

Human Flourishing as the Telos of Christian Mission

A Theological and Practical Argument



Stephen Shaffer, DMin, Director of Operations, Mission Alive
Tod K. Vogt, MMiss, Executive Director, Mission Alive

1. Introduction

At the heart of Christian teaching and ministry lies a compelling vision: that God desires all creation to flourish. Human flourishing is understood theologically as life lived in full communion with God, others, and creation. This paper argues that such flourishing is not a peripheral concern but the very *telos*, the ultimate end, that directs every act of proclamation and service. When the church loses sight of this *telos*, ministry tends to narrow to either the escape of disembodied souls to heaven or a social program stripped of its relationship to God. When it recovers this vision, ministry becomes what it was meant to be: a living, embodied foretaste of the Kingdom of God that brings flourishing to individuals, families, churches, and communities alike.

The concept of *telos* has a rich theological heritage. From Aristotle's *eudaimonia*¹ to Aquinas's beatific vision², theologians have consistently asked, "Toward what end is human life ordered?" The Christian answer, we contend, is not an escape from the physical world but a full entering into the "not yet" realities of life, buoyed by the telic hope. The *telos* of ministry is the *shalom* of God, a Hebrew word that captures not merely the absence of conflict but the fullness of right relationship, holistic well-being, and embodied peace that pervades the whole of creation. This paper locates that vision in its fullest biblical expression and then traces its implications for how the church understands and evaluates its ministry in the contemporary world.³

Within practical theology, there is renewed interest in asking not merely what the church does but what the church is for. Spiritual formation movements ask how persons are shaped into Christlikeness across the whole of life. Liberation theologians have long insisted that God's salvific work is inseparable from the struggle for justice and the dignity of the poor. Meanwhile, philosophers and social scientists working in the emerging field of human flourishing studies are developing empirical frameworks to measure what an objectively good human life looks like.

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 1.7.1097a30–1098a20

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947), I-II, q. 3, a. 8.

³ Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983; Wright, Christopher J. H. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006.

This paper brings these conversations into constructive dialogue, arguing that the biblical vision of *shalom* illuminates, corrects, and ultimately transcends the best of each tradition.⁴

This argument begins with a biblical study tracing the consistent narrative thread of God's telic investment in the flourishing of creation, from the 'very good' of Genesis to the descending New Jerusalem of Revelation. We then examine both the resonances and the distortions that arise when comparing Christian flourishing with contemporary secular and competing theological frameworks. From there, we draw out the ministry implications of a cruciform, kingdom-oriented vision of *shalom* before turning to the practical question of how human flourishing measures can serve as effective tools for ministry. We then present Mission Alive and its network of Innovative Faith Communities (IFCs) as a concrete, living embodiment of this theological vision. The paper concludes by addressing real challenges: eschatological tension, the risk of reductionism, and the limits of quantitative measurement, before summarizing the constructive vision the church is invited to embrace.

2. Biblical Foundations

Scripture presents a consistent narrative thread that reveals the *Missio Dei*: God's love of his creation and his relentless effort to bring *shalom*. This is a holistic peace, flourishing, and well-being; a peace in which humanity and creation inhabit their intended, designed, and divinely established ultimate state of existence; an existence that is 'very good' in all aspects. This ultimate *shalom* is not a Platonic escape from the body but a fully embodied existence on a renewed earth. Scripture expresses this *telos* through the creative voice of Genesis, the melodic expression of the Psalms, the judicial frames of the Law, the prophetic visions, and the apocalyptic assurances. From start to finish, the picture emerges that God desires his entire creation to experience a state of universal flourishing, of holistic integrity in relationship with God, creation, and one another. God's repeated and consistent pursuit and kenotic investment in the well-being of the creation and all humanity resists the conclusion of an ontological fall that has irreparably ruined God's original creation. Instead, the story finds internal integrity when we

⁴ See Martin E. P. Seligman, *Flourish* (New York: Free Press, 2011); Tyler J. VanderWeele, "On the Promotion of Human Flourishing," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114, no. 31 (2017): 8148–8156; Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973).

understand Sin (with a capital S) as the persistent distortion within God's creation. This distortion, although increasingly woven into human systems, is unwound as the Spirit reveals and empowers those in Christ to understand and embody God's good and perfect will. Framed in this way, the *Missio Dei*, God's undeterred investment in creation and humanity, becomes the *Missio Hominum*: our calling to imitate God's boundary-crossing character for the sake of the other and to join the relentless investment in the well-being, justice, and flourishing of humanity and all creation. In this section, we will first briefly expand the scriptural witness of this theme and then explore the distinctiveness of the Christian pursuit of human flourishing.

The literary account in Genesis 1-3 establishes God's powerful, imaginative, and generous desire for life in multiple forms, existing in harmonious, mutually generative relationships that are 'very good.' Thus, Genesis reveals an embodied *shalom* characterized by harmonious relationships with creation, God, and one another. Rather than a static state of existence, Scripture expresses this *shalom* dynamically. God creates humanity in the *Imago Dei*, entrusting his creation to their care and subject to their choice. We come to understand that the well-being of creation is not automatic or self-perpetuating; it is intertwined with human choice and is vulnerable to distortion and deception. God desires and actively pursues expanding the universe with an embodied existence in which humanity thrives in harmonious relationships with their Creator, with one another, and with the *adamah* (the ground) from which they were formed. God's continued investment expresses an inherent worth of the present embodiment rather than a temporary experiment waiting to be replaced.

In the Law, given centuries after creation when the distortions of Sin have become embedded in cultural norms, God reveals a strategy for enacting societal *shalom* that actively pushes against the distortions of human power, greed, and abuse. God explicitly instructs Israel to care for the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner (e.g., Deuteronomy 10:18), precisely because their false beliefs of status, position, wealth, and ethnicity can easily distort their *shalom*. The Law also reflects God's concern for the land itself, mandating Sabbath rest for the soil (Exodus 23:10-11). The Jubilee (Leviticus 25) celebration was a radical economic 'reset' that restored people to their ancestral land and freed them from intergenerational debt, ensuring that the

randomness of circumstances and the distortions of concentrated wealth would not permanently shatter the well-being of the community.⁵

The Psalms give voice to a confident hope in telic *shalom* despite the tension between God's desire and human experience. True peace is found in relationship with God amid a creation that reflects this bond. The full range of life, suffering, injustice, conflict, and joy, is expressed in both praise and lament, grounded in the trust of God's faithful rule. Psalm 19 portrays creation as active in worship, while Psalm 104 celebrates the interdependence of all life sustained by God. *Shalom*, then, is the pursuit of an embodied, tangible, secure, and joyful life within God's created world emboldened by God's sustaining care.

The prophetic vision in Ezekiel 47 restates God's intent to bring about an embodied, harmonious created world. The river flowing from the temple depicts God as the source and sustainer of all life. As it flows, it transforms the desert and heals the Dead Sea, making its water fresh (Ezekiel 47:8–9). On its banks grow trees that bear fruit in every season and provide “leaves for healing” (Ezekiel 47:12). Significantly, the same fruit and the same healing leaves are given on both sides of the river, revealing God's desire to restore harmony by crossing and dissolving human boundaries and extending life and healing without distinction. The vision repeats the foundational truths that God is both the source and sustainer of life that is “very good.” Creation and humanity flourish when nurtured by the river that connects them to God. The perpetual harvest of fruit and the healing it provides powerfully illustrate the *Missio Dei*: God's holy pursuit of a tangible, embodied, and perfected created life. The vision is earthly, far from being a distant, other-worldly, disembodied *telos*.

In the synoptics, Jesus proclaims the Kingdom of God as the tangible presence of *shalom* breaking into the here and now. When Jesus announces, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15), he declares that God's restorative rule is entering a new phase. In this phase, God enters creation, affirming both the goodness of creation and his intent to close the gap between “God said” and “it was so.” Like Ezekiel's river, Jesus enters the arid, distorted

⁵ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 203–221; Exodus 23:10–11; cf. Leviticus 25:1–7. Terence Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 146–151; Deuteronomy 10:18; see also Deuteronomy 24:17–22; Leviticus 19:9–10. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 11–27.

world bringing healing and food, embodying the promise that he has come so that people “may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). His proclamation in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4:18–19) declares the physical, social, and spiritual liberation for the oppressed. Jesus welcomes all whom society has distorted, whether tax collectors, women, or Samaritans, into a community of *shalom* characterized by rest, restoration, and overflowing well-being (Matthew 11:28).

Paul expresses a fully accomplished yet partially realized eschatology embodied in the present *ekklesia*, a community being filled “to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19) and growing toward “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). The *Missio Dei* finds expression in and through those in Christ as they participate in this divine fullness. He urges the church to yield to the transforming power of God and establish communal practices that reflect the “not yet,” where “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female” (Galatians 3:28). Despite the surrounding societal distortion, Paul calls the church to offer a tangible, embodied alternative reality by sharing resources, radical hospitality, deep community, and bearing suffering while naming the distortion in lament and prayer. (e.g., 2 Corinthians 8–9). Paul’s *telos* is profoundly physical: creation itself “waits in eager expectation” for its own liberation from distortion (Romans 8:19–22), a destiny inextricably tied to the final physical resurrection of humanity. Finally, the apocalyptic scenes of Revelation provide yet another depiction of the *telos* of the *Missio Dei*. This *telos* is not the destruction of Earth and the escape of disembodied Platonic souls. Instead, John describes a New Jerusalem that, like Christ, comes to earth (Revelation 21:2), making the earth 'new.' While in the present God dwells with his people through the indwelling Spirit, at the culmination of the *Missio Dei*, God makes his final dwelling among us. The garden of Genesis 2 becomes the city where God reigns in the temple, and the river nourishes life and provides “the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:2). God's *shalom* is fully and finally realized as he dwells physically with a resurrected humanity in a restored, material creation forever.^{6,7}

⁶ Revelation 22:1–2. See Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 132–143.

⁷ Revelation 21:1–5. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 104–111.

In sum, the biblical narrative, from Genesis's initial 'very good' to Revelation's descending New Jerusalem, presents a unified and deeply material *telos*. God's *Missio Dei* is not to rescue disembodied souls from a flawed creation, but to reclaim and restore that very creation through the establishment of his Kingdom. This Kingdom *shalom*, as seen in the Law's justice, sung in the Psalms, envisioned by Ezekiel, inaugurated by Christ, and proclaimed by Paul, is fundamentally *embodied*, making real and tangible differences in time and space to living human beings. The apostolic hope, therefore, is not in a disembodied afterlife but in the bodily resurrection and the final, tangible renewal of all things.

This theological trajectory dramatically reframes the church's present calling. If God's ultimate *telos* is an embodied, restored creation, then the *ekklesia* cannot be a community focused solely on a disembodied, spiritualized future. The church is not merely an ark saving souls from the world; it is the "first fruit" (Romans 8:23) of the *Missio Dei*, sent to be a tangible, visible, and fully human revelation of that future *shalom* in the 'already, but not yet.' This is *Mission*, a mission that requires the church to move beyond the purely 'spiritual' to actively pursue the concrete, holistic well-being and flourishing of human life now. This imperative finds its most urgent focus, as it did in the Law and in Christ's own ministry, at the margins of society. When the church partners with and advocates for the flourishing of the poor, the dispossessed, and the oppressed, it offers a real, flesh-and-blood revelation of God's ultimate intent, a tangible, prophetic witness to the coming Kingdom where *shalom* will be all-in-all.⁸

This calling, to pursue holistic well-being, especially for the marginalized, finds a compelling, contemporary echo in the popular and academic pursuit of 'human flourishing.' This modern language, emerging from fields such as positive psychology, quantitative social science, and philosophy, offers a vital point of connection, presenting an intuitive, secularized understanding of the very *telos* that God desires for creation. However, this apparent alignment demands careful theological and missiological analysis, as the term 'flourishing' is not neutral; it is laden with competing visions and assumptions. Before the church can faithfully embody and proclaim its unique mission, it must first critically examine these contemporary understandings,

⁸ Romans 8:23. The "firstfruits" (*aparchē*) language positions the Spirit-indwelt community as an anticipatory foretaste of coming redemption. See James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary 38A (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 473–475.

contrasting them with the distinctive, cruciform, and kingdom-oriented *shalom* revealed in Scripture.

3. The Distinctiveness of Christian Flourishing: A Theological and Missiological Analysis

The growing academic movement surrounding “human flourishing” represents a significant cultural attempt to define and measure the human condition and, in doing so, offers a useful proxy for engaging the *Missio Dei*. At its best, this movement recognizes that human life is oriented toward more than survival and seeks to quantify six domains of flourishing: happiness and life satisfaction; physical and mental health; meaning and purpose; character and virtue; close social relationships; and financial and material stability.⁹ These domains are “nearly universal” because they reflect the shared imprint of the *Imago Dei* across humanity. Missiologically, this provides the church with a vital point of contact: a shared language of *shalom* that can serve as a bridge for gospel witness in neighborhoods marked by brokenness, distance from the church, or marginalization. The church does not enter a cultural vacuum but a community and culture already marked by desire for wholeness, what Scripture names as abundance and *shalom*. Thus, the flourishing framework can function as a diagnostic tool for mission, helping the church discern tangible ways to embody the love of Jesus.

At the same time, both theologically and missiologically, the concept of flourishing remains contested and vulnerable to distortion. Measures of “life satisfaction” or “meaning” are inevitably shaped by cultural narratives, personal histories, and competing visions of the good life. For mission, this means the church must move beyond mere affirmation of the language of flourishing toward careful discernment and re-narration. The task is not simply to adopt the language of flourishing but to identify it within the story of God and within the local realities of the people and places God has entrusted to us. Without this theological anchoring, missional engagement risks reinforcing cultural assumptions rather than transforming them, especially in communities where the church is disconnected from the neighborhood's lived experience.

⁹ Tyler J. VanderWeele, “On the Promotion of Human Flourishing,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114, no. 31 (August 2017): 8148–56.

One significant distortion emerges from the influence of Aristotelian *eudaimonia*¹⁰ as refracted through modern humanism and positive psychology. Here, flourishing is framed in terms of self-actualization, autonomy, and the maximization of positive experience. Missiologically, this results in a form of engagement that centers the individual as both the agent and goal of transformation, often neglecting the communal, covenantal, and justice-oriented dimensions of biblical *shalom*. Furthermore, as this framework does not account for sin as understood within a Christian worldview, it risks reducing mission to the enhancement of well-being rather than participation in God’s redemptive work through brokenness. In contrast, a Christian missiology insists that true flourishing is inseparable from a restored relationship with God and is often encountered precisely in contexts of vulnerability, sacrificial presence, and patient accompaniment among people on the margins.

Within the broader Christian imagination, several theological distortions carry significant missiological consequences. Evangelical *gnosticism*, for example, reduces the scope of salvation to the disembodied soul, producing a truncated mission focused primarily on “saving souls” while neglecting the healing of bodies, communities, and creation. This distortion undermines the church’s participation in the *Missio Dei* and weakens its witness among people who live with poverty, displacement, injustice, and other forms of marginalization. Conversely, the health-and-wealth gospel collapses the eschatological tension of the Kingdom by equating flourishing with present-day material success. Missiologically, this distorts witness by aligning the gospel with consumerism and excluding those who suffer, thereby contradicting the cruciform nature of Christ’s mission. Reductionist liberalism, while rightly attentive to justice, risks detaching mission from its theological source, reframing the church as a primarily political actor and flattening the Kingdom into human-driven progress. In each case, the distortion is not merely doctrinal but missional, reshaping how and where the church embodies and proclaims good news.

In contrast, the biblical vision of flourishing calls the church to a form of mission that is both theologically grounded and locally embodied. This vision is holistic, refusing to separate spiritual and physical realities; communal, centering on reconciled relationships and justice for

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 1.7.1097a30–1098a20.

the marginalized; cruciform, embracing suffering as a participation in Christ's life; and eschatological, oriented toward the coming renewal of all things. Mission Alive's language of equipping leaders, developing innovative faith communities, and transforming marginalized communities fits naturally with this vision because it emphasizes incarnation, contextual mission, and the formation of communities that embody the Kingdom of God in specific places. In this way, engagement with contemporary flourishing discourse is not an end in itself but a starting point for faithful witness, inviting the world beyond its partial visions into the fullness of life found in Christ through communities that are rooted in place, attentive to the overlooked, and committed to God's ongoing mission.

4. Ministry Implications

A ministry oriented toward the *telos* of *shalom* does not focus on institutional survival or attendance metrics, as these are too inwardly focused. Nor does it focus on a catalog of felt needs. It focuses on flourishing. It shares God's declaration that creation is "very good" and strives to live out that resolution. It assumes that the Spirit is already at work in every community and that the church's calling is neither to separate from brokenness nor to imagine that we bring God to new places, but rather to enter into the brokenness around us, fully confident that God is already there investing in the well-being of all his creation.

This starting posture of *shalom*, abundance, and flourishing reshapes the imagination of ministry. Rather than asking, "What is broken here and how can we fix it?" the missional leader asks, "Where is God's life already breaking through, and how do we join it?" Rather than positioning the church as a service provider to passive recipients, this vision calls communities of faith to become participants in a substantially larger story. This vision is not naïve optimism about the absence of suffering. The Cross stands at the center of Christian theology precisely because suffering is real, systemic injustice is real, and the gap between the world as it is and the world as God intends it to be is real. While the Cross could signal a nihilistic *telos*, the resurrection proves that God is actively at work through suffering, through service, through self-giving love, bending the arc of history toward a reality that is better in every way. The Cross informs the sacrifice of ministry, while the resurrection empowers the vision of ministry. As

God's missional partner, the church is called to work with hopeful expectation and strategic intention to change the tangible realities of life wherever and however possible.

This ministry of *shalom* is irreducibly holistic. It refuses the fragmentation that treats the spiritual as separate from the physical, the personal as separate from the systemic, or the individual as separate from the community. Human beings flourish or fail to flourish in the full complexity of their lives. They need the experience of being known and loved by God. They need communities of authentic belonging, where they are seen, valued, and experience reciprocal love. They need meaningful work and financial stability. They need physical health and psychological care. They need a sense of purpose and the feeling that their lives are oriented toward something larger than themselves. They need the beauty and sustenance of the natural world, and the responsibility to care for it. A ministry that addresses only one or two of these dimensions while ignoring the rest is not faithful to the vision of *shalom*. God calls the church to attend to the flourishing of persons and communities across all these dimensions simultaneously: in their relationship with God, with others, with creation, and with themselves.

We propose that this type of mission benefits from focusing on measurable impacts rather than the more common religious experience. For too long, churches have evaluated their effectiveness by attendance, budget, and the subjective satisfaction of their members. A ministry oriented toward *shalom* asks harder questions: *Are the people in our community more whole than they were before? Are the marginalized finding dignity and belonging? Are the broken systems around us being challenged and transformed? Is our neighborhood experiencing the tangible effects of God's redemptive presence because we are here?* These are questions of impact, not just experience. They demand that the church be willing to look honestly at the evidence, be accountable for outcomes, and continually reimagine its practices in light of what it learns. The following sections explore both a conceptual bridge for this kind of evaluation, the human flourishing measures developed at Harvard University, and Mission Alive's concrete missional model, which aims to train churches to live out this vision in marginalized communities across North America.

5. Employing Human Flourishing Measures to Assess Mission Impact

The foregoing theological and missiological analysis calls the church toward a ministry of holistic, measurable impact, not only for the sake of internal faithfulness but for credible witness in the world. A missional church does not simply proclaim good news in words; it embodies and demonstrates it within the lived realities of its context. Yet impact-oriented ministry requires tools. How does a congregation discern whether its presence is making a constructive difference in the well-being of the people it serves? How does a church planter evaluate whether a new faith community is contributing to human wholeness in its neighborhood or merely attracting religious consumers? These are not merely pragmatic or managerial questions; they are deeply theological and fundamentally missiological. They press us to ask whether the church is participating in God's reconciling mission in ways that are visible, tangible, and intelligible to the world, whether it is bearing the fruit of *shalom* in ways that can be recognized both within and beyond the community of faith. While the biblical vision, explained in Section 3, provides the 'why' of ministry, Harvard University's Human Flourishing measures provide a 'how' for assessing that vision in a way that is intelligible to both the church and the world.

A promising and theologically resonant resource for such discernment comes from an unexpected partner: the social sciences. Harvard's Human Flourishing Program, led by epidemiologist Tyler VanderWeele¹¹ and his colleagues, has devoted significant scholarly attention to defining and measuring what constitutes a flourishing human life across observable domains. Their framework identifies six dimensions of flourishing: happiness and life satisfaction; physical and mental health; meaning and purpose; character and virtue; close social relationships; and financial and material stability.¹² These domains are not arbitrary; they reflect a broad, cross-cultural consensus about the conditions necessary for human thriving.^{13,14} From a missiological perspective, they provide a shared language through which the church can engage its surrounding culture, offering a credible account of the gospel's impact that is publicly accessible and empirically grounded. From a theological standpoint, their near-universality

¹¹ VanderWeele, "On the Promotion of Human Flourishing," 8150.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Tyler J. VanderWeele et al., "The Global Flourishing Study: Study Profile and Initial Results on Flourishing," *Nature Mental Health* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44220-025-00423-5>.

¹⁴ Węziak-Białowolska, D., et al., "Psychometric Properties of the Flourishing Index and the Secure Flourish Index—A 10-Country Study," *Frontiers in Psychology* (2022).

points toward a deeper truth: human flourishing is rooted in the created order itself, in what Scripture names the *Imago Dei*. As such, these measures can function as both diagnostic and dialogic tools, helping the church assess its faithfulness while also bearing witness to the holistic redemption God intends for all people.

The resonance between these six domains and the biblical vision of *shalom* is striking. Happiness and life satisfaction correspond to the Psalmist's confidence that "blessed" is the one who walks in God's ways. Physical and mental health echo the fruit and leaves of the Ezekiel vision as well as the healing ministry of Jesus, who restored both bodies and minds as tangible signs of the Kingdom. Meaning and purpose find their deepest anchor in God's invitation to each person to participate in the *Missio Dei*. Character and virtue reflect the Spirit's work of transformation into Christlikeness. Close social relationships mirror the communal vision of the *ekklesia*, where deep bonds of mutual care transcend the divisions of ethnicity, class, and gender. And financial and material stability resonates with the Jubilee vision of a community where no one is permanently dispossessed.^{15,16,17}

For this reason, these measures, while secular in origin, offer the church a useful bridge. They provide a common language for conversations about human well-being that can connect faith communities with healthcare systems, social service agencies, city planners, and academic researchers. They offer a useful assessment model that can help a congregation evaluate whether participation in its life and ministry is contributing to the psychological, social, and spiritual well-being of its community over time. Employed well, they can help a church move from evaluations based on experience to evidence and from self-congratulation to honest learning.

At the same time, the church must interpret these measures through both theological and missiological lenses if they are to serve the church's distinctive calling in the world. On their own, they remain vulnerable to the distortions identified in Section 3. When a person is asked how satisfied they are with life, their response reflects the convergence of personal history, cultural meta-narrative, and worldview. A person shaped by consumer individualism will define

¹⁵ Psalm 1:1–3; cf. Psalm 119:1–2; Matthew 5:3–12 (the Beatitudes).

¹⁶ Leviticus 25:10–13. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 203–221; Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 39–58.

¹⁷ See Matthew 11:2–6; Luke 7:22–23. John Wilkinson, *The Bible and Healing* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 56–88.

satisfaction differently than one formed within the cruciform life of the kingdom of God. From a missional standpoint, this divergence matters deeply, as the church is not merely assessing well-being but discerning how lives are being reoriented toward participation in God's redemptive mission. The flourishing measures, therefore, do not replace theological or missional discernment; they serve it. They function best not as a destination but as a diagnostic, equipping ministry leaders to ask more precise questions, surface hidden needs, and discern whether lives and communities are being tangibly transformed in alignment with God's *shalom*.

Moreover, the Harvard measures, as presently constituted, do not include an explicit dimension for the human-divine relationship. From a Christian standpoint, this is a significant absence. The scholarly literature is quite clear that religious faith and practice function as powerful safeguards for flourishing across multiple domains, even and especially in the face of poverty, illness, and social marginalization. Studies consistently find that regular participation in a religious community is among the strongest predictors of well-being across the flourishing domains.¹⁸ This means that paying serious attention to the spiritual dimension, especially the depth and health of a person's relationship with God, is not optional in any vision of flourishing. It is a vital contribution that the church is uniquely equipped to offer. Even in the tension of the "already but not yet," true flourishing depends on this dimension.

In practice, churches that adopt the flourishing measures as an evaluative tool can use them at multiple points: as an initial assessment of the baseline well-being of the communities they serve, as a longitudinal measure of whether ministry engagement is producing change over time, and as a catalyst for holistic conversations that signal a community's commitment to the whole person rather than merely to religious consumption. The goal is not to turn ministry into a social science experiment but to ensure that the church's mission as an agent of *shalom* is grounded in a meaningful, demonstrable impact on the lives of real people.

6. An Innovative Model: Mission Alive

The theological vision articulated in this paper of a ministry of holistic, cruciform, kingdom-oriented *shalom*, pursued with attention to measurable impact and oriented toward the

¹⁸ Tyler J. VanderWeele, "Religious Communities and Human Flourishing," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26, no. 5 (2017): 476–81.

flourishing of the marginalized, is not merely theoretical. Mission Alive is a Dallas-based missional ministry that equips leaders to develop Innovative Faith Communities (IFCs). These communities focus on transforming marginalized areas by organizing ministry around the *telos* of human flourishing. Central to its approach is the development of Innovative Faith Communities (IFCs): small, creative, and embedded expressions of church life that prioritize shared rhythms of discipleship, relational depth, and local mission, particularly among those on the margins. Together, this framework offers a living case study in what it looks like to organize Christian ministry around the *telos* of human flourishing in communities where that flourishing is most vulnerable.

Missional Theology Framework

The vision of Ezekiel 47 significantly shapes Mission Alive's theological and missiological DNA. Like the river flowing from the temple, Mission Alive understands the church not as an institution that draws people inside its walls but as an embodied source from which streams of life flow outward into their respective communities. The Temple is not a destination; it is a wellspring. The church is not an ark safely carrying members across the dangers of this world until they are swept up into heaven; it is the river itself, connecting God to the margins, provoking healing and abundance in the most arid and neglected places. This image captures Mission Alive's conviction that the church fulfills its calling not by accumulating religious consumers but by becoming organically embedded in neighborhoods and contexts where God's abundance and *shalom* are most urgently needed.

Mission Alive's incarnational missiology begins with the conviction that God does not relate to the world from a distance but enters into its particular cultures, stories, and struggles in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit-formed church. In contrast to attractional models that focus on drawing people into church events, programs, and buildings, Mission Alive encourages leaders and IFCs to assume responsibility to cross whatever barriers exist between the church and its community and become human signs of God's presence in the everyday spaces where people already live, work, and gather. By adopting this incarnational approach, Mission Alive IFCs are not layering a strategy on top of church life; rather, they are reimagining church life as a way of being that joins God's renewing work already underway in apartment complexes, schools, coffee

shops, businesses, and households. In this way, Mission Alive calls churches and IFC leaders to embody the good news with their time, homes, and habits, so that the gospel is seen, touched, and experienced in shared life long before it is proclaimed.

This missional-incarnational commitment shapes everything. Mission Alive equips leaders to understand their communities deeply, their histories, their wounds, and their hidden assets and to be faithfully present in those communities over the long term. The aim is not to parachute in with solutions but to dwell, to listen, to befriend, and to let authentic expressions of faith emerge organically from within the soil of each particular place. In an era when Americans are increasingly skeptical of organized religion and continue to distance themselves from a Christian identity, Mission Alive prioritizes embodying God's love in tangible ways and fostering redemptive relationships with God over institutional recruitment.

Church Planting and Renewal Among the Marginalized

Mission Alive has identified one hundred communities across six types of marginalized communities in North America where new Innovative Faith Communities (IFCs) are needed. The six categories of marginalized communities they engage include urban neighborhoods marked by poverty and disinvestment, rural and small-town communities experiencing economic decline and social isolation, immigrant communities living in fear of both deportation and joblessness, and indigenous communities with some of the most devastating levels of poverty in the United States, and other communities where the gap between the church that exists and the community's needs is widest. Mission Alive's commitment to work preferentially in these contexts is not a strategic calculation; it is a theological conviction rooted in the consistent witness of Scripture that God's heart is oriented toward those whom society overlooks.

Developing new IFCs in marginalized communities is harder, slower, and more costly than planting congregations in thriving suburbs. Resources are scarcer, systemic obstacles are greater, and the path from first encounter to sustained community is longer. Mission Alive is committed to it anyway, because the *Missio Dei* demands it, because the evidence is clear that faith communities are among the most powerful forces for human flourishing available in any community, and because Jesus' command to love our neighbors compels us toward these places.

To fail to tangibly love our poor neighbors is, in the words of Matthew 25, to fail to tangibly love Jesus himself.

Practical Flourishing

At the level of concrete practice, Mission Alive's IFCs take many different forms, each shaped by the specific needs and assets of its context. Some function as Missional Community Networks, addressing specific needs in marginalized communities, such as food insecurity, literacy, mental health support, and many other needs. Out of that shared mission, they grow a spiritual community. Others operate as Missional House churches or Missional Neighborhood Parishes, investing deeply in the immediate neighbors on a particular street, in a defined neighborhood, or in a specific apartment complex. Individual Missional Initiatives and Missional Small Groups allow individuals and clusters of Christians to join the mission without leaving their current congregation, multiplying the river's reach into communities that larger institutional churches rarely penetrate.

What all of these IFC types share is an intentional commitment to the full range of abundance and *shalom*: addressing spiritual longing and relational isolation, physical need and emotional wounds, systemic injustice and personal crises, all within the framework of a community explicitly oriented toward God's Kingdom. These are not social service agencies that happen to offer prayer, nor religious clubs that occasionally serve a meal. They are a community of people captivated by the vision of God's abundant *shalom* and, in the power of the Spirit, attempting to be a living foretaste of it right where they are.

7. Addressing Challenges

Any missiological vision as ambitious as the one outlined in this paper must consider the challenges it encounters in practice. Five deserve sustained attention: the risk of reducing flourishing to material prosperity; the eschatological tension inherent in all "already but not yet" ministry; the limits of quantitative measurement when applied to the depths of human and spiritual life; shifting metrics from attendance to impact; and integrating the spiritual into secular frameworks.

Guarding Against Material Reductionism

The first risk is that a ministry committed to the tangible, embodied flourishing of people in material terms will, over time, slide into equating *shalom* with mere comfort or prosperity. This is not a theoretical danger; the history of the church is littered with examples of well-intentioned ministries that began with a comprehensive vision of *shalom* and gradually reduced it to the provision of goods and services. When this happens, the community of faith becomes a purveyor of social goods rather than a bearer of transformative presence.

Two safeguards are available. The first is structural: the Harvard flourishing measures themselves are broader than material well-being. Their explicit inclusion of meaning, purpose, character, virtue, and close social relationships ensures that any evaluation informed by these measures must attend to dimensions of human life that cannot be purchased or distributed. Material stability is one component of flourishing, not its sum. The second safeguard is theological: the robust body of scholarly literature on religion and well-being consistently demonstrates that faith functions as a powerful and irreplaceable factor in human flourishing, particularly under conditions of material hardship.¹⁹ People of authentic faith flourish, experience meaning, resilience, virtue, and relational depth, even in the midst of poverty, illness, and loss, in ways that purely material interventions cannot produce. This evidence does not justify indifference to material need; it does, though, insist that a ministry that addresses material need without attending to the human-divine relationship has not yet arrived at *shalom*.

Navigating Eschatological Tension

The second challenge is the irreducible tension of the 'already but not yet.' The Kingdom of God has been inaugurated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; it has not yet been consummated. This means that in the present age, ministry impact will always be an approximation of God's telotic intent. Poverty is addressed but not abolished. Wounds are mended, but healing is not total. Communities are renewed but never perfectly. The gap between the vision and the reality is not a sign of failure; it is the normal condition of faithful ministry in a world still groaning in labor pains (Romans 8:22).²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Romans 8:22. The metaphor of labor pains (*syndōnei*) implies expectant suffering issuing in birth. See Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 514–517.

The danger here is twofold. On one side lies the temptation of triumphalism, claiming more than has been accomplished, conflating the work of the church with the final Kingdom, and losing the honest realism that keeps ministry grounded. On the other side lies the temptation of paralysis, concluding that because nothing can be fully accomplished, nothing is worth attempting. The biblical response to both temptations is eschatological hope: the confidence that God will complete what God has begun, combined with the urgent commitment to embody as much of that completion as possible in the present. Approximations of *shalom* are not consolation prizes. They are actual, Spirit-empowered foretastes of the final reality, real refreshment in a thirsty land. Every IFC that becomes a community of belonging for the isolated, every act of justice that restores dignity to the dispossessed, every healing that anticipates the resurrection, are real, even if incomplete.

The Limits of Quantitative Measurement

The third challenge concerns the limits of the evaluative tools this paper has commended. Quantitative flourishing measures are objectively useful, but they are not sufficient. They capture what can be counted; they cannot capture everything that counts. The depth of a person's relationship with God, the quality of a community's life together, and the long-term transformation of character and virtue resist reduction to numerical scores. A congregation whose members report high life satisfaction on a survey instrument may be a community of God's telic *shalom*, or it may be a community of comfortable consumers insulated from the demands of the Gospel. The numbers alone cannot tell the difference.

This is why quantitative evaluation must always be held alongside qualitative, theological discernment. Narrative and testimony matter. The ability of a community to name and celebrate the specific ways God is at work among them, to tell stories of transformation, reconciliation, and healing, is itself a form of accountability that numerical measures cannot replace. Skilled pastoral leaders, formation practices that cultivate spiritual attentiveness, and honest communal conversation about what the church is actually producing in the lives of real people: these are the indispensable companions to any data-driven evaluation. The goal is not to be governed by metrics but to be informed by them and to use the best available tools in service of a vision that always exceeds them.

Shifting Metrics from Attendance to Impact

Mission Alive seeks to transition away from traditional evaluative frameworks centered on institutional sustainability, such as attendance figures and participation metrics, toward a model that prioritizes measurable indicators of human flourishing in the community in which they are embedded. This shift necessitates adopting more rigorous, at times uncomfortable, lines of inquiry, including whether marginalized individuals are experiencing greater dignity, agency, and social integration, and whether systemic injustices within communities are being meaningfully addressed and transformed.

Such a reorientation requires congregations to engage in critical self-examination, moving beyond subjective measures of member satisfaction to a more evidence-based assessment of outcomes. This involves both developing appropriate evaluative tools and a willingness to confront data that may challenge long-held assumptions about effectiveness. Consequently, congregational practices, priorities, and resource allocations must be continually reimaged in light of emerging evidence, fostering an adaptive learning posture and missional responsiveness.

Integrating the Spiritual into Secular Frameworks

Integrating the spiritual dimension into a secular framework, such as Harvard's Human Flourishing Project measures, is central to Mission Alive's vision of holistic transformation. While these tools offer a helpful shared language, Mission Alive insists that a restored relationship with God is the essential anchor, keeping ministry from becoming mere social work.

First, secular frameworks reveal a critical gap. While they highlight domains like health, relationships, and financial stability, they omit the human-divine relationship. For Mission Alive, this is foundational. Rooted in a vision of the church as an embodied river (Ezekiel 47), true flourishing requires connection to the source of life itself.

Second, secular categories serve as a bridge for credibility. In skeptical contexts, Innovative Faith Communities begin with widely recognized measures of well-being, demonstrating care for the whole person. This creates space for spiritual conversations to emerge naturally within everyday concerns rather than as abstract or imposed ideas.

Third, the social sciences reinforce the importance of spiritual life. Research consistently shows that participation in a religious community strongly correlates with overall well-being.²¹ For Mission Alive, this confirms that integrating faith is not an added layer but a vital driver of resilience and flourishing.

Fourth, this integration guards against reductionism. Mission Alive resists becoming a provider of social services detached from spiritual transformation. Instead, it remains theologically rooted, holding that true flourishing involves both addressing human need and restoring relationship with God.

Finally, this approach reshapes how impact is measured. Rather than focusing on attendance or subjective satisfaction, Mission Alive evaluates whether communities are becoming more whole, socially, physically, and spiritually, through the tangible presence of God's redemptive work.

8. Examples: The Flourishing Measures at Work in Mission Alive IFCs

The theoretical argument for using human flourishing measures in a ministry context becomes concrete when we consider how they might be, and in some cases already are being applied within Mission Alive's network of Innovative Faith Communities. Three distinct applications merit attention: flourishing measures as baseline assessment, as evidence of ministry impact, and as a catalyst for holistic conversations that reframe the church's relationship with those it serves.

Assessment of Present Conditions

When a new IFC is launched in a marginalized community, one of the most important tasks is to understand the current conditions of flourishing, or their absence, in that community. Without this baseline, ministry can easily be driven by assumption rather than reality. A neighborhood that appears economically depressed may, on closer examination, have strong relational networks and high scores on meaning and purpose, assets that a flourishing-informed ministry would seek to honor and amplify rather than inadvertently undermine. Conversely, a

²¹ VanderWeele, "Religious Communities and Human Flourishing," 478.

community whose material needs appear modest may be experiencing profound social isolation, declining mental health, or a crisis of meaning that is invisible to a ministry focused only on obvious physical need.

Administering an adapted version of the flourishing survey to community members at the outset of a new IFC provides leaders with a multidimensional picture of the community's actual situation. This data, gathered with care and communicated transparently to invested organizations within the larger community, also signals something important to the community itself: that this new faith presence is interested in the whole of their lives, not merely their church attendance or their spiritual status. This initial act of attentiveness is itself a form of incarnational ministry.

Evidence of Ministry Impact

While acknowledging the limits of the data discussed previously, the use of longitudinal flourishing measures provides necessary accountability for the 'fruit' of our ministry. Over time, repeated measurements using the flourishing domains enable IFC leaders and the broader Mission Alive network to assess whether engagement with the community of faith is producing meaningful change. Are people who are consistently connected to the IFC experiencing measurable improvement in their sense of meaning and purpose? Are their social relationships deepening and their levels of social isolation declining? Are they reporting greater physical and mental health? Are they developing the financial stability needed to move from crisis to sustainability?

These are not easy questions to answer with certainty, given the many variables that shape human well-being. But longitudinal data, gathered honestly and carefully interpreted, can provide meaningful evidence that the ministry is bearing real, tangible fruit or that it needs to change course. This kind of accountability to outcome is not alien to the Gospel; it is, in fact, deeply consonant with Jesus's own insistence that a tree is known by its fruit (Matthew 7:16). Mission Alive's commitment to working in some of the most challenging contexts in North

America makes this kind of honest evaluation not merely a best practice but a theological imperative.²²

Catalyzing Holistic Conversations

Perhaps the most generative use of the flourishing measures is their capacity to open conversations that would otherwise be difficult to initiate. When an IFC leader and a community member walk through the six flourishing domains together, not as a clinical intake interview but as a genuine expression of pastoral curiosity and care, the conversation that unfolds is qualitatively different from what typically happens in either a social work office or a typical church setting. It communicates, before a word of the Gospel is explicitly spoken, that this IFC is interested in the whole person: their happiness, health, sense of purpose, quality of relationships, economic stability, and depth of character.

This holistic framing repositions the church in the imagination of community members who have been wounded by institutional religion, or who have only ever experienced the church as a vendor of spiritual products in exchange for attendance and donations. It announces, in practice, that Mission Alive's IFCs are not suppliers of religious products and messages but partners walking alongside people toward a sustainable, better approximation of human flourishing. It creates space for the question of faith and relationship with God to arise naturally because it has been embedded from the beginning in a framework that treats that relationship as one dimension of the whole, not as the one thing the church is willing to talk about while remaining indifferent to everything else.

In this way, the flourishing measures become not merely an evaluative tool but a missional one: a practical embodiment of the church's conviction that God cares about the whole of human life and that the ministry of wholeness is both credible and compelling precisely because it shows up in the fullness of what it means to be human.

9. Conclusion

²² Matthew 7:16–20; cf. John 15:1–8. For the theological grounding of outcome evaluation in ministry, see Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 142–157.

This paper has argued that human flourishing, understood as the holistic *shalom* of God, encompassing a relationship with God, with one another, with creation, and with self, is not a secondary concern of Christian teaching and ministry but its central *telos*. This claim is not the product of capitulation to secular therapeutic culture. It is the conclusion that emerges when the full arc of the biblical narrative is taken seriously: from the "very good" of Genesis, through the justice of the Law and the lament of the Psalms, through Ezekiel's life-giving river and the healing ministry of Jesus, to Paul's vision of a community that embodies the "not yet" and Revelation's promise of a renewed earth where God dwells bodily with a resurrected humanity.

The theological and missiological analysis in Section 3 demonstrated that this vision of flourishing is distinct from its competitors. It is not the individualistic self-actualization of secular humanism, which lacks both the transcendent anchor of the divine relationship and the communal justice orientation of biblical *shalom*. It is not the functional *gnosticism* of much American evangelicalism, which devalues the body, the land, and the systemic dimensions of human life. It is not the prosperity gospel's over-realized eschatology, which conflates *shalom* with material success and heaps shame on those who suffer. And it is not the reductionist liberalism that pursues justice without the transforming power of the Gospel. The church's distinctive *telos* is holistic, communal, cruciform, and God-rooted: a foretaste of the final Kingdom, pursued with fierce hope amid the present age's persistent brokenness.

The ministry implications are concrete. A ministry oriented toward *shalom* begins with abundance, partners with God's prior work in communities, attends to the full range of human experience and need, and measures itself by impact rather than merely by experience. The Harvard Human Flourishing Program's six-domain framework, happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial and material stability, provides the church with a theologically and missiologically resonant, practically useful bridge between its convictions and the broader cultural and academic conversation about what human beings require to flourish. Used with theological discernment and supplemented by the explicitly spiritual dimension that the secular framework undervalues, these measures can help communities of faith become faithfully accountable to the *shalom* they proclaim.

Mission Alive stands as a compelling example of what it looks like to build a ministry organization around this vision. Its commitment to the Ezekiel 47 metaphor, that is, the church as an embodied river through which streams of healing flow into both the most neglected places and across social barriers, shapes its theology, its church-planting strategy, its formation pathways, and its practical engagement with marginalized communities across North America. Its network of Innovative Faith Communities, in their many forms, represents a serious and sustained attempt to be the kind of embodied revelation of God's *shalom* that the biblical witness calls the church to be.

The challenges are real. The eschatological gap between vision and reality will never be fully closed in this age. The risk of reductionism, whether toward material prosperity or spiritual escapism, requires constant vigilance. The limits of quantitative measurement demand that data always be held alongside narrative, testimony, and pastoral discernment. But these challenges do not diminish the vision; they clarify the kind of wisdom required to pursue it faithfully.

Ultimately, the church's most powerful witness to a fragmented and suffering world is not an argument but a community: a gathering of people who have been captivated by the vision of God's *shalom*, formed by the cruciform love of Jesus, and empowered by the Spirit to make that *shalom* tangible in the lives of real people in real places. When the church is that community, when its mission truly contributes to the flourishing of the whole person and the renewal of the created order, it becomes, however imperfectly and provisionally, what it was always meant to be: a living, breathing foretaste of the Kingdom where *shalom* will, at last, be all in all.

Note: "The authors used Perplexity AI and Claude (Anthropic) as conversational aids during the development of this paper. The outline and central arguments were conceived and structured by the authors. Perplexity and Claude were consulted to explore and refine ideas interactively, and any AI-assisted language was reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content."

Contact Mission Alive at: missionalive.org or at tod@missionalive.org or steve@missionalive.org