

Towards the Measurement of Flourishing in Religious Communities

KATELYN N. G. LONG

Harvard University, Human Flourishing Program

knlong@fas.harvard.edu

RYAN J. GREGG

Independent Scholar

ryan@thebay.church

Abstract: In this essay we describe ways that empirical measurement, when theologically informed, can deepen the pursuit of truth and flourishing in religious communities, particularly Christian congregations. By drawing on recent epidemiological and social-scientific work linking religion, spirituality, and human flourishing, we commend careful, tradition-sensitive use of surveys and quantitative tools while acknowledging the limits of measuring sacred realities. We then undertake brief theological reflection on a number of empirical tools, including the nature of data, the sacred potential of technical labor, and potential for both vice and virtue in empirical activities. We close by suggesting five ways empirical data can potentially serve the church: witness, preaching, accountability, discipleship, and financial stewardship. Properly ordered, empirical methods can be a resource for congregations to better understand and nurture flourishing while remaining primarily oriented toward worship, wisdom, and the love of God and neighbor.

Keywords: Empirical measurement, Theology, Human flourishing, Interpretation of data

1. Introduction

Since the beginning humans have been shaped by story. Stories about God. Stories about the beginning and end of the world. Stories about good and evil. Stories about victory and defeat. While humans once told stories huddled around campfires

under a canopy of stars, today we tend to read or watch them in isolation, our faces lit by the blueish glow of private screens. Moreover, the ancient role of storyteller—the village elder, the priest, the holy man or woman—is now available to anyone with an internet connection and a camera. We find ourselves surrounded by an ever-greater cacophony of competing stories—and interpretations.

In general, modern stories are built on modern knowledge, and modern knowledge is increasingly built on data, with preference toward numerical data that can be analyzed by experts (or now machines). In light of this trend, this essay aims to sketch a case for the thoughtful use of empirical measurement within the context of religious communities. Given our own Christian commitments, we reflect most on application within Christian communities, although many of our broader themes may resonate with those from other traditions. We begin by reviewing some of the empirical work that has facilitated greater attention to the relationship between religion, spirituality, flourishing, and well-being. We then reflect on a selection of theological ideas that underpin the use of empirical “data” with the aim to contextualize the natural, often unresolvable tensions that occur when we attempt to measure sacred things. Finally, we describe what might be involved in thoughtful, bidirectional engagement between empirical sciences and religious communities. Our argument is not simply for more measurement—more data as such. Instead, we argue that the wise and skillful use of tools available in the empirical world may be one way of deepening the pursuit of truth, humility, and flourishing in our tasks as human beings created in God’s image.

2. Empirical evidence on religion, spirituality, flourishing and well-being

While the study of religion has been a mainstay of the humanities and social sciences for well over a century, recent decades have seen an explosion of epidemiological and clinical research on religious exposures—especially religious service attendance—as potentially consequential determinants of health and well-being. For example, in 2022 Balboni and colleagues published a landmark review in the top-tiered *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) synthesizing over twenty years of rigorous empirical research on religion and health. The study reviewed over 15,000 research studies, of which 586 met the demanding criteria for inclusion, including requirements for study design, sample size, sufficient covariate control, and low or moderate risk of bias. Among many findings, the authors—along with an expert panel of multidisciplinary reviewers—concluded that religious service attendance was robustly associated with lower all-cause mortality, reduced depression and suicide, less smoking and substance misuse, and better quality of

life and social support (Balboni et al. 2022). The panel also made a number of recommendations based on the strength of the empirical evidence, including incorporating spiritual care for patients with serious illness, integrating spiritual care providers in health systems, and recognizing the value of spiritual community in the promotion of population health. Building on this review, Long et al. published a *Health Affairs* policy analysis highlighting the way that many faith-based groups, congregations, and chaplains have worked alongside—at times directly in partnership with—public sector actors to engage spiritual themes within the context of care. The repository of high-quality studies in Balboni et al., 2022 also provided opportunities for focused sub-analyses. In 2026, Koh et al., published a landmark meta-analysis on spirituality and substance use in the *JAMA Psychiatry* documenting significant protective association of spirituality on both prevention and recovery, which increased substantially for those with greater than weekly religious service attendance (Koh et al. 2026). These papers are merely “tip of the iceberg” examples of recent empirical work on religion and health, which is surveyed more broadly in texts such as Koenig, VanderWeele, and Peteet’s 3rd volume *Handbook of Religion and Health* (Koenig et al. 2023) and Oman’s *Why Religion and Spirituality Matter for Public Health* (2018).

In the context of health-focused work, many empirical studies have begun to take a broader view of the human experience by, for example, exploring the relationship between religion, spirituality, and overall flourishing. While there are many ways to define and measure flourishing, the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University (where KL is a researcher), defines it as “the relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of a person’s life are good, including the contexts in which that person lives” (VanderWeele and Lomas 2022). Within this measure of flourishing are six domains: happiness and life satisfaction, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, mental and physical health, close social relationships, and financial and material stability. The group often reiterates that the domains in their model are not meant to be exhaustive but rather are meant to capture a wider understanding of the human experience with outcomes that are universally desirable (VanderWeele 2017a). New evidence from the Global Flourishing Study, a five-year longitudinal investigation in 22 diverse countries, helps shed further light on the state of flourishing around the world, including the connection to religious and spiritual factors (for more about the Global Flourishing Study see: <https://globalflourishingstudy.com/>). For example, using the first wave of data, composite flourishing scores across countries were substantially higher among adults who attended services most frequently compared to those who never attended. Childhood religious service attendance also predicted higher adult

flourishing: attending at least weekly around age 12 was associated with greater flourishing in adulthood compared with never attending, even after adjustment for other childhood factors. These positive associations between religious service attendance and flourishing were observed for many specific well-being domains and in most countries, although the size of the association varied cross-nationally (VanderWeele et al. 2025). Further empirical work on specific aspects of religion and spirituality has been conducted within and beyond the Global Flourishing Study. For example, see recent studies on hope (Counted et al. 2025; Counted et al. 2025; Long et al. 2024), forgiveness (Cowden, Worthington, et al. 2025; Worthington and Wade 2020), faith sharing (Woodberry et al. 2025) and prayer (Bradshaw et al. 2025).

Those involved in gathering and analyzing such empirical data encounter many critiques. One of the most common (asked by peer-reviewers and by researchers themselves) addresses the wording of survey questions. Do questions about hope, forgiveness, or faith really capture what they claim to capture? Can such ideas be reduced to survey questions, that often, by design, are written at junior high reading levels? Another common hesitation deals with the limited ability of any single question—such as the frequency of religious service attendance—to unpack fully what a person encounters in the process of going to church. Some scholars, like Idler, point to religious services as “black box” with endless forms of “exposures” that can influence and impact people’s spiritual and physical health and well-being (Idler et al. 2009). In previous work, we have argued that there are likely limits to the universal measurement of religious and spiritual factors given the particular ways in which religious traditions are practiced and the diverse ends to which they are pointed (VanderWeele et al. 2021). We further suggest that tradition-specific measurement—for example the measurement of theological virtues (Long and VanderWeele 2022) or Individual Christian Flourishing (Counted et al. 2025) - might be more appropriate within particular contexts. There may even be scope for faith communities themselves to deepen their understanding of flourishing within the context and paradoxes of their own faith (Long et al. 2024).

Despite efforts to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue on such matters, it is often the case that empirical researchers in the social sciences are unfamiliar with the thinking and concerns of their colleagues in the humanities, and vice versa; and many in the academy, regardless of field, are often out of touch with the everyday realities impacting real-world communities and people of faith. We therefore welcome an opportunity to reflect on how the sorts of data-driven outputs—and vocational expressions—described above might more meaningfully engage with religious people and communities themselves. In that spirit we turn now to theological reflection on aspects of empirical work, beginning with the sacred

potential of technical labor.

3. Theological reflection on empirical tools

On the sacred potential of technical labor

The creation stories of the Hebrew Bible depict a God who partners with humans for the good of the world. In Genesis 1, after a sequence of domains are established in which creatures of many sorts are urged to multiply and have dominion (1:16–18), God installs a special creature in the world with a mandate to exercise wise stewardship over this terrestrial domain: humankind. The vocational language of Genesis 1:26–28, deepened in Genesis 2:15, 19–20, makes clear that the *Adam* (אָדָם, from the Hebrew term for “earth” or “soil,” *adamah*, אֲדָמָה), is equipped and tasked to make their own contributions of fresh creativity and order within God’s newly established world. Creation isn’t made perfect, in other words, but is an unfolding endeavor requiring skillful participation from God’s creatures (Middleton 2005).

Scholars attuned to the ancient Near Eastern cognitive environment of these narratives often point out the rich temple imagery that orients their meaning—from the seven-day cadence of construction in Genesis 1, mirroring temple-building practices of the ancient world, to the lavish gemstones and vegetation of Eden in Genesis 2, anticipating the architectural details of Israel’s later tabernacle and temples. To the surprise of many modern readers curious about the relationship between faith and science, these early biblical chapters have little interest in the mechanical question of “how the world was made,” and are more interested in the functional question of “what the world is for.” Temple imagery is the clue to the purpose of creation, and our role within it: it is a cosmic cathedral, the home of God, a place where the Creator may be at home with his many creatures in a relationship characterized by love, mutual agency, joy, and shalom (Walton 2009; Levenson 1994; Volf and McAnnally-Linz 2022; Morales 2024). Even after sin appears in Genesis 3, bringing into the story notes of tragedy, irony, and exile (from God, others, the natural world, and self), God remains committed to working with and through often faithless human beings on a long arc from creation to New Creation.

This context is necessary for considering empirical disciplines through a theological lens. The tremendous cognitive abilities of our species index to the human vocation in God’s temple-shaped world, and can be wisely leveraged toward modern scientific analogues of the tasks originally given *Adam*: tending and keeping the garden, naming the animals, and expanding the boundaries of order and harmony so that all creatures may flourish in the presence of God. Interestingly, the

first person in the Bible explicitly “filled with the Spirit of God” was the master craftsman Bezalel who oversaw the construction of the Israelite tabernacle (see Exodus 31:1–5; 35:30–36:1). This structure, which travelled with the Israelites on their wilderness journey from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, recalled Eden not only in its physical design—precious stones, plants, etc.—but in its deeper spiritual function: it was the privileged point of overlap between the dwelling places of God and humanity. And to build such a holy place, great technical skill was required.

Such coincidence of advanced skill and devotion to God is not uncommon in Scripture. According to tradition, much of the New Testament was written by men whose prior training as, e.g., financiers (Matthew) or legal scholars (Paul) helped them articulate the Gospel in a compelling way not only for 1st century readers, but for readers across the centuries. Think of Luke, “the beloved physician” (Col 4:14), who further established his credentials as a historian compiling his sources according to the canons of ancient historiography: “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us ... it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:1–4).

Overly strict boundaries, then, between “sacred” and “secular” labor are clearly contested by the creational theology of Scripture. In American church settings—the context with which we are most familiar—these insights have come to expression through “faith and work” initiatives that seek to forward a holistic understanding of the Kingdom of God as it impinges on our daily labor. But we feel there is need for better articulation of these ideas as they pertain to the empirical disciplines, from the formation of survey items, to the collection of data, to the interpretation of results.

On Data

The word *data* is a Latin term that, in its singular form, means “something given.” In the sciences, data is often treated as something to be manipulated in various ways for our own purposes. But Christians who engage with empirical data may begin to see it in a different and deeper light: as reflections of a reality that is fundamentally *given*, with potential to teach us about God, God’s world, and our place within it. More broadly, for Christians, human consciousness itself is a gift - given from and held within God’s own “consciousness” (for lack of a better term), and the Christian life of the mind should therefore be grounded in humble gratitude for such

fundamental gifts.

20th century theologian T. F. Torrance, in his book *Space, Time, and Resurrection* (2019), beautifully summarizes such an epistemic stance towards reality:

The more intensively we probe into the inherent profundity of the universe, the deeper the dimension in which its objectivity and intelligibility become disclosed to us, the more we find our epistemic relation to it being reversed: we are up against a reality that towers above our intelligence, which we cannot know or reflect about by trying to occupy some epistemic stance “above” it. This is the kind of reality which we know by inquiring into it from “below,” as it were, by submitting our minds to the authority of what it actually is and seeking to apprehend it by allowing our understanding to fall under the power of its intrinsic but transcendent intelligibility ... to embark on a course of humble discipline in which our minds will be stretched beyond our capacities which they may claim to have in themselves.

Echoing Torrance, people of faith who ponder data in various forms must do so from “below” not “above.” We operate most authentically when we approach empirical inquiry not as masters but as students. Yet as we saw above, humans are also not merely passive recipients of reality; we are invited into creative and generative roles. The ordering power of God over the heavens and earth is reflected in the ordering potential of humanity, and it is just here that technical mastery—learning how “data” is generated and analyzed, what it can say and more importantly, what it cannot—may be viewed as part of a human vocation to discern the good, the true, and the beautiful at work in the world today. While genuinely accepting that much of what is most holy and sacred about God and human persons defies perfect measurement or understanding, we might humbly move towards ways to approach sacred ideas embedded in empirical projects. For example, many in the field of positive psychology are eager to measure and better understand constructs like hope or happiness; yet for Christians, these ideas are uniquely interpreted in the context of Christian scripture and Christian tradition and might benefit from survey questions and research projects that more fully reflect a theological understanding of hope alongside measures of dispositional hope or optimism.

More broadly, meticulous, data-based work in arenas such as human health, social and political sciences, and the natural world is in continuity, not antagonism, with scriptural calls to “be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Romans 12:2) and to put on “the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Colossians 3:10). In this vein, theologian Karl Barth once advised his students to read deeply from both Bible *and* newspaper, with one in each hand (“Barth in Retirement,” 1963); just so, Christian vocation in the 21st century

may be done by some with Scripture and a spreadsheet, one in each hand.

On the Interpretation of Data

Some have pointed out that we live in an Age of Interpretation, where “there are no facts, only interpretations” (Nietzsche 2017; Vanhoozer 2009). Although some accept empirical research as the closest proxy to “fact,” and seem to believe all of reality could in principle be coded and reduced to data, many others resist this assumption for a variety of reasons. Leading philosophers of science have highlighted the limitations of empirical knowledge as such (Polanyi and Sen 2009; Nagel 2012) while physicists have exposed the fundamental indeterminateness of the quantum world. The very act of measurement changes what is measured, and perhaps the measurer too. The verdict is in, from many fields: raw data alone cannot have a monopoly on the nature of reality, because there is no such thing as perfectly raw data or perfectly objective interpreters. All is backlit with values, dynamic and multi-layered, pregnant with mystery. And yet, many in the empirical world often ignore the quandaries of interpretation and overstate what is “known,” neglecting the intellectual humility that is a core ingredient of wise academic pursuit.

So in a context where temptation lies in both directions, towards over- and under-interpretation, how should Christian communities relate to empirical data? Very carefully—in a manner fully aware of how the Christian tradition both relativizes and legitimizes data. On one hand, many have critiqued moments in Christian history when theology seemed to concede too much ground to the scientific dogmas of the day, focusing on the temporal at the expense of Scriptural revelation and matters of the highest good (Barth 1968); on the relativizing side, then, Christian communities may gladly listen to empirical findings while allowing deeper epistemological commitments to help discern implications. On the other hand, the empirical deliverances of science have historically had a symbiotic relationship with theological reflection, as new data has spurred new ways of conceiving God just as surely as curiosities about God have motivated a great deal of research into the workings of the natural and social worlds (Pannenberg 1993). For example, in their book *The Penultimate Curiosity: How Science Swims in the Slipstream of Ultimate Questions* (Wagner and Briggs 2016), English scholars Roger Wagner and Andrew Briggs write about “many of the pioneers of the so-called ‘scientific revolution’ for whom the study of nature was conceived as an aspect of religious worship”. Data-based questions are often drawn along in the wake of powerful curiosities about God, which in turn confers on the study of nature a dimension of worshipful inquiry. (In a related stream, “natural theology” is a mode of thought seeking to glean truths

about God from the empirical facts of nature and history alone, aside from revealed Scripture.) The bottom line here is that when data is theologically contextualized—legitimized for what it offers yet appropriately relativized within a wider epistemological framework—labor with data can engage the full analytical powers of the mind and also the religious devotion of the heart.

Interestingly, this coupling is mirrored in the very architecture of the organ that knows, the brain, with its right and left hemispheres. Neuropsychologist Iain McGilchrist has done much to increase our understanding here. Cartoonish versions of a black-and-white, logic-chopping left hemisphere sitting alongside the colorful, creative swirls of the right hemisphere are wrong: networks in both sides of the brain are clearly at work in nearly all activities. At the same time, McGilchrist articulates a deeper and more nuanced account of this basic division of labor (McGilchrist 2019, 2021). The right hemisphere, which is predisposed to *care*, is indeed the part of the brain awake to metaphor, story, context, depth, emotion, embodiment, and importantly, faith. It is our primary way of knowing the world. The modern West, however, argues McGilchrist, is built in the image of a left hemisphere predisposed to *control*, and preferring abstraction, precision, analysis, logic, and yes, data. These are two very different ways of attending to the world: the right hemisphere can negotiate layers of meaning, while the left hemisphere—which believes it is in charge and prefers the fiction that whatever it cannot understand does not exist—tends towards flat, reductive accounts of the world. For McGilchrist, the future hangs on whether we can find ways to reign in the technocratic certainties of the left hemisphere, and rehabilitate the deeper, richer world of the right hemisphere. Who better to participate in such interpretative synthesis than people of faith, trained in the use of the scientific method while also aware that certain mysteries may only be approached through metaphor, story, and humble faith?

With the vital role it plays in the modern production of knowledge, data and its interpretation are likely to become (if they are not already) a chief mode of learning about our world and the people in it. In the midst of what can sometimes be a frenetic swirl of numbers, facts, charts, and figures, Christian communities can support and contribute to the production, analysis, and interpretation of data concerned with furthering social conditions that allow people and whole communities to reach their fulfillment more fully and easily (Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace 2005). At the same time, we must bear in mind an irony that is increasingly clear: that data itself reveals how data only gets us so far. Quantitative reasoning is one ingredient in the task of discerning the full contours of reality, but it cannot claim to approach ultimate knowledge. For that, we need God. And speaking truthfully about God and God's world is a theological practice—a self-

involving discourse that makes a claim not just on what we know, but on who we are as knowers. Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar put it this way: “In theology, there are no ‘bare facts’ which, in the name of an alleged objectivity of detachment, disinterestedness and impartiality, one could establish like any other worldly facts, without oneself being gripped so as to participate in the divine nature.” (Balthasar 2009, pg. 121) As we remember the limits of “data” and of our capacity to know reality in full, Christians and Christian communities can explore the intrinsic beauty of empirical findings with grateful wonder and prayerful interpretation.

On Vice and Virtue in empirical measurement

There is a tension between, on the one hand, embracing technical, empirical methods, and on the other hand, an idolatry of such pursuits, particularly when means become ends. In his Thomistic study of the four cardinal virtues Joseph Pieper writes, “Without rational self-restraint even the natural hunger for sense perception or for knowledge can degenerate into a destructive and pathological compulsive greed; this degradation Aquinas called *curiositas*, the disciplined mode *studiositas*” (Pieper 1966, pg. 151). He later goes on to comment: “Nietzsche said that wisdom ‘puts limits on knowledge.’ Whatever he himself may have meant by this, there is no doubt that the will-to-knowledge, this noble power of the human being, requires restraining wisdom, ‘in order that man may not strive immoderately for the knowledge of things.’ [quoting Aquinas]” (pg. 198).

Where then do we draw the line in the quest for knowledge? For Christians the umpire is Christ, who rebukes the corruption of the measuring spirit, with its tendency to harness on details and miss the big picture. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!” (Matthew 23:23–24). Christ’s words, as in many places, have a hard edge both to his first hearers, and when we attempt to apply them to modern scenarios.

Think of the Christian analyst who builds technically excellent models of human health and well-being, but never considers the bigger picture in terms of what might be missing from the model, how constructs are defined and measured, and how statistical modeling might ultimately inform public policy that impacts real lives and communities. What happens if this analyst never pauses for deep reflection and prayer, rushing instead to the next model, the next paper, the next product, caught

in the modern distraction of quantity over quality? Endless and aimless data untethered from wisdom tends to dehumanize both the knower and what is known.

“Knowledge,” writes theologian Oliver O’Donovan, “is the characteristically human way of participating in the cosmic order ... To know is to fill a quite specific place in the order of things, the place allotted to mankind ... The exercise of knowledge is tied up with the faithful performance of man’s task in the world, and his knowing will stand or fall with his worship of God and his obedience to the moral law.” (O’Donovan 1996, pg. 81) In other words, *knowing* gets at a core element of human *being*, while *worship* and *obedience* get at a core aspect of *knowing*. For Christians, empirical rigor must find its corollary in faithful response if we are to be fully human.

Keeping these two things together is a delicate dance, of course, always in motion. The potential ego inflation that comes with all gains in knowledge (see 1 Corinthians 8:1, “knowledge puffs up”) must be counterbalanced with practices of humility and confession. As Rowan Williams points out in *The Wound of Knowledge* (Williams 1991, pg. 11), “The questioning involved here is not our interrogation of the data, but its interrogation of us ... The greatness of the great Christian saints lies in their readiness to be questioned, judged, stripped naked and left speechless by that which lies at the center of their faith.” In this, as in most things, Christians are called to paradox—to be curious, inquisitive, and technically skilled people, pursuing excellence in the vocational tasks given to us by God. And we are also to be prayerful, discerning, and wise people. At times this may slow our work or lead us to do less (or perhaps more) for the sake of meaningful output that not only enriches our fields in the long run, but may be a blessing to others far beyond our understanding.

Future Directions

Our argument is that Christians can engage deeply in the life of the mind and particularly in empirical research pursuits as a thoroughly faithful exercise that blesses not only the world but also the church. As Christians, we can approach data as something received *and* as a task in which we have a generative and interpretive role to play. All manner of technical and scientific vocations may be done unto God, Scripture and spreadsheets in hand, learning ever more about God’s world in a posture of humility towards all that remains a mystery, and mindful of the vices of pride and self-worship that can creep into our work when we forget who we are. To close, then, we consider what might be possible if Christian congregations and

communities engage more directly with the resources available through empirical methods.

In general, when numerical data is used in the church it often begins and ends around basic metrics of attendance and giving, while richer trends of spiritual and religious life are left to the pollsters and a select number of academic researchers. But what if Christian congregations moved beyond merely tracking (forgive us) “butts, bucks, and buildings”, and explored thoughtful ways to measure and understand the formation of faith, hope, and love in the lives of believers, and where these virtues lead in everyday lives and communities? Could modern empirical methods allow us to understand timeless realities in a new way? Some argue that such a premise is offensive to the mission of the Church and should not be pursued. Others argue that such work is already underway by pointing to the type of empirical research we highlighted at the beginning of this essay. For those within the Christian tradition (and other religious traditions) many of these studies aren’t saying anything wildly new to those who have ears to hear. But they do analyze these ideas in new ways that ears both old and new can hear afresh. This is good news. There are good stories yet to tell, and empirical data can be one resource for this work. What more could we learn if Christian religious communities carefully and wisely engaged measurement in their own settings?

We suggest five ways in which a rich stewardship of data might strengthen the church:

1. **Witness.** Amidst the increasing calls in the scientific and biomedical communities to seriously consider religion and spirituality as key features of human experience and wellbeing (Balboni et al. 2022; Long et al. 2024) there are new doors open for people and communities of faith to study and share their own work with a wider world (McLaughlin 2025). Many Christians have been blessed to hear that going to church is a good thing “according to science”, and there may be yet other dimensions of church participation, the Christian spiritual life, or Christian service that empirical tools can help us better understand and explore (Counted et al. 2025; Vander Weele and Case 2021). Social scientists will be hard at work unpacking these multilayered realities and the Church should not sit idly by waiting for results to come in. This is an opportunity to engage more deeply: participating in the good and wise use of data, discerning what to glean when “results are in,” and sharing that learning with the wider world and communities we serve.
2. **Preaching.** As a unique type of witness, preaching today can better use the storytelling power of empirical data to address seekers in a language they

understand. While many pastors reference studies or trends in society, there are many empirical resources that can shed deeper light on ways people are suffering or flourishing in our communities and across our world (See, for example, Chen et al. 2025; Nakamura et al. 2025; Cowden, Chen, et al. 2025; Kim et al. 2025). In engaging these materials and sharing with their congregations, pastors and spiritual leaders can judiciously employ modern data to help narrate the timeless Christian story. This includes avoiding overinterpretation of any one study, using real numbers (where possible), and citing sources so congregants have context for their own learning and discernment. For better or worse, empirical data is a key ingredient to the language in our time, and the pulpit may engage its persuasive power with wisdom.

3. **Accountability.** Not everything in the church leads to the outcomes we claim to care most about. Christians should be the *most* inquisitive about the impact of our faith and work in and for the world. For example, we say we love our neighbors and want to serve others, and most congregations have many programs designed to demonstrate this love—but do our acts of love or practical service make a demonstrable, dignified difference in the lives of our neighbors and in our communities (Long et al. 2025)? This, and many other avenues, are perfect lanes for the church to embrace empirical methods to help learn about ourselves and our work in a new way, carefully studying the results and making changes in places we fail. This work will require partnership, since most pastors and church leaders are not trained in data collection or analysis; this need for partnership opens doors for whole new groups of people, like those with various technical skills, to engage in the mission of the Church.
4. **Discipleship.** Not every practice in the Christian life is easy. Who really likes waking up early on weekends to go to church? Who loves confessing their sins out loud, fasting, forgiving, and swapping vacation money for tithe? Yet these sacred rhythms lead to surprisingly good (and sometimes measurable) outcomes (VanderWeele 2024, 2017b), and should not be abandoned simply because they sit awkwardly alongside modern ideals. To that end, empirical data, like studies showing the multiprong benefits of religious service attendance, can also encourage us not to give up on difficult habits and virtues that lead to life (Case et al. 2025). From our own experience developing survey items for Christian communities (VanderWeele et al. 2021) and new empirical work alongside congregations (see flourishingandthechurch.com), we have witnessed firsthand the way that

theologically rich surveys in the context of spiritual community can act as a rich form of reflection, and even individual and collective examen. Surprisingly, empirical data can remind us who we are or ought to be—re-telling a story that God has been telling us from the beginning. It can also prod us where we fail and help us see points of pain in our communities where attention is needed.

5. **Financial Stewardship.** Given Christ's many warnings of money's way of stealing our affections, it goes without saying that the overlap of dollars and data must be handled with care. Yet, we are also mindful that healthy things grow (both deep and wide), and growing things need infrastructure. So with hearts duly guarded, we suggest that the faithful use of data in the church can sharpen our stewardship, and by extension, our fidelity to mission. Many things are needed here: better understanding of programs and practices that facilitate flourishing in the lives of our congregants and communities; stewarding investments and resources to promote maturity and discipleship among believers and meaningful relief for those who suffer; strengthening families, neighborhoods, towns, cities, and whole regions; and preparing well for future generations.

Conclusion

In the beginning was story, and a God who loves to give. Today the stories that shape us are often told through data, analyzing the many layers of *givens* in our world. As a storytelling people—curious, expansive, imaginative—Christian communities can approach the use of empirical data to help discern and tell robust and truthful stories in our time. Engagement here begins with gratitude for the givenness of creation. The universe didn't have to be this big, or intricate, or coherent, or beautiful—but it is! Eucharistic wonder can guide our empirical enterprises, kindling within such work an inner glow of worship.

Coming alongside this gratitude and giving it form, Christian theological reflection on and with empirical measurement can allow us new avenues to think through big questions about the human experience, as well as urgent issues of ministry impact. From the beginning God chose to work through human beings to bring about good work in the world, and Christians look to the resurrected Lord as the one who still points the way forward, sowing seeds of healing and beauty, justice and love, that one day will bloom. Empirical measurement—data, analysis, interpretation—is simply a tool. Like all tools, it requires training and skill, an understanding of proper application and limitations. In the context of religious

communities, measurement requires engagement with theology and philosophy, which each have their own sets of tools to sort and discern the nature of reality. Wisely deployed, empirical methods are a meaningful resource in our essential mission of loving God and neighbor, both now and for future generations.

Bibliography

- Balboni, T. A., T. J. VanderWeele, S. D. Doan-Soares, et al. 2022. "Spirituality in Serious Illness and Health." *JAMA* 328, no. 2: 184. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2022.11086>.
- Balthasar, H. U. von. 2009. *Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. Ignatius Press.
- "Barth in Retirement." 1963. *TIME* 81, no. 22: 58–60.
- Barth, K. 1968. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Translated by Edwyn C. Hoskyns. Oxford University Press.
- Bradshaw, M., V. Counted, T. Lomas, R. D. Woodberry, T. J. VanderWeele, and B. R. Johnson. 2025. "Childhood Experiences and Adult Prayer or Meditation in 22 Countries around the World." *Sci Rep* 15, no. 1: 15083. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-99796-x>.
- Case, B., K. N. G. Long, T. J. VanderWeele, and B. R. Johnson. 2025. "Measuring the Good Life." *Christianity Today*, May 1. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2025/05/global-flourishing-study-good-life/>.
- Chen, Y., D. Weziak-Bialowolska, E. S. Kim, et al. 2025. "Variations in Character Involving an Orientation to Promote Good across Sociodemographic Groups in 22 Countries." *Sci Rep* 15, no. 1: 14552. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-83539-5>.
- Counted, V., K. Long, B. Johnson, et al. 2025. "The Individual Domain of Christian Flourishing: Conceptual Foundations and Measurement Template." *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 44 (June): 15–38.
- Counted, V., K. N. G. Long, R. G. Cowden, C. V. O. Witvliet, C. Gibson, A. Cortright, J. Walsh, et al. 2025. "Seeds of Hope: Cross-National Analysis of Childhood Predictors of Hope in 22 Countries." *Appl Res Qual Life* 20, no. 3: 1111–37. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-025-10450-0>.
- Counted, V., K. N. G. Long, R. G. Cowden, C. V. O. Witvliet, C. Gibson, A. Cortright, E. Purcell, et al. 2025. "Where Hope Thrives: Demographic Variation in Hope across 22 Countries." *J Happiness Stud* 27, no. 1: 5. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-025-00981-6>.
- Cowden, R. G., Z. J. Chen, R. Wilkinson, et al. 2025. "A Cross-National Analysis of Sociodemographic Variation in Suffering across 22 Countries." *Commun Med* 5,

- no. 1: 144. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43856-025-00859-x>.
- Cowden, R. G., E. L. Worthington, D. Weziak-Bialowolska, et al. 2025. "Childhood Predictors of Dispositional Forgiveness in Adulthood: A Cross-National Analysis with 22 Countries." *Appl Res Qual Life* 20, no. 3: 1057–84. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-025-10451-z>.
- Idler, E. L., D. A. Boulifard, E. Labouvie, Y. Y. Chen, T. J. Krause, and R. J. Contrada. 2009. "Looking Inside the Black Box of 'Attendance at Services': New Measures for Exploring an Old Dimension in Religion and Health Research." *Int J Psychol Relig* 19, no. 1: 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508610802471096>.
- Kim, E. S., M. Bradshaw, R. N. Padgett, et al. 2025. "Identifying Childhood Correlates of Adult Purpose and Meaning across 22 Countries (Global Flourishing Study)." *Npj Mental Health Res* 4, no. 1: 14. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44184-025-00127-9>.
- Koenig, H. G., T. VanderWeele, and J. R. Peteet. 2023. *Handbook of Religion and Health*. 3rd ed. Oxford University Press.
- Koh, H. K., D. E. Frederick, T. A. Balboni, et al. 2026. "Spirituality and Harmful or Hazardous Alcohol and Other Drug Use: A Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies." *JAMA Psychiatry*, February 18. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2025.4816>.
- Levenson, J. D. 1994. *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*. Princeton University Press.
- Long, K. N. G., V. Counted, A. Fogelman, M. T. Lee, B. R. Johnson, and T. J. VanderWeele. 2024. *Flourishing and the Church*. <https://abundantlifeflourishing.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/GFS-FlourishingChurch-I-FINAL-05.08.2024-Pages.pdf>.
- Long, K. N. G., J. S. Nakamura, P. M. Long, et al. 2025. "Flourishing Communities: The Role of Faith Communities in the Promotion of Flourishing and the Common Good." *J Psychol Christ* 44, no. 1: 84–107.
- Long, K. N. G., X. Symons, T. J. VanderWeele, et al. 2024. "Spirituality As A Determinant Of Health: Emerging Policies, Practices, And Systems." *Health Aff* 43, no. 6: 783–90. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2023.01643>.
- Long, K. N. G., and T. J. VanderWeele. 2022. "Theological Virtues, Health, and Well-Being: Theory, Research, and Public Health." In *Handbook of Positive Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality*, edited by Edward B. Davis, Everett L. Worthington Jr, and Sarah A. Schnitker. Springer.
- Long, K. N. G., R. Wilkinson, R. G. Cowden, Y. Chen, and T. J. VanderWeele. 2024. "Hope in Adolescence and Subsequent Health and Well-Being in Adulthood: An Outcome-Wide Longitudinal Study." *Soc Sci Med* 347: 116704. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2024.116704>.

- McGilchrist, I. 2019. *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. Yale University Press.
- McGilchrist, I. 2021. *The Matter With Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*. Perspectiva.
- McLaughlin, R. 2025. *How Church Could*. Crossway.
- Middleton, J. R. 2005. *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*. Baker Academic.
- Morales, L. M., ed. 2024. *Cult and Cosmos: Tilting Toward a Temple-Centered Theology*. Peeters.
- Nagel, T. 2012. *Mind & Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*. Oxford University Press.
- Nakamura, J. S., D. Węziak-Białowolska, R. D. Woodberry, et al. 2025. "Demographic Variation in Charitable Giving and Helping across 22 Countries in the Global Flourishing Study." *Sci Rep* 15, no. 1: 14802. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-96009-3>.
- Nietzsche, F. 2017. *The Will to Power*. Edited by R. Kevin Hill. Translated by Michael A. Scarpitti. Penguin Classics.
- O'Donovan, O. 1996. *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*. Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Oman, D., ed. 2018. *Why Religion and Spirituality Matter for Public Health: Evidence, Implications, and Resources*. 1st ed. Springer.
- Pannenberg, W. 1993. *Toward a Theology of Nature: Essays on Science and Faith*. Westminster John Knox Press.
- Pieper, J. 1966. *The Four Cardinal Virtues*. Translated by Richard Winston, Clara Winston, Lawrence E. Lynch, and Daniel F. Coogan. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Polanyi, M., and A. Sen. 2009. *The Tacit Dimension*. University of Chicago Press.
- Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace. 2005. "Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church." https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html.
- Torrance, T. F. 2019. *Space, Time and Resurrection*. T&T Clark.
- VanderWeele, T. J., and B. W. Case. 2021. "Empty Pews Are an American Public Health Crisis." *Christianity Today*, October 19. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2021/10/church-empty-pews-are-american-public-health-crisis/>.
- VanderWeele, T. J. 2017a. "On the Promotion of Human Flourishing." *PNAS* 114, no. 31: 8148–56. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1702996114>.

- VanderWeele, T. J. 2017b. "Religion and Health: A Synthesis." In *Spirituality and Religion within the Culture of Medicine: From Evidence to Practice*. Oxford University Press.
- VanderWeele, T. J. 2024. *A Theology of Health: Wholeness and Human Flourishing*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- VanderWeele, T. J., B. R. Johnson, P. T. Bialowolski, et al. 2025. "The Global Flourishing Study: Study Profile and Initial Results on Flourishing." *Nat Ment Health* 3, no. 6: 636–53. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44220-025-00423-5>.
- VanderWeele, T. J., and T. Lomas. 2022. "Terminology and the Well-Being Literature." *Affect Sci* 4, no. 1: 36–40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42761-022-00153-2>.
- VanderWeele, T. J., K. N. G. Long, and M. J. Balboni. 2021. "Tradition-Specific Measures of Spiritual Well-Being." In *Measuring Well-Being: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from the Social Sciences and the Humanities*, edited by Matthew T. Lee, Laura D. Kubzansky, and Tyler J. VanderWeele. Oxford University Press. <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/measuring-well-being-9780197512531>.
- Vanhoozer, K. J. 2009. *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*. Zondervan.
- Volf, M., and R. McAnnally-Linz. 2022. *The Home of God: A Brief Story of Everything*. Brazos Press.
- Wagner, R., and A. Briggs. 2016. *The Penultimate Curiosity: How Science Swims in the Slipstream of Ultimate Questions*. Oxford University Press.
- Walton, J. H. 2009. *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*. IVP Academic.
- Williams, R. 1991. *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross*. Cowley.
- Woodberry, R. D., M. Bradshaw, T. J. VanderWeele, and B. R. Johnson. 2025. "Cross-National Variation in Faith Sharing across Religious Traditions." *Sci Rep* 15, no. 1: 13299. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-83531-z>.
- Worthington, E. L., and N. G. Wade, eds. 2020. *Handbook of Forgiveness*. 2nd ed. Routledge.

Published Online First: August 12, 2026