

## INTER-RELATIONS BETWEEN FLOURISHING, FAITH, RELATIONSHIPS, BELONGING, AND SELF-CONCEPT, AMONG GENERATION Z AND THE ROLE OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

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Using the Global Human Flourishing data set, the research presented seeks to understand the connections between the relationships of Generation Z (with self, others, and God) and flourishing. Much like society at large, the landscape of youth culture experienced significant change over the last few decades, with personal power and authority being celebrated in mainstream culture. However, Generation Z indicates a desire for values more aligned with servant leadership. Survey respondents (N = 24,703) ranged in age from 18 to 24. They were selected from the larger sample of respondents participating in the Global Flourishing Study (GFS), a five-year international longitudinal study involving more than 240,000 participants in 22 countries (Johnson et al., 2024). Survey data were analyzed, and important relations between the constructs of close relationships, belonging, self-concept, faith, and flourishing were uncovered. Using a structural equation model, it was found that flourishing (using Harvard's Human Flourishing Scale, Modified) is most strongly predicted by close relationships. Further, close relationships strongly covary with belonging and self-concept. Servant leadership dimensions such as listening, empathy, and building community are key to the development of close relationships. Examination of these dimensions as facilitating flourishing, as well as implications for future research and practice are identified.

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## INTRODUCTION

Social connection and relationships are fundamental human needs and are strongly connected to human flourishing. The U.S. Surgeon General's report on the epidemic of loneliness cites recent research that approximately half of U.S. adults report experiencing loneliness (and correlated negative outcomes), with some of the highest rates among young adults. This trend began before COVID-19, and it accelerated during the pandemic (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). The Surgeon General recommends social connection as an antidote to loneliness, which aligns with the Social Development Model (Hawkins & Weiss, 1985) as well as with the Search Institute's 40 developmental assets (Search Institute, 2020). An individual's level of social connection is not simply determined by the number of close relationships, but also the quality of those relationships. Listening, empathy, and trust contribute to the level of closeness in relationships, all of which are key aspects of servant leadership.

In addition to rising reports of loneliness, research shows that more than half of Generation Z (Gen Z, born between 1997 and 2012) aged adolescents feel stressed and anxious—contributors include climate change, finances, health and welfare of self and family, mental health, relationships, and loneliness (Bethune, 2019; Brownlee, 2022; Deloitte Global Talent, 2021; Deloitte, 2022; McKinsey, 2022; Springtide, 2024; U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic also contributed to a trend towards increasing depression and anxiety among adolescents (WHO, 2022).

Some theorize that the rise in time spent engaged with technology (e.g., smartphone use and social media) and less time in unstructured play among teens has made them less happy, and more depressed, anxious, and lonely (Haidt, 2024; Springtide, 2024; Twenge, 2017; Twenge, 2023; U.S. Surgeon General, 2023; WHO, 2022). The impact of technology on Gen Z is the topic of much research and discussion. They are the first generation to grow up only knowing the world with the possibility of endless information and infinite connectivity of the digital age, which they are constantly processing (Annie E. Casey Foundation - AECF, 2021; Francis & Hoeffel, 2018; Katz et al., 2021; Parker & Igielnick, 2020; Youth of the Nations, 2019). Being hyper-connected, they quickly become experts in the use of innovative technologies (such as Artificial Intelligence—AI). Generation Alpha is already using AI to spark creativity, and many (44%) use AI for their schoolwork (Springtide, 2024). These challenges are unlike any faced by older generations.

In the background of loneliness, anxiety, and mental health concerns, Gen Z are also self-drivers who care about others (AECF, 2021; Francis & Hoeffel, 2018; Katz et al., 2021). They are invested in their communities of identity and strive for a diverse community (AECF, 2021; Deloitte, 2022; Francis & Hoeffel, 2018; Katz et al., 2021; The Youth of the Nations, 2019). They value authenticity and prefer collaborative, social, and consensual models of leadership (Francis & Hoeffel, 2018; Katz et al., 2021; Parker & Igielnick, 2020). These values align with hallmarks of servant leadership, including authenticity, empathy, and building community (Patterson, 2003; Van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011). Gen Z are disillusioned by the past and have a no-nonsense attitude

about the present (AECF, 2021; Deloitte, 2021; Francis & Hoeffel, 2018; Katz et al., 2021; Klein, 2022; Parker & Igielnick, 2020; The Youth of the Nations, 2019).

There is clearly concern about the well-being and flourishing of Gen Z as seen by the many important research studies around mental health, worry and anxiety, loneliness, and the impacts of technology on Gen Z. Researchers also have explored the importance of close relationships and, increasingly, spirituality in this age group (Barna, 2021; Farie et al., 2024). However, there is less research on the contributors, such as servant leadership constructs of authenticity, empathy, and building community, and relations between strong positive relationships, self-concept, flourishing, and the role of faith amongst Gen Z.

### *Relationships and Flourishing*

The 40 developmental assets and other research on protective factors support that positive, close relationships with an adult can increase an adolescent's ability to make healthy choices, increase their self-esteem, and promote social and emotional competencies and may be seen as positive, countering events to risk factors like low income level, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and employment status (Search Institute, 2020; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020; Werner & Smith, 1992). When youth are bonded to a healthy community, they make healthy decisions and grow into healthy adults as well, with decreased rates of juvenile delinquency (Hawkins & Weiss, 1985). In addition, strong, positive relationships with parents and other caring adults protect adolescents from a range of poor health-related outcomes and promote positive development (Sieving et al., 2017). Other positive outcomes of healthy relationships with adults include higher GPA (Scales et al., 2019; Sethi & Scales, 2020), higher social-emotional competencies and stronger experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion, a more culturally responsive environment in those settings, and better economic outcomes (Search Institute, 2020; Search Institute, 2024).

The Search Institute (2024) defines developmental relationships as close connections through which young people discover who they are (identity), cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them (agency). The Search Institute also identified that close relationships that involve expressing care (dependability, listening, warmth, encouragement), and expanding possibilities (connections) positively impact the outcomes of adolescents. These aspects also align with servant leadership principles. Using servant leadership as a facilitating framework for the development of close relationships is explored in relation to adolescent flourishing.

### *Flourishing*

The Human Flourishing Program at Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science considers flourishing to be a state of life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close relationships (<https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/measuring-flourishing>). A short definition is "living in a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good" (VanderWeele, 2017, p. 8149).

VanderWeele discusses four pathways to flourishing: family, work, education, and religious community. In addition, integrating spiritual considerations in person/community-centered practices has been identified as a promising approach for strengthening U.S. public health (Long et al., 2024). A critical component of all four pathways includes relationships present in each pathway. This current research project focused specifically on understanding contributors to flourishing, and focused on faith, belonging, identity, agency, and close relationships. Furthermore, given the value and concern Gen Z expresses about community and the well-being of others, we explored the expression of servant leadership in those contributors. Considering the many protective factors associated with positive close relationships (facilitated by servant leadership/followership), it is likely that adolescents with positive, close relationships are more likely to flourish. This includes both the number of relationships and the quality, or closeness, of those relationships.

### *Self-Concept: Identity and Agency*

Self-concept is made up of two related constructs: identity (what I think about myself/humility) and agency (my belief I can make a difference in the world/empowerment and service). Agency is developed by providing authentic opportunities for youth to lead and express their voice in decisions and actions and is related to the servant leadership constructs of altruism, service, and empowerment. Compared to an adult-only solution to a youth-oriented problem, including adolescents often creates better solutions. The Social Development model states that when there are opportunities for involvement along with the ability to learn and use skills (expressing agency) and recognition for their actions, bonding to their community will occur, and likewise, a decrease in negative outcomes (Hawkins & Weiss, 1985). Often identity and agency are formed in the context of close, positive relationships, especially those where the adult lives out servant leadership constructs like love, trust, and forgiveness (Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Houltberg, 2022). Identity can be made up of how one thinks about oneself: do I like myself, and do I think I am worthy of being loved? Agency is both believing one can make a difference and living that out in numerous ways.

The 40 developmental assets reinforce the importance of self-concept as related to promoting flourishing (Search Institute, 2024). Specifically, the areas of “challenge growth” (push me to get better, hold me accountable), “provide support” (empower and advocate), and “share power” (treat with respect, inclusion, and collaboration) are related to the constructs of agency and identity. Challenging growth and sharing power (empowerment) both occur in the context of close positive relationships with adults, so it is likely that self-concept and close relationships are related to one another and predictive of flourishing.

### *Belonging*

As part of a mixed-method research project involving interviews and surveys of young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families, Carter and colleagues (Carter, 2016; Carter, Biggs, & Boehm, 2016) identified ten dimensions

of belonging within the context of a religious community. Together, these dimensions address the extent to which people with disabilities, and their families are (a) invited, (b) present, (c) welcomed, (d) known, (e) accepted, (f) supported, (g) cared for, (h) befriended, (i) needed, and (j) loved with their community of faith. These dimensions of belonging transcend faith communities. Creating spaces of belonging where someone can be fully themselves is closely connected to positive relationships (Carter, 2016). Being able to be fully oneself, a critical aspect of belonging, is also part of the servant leadership construct of authenticity. In focus groups, Gen Z expressed that they do not expect older generations to be like them. They want other adults to show up as themselves, to be authentic. They want them to be seen as humans. Again, listening is important to this construct (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

### *Faith and Flourishing*

Religiosity and spirituality are essential components of lifestyle medicine. Both offer social connection and strategies for coping with stress. Religiosity is often defined around organized beliefs, practices, and the culture of a given religious tradition. Spirituality, while historically rooted in and based on religion, is often vaguer, defined by individuals, and not connected with any one religion; it has more to do with personal meaning in life (Faries et al., 2024). Faith is differentiated here from religiosity and spirituality to indicate belief in a higher power (often called God). Expressing faith is associated with more favorable health outcomes, which is related to flourishing as well (Faries et al., 2024; U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). From this, it is expected that embodying servant leadership constructs, which are patterned after the life of Jesus Christ, would also increase faith (Greenleaf, 1977; Patterson, 2003).

### *Servant Leadership*

For adults, especially those in the ministry context looking to build relationships with adolescents, embodying servant leadership will go far in building close relationships, as well as helping Gen Z learn and practice agency and build positive identity. This paper draws from the work of Kathleen Patterson (2003), who includes the following constructs as defining servant leadership: love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service. It also draws from the work of Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011), who validated eight dimensions of servant leadership, including: standing back, forgiveness, courage, empowerment, accountability, authenticity, humility, and stewardship.

In the Relate model (Young Life, 2024), love, specifically being worthy of love, is a key component of identity. Agency (believing one can make a difference) is connected to altruism, empowerment, standing back, and also service/stewardship. Close relationships are also connected to and facilitated by trust, love, and living out forgiveness (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011; Patterson, 2003). Listening is a critical skill that enhances all the servant leadership constructs. Servant leadership is examined as a relational facilitator, not measured as a construct, in this study.

### *The Relate Project*

A recent study, the Relate Project (Young Life, 2024), examined the relationships, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of 7,261 adolescents, teens, and young adults ages 13 through 24 in the United States (N = 1994), the United Kingdom (1,004), Mexico (1,768), India (997), and Eastern Africa (Kenya-627, Uganda-447, Ethiopia-413 and Tanzania-11) (Young Life, 2024). Quotas were set by age, gender, ethnicity, and geographic region, and respondents were then weighted by gender to achieve statistical representation of the population in each country. Additionally, racial minority groups in the U.S. were oversampled and then weighted back to their population proportions to allow for deeper analysis of these subgroups. The margin of error on this sample ranges from 2.2% to 3.1% per country. Replication studies are important for establishing the scientific research base around leadership development. Additionally, showing that a structural equation model replicates across datasets increases the strength of the evidence for the validity and reliability of the model and its implications for leadership development and ministry methods and practices.

The project hypothesized that having close relationships and social connections would function as protective factors against adverse childhood experiences. Topics and questions in the survey examined adolescents' relationships (with adults they trust and talk to as well as friends), their sense of belonging, their identity, sense of agency, what is important to them, their motivation to have influence in the world, and their faith backgrounds and beliefs. The survey included Harvard's Human Flourishing Scale for Adolescents, Modified (<https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/measuring-flourishing>). In the modified version of the Adolescent Flourishing Scale, the variables "I am content with my friendships and relationships," and "I have people in my life I can talk to about things that really matter," were removed and combined with two other relationship-oriented questions to form the construct "Close Relationships." Additionally, the questions "My family has enough money to live a truly decent life," and "How often do you worry about safety, food, or housing?" were used in a separate statistical exploration of stress factors.

Confirmatory factor analysis of the survey data defined five constructs: flourishing, self-concept (identity and agency), belonging, close relationships, and faith. Self-concept is defined as identity (what I think about myself) and agency (my belief that I can make a positive difference). In the model, faith as a latent construct defined by adolescents' view of and connection to God, directly covaried with belonging, close relationships, and self-concept. Faith did not have a direct effect on flourishing, but indirectly predicted flourishing through self-concept, sense of belonging, and close relationships. The latent constructs identified through confirmatory factor analysis were then used in further statistical analysis examining structural equation models of the relations between them. These latent constructs can be understood as specific questions in the survey that, together, reliably describe a characteristic of the respondents, Gen Z adolescents.

Several versions of a structural equation model (SEM) were tested to determine how best to represent the relations between belonging, close relationships, faith, positive self-concept, and flourishing. These models sought to predict flourishing as an

outcome of the inter-relations between the other latent constructs, as well as direct relations with flourishing. The final model determined to best represent the data from the Relate project survey is shown in Figure 1. In this figure, covarying relations are represented by two-way arrows and predictive relations are represented by one-way arrows. The construct of flourishing was defined in this model without the relationship items (using the modified HFS, as described above). This model predicted 82% of the variance in flourishing. Model fit was good (CFI = .95, RMSEA = .055, SRMR = .036).

This model depicts the inter-relations between faith, belonging, close relationships, and positive self-concept. As mentioned, the strongest inter-relations are between belonging, close relationships, and positive self-concept. Increases in any of these constructs lead to increases in the others. For example, as youth experience an increased sense of belonging, their positive self-concept and the quality and number of close relationships also increase.

In a structural equation modeling analysis of the Relate survey data, self-concept strongly and directly predicted flourishing. Positive self-concept was the strongest predictor of flourishing, with belonging (being able to be yourself with friends and family) and close relationships (having people you can talk about things that really matter and depend on) having a weaker predictive relation with flourishing. However, it is important to keep in mind that there is considerable shared variance between positive self-concept, belonging, and close relationships. This shared variance contributes to the strong relation between positive self-concept and flourishing.

Faith, as defined by adolescents' self-report of their view of God, has weaker relations to these constructs, but positively covaried with all three. Faith did not predict flourishing directly (the coefficient was not found to be different from zero). However, it did influence flourishing indirectly through its relations with belonging, close relationships, and positive self-concept.

### *The Present Study*

The goal of this project was to replicate the Relate model with a larger and more diverse data set and explore the role of servant leadership on the latent constructs in this model. Although some items that formed the constructs in the Relate project are different from those in the Global Flourishing Study (GFS), we hypothesized that similar items could be grouped into similar constructs. We repeated the analyses conducted in the Relate project, using confirmatory factor analysis to determine if the latent constructs of close relationships, belonging, positive self-concept, and faith could be validated with the GFS data. We hypothesized that the relations between the constructs in the Relate model (belonging, self-concept, and close relationships) would strongly covary with the faith construct. We also hypothesized that these constructs would predict flourishing, and the Relate model would replicate when the constructs were defined using the GFS items.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Survey respondents (N = 24,703) ranged in age from 18 to 24. They were selected based on age from the larger sample of respondents participating in the Global Flourishing Study (GFS), a five-year international longitudinal study involving more than 240,000 participants in 22 countries (Johnson et al., 2024). The respondents were distributed across ages within this span evenly, with the percentage at each age ranging from 13.1-16.5% of the overall sample. The sample included more women (56.3%) than men (43.0%); less than 1% of the sample indicated their gender was “other” or did not provide a response. Most respondents (68.2%) were unmarried; 19.7% were married, while 9.0% reported having a domestic partner. Less than 3% of the sample were separated, divorced, or widowed. More than half of the respondents (55.4%) lived in a household with one or more children under the age of 18.

Respondents resided in one of twenty-two countries. The five countries with the largest proportion of respondents were Kenya (14.8%), Brazil (10.5%), India (9.5%), Sweden (7.4%), and Tanzania (7.2%). Most respondents lived in a small town or village (36.7%), while 26.2% lived in a large city, 23.8% in a rural area, and 12.6% in a suburb of a large city. The most common religious identity of respondents was Christian (49.0%); 19% of respondents had no religious affiliation, while 17.7% practiced Islam, 8.3% Hinduism, 2.0% Judaism, and 1.3% Buddhism.

Nearly three-fourths (73.8%) of the sample had completed secondary school, while 16.8% had completed eight years of elementary education and 9.4% had completed four years of college. About one-third of the sample were enrolled in school (34.0%). Of those who were not students, 32.0% were employed working for an employer, 19.3% were self-employed, 15.7% were homemakers, and 27.8% were unemployed and looking for a job.

### *Measure*

All respondents were surveyed using a questionnaire developed for the GFS (Baylor University et al., 2024). The study panel was a nationally representative probability sample of each country’s population. The questionnaire was developed using a lengthy process that reflected best practices for survey construction (described in Johnson et al., 2024). Items on the questionnaire that assessed flourishing were drawn from VanderWeele’s (2017) flourishing index. Items from the Brief Multi-Dimensional Measure of Religion/Spirituality (BMMRS) (Fetzer Institute, 1999; Idler et al., 2003) were adapted to measure aspects of faith. GFS researchers consulted experts in other areas of social science research to solicit recommendations for items that had shown evidence of validity in prior research. After several rounds of feedback from stakeholders and experts to refine the survey items for the study’s cross-cultural context, GFS researchers opened the survey for public feedback. After further revisions, the survey was evaluated and refined by a group of experts in cross-cultural research

from the Gallup Organization before being translated for testing in cognitive interviews in all 22 countries. Interviews focused on whether respondents' understanding of the items reflected the researchers' intended meaning. Additional revisions were made to the survey following these interviews and after pilot testing to determine the survey's length in both phone and online administrations. Given that survey data represent self-reports, the extent to which a respondent's data accurately reflects their level of faith and flourishing is limited by self-awareness and self-perception. However, more objective data assessing these constructs is difficult or impossible to collect.

### *Procedure*

As described in Ritter et al. (2024), interviewers were trained in each country where data were collected using a training manual produced by Gallup, Inc. Interviewers delivered the questionnaire in person or by telephone. Online administration was conducted in locations where sufficient internet access was available.

### *Data Analysis*

*Confirmatory Factor Analysis.* We conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in Mplus version 8 (Muthen & Muthen, 2017) using the items specified in our pre-registration document as measuring the constructs of faith, self-concept, belonging, close relationships, flourishing, and negative life events. Each construct was modeled separately. Model modifications were made to improve fit, including dropping items and co-varying residuals. Model fit was evaluated using the confirmatory fit index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) fit indices. As stated in our pre-registration, criteria for model fit were set as follows: CFI values of .85 to .89 indicate acceptable fit, values of .90 or greater indicate good fit, and values of .95 or higher indicate excellent fit. For SRMR and RMSEA, values of .05 and lower indicate excellent fit, values of .06 to .08 indicate good fit, and values of .09 to .10 indicate acceptable fit. These thresholds have been applied in research across cultures and are generally accepted as appropriate indications of model fit.

### *Structural Equation Modeling*

We fit structural equation models (SEM) to determine if we could replicate the Relate model using the GFS data from Gen Z adults (Young Life, 2024). As with the CFAs, models were fit in Mplus, with measurement models for the latent constructs and a structural regression model for the relationships between the constructs. Full-information maximum likelihood estimation was used to fit the model to accommodate missing data. The same criteria for model fit that were applied in the CFAs were applied to evaluate model fit for the SEM. Modifications were made to improve fit.

## RESULTS

To address if the Relate model can be replicated with Gen Z adults in the GFS study sample, we first conducted CFA to determine if the items on the GFS questionnaire loaded on each latent construct as we had hypothesized and if the measurement models were a good fit to the GFS data. Next, we used the latent constructs from the CFAs in an SEM to determine if the Relate model replicated in the GFS data.

### *Religious Faith CFA*

We hypothesized that nine GFS items measured the latent construct of religious faith. These items asked about topics such as the importance of the teachings of the respondents' faith to their lives, their practice of prayer or meditation, their sense of connection to their religion, and their belief that the god they worship loves and cares for them. Six of the nine items were retained in the final CFA model. The three items that were dropped had low loadings ( $< .30$ ) on the construct or were too highly correlated with other items to allow the model to converge (multicollinearity). Additionally, to improve model fit, the residuals were allowed to covary for the item on the practice of prayer/meditation and the items on the importance of religious teachings to one's life and one's sense of connection to their religion. The resulting model met the criteria for good fit (CFI = .991; RMSEA = .059; SRMR = .015). See Table 1 for model parameters.

### *Close Relationships CFA*

We hypothesized that six GFS items measured close relationships as a latent construct. These items asked about topics such as close relationships with parents in childhood, having people you can count on for help, satisfaction and contentment with one's current relationships, and how often one demonstrates care for others. Four of the six items were retained in the final model for the close relationships latent construct. Items were dropped due to low loadings or multicollinearity. To make it possible for the model to converge, the residuals were allowed to covary for the two items asking about closeness to one's mother and one's father in childhood. The final model showed excellent fit, CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = .000; SRMR = .000. See Table 2 for model parameters.

### *Self-Concept CFA*

We hypothesized that 17 GFS items measured self-concept. These included seven items on topics including feeling capable, altruism, and personal agency, as well as ten items that asked about the extent to which particular personality traits described the respondent. Some of these items asked about positive traits (e.g., calm, dependable), some asked about negative traits (e.g., critical, disorganized), and some asked about neutral traits (e.g., quiet, extroverted). The three items that asked about altruistic behaviors were binary (yes/no) items. We summed the responses, giving one point for each "yes" response, to create a variable with a greater range. The final model

retained this composite altruism item, the item about feeling capable, and five items describing positive or neutral personality traits. The remaining items were dropped due to very low loadings. The final model had good fit: CFI = 0.972; RMSEA = .042; SRMR = .021. See Table 3 for model parameters.

### *Flourishing CFA*

The items included in the CFA for the flourishing construct were previously validated by GFS researchers (citation) as measuring six domains of flourishing. In our analysis, we removed the items measuring the domain of close social relationships (because we included these in our close relationships CFA). We also removed the two items measuring financial and material stability due to low loadings in our CFA. The remaining eight items measuring four domains of flourishing formed our final model. To improve model fit, the residuals for the pairs of items measuring each domain of flourishing were covaried. This model had good fit, CFI = 0.981; RMSEA = .054; SRMR = .022. See Table 4 for model parameters.

### *Belonging CFA*

We hypothesized that four GFS items measured the latent construct of belonging. However, we were unable to achieve an acceptable fit for a latent construct using these items or a subset of these items. Unlike in the Relate project, three of the four GFS items that we hypothesized as measuring belonging had a negative orientation, asking respondents if they felt like an outsider and if they felt discriminated against or criticized. As a result, we decided to model belonging as an observed construct in the SEM phase of the analysis using one positively worded item, “How would you describe your sense of belonging in your country?” Although this decision departs from the approach used in the Relate model, we determined that the single item was the best match for the way in which we conceptualized belonging in the Relate model. However, we acknowledge that the interpretation of the model may change based on the difference in the way belonging was operationalized in this study.

### *SEM Replication of the Relate Model*

We modeled the four latent constructs and one observed construct using the structural regression model from the Relate project to see if the GFS data would fit the Relate model. See Figure 2 for the model structure and coefficients from the GFS model and the original Relate model. Results indicated that the model was a good fit for the GFS data, CFI = 0.945; RMSEA = .055; SRMR = .036. The model explained 83.6% of the variance in flourishing, compared to 82.0% in the original Relate model. All path coefficients were statistically significant at  $p < .05$ . The strength of the path coefficients for this model varied somewhat compared to the original Relate model. Self-concept was a weaker predictor of flourishing in the GFS model (.830 vs. .167), while close relationships were a stronger predictor of flourishing (.227 vs. .788). Additionally, belonging and self-concept covaried to a lesser degree in the GFS model than the original model (.779 vs. .360). However, given that the overall model had a good fit to

the GFS data, we determined that the Relate model was successfully replicated. Having accounted for a large percentage of the variance in flourishing with the same constructs in both the Relate model and the GFS data model, we have demonstrated that these constructs are critical to flourishing across datasets.

## DISCUSSION

Using the Global Human Flourishing data set and building on previous research (Young Life, 2024), the research presented sought to understand the relationships Generation Z has with others, themselves (identity and agency), and with faith, contributions to flourishing and in particular to determine if the Relate model could be replicated with Gen Z adults in the Global Flourishing Study sample. In addition, the connections between servant leadership constructs being lived out in relationship with Gen Z and the development of servant leadership constructs were considered.

Although some survey items that formed the constructs in the Relate project are different from those in the Global Flourishing Study, we hypothesized that similar items from the GFS study could be grouped into similar constructs. We repeated the analyses conducted in the Relate project, using confirmatory factor analysis to determine if the GFS items formed valid scales measuring the latent constructs of close relationships, belonging, positive self-concept (identity and agency), and faith. Similar to the Relate project, confirmatory factor analysis of the survey data validated four latent constructs: flourishing, self-concept (identity and agency), close relationships, and faith. Self-concept is defined as identity (what I think about myself) and agency (my belief that I can make a positive difference).

We used these four latent constructs (close relationships, positive self-concept, faith, and flourishing) and one observed construct (belonging) in the structural regression model from the Relate project to see if the GFS data would fit the Relate model. Results indicated that the model was a good fit for the GFS data, explaining 83.6% of the variance in flourishing, compared to 82.0% in the original Relate model. On this basis, we determined that the Relate model was successfully replicated.

In the model, “faith,” defined by adolescents’ view of and connection to God, directly covaried with belonging, close relationships, and self-concept. Faith in both exploratory research projects did not have a direct effect on flourishing, but indirectly predicted flourishing through self-concept, sense of belonging, and close relationships. Gen Zers who believe in God feel a greater sense of belonging in general, hold a more positive view of themselves, and experience less stress. This finding is consistent with other research indicating the positive associations of faith (Faries et al., 2024; U.S. Surgeon General, 2023)

Consistent findings from both research projects showed that belonging, identity, agency, and closeness in relationships impact flourishing in Gen Z young adults. Given the many protective factors associated with positive close relationships (Faries et al., 2024; Search Institute, 2020; Search Institute, 2024; U.S. Surgeon General, 2023;

Werner & Smith, 1992), it is not surprising that young adults with positive, close relationships are more likely to flourish.

Both research projects found that the strongest inter-relations are between belonging, close relationships, and positive self-concept. Increases in any of these constructs lead to increases in the others. For example, as young adults experience a sense of belonging, their positive self-concept and the quality and number of close relationships increase.

A difference between the projects is that in the Relate project, positive self-concept had the strongest effect on flourishing, while in the GFS sample, quality close relationships (having people you can talk about things that really matter and people you can depend on) most strongly affected flourishing. The differences may be attributed to the items making up these constructs being slightly different in the two surveys.

Given that the model was validated by both samples, adults working with and those employing Gen Zers should consider these factors when designing and implementing programs and creating environments where flourishing is desired, and especially as they build relationships with Gen Z. It is also clear that from this research and other research that Gen Z values align with many servant leadership constructs. Gen Z values opportunities to express agency (empowerment, service, and altruism) (Patterson, 2003; Search Institute, 2024). They prefer collaborative work environments compared with authoritarian ones (standing back, interpersonal acceptance, humility) (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011; Patterson, 2003). Expressing agency and having a strong identity are related to flourishing. In addition, having people they are close to whom they can talk to about what really matters also predicts flourishing. These aspects of servant leadership are inferred theoretically rather than directly measured in the Structural Equation Model. These relationships can be found at work, school, and social connections.

When servant leadership is lived out through active listening, empowerment, building community, and agapao love, close relationships will likely be formed. Furthermore, listening builds trust and communicates love. In one study, 40% of Gen Z expressed that they are not sure they are worthy of being loved (Young Life, 2024). When a servant leader expresses agapao love, considering the needs of others, paying attention to “learn the giftings and talents of each person” (Patterson, 2003, p. 3) and demonstrate love by empathy, active listening, and clear communication (Patterson, 2003), it builds up the recipients sense of being worthy of being loved, which likewise contributes to a higher sense of flourishing.

Like every generation before them, Gen Z young adults are experiencing the natural transitions of going from childhood to adulthood and moving from what is usually an emotionally and physically secure environment (home, school, community) to independence in new and less familiar places and social networks, but in a world in which they can be overwhelmed with more digital access than their minds can process. This transition period is, at best, a time of uncertainty and, at worst, one in which

adolescents can develop anxiety, self-doubt, loneliness, or unhealthy coping behaviors. To flourish, adolescents and young adults need adults in their lives who will lean in during this period and help them navigate unfamiliar territory and build their social fabric and resilience.

This research affirms that relationships matter. One of the most important protective factors is healthy relationships—with family, peers, and non-family adults or mentors (Search Institute, 2020; Search Institute, 2024; Scales et al., 2019; Sethi & Scales, 2020; Sieving et al., 2017; Werner & Smith, 1992). The most important building block for relationships with Gen Z is really listening to them, a key component of the servant leadership constructs of trust and agapao love and enhances all other aspects of servant leadership (Patterson, 2003). Before offering advice, adults seeking to build relationships with Gen Z would be wise to be curious and ask questions. Sometimes it takes a few rounds of questions to uncover matters of the heart and what is weighing on someone. Asking Gen Z what they are thinking about, listening to, their thoughts about the future, and what they worry about communicates love and interpersonal acceptance.

As adolescents reach their 20s, they tend to open up more about topics of faith, finances, and relationships, and begin to seek guidance and want to talk about these areas (Young Life, 2024). Gen Z wants to learn from older adults, but in a collaborative, non-lecture format. Listening, again, is part of being collaborators, rather than advice givers (Francis & Hoeffel, 2018; Katz et al., 2021; Parker & Igielnick, 2020). In focus groups, Gen Z expressed that they do not expect older generations to be like them. They want other adults to show up as themselves, to be authentic. Exhibiting this servant leadership trait communicates that Gen Z is seen as human (Young Life, 2024). Expressing the constructs of servant leadership (like trust, agapao love, and authenticity) will build close relationships that Gen Z desires. When Gen Zers have close relationships, they are more likely to flourish.

Part of the work of becoming an adult is taking on more responsibility and expressing agency. Greenleaf (1977) lists commitment to serve others rather than seeking power or control as key characteristics of a servant leader. These are also values Gen Z holds, and are important to building a strong self-concept, which is predictive of flourishing.

If there is one thing Gen Zers have in common, it is a desire for purpose. Half of Gen Z (Young Life, 2024) agreed that they are looking for something to help them lead a better life. Gen Z wants and believes they can make a difference. When asked about what they are concerned about when thinking about their community or the larger world context, the top items concern the well-being of their neighbor—housing, food insecurity, access to medical care, and human trafficking. Adults in a relationship with Gen Zers who also express the servant leadership construct of altruism will model and help Gen Z express altruism and service. Expressing agency is also predictive of flourishing (Young Life, 2024).

### *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

Outside of items on the flourishing scale, the survey items measuring close relationships, faith, self-concept, and belonging were different between the Relate project and the Global Flourishing Project. This constitutes a limitation to this research and the application of the Relate model broadly. It is recommended that future studies continue to refine the measurement of faith, identity, agency, belonging, and close relationships. It would also be important to see if this model holds as Gen Z ages by testing it with future data sets of the GFS. Furthermore, it would be important to use servant leadership scales with known psychometric properties in research about flourishing to confirm that servant leadership constructs were measured correctly. In addition, there are theological limitations of survey-based measures when studying faith and flourishing. At the time of this article, longitudinal causal inference is a limitation. With subsequent years of the Global Flourishing Study, longitudinal data will become available, allowing us to study changes in these constructs and their relation to flourishing over time and determine how changes in the predictors affect changes in flourishing.

Future research is also needed to better understand the covariance of belonging, close relationships, and self-concept, along with the connection between these and servant leadership/followership expression. These constructs are unique, and understanding their unique relationships with faith and flourishing is important. In addition, consideration of the role of social media/time spent online, and emerging AI is needed to understand the impact on all the Relate model constructs.

### CONCLUSION

In summary, flourishing in Gen Z seems to be a combination of the development of a strong identity, opportunities to express agency, and close relationships. Belonging is also correlated with self-concept and close relationships. Although faith does not directly impact flourishing, it is related, although not strongly, to self-concept, belonging, and close relationships. Stronger faith is correlated with higher scores on these three constructs. These findings support the importance of the protective factor of a positive close relationship with an adult in order for young adults and adolescents to flourish. Using these findings, practical strategies for working with Gen Z and adolescents around forming close relationships (encountering one another), bolstering adolescents' self-concept, creating spaces of belonging, and facilitating faith formation are identified. Essential to these strategies are the servant leadership constructs like agapao love listening, trust, service/altruism, authenticity, empowerment, and collaborating with Gen Z. When adults live out servant leadership in relationship with adolescents, close relationships are likely to be formed, adolescents will have the opportunity to learn and express agency, a strong identity will be grounded in believing they are worthy of being loved, they will be loved by someone who considers their needs, will demonstrate communication, exhibit empathy, and develop active listening skills (Patterson, 2003), all of which lead to flourishing.

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**Table 1***Model Parameters for the Religious Faith CFA*

Item	Standardized Loading
The teachings of your religious faith are very important in your life	.677
You find strength or comfort in your religion or spirituality	.881
You feel connected to a religion or form of spirituality	.308
How often do you pray or meditate?	.656
Your religious beliefs and practices are what lie behind your whole approach to life	.806
You feel loved by god, the main god you worship, or the spiritual force that guides your life	.855
Covariance for the residuals for how often you pray and the teachings of your religious faith are very important in your life	.173
Covariance for the residuals for how often you pray and how you feel connected to a religion or form of spirituality	.164

**Table 2***Model Parameters for the Close Relationships CFA*

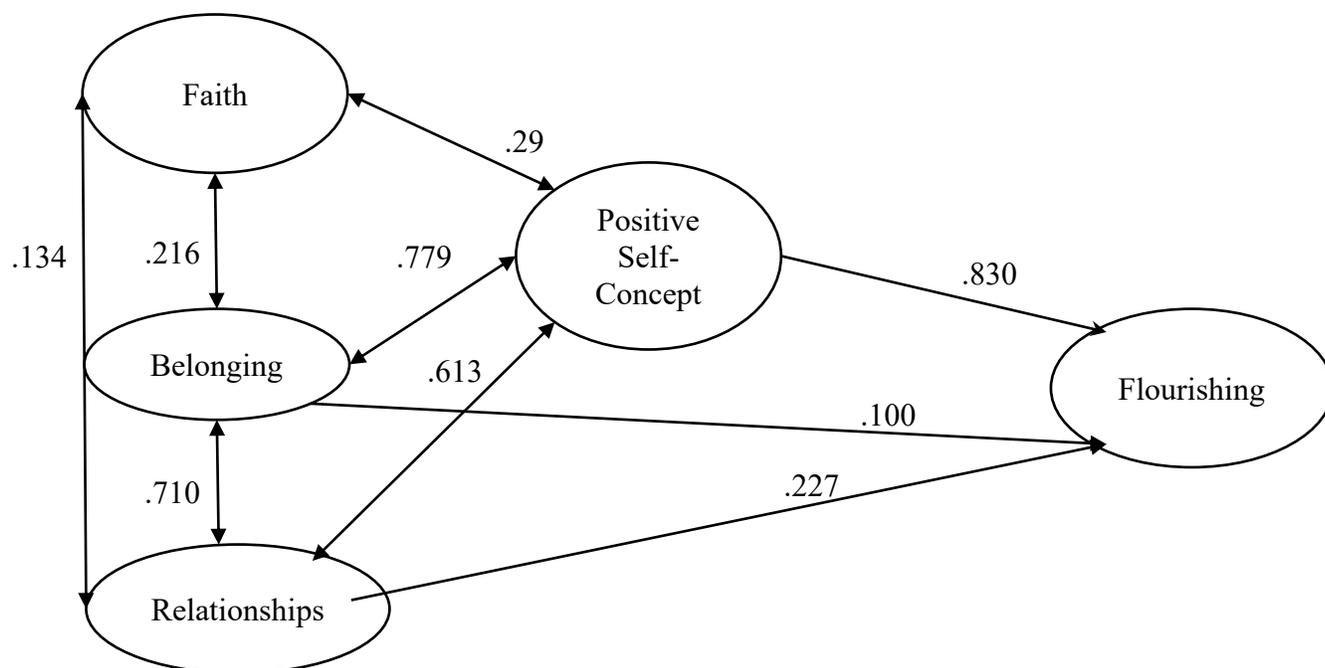
Item	Standardized Loading
Relationship with your father when growing up	.257
Relationship with your mother when growing up	.290
You could count on people in your life to help you if you were in trouble	.510
I'm content with my friendships and relationships	.633
Covariance for the residuals for relationship with mother and father when growing up	.360

**Table 3***Model Parameters for the Self-Concept CFA*

Item	Standardized Loading
You feel very capable in most things you do in life	.317
Pair of traits applies to you: extroverted, enthusiastic	.519
Pair of traits applies to you: dependable, self-disciplined	.654
Pair of traits applies to you: open to new experiences, complex	.492
Pair of traits applies to you: sympathetic, warm	.629
Pair of traits applies to you: calm, emotionally stable	.582
Altruism composite (sum of donated money, helped a stranger, volunteered in the past month)	.165

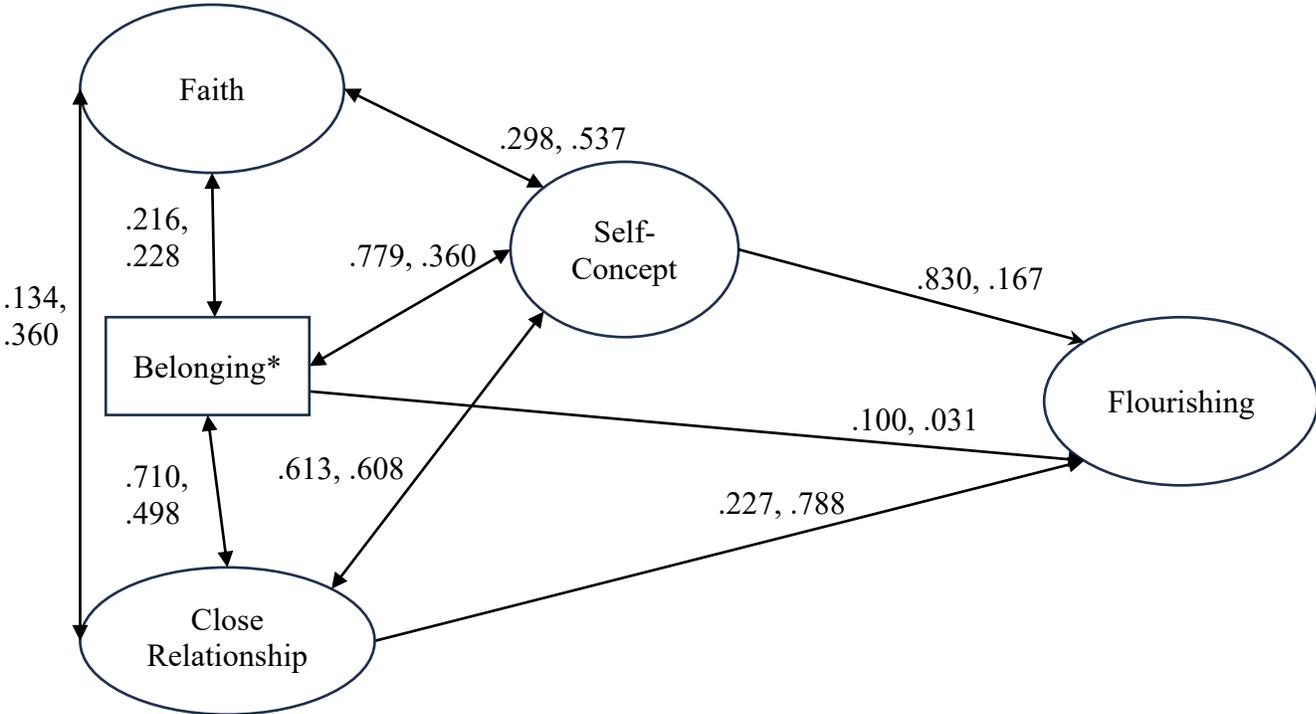
**Table 4***Model Parameters for the Flourishing CFA*

Item	Standardized Loading
How satisfied are you with life as a whole these days?	.522
How happy do you usually feel?	.639
How would you rate your physical health?	.616
How would you rate your mental health?	.702
The things you do in your life are worthwhile	.671
You understand your purpose in life	.682
You are always able to give up some happiness now for greater happiness later	.455
You always act to promote good in all circumstances	.565
Covariance for the residuals for life satisfaction and thing you do are worthwhile	.208
Covariance for the residuals for life satisfaction and how happy you feel	.303
Covariance for the residuals for physical and mental health	.248
Covariance for the residuals give up some happiness now and act to promote good	.224

**Figure 1***The Relate Model*

**Figure 2**

*The Relate Model with Coefficients for the Original and GFS Data Models*



*Note:* The first coefficient listed in each pair is from the original Relate model and the second is from the GFS data model. Belonging was modeled as a latent construct in the original Relate model and as an observed construct in the replication.