

WHAT DOES SPIRITUALITY MEAN TO US?

*A Study of Spirituality
in the United States
Since COVID*



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Survey data sets for A Study of Spirituality
in the United States (for 2020 and 2022) are
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Archives (ARDA), www.thearda.com.

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PREFACE

This continuation of the *Study of Spirituality in the United States* builds on the initial study conducted in 2020. Using the original questionnaire, this updated version includes new items seeking to uncover any shifts in how we, in the United States, articulate and embody our faith and spirituality, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Fetzer Institute is catalyzing a movement of organizations and funders that apply spiritual solutions to social problems. This work is rooted in the conviction that we are intrinsically spiritual beings, and no 21st century challenge can be solved without taking into account the full spectrum of needs that enable true human flourishing. We are dedicated to research that enlightens our understanding of this essential dimension of life and to contributing to a growing body of work in this field.

Special thanks to Gillian Gonda, Research Strategist, GKG Consulting; Mohammed Mohammed, Fetzer Institute Senior Program Officer; and Veronica Selzler, Managing Director at Hattaway Communications, for guiding this project and making valuable contributions to this research report.

We extend our gratitude to the numerous scholars and researchers whose curiosity and expertise have been instrumental in shaping this study, reviewing its data, and interpreting its findings.

The *Study of Spirituality in the United States* survey data sets (from 2020 and 2022) are available from the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), www.thearda.com.



INTRODUCTION

To many people, religiosity and spirituality are two ways of saying the same thing. This report, along with its 2020 predecessor, makes clear that religiosity and spirituality are not the same. At a time when organized religion is on the decline, it is more important than ever to understand the many ways that people connect with the transcendent, for while some do so through conventional forms of religious worship, others seek spirituality through other means.

The data produced through this project is like the Webb telescope, only instead of distant stars, it has revealed the interior lives of many Americans—how they think and feel about their relationship to a higher power.

This report stands out both for the important questions it poses, and for the innovative methods used to answer those questions. In addition to a high-fidelity public opinion survey (conducted with a gold-standard probability sample, a rarity), these researchers asked people to visualize their spiritual lives by drawing, not just verbalizing, their thoughts. This is a simple yet brilliant way of having people represent what, to many, is difficult to put into words. The resulting analysis is a fascinating exploration of people “in their natural habitat,” as they represent how they conceive of their connection (or not) to a higher power, and to other people. I hope other researchers take note of this powerful tool.

This report would thus be valuable at any point in time, but it is even more so in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. To what extent did the pandemic affect both Americans’ spirituality and religiosity? Did the public health crisis ignite a spiritual reawakening? Or did it lead people to abandon any hope in a higher power? The answers are subtle—neither a reawakening nor a large-scale abandonment of belief. While there are slight declines in various measures of spirituality,



David Campbell

Packey Dee Professor of American Democracy, University of Notre Dame.
Author, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*

The data produced through this project is like the Webb telescope, only instead of distant stars, it has revealed the interior lives of many Americans.

this is not the whole story. The report also finds that spirituality has provided resilience. These innovative data show that spirituality is like a vaccine, inoculating people against isolation and despair.

I am especially excited to see this report’s conception of spirituality enter the “bloodstream” of the empirical study of Americans’ values and views. As the report sagely notes, we are in a period of polycrises—that is, many crises compounding one another. How does spirituality—and the lack thereof—shape the nation’s response to the threats facing democracy? Or attitudes toward climate change? Or a desire for racial justice? Or any of a number of other challenges facing the nation?

However, we need not stop at America’s borders. The insights provided by this project also have applicability in other nations and cultures. I look forward to learning what aspects of spirituality are common across different contexts. In short, this report has done what the best research is designed to do. It answers one set of important questions while spurring still more.



RESEARCH PROCESS AND DESIGN



PURPOSE

The Study of Spirituality in the United States, first conducted in 2020 and revisited in 2022, explores how people talk about their religious and spiritual lives in these times—and how the spiritual dimensions of their lives help people navigate difficulty, cultivate fulfilling communities, and build a life of meaning over several challenging years.

The 2020 study revealed that a spiritual life comprises a unique and evolving mix of people's personal identity, beliefs, and actions as well as the relationships and connections they have beyond themselves—with a higher power and with the world around them. This study, with data from 2022, continues to explore how people experience these individual, relational, and transcendent elements that comprise one's spirituality and, importantly, how they contribute to a more resilient life.



SCOPE AND SURVEY DESIGN

This survey adds to and builds on the 2020 study *What Does Spirituality Mean To Us? A Study of Spirituality in the United States*, a qualitative and quantitative exploration of the spiritual lives of people within and outside religion. The 2020 survey was conducted by NORC between January 16 and February 3, 2020. The subsequent survey in 2022 built on the original survey questionnaire and included new questions specific to the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2022 survey of 3,651 people was conducted by NORC during October and November 2022 of a general U.S. population ages 18+ and was conducted in English. Both sets of respondents were identified through NORC's AmeriSpeak® panel, a nationally representative, probability-based panel of the U.S. household population.



IN WORDS AND DRAWINGS

This study seeks to build upon existing spirituality research by exploring how people understand spirituality and live spiritual lives in their own words and expressions.

To many, spirituality is ineffable, so the survey included a novel methodology for respondents to describe spirituality with more than words. Half of the survey respondents were asked to draw what spirituality means to them using an interface on their desktop, tablet, or mobile device and also to describe their drawing. An analysis of the drawings and descriptions are shared below, and drawings and quotes from open-ended responses are provided throughout this report to illustrate and illuminate various findings.

In addition, artificial intelligence topic modeling (unguided semantic analysis) was employed to offer a unique analysis of the open-ended answers about what spirituality means to people as well as how their spiritual lives changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.



RESEARCH PARTNERS

We share our appreciation to the scholars and research partners who provided their expertise for the 2022 survey and report:

- David Addiss, Director, Focus Area for Compassion and Ethics (FACE), Task Force for Global Health: Survey item selection and refinement, findings, and report reviews.
- Baylor University's Institute for Religious Studies: Literature review about the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and spirituality and religion.
- Rebecca Bonhag, Ph.D., Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University: Literature review.
- David Campbell, Packey Dee Professor of American Democracy, University of Notre Dame: Review and refinement of report findings.
- Richard Cowden, Ph.D., Research Scientist, Human Flourishing Program, Harvard University: Survey item selection and refinement, and additional COVID-19 analysis.
- Matthew T. Lee, Ph.D., Professor of Social Sciences and Humanities at the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University, and Research Associate, Director of the Flourishing Network at the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University: Survey item selection and refinement and report reviews.
- Paige Rice, Senior Associate, Research, Hattaway Communications: Qualitative analysis of open-ended responses.
- Tom W. Smith, Senior Fellow and Director, Center for the Study of Politics and Society at NORC: Survey item selection and refinement, findings, and report reviews.
- Thrive Center for Human Development at Fuller Theological Seminary: Structural equation modeling through AI-machine learning methods on how Americans' descriptions and views of spirituality changed between 2020 and 2022. Pamela Ebstyne King, Ph.D., Co-PI; Sung Kim, Ph.D., Co-PI; Conner Stephenson, M.A., Research Assistant; Shannon R. Constable, M.A., Research Assistant; Jilleen R. Westbrook, Ph.D., Project Manager.
- Roman Williams, Ph.D., and Jason Burt, Ph.D.: Content and statistical analysis of the

STATE OF SPIRITUALITY SINCE COVID-19



For many, the world today feels like it is messier and more difficult than it has ever been. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting quarantines that began in March 2020 also coincided with—and fueled—significant social and political unrest. Political polarization intensified and extended to perspectives on vaccination requirements and trust in public health officials. Racial justice protests exploded after the murder of George Floyd by law enforcement in May 2020 and spurred a reckoning of racism in this country that continues to this day. Countless individuals were struck ill or died, and many lost jobs, were displaced, or were otherwise negatively impacted because of the COVID-19 pandemic. And in the middle of the pandemic, the country experienced an insurgency, numerous climate emergencies, and ongoing social challenges. These sentiments were acknowledged in written responses to several open-ended questions in the 2022 survey that asked about the COVID-19 pandemic:

“

I think the pandemic highlighted a lot of our country's weak points. We all slowed down, and we're able to see some pretty horrific things happening around us.

Female, 33, very spiritual, slightly religious (Other)

“

The world seems to be suffering as a whole.

Female, 33, moderately spiritual, not religious at all (Agnostic)

The suffering experienced in 2020 and beyond has been considered a polycrisis, a time when distinct crises occur simultaneously, creating a collective experience of confusion and overwhelmingness. Indeed, much of the time between early 2020 and late 2022 was filled with pain, uncertainty, and loss:

“

I felt lost and wondered why a God would send a deadly pandemic to the world if he truly loved everyone.

Female, 19, not spiritual at all, slightly religious (Christian)

“

I developed a stronger pessimism about life and the world. Still spiritual, but also lost my previous, more chronically optimistic views.

Male, 40, very spiritual, not at all religious (Atheism)

“

I became depressed and anxious.

Female, 26, not spiritual at all, not religious at all (Buddhist)

Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic itself, public health officials worried¹ about increased levels of loneliness, depression, and anxiety caused by the isolation, adding to the sense of despair around multiple societal struggles and suffering. But throughout this time, there were also opportunities to pause, reflect, and shift perspectives. And many drew from their spiritual wells to do so:

“

I engaged profoundly in God's mercy through prayer, especially since my mom died from COVID.

Female, 69, very spiritual, moderately religious (Catholic)

“

I am more accepting of what I cannot control, and I am more grateful and mindful of very little things. I see beauty more often, and I take the time to acknowledge it.

Female, 26, moderately spiritual, not at all religious (Jewish)

So, what makes some people more adaptable to change, resilient amid struggle, and hopeful despite loss? What wells are they tapping into? And how can understanding their experiences help equip all of us to manage the changes and challenges that we will continue to face?

What this study affirms through interviews, focus groups, and two surveys over two and a half years is that spirituality is an inward and outward experience—it offers a sense of identity, offers tangible benefits, defines individual and group practices, infuses daily practices and experiences, and supports our religious life, our search for meaning and purpose, and our connections to the transcendent.

¹ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, we found most Americans continue to identify as spiritual and religious, but the extent for some is changing. We also observed toward the end of the pandemic that people are experiencing:

- a little more doubt (in a higher power).
- a little less feeling of connection (to a higher power, all of humanity, the natural world).
- a little less aspiration (to be spiritual).
- a little less engagement in spiritual and/or religious activities.

Taken individually, these are minor shifts. However, taken together, a possible trend is emerging. Future studies may tell us if this is, in fact, a trend of declining spirituality. But from 2020 to 2022, given the many challenges people in the United States faced—our data shows that nearly 60% of people experienced one or more significant life events during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as loss of a loved one, loss of

employment, or financial setback—combined with less access to spiritual or religious gatherings, this pattern is not a surprise.

At the same time, *we also found people finding solace in their spiritual lives*; and as this report illuminates, those who reported improvement in their mental and spiritual health two and a half years after the beginning of the pandemic reported a more expansive spirituality in their practices, experiences, and prosocial activity.

It is important to note that while this study is primarily about spirituality, it seeks to understand more about the relationship between spirituality and religion—an inextricable connection for some and separate forces for others. In some cases, we look solely at spiritual findings, and in others, we look at spiritual and religious findings side by side. These distinctions are made throughout the report.



2022 SPIRITUALITY FINDINGS

SPIRITUAL AND/OR RELIGIOUS IDENTITY



65% of people identify as spiritual and religious

18% identify as spiritual only

12% identify as neither religious nor spiritual

3% identify as religious only

ASPIRATIONS

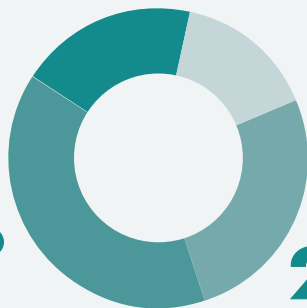
49% of people aspire to be more spiritual.

85% of people who aspire to be more spiritual are "very" spiritual and/or religious.

EXTENT OF SPIRITUALITY

19%
Very Spiritual


39%
Moderately Spiritual



15%
Not At All Spiritual

26%
Slightly Spiritual

BENEFITS

 **68%** PEACE

 **55%** LOVE

 **51%** INSPIRATION

 **47%** VALUES

 **46%** PURPOSE

THE MOST FREQUENT SPIRITUAL ACTIVITIES ARE:



Prayer

Yoga or other physical activity

Reading

Being in nature

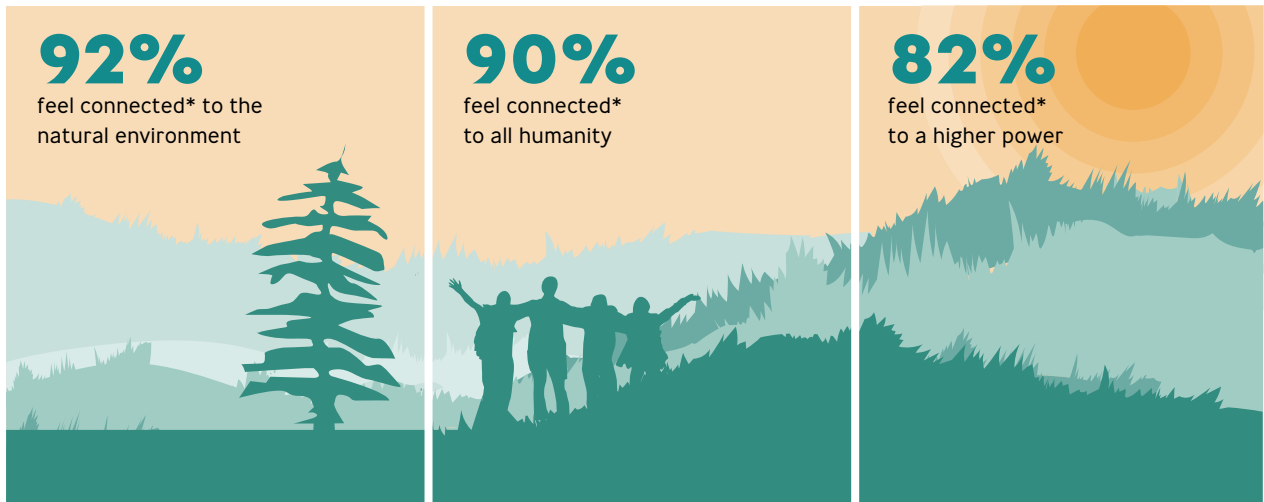
Art (singing, painting, or music)

TRANSCENDENT SPIRITUALITY

BELIEF IN A HIGHER POWER—WHETHER IT BE GOD, GODS, OR SOME OTHER DIVINE SOURCE OR UNIVERSAL ENERGY



CONNECTION



*feel slightly, moderately, or highly connected

EXPERIENCES

71%
of people frequently* feel *thankful for their blessings*

55%
of people frequently* feel *touched by the beauty of creation*

47%
of people frequently* *ask for help from a higher power* during times of need

*most days, every day, many times a day

RELATIONAL SPIRITUALITY

SPIRITUALITY GUIDES MY SENSE OF RIGHT AND WRONG AND HOW I ACT IN THE WORLD.



HELPING OTHERS IN NEED IS IMPORTANT.



ACCOUNTABILITY

People who see themselves as extremely accountable to a higher power for their impact on other people are more likely to say that their spirituality and religion affect their:





INDIVIDUAL SPIRITUALITY

“

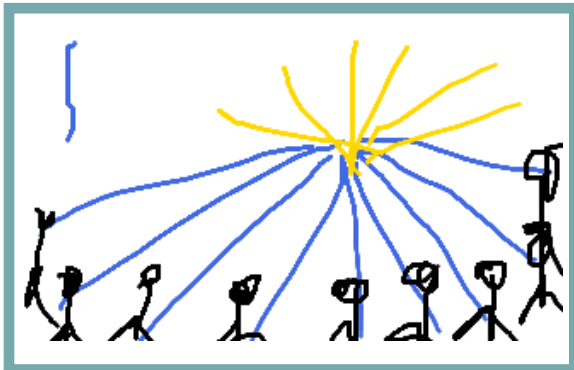
I became a little more spiritual in that I went outside more, especially in the summer of 2020. I went on more hikes, I read more books on religion, and I tried to slow down more by engaging in meditation.

Male, 32, moderately spiritual,
moderately religious (Protestant)

We have learned through our research that spirituality often begins with—and extends beyond—how we identify. A spiritual identity may include the label we give ourselves, but it also includes how we understand what it means, how we perceive its benefits, and what our spiritual aspirations and practices are. It is an individual understanding shaped by our upbringing, our culture, and our communities, but also one that involves our innermost experiences, our deepest held beliefs about the world, and what supports our place in it.

How have our spiritual identities and understandings changed in the past few years? In this section, we explore how people describe and experience spirituality for themselves and in what ways our perspectives and practices are changing or are consistent with pre-pandemic measures. We will begin to see how people drew from their spiritual wells during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We begin with the drawings and words people use to understand the ineffable:



Description of drawing²:

Spirituality is the interconnected nature of the entire universe and everything in it.

Definition of spirituality:

Enlightenment

Female, 42, moderately spiritual, slightly religious (Jewish)



Description of drawing:

In Harmony with Nature, God. At Peace.

Definition of spirituality:

In Harmony with God.

Male, 66, moderately spiritual, moderately religious (Catholic)



Description of drawing:

I feel as if anyone could be above us, and I only hope they're proud of us or are willing to guide us along the better path.

Definition of spirituality:

Nothing in particular...

Male 24, very spiritual, slightly religious (nothing in particular)

²Throughout this report, we will be sharing drawings that were solicited as part of the survey. How respondents described their drawings will be indicated in the "Drawing" text, and how people responded to the question, "What does spirituality mean to you?" is indicated in the "Definition" text.

Visualizing Spirituality: Drawing Analysis

Visual analysis led by Roman Williams, Ph.D. and Jason Burt, Ph.D.

Most existing research on changes in the spiritual and religious lives of people in the United States relies on surveys that report levels of agreement or reported engagement with generally simplistic religious or spiritual attitudes and behaviors. This study sought to overcome these limitations by collecting open-ended questions about spirituality in words and drawings.

This research is built on qualitative research in the 2019 study, where researchers began focus groups by asking participants to draw upon what spirituality means to them and then share their drawings with their peers around the table. The value of the drawings in the study's exploration of spirituality led us to continue this methodology in survey form.

To understand whether being asked to draw influenced subsequent responses to questions on spirituality, only half of the respondents were given the drawing option. All respondents—whether they drew or not—were asked an open-ended question, "What does spirituality mean to you?"



Roman Williams, Ph.D.



Jason Burt, Ph.D.

Half of the participants were asked:

"What comes to mind when you hear the word 'spirituality?' Draw with the cursor." "Explain your drawing."

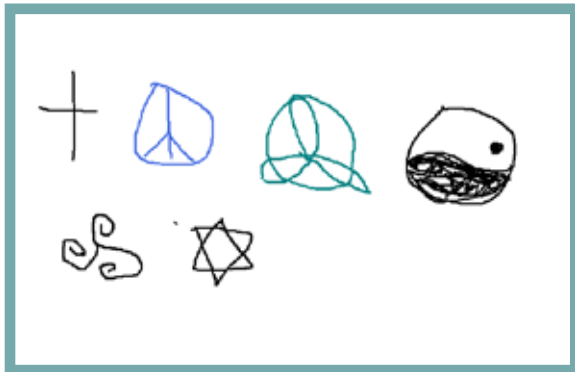
All participants were asked:

"What does spirituality mean to you?"

Many people rely on symbols and language to describe spirituality.

A content analysis of the drawings revealed that people default to symbols and words across the continuum of religious and spiritual self-identification.

Among all drawing respondents, 38% used a symbol and 29% used a word in their drawings. Over half (52%) of all drawings comprised only symbols or words:



Description of drawing:

Symbols for the different religions and beliefs. Spirituality is believing in a higher power, respecting the world we live in.

Definition of spirituality:

Believing in a higher power. Respecting nature and the world we live in.

Female, 71, moderately spiritual, slightly religious (Protestant)

In response to the request to “draw what comes to mind when you hear the word ‘spirituality,’” 75% of symbols and 60% of words were related to religion. Of the rest, 56% of those who drew crosses and 53% of those who incorporated the word God in their pictures identify as not religious.



Common themes in the drawings included nature, human or spirit beings, visible or invisible light (e.g., auras), and abstractions.

20% of drawings included nature:

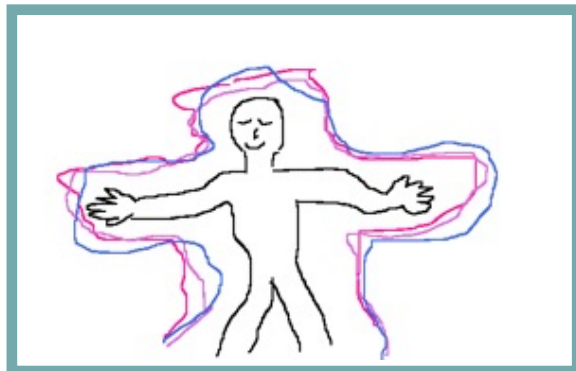


Description of drawing:
Mountains with a sunset.

Definition of spirituality:
Peace, happiness.

Male, 55, moderately spiritual,
not at all religious (nothing in particular)

15% of drawings included human or spirit beings,
and 8% of drawings depict people:



Description of drawing:
Spirituality doesn't necessarily mean religion, but it's a feeling and connection with both seen and unseen forces that surround us. It guides one's moral compass.

Definition of spirituality:
Connection

Male, 40, moderately spiritual,
not at all religious (Agnostic)

11% of drawings incorporated light, and
4% of drawings included auras.



Description of drawing:
Spirituality would be Jesus in the clouds.

Definition of spirituality:
Believing in something to have hope.

Female, 69, slightly spiritual,
slightly religious (Christian)

11% of drawings were abstract, and another 60% were only symbols or words.



Description of drawing:

It comes from within and then continues in all directions.

Definition of spirituality:

What you feel from within when all is well.

Female, 60, slightly spiritual, not at all religious (Catholic)

When people are given different methods to articulate what spirituality means to them, their drawing takes different forms.

Descriptions of the drawings and the open-ended definitions of spirituality were all coded according to the respondents' references (referent codes) of spirituality and respondents' orientations (dimension codes) to these ideas. This approach allows one to explore "the difference, for example, between spirituality as described as a belief in God, practices oriented toward God, or a relationship toward God,"³ if God were the primary context of their spirituality. These assigned codes were not mutually exclusive; therefore, multiple referent and dimension codes could be applied to the same drawing description or open-ended definition of spirituality.

Referent Codes	Dimension Codes
Afterlife	Activity
Community	Being
Monotheistic	Cognitive
Nature	Emotional
Not religion	Ethical
Organized religion	Relational
Other Deity	
Past	
Self	
Supernatural	
Transcendent	
Unknown	

³ Brian Steensland, Xiaoyun Wang, and Lauren Chism Schmidt, "Spirituality: What Does It Mean and to Whom?" *JSSR* 57.3 (2018): 450-72, 454. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jssr.12534>

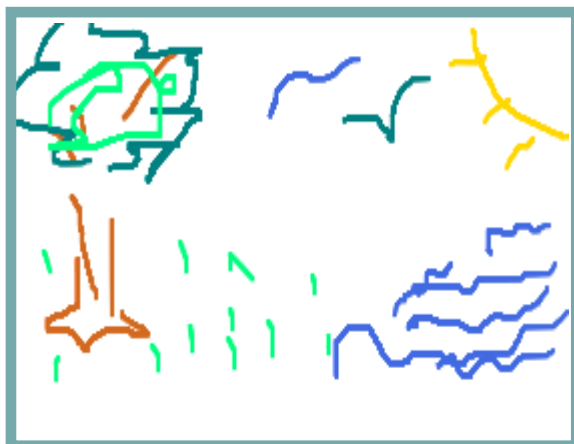
In drawing descriptions, most respondents referred to monotheism, nature, organized religion, supernatural phenomena, and the self (referent) codes. In terms of dimension codes, emotion was expressed most frequently, followed by cognitive, relational, and activity.

All survey respondents were also asked the open-ended question, “What does spirituality mean to you?” This allowed for a comparison between those who received the drawing prompt and those who did not (the control group).

People who were given the drawing prompt before the rest of the survey more frequently described spirituality in terms of community, nature, and the self. They were significantly less likely to include organized religion, transcendence, and/or other deities when compared to those who did not draw.

Among those who drew spirituality, their definitions emphasized emotions, ethics, relationships, and activities. The odds of describing spirituality in terms of nature increased by nearly half when the respondent drew a picture, the odds of describing spirituality in terms of community nearly doubled, and the odds of describing spirituality in terms of emotions or ethics more than doubled. The open-ended definitions of those who did not draw tended to be slightly more cognitive.

Referent or Dimension Code	Odds of including if the respondent drew a picture
Community	95% higher
Nature	47% higher
Emotional	117% higher
Ethical	111% higher



Description of drawing:

I think of nature when I think of spirituality.

Definition of spirituality:

Peacefulness, community, generosity of spirit.

Female, 61, moderately spiritual, slightly religious (nothing in particular)

Describing Spirituality: Structured Topic Modeling and Artificial Intelligence

Text analysis led by the Thrive Center team in the School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary.



Pamela Ebstyne King, Ph.D., Co-PI



Sung Kim, Ph.D., Co-PI

Additional analysis of participants’ responses to the open-ended question, “What does spirituality mean to you?” used “structured topic modeling” (STM) and artificial intelligence (AI)/Machine Learning to identify the main categories that participants used to describe spirituality. STM and AI/Machine Learning allow participants to speak in their own voice as they describe spirituality using their own words and are not limited to choosing from specific answers. The following categories show the topics identified through the text analysis—religious/theistic, Christian, and spiritual—that were then tested for significant changes between descriptions in 2020 and 2022.

People largely use theistic and religious language to describe spirituality.

Sample Terms Associated with the Three Topics of Spirituality Descriptions

Religious/Theistic (34%)	Christian (23%)	Spiritual (43%)
faith	peace	belief
religion god	person	universe
peaceful	jesus christ	connection high
church god	lord	experience
relationship god	spirit	high
god church	christ	spirituality
praying	ghost	force
god peace	living	organized religion
god belief	jesus	power
connection god	good	belief high power
happiness	holy spirit	existence

Sample Descriptions (with terms identified through text analysis underlined)		
Religious/Theistic	Christian	Spiritual
<p>"<u>God, faith, religion</u>"</p> <p>"Close to <u>God</u>, communication with <u>God</u>"</p>	<p>"<u>Christ</u> died for my sins. He is seated at the right hand of The Father God. Now, the <u>Holy Ghost</u> of God is here leading and guiding me in all truth. Thank God."</p> <p>"God the Father and <u>Jesus Christ</u>. Being righteous, <u>living</u> the true gospel, being kind and <u>loving</u> to everyone. Having hope, faith, and charity."</p>	<p>"A self-sense of being and a <u>connection</u> to some <u>higher power</u> or <u>energy</u> force. It's the part of us that gives us a balance between our physical presence and mental capacity. It's the part of us that makes us 'us.'"</p> <p>"An understanding of the <u>universe</u> as being omnipresent and wastes nothing. I believe if the <u>universe</u> is infinite, all things are possible, and I think we will all live an infinite number of lives in an infinite number of forms."</p>
Topic Detail		
<p>The Religious group was favored by right-leaning middle-aged women who reported attending religious or spiritual gatherings more often, were identified as more religious and less spiritual, reported feeling a sense of God's presence, love, and guidance, and were less engaged with their community than other survey respondents. This group typically used fewer words to describe their spirituality than those in the other two groups. Of the three topics, this one was more present in the 2020 pre-COVID survey response group than it was in the 2022 sample.</p>	<p>For the Christian topic group, the covariates illustrate a different sort of typical respondent. This topic is most endorsed by right-leaning and older people of color (e.g., Black, Hispanic, or Asian). People who identified with this topic also tended to report attending religious or spiritual gatherings. It is worth noting that people who reported higher levels of identification with spirituality and lower levels of identification with religion endorsed this topic more frequently. This group was also less engaged with their community than others and was more present in the 2022 post-COVID survey response group. Finally, this group tended to write longer responses than the Religious group but less than the Spiritual group.</p>	<p>Those who identified with the Spiritual topic tended to be left-leaning younger women. They reported less attendance at religious or spiritual gatherings as well as less identification with being religious; and they reported less of a feeling of God's presence, love, and guidance in their lives. People who endorsed this topic reported being very engaged with their community. The differences between the 2020 and the 2022 datasets were not significant for this topic, suggesting there was no meaningful difference between the pre-COVID and post-COVID groups. People who endorsed this topic tended to write substantially more than those who endorsed the other topics.</p>

The difference between the three topic categories helps paint a picture of what types of people are most likely to endorse topics identified in the model, and it can give more texture to the interpretation of the topic model. However, they represent tendencies and are not necessarily determining factors.

While this model suggests that people largely use theistic and religious language to describe their spirituality, descriptions of spirituality alone offer nuance and often an alternative to religious terms. Many studies reveal shifts in religious behaviors (e.g., attendance), affiliation, and beliefs; however, across the two years covered in this study, people by and large demonstrated very little change in how they describe spirituality.

As noted above, the “religious” category decreased slightly and the “Christian” category increased slightly, while the “spirituality” category showed no significant change. The semantics around spirituality, especially for older populations, seems to be shifting slowly. This model, however, found that younger people are more apt to describe their spirituality with less conventional religious terms.

Look for more structured topic modeling, machine learning analysis on page 29, 42, 48, and 60.



IDENTITY



Like in 2020, we asked two separate survey questions in 2022 to explore spiritual and religious identity and intensity: “To what extent do you consider yourself a spiritual person?” and “To what extent do you consider yourself a religious person?” From this, we have a clear picture of how many people in the United States identify as spiritual, religious, or both.

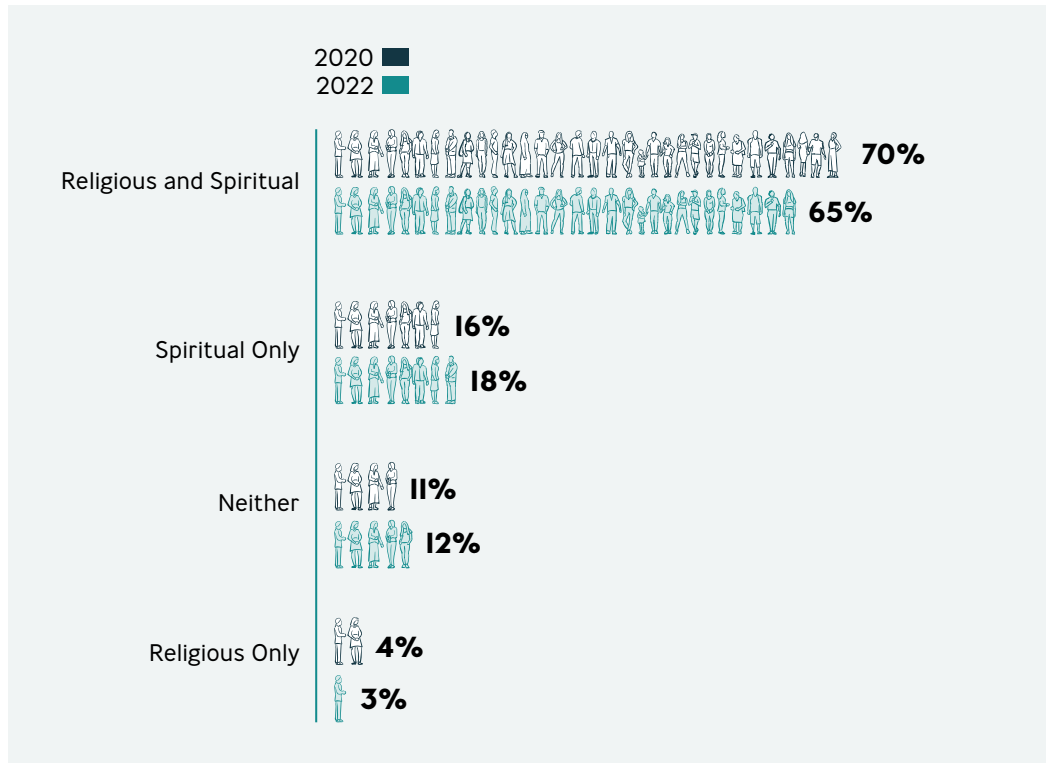
The majority of people continue to consider themselves spiritual AND religious, but the extent is declining.

Q. To what extent do you consider yourself a spiritual/religious person?

	Spiritual		Religious	
	2020	2022	2020	2022
Very	23%*	19%	15%	12%
Moderately	39%	39%	34%	33%
Slightly	23%	26%	23%	25%
Not At All	14%	15%	27%	29%

*Throughout the report, asterisks note statistically significant (not due to chance) changes from 2020 to 2022 at the level of at least $P < 0.05$.

Q. To what extent do you consider yourself a spiritual/religious person?



		Religious				
		Very	Moderately	Slightly	Not At All	
Spiritual	Very	2020	11%	6%	3%	3%
		2022	8%	5%	2%	4%
	Moderately	2020	3%	22%	8%	6%
		2022	3%	23%	8%	5%
	Slightly	2020	1%	4%	11%	7%
		2022	0.05%	4%	12%	8%
	Not At All	2020	0.3%	1%	2%	12%
		2022	2%	1%	0.02%	12%

The only significant difference from 2020 to 2022 is that those identifying as “very” spiritual declined moderately. However, the majority of people in the United States still consider themselves spiritual to some degree (85%), and the majority also consider themselves spiritual and religious (65%).

When asked to describe the consistency of their spiritual identity (“Have consistently identified as spiritual,” “Identify as more spiritual now than in past,” or “Less spiritual now than in past”), the majority of people (67% of all respondents) have either consistently identified as spiritual or identify as more spiritual now than in their past. The same is true (consistently religious or more religious) for 49% of people who identify as religious.

Just like in 2020, the extent of religious or spiritual identity is related to other spiritual beliefs and behaviors. Those who identify as “moderately” or “very” spiritual or religious in 2022 are also highly likely to engage in other related beliefs, experiences, or actions:

- Believe in a higher power (89%)
- Frequently feel thankful for blessings (87%)
- Feel connected to a higher power (81%)
- Feel their spirituality influences the way they see the world (79%)
- Engage in prayer (weekly or more) as a spiritual activity (73%)
- Frequently feel touched by the beauty of creation (73%)
- Feel connected to the natural environment (71%)
- Donate to causes or organizations important to them (64%)



Description of drawing and definition of spirituality:

My faith in God.

Female, 60, moderately spiritual, moderately religious (Christian)

Self-identification as spiritual or religious may have more of an impact than just how one labels themselves. A spiritual or religious identity is the first of several measures that relate to mental well-being and spiritual growth since the COVID-19 pandemic.



IDENTITY AND COVID-19 RESILIENCY

People continue to identify as spiritual and religious, and people's responses about the effects of the challenges of the last two years point to a relationship between spiritual self-identification and resilience.

In our 2022 study, several questions were asked about the state of one's mental well-being and spiritual life since the pandemic began. We asked if respondents' mental well-being had improved, remained the same, or worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic. We probed further about respondents' spiritual lives, asking if respondents had grown spiritually or felt spiritually lost, if they had discovered a deeper meaning or purpose in life or questioned if life really mattered, if they had a renewed sense of faith, or if they felt God had abandoned them.

Spiritual or religious self-identification has a relationship with improved mental well-being and especially with spiritual growth.

In our survey, the majority of people (70%) looking back at the COVID-19 pandemic reported that their mental well-being remained about the same. Seventeen percent of people reported worsened mental well-being. Of the 12% of the population who stated that their mental well-being improved, 73% were more likely to consider themselves "very" or "moderately" spiritual.

In terms of spiritual growth or loss, 50% of people reported spiritual growth, and 14% reported spiritual loss (35% had no change). Of those who experienced some degree of spiritual growth, 82% of them identified as "very" or "moderately" spiritual. In addition:

- 78% of those who "discovered deeper meaning or purpose in life" since the COVID-19 pandemic identify as spiritual.⁴ In comparison, 51% of those who only somewhat discovered or did not discover "deeper meaning or purpose in life" identify as spiritual.⁵
- 85% of those who experienced a "renewed sense of faith" (roughly 25% of the population) identify as spiritual,⁶ and 49% of those who somewhat or did not find a "renewed sense of faith" identify as spiritual.⁷

⁴ Identified as "moderately" or "very" spiritual. ⁵ Identified as "moderately" or "very" spiritual.

⁶ Identified as "moderately" or "very" spiritual. ⁷ Identified as "moderately" or "very" spiritual.

Thrive Center Structured Topic Modeling and Artificial Intelligence

To extend the use of STM AI/machine learning from the Thrive Center, structural topic modeling was applied to the short-answer responses to the question, “In what ways did your religious and/or spiritual life change as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?” Based on a review of the key terms affiliated with each topic and an analysis of the use of the terms in the participants’ answers, the five topics were named: (1) Change of Values, representing 16% of respondents; (2) Change of Attendance, 24%; (3) Change of Faith, 16%; (4) Change of Focus, 18%; and (5) No Change, 26%.

The “No Change” group reported either their spirituality did not change as a result of the pandemic or that they were not spiritual or religious to begin with. For example, one person explained: “They DIDN’T CHANGE really AT ALL. I have never been very religious or spiritual.”

Note that words in ALL CAPS are words/phrases that machine learning identified as the key terms.

ASPIRATION



In 2020, we learned from participants in focus groups and interviews that there was a dynamic quality to spirituality—it was something they were working toward or something that could help them become a better version of themselves. People offered examples of how spirituality was an experience of seeking and growth. Aspiration, much like identity, offers a perspective on how people see themselves. This is sometimes reflected in descriptions of spirituality:

“

Deep faith and inner thought on being thoughtful and a better person.

Male, 63, moderately spiritual, moderately religious (Christian)



Description of drawing:

The time or moment to connect to your spiritual self or space in the universe.

Definition of spirituality:

Connection to success. Reset and better start, connection with others

Male, 39, moderately spiritual, slightly religious (Buddhist)

In both the 2020 and 2022 surveys, we measured this dynamic aspect of spirituality by asking respondents if they aspired to be more spiritual and if the extent of their spirituality had changed over time.

Nearly half of people aspire to be more spiritual—and those who see themselves as “very” spiritual aspire even more.

There was a decline in spiritual aspiration in 2022, though half the population still desires to be more spiritual. In 2020, 60% aspired to be more spiritual; in 2022, nearly half (49%) aspire to be more spiritual. Of those who are “very” or “moderately” spiritual, 7 in 10 aspire to be more spiritual, a ten percentage point decline from 2020.

As in identity measures, the *extent* is what is shifting when we look at the aspirational declines. Fewer are reporting that they “strongly agree” (31%* in 2020 vs. 22% in 2022) that they aspire to be a more spiritual person, roughly the same number agree (29% in 2020 and 27% in 2022), and more (22% in 2020 vs. 31%* in 2022) are reporting they “neither agree nor disagree.”





ASPIRATION AND COVID-19 RESILIENCY

The intentionality of a spiritual life may occur with the sense of identity that one has combined with the aspiration to be *more* spiritual. Does this intention relate to how one experienced the pandemic?

The majority of those who experienced spiritual growth since the COVID-19 pandemic also aspire to be more spiritual or religious.

Over 70% of those who experienced spiritual growth and a renewed sense of faith also aspire to be more spiritual. Of those who found deeper meaning and purpose in life since the pandemic, 68% aspire to be more spiritual. And of those who experienced improved mental well-being, 63% aspire to be more spiritual. This is similarly true for those with religious aspirations.

In their own words, some reflected on how the COVID-19 pandemic in and of itself inspired them to become better:

“

I have had time to evaluate my life and my life purpose and how to love and help myself and my community [to] be a positive person for growth and change.

Female, 55, very spiritual, very religious (other, “Nature and love is my religion”)

“

I became more introspective. The daily loss of lives from COVID-19 was disturbing; it forced me to re-evaluate my choices, the things I valued, and my relationships. It made me consider the fact that I lived alone and could possibly die alone. It brought home my immortality and how I wanted to live better, with purpose and good intentions no matter how people lived around me.

Female, 61, very spiritual, very religious (Protestant)

BENEFITS



After asking respondents to draw or describe what spirituality means to them, we asked what words best describe what spirituality *and* religion offer them. Nearly all respondents (95%) noted at least one benefit of spirituality—and this increases to 99% of the responses for those “moderately” or “very” spiritual—indicating that regardless of spiritual self-identification, people see value in what spirituality offers.

There are remarkable similarities in how respondents describe the benefits of spirituality and religion, but there is more nuance for less often reported benefits. Wonder is a stronger benefit of *spirituality*, whereas structure is more reported as a benefit of *religion*.

People continue to look to spirituality for peace, love, inspiration, and values.



PEACE
68%



LOVE
55%

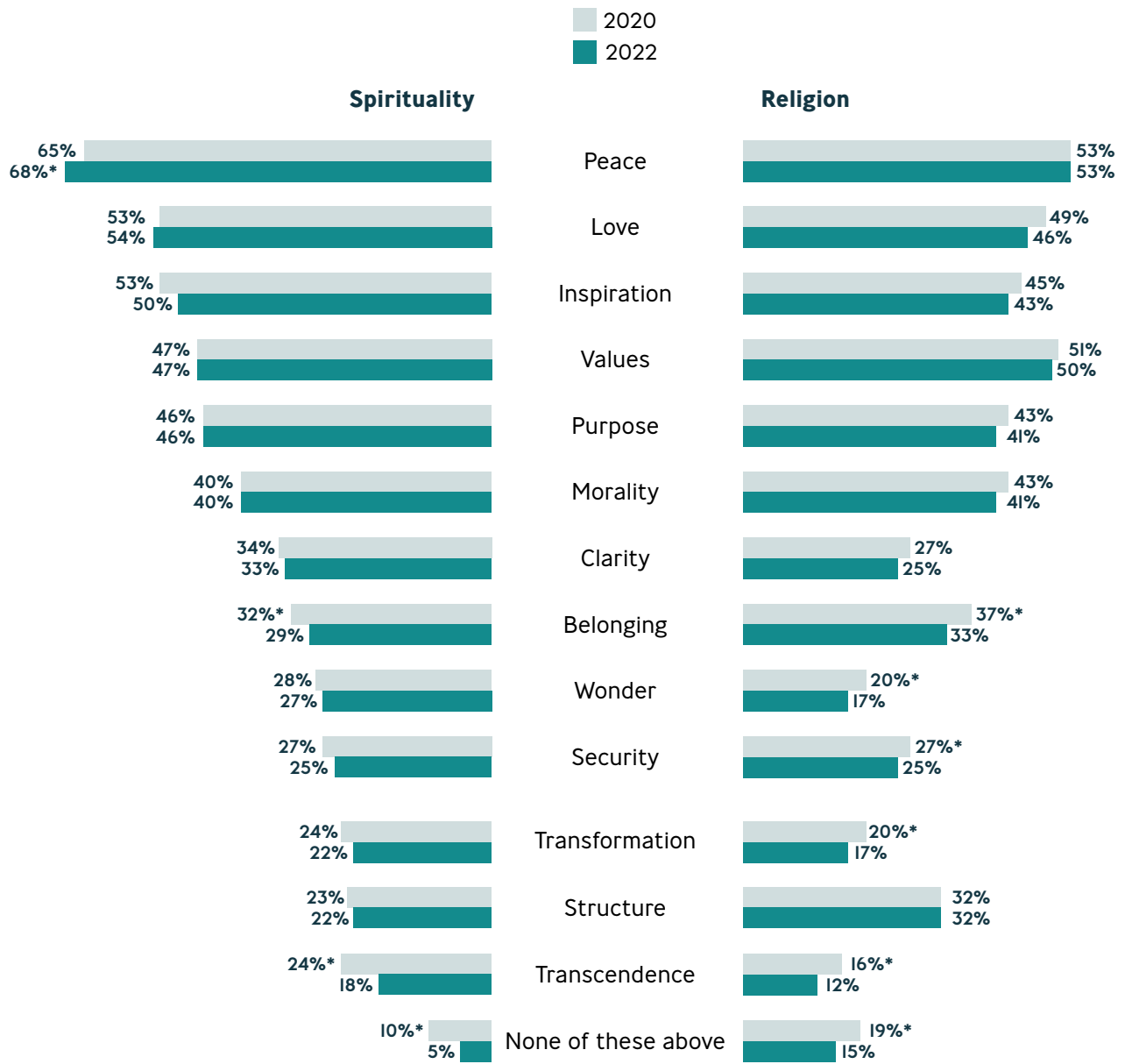


INSPIRATION
51%



VALUES
47%

Q. What words best describe what spirituality/religion offers for you, personally?



*statistically significant change from 2020 to 2022 at least the 0.05% level

The words that people use to describe what spirituality and religion offer them provide insight into how they connect their spirituality to their lived experience. The increase in mentions of Peace from 2020 to 2022 is notable when we consider the backdrop of the pandemic and the uncertainty and stress it caused for many. And even as we see the extent of spirituality declining (less “very” spiritual), the more people identifying the benefits of spirituality indicates the prevalence and importance of spirituality in people’s lives.

“

Spirituality to me means self-love and peace. Also, putting that into the world starts a positive cycle that can continue to others.

Female, 27, moderately spiritual, moderately religious (Christian)



Description of drawing:

Having faith will give you peace and know that you’re loved.

Definition of spirituality:

Peace and love. You’re never alone. Having faith.

Female, 61, moderately spiritual, moderately religious (Christian)



BENEFITS AND COVID-19 RESILIENCY

Identity and aspiration tell us about how people see themselves. Asking what spirituality or religion offers them, personally, helps us begin to see how a spiritual or religious life helps us get through difficult times.

Nearly all respondents (95%) reported at least one benefit of spirituality or religion. Thus, people identified the benefits of spirituality regardless of whether they indicated they had spiritual growth or loss or experienced a change in mental well-being. However, much like identity and aspiration, we see a relationship between improved mental well-being and spiritual growth and an identification of the benefits of spirituality or religion.

More people who have experienced an improvement in their mental well-being and spiritual growth since the COVID-19 pandemic identified Love and Peace as a benefit of spirituality.

Mental well-being improvement or decline was also linked to the view that Love is a benefit of spirituality. Of those who expressed improved mental well-being, 64% identified Love as a personal benefit of spirituality compared to 49% for those who reported worsened mental well-being. A similar pattern plays out for spiritual growth, with 68% of those who indicated they experienced spiritual growth also identified Love as a top benefit of spirituality compared to 43% for those reporting spiritual loss.

Of those who experienced spiritual growth, 80% indicated Peace as a top benefit of spirituality; this was true for 61% of those who experienced spiritual loss. In addition, Love was noted as a personal benefit of spirituality among 68% of those who experienced spiritual growth but only 43% of those who experienced decline.

Respondents who experienced:	Spiritual growth	Spiritual decline	Improved mental well-being	Worsened mental well-being
Peace as a personal benefit of spirituality	80%*	61%	74%	67%
Love as a personal benefit of spirituality	68%*	43%	64%*	49%

*statistically significant difference between responses within each category at the level of at least $P < 0.05$.

Our spiritual identity and what we attach to it appear to make a difference in how we experienced the challenges of COVID-19. Did our personal activities and practices also help?

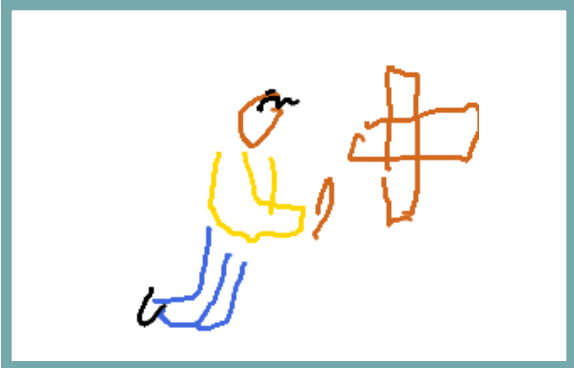
INDIVIDUAL PRACTICES



How have our spiritual and religious practices changed over the course of the pandemic? What activities do we deem spiritual or religious, and how did the pandemic affect the frequency and types of activities we engage in?

Picking from a list of 17 activities—ranging from traditional practices such as prayer or attending services to non-traditional activities such as acts of protest or Tarot cards⁸—respondents were asked to indicate if they engage in the practice as a spiritual or as a religious activity, how frequently, if they engage online, and if they do so with other people. Additionally, respondents were asked to identify if they engaged in the practice more often or less often, if the activity gave them a sense of hope, or if it helped them deal with difficulty since the COVID-19 pandemic.

88% of people engage in a spiritual or religious activity weekly or more.



Description of drawing:
I drew someone kneeling in prayer because that's an opportunity where you might focus on your Spirituality.

Definition of spirituality:
Lifestyle, sacrifice, kindness, charity, attending Mass or other religious services.

Male, 44, moderately spiritual, moderately religious (Baptist)

⁸ The activities listed in the 2022 survey are the same as in 2020 and were generated from focus groups and in-depth interviews.



Description of drawing:

I drew a person meditating because meditation helped me to maintain my peace on the toughest days.

Definition of spirituality:

Magic. Peace. Love.

Female, 32, very spiritual, not at all religious (nothing in particular)

Q. How often do you engage in the following as spiritual/religious activities? (Activities engaged in weekly or more)

	Spiritual Activity		Religious Activity	
	2020	2022	2020	2022
Prayer	59%*	53%	59%*	52%
Art (singing, painting, listening to music)	47%	47%	44%*	40%
Reading	49%*	44%	46%*	39%
Being in nature	39%	43%*	35%	37%
Yoga, martial arts, or other physical activity	28%	27%	26%*	23%
Acts of service	27%	27%	26%	25%
Attending religious service	32%*	26%	32%*	27%
Study of religious texts	31%*	26%	31%	25%
Meditation	27%	26%	26%*	22%
Writing	23%	20%	21%*	17%
Offering or donation	21%	18%	21%*	17%
Honoring ancestors	13%	13%	12%	13%
Attending other religious or spiritual groups	13%	12%	13%*	11%
Teaching in a religious or spiritual setting	11%	10%	10%	10%
Fasting	6%	5%	5%	6%
Acts of protest	4%	4%	3%	4%
Tarot cards or fortune telling	2%	5%*	3%	4%*

*statistically significant change from 2020 to 2022 at the level of at least P<0.05.

The majority of people engage in prayer as a spiritual or religious practice weekly or more.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, where we gathered—whether for work, play, or prayer—changed drastically. But for the most part, the activities we engaged in before the pandemic continued to be popular practices two and a half years later.

The differences in *spiritual* practices from 2020 to 2022 indicate that “Art” (singing, painting, listening to music), “Being in nature,” “Yoga,” and “Acts of service” became more important as the frequency in more traditional practices, such as “Study of religious texts” and “Attending religious services,” declined. “Being in nature” and “Tarot cards or fortune telling” were the only two spiritual practices to significantly increase in frequency since 2020. Both speak to the context of the quarantine. Many had more opportunities to be outside in nature when social gatherings were limited. Though infrequently practiced, the rise in Tarot cards or fortune telling from 2020 and during very uncertain times may have helped some find meaning and answers.

The top *religious* activities remained the same since 2020, although the overall frequency of religious activities tended to decrease. “Being in nature” as a religious activity was the only practice to increase in frequency.



INDIVIDUAL PRACTICES AND COVID-19 RESILIENCY

For activities that respondents identified as spiritual or religious that they engaged in, we also followed up directly with questions to determine if related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the activities “happened more or less often,” “gave a sense of hope,” or “helped people through difficult times.” A clear picture emerges confirming the popularity of specific activities and how they may have helped people through the pandemic.

While overall, frequent engagement in spiritual or religious practice declined, respondents said they engaged in the following activities more often during the pandemic:

- Being in nature (31%)
- Prayer (28%)
- Reading (27%)
- Meditation (25%)

Those who practiced found solace and hope in spiritual activities—“Prayer” and “Being in Nature” in particular.

Respondents who said spiritual activities	
Gave Them a Sense of Hope ⁹	Helped Them Endure Difficulty ¹⁰
Prayer (75%)	Prayer (73%)
Being in nature (70%)	Being in nature (66%)
Art (61%)	Art (63%)
Reading (60%)	Reading (60%)

In the open-ended question that asked respondents how their spiritual life changed since the pandemic, we see the importance of prayer, either in relationship to God or in place of a religious service.



I became more spiritual, through independent worship, prayer, and study. While being less religious, attending service as a group.

Male, 18, slightly spiritual, very religious (Baptist)



More meditation, prayers to those affected.

Female, 59, moderately spiritual, not at all religious (nothing in particular)

⁹ Of those who engage in activity ¹⁰ Of those who engage in activity

We also see that because of isolation and life slowing down, people spent more time outside—gardening, swimming, hiking, meditating, connecting—activities that brought them closer to nature and the spirituality of the natural world.

“

Because of greater isolation, I spent much more time in solitary activities like gardening and hiking with my dogs. I think the importance of the natural world to my spirituality increased.

Female, 58, moderately spiritual, moderately religious (Protestant)

“

My family used to attend a church, but when COVID hit, we stopped attending. I feel like I stopped being in touch with God in a church and more with God in nature.

Female, 20, slightly spiritual, slightly religious (nothing in particular)

“

I became a little bit more spiritual in that I went outside more, especially in the summer of 2020. I went on more hikes, I read more books on religion, and I tried to slow down more by engaging in meditation.

Male, 32, moderately spiritual, moderately religious (Protestant)

Many people, however, practiced less often and shifted how they engaged in practice, engaging alone or online. Isolation forced people to practice spirituality and religion more online.

“

I sought more spiritual support online.

Female 58, moderately spiritual, slightly religious (nothing in particular)

“

I was forced to watch my service virtually and worship alone.

Female, 69, moderately spiritual, moderately religious (Protestant)

“

I spent more time in introspection, reading on my own since meetings were restricted in attendance.

Male, 72, moderately spiritual, moderately religious (Mormon)

Change of Attendance – Thrive Center Structured Topic Modeling and Artificial Intelligence

For the Change of Attendance topic (24%), these respondents tended to talk about how their attendance at religious or spiritual functions changed to either online or not at all. “We stopped ATTENDING IN-PERSON SERVICES at our CHURCH and started watching them ONLINE by livestream. We also stopped ATTENDING IN-PERSON CHURCH groups or activities.”

It is worth noting that the three attitudinal change topics—values, faith, and focus—all correlated positively with each other but negatively with the other two topics—Change of Attendance and No Change. This suggests that people who described changes in their spirituality primarily by a change of attendance or reported that they experienced no change (or were not spiritual to begin with), were highly unlikely to also report a change in values, faith, or focus. This pattern of correlation between the topics serves as an indicator that the naming of the topics is likely to be accurate, as the logic is consistent across topics. Those who reported a personal change in one area were more likely to report it in another area as well. Those who reported no change or only an external change (e.g., attendance) were more likely to not also report a personal change elsewhere.

Note that words in ALL CAPS are words/phrases that machine learning identified as the key terms.



TRANSCENDENT SPIRITUALITY

“

It brought me closer to Allah.

Female, 70, moderately spiritual,
moderately religious (Muslim)

“

*I began to become closer to
my beliefs, and I in turn
grew patient with others.*

Male, 35, slightly spiritual,
moderately religious (Christian)



Fundamentally, spirituality points to “something more,” an experience beyond our spiritual identity or descriptions. The “transcendent” aspects of spirituality are the ineffable qualities that take us beyond the physical or material world of existence. In the words and drawings from the survey respondents, there is a preponderance of references to the transcendent, pointing to these metaphysical or “higher” realms of existence.



Description of drawing:

Light, essence of being, transcendence.

Definition of spirituality:

A connection to our higher selves.

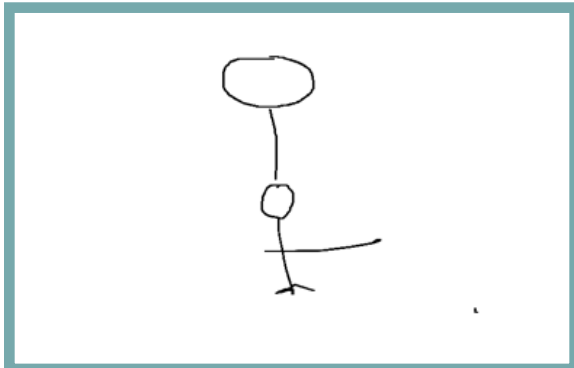
Female, 32, slightly spiritual,
slightly religious (nothing in
particular)

In this study, some of the ways we have measured the transcendent aspect of spirituality is through one’s belief in a higher power, a sense of connection to something bigger than oneself, and reporting of daily spiritual experiences. All of these give depth and meaning to the lived experience of spirituality and may also point to how we use our spirituality during difficult times.

BELIEF



Like in 2020, we asked survey respondents to consider their beliefs expansively—inclusive of theistic and other belief systems outside of a religious tradition: “Which statement comes closest to describing your belief in a higher power—whether it be God, gods, or some other divine source or universal energy.”



Description of drawing:

A faith relationship with something or someone greater than yourself.

Definition of spirituality:

A belief in a powerful, life-giving being that transcends religious tradition.

Female, 63, moderately spiritual, moderately religious (Christian)

Three in four people believe in a higher power. However, in 2022, fewer have no doubts, and more believe there is no way to find out.

Q. Which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about a higher power—whether it be God, gods, or some other divine source or universal energy?

	2020	2022
Believe and have no doubts	53%*	48%
Believe more than doubt	23%	26%*
I don't know...and I don't believe there is any way to find out	10%	12%*
Doubt more than believe	4%	5%
Don't believe	6%	6%

Eighty percent of those who identify as very spiritual or religious believe in a higher power and have no doubts.

In 2022, over 80% of those with a spiritual or religious identity believe in a higher power, and the extent of one's spiritual and religious identity indicates a more certain belief.



Description of drawing:

My family, people I love, in a beautiful world. Our Heavenly parents looking down on us with love.

Definition of spirituality:

A sense of something more than self. A binding force. A search for our source. A seeking for a TRUTH greater than the truth of men. An instinctive understanding that there is more, despite science's current tools' inability to locate that ultimate TRUTH. Peace. Connectedness.

Answered:

I know a higher power exists, and I have no doubts about it.

Male, 63, very spiritual, very religious (Mormon)



BELIEF AND COVID-19 RESILIENCY

Belief in a higher power relates to those who experienced positive spiritual change: “grew spiritually,” “discovered deeper meaning or purpose in life,” and “had a renewed sense of faith.” Belief is not only associated with spiritual growth: Many who may have experienced a spiritual crisis also expressed a belief in a higher power. Nonetheless, strong believers have a stronger relationship to qualities of spiritual growth.

Respondents who experienced:	Spiritual Growth	Spiritual Loss	Deeper Meaning And Purpose (a great deal/ quite a bit)	Deeper Meaning And Purpose (somewhat/not at all)	Renwed Sense Of Faith (a great deal/quite a bit)	Renwed Sense Of Faith (somewhat/ not at all)
Believe in a higher power	89%*	68%	86%*	70%	91%*	69%

*statistically significant difference between categories at the level of P<0.05.

Describing how their spiritual or religious lives changed since the pandemic, we see in the following quotes the opportunity for deeper explorations of belief, where it was nurtured, and why more doubt may have emerged, reflecting a wide range of experiences:



It brought me closer to Allah.

Female, 70, moderately spiritual, moderately religious (Muslim)



I found myself doing more meditation, bonding with my higher power and sense of self.

Female, 73, moderately spiritual, slightly religious (Christian)



I began to become closer to my beliefs, and I in turn grew patient with others.

Male, 35, slightly spiritual, moderately religious (Christian)



Many things happened to my family during the pandemic, and I grew a lot closer to God and grew in my faith a lot during those experiences.

Female, 19, very spiritual, very religious (Catholic)



I felt like God had abandoned me.

Female, 25, slightly spiritual, slightly religious (Agnostic)

Change of Faith – Thrive Center Structured Topic Modeling and Artificial Intelligence

For the “Change of Faith” group (16%), topic modeling analysis revealed that these respondents reported a change in what or whom they trust or put their faith in. There was not a common direction where this faith or trust traveled. For instance, some people reported losing faith in religion and gaining faith in science. One noted “the importance of medicine and science and the idea of LOVE thy neighbor.” Others reported losing their faith in humanity and placing it in God instead. For example: “I think that seeing how poorly the politicians were handling the whole thing ... I needed to rely more on my FAITH and belief that God was there and had a plan for all of this evil.” This group also frequently mentioned loss and pain. “Engaged profoundly in God’s mercy through PRAYER, especially that my mom died from COVID.”

In the context of our spiritual and religious lives, what we put our faith in speaks to what we lean back on when we are struggling or suffering. For some, it is a strong belief in God; for others, it is a strong belief in the scientific facts and knowledge of the day. In either case, we use various frameworks of faith to make sense and push through.

Note that words in ALL CAPS are words/phrases that machine learning identified as the key terms.

EXPERIENCES



In 2020, we learned through the focus groups and interviews that people of all spiritual and religious self-identifications had experiences they described as spiritual. People described these experiences as “deeply moving” or as “something I couldn’t explain.”

The 2022 survey repeated a series of questions asked in 2020 that were taken from the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES) developed by Lynn Underwood¹¹. In a wide variety of studies and contexts using the DSES, “many report these experiences frequently, both those who are explicitly religious and those who are not, showing that a relationship with the transcendent is a reality of life for many people on a regular basis.” Spiritual experiences such as the ones that follow have been shown to fuel people’s faith, propel them to act in the world in loving ways, and influence how people give of themselves to others.

More than half of respondents frequently feel grateful for blessings or touched by the beauty of creation.

Each of the nine experiences measured saw declines in frequency from 2020. Frequent experiences are measured as “many times a day,” “every day,” and “most days.” In 2022, there were fewer frequent experiences and more occasional (“some days” or “once in a while”).

Like in other measures, the extent of one’s spiritual or religious identity and belief in a higher power relates to the frequency of spiritual experiences. Of those who identify as “very” spiritual or “very” religious frequently (daily or more), 92% feel thankful for their blessings, and 87% of those who strongly believe in a higher power frequently feel thankful for their blessings.

¹¹ <https://www.dsescala.org/>

Additionally, these two experiences seem to transcend spiritual or religious self-identification. Of all the experiences measured, gratitude and appreciating the beauty of creation rank highest among those who do not identify as spiritual or religious, do not believe in a higher power, or engage in few spiritual or religious activities.



Description of drawing:

Enjoying nature is my version of spirituality.

Definition of spirituality:

Reaching beyond the everyday, searching for experiences that transcend ordinary modes of apprehending the world.

Female, 75, not at all spiritual, not at all religious (Atheist)

Q. How often do you... (Most days, every day, or many times a day)

	2020	2022
Feel thankful for my blessings	76%*	71%
Feel touched by the beauty of creation	61%*	54%
Ask for help from a higher power / times of need	50%	47%
Desire to be closer to a higher power	54%*	47%
Feel the presence of a higher power	49%*	45%
Ask for help from a higher power / daily activities	49%*	44%
Feel a higher power's love for me, directly	49%*	44%
Feel guided by a higher power in the midst of daily activities	46%*	41%
Feel a higher power's love for me, through others	45%*	39%

*statistically significant change from 2020 to 2022 at the level of at least P<0.05.



EXPERIENCES AND COVID-19 RESILIENCY

Those who experienced improvement since the COVID-19 pandemic reported they frequently had daily spiritual experiences, significantly more than those who reported no change or experienced decline.

Frequent feelings of gratitude and feeling touched by the beauty of creation most relate to spiritual growth and improved mental well-being regardless of spiritual identity.

Nine out of 10 people who experienced spiritual growth frequently experienced “feeling thankful for my blessings.” In fact, each of the nine daily spiritual experiences measured is frequently experienced by the majority of those who experienced spiritual growth, significantly more than those who experienced spiritual loss, and more on average than the total population. Conversely, more than half of those who experienced spiritual loss “occasionally or never” experienced 8 out of 10 of the daily spiritual experiences.

As we learned in the 2020 study, spiritual experiences make a difference in how people manage their lives. People described experiences that “lifted me out of myself,” “made me feel a sense of wonder,” or “made me feel a sense of belonging.” Themes included a sense of awe, belonging, clarity, connection, discomfort, love, peace, mystery, presence, scale, self, significance, and transformation.



People who experienced an increase in mental well-being also frequently feel thankful for their blessings.

Respondents who experienced:	Improved Well-Being	Worsened Well-Being	Spiritual Growth	Spiritual Loss
Feel thankful for my blessings	77%*	66%	88%*	61%
Feel touched by the beauty of creation	63%*	52%	74%*	37%
Ask for help from a higher power / times of need	53%	44%	63%*	39%
Desire to be closer to a higher power	58%*	44%	66%*	31%
Feel the presence of a higher power	53%*	36%	63%*	26%
Ask for help from a higher power / daily activities	55%*	37%	62%*	32%
Feel a higher power's love directly	55%*	33%	63%*	25%
Feel guided by a higher power in the midst of daily activities	50%*	31%	59%*	23%
Feel a higher power's love through others	49%*	31%	56%*	21%

*statistically significant difference within each category at the level of at least $P < 0.05$.

In open-ended responses, some people shared that the COVID-19 pandemic supported a perspective shift and feelings of gratitude.

“

I have become a more spiritual person since the onset of COVID though. I am more accepting of what I cannot control, and I am more grateful and mindful of very little things. I see beauty more often, and I take the time to acknowledge it.

Female, 55, moderately spiritual,
not at all religious (Jewish)

“

Being thankful for all I have still throughout that terrible time.

Female, 24, very spiritual,
very religious (Christian)

“

I became more thankful for the blessings I have. I realized there are many people who have it worse than me and need help and understanding.

Male, 53, slightly spiritual,
slightly religious (Catholic)

“

My sense of gratitude was brought even more sharply into focus. I give thanks multiple times each day. Gratitude is my main spiritual emotion.

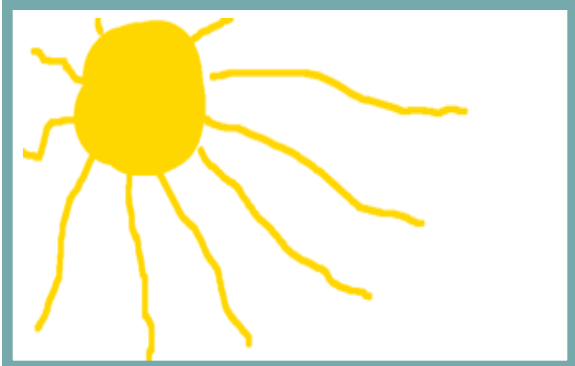
Female, 70, moderately spiritual,
not at all religious (not indicated)

CONNECTION



In our 2020 interviews and focus group conversations about spirituality, people commonly drew or described a sense of connection—with themselves, with a higher power or divine being, with others living or dead, or with nature—as a fundamental part of a spiritual life.

Many people, when describing spirituality or the drawings/words they drew, used the word “connection” to highlight the bridging role spirituality plays in our lives.



Description:

Spirituality is like the light of the sun shining down on people. We feel the warmth of a connection to a higher power.

Definition of spirituality:

A belief in a higher power and an ability to sense that power.

Male, 61, moderately spiritual, very religious (Mormon)

Most people feel some sense of connection to all of humanity, the natural environment, and a higher power, but the intensity of the connection diminished slightly.

- 92% feel¹² connected to the natural environment
- 90% feel¹³ connected to all of humanity
- 82% feel¹⁴ connected to a higher power

Like in other measures, the extent of the connection may be declining, or it may have been more impacted than other spirituality measures, because of the pandemic. The number of people who feel “moderately” or “highly” connected to a higher power or all of humanity significantly declined from 2020 to 2022. It was prevalent during the pandemic to hear people lament the lack of connection we were experiencing with our friends, colleagues, faith communities, and more. Perhaps this extended even further to more transcendent and existential feelings of connection.

Q. To what extent do you feel connected to the following?

Respondents who feel “moderately/very” connected to...	2020	2022
The natural environment	69%	66%
A higher power	66%*	61%
All of humanity	59%*	53%

*statistically significant change from 2020 to 2022 at the level of at least $P < 0.05$.

In our 2022 survey, we continued to see that not only do many feel connected to a higher power, all of humanity, and the natural environment, but like other spiritual measures, these feelings relate to political or civic dispositions. Those who believe their spirituality influences their political views or their civic engagement are more likely to feel highly connected to the natural environment (75%), a higher power (78%), or all of humanity (63%).

¹² Slightly, moderately, or highly

¹³ Slightly, moderately, or highly

¹⁴ Slightly, moderately, or highly



CONNECTION AND COVID-19 RESILIENCY

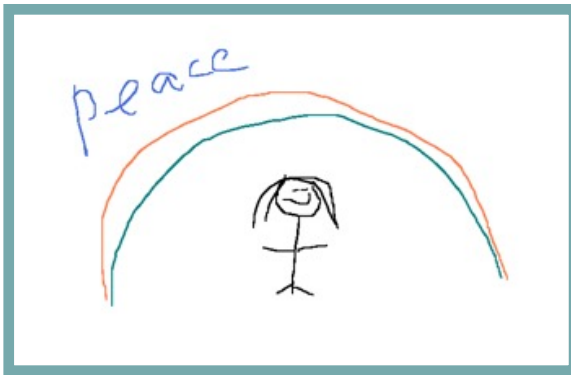
Those who have a moderate to high connection to the natural environment, humanity, and a higher power (compared to those who do not) also have self-reported spiritual growth or improved mental well-being since the COVID-19 pandemic. A strong connection to the natural world has a stronger relationship to improved well-being than connections to a higher power or all of humanity.

Eight in 10 people who experienced spiritual growth also feel moderately or highly connected to a higher power.

Respondents who experienced:	Improved Well-Being	Worsened Well-Being	Spiritual Growth	Spiritual Loss	Deeper Meaning and Purpose (a great deal/quite a bit)	Deeper Meaning and Purpose (somewhat/not at all)	Renewed Sense of Faith (a great deal/quite a bit)	Renewed Sense of Faith (somewhat/not at all)
Connected to the natural environment (mod/high)	74%*	58%	74%*	60%	75%*	64%	73%*	65%
Connected to all humanity (mod/high)	57%*	40%	62%*	39%	64%*	50%	65%*	49%
Connected to higher power (mod/high)	63%*	53%	79%*	49%	80%*	55%	87%*	53%

*statistically significant difference between responses within each category at the level of at least $P < 0.05$.

Three in four people who experienced improved mental well-being feel moderately or highly connected to the natural environment.



Description of drawing:

Spirituality is peace for me. I'm not religious, but having something to believe in has been beneficial to my mental health.

Definition of spirituality:

Having something intangible to rely on for support.

Male, 33, moderately spiritual, not at all religious (Agnostic)

Descriptions of connection were expressed when describing spirituality, explaining why respondents' civic participation changed, and how their spiritual life changed since the pandemic.

“

Having a connection with your spirit, having the belief in something greater than oneself.

Male, 20, slightly spiritual, not at all religious (nothing in particular)

“

It was important for me to connect with people with similar and differing views to feel more comfortable about humanity. With so much negative media coverage of the huge divide in the US, I wanted to have a better connection with people.

Female, 61, moderately spiritual, slightly religious (Agnostic)

“

I went through a depression and found understanding in my spirituality and connection to God.

Female, 20, very spiritual, moderately religious (Hindu)



RELATIONAL SPIRITUALITY

“

The world seems to be suffering as a whole, and I hate not being able to help, even if it's just an ear to listen, advice to give, or to help stand together in protest to try and make a difference. I want to be a part of something bigger than just li'l ol' me.

Female, 61, moderately spiritual,
not at all religious (Agnostic)

Spirituality is often considered to be a very personal part of our lives—and as we have learned, spirituality is connected to various aspects of our identity, beliefs we hold, experiences with the transcendent, and practices we engage in. But individual experiences alone do not fully describe an expansive spiritual life. Our spiritual life often considers others.



Description of drawing:

Hearts overlapping because when I think of spirituality, I think of people connecting.

Definition of spirituality:

Higher power, greater purpose.

Female, 27, moderately spiritual,
not at all religious (nothing in particular)

Relational spirituality is most obvious when we engage in spiritual practice or gatherings with friends or even strangers. Given the temporary closure of many religious spaces and the quarantines we experienced, it isn't surprising that according to our survey, only 28% of people in the United States regularly attend religious services (down from 34% pre-pandemic). However, this may point to an ongoing trend of a decline in religious membership more broadly. In 2022, fewer than half stated that they are part of a religious or spiritual community (42%, down from 46% in 2020).

Still, people offered examples of cultivating a connection with others during a time when it was difficult to do so:

“

Though the worst of the COVID quarantine was sometimes demoralizing, I was inspired by how my friends made such an effort to support each other and keep in touch despite the limitations in our in-person contact, which helped bolster my faith in humanistic principles of communal support.

Female, 78, very spiritual,
very religious (Catholic)

“

I joined more faith-sharing groups via Zoom, which enriched my spiritual life. I had more time to call and interact with family and friends via phone and Zoom, which also enriched my spirituality.

Female, 67, very spiritual,
moderately religious (Catholic)

How we make connections between our spiritual life and our prosocial or civic behavior tells a story about how spirituality gives us the opportunity to integrate our inner lives with our outer actions. For some, this arises from their spiritual or religious beliefs with a sense of responsibility or connection to the natural world or all of humanity; for others, their actions themselves may support a deeper sense of meaning and purpose. In either case, do our prosocial actions help support our spiritual health and mental well-being?

Change of Values – Thrive Center Structured Topic Modeling and Artificial Intelligence

One of the five major categories of descriptions of change in spirituality was described as Change of Values. For that topic (16%), respondents talked frequently about realizing that life is fleeting and that their priorities changed as a result of the pandemic. For example, one participant wrote, “I believe I began to be more aware of the fleeting aspect of our lives and thus focused more on SPIRITUAL matters and less on physical LIFE. In a sense, I became somewhat more SPIRITUAL in the face of death all around us.” And another wrote, “I became more introspective. The daily loss of lives from COVID-19 was disturbing; it forced me to re-evaluate my choices, the things I valued, and my relationships.”

Note that words in ALL CAPS are words/phrases that machine learning identified as the key terms.

CIVIC IMPORTANCE AND ACTIVITY



Like in 2020, we asked people about the ways they engage with others, in their community, and in politics. These actions ranged from informal prosocial behaviors such as getting to know their neighbors; to community behaviors such as engagement in local events; to civic actions such as volunteering; to political actions such as reaching out to a public official or voting.

We also asked how their civic actions changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2022 survey was consistent with the 2020 survey in finding that people with a stronger spiritual and/or religious identity are more likely to engage in all kinds of prosocial, civic, and political activities—and believe those actions are important.

However, in 2022, there were decreases across the board in the perceived importance of prosocial or civic activities. Compared to 2020, each of the prosocial behaviors and activities we asked about showed declines in importance from 2020, with “volunteering” and “making a difference in my community” declining the most. Understandably, opportunities to be engaged with one’s community were not as prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nonetheless, those who are “moderately” or “very” spiritual and/or religious have the strongest perception of the importance of civic activities.

Eight in 10 people say helping other people in need is important—and 9 in 10 “very” spiritual say this is important.

Higher measures of spirituality are related to more active civic and political lives. They are also related to a stronger perception of the relationship between spirituality and civic action. While there were modest declines from 2020 to 2022, the strong majority of those with a spiritual identity continue to see the influence of spirituality on their actions—even more so for the “very” or “moderately” spiritual and religious.

**Q. How important are each of the following actions to you?
(Very or somewhat important)**

	Total population		Of those “moderately” or “very” spiritual or religious	
	2020	2022	2020	2022
Helping other people in need	87%*	81%	91%*	86%
Contributing to the greater good in the world	80%*	75%	86%*	81%
Speaking up when other people have been wronged	80%*	75%	85%*	79%
Supporting causes or organizations that are important to me	77%*	71%	82%*	78%
Being informed of community issues	72%*	65%	77%*	69%
Making a difference in my community	71%*	63%	78%*	71%
Welcoming people who are different from me into my community	69%*	63%	75%*	68%
Volunteering	71%	63%	79%*	72%

*statistically significant change from 2020 to 2022 at the level of at least P<0.05.

**Q. How important are each of the following actions to you?
(Very or somewhat important)**

	Low spiritual and religious identity ¹⁵	High religious and low spiritual identity ¹⁶	High spiritual and low religious identity ¹⁷	High spiritual and religious identity ¹⁸
Helping other people in need	74%	77%	88%	86%
Contributing to the greater good in the world	66%	72%	81%	81%
Speaking up with other people have been wronged	68%	66%	81%	79%
Supporting causes or organizations that are important to me	61%	69%	76%	78%
Being informed of community issues	58%	60%	66%	69%
Making a difference in my community	51%	61%	68%	71%
Welcoming people who are different from me into my community	55%	55%	67%	68%
Volunteering	51%	67%	67%	72%

¹⁵ Of those “slightly” or “not at all” religious and “slightly” or “not at all” spiritual

¹⁶ Of those “moderately” or “very” religious and “slightly” or “not at all” spiritual

¹⁷ Of those “moderately” or “very” spiritual and “slightly” or “not at all” religious

¹⁸ Of those “moderately” or “very” religious and “moderately” or “very” spiritual

While a majority of people believe their spirituality guides their morals and actions, they are slightly less likely to name spirituality as a driving force in 2022.

Q. How much do the following statements describe you? (Moderately or very well)

	Total population		Of those “moderately” or “very” spiritual and/or religious	
	2020	2022	2020	2022
My spirituality guides my sense of right and wrong.	67%*	62%	84%*	80%
My spirituality guides how I act in the world.	66%*	61%	84%*	79%
My spirituality inspires me to give back to my community.	57%*	53%	75%*	70%

*statistically significant change from 2020 to 2022 at the level of at least P<0.05.

A modest to strong spiritual identity seems to support more broad intentions for their actions, but this is less so for more specific political activities or civic engagement.



Q. How much do you agree, disagree, or neither agree nor disagree with the following statements? (Strongly or somewhat agree)

	Total population		Of those “moderately” or “very” spiritual and/or religious	
	2020	2022	2020	2022
My spirituality influences my political views.	43%*	37%	57%*	51%
My spirituality influences my political activity (such as voting, volunteering for political campaigns or issues, or donating to candidates or political organizations).	35%*	31%	47%*	43%
My spirituality influences my civic engagement (such as volunteering in my community or donating to charity).	38%*	33%	51%*	46%
My spirituality leads me to hold politicians accountable.	39%*	34%	51%*	46%

*statistically significant change from 2020 to 2022 at the level of at least $P < 0.05$.

When we asked people how often they actually engage in various prosocial activities, most activities remained stable with only slight changes from 2020: “Staying informed of community events” went up and “participating in volunteer opportunities” went down. As we’ll see below, the pandemic challenged our opportunities to get involved, but for others, it revealed the need to raise their voice or make their voice heard when they saw others struggling or experiencing injustice.

Extent of spiritual and religious identity also relates to prosocial activity. Those who are “moderately” or “very” spiritual and/or religious have the most self-described activity level, and that level most closely matches their perception of importance.

Q. How well do the following statements describe you? (Moderately or very well)

	Total population		Of those “moderately” or “very” spiritual or religious	
	2020	2022	2020	2022
I donate to causes or organizations that are important to me.	52%	54%	61%	64%
I stay informed of events in my community.	50%	53%*	56%	60%*
Working with others, make positive change in my community.	50%	52%	58%	56%
I make an effort to know my neighbors.	50%	51%	56%	59%
I make an effort to interact with strangers.	45%	43%	51%	51%
I make an effort to attend community events.	34%	34%	39%	41%
I participate in organized volunteer opportunities.	35%	33%	42%	41%

*statistically significant change from 2020 to 2022 at the level of at least $P < 0.05$.



CIVIC IMPORTANCE AND COVID-19 RESILIENCY

Two questions were asked that referenced the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in civic participation. We asked if civic activities increased, decreased, or remained the same and then asked an open-ended question to explain their answer.

The majority of people reported that they did not change the level of their civic participation due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the few (9% of the population) who saw an increase in their civic participation, they are more likely to be “very” spiritual or religious (72% vs. 28% who identified as “slightly” spiritual or religious or “not at all”).

When asked why their civic engagement changed, people described the challenge of participating civically due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions as well as a heightened sense of concern for their community impacted their actions, from COVID-19 to racial justice concerns.

“

Awareness of social discrimination and economic disparity were highlighted during COVID. It led me to donate more to the underprivileged and underserved.

Female, 73, very spiritual, very religious (Protestant)

“

It showed me just how much our voices matter. Nothing changes if we're behind closed doors and not standing up for ourselves/livelihoods.

Female, 26, very spiritual, not at all religious (something else)

“

Felt the need to inform and encourage people to come out and vote.

Male, 46, moderately spiritual, moderately religious (Christian)

“

The welfare of others in need was more evident, and I was able to help. The leadership at the time was also cruel to the most vulnerable.

Male, 22, not at all spiritual, not at all religious (Atheist)

“

So many are struggling. I feel that every child needs to have food on their table.

Female, 22, very spiritual, moderately religious (something else)

“

The world seems to be suffering as a whole, and I hate not being able to help, even if it's just an ear to listen, advice to give, or to help stand together in protest to try and make a difference. I want to be a part of something bigger than just li'l ol' me.

Female, 61, moderately spiritual, not at all religious (Agnostic)

“

I'm almost 70 years old, and my husband is a stem-cell transplant and cancer survivor, so we've stayed away from crowds until recently after the threat of COVID had gone down.

Female, 68, very spiritual, not at all religious (Christian)

“

COVID stopped everything in my life. I couldn't do a lot of things because we were worried about catching it.

Female, 38, slightly spiritual, moderately religious, (Christian)

Change of Focus – Thrive Center Structured Topic Modeling and Artificial Intelligence

For the Change of Focus group (18%), respondents commonly reported an increase in spiritual activities and a change or reprioritization in how they spend the bulk of their time. Characteristic of this category, one participant wrote, “I needed something else to occupy my time and found a sense of belonging, CONNECTION, and purpose through my SPIRITUALITY. It helped me learn that there are more things that matter over the pushed, capitalist values my country prioritizes over human existence.”

To contrast this group with the Change of Values group (page 60), the latter group commonly reported a change in what was important to them, but the Change of Focus group commonly reported a change in what they spent their time on.

ACCOUNTABILITY



We learned in earlier focus groups and interviews that some people see a connection between their spirituality and outer actions and that it informs a sense of responsibility. They said this responsibility came with their faith, their relationship with a higher power, or their sense of connection with humanity, to “help others.”

In addition to asking to what extent people are “accountable to a higher power” for their impact on other people, we also asked how “accountable to other people” they were for their actions. We found that the majority of respondents reported feeling their strongest sense of accountability to other people as inspiration for their actions.

- Accountability to other people for your impact on them: 83%
- Accountability to a higher power for your impact on others: 68%
- Accountability to a higher power for your impact on the natural environment: 65%

Like in 2020, people who see themselves as accountable to a higher power for their impact on other people are more likely to vote (70%). They are also more likely to:

- say that their spirituality and religion influence their political views.
- say that their spirituality and religion influence their civic engagement.

Of respondents who agree:	My spirituality influences my political views.	My religion influences my political views.	My spirituality influences my civic engagement.	My religion influences my civic engagement.
Accountable to other people for your impact on them (extremely/somewhat)	86%	86%	89%	89%
Accountable to a higher power for your impact on other people (extremely/somewhat)	85%	92%	83%	91%
Accountable to a higher power for your impact on the natural environment (extremely/somewhat)	79%	84%	81%	85%



ACCOUNTABILITY AND COVID-19 RESILIENCY

Does a sense of accountability impact how one fares with their mental well-being and/or spiritual health? Having a strong sense of accountability toward a higher power has a stronger relationship to spiritual growth than a strong sense of accountability toward other people.

Respondents who experienced:	Improved Mental Well-Being	Worsened Mental Well-Being	Spiritual Growth	Spiritual Loss	Deeper Meaning and Purpose (quite a bit)	Deeper Meaning and Purpose (not at all)	Renewed Sense of Faith (quite a bit)	Renewed Sense of Faith (not at all)
Accountable to a higher power (extremely/somewhat)	69%*	60%	84%*	57%	82%*	63%	88%*	61%
Accountable to other people (extremely/somewhat)	83%	84%	87%*	80%	82%	83%	82%	83%

*statistically significant difference between responses within each category at the level of at least $P < 0.05$.



BELIEF, BONDING, BELONGING, AND BEHAVIOR: COVID-19 RESILIENCY

Throughout this report, we have demonstrated that in every aspect of a spiritual life that we measured, there is a positive relationship between the extent of that aspect to spiritual growth and often mental well-being. Taken together, there is more evidence of an expansive spiritual life supporting resiliency.

EXPERT ANALYSIS



Richard Cowden, Ph.D.

*Research Scientist, Human Flourishing
Program, Harvard University*

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a multilayered assortment of challenges that threatened or disrupted many aspects of our lives, including (but not limited to) physical and mental health, social connectedness, financial security, and religious/spiritual life (Cowden et al., 2023; Davis et al., 2021; Siba et al., 2023). In addition to the generalized climate of stress that was brought about by the public health crisis, specific instances of adversity or loss also permeated the lived experiences of individuals. In the 2022 data from this study, nearly 60% of American adults had experienced one or more of the following significant life events during the COVID-19 pandemic: bereavement, loss of employment, and financial setbacks.

When people encounter such adversity or loss, they are inclined to draw on available resources to offset or recover from the stressful situation (Cowden et al., 2022). One such resource is spirituality and religion, which may have been especially salient during the COVID-19 pandemic because everyday resources might have been less widely available or unsuitable for dealing with the adversity or loss that people faced under the conditions created by the global health crisis (Cowden et al., 2021, 2022).

Religion and spirituality may be studied through various lenses, and many different frameworks could be appropriated to operationalize the notion of a full religious and/or spiritual life. Here, we apply a multidimensional conception of religious/spiritual life that consists of four interrelated psychosocial processes (the “4 Bs”)—believing, bonding, belonging, and behaving (Saroglou et al., 2020)—to explore whether a more expansive religious/spiritual life might have played a role in helping U.S. adults adjust to the COVID-19 pandemic. Believing refers to a person’s recognition and acceptance of a transcendental reality.

Bonding underscores the self-transcendent experiences that connect a person to a transcendent reality they share with a religious/spiritual community. Belonging represents the social identity and commitment a person experiences when they are connected to a religious/spiritual group that has a common history and future. Finally, behaving captures a person’s moral and ethical actions that are inspired by religious/spiritual convictions.

We selected items from *A Study of Spirituality in the U.S.* that represent the 4 Bs. Participants were classified into two groups—those who met the criteria for all 4 Bs (the 4 Bs group) vs. those who met the criteria for fewer than the 4 Bs (the Less Than 4 Bs group). A fuller or more expansive religious/spiritual life was implied among those in the 4 Bs group. One-third (33%) of people met the criteria for all 4 Bs (around 13% did not meet the criteria for any of the 4 Bs). Approximately 96% of those in the 4 Bs group were moderately/very religious or spiritual compared to 50% in the Less Than 4 Bs group. A similar trend was found when religious and spiritual identity were considered separately, although the difference was smaller for spiritual identity (90% vs. 45%) compared to religious identity (85% vs. 27%)

Across a range of retrospective survey items that captured pandemic-related changes in functioning, a higher percentage of people in the 4 Bs group tended to report positive changes in different areas of functioning relative to the Less Than 4 Bs group. The percentage of individuals who reported experiencing spiritual growth (78% vs. 39%), discovering a deeper meaning or purpose in life (43% vs. 21%), having a renewed sense of faith (46% vs. 16%), and becoming more spiritually connected to sacred places (42% vs. 24%) during the COVID-19 pandemic was greater in the 4 Bs group compared to the Less Than 4 Bs group. The exception was a perceived change in mental well-being, with a similar percentage of individuals in both groups endorsing a positive change in mental well-being throughout the public health crisis (approximately 12% in each group).

Taken together, these findings suggest that a more expansive religious/spiritual life is related to several positive indicators of functioning during times when society is facing a generalized climate of stress, including more frequent daily spiritual experiences, spiritual growth, deeper meaning and purpose in life, and prosocial attitudes and behavior. This is also true for people who encountered personal stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic. For some people, having a richer religious/spiritual life may be an important resource for coping with the challenges of a public health crisis.

A more expansive religious/spiritual life is related to several positive indicators of functioning during times when society is facing a generalized climate of stress.

CONCLUSION:

THE RESILIENCY OF AN EXPANSIVE SPIRITUAL LIFE

The COVID-19 pandemic was part of a polycrisis that intensified between 2020 and 2022. The simultaneous social, economic, environmental, political, and public health challenges brought illness, loss, extreme frustration, heightened anxiety, and devastating separation from loved ones, friends, colleagues, and our communities. It changed how we work, how we educate our children, where we congregate, how we accompany our dying relatives, and how we spend our time.

In the face of such considerable global suffering and in ways that seem consistent with the narratives of faith traditions, people reacted differently: Some leaned into their spiritual strength, while others disconnected from their spiritual identity and behaviors. In people's descriptions of their experiences and challenges, we understand better why some people disengaged, feeling the adverse impact of isolation and loss, and why some people continued to engage and grow. But most of all, we saw how people were able to draw from their spiritual wells in different ways to navigate uncertainty, consider their values, and remain engaged with their communities.

As our research shows, spirituality is a defining aspect of who we are, how we orient ourselves to our world, and how we get through the ups and downs of life. For some, spirituality was central to how they navigated the pervasive and disorienting events of the COVID-19 pandemic. And while we saw slight declines in many spiritual measures in 2022, time will tell if this is a continuing trend or an understandable shift due to the challenges of this time.

For some, spirituality was central to how they navigated the pervasive and disorienting events of the COVID-19 pandemic.

When we began this study in 2018, we posed a central question: “What does spirituality mean to you?” Rather than define spirituality, we wanted to hear how people described it themselves. Through various forms—drawings, open-ended answers, and a myriad of survey questions—we’ve learned a great deal about the nuances of a spiritual life, its relationship to faith and religion, and the many ways we use our spirituality to ground us, support us, and engage with the world.

The morbid shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic is not entirely behind us, and there is no shortage of challenges in our world today. We hope this study invites scholars, practitioners, and people across the spiritual spectrum to pause and reflect. We also hope that the findings and reflections support an expansive conversation—one that leads to a greater understanding of the state of spirituality today and its significant relationship to resilience in times of adversity. How we retain and bolster this fundamental aspect of our being is critical to the ever-increasing complexity and challenges in our present world.



EXPERT OPINION



Matthew T. Lee, Ph.D.

Professor of Social Sciences and Humanities at the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University, and Research Associate and Director of the Flourishing Network at the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University

This report makes several significant contributions. One is methodological: By inviting respondents to use a creative and artistic capacity (drawing), respondents were able to get more deeply in touch with relational and embodied forms of spirituality. This included connections to self, community, and nature at a higher level that was statistically significant. This is a reminder that more robust and “humanized” methods invite respondents to engage more fully with the inquiry. Indeed, participation in the study may have itself been considered spiritual or religious.

Perhaps the most important finding is that spirituality and religion were waning in the United States during the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and co-occurring crises at precisely the time when these factors made such a positive difference in the lives of those who self-identify as spiritual or religious. In many cases, spirituality and religion were associated with resilience and even growth despite powerful experiences of loss and deprivation. This affirms the value of spirituality and religion, but it also leaves us with cause for concern, as people seemed less able to access the settings and experiences that confer so many benefits in 2022 compared with 2020.

It is encouraging that so many people responded to the crises by developing deeper and more meaningful spiritual practices and that this had strong prosocial and civic impacts. It is worth spotlighting the fact that, based on this survey, only 12% of the United States population reported that their well-being improved post-pandemic and that this set of “flourishing-despite-adversity” respondents were more likely to consider themselves “very” or “moderately” spiritual.

Spirituality and religion were waning in the U.S. during the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and co-occurring crises at precisely the time when these factors made such a positive difference in the lives of those who self-identify as spiritual or religious.

Research has shown that children raised in a religious or spiritual environment subsequently report a range of positive effects on their flourishing, including higher levels of happiness and volunteering, lower levels of depression and substance abuse, and a greater sense of mission and purpose.¹⁹ The findings in this study affirm these benefits. But the research is also clear that religious service attendance and participation in spiritual practices, such as prayer and meditation, drive the positive effects.

If the U.S. population is becoming less active in service attendance and related practices, this does not bode well for the future of human flourishing. This could serve as a call to find ways to support spiritual and religious development in a manner that can reach those who are pulling away from the existing offerings. More research on the connection between spirituality/religion and flourishing could help identify promising interventions, particularly with regard to the development of “spiritual strengths” (Lisa Miller’s phrase, author of *The Spiritual Child*).

It is also significant that 64% of those who reported improved mental health post-pandemic also identified “Love” as a benefit of spirituality compared with only 49% of those who reported that their mental well-being declined. This complements other research that has demonstrated the special connection between Love and flourishing in general, and particularly in spiritual contexts. Future research should explore the causes of these findings.



¹⁹ <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/religious-upbringing>

APPENDIX

A general population sample of U.S. adults ages 18+ was selected from NORC’s AmeriSpeak Panel for this study. All panelists who completed the 2020 National Religion and Spirituality Survey were excluded from the sample.

In total, NORC collected 3,651 final interviews, 3,456 by web mode and 105 by phone mode, between November 9, 2022, and December 7, 2022. This does not include interviews that may have been removed for data quality purposes.

The sample for a specific study was selected from the AmeriSpeak Panel using sampling strata based on age, race/Hispanic ethnicity, education, and gender (48 sampling strata in total).

Weighted Sample

Due to rounding, some tables do not add up to exactly 100.

Age	
18–34	29%
35–49	25%
50–64	25%
65+	22%

Race/Ethnicity	
Non-Hispanic White	62%
Non-Hispanic Black	12%
Hispanic	17%
Non-Hispanic Asian / Pacific Islander	6%
Non-Hispanic Other	3%

Education	
Less than High School	9%
High School Equivalent	29%
Some College/ Associate Degree	26%
Bachelor’s Degree	20%
Graduate Degree	15%

Gender	
Male	49%
Female	51%

ABOUT AMERISPEAK® AND NORC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Funded and operated by NORC at the University of Chicago, AmeriSpeak® is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the US household population. Randomly selected US households are sampled using area probability and address-based sampling, with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame. These sampled households are then contacted by US mail, telephone, and field interviewers (face-to-face). The panel provides a sample coverage of approximately 97% of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with P.O. Box—only addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings. While most AmeriSpeak households participate in surveys by web, non-internet households can participate in AmeriSpeak surveys by telephone. Households without conventional internet access but having web access via smartphones are allowed to participate in AmeriSpeak surveys by web. AmeriSpeak panelists participate in NORC studies or studies conducted by NORC on behalf of governmental agencies, academic researchers, and media and commercial organizations.

For more information, email AmeriSpeak-BD@norc.org or visit AmeriSpeak.norc.org.



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