



Spiritual Innovation and Entrepreneurship

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Spiritual Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Spiritual care has traditionally been accessed in religious contexts. However, the closure of churches and rising numbers of religiously unaffiliated is rendering this form of care obsolete. Meeting with faith leaders within the bounds of religious institutions, such as meeting with a pastor for marriage counseling, has become less aligned with the current needs of the population. We live in an age of increasing religious apathy, indifference, and disaffiliation. Trends show rising numbers of people identifying as “nothing in particular”, which lends to the perception that people are no longer interested in religion. However, beneath this statistic is a more complicated story.

The rise in religiously unaffiliated individuals in the US has been significant, with the number increasing from 16% in 2007 to 26% in 2021.¹ This shift highlights the need for alternative avenues for spiritual support, in order to address spiritual needs and their impact on mental health. Studies reveal the effect of religious disaffiliation on mental health, with religiously unaffiliated individuals reporting higher rates of depression, anxiety, and feelings of loneliness.² Conversely, spirituality can help people develop positive coping skills and a sense of meaning, both predictors of overall wellbeing.³

¹ Smith, Gregory A. 2021. “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated.” *Policy File*. Pew Research Center.

² Aksoy, O., Bann, D., Fluharty, M. E., & Nandi, A. (2022). Religiosity and Mental Wellbeing Among Members of Majority and Minority Religions: Findings From Understanding Society: the UK Household Longitudinal Study. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 191(1), 20–30.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwab133>

³ Bailee Blankemeier and Ilana Ron Levey, "Religion and Spirituality: Tools for Better Wellbeing?," Gallup Blog, October 10, 2023, accessed 4/3/24,
<https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/512216/religion-spirituality-tools-better-wellbeing.aspx>

The rising rates of disaffiliation do not necessarily mean that people are no longer interested in developing spiritual lives. Small, stable increases in the atheist population lend to the idea that the large shift is not away from belief itself, but the institutions that have historically housed it.⁴ The younger generations, in particular, have grown up in a time of institutional critique, where once-respected entities have come under intense public scrutiny. The advent of the internet has transformed how we form and share beliefs, as well as where we seek knowledge. In this changing landscape, belief systems persist, but the structures supporting meaning making require innovation.

I identify as a religious “none” and see myself represented in these statistics. Growing up, I was part of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, commonly known as Mormons. Despite the good that I recognized in the church, from its emphasis on family to its strong emphasis on social service, I knew that my political beliefs, gender, and sexuality would always leave me on the outskirts of the community. My feeling of disconnection from this particular tradition has always been accompanied by a deep love of the Divine. Disaffiliation does not outwardly illustrate the many positive affiliations I have, such as seeker, creative, and contemplative. For ‘nones’ like myself, separation from organized religion can be equated with not being able to have a spiritual life.

As a Religious Studies major in college, I came to see that religion plays a deeper role in our lives, decisions, and society than we might initially conceive. It has the potential for great good and great harm. In response to the harms that religion has spurred, we have moved to an age where religion is strictly separated from public life. However, scholars such as Saba Mahmood have meticulously argued against the mirage of a completely secular world.⁵

⁴ Smith, “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated.”

⁵ Mahmood, Saba. 2011. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Mahmood makes the case that secularism is not a neutral framework, but a system imposing beliefs and values. I was particularly drawn to the staunch secularity of the mental health field. Despite the deeply intertwined nature of meaning, purpose, and faith in one's spiritual life, I felt that the modern institution of mental health focused only on a medicalized view of human functioning.

My focus on religion and mental health strengthened as I graduated and started work at a suicide prevention non-profit in an Alaskan town. I noticed that mental health was too often seen as a siloed issue separate from spiritual well-being or life in a faith community. Mental health practitioners were often resistant to discussing religion or working with faith leaders, despite the fact that this is a guiding framework in many people's lives. I saw a great possibility for spirituality to be more widely accepted as a facet of well-being, as well as a great mistrust of what opening the door to the non-secular could imply. This mistrust was not unfounded. However, alliances between faith leaders and mental health professionals seemed to be an important opportunity that was left unexplored.

After working in the mental health field, I wanted to better understand how spirituality showed up for people in challenging times. The rich spiritual lives of nones were highlighted to me when I worked as a hospital chaplain intern. Many of the people I visited in the hospital had complex religious or spiritual identities that may have been obscure even to themselves. Patients question why they have to get sick and how a good God or Universe could allow them to. They ask whether they have led moral lives up to that point and seek forgiveness for moments that they have fallen short. The theological narratives that are intertwined in these beliefs and questions are deeply important, but few people ever have a space in which they can safely discuss them.

I have talked with faith leaders, atheists, mental health workers, academics, and entrepreneurs and I keep coming back to my central idea: everyone can have a rich spiritual life and everyone deserves spiritual care. Ignoring the harms and challenges of faith also does not heal the wounds they have inflicted. I am a faithful optimist. I believe that we can tend to the spiritual needs of people if we are willing to create new systems of care that can meet people where they are. This is a movement I call spiritual innovation and entrepreneurship. When we faithfully innovate, we open the door to lives of deeper meaning and purpose. This yearning was the emotional throughline of my many interviews with people in the fields of mental health, wellbeing, and religious studies. Many of us aren't able to put words to this want or imagine systems beyond the religions that do not sit well with us. However, we can sense that there's something more to life and we are seeking it in every way possible, from workout classes to 5 am meditations to weekly therapy.

I joined the Spiritual Care Project (SCP) as a co-founder driven by the desire to increase access to soul care. The Spiritual Care Project was founded by Jenn Louie when her mother was diagnosed with cancer. At the time she was taking classes at Harvard Divinity School and deeply engaged in a world of spiritual seekers, yet she struggled to find resources to address her spiritual needs in this time of crisis. Jenn and I wanted to fully understand the interests of the religiously unaffiliated so we set out on a listening tour of individuals, innovators, faith leaders, and academics.

We identified three pressing issues: accessibility, literacy, and trust. The most tangible issue was that the unaffiliated had nowhere to turn with their spiritual needs. Access was often limited to religious denominations that often felt misaligned with the social values or schedules of seekers. Chaplains, who are trained in multireligious care, operate only in institutions like

hospitals and are generally not accessible in non-crisis moments. It could be challenging to choose a spiritual director given the huge range of specialties they operated under, as well as the cost of these sessions. Literacy was also a contributing factor because many people did not have the language to express their spiritual needs. They may have left the religion of their childhoods and since been in a liminal period of wanting more, but not being sure what options there were. Challenging experiences with organized religion and a mistrust of the social and political values of religious organizations made it hard for seekers to trust that spiritual care providers could meet them where they were. Seekers found it challenging to build trust that spiritual care providers could support them without agendas or conversion.

The Spiritual Care Project seeks to address these challenges by providing individualized interfaith care in a world where it can seem like religion is disappearing. The first question we faced was who should provide this care. We turned to board certified chaplains because they receive multiple years of training, have knowledge of how to work with people of all and no faith traditions, and operate with a strong code of ethics. Interviews with chaplains also highlighted the sentiment of wanting to expand chaplaincy to new settings and benefit from the flexibility of telehealth care. We reached out to a number of spiritual care providers online forums and put out a call for providers. Over a month-long period we interviewed over 30 chaplains.

Care providers hold a great deal of authority with clients and we felt an ethical duty to make sure that the chaplains on our team could uphold professional standards. In addition, we faced worries of what a chaplain might do if faced with a client in a mental health crisis. Thus, we devised an interview method where we role-played challenging situations with chaplains to put them in some of the most challenging situations they might face. We came to a wonderful

team of six providers who are ACPE certified, trained in additional fields like mental health and disaster response, and excited about exploring new avenues of spiritual care.

The first iteration of the platform was a directory of spiritual care providers that seekers could look through and choose from. However, interviews with users showed that this amount of choice could be overwhelming, particularly in times of crisis. We then pivoted to an individualized matching service. The process started with a survey, a 15 minute interview with a team member, and then 2 matches based on their answers. Our pilot yielded some invigorating feedback. Users noted that they felt understood, valued, and supported by the experience.

The pilot also highlighted the shortcomings of our model. Logistics could be challenging when matching people across time zones and around busy schedules. Some users had never spoken with a chaplain before and were unsure what to discuss. Our model also highlighted the need for both individual spiritual counseling and group spiritual development. With isolation looming large in the lives of many users, we found that users sought deep, long-term connections with groups of like-minded spiritual seekers. This feedback led us to pilot a number of group sessions on grief, the spiritual imagination, and the future of spiritual care. There will not be a one size fits all solution to meet our spiritual needs.

My work at the Spiritual Care Project opened my eyes to the nuances and challenges of building new spiritual infrastructure. Unlike mental health care, spiritual care is not currently covered by insurance. This kind of care has traditionally been accessed in religious institutions that are funded through tithes, donations, and offerings. Building a service that provides spiritual care lent to the question of where this offering fits in our current health system. Is it mental health care similar to therapy, an employee benefit offered by companies, an individual wellness

pursuit like life coaching, or a form of accompaniment offered by good samaritans? Who foots the bill for soul care?

Adding to this challenge, it also felt imperative to recognize the needs of spiritual care providers. Chaplains undergo years of expensive training and are often underpaid and overworked. Many people perceive spiritual care as a soft skill that providers do solely out of love for the work, overlooking the burnout and emotional turmoil that providers can face. In building a new system of spiritual care, we wanted to be sure to lay a foundation of equitable pay that could sustain providers and acknowledge their expertise.

In studying new approaches to spiritual care we examined a number of possible funding mechanisms. We were quickly faced with the question of whether to incorporate as a non-profit or for profit entity. As a non-profit, we could have offered free or reduced price spiritual care services with the aid of grants. However, nonprofits in the religious and spiritual world face significant competition to receive funding, struggles to maintain the longevity of programming, and risks to being able to offer agenda-free care against priorities of funders with ties to religious institutions. The right business model needed to balance liveable wages for providers with accessible pricing for users.

The challenges of creating an independent spiritual care entity opened my eyes to the paths of least resistance of deepening spirituality's role in institutions that already housed it. Hospitals, healthcare settings, universities, and the military all serve as examples of institutions that employ chaplains and cover the cost of care for beneficiaries. Research has shown the benefits of spiritual care for managing grief, building resilience, feeling a sense of purpose, and even better surgical outcomes.⁶ The clear integration of spiritual care into wellbeing offerings

⁶ Hall, E. J., & Powell, R. A. (2021). Valuing the Spiritual. *Journal of religion and health*, 60(3), 1430–1435. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-021-01206-9>

can save institutions money on multiple fronts, decreasing the billions lost to burnout and intensive in-patient stays. However, biases and a lack of knowledge inhibit its widespread use. A recent study by Wendy Cadge and Amy Lawton illustrated the belief by care-recipients that chaplains are representatives and leaders of religious support.⁷ In contrast, chaplains view themselves via the “ministry of presence” that is a form of accompaniment and emotional support in a broadly spiritual sense.⁸ The external perception of chaplains can keep them sequestered to the *religious* side of a religion/secularism binary.

The work that must be done to increase access to spiritual care will need to take place on multiple fronts. The innovation of religious institutions that have formed over hundreds of years and the creation of new models cannot be done by one person or organization. Meeting the needs of a population who no longer feel connected with organized religion will require expansion in three fields: spiritual care, spiritual imagination, and spiritual infrastructure. Spiritual care is the act of offering support and direction to people as they expand their spiritual lives. It can be carried out by professionals or loving peers. Care is at the heart of spiritual innovation. When people receive spiritual care they are better able to grow their spiritual imaginations. This is the act of expanding what one sees as possible in her spiritual life. The spiritual imagination helps people break out of the box of how faith has traditionally played out and discover new ways for spirituality to live and energize their beings. Spiritual infrastructure is the scaffolding of resources and support that make spiritual care and imagination more broadly accessible.

Throughout my time working on this project, I have been able to build relationships with a number of people leading programs across these three fields. I have talked with spiritual director networks, ritual specialists, spiritual app founders, religious literacy consultants, and

⁷ Lawton, Amy, and Wendy Cadge. 2023. “The Persistence of Religion as a Master Status for Chaplains.” *Review of Religious Research* 65 (4): 493–507. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034673X231215280>.

⁸ *ibid*

more. In doing so, I have had the opportunity to support multiple forms of spiritual innovation. In the fall of 2023 I joined Spiritual Care Partners, a community of practice for spiritual care providers. The organization addresses the need for advocacy and spiritual literacy building by promoting evidence-based practices and research in support of the integration of spiritual care providers into holistic multidisciplinary care teams. Through this online learning platform, chaplains can be trained to support users through issues like moral injury and trauma, gaining the credentials necessary to advocate for themselves in their home institutions. Significant research supports the integration of spiritual care. We now need to translate and give access to these complex texts to those who can lead change.

In the universe of those who give and have received spiritual care, there are a number of people who want to see its expansion. In the Fall of 2023 I was accepted to the Technology, Innovation, and Digital Engagement Lab at Union Theological Seminary. The purpose of this fellowship is to equip members of faith institutions to solve the problems of engagement and access that this changing spiritual period has brought forth. Learning alongside these pastors, theologians, and community organizers has helped me expand my view of where spiritual care is needed from the situations highlighted by my own experiences to the many possible ways that people want and need a spiritual life. When first starting the Spiritual Care Project I focused on the needs of the unaffiliated. My own identity led me to want to reach young, spiritually seeking people, who might benefit from similar forms of care that I have received. Yet the strains put on faith leaders to meet the needs of aging and skeptical congregations has highlighted the issue that it is not only the unaffiliated who need care. There is a large population of people who are seeking, questioning, or part of a religious organization but want more. We need new spiritual infrastructure for all identities, not just the unaffiliated.

My time at Harvard Divinity School and work with these organizations has shown me that there is a vibrant world of spiritual leaders who see and feel this changing landscape. However, resilience, creativity, and institutional change will be necessary to move the needle. Each year a new wave of students enters Harvard Divinity School with incredible ministerial visions. They need funding and strategies to bring these to fruition in a way that suits the religious landscape now, not as it was 30 years ago. Chaplains are being trained to walk beside people of any spiritual or religious affiliation, but are often relegated to purely liturgical practices. Funders and venture capitalists continue to be skeptical about programs with spirituality at their core due to biases about these topics being ‘too complex’ or ‘political’. These challenges block many important moments of spiritual growth.

The journey towards building new spiritual infrastructure and expanding access to spiritual care is a multifaceted endeavor that requires collaboration across various sectors and disciplines. Through my experiences, I have come to recognize the immense potential that lies in fostering partnerships and synergies among spiritual care providers, faith leaders, mental health professionals, academics, and innovators. Overcoming these obstacles will necessitate a concerted effort to develop sustainable funding models, cultivate spiritual literacy, and build trust within secular institutions and the broader public. Despite these challenges I look to the future with hope that there will be not one spiritual innovation, but a constellation of them to meet the multi varied needs of our society. I have faith that this will happen because I am not the only person who believes that everyone can have a spiritual life and everyone deserves spiritual care.