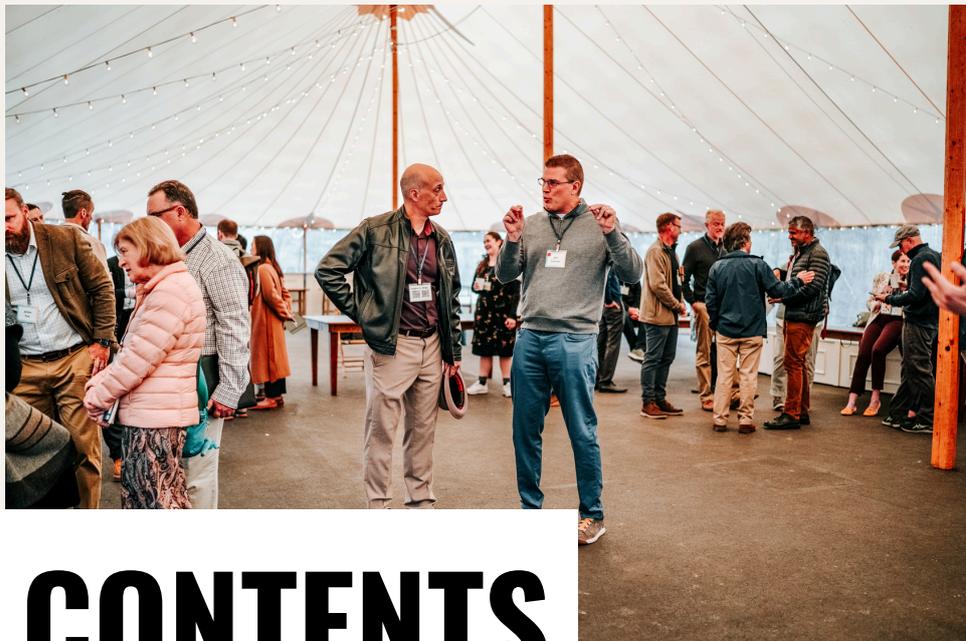# WHEN SPIRITUAL PRACTITIONERS AND SCIENTISTS COLLABORATE FOR GREATER IMPACT

A RE-SORSE GUIDE ON COLLABORATION: FOR THE SCIENCE OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL EXERCISES (SORSE)

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A SUCCESSFUL SCIENTIST-PRACTITIONER COLLABORATION

The program officer enthusiastically spoke up. She was talking so quickly I could hardly type fast enough to keep pace. Her usually measured tone instead bubbled with energy and excitement. Something had her buzzing with intellectual giddiness. Something had her bursting with an unexpected intensity.

If we could get Glen and Sarah to talk to us, that would be incredible. Their work is making a huge difference - and they seem to have really figured out the collaboration element. I don't know if they would, they're both incredibly busy, but if we could get them, they are in the top tier of excellence all around.

This enthusiasm wasn't just about good ideas, it was about impact. Truly global impact, at scale, where research and innovation have come together and are actively, and actually, changing the world. Just who were these people?! And, what had they done that was so noteworthy it was worth capturing their story and sharing it with other researchers, scholars, and professionals engaged on the ground?

Naturally, I turned to Google. Glen's organization has become the largest mental health community in the world. At the writing of this resource they've reached over 72 million people, in 189 countries, and work in 140 languages. Sarah, a prolific social psychology researcher and professor with over 75 publications and $10 million in grant funding, specializes in the study of patience, gratitude, thrift, generosity and self-control.

WHY COLLABORATE?

Sarah and Glen's individual accomplishments were easy to find. But their collaboration, the story of what they had built together, and how they had worked together so successfully, was unsearchable. And yet, it was the collaboration that changed everything.

When research and practice truly work together something new emerges.

- Deeper insight
- Contextualized application
- Richer questions with more impactful results

This kind of collaboration — between researchers and practitioners, between scientists and the community they are studying — is how we move beyond the limits of our own fields, roles, or systems. It is how complex questions turn into transformative work. It's where ideas meet impact.

We set out to learn from each Science of Religious and Spiritual Exercises (SoRSE) team we could, grantees who consist of scientist-practitioner teams investigating how spiritual disciplines impact lives and communities. How are these scholars and those leading in faith communities partnering in ways that are meaningful, sustainable, and powerful enough to exceed what either could do alone? Sarah and Glen's story provides a vivid entry.

What is the SoRSE context?

In the early 2020s the Templeton World Charity Foundation launched a funding program, entitled, _The Science of Religious and Spiritual Exercises_, to "Focus on expanding our understanding of the science of religious and spiritual exercises," "Support interdisciplinary and practice-informed empirical research on the impact of religious and spiritual exercises," and "Encourage science-informed innovation in religious and spiritual exercises to promote human flourishing."

Grants funded by this initiative are exploring fasting, group singing, meditative stances, prayer, and many other spiritual practices, across many religious traditions. But "the SoRSE context" that we are addressing here extends to other research that uses the tools of the sciences to better understand religious and spiritual practices, rituals, ceremonies, and spiritual technologies.

COLLABORATION IN THE SORSE CONTEXT

When our work involves understanding humans, especially the impact of spiritual and religious practices on physical, psychological, social, and spiritual wellbeing, we need multiple voices to answer our research questions. No single scholar, synagogue, or discipline can answer these questions alone.

Collaboration isn't just a strategy. In this work it's imperative. It matters not only from a research standpoint, but also from the perspective of the communities being studied. Trust deepens when a religious community and its leadership is directly involved from concept development, to investigation, to the interpretation and communication of findings. By practicing inclusion from the start, research teams can dismantle the insider/outsider divide that has long shaped the study of religious and spiritual practices.

Historically, much of the research on religion-science has been "outsider"-driven, framed by external theoretical lenses, investigating practices researchers often did not personally engage. But, "insider"-informed research, in which communities help define the questions, identify pain points, and clarify helpful goals, yields richer insights. When inquiry is rooted in lived experience it becomes more relevant, and more likely to serve the faith communities it studies.

As such, we need each other to gain understanding, to make progress, to produce resources, and to make a positive difference in the world through both research and practice. In the spaces where it matters most, collaboration across boundaries isn't optional. It's essential.

WHY A COLLABORATION GUIDE?

In a world where results are expected fast, where the pace of life never slows on its own, and where demands are high, the quiet question under everything is, *Do I really have the time to add anything more?*
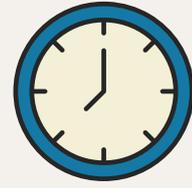
That's the tension. Because while collaboration may be "meaningful," it's also more.

More people.   **More perspectives.**   **More time.**

And, if we're honest, sometimes more exhaustion. So, how do we create collaborations worth having? Where the sum of our efforts really is greater than its parts? And, how do we create space for others, when people can be …a lot?

This guide is here to help.

It shares the real, behind-the-scenes of collaboration between researchers and religious and spiritual leaders. Shared in a way that will skip the headaches, reduce friction, increase ease, bring laughter, and produce effective, repeatable results.

This resource is a curated set of the principles and lessons from across seventeen SoRSE teams:
- Industry professionals
- Research scholars
- Social, clinical, and counseling psychologists
- Rabbis and ministry leaders
- Philosophers and theologians
- *And often, individuals with dual roles from the list above

Through their experiences we've surfaced repeatable patterns - principles you can apply to your own context, in your own way, without starting from scratch.

Note:

Though the upcoming narrative reads like an interview transcript, it's adapted from notes, direct conversation, and observation. We've paraphrased for clarity and flow. Italics indicate dialogue or reflection, even if not always verbatim. We are beginning with Sarah and Glen because their story highlighted many of the same principles that we heard from many other teams.

WHAT COLLABORATION SOUNDS LIKE: A STORY FROM GLEN AND SARAH

I initially said no. I didn't have time. I get asked to help people all the time, and I just don't have enough time to go around. I thought, no, I'll take your call, but I'm for sure going to tell you no.

The three of us on the zoom call all broke into laughter. From the moment we started talking, the friendship, respect, and ease between them was obvious. Beyond the friendship, I had already heard stories of their incredible productivity, and their work project success, the world's largest mental health community, reaching over 72 million people, built on research-backed tools and deep community trust. Their work was exceptional, and their generosity and humility had brought us together to explore a simple question.

What's your secret sauce?

Probably not. These are the first words Sarah shared when Glen first reached out about collaborating.

You started with a no?! How did we get from "no" to years of collaboration? I simply could not wait to learn more.

I'm going to use first names, because that's what these types of collaborations create. These relationships aren't built around titles, but are built around trust. These are the kind of partnerships that extend beyond any one project or research question, and lead to a lifetime of connection.

So, Sarah, I hate to say the obvious here, but you clearly ended up working together? They both erupted into laughter this time. I continued pressing.

What changed? How did you decide you wanted to collaborate with this person you didn't know?

Glen's vision was compelling. When I learned about what they were doing, it was just really compelling. I realized pretty quickly, ahh shoot. I am going to have to find a way to do this. It was too compelling to not join.

Principles

Say yes to the work that moves you. Engage only in collaborative work you genuinely want to do. Collaboration thrives when it's fueled by internal motivation and genuine desire - not obligation. There typically are not enough "carrots" or compensation to make collaboration feel "worth it" all the time. When you say yes to the work that moves you, you can more easily power through the hard to get to the payoff.

Join forces around a superordinate goal. The most powerful partnerships form when people rally around a mission too big to accomplish alone. Superordinate goals - those that transcend individual roles - demand collective effort, ignite vision, dissolve division, and pull us into purposeful action.

For an hour and a half I listened to Sarah and Glen talk back and forth, building on each other's ideas seamlessly. They sparked off each other in real time. Sometimes fast, sharing the story as if it was happening right now. Other times slow, stopping to pause and ask each other to reflect on what happened. It was as if their minds had become an extension of the other's, accessing the information, ideas, and innovations held in a mutual space that hung between them.

Sarah jumped in. *They also had a highly functional team. I could see that from the very start. I knew I could trust my time was going to be valued, and we weren't going to waste time with people who didn't know what they were doing. If they didn't have a strong team I wouldn't have had time to say yes.*

Principle

Build from a solid foundation. Before inviting others into collaboration, check your foundation. Whether working solo or leading a team, make sure your purpose is clear and you have effective systems. If your team is misaligned or pulling in different directions, adding a new collaborator won't fix it, it will magnify the cracks.

More laughter. There had been so much laughter.

It wasn't performative or forced. It was foundational. As I observed them I thought of the research on laughter. It's a powerful tool to encourage creativity, boost innovation, and enhance performance. It was evident these two leaders, and their teams when all together, had created a power-house environment. Glen and Sarah had created an environment that wasn't just high-functioning. It was genuinely fun.

Principle

Lead with laughter. Laughter fuels collaboration. When teams laugh together they lower defenses and unlock creativity. Laughter isn't a distraction, it's a catalyst for deeper work. A little levity opens the door for big breakthroughs.

Glen initiated the partnership. In the first part of our conversation, Sarah had a lot to say about why she said yes. Glen happily nodded away in unison with the stories she shared. The stories made it clear, even though Glen reached out, it wasn't Glen's project or Sarah's project. It was theirs.

We built it together, from the start. I notice they exclusively use "we" language from here on out.

I asked how they got started together, at what stage of the project they started working together, and what specifically they did to begin. I was particularly interested in the details of the day to day, and barraged them with questions to dig into the things they may have done without conscious effort, the things that seemed to "just happen" so we could reverse engineer what led to the quality of work and relationship I was hearing about.

Sarah shared, *We started with the proposal itself and asked, what would be a good strategy here? To do that, we had to first understand the ecosystem of 7 Cups. We needed to find where we fit into this so we could find how to partner in useful ways.*

They shared about the multiple conversations spent to gain clarity and understanding of everything going on. There were two different cultures at play – one of a tech company that can move quickly, and one of academia where movement is so slow it sometimes looks like molasses spreading…in January…in Manitoba. Merging cultures took time, the time they felt was well spent.

Principle

Start slow to move fast. Take time to understand the organizations and the people involved. Time spent at the start sets the path for success. Skipping steps to just "get started" with the work typically ends up backfiring with missed expectations and unclear process. Every minute spent up front saves hours in the long run.

This got my attention. *How? How did you learn these things? What specifically did you do?*

After we had a baseline established that we were going to work together we got our teams together, in person, for two full days. We had an external facilitator come in and lead us through getting to know each other as people and as colleagues. We learned about our working style preferences, our skills and experiences, we shared about our concerns and our excitement at the possibilities.

We also practiced together some of the interventions, and gathered in small groups to go through gratitude storytelling exercises. We did the practices together, and then dug into the brainstorming process. We started asking, how does the science connect, how do these show up in our experiences? How do these show up in the 7 Cups community members? The key was, we were actually doing it together. We connected on a deeper personal level, which makes the work going forward easier.

Principle

Build relationships before partnerships. The best collaborations start with connection. Before diving into the work, take time to get to know each other. Find out how you think, what you value, and where you're coming from. Trust built early becomes the foundation for navigating challenges ahead. Real collaboration begins when we show up as people, not just our roles.

I asked more about the time together. Besides the people parts, I wanted to know how the work itself came together. What did they do to create the proposal, and the resulting work, together?

They continued on, *The in-person meeting was essential to figure out next steps. It took some real digging that could have been super uncomfortable. I (Sarah) needed to understand the business model, for example, to be able to effectively understand how the research was going to work, and what incentivized this community to work. Because we had built trust I started asking my pointed questions about the business. In turn, Glen started asking pointed questions about the research and interventions.*

We spent a lot of time asking questions we never could have known going into it that we needed to ask. Everything we were getting stuck on came out, and as we shared our process behind all the curtains we started to see what we could create together. That couldn't have come without the in person time to just kind of grab an idea and drill down until we had understanding. Understanding the research and business models led to our project ideas, which led to what became our proposal.

Because we took time to really get in deep on things seemingly unrelated to "the proposal" we were able to find key understandings of how it was all going to work. We didn't know what to ask up front because we didn't know what we didn't know.

Principle

Design together. The strongest projects are not pieced together, they are designed together. Develop the relationships, build trust, and the key turning moments to create a project will emerge naturally.

It almost sounded too good to be true. While the people involved had built trust and relationships, and made some fun discoveries about the research, there are still far more elements involved in research collaborations that I hadn't heard anything about yet. *That all sounds well and good, but what about the not-fun stuff?*

We got into the tensions of our organizations, too. Tech and universities are funded differently, their goals are different, the pace of work, the amount of research processes to clear, it felt at odds a bit. But we found the simple truth – universities need people and data, tech companies need scientists – and we built from there. I (Glen) feel that if you can unlock integrated innovation it creates huge potential to unlock loads of opportunities, if you can be flexible and understanding. Flexibility and communication is key.

I asked them to explain more about these ideas. *How? What did you do, practical steps, to bring flexibility and communication to tech and university collaborations?*

We let the culture drive the communication channels. Since the work was being done "inside" the tech company, we used their communication channels and adapted the research team into those. Specifically, we used their Slack channels instead of the university email default.

We opened up Slack access and designated a communication liaison to bridge between the university world of email and the tech companies world of Slack messaging. That's a specific example of how we used flexibility and communication to meet the needs of each team and organizational culture.

More laughter as Sarah states loudly, *Yeah, I was never going on Slack. But the Slack liaison made it work from my emails!*

A STORY FROM GLEN AND SARAH CONTINUED

Principles

Understand the culture of the organizations involved. Organizations often run very differently. What's normal and expected in terms of behavior and process does not always translate automatically or intuitively to those involved. Invest time to learn what drives each organization, what is underneath specific processes, and how to navigate key differences.

Name tensions or misunderstandings explicitly. Naming the issues removes tension and builds cohesion. By naming the issues they can be discussed and explored with curiosity. The greater the ability to talk about the things that are different or difficult increases the ability to redesign for progress.

Glen and Sarah further expanded here about why they think this worked so well, and what they've gleaned from other collaborations they were a part of previously. They shared that these ways of working only succeeded because of the virtues of the specific people involved. They discussed how finding people with virtue and character strengths was the glue that held the other principles together. For example, having people who are high in patience, and low in irritability created the background conditions for everything else.

They further explained that being careful to bring people on who are humble and kind and curious, quick to ask questions and slow to frustrations, are the kind of traits they've learned to look for. We discussed how it really only takes one difficult person to make an entire collaboration go awry.

Principle:

Choose character over credentials. In work that crosses outside a single organization or sphere, the way people interact with others matters more than having the most prestigious credentials. Identify possible collaborators by the training, skills, and expertise needed, but make the final selection based on character. Collaboration thrives on humility, integrity, openness to admit failure, and respect; not prestige, reputation, and ego.

One final insight came near the end of our conversation. *How did you know what steps to take? The importance of getting everyone together in person, managing communication to ease friction points, this isn't what you were trained in?*

They both smiled. *Experience.* **They had experience** running these types of collaborations, and they both had made, and seen, a lot of mistakes along the way.

For Sarah, she shared multiple other collaborations that went poorly. Where projects suffered, or potential collaborators just didn't seem to get the purpose, and therefore kept tanking the way forward. She now had expertise to mentor the project, and had benefited from many mentors along the way.

Both were adamant. Mentorship matters. While the contexts are different, the principles and patterns of work translate. An experienced mentor or expert who can provide insight at key junctures is critical on these types of collaborations.

Principle:

Bring in wise guides. People who have done similar work can help navigate challenges to save you time, stress, and missteps. Whether it's at launch or a key turning point, an experienced mentor can help you see around corners you didn't know were coming.

Somehow, we talked ourselves out of time. We had gone long, yet it felt like we had only just begun. These strangers-turned-collaborators-turned-trusted-friends had shared such gold mined from the depths of their experience. They spoke for the benefit of others stepping into similar work, to create the kinds of collaborations that change the world by bringing together needed wisdom, insight, tenacity, and curiosity across disciplinary lines.

PRINCIPLES OF SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION

The principles come from the lived experience of 17 collaborative teams of researchers, faith leaders, nonprofit professionals, and organizational partners who are working across disciplines, countries, languages, and religious traditions. Some of the principles emerged through the story of Glen and Sarah. Others emerged in the presentations at the SoRSE workshop*. Each principle reflects the real tensions, patterns, and insights behind collaborations that didn't just work, but built beyond the work to new and different ways of being.

To make these principles easier to use we have grouped them into two categories:
- About people: who you collaborate with and how you show up
- About work: how you design, navigate, and sustain the project itself

SORSE WORKSHOP*

In April 2025, Blueprint 1543 convened 17 teams who had been funded by the Templeton World Charity Foundation's SoRSE initiative. The goals were to build a supportive, collegial community and learn from each other, particularly how to build effective, enjoyable practitioner-scientist collaborations.

PRINCIPLES ABOUT PEOPLE

Say yes to the work that moves you. Engage only in collaborative work you genuinely want to do. Collaboration thrives when it's fueled by internal motivation and genuine desire, not obligation. There typically are not enough "carrots" or compensation to make collaboration feel "worth it" all the time. When you say yes to the work that moves you, you can more easily power through the hard-to-get to the payoff.

Join forces around a superordinate goal. The most powerful partnerships form when people rally around a mission too big to accomplish alone. Superordinate goals – those that transcend individual roles demand collective effort – ignite vision, dissolve division, and pull us into purposeful action.

Build from a solid foundation. Before inviting others into collaboration, check your foundation. Whether working solo or leading a team, make sure your purpose is clear and you have effective systems. If your team is misaligned or pulling in different directions, adding a new collaborator won't fix it, it will magnify the cracks.

Lead with laughter. Laughter fuels collaboration. When teams laugh together they lower defenses and unlock creativity. Laughter isn't a distraction, it's a catalyst for deeper work. A little levity opens the door for big breakthroughs.

Start slow to move fast. Take time to understand the organizations and the people involved. Time spent at the start sets the path for success. Skipping steps to just "get started" with the work typically ends up backfiring with missed expectations and unclear process. Every minute spent up front saves hours in the long run.

Build relationships before partnerships. The best collaborations start with connection. Before diving into the work, take time to get to know each other. Find out how you think, what you value, and where you're coming from. Trust built early becomes the foundation for navigating challenges ahead. Real collaboration begins when we show up as people, not just our roles.

Design together. The strongest projects are not pieced together, they are designed together. Develop the relationships, build trust, and the key turning moments to create a project will emerge naturally.

Decide how you'll decide. Collaboration requires clarity about how choices are made. Naming who holds what authority, what consensus is needed, where alignment versus full agreement matters, and how input is gathered prevents confusion and conflict.

Understand the culture of the organizations involved. Organizations often run very differently. What's normal and expected in terms of behavior and process does not always translate automatically or intuitively to those involved. Invest time to learn what drives each organization, what is underneath specific processes, and how to navigate key differences.

Name tensions or misunderstandings explicitly. Naming the issues removes tension and builds cohesion. By naming the issues they can be discussed and explored with curiosity. The greater the ability to talk about the things that are different or difficult increases the ability to redesign for progress.

Make the invisible, visible. Pre-existing, often subconscious frameworks impact collaboration. The assumptions, power dynamics, or cultural norms shape how each person and group enters the work. Uncover and discuss the deeper context shaping how people come to the work. Behind every process are assumptions, histories, and values. Make time to name what usually stays hidden. For example, what does "on time" mean to each person? Just ask, it's wildly different!

Choose character over credentials. In work that crosses outside a single organization or sphere, the way people interact with others matters more than having the most prestigious credentials. Identify possible collaborators by the training, skills, and expertise needed, but make the final selection based on character. Collaboration thrives on humility, integrity, openness to admit failure, and respect; not prestige, reputation, and ego.

Bring in wise guides. People who have done similar work can help navigate challenges to save you time, stress, and missteps. Whether it's at launch or a key turning point, an experienced mentor can help you see around corners you didn't know were coming.

PRINCIPLES ABOUT WORK

Co-create with practitioners and local communities. The people closest to the work carry knowledge you can't find in research alone. The people doing the work and living the experience bring insights no model can predict. When they are invited in from the start, it shapes the ideas in robust ways. The solutions are sharper, stronger, and more sustainable in the context.

Find language and framing that will translate "both" ways. Taking the time to understand the context and norms of the communities being studied will go a long way toward adoption and acceptance of findings. The same words can be used to mean very different things. Framing can seem clinical, cold, or culturally-specific, without careful examination.

Test and adapt in real time. Start small, learn fast, and adjust as you go. Whether from bots ruining a survey, organizations backing out, or protocols not working as anticipated across audiences, real collaboration means learning in front of others.

Avoid "parachute science." Be patient to learn about local cultural environments and observe religious practices in context. Be open to learning and adapting the protocol through those experiences and consultation with cultural insiders. Be conscientious about what the work can contribute to participants and not only what can be taken away from them.

Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. As with many domains of inquiry, you will have to make trade-offs concerning the degree of experimental and statistical control, measurement precision, representativeness of samples, and ecological validity. That has to be okay. It is better to produce a few good studies than be paralyzed by the quest for a single perfect study.

OBSTACLES TO NAVIGATE IN STUDYING THE SACRED

Maybe you are interested in joining the SoRSE teams in studying the sacred. The scientific study of religious and spiritual exercises can surface unique tensions, especially when standard research practices meet sacred traditions. Many of these can be overcome through practitioner-scientist collaboration.

Tension may exist between scientific norms and respectful engagement.
Scientific norms, such as concealing the hypothesis, using random condition assignment, or submitting to peer review processes may unintentionally erode participant trust. In some cases it can create feelings of being examined or exposed, thus interfering with outcomes, causing participants to drop out, or damaging relationships. Designing research that is both rigorous and respectful requires flexibility.

Across teams, the most frequently discussed tensions included:
- Misalignment between spiritual aims and scientific metrics.
- The limits of control conditions in sacred practices.
- Cultural or political sensitivities in global contexts.
- The gap between empirical expectations and lived religious meaning.

These and other roadblocks, challenges, and tensions can be roughly grouped into three types: challenges in getting research programs started, hurdles in conducting the research itself, and barriers to the findings being received by its intended audiences.
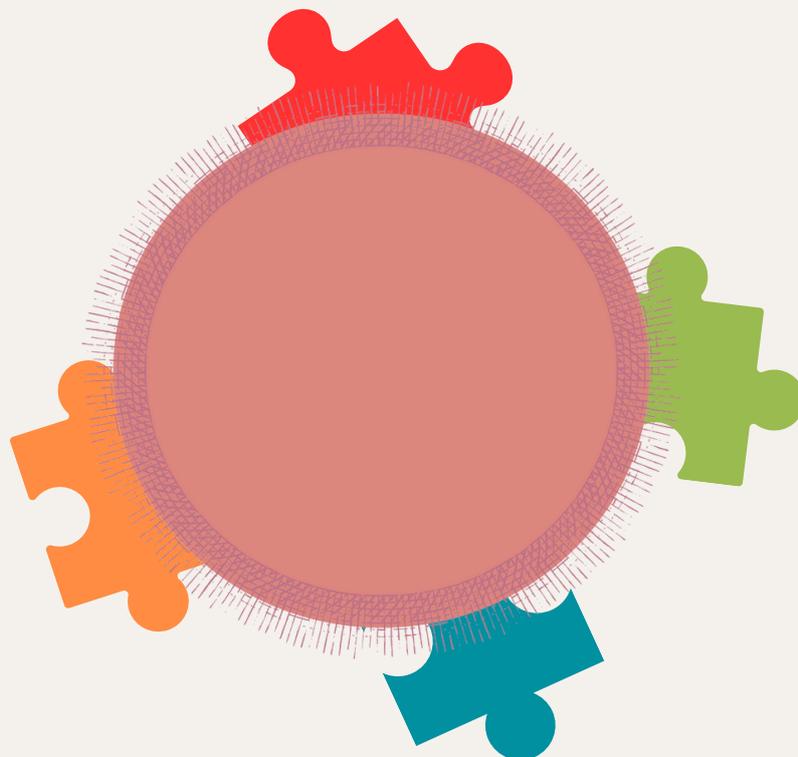
CHALLENGES IN GETTING STARTED

Opening the doors to collaborate with a faith community or ministry organization can require navigating around a few common obstacles. Trust matters. Scientists need to earn the trust of practitioners and the community of people they are studying, but it goes the other way, too. Researchers need to have a degree of trust that ministry leaders and other gatekeepers will follow through on commitments and support the learning process. Some challenges identified in this space include the following.

Mistrust of "Western science" in non-Western cultural contexts. Establishing trust up front is important. How can scientific researchers meet the standards of their guild but be flexible enough to accommodate the best of local ways of gathering and evaluating evidence?

Indifference about "what the science says". Not everyone is particularly worried about having scientific evidence in support of their claims, and this disinterest is not always a result of anti-intellectualism or distrusting scientists. Rather, so much of what we believe comes from personal experience, respected authorities, and reason, that scientific evidence can seem unnecessary. How can scientists show the usefulness of the kind of evidence they could produce?

Confusion about the aims of research. Research is often conducted to support or challenge a particular claim. Religious practitioners may assume, then, that scientists are either there to help them show what they already know or to debunk them. How can scientists impress upon their collaborators that their motivation is an open-minded pursuit of the truth?

Fears about "Reductionism". The R-word has begun seeping into popular discourse but is only vaguely understood. Scientific inquiry generally does operate through reducing a phenomenon to causes, consequences, and mechanisms. That isn't the fear, any more than "fearing" the auto mechanic who identifies one particular part of the car as the reason it isn't running. The fear is that scientists will conclude that because they understand a particular component of spiritual experience, then the whole experience isn't genuine, meaningful, or bigger than the parts. Good scientists know better and should make it clear.

Not all religious insiders agree. It is good advice, especially when studying spiritual practices that are not one's own, to seek expert advice for understanding the practices. But experts may disagree and leaders may even differ in their understandings from the people they lead. Different traditions within the same religions may have different understandings of practices that carry the same name. Consider the diversity of meanings and forms of baptism across various Christian traditions; are they actually instances of the same thing?

Gaining the commitment of religious leaders may not be enough. Many religious organizations, congregations, and communities have weak hierarchies. Though head pastors or priests may be gate-keepers, their buy-in does not guarantee that those who make things go will also be enthusiastic supporters. More than one team did the hard work of gaining the commitment of the leadership only to find that the leaders had little to do with helping the research get done.

HURDLES IN CONDUCTING RESEARCH

Many domains of research have characteristic challenges and the study of religious beliefs, values, and practices is no exception. Examples from researchers include the following:

Big contact lists ≠ big participant lists. One of the potential upsides of collaborating with religious organizations to conduct human-subjects research is the allure of large datasets. Churches, denominations, and ministries can have membership roles and contact lists numbering in the thousands. In the experience of researchers, however, these promising contact lists often don't translate into big participant lists. Faith leaders who enthusiastically offer access to their flock may not have realistic ideas about participation or completion rates.

Preserving intrinsic motivations. A general finding in psychology of religion is that intrinsically motivated religious participation has markedly different qualities than extrinsically motivated participation. Is it appropriate, then, to pay participants or does this change the phenomena under consideration? One suggestion is to be sure to find participants who want to engage in the spiritual exercises for their own sake and make it clear that payment is for completing the measurements and not for performing the exercises.

Ecological validity and faith-consistent operationalization. What happens when a practice or spiritual exercise is too intensive or long in duration to adapt to a research protocol? One team carefully consulted practitioner-experts to arrive at a version of the practice that struck the balance between rigor and practicality: a one-hour per day for one year standing meditation was converted to 30 minutes daily for three months.

Need for appropriate, comparable control conditions. Because religious exercises may consist of particular physical movements, mental states, social interactions, and environmental contexts, it may be challenging to find appropriate control conditions for studies that concern the consequences of engaging the exercises. Wait-list control groups can be helpful but so can multiple active control groups, each of which approximate the practice under consideration.

Cultural events outside of anyone's control. Religious identities are often closely tied to cultural identities and political power. Religious groups may become the victims or aggressors in acts of persecution or warfare that suddenly change the context for research. One project team that was focused on Jewish spiritual practices of young men in Israel was forced to radically rethink their strategy after October 7, 2023.

BARRIERS TO RECEPTIVITY OF RESEARCH

Many of the scientists who provided perspectives are early in the research process, and so it was too soon for them to have many experiences to share concerning how their academic peers or religious audiences received the findings of the research. Nonetheless, here are a few suggested barriers based upon cumulative experiences.

Encountering skepticism regarding religious practice as a serious "intervention". Much research concerning the impact of religious or spiritual practices takes the form of intervention experiments, but in order to properly approximate the spiritual practices as they are traditionally performed, they may not appear to many psychologists, medical researchers, and other scholars as well-formed "interventions" that should be taken seriously. Some of this skepticism may arise from anti-religious prejudices but may also come from legitimate concerns that practices cannot be readily extracted from their native contexts and used as portable treatments.

Varying degrees to which all knowledge is regarded as valuable. A Jewish contributor commented that "as a rule, Jews love science" because in Judaism "all knowledge is valuable." This sentiment is also common in academia and many of the sciences, but it is not a universal idea. In some religious and cultural traditions, knowledge is not good in its own right but needs to be guided by deeper values, wisdom, or at least practicality. Depending upon the research context, it may be helpful for researchers to connect their project to these values or practical problems to get buy-in to start a project and also a warm reception when presenting findings.

Too much eagerness (and not enough expertise) in putting findings into practice. Not all religious communities are reluctant to learn from scientific findings. To the contrary, some scientists-of-religion report enthusiastic attention to their findings, particularly a desire on the part of ministry leadership to quickly put the findings to work to improve their ministry. The roadblock here is that these application efforts may be premature because of limitations on the research to date, or the ministry leaders do not understand the findings with enough sophistication to make appropriate applications.

ENCOURAGEMENT FROM COLLEAGUES

> " It's hard, but it gets better the more you know your audience! "

> " Talk to others, and be open. "

MOSTAFA SALARI RAD

SHIRA GABRIEL

> " Be curious, and open minded. "

> " Unexpected setbacks can turn into unexpected opportunities. "

MIGUEL FARIAS

MICHAEL FERGUSON

ENCOURAGEMENT FROM COLLEAGUES - CONTINUED

"

We actually got to see that change happen and how you're actually having an impact.

"

ARIELLE LEVITES

"

We're not doing research onto them. We're doing research with them and in partnership with them.

"

JESSE FOX

"

There's just an awful lot of work that needs to be done in this area. By all means, we're gonna keep doing it. But do join us.

"

BRANDON CASE

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN COLLABORATING

Use these questions as a reflection tool at every stage of your collaboration. They're designed to bring clarity and purpose, and to guide the work forward with curiosity.

When getting started

- Why do I want to be part of this collaboration?
- Would I still say yes to this project if I were tired, emotional, underpaid - or not paid at all?
- How strong are my (my team's) working systems? What do we need to address before bringing others in?
- What kind of collaborator do I want to be remembered as?
- What assumptions am I bringing into this work? Where might I need to get curious?
- How well do I understand how the other people and organizations involved operate? Am I assuming we're all the same?
- What roles, decision-making, or values need to be clarified now?
- What do we want to build that we can't do alone?

Along the way

- What do we need to understand about "the other" person, team, organization, community involved?
- Where do we need extra flexibility for this collaboration to work?
- What are we learning?
- What mentor or guide might help us with what's emerging?
- What changes do we need to make?
- What do we need to discuss that we're avoiding?
- What is currently making this effort worth it?
- What do we need to celebrate?

At the conclusion

- What did we build together that wouldn't have happened alone?
- How did our work change as a result of working together?
- How am I different as a result of collaborating?

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

So, where do we go from here? Now that we've laid out the principles and challenges, it's time to put them into action. Start small—reach out, build relationships, and get clear about your purpose before diving into the work. Take the time to understand who you're collaborating with, what motivates them, and what the bigger picture looks like. Test your ideas, make adjustments as you go, and keep the lines of communication open. The best collaborations don't just happen by chance—they thrive because people are willing to engage, learn, and grow together.

And yes, there will be moments of difficulty, moments when the process feels frustrating or unclear. But those moments are where the magic happens. Embrace the tough conversations, the moments of learning, and the spaces where growth happens—both for the project and for the people involved. This is how we create collaborations that work, but more importantly, collaborations that thrive. So, take the principles, the challenges, and the excitement we've laid out and put them to work. It's time to step into the process with intention and purpose. Together, we can make strides toward something greater than ourselves, something that truly impacts lives. Ready to dive in? Let's get started.
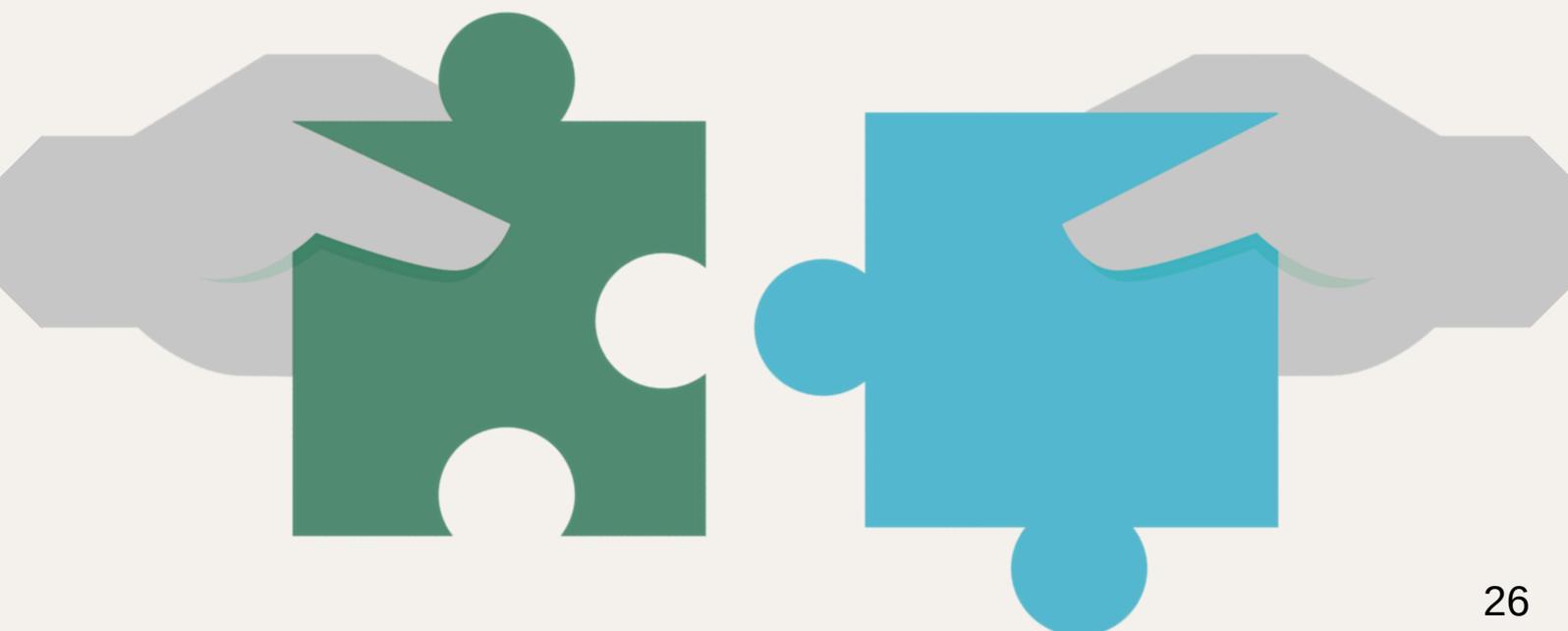
CREDITS

The SoRSE workshop was attended by the following guests who informed this document.

Job Chen and Jeanette "JJ" Bennett
Standing like a tree: Effects and mechanisms of Daoist zhanzhuang on human flourishing

Eranda Jayawickreme and Michael Brady
Confession & flourishing: An investigation into the impact on flourishing of Catholic confessional practices

Ward Davis and Jenna Faith McClear
Worship 2.0: Testing the benefits and challenges of virtual worship participation for flourishing

Jordan Moon and Michael Barlev
The paradoxical effects of religious fasting on prosociality and flourishing

Shira Gabriel
Creating the sacred from the profane: The psychological mechanisms, moderators, and outcomes of mass singing events held by Koolulam

Julia Logan Labow and Arielle Levites
Extending the table: Does Shabbat dinner as a spiritual practice increase social connectedness?

Adam Cohen and Kathryn Johnson
Fasting and flourishing a comparative analysis

Michael Ferguson and Brendan Case
Toward evidence-based spiritual therapeutics: randomized controlled trial of Hesychastic prayer

Lesley-Ann O'Connor Kavanagh, Paul Granello, Joe Currier and Jesse Fox
A sequential-explanatory approach to understanding the forms and functions of Lectio Divina in the everyday lives of Christians

Aaron Cherniak
Temporal dynamics of felt security in Jewish ritual and experience

Miguel Farias
From the heart: Testing the efficacy of heart-centered contemplation

David DeSteno and Geoffrey Mitelman
Gratitude blessings as a key to flourishing: The translational potential of the Jewish "Nisim B'chol Yom" (miracles of the every day)

Liz Hall and Jason McMartin
The Christian practice of lament: Mechanisms of change, moderators, and flourishing outcomes

Kevin Ladd and Daniel McIntosh
Embodied spiritual pathway: Experimental, applied, & cross-cultural studies of labyrinths & flourishing

John Groeger
Repose, insight, activity: A trinity of spiritual exercises

Mostafa Salari Rad
Understanding the psychological, behavioral, and social outcomes of the Ramadan fast

Yuria Celidwen
Expanding the exercise, science, and discourse of spiritual flourishing: Toward a science and practice of indigenous traditions

Sarah Schnitker and Glen Moriarty
Special guests

Jenna Juday
Special guest

Steve Porter
Special guest

Bonnie Zahl
TWCF advisor

Lashanti Jupp
TWCF staff

TEMPLETON
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