effective time management is critical during these sessions. As the program lasts for one hour with four to five participants including the facilitator, each participant's sharing time is limited to ten to fifteen minutes. To maintain control over the meeting, the facilitator must handle interruptions, ensure equitable speaking opportunities, and prevent side conversations from diverting the primary discussion. One valuable technique employed by the researcher is to pause a participant's sharing momentarily, summarize key points and takeaways, and then proceed. Lastly, the facilitator must be prepared to mediate

conflicts or disagreements that may arise during the meetings. The researcher sometimes needs to stress that there are no definite right or wrong opinions, particularly when some participants feel judged or uncomfortable during the discussions.

While this program can be applied in nearly any Christian setting, the researcher considers it a valuable addition to the training of Christian chaplains in the Army. This project's framework draws inspiration from the researcher's firsthand experiences as an Army Reserve chaplain and aligns with the Spiritual Readiness Initiative (SRI) espoused by the Army Chaplain Corps. However, the Chaplain Corps currently lacks a dedicated program for its chaplains to foster camaraderie, not to mention spiritual friendship, through online platforms. The researcher is convinced that a program similar to this project could greatly assist Christian chaplains in enhancing their self-awareness regarding negative emotions, nurturing positive emotions, and cultivating a strong sense of camaraderie among themselves.

In the position of a supervising chaplain at the Army division level, the researcher consistently encounters difficulties in forming a cohesive team with subordinate chaplains who share the same faith tradition, let alone with chaplains and chaplain candidates from other faith traditions. Within the Army Reserves, there is a unique situation where Soldiers are geographically dispersed, despite being assigned to the same division. To illustrate, the researcher's division encompasses two brigades and six battalions, with a total of ten chaplains and six chaplain candidates scattered across six different states. Each group maintains distinct training schedules and drills on separate dates. As an experienced chaplain, the division chaplain serves as a mentor, offering guidance to subordinate chaplains not only in their professional development, but also in nurturing their spiritual well-being. This role is especially crucial within the Army Reserve, where supervising chaplains play a pivotal role in training new chaplains and

those aspiring to become chaplains in the future. To develop future chaplains, the Army has

established the Chaplain Candidate Program. These chaplain candidates are commissioned

officers in the Army Reserve or National Guard who are temporarily in an "educational delay

status" while working to meet the distinct religious group requirements for recognition as

religious professionals, endorsed by their respective religious organizations (ROs).[132] The

introduction of this online program could potentially overcome the challenges posed by

geographical distance and time constraints that often hinder chaplains from developing their

support networks.

Besides helping the supervising chaplain to train subordinate chaplains, this project also

has the potential to assist chaplains in developing a virtual training program for their Unit

Ministry Teams (UMTs). A UMT typically consists of at least one chaplain and one religious

affairs specialist (RAS) responsible for providing religious support (RS) and advising

commanders on religious matters.[133] In the context of the Army Reserve, most chaplains and

RASs are categorized as TPU (Troop Program Unit) Soldiers, distinguishing them from those on

full-time duty, known as Active Guard Reserve (AGR) Soldiers. TPU Soldiers typically gather

for training purposes two days a month, often referred to as drill days or battle assembly (BA)

days, and for two weeks annually during Annual Training (AT). Given this limited interaction as

well geographical distance constraints, UMT members who rely on teamwork to serve Soldiers

often have insufficient time to build strong relationships among themselves. If both the chaplain

[132] Department of the Army, *Army Chaplain Corps Activities*, AR 165-1 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2015), 7-5a, https://www.armyresilience.army.mil/ard/images/pdf/Policy/AR%20165-1%20Army%20Chaplain%20Corps%20Activities.pdf.

[133] Department of the Army, *Religious Support*, FM 1-05 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2019), 1-09, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN14613_FM 1-05 FINAL WEB.pdf.

and their RASs are Christians, this online program can undoubtedly aid them in cultivating spiritual support and enhancing team cohesion.

This online program also proves valuable in assisting Christian chaplains in establishing camaraderie with their fellow Christian Soldiers during off-duty hours. Unlike their Active-Duty counterparts, chaplains and other TPU Soldiers often have limited interactions with their fellow Soldiers outside of these scheduled drill days. It is recognized that Army Reserve and National Guard Soldiers frequently face various emotional challenges due to their physical separation from their units, fellow Soldiers, and support networks. In addition to the challenge of isolation, Soldiers' emotional well-being can be impacted by permanent change of station (PCS) assignments, which involve relocating to different duty locations every two to three years. Adapting to new environments, cultures, and routines can be challenging, and these adjustments, coupled with stressors related to relationships and children's education, can contribute to emotional difficulties. Through the utilization of this online program, a Christian chaplain can strengthen their bonds with fellow Christians and attend to their emotional well-being while they could not have in-person fellowship regularly.

Research Limitations

Given the limited resources and time constraints, this research project relied on a modest sample size of only thirteen participants. It is important to acknowledge that small sample sizes could potentially constrain the validity of the findings. Nevertheless, this project falls within the realm of action research, with its primary objective being the provision of a new platform for Blessed Life Church to reconnect with former members and enhance their spiritual readiness to cope with negative emotions. The goal of this research is not to generalize a theory. In the context of action research, the validity of the findings can be reasonably justified. This approach

hinges on the principle that all stakeholders affected by the issue being studied should actively engage in the research process. These stakeholders participate in a rigorous inquiry process, involving data collection and analysis to deepen their understanding of the problem under investigation. This new comprehension is then employed to formulate plans for addressing the issue (action), setting the stage for testing hypotheses derived from collective theorizing (evaluation).[134] In other words, it is common for action research to have a small sample size because it focuses on engaging with a limited number of stakeholders directly involved in addressing a specific issue or problem. Also, there are limitations associated with quantitative data as well. "While collecting quantitative data may make an important contribution to an action research project, it should be remembered that information represented in an observation chart needs to be interpreted in exactly the same way as other data gathered during a research study."[135] The researcher is fully aware of the limitations associated with a small sample size and approached the findings with a degree of caution and consideration for potential biases and limitations.

Because of the small sample size, the researcher acknowledges that the findings of this study may lack the statistical power necessary to identify significant effects or relationships. "Statistical power is a function of the relationship between probability of error, the number of participants in a sample, and the effect size (e.g., the size of differences between groups)."[136] In investigations with small sample sizes, statistical power is typically low. This means that even if there are genuine changes or patterns in the data, they may not reach statistical significance because there are too few data points to draw firm conclusions. Small samples can also be more

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[134] Ernest T. Stringer, *Action-Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 39.
[135] Patrick J. M. Costello, *Effective Action Research: Developing Reflective Thinking and Practice* (London: Continuum, 2011), 68.
[136] Catherine S. Taylor, *Validity and Validation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15.

susceptible to sampling bias. If the sample is not representative of the entire population or context, the results may not accurately reflect the true state of affairs. This can lead to biased conclusions and recommendations.

In this research, triangulation is employed as a strategy to address some of the challenges associated with small sample sizes. It involves using multiple data sources to enhance the depth and validity of the study. The researcher collected data from various avenues, including interviews, observations, and SRA surveys. This approach allows for a more comprehensive examination of the research topic, compensating for the limitations imposed by the small number of participants. In fact, the final interviews and the researcher's observations within group chats played a crucial role in validating the program's success. As Stringer suggests, "The credibility of a study is enhanced when multiple sources of information are incorporated."[137] The inclusion of perspectives from diverse sources complement the findings, providing a richer understanding of the subject through insights derived from observations and the personal experiences of the participants. The size of data can matter in action research, but it is not the only important consideration.

Another constraint of this research project is the lack of a control group that could have functioned as a baseline or reference for comparing the outcomes of the three online groups. The research employed two surveys, one conducted before the program and another after its completion, to assess whether participants made significant improvements in their spiritual health through the project. As demonstrated in the preceding chapter, the conclusive Spiritual Readiness Assessment (SRA) did not reveal statistically significant improvements in the categories of Personal Connection to a Higher Power (PCHP) and Service and Sacrifice for the

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[137] Stringer, 103.

Greater Good (SSGG). One potential explanation for this outcome could be the initially high scores recorded in the initial SRA since all participants were mature Christians with ministry experience. Given this consideration, it is worth noting that the inclusion of a few control groups consisting of more than ten new Christians without any prior ministry experience could provide valuable insight. These control groups could serve as a basis for evaluating whether the online program has a demonstrable impact on the spiritual growth of Christians.

Due to the constraints of limited time and resources inherent in this research project, incorporating control groups alongside the three online groups posed a considerable challenge. The task of managing three online groups, including one based in Hong Kong, within the span of a week, while also engaging each participant in discussions throughout the week proved to be a demanding endeavor for a single researcher who concurrently served as a full-time pastor and a part-time Army Reserve chaplain. Despite the absence of a control group serving as a baseline, an alternative method for evaluating the program's effectiveness was sought through candid feedback from stakeholders. Qualitative information such as the final interview conducted in this project unquestionably enriched the researcher's comprehension of participants' experiences and perspectives, even in the absence of a control group.

Further Research

Following the conclusion of this research project, it appears that there is a need for further research on the topic of fostering emotional well-being within a Chinese immigrant church in the United States. At the beginning of each online meeting within this project, all participants were asked to define the core subject and distinguish it from a closely-related but distinct concept. For example, in the first session, they compared anger and hatred, while in the second session, they contrasted shame and guilt. Subsequent to the presentation of various

perspectives, the facilitator tried to consolidate the inputs and formulate a functional definition of the subject matter. Nonetheless, reaching a consensus on the definition and differentiation of these concepts proved to be a challenging task. Emotions can be quite elusive to define, and cultural factors are among the reasons for this complexity.

Emotions do not have universally agreed-upon definitions across cultures and languages. Different cultures may have unique emotional concepts and expressions, making it challenging to establish a single, all-encompassing definition.[138] During the second session, the researcher referred to Brene Brown's distinction between shame and guilt, suggesting to the participants that "Guilt = I did something bad. Shame = I am bad."[139] While this interpretation resonated with the researcher, the participants, in general, expressed disagreement. This divergence in understanding can be attributed to the influence of Chinese culture, where shame is intricately connected to an honor and shame culture. In this cultural context, individuals are expected to adhere to societal norms and maintain proper conduct to prevent bringing shame upon themselves and their families. In other words, shame is a positive emotion. Mencius, the philosopher responsible for establishing the ethical foundation of Chinese culture, claimed, "The sense of shame and hatred engenders righteousness."[140] To put it differently, shame in Chinese culture is indeed connected to instances of misbehavior. Guilt and shame are situated on a spectrum, exhibiting subtle shades of distinction between them. Precisely differentiating between them can be challenging due to their shared characteristics. Guilt usually stems from internal

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[138] Anna Wierzbicka, *Emotions Across Languages and Cultures: Diversity and Universals* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 247.

[139] Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2020), 56.

[140] Yi Ting Zhu, *A Panoramic History of Traditional Chinese Ethics* (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 123.

emotions associated with one's wrongdoing, while in Chinese society, shame often centers around concerns about how one's actions may affect personal, familial, and communal honor.[141]

The conversations about guilt and shame during the online meetings sparked the researcher's interest in exploring methods for promoting emotional well-being within a Chinese immigrant church, where members are shaped by the intersecting influences of both Chinese and American cultures. Promoting emotional well-being in a culturally diverse church requires a multifaceted approach that acknowledges the unique challenges and strengths of Chinese immigrant members. It is essential to create a supportive and inclusive environment where individuals can thrive emotionally and spiritually.

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[141] Hannes Wiher, *Shame and Guilt: A Key to Cross-Cultural ministry* (Bonn: World Evangelical Alliance, 2003), 121.

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APPENDIX A

EACH SESSION OUTLINE

Session 1 – Anger

1. What is your definition of anger? Share your thoughts with others. (Round Robin Sharing)

2. What are the differences between anger and hatred? Share your thoughts with others (optional).

3. Scenario Discussion (Round Robin Sharing):

"John is a father of three children, aged 12, 10, and 8. One day, John's oldest child, Mary, comes home with a failing grade on her math test. John becomes angry and starts yelling at Mary, asking her how she could do so poorly on the test. He accuses her of not studying and not taking her education seriously.

Mary becomes upset and starts to cry, feeling ashamed and embarrassed. John's other two children also witness the argument and become uncomfortable. The tension between John and Mary continues, with John continuing to yell and Mary becoming more and more upset."

What are the possible consequences of the scenario?

What factors may be contributing to John's anger, and is there a valid basis for his emotional response?

4. Self-Reflective Question:

Recall a time when you experienced anger. What thoughts crossed your mind during that moment, and what circumstances led to those thoughts? Feel free to share your experiences with others if you'd like.

5. The opposite of anger is peace.

Reflect and discuss the following passage: Where can you find peace? Share your thoughts with others if you'd like.

Philippians 4:6-7 (NIV)**:** "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Session 2 – Shame

1. What is your definition of shame? (Round Robin Sharing)

2. What are the differences between shame and guilt? Share your thoughts with others (optional)

3. Scenario Discussion (Round Robin Sharing):

"Alex was a third-year college student who had always been a high achiever in community college. He was used to being at the top of his class and receiving praise and recognition for his academic achievements. However, when he started his junior year in college, he found the coursework to be much more challenging than he had anticipated.

Alex struggled to keep up with the fast-paced lectures and complex assignments. He found himself falling behind in his classes and struggling to grasp the material. He felt embarrassed and ashamed, as he had always been seen as the "smart kid" among his peers and had built his identity around his academic achievements."

What are the possible consequences of the scenario?

What might be causing Alex's sense of shame, and is it appropriate for Alex to be feeling this way?

4. Self-Reflective Question:

Recall a time when you experienced shame. What thoughts crossed your mind during that moment, and what circumstances led to those thoughts? Feel free to share your experiences with others if you'd like.

5. The opposite of shame is self-esteem

Reflect and discuss the following passage: What talents do you have? Share your thoughts with others if you'd like.

Psalm 139:13-14 (NIV): "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."

Session 3 – Sadness

1. What is your definition of sadness? (Round Robin Sharing)

2. What are the differences between sadness and grief? Share your thoughts with others (optional).

3. Scenario Discussion (Round Robin Sharing):

"Lisa had always been a devout Christian and believed firmly in God's plan for her life. But all of that changed one fateful day. However, Lisa's world came crashing down when she received a call from the hospital informing her that her beloved husband, Mark, had been in a serious car accident. Rushing to the hospital, she prayed fervently for his recovery, believing that God

would hear her plea. However, when she arrived, she was met with the devastating news that Mark had succumbed to his injuries.

The loss of her husband was an unimaginable tragedy that shook Lisa to her core. The grief and sadness that followed were unlike anything she had ever experienced. She couldn't understand why God had allowed such a terrible thing to happen to her, especially when she had been faithful and devoted."

What are the possible consequences of the scenario?
How can Lisa find solace and overcome grief by reestablishing a connection with her faith in God?

4. Self-Reflective Question:

Recall a time when you experienced sadness. What thoughts crossed your mind during that moment, and what circumstances led to those thoughts? Feel free to share your experiences with others if you'd like.

5. The opposite of shame is joy.

Reflect and discuss the following passage: What blessings from God have filled your heart with joy? Feel free to share your story with others if you'd like.

Psalm 104:14-15 (NIV): "He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate— bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains their hearts."

Session 4 – Fear

1. What is your definition of fear? (Round Robin Sharing)

2. What are the differences between fear and worry? Share your thoughts with others (optional).

3. Scenario Discussion (Round Robin Sharing):

"Sarah was an experienced driver who had been commuting to work for years without any major incidents. However, one fateful morning, as she was driving to the office, she was involved in a serious traffic accident. Fortunately, she escaped with only minor injuries, but the experience left a lasting impact on her.

In the days following the accident, Sarah began to experience intense anxiety whenever she thought about getting behind the wheel. She couldn't shake the vivid memories of the collision, the screeching of brakes, and the feeling of helplessness. The fear was so overwhelming that she decided to take a break from driving altogether.

Weeks turned into months, and Sarah's fear of driving persisted. She relied on public transportation, carpooled with colleagues, or occasionally used ride-sharing services to get around. The thought of sitting in the driver's seat and navigating traffic filled her with dread."

What are the possible consequences of the scenario?
What steps can Sarah take to conquer her fear and resume driving?

4. Self-Reflective Question:

Recall a time when you experienced fear. What thoughts crossed your mind during that moment, and what circumstances led to those thoughts? Feel free to share your experiences with others if you'd like.

5. The opposite of fear is courage.

Reflect and discuss the following passage: What challenges have you overcome? Feel free to share your story with others if you'd like.

Psalm 27:1 (NIV): "The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?"

Session 5 – Loneliness

1. What is your definition of loneliness? (Round Robin Sharing)

2. What are the differences between loneliness and solitude? Share your thoughts with others (optional).

3. Scenario Discussion (Round Robin Sharing):

"Peter had recently moved to a new city for a job opportunity. As a devout Christian, one of his top priorities was finding a church where he could connect with like-minded individuals and continue to nurture his faith. Eager to establish a sense of belonging in his new community, he began attending different churches in the area.

His first few visits were filled with optimism and hope as he attended Sunday services, and participated in post-service fellowship. However, as weeks turned into months, Peter began to realize that forming meaningful connections within the church community was proving to be a more significant challenge than he had anticipated"

What are the possible consequences of the scenario?

What could be the potential causes of Peter's challenges in connecting with the church, and how might the church members have taken different actions to address this issue?

4. Self-Reflective Question:

Recall a time when you experienced loneliness. What thoughts crossed your mind during that moment, and what circumstances led to those thoughts? Feel free to share your experiences with others if you'd like.

5. The opposite of loneliness is gratitude: Recall the happiness you experienced through fellowship with others. Feel free to share your story with others if you'd like.

Ephesians 5:19-20 (NIV): "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Session 6 – Faith

1. What is your definition of faith? (Round Robin Sharing)

2. What are the differences between faith and certainty? Share your thoughts with others (optional).

3. Biblical Narrative Discussion (Round Robin Sharing):

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about." Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about.

On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. (Genesis: 22:1-8 NIV)

How difficult was it for Abraham to make that decision?

What led Isaac to have faith in his father, Abraham, and carry on with the journey?

How difficult was it for Abraham to make that decision?

4. Mindfulness Exercise: Reflecting on the blessings that God has bestowed upon you and envisioning Jesus seated before you, saying, "Believe in Me." The second part involves imagining a person in front of you and genuinely wishing them happiness and support.

5. Biblical Passage Reflection: Sharing your personal testimony of faith with others (Round Robin Sharing).

Hebrews 11:1 (NIV): "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."

Session 7 – Hope

1. What is your definition of hope? (Round Robin Sharing)

2. What are the differences between hope and wish? Share your thoughts with others (optional).

3. Biblical Narrative Discussion (Round Robin Sharing):

After burying his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, together with his brothers and all the others who had gone with him to bury his father. When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs, we did to him?" So, they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept. His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said. But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:14-21 NIV)

What prompted Joseph to extend forgiveness to his brothers and offer them his support and provision?

Do you hold hope that negative situations can ultimately bring about positive outcomes? Please elaborate on your reasons.

4. Mindfulness Exercise: Reflecting on the moment that God answered your prayers, and envisioning Jesus seated before you, saying, "Come and I will give you rest." The second part involves imagining a person in front of you and genuinely wishing them happiness and support.

5 Biblical Passage Reflection: Sharing your personal experiences of situations where initially low expectations or negative circumstances turned out to be positive or good outcomes. (Round Robin Sharing)

Romans 5:5 (NIV): "And hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

Session 8 - Love

1. What is your definition of love? (Round Robin Sharing)

2. What are the differences between love and charity? Share your thoughts with others (optional).

3. Biblical Narrative Discussion (Round Robin Sharing):

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'

So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. '"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:11-24 NIV)

What led the father to welcome and accept the prodigal son?

How does the father's love the prodigal son mirror the love of God to us?

4. Mindfulness Exercise: Reflecting on the moment that you accepted the love of God, and envisioning Jesus seated before you, saying, "My beloved brother (sister), welcome to the family." The second part involves imagining a person in front of you and genuinely wishing them happiness and support.

5. Biblical Passage Reflection: Sharing your personal experience of feeling loved (Round Robin Sharing).

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NIV): "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

APPENDIX B

INITIAL SPIRITUAL READINESS ASSESSMENT[142]

The following set of statements seeks to understand your opinions and beliefs. Please respond to each question as accurately as you can.

1 I know what my life is about.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

2 I can find meaning and purpose in my everyday experiences.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

3 I can help people think positively when they are going through difficult times.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

4 I've been able to prevent negative emotions from affecting my life.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

5 Human value and respect should be the greatest social value.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

6 Being of service to others is an important source of meaning in my life.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

7 I feel God's love for me

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[142] This SRA is adapted according to a recent spiritual readiness initiative (SRI) training handbook, but it is edited to cater to the current research project. It contains fewer statements than the original SRA provided by the Army, and Statement 3 and Statement 4 are not part of the original SRA.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

8 I am grateful for all God has done for me

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

9 Religious beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

10 I look to God for strength, support, and guidance.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

11 The relationship among my family members is very close

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

12 I have a core set of beliefs, ethics, and values that give my life a sense of meaning and purpose.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Core Attribute	SCORE (Add the total from statements respectively)	
PMPV (1, 2, 4, 12)		
SSGG (3, 5, 6, 11)		
PCHP (7-10)		
Your UUID[143]:		*Date:*

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[143] UUID is the identity you created. The instruction to create your UUID is detailed in the consent form

APPENDIX C

FINAL SPIRITUAL READINESS ASSESSMENT[144]

The following set of statements seeks to understand your opinions and beliefs. Please respond to each question as accurately as you can.

1 I know what my life is about.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

2 I can find meaning and purpose in my everyday experiences.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

3 I can help people think positively when they are going through difficult times.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

4 I've been able to prevent negative emotions from affecting my life.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

5 Human value and respect should be the greatest social value.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

6 Being of service to others is an important source of meaning in my life.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

7 I feel God's love for me

Strongly		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly

[144] This SRA is basically the same as the one in the Recruitment Phase.

Disagree									Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

8 I am grateful for all God has done for me

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

9 Religious beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

10 I look to God for strength, support, and guidance.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

11 The relationship among my family members is very close

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

12 I have a core set of beliefs, ethics, and values that give my life a sense of meaning and purpose.

Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral			Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Core Attribute	SCORE (Add the total from statements respectively)	
PMPV (1, 2, 4, 12)		
SSGG (3, 5, 6, 11)		
PCHP (7-10)		
Your UUID:[145]		*Date:*

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[145] Please provide the same UUID from the Initial SRA.

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS[146]

1. How has this project supported your connections with others in general and your spiritual connection with God?

2. What factors or obstacles prevent you from regularly attending online meetings?

3. What factors or barriers hinder your active participation in the group chat?

4. In terms of coping with negative emotions, which aspect of the project has proven to be the most beneficial to you, and which one has been the least beneficial?

5. How would you modify the project to enhance its effectiveness in nurturing your spiritual well-being?

6. Under what conditions would you decide to continue your online group meetings with your fellow group members?

7. What have you taken away from the project overall, and what sparked your curiosity to explore spirituality and emotional well-being on a deeper level?

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[146] The interview will take place via phone and will last for thirty minutes.

APPENDIX E

CONSENT FORM

Title of the Project: Boundless Community: a virtual platform designed for collective development of emotional well-being

Principal Investigator: Rev. Sai On Ng

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must once be associated with Blessed Life Church

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of my research is to develop a virtual platform to improve the spiritual health of Christians, who could not meet physically in one geographical location. This action research project is to develop a pastor-led 8-week community via a virtual means, one session per week, to nourish the spiritual health of lay persons and ministers alike and to equip them to take an active role in their faith community. This research claims that an effective way of nourishing spiritual health is through community and accountability.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

By agreeing to participate in this study, you commit to the following tasks:

1. Complete an initial Spiritual Readiness Assessment (SRA), which will take approximately 10-15 minutes. This assessment should be filled out and returned directly to the researcher within one week of receiving it.
2. Choose your preferred group.
3. Engage in an eight-week online training program, involving eight online meeting sessions held weekly via Zoom.
4. Maintain daily text message communication with each participant between sessions.
5. Reflect upon assigned questions after each session.
6. Conclude the program by filling out the final SRA, which will require approximately 35-40 minutes of your time during the week following the 8-week training.
7. Coordinate with the researcher to schedule a final interview via Zoom and grant permission for the interview to be recorded. These interviews will last approximately 30 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Benefits participants can expect to gain from their involvement in this program include forming spiritual friendships with individuals they may have previously known. Each participant will also develop greater self-awareness and a deeper understanding of their role within the faith community, such as becoming a spiritual caregiver to fellow group members.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

This study is considered as minimal risk, indicating that the potential risks associated with it are no greater than those encountered in everyday life. One potential risk is that participants may be reminded of negative experiences that could still be affecting them.

How will personal information be protected?

The data collected in this study will be kept confidential. Published reports will not contain any details that could lead to the identification of individual subjects. Research records will be securely stored, and only the researcher will have access to them.

Participant responses to the SRA will be maintained confidentially through the use of unique codes. Each participant will visit www.uuidgenerator.net to obtain their Universal Unique Identifier (UUID), a free online application that provides a UUID format like "cd23a857-c653-4427-a3e3-cefe8fb58c86," for instance. When accessing the website, participants will be presented with a random UUID without the need to input any personal information. Only the participant will be aware of their individual UUID, which they will use for completing the SRAs.

A shared email address, virtualreadinesstraining@gmail.com, has been established and is utilized by all participants. This allows them to submit their response documents to the researcher using this email address instead of their personal ones.

Every participant will anonymously submit their response documents to the online Dropbox here: https://www.dropbox.com/request/LiPb3QUbP6LdibWvXxut. Access to this Dropbox is restricted to the researcher only.

Participants will utilize their individual UUIDs, rather than their names, and the shared generic email address used by all participants when submitting their response documents through the Dropbox portal.

The data will be securely stored in an online space protected by a password and may be utilized in future presentations. However, all electronic records will be deleted after a period of three years.

The interviews will be conducted via phone, and any notes taken during the interviews will be securely destroyed once the research is completed. These notes will be stored on a password-

locked computer, maintained with utmost confidentiality, and erased from the system after a duration of three years. Access to these recordings will be restricted solely to the researcher.

When reporting the content of the interviews, pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of the interviewees.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision to participate or not will have no impact on your present or future relationship with Blessed Life Church. If you choose to participate, you are under no obligation to respond to any question, and you have the freedom to withdraw from the study at any point without it affecting your relationships with the church.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you wish to withdraw from the project, you can contact the researcher via email or phone. If you choose to withdraw after the first or second meeting, any data collected from you will be promptly deleted and will not be included in this study. However, if you decide to withdraw after the third meeting, you will be requested to complete the final Spiritual Readiness Assessment (SRA) and participate in an interview with the researcher, as originally planned for the study's conclusion. In this case, the data collected from you will still be used in the study. If you decline to take the final SRA and interview, any data collected from you will be immediately discarded and not utilized in the study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Rev. On Ng. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at ██████████████
████████████. You may also contact the researcher's mentor, Dr. Farid Awad, at ██████
████.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will save a copy of the consent form to your computer, type your name and the date on the form, save the completed form, and return it to the researcher as an emailed attachment before the study procedures begin. Rev. Ng will keep a copy of the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Your name

_____

Date

APPENDIX F

Invitation Email

As a graduate student in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree. The purpose of my research is to develop a virtual platform to improve the spiritual health of Christians who may not have the opportunity to meet physically in one geographical location. I would like to extend an invitation to you to participate in this study.

Please note that participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and we prioritize maintaining confidentiality throughout the research process. Enclosed with this invitation is a consent form that provides detailed information on how we ensure confidentiality.

We are specifically seeking Christians who are currently engaged in ministry or those who aspire to serve within a church context. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete pre and post-spiritual readiness assessments, which typically take around 20 minutes to finish. Additionally, participants will be invited to take part in an eight-week online training program aimed at enhancing spiritual well-being and fostering a sense of community among participants. Each weekly session will last approximately one hour.

Here is a breakdown of the research schedule:

Phase	Number of Weeks	Activities
Recruitment Phase	2 Weeks	• Distribution of Invitation Email • Candidates' response to the invitation • Candidates receive and return the consent form and initial SRA.
Implementation Phase Part 1	1 Week	• Deadline for Candidates to return their consent form and the SRA. • Researcher reviews initial questionnaire data.
Implementation Phase Part 2	8 Weeks	• Intervention: 8 online sessions per group.
Implementation Phase Part 3	2 Weeks	• Participants receive and complete the final Spiritual Readiness Assessment (SRA). • Interview with each participant. • Researcher collects and analyzes the data.

Upon receiving this letter, you will have a two-week window to decide whether you wish to participate in the training program and select your preferred group, provided you choose to join this research and training endeavor.

Should an individual agree to participate in this training and research, please email the point of contact (POC) below with a signed consent form before April 19, 2023.

POC for this research is Sai On Ng at ████████████████████████████.

Thanks for your consideration.

Sai On Ng

APPENDIX G

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 19, 2022

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-316 Boundless Community - A Spiritual Readiness Training Program for US Army Reserve Unit Ministry Teams

Dear Sai Ng, Farid Awad,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 1. Research, conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.
Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).
Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 8, 2023

Sai Ng
Farid Awad

Re: Modification - IRB-FY22-23-316 Boundless Community - A Spiritual Readiness Training Program for US Army Reserve Unit Ministry Teams

Dear Sai Ng, Farid Awad,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-FY22-23-316 Boundless Community - A Spiritual Readiness Training Program for US Army Reserve Unit Ministry Teams.

Decision: No Human Subjects Research

Your request to revise your study purpose and develop a pastor-led, 8-week community via a virtual platform to "nourish the spiritual health of lay persons and ministers alike and build a stronger spiritual foundation for their ministry" has been approved.

Thank you for complying with the IRB's requirements for making changes to your project. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.

We wish you well as you continue with your project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office