

Diane Chandler: Resource Guides in the area of Christian Formation AAAS Grant

1. Overview of Christian Formation: Intersections of the Spirit & Science

Christian formation has typically been seen through the lens of the Spirit, including how followers of Jesus are being conformed into the image of Jesus through their faith journeys, daily devotional and spiritual practices, life circumstances, and human interactions. What we may not realize is that Christian formation is holistic in nature, meaning that people, being created in the very image of God, are integrated beings. One area of our lives invariably influences another.

Each human dimension, whether spiritual, emotional, relational, intellectual, vocational, physical, or relating to how we steward our personal resources, holistically interacts to create tension, resistance, growth, and/or change. Hence, all life dimensions – from prayer times with God to how we interact with others to how we tend the earth – have an interactive effect. And science reveals some ways that the spiritual life can be empirically assessed.

With the primary overarching theme in Christian formation being love of God and neighbor (Luke 10:27), science interestingly validates the positive impact of godly love and religious involvement on overall health and well-being. For example, [Harold G. Koenig](#), Duke University professor of medicine and director of Duke's Center for Spirituality, Theology, and Health, has [empirically shown](#) that those who pray and attend religious activities have healthier lifestyles, stronger marriages, decreased incidence of depression, better stress tolerance, and increased longevity, when compared with those who do not. In his book, [Medicine, Religion and Health: Where Science and Spirituality Meet](#), Dr. Koenig also identifies studies examining the relationship between religious involvement and criminal activity. Not surprisingly, those who participated in religious activities were less likely to engage in delinquent and/or criminal behavior. Although religious participation is not a tell-tale indicator of authentic love of God, spiritual and religious practices provide one such index.

In addition to nurturing one's relationship with God, another indicator of godly love is love of others, or what some would call altruism. Altruism has become synonymous with benevolence, kindness, and compassion, the very opposite of narcissism and self-interest. In the book *Altruism & Health: Perspectives from Empirical Research*, [Stephen G. Post](#) views altruism as "other regarding" rather than "self-regarding," and those "who are motivated with little or no interest in reciprocity or reputation gain" (p. 3). Studies on altruistic behavior have proliferated through the influence of the John Templeton-sponsored [Institute for Unlimited Love](#), led by Dr. Post. For example, scientific studies have shown a positive correlation between volunteering and personal health, with a strong but inconclusive correlation between volunteering and longevity (pp. 21-22).

One biblical imperative of forgiving others, another formidable indicator of loving others as well as being obedient to the divine command in Matthew 6:14-15, likewise contributes to overall well-being. Acts of forgiveness predicated on love for God in Christ and regard of others despite ensuing personal pain, or damage does not imply condoning of violating behavior for which an offender must be held accountable. Forgiveness becomes a gift to an underserving

offender. Empirical studies demonstrate that forgiveness reduces hostility, stress, cardiovascular involvement, and anger, while reinforcing positive emotions that affect cognitive, physical, and social resources.

A clear demonstration of this kind of forgiveness is vividly portrayed through the family members of nine victims, including Senior Pastor Clementa C. Pinckney, who were murdered on Wednesday, June 17, 2015 at Emanuel AME Zion Church in Charleston, South Carolina by racist shooter Dylann Roof. Family members spoke [words of forgiveness](#) over Roof during the court hearing following the tragedy, which served to moderate the possibility of subsequent violent responses and demonstrations.

The experience of godly love also has been researched from a sociological perspective. Sociologists Matthew T. Lee and Margaret M. Poloma, along with Stephen G. Post, surveyed 1200 people from across the U.S. and conducted 120 in-depth interviews, assessing the experience of godly love and benevolence. In their book [The Heart of Religion: Spiritual Empowerment, Benevolence, and the Experience of God's Love](#), eighty-three percent of survey respondents indicated that they felt God's love increasing their compassion for others" (p. 28). The authors concluded that having a loving relationship with God has a ripple effect that positively influences personal well-being and relationships with others.

Christian formation predicated on the work of the Holy Spirit in shaping the believer into the image of Jesus not only can be viewed from a purely spiritual lens but also from a scientific lens, whereby empirical analysis further reinforces the purpose and benefits of godly love. The work of the Spirit, so prolific in Scripture, further testifies of the interaction of the divine with natural phenomenon, where God's love breaks through in inexplicable ways, trumping rationality and sometimes defying science. Yet as preeminent physicist-theologian John Polkinghorne asserts, the Christian faith and science do not need to be repelling polarities but rather interact because God is the Creator of the entire universe. [For more on the intersection of the Christian faith and science, see Polkinghorne's books: [Faith, Science, and Understanding](#) and [Questions of Truth: 51 Responses to Questions about God, Science, and Belief](#).

Application Questions to Ponder:

- Why might people dismiss science as having any relevance to the Christian faith?
- In what ways does science mitigate one's belief in God?
- In what ways does one's Christian faith inform one's appreciation of science?