



The Fetzer Institute's Community *of* Freedom Gathering:

A Case Study on Cultivating
Sacred-Centered Community

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Introduction

The Fetzer Institute's weekly gathering of its sacred-centered community models the [organization's mission](#): it's helping build a spiritual foundation for a loving world.

The Fetzer Institute is a private foundation with a spiritual mission. It is not a religiously affiliated organization, and its employees embrace a wide range of religious traditions, spiritual practices, and worldviews. Fetzer fulfills its mission by nurturing a movement for a more loving, interconnected, and flourishing world. It does so by supporting and convening sacred-centered organizations and by living the change it wants to see in the world. Fetzer's Community of Freedom Gathering (COFG) — a weekly organization-wide convening and dedicated time for soul work in service of self, institutional, and societal transformation — is the cornerstone for how Fetzer staff embody and stay grounded in the organization's mission and vision.

This case study tells the story of the COFG: how it evolved, what difference it has made, the challenges it has encountered, and what Fetzer is learning about what it takes to cultivate sacred-centered community in the workplace. It focuses on the most recent chapter — spanning 2020 to 2025 — of the Institute's more than 60-year commitment to the inner and outer work of spirituality and community. It builds on an earlier study assessing the first three years of the Community of Freedom Gatherings (Parker, 2017).



Who this is for

The case study was developed for leaders for whom the [Sacred](#) is real and who care deeply about cultivating loving community in the workplace and in the world. It is for changemakers who are curious about what an inclusive, spiritually grounded community in the workplace could look like in practice, what it can make possible, and some of the twists and turns they might encounter in fostering such a community within their own organizations.

What this is (and is not)

Think of the stories, reflections, and data points that follow as an invitation to experiment and learn alongside the Fetzer Institute. We see ourselves as a learning laboratory for exploring and enacting our conviction that individual and communal relationships to the Sacred will lead to shared flourishing. By sharing what we are learning and doing with others committed to spiritually grounded organizational life, we hope to spur others to act so that together we can help build the spiritual foundation for a loving world.

Please do not treat this case study as a playbook. Like all organizations, Fetzer has a unique history, set of circumstances, and organizational DNA that together inform how we have tended to our sacred-centered community and culture. Your situation will, no doubt, require a different design. By making our experience visible, we hope to help you imagine what might be possible within your own context.

How it was developed

Our case study was developed through a participatory learning process with the members of Fetzer's sacred-centered community. We collected the following data in fall 2025: in-depth interviews with 28 of Fetzer Institute's 65 staff members, five interviews with external partners, and a 45-question survey, designed for consistency and anonymity, which was completed by 98 percent of the staff. In each instance the goal was to listen to perspectives on Fetzer's sacred-centered weekly Community of Freedom Gathering.

In early 2026, we held all-staff conversations to collaboratively discuss and digest the findings, as well as sense-making dialogues with leaders and advisors to Fetzer's sacred-centered community. These extensive inputs were then used to create the resulting case study.



Acknowledgements

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Why Invest in Workplace *Spirituality*



What Becomes Possible When Workplaces Center the Sacred

The Fetzer Institute is cultivating a sacred-centered organizational culture with its longstanding Community of Freedom Gathering (COFG). Every Tuesday morning for three hours, all Fetzer staff members are expected to join the COFG and participate in a mix of collective, small group and individual spiritual development and learning activities. The ultimate aim: to build a sacred-centered organizational culture, and in so doing, to enact the Institute's mission of helping build the spiritual foundation for a loving world.

As the Fetzer Institute experience has shown, dedicated and long-term investment in individual and communal spiritual formation at work can help foster:

1. Individuals who are connected with their spiritual selves and are living the organizational values of love, trust, authenticity, and belonging.
2. A purpose-driven, humane, and relational workplace where people can be the change they seek; at Fetzer, this means embodying the Institute's mission to help build the spiritual foundation for a loving world both inside and outside the organization.
3. Societal ripple effects. The individual and collective inner work radiates out into the world, becoming a fractal of [the movement](#) for shared sacred flourishing.

What is "sacred-centered"?

Fetzer understands the Sacred as the common source of the world's religious and spiritual traditions. It is the infinite, creative energy that gives birth to the universe. It is Love that creates and sustains life. If a community or a culture is "sacred-centered," this infinite, creative energy and love is the organizing force behind it.

What is "spiritual development"?

Spiritual development (alternatively called "spiritual formation" and "spiritual growth") is the lifelong process of becoming more fully alive, aware, and aligned with one's deepest values and callings. It is the intentional process of staying present to the sacred. Spiritual development is not about religious affiliation, but about the inner life that informs outer action (Forde, 2026).



Why Now: The Landscape for Well-being and Spirituality in the Workplace

At a time when the headlines are dominated by overlapping and accelerating polycrises — from political polarization and climate change to the rapid rise of artificial intelligence (AI) — widespread belief in the Sacred remains a bright spot. Most Americans believe in a force larger than themselves, whether a soul, a universal spirit, or a faith-driven force beyond the natural world ([Pew Research Center](#), 2025).

Yet in daily life and at work, Americans struggle to find connection, contentment, and well-being. One in three adults in America report experiencing loneliness ([Murthy](#), 2023), and the [2025 World Happiness Report](#) showed that the United States fell to its lowest ranking ever — 23rd — after reaching as high as 11th in 2012. At work, stress levels remain at a historic high ([Gallup](#), 2026). The situation is particularly acute for nonprofits, where, according to a 2026 survey, 89% of surveyed nonprofit CEOs report that their own burnout is a concern ([Center for Effective Philanthropy](#), 2026).



And yet, a rich variety of spiritual practices are expanding to meet the difficulties of this moment. While Americans continue to tap into the power of the Sacred in traditional houses of worship ([Pew Research Center](#), 2024), people are also accessing spiritual practice in diverse places — from Buddhist bars and TikTok to public parks, healthcare clinics, leadership development programs ([Thurston](#), 2024), and even workplaces. Interest in workplace spirituality is growing. There is an increasing recognition that employees are driven by more than monetary compensation; many are seeking meaning at work and wanting to maintain their mental health and well-being ([Wnuk and Charzynska](#), 2025). Moreover, there is

evidence that organizational support for religion and spirituality significantly buffers burnout, reducing exhaustion and cynicism among frontline workers ([Goff et al.](#), 2025).

There is a spiritual yearning in America, and workplaces like the Fetzer Institute have a powerful role to play in elevating inner work as an integral part of professional life.



How Fetzer Nurtures Sacred-Centered Community at Work

The Fetzer Institute is animated by its mission: helping build the spiritual foundation for a loving world. John Fetzer — a successful 20th-century businessman, a pioneering broadcaster, devotee of faith and spirituality, and generous philanthropist — founded the Institute in 1962. In the following six decades, the Institute has supported and incubated social solutions at the frontiers of science and spirituality. (Find more on the foundation's history [here](#).)

Today, the Fetzer Institute's primary goal is to catalyze a [sacred movement](#), inspiring collective action toward a more loving, interconnected, and flourishing world. The Institute does so by supporting and convening spiritually grounded organizations and individuals working in areas such as transforming civic engagement, guiding environmental stewardship and bridging science and spirituality. (Find more on the foundation's work [here](#).)

Fetzer's work in the world is fueled by an internal commitment to shaping an [organizational culture](#) grown from a sacred worldview. The Institute's employees are living the work by engaging in deep individual and communal spiritual development within the workplace. As Fetzer Institute Trustee and President Emeritus Bob Boisture asserted, "Only if we continue to support each other in this hard and never-ending work of personal and communal spiritual transformation will we be able to authentically and effectively go out into the world and support the spiritual transformation of others" (Parker, 2017, p.15).

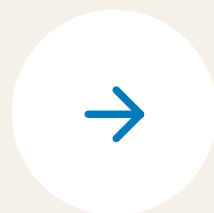
The Community of Freedom Gathering (COFG) is the primary way that spiritual growth and community are fostered at the Institute. The COFG is a weekly organization-wide convening that provides dedicated space for soul-work in service of self, institutional, and societal transformation, where staff engage in contemplative practices and tend relationships anchored in love and shared purpose. The COFG is part of a suite of activities and functions — such as well-being benefits, individual spiritual development resources and opportunities, and organizational

Loving concern is the one ingredient that can *make us successful*.

It's the glue that binds us together...

We simply must have *love as an institution*.

— John Fetzer





practices for centering the Sacred and growing a sense of belonging — that reinforce and help fuel Fetzer’s spiritually grounded community. This work is stewarded by Fetzer’s Organizational Culture department, which Vice President of Organizational Culture Shakiyla Smith-Sengu refers to as “the heart and liver function of the organization.”





Cultivating *Spiritually* Grounded Community

An Overview of Fetzer's
Community of Freedom Gathering (COFG)



How Fetzer's Sacred-Centered Community Operates

Every Tuesday from 9 a.m. to noon, all Fetzer Institute staff are expected to participate in individual or communal spiritual formation and learning through the Community of Freedom Gathering. These mornings rotate between full-community and self-directed time, where staff may engage in spiritual development activities independently or in small groups. Together, these spaces are intended to support spiritual, social, and emotional development both individually and communally, foster a rich sacred-centered community, and serve as a practice space for shaping the spiritual infrastructure of the future.

Full community gatherings are structured to be accessible for people across various stages in their spiritual journeys, and the spiritual practices offered during the gatherings are explicitly invitational (staff can choose not to engage if the practice does not feel right for them). The gatherings are crafted to nurture personal and interpersonal skills that are critical to being in healthy relationship with each other, and to stewarding Fetzer's mission. These skills include self-awareness and self reflection, comfort with "both/and" realities, and the ability to engage across differences.

Outside speakers and facilitators are invited to design and lead roughly half of the sessions, with the other half planned and facilitated by Fetzer staff. Full-community sessions address wide-ranging topics such as: learning about world religions, building capacities such as communal discernment and [visual thinking](#), exploring contemplative practices, and seeing the Sacred in the everyday. (More information on the specifics of full community gatherings can be found [here](#).)

On alternating Tuesdays, staff chart their own paths. Some choose to spend the time on their own: doing artwork, exploring the network of wooded paths around the Fetzer campus, reading and researching spiritual interests, or moving their bodies or minds in myriad other ways. Others form or join small groups organized around a shared interest or activity, such as liturgical dance, improvisational music, Black and Asian ethnicity, and spiritual parenting. (More information on the specifics of small group and individual exploration can be found [here](#) and [here](#).)



Dedicated staff and an intentional planning structure make the COFG a reality. Two full time employees, a Director of Spiritual Care and a Spiritual Engagement Coordinator, steward the community. Their work includes a mix of community engagement and spiritual care (e.g. engaging community members in the planning and leadership of specific sessions, checking on staff experiences and needs), and detailed event planning. Their efforts are guided and shaped by monthly meetings with Institute leaders who are experts in adult learning and development, as well as spiritual development and formation. This group is called the Developmental Team. In addition, an advisory group of key stakeholders and leaders at Fetzer meet twice a year to offer feedback, insight, and connections with developments in the field of spirituality.

COFG Planning Structure



The Institute's sacred-centered community is embedded within a sizable suite of supports for spiritual development at Fetzer, which includes an annual individual spiritual development benefit for staff to take time away from work responsibilities and access funding to deepen their spiritual or religious practice. This is used in personal, highly customized ways, from participation in structured retreats to solitary time in nature. (More information about the full suite of elements that enable Fetzer's sacred-centered community and culture can be found [here](#).)



Who the Community Includes

All of the Fetzer Institute's 65 employees participate in its Community of Freedom, including the 54 members based full-time in the Institute's Kalamazoo headquarters (which includes both office space and a retreat center), six at [GilChrist](#) — a retreat center operated by Fetzer in nearby Three Rivers Michigan — and five working remotely. With the large majority of staff based in or near Kalamazoo, participation in the community is largely in person; 92% typically join in-person and 8% join online.

The Community of Freedom Gathering is inclusive of staff from the most junior to the most senior positions in the organization, encompassing employees in Fetzer's full range of functions: programs, communications, partnerships, finance, facilities, administrative support, organizational culture, culinary, hospitality (for the retreat centers), and information technology.

As of late December 2025, most employees (52%) started at Fetzer after the community's current leadership and structure were established in 2020. A third of Institute staff (31%) have been with the organization since before 2012, when the COFG was initiated.

According to the 2025 demographics survey of staff, twelve faith traditions, spiritual practices and/or worldviews are represented across the community. The most common include: Christian (44%), spiritual but not religious (26%), agnostic (13%) and nature- or earth-based spirituality (13%).

Nationwide, affiliation with houses of worship has declined over the past several decades, leveling off in recent years as new spaces for spiritual practice and community have emerged. These shifts are reflected within Fetzer: 56% of staff consider the Community of Freedom their primary spiritual community, while 48% report having spiritual communities outside Fetzer (which may or may not be their primary community).





What the Community Represents to its Members

Fetzer's Community of Freedom Gatherings are designed to help staff inhabit a sacred worldview, engage in contemplative practice, and tend to relationships (with self, others, the natural world, and the Sacred) rooted in love and shared purpose. Institute leadership believes this core organizational foundation expands staff capacity to support transformation within themselves, their community, the organization, and the world. Staff member perspectives on the gatherings suggest that this hypothesis is bearing out.

When community members were asked what the COFG represents to them, they described it as space to “be the work,” a communal experience of deepening into relationships, time to connect with the Sacred, and an opportunity to learn and grow with encouragement and support from the Institute.

In short, the COFG gives staff a practice space for doing the inner, and often invisible, work that makes it possible to embody Fetzer's mission in the world.

What Fetzer's spiritually rooted community represents, in staff members' own words:



A time & space devoted to something much bigger than ourselves.

The space where I'm free to explore my truest self — where I can question my assumptions.

A way for us to deepen our relationships, and as a result, allow us to work more effectively together.

It's how we live our purpose together.

Our collective spiritual journey. A communal experience in religious and spiritual plurality.

Fetzer providing the space for the transformation it wishes to incite in the world for its closest community. Fetzer living into its values.

A reminder to center the Sacred in everyday interactions.





The Origins and *Evolution* of Fetzer's *Sacred-Centered* Community



The Early Days: John Fetzer's Intent and Initial Development

Early on, in the 1960s and 70s, John Fetzer gathered every Monday night with a group of advisors and friends to engage in contemplative practices. This experience guided his early efforts to fund the intersection of science and spirituality, and to create the Fetzer Institute. Then, in the late 1980s and nearing the end of his life, John Fetzer crystallized his belief that for Fetzer Institute to succeed, it had to be a cohesive community that was bound together by a deeply inclusive and mobilizing larger purpose. John Fetzer called this a Community of Freedom.

“I am sure that as you *listen*, you will *hear* the ring of truth, first and foremost, trying to create a *community of freedom* within the [Institute], which is based upon freedom of *consciousness*, freedom of the *individual*, freedom of *movement*, freedom of *thought*, freedom of *development*, and freedom of *expression*, which will allow the [Institute] to *succeed in its mission*.”

— John Fetzer

What such a Community of Freedom meant in practice was not clear to most people at the time, even John Fetzer. However, he was clear that an active and growing spiritual life would be paramount for the Institute and its members (Parker, 2017).

After John Fetzer died, staff integrated his vision for a Community of Freedom through spiritually rooted practices that remain part of the Institute's organizational fabric today, such as opening meetings with a meditation or centering practice, and pausing for 20 minutes of quiet reflection every day at 2 p.m. According to Rob Lehman, who was president throughout the 1990s, “I feel my most important mission is to carry love to this process, to nurture it ... We simply must have love as an institution.”



In the 1990s and early 2000s, several projects were funded to create spaces for shared spiritual formation of staff and board members, and a spiritually grounded approach was intentionally embedded into convenings and program work. Staff learned that “to do the work is to be the work,” and staff and board together participated in spiritual processes to discern key aspects of the Institute’s evolution, including its guiding purpose. Over the years, board meetings were accompanied by communal spiritual formation opportunities and widely respected spiritual teachers were brought in to lead retreats for staff and board members; these practices continue today.





2013-2019: Forming a Spiritually Grounded Community

After a period of turbulence punctuated by demanding work and significant transitions at Fetzer, the new president, Bob Boisture, felt that it was necessary for healing and progress for the entire staff to spend dedicated time together each week. The intent was to build on the Institute's existing spiritually rooted practices and to cultivate an intentional community that encouraged people to show up at work as their full and authentic selves, to deepen their relationships with one another, and to find spiritual common ground. What's more, providing the space to develop such a community could help Fetzer become a more effective organization — if it could create a culture of love and authenticity and develop the skills to lean into challenging situations (Parker, 2017).

A staff committee was established to guide the community. For several years, leadership was collaboratively held, with workgroups planning weekly sessions. The planning team engaged longtime contemplative practitioner [Mirabai Bush](#) to help design sessions, and staff members assumed coordinating roles.

From the start, the gatherings were mandatory for all Fetzer employees. That decision drew on prior experience, as earlier attempts to foster spiritual community on an optional basis had unintentionally created "in-groups" and "out-groups." After a few years of gathering together, staff began asking for more time to pursue their own spiritual interests. In response, in 2015, self-directed individual and small group work was incorporated into the dedicated gathering time.

In those early days, not all staff members were eager to participate in a workplace spiritual community, as it had not been part of their original job expectations. It became clear that shared expectations for engagement in the community was critical. By proactively telling prospective employees about the Community of Freedom and the expectation of their participation in it, new hires would be more likely to arrive aligned with the Institute's vision for workplace spirituality.

That hypothesis proved accurate. Since 2017, when recruiting and hiring practices began incorporating information about the spiritual community and related expectations, alignment with the community's intentions has strengthened. According to Nathan Moore, Spiritual Engagement Coordinator, "People come here knowing that they're going to be participating in a larger culture building experience. People are excited about this. There are fewer concerns like, 'Are they trying to convert us?' Or, 'Am I spiritual enough?'"



2020-2021: New Leadership, Structure and Intentionality

The COVID pandemic ushered in a new era for Fetzer's spiritually grounded community. Like so many organizations, Fetzer quickly pivoted to remote work in the spring of 2020. At a time when staff were feeling isolated, anxious, and grieving the loss of loved ones, the weekly online gatherings were a balm to many. They became a source of stability, and an opportunity to authentically connect and engage in a sacred-centered community providing levels of support for the soul as much as the mind and body.

The leadership structure also shifted in 2020. An assessment of the Community of Freedom Gathering's first three years revealed that the COFG felt separate from the rest of the Institute's work, its organizational policies, and way of being (Parker, 2017). While a collaborative leadership model was initially crucial for building the desired shared ownership of the community (Parker, 2017), it was time to evolve toward a clearer vision and supportive organizational structure; more centralized leadership could help. Shakiyla Smith-Sengu was promoted to Vice President of the newly created Organizational Culture department, which includes the COFG, Fetzer's HR and DEI work, and the GilChrist retreat center. Previously, each of these functions, and the ways in which they supported employee well-being and inner life, had been operating in silos. Now housed within a single department, both individual staff development and the cultivation of a sacred-centered organizational culture benefit from a more holistic and integrated approach. Each of the departmental units are advancing mutually reinforcing work. Team members are in dialogue with one another and the departmental VP champions and stewards the shared vision.





Building on her background in adult and organizational development, Smith-Sengu introduced a developmental vision for the community: If Fetzer could center the Sacred in its own organizational practices and culture, then individuals and the community could experience deeper spiritual growth, enhancing their capacity to contribute to a future of shared flourishing. In this way, Fetzer could serve as an inspiration to other organizations seeking to integrate embodied spirituality into their culture and practices.

In 2021, Smith-Sengu emphasized the small group structure as a form of spiritual practice and container for catalyzing deeper relationships and growth among participants. Staff could opt into small groups focused on racial equity and deep transformation with an initial participation commitment of six months.

These were spaces where participants could embark on profound developmental work. This involved clear guidance and support for how to structure and facilitate the groups such that a solid container could be quickly established, participants would know what to expect and, as a result, staff could more comfortably and effectively participate in this new structure. While formation and facilitation of small groups has since become more organic, [small groups](#) continue to be integral to the COFG today.

Smith-Sengu's vision for spiritual growth was accompanied by intentionally building capacity and skills for genuine learning and inner development. She and her team have articulated a suite of core competencies for facilitating that growth — among them, the ability to guide oneself with discernment, fluency with difference, and a sustained commitment to self reflection and contemplative practice. These are woven, explicitly and tacitly, into community gatherings and other spiritual formation opportunities.

The vision and supportive organizational structure established in 2020 created a strong holding environment for the COFG, one that is key to its success today. Across the Organizational Culture department, the intent is to create the conditions and infrastructure that open doors to growth, which community members can choose to enter. As Smith-Sengu says, "COFG is meant to be catalytic. We invite, not force, people to change."

We engage in *self-inquiry, inner work, and personal transformation* to alleviate our own suffering for sure, but mostly for the purpose of *better relating and co-creating with others* for societal transformation.

— Shakiyla Smith-Sengu





2022-Present: A Mature Community With Clear Signs of Impact

In the spring of 2022, once the initial COVID crisis quieted and an extensive remodel of Fetzer's headquarters was complete, staff began coming back to the office and the Community of Freedom started in-person gatherings again.

The Institute also began recruiting for a new Director of Spiritual Care position to expand the Organizational Culture team and help enact the department's vision of a "spiritually grounded, deliberately developmental, beloved community that invites and supports individual and communal growth and thriving."

With the new position, the Organizational Culture team would have someone trained in spiritual formation who was dedicated to holding this body of work and community in a sacred-centered and developmentally appropriate way. In 2023, Sarah Roelofs, an ordained minister and former hospital and military chaplain, arrived as Fetzer's new Director of Spiritual Care. "As chaplains," Roelofs explained, "we assess spiritual need and we pair that with a spiritual intervention. This is core to the work at Fetzer."

Under Roelofs' leadership, staff have been invited to discover and express the full range of their religious and spiritual traditions and worldviews. In Roelofs' words, "It can feel daunting to know how to "best" talk about your own faith and spirituality in a workplace. There is a fear of offending someone or saying the wrong thing. We are giving permission for folks to speak from their first spiritual language." In line with Roelofs' belief that people can connect with Spirit in myriad ways, she has welcomed and incorporated into the COFG a wide range of avenues for exploring spirituality, such as nature, music, grief, photography, somatic practice, and learning across diverse world religions.

According to Roelofs, "Our hope is that staff are inspired to explore more deeply beyond the COFG container and the allotted time on Tuesdays. That what we learn and practice will spark something." Such ripple effects can already be seen in the increased use of Fetzer's individual spiritual development benefit — the annual opportunity for staff to take time away from the office and access funding for their own spiritual or religious practice. Roelofs regularly meets with community members to explore their spiritual interests and needs, encourages them to tap into benefits, and helps them identify relevant resources. In 2025, 80% of staff (52 people) used the individual spiritual development benefit, up from less than thirty percent (20 people) in 2023.



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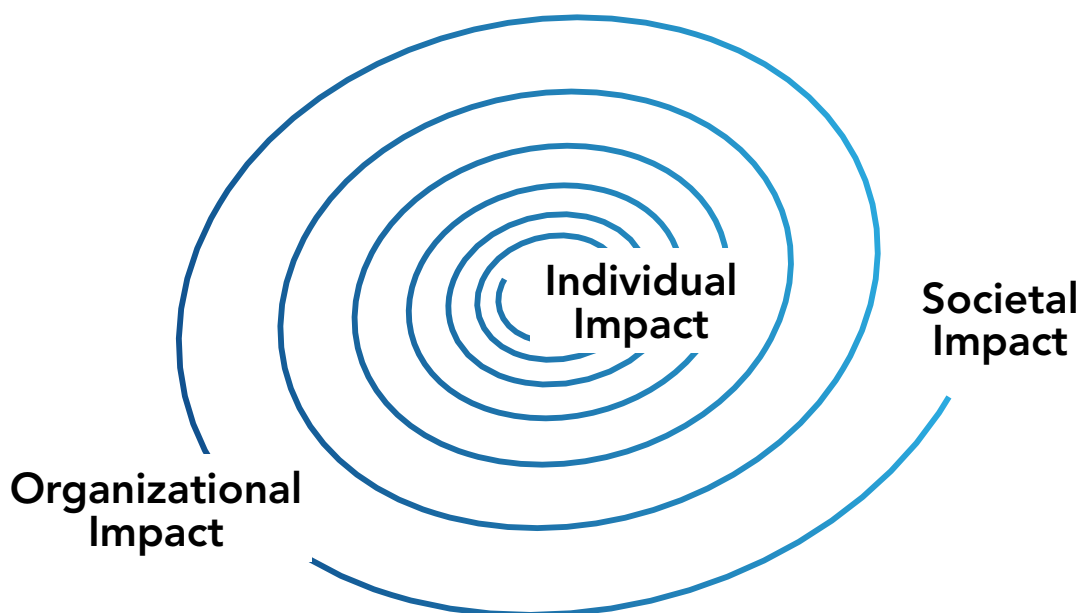


The Individual, Organizational and Societal Ripples of Fetzer's Sacred-Centered Community

The hypothesis at the core of the Community of Freedom Gathering is playing out: when individuals and communities see the world through a sacred-centered lens, engage in spiritual practices, and cultivate relationships rooted in Love and shared purpose — with self, others, the natural world, and the Sacred — their capacity to support transformation expands. It ripples outward through the self, the community, the organization, and into the world towards shared flourishing.

How inner transformation contributes to organizational and societal change is one of the central questions the COFG's work invites us to explore. While no single case study can fully answer that question, these findings begin to illuminate how sacred-centered community may cultivate the relationships, capacities, and ways of being that ripple outward into organizations and the broader world.

The Institute's sacred-centered community invites individuals into a journey of discovery of their spiritual selves. Change then happens at both individual and relational levels, radiating out into the organization and the broader world. Through this inner work, community members come into sacred relationships with their colleagues and generate a heart-centered essence that permeates the organization. Staff are able to "live the work" outside of Fetzer, within their families and other communities. In this way, Fetzer's Community of Freedom becomes a fractal of the movement for shared flourishing.





Individual Impact

How Fetzer's Commitment to an Inclusive, Spiritually Grounded Community Makes a Difference for Staff

Fetzer's sacred-centered community is making a profound difference for individual staff members. Staff survey data show that **92% of staff consider the weekly Community of Freedom Gathering impactful for their spiritual growth**. Relatedly, **67%** reported that the COFG led them to **engage in, deepen or expand sacred-centered practices, like meditation, mindfulness, or prayer**.

The community's weekly gathering is helping staff explore and connect with their inner worlds and spiritual selves, and thereby enact the community's core values of love, trust, authenticity, and belonging. In staff members' words:

- "[The COFG has helped me realize] that I am a spiritual person ... and that the practices I already have truly matter, even if they don't look traditionally 'religious.' COFG has helped me name and honor what nourishes me spiritually ... allowing me to explore and claim my own path with more confidence."
- "The sense of love, trust, belonging, and reverence in the space has made it possible for me to stretch, to be vulnerable, and to discover new ways of being in relationship — with myself, with colleagues, and with the Sacred."
- "It doesn't force you to become a better person and it kinda does."

Personal stories uniquely illuminate the COFG's effects. What follows are just three of these many stories.

Faith and Love Without Judgment

When this long-time employee first joined Fetzer, she had a "strong, vibrant, and mature faith journey through Christianity." She was not seeking to grow her faith and spirituality in the workplace and, in her early years at the Institute, did not feel comfortable being vocal about her inner world at work. With the advent of the COFG in 2013, things changed. Now she feels seen and supported in her faith journey. Tuesday mornings are a cherished time when she can connect with the healing power of her faith. Her spiritual worldview has also broadened. By learning about the "why" of other faith traditions, she has deepened her own faith and ability to "love others without judgment."



Nature as Spirituality

Raised Catholic, she “disliked every minute of it.” After leaving home at age 17, she spent many years without a faith or spiritual path. Once she joined the Fetzer Institute, she attended the weekly sacred-centered gatherings with “an open heart and mind,” even while the experience wasn’t fully landing for her yet. After about a year, she became more comfortable raising her hand and sharing her perspectives during the COFG. Then, five years into her tenure at Fetzer, with the encouragement of the Director of Spiritual Care, she tapped into Fetzer’s individual spiritual development benefit and went on retreat to her brother’s cabin where she could be on her own in nature. She came back feeling “like Wonder Woman.” At Fetzer she has learned that Spirit and spirituality need not be religious. She has come to realize “this stuff that stirred in me — nature — is spiritual. Nature is my spiritual path.” When confronting a significant health challenge, her spirituality became “medicinal” — the healing power of nature and the caring community back at Fetzer were vital to her during an extremely difficult time.

Freedom to Explore and Eliminating Othering

When he joined Fetzer over 15 years ago, it represented a professional “step up,” not an opportunity for inner growth. He had a faith community outside of Fetzer, but the experience was “pretty surface level.” Through his experience in the weekly community gatherings and by tapping into the individual spiritual development resources, his perspectives have opened up, and his spiritual life has expanded. He has greater respect for different religions and faith traditions and sees this learning as a way of “eliminating othering.” He appreciates that Fetzer is “not prescriptive.” “Everybody is free to explore their own [beliefs] and figure out what makes most sense for them.” In his experience, “employees are able to do the inner work so that ultimately we can do the outer work in the world.”

For many community members, inner transformation is facilitated and accompanied by experiences of **healing and learning**.



Staff speak of the invitation to rest and to play as integral to healing, and even as sacred rights. One staff member said that the community time “has allowed me to heal my inner child ... this has been one of the most beautiful things for me ... we have all these tough and vulnerable conversations but then there are some COFGs where we just have fun.” Another person described the impact as “a weight that has been lifted that I didn’t know was there ... I would not be at the point that I’m at without COFG.”

Staff are empowered to show up at work as “perfectly imperfect.” There may be days when staff don’t have it all together, and that’s okay; they can be their imperfect selves without fear of judgment, which facilitates healing and growth. As one person said, “You can show up at work and talk about parts of your life that are often hidden away.”

Fetzer’s sacred-centered community is also a space for learning about and growing respect for the full body of faith traditions and worldviews. This contributes to staff members’ ability to embrace difference, but also recognize the Sacred in each living being. Learning about other worldviews also helps the relationships that community members have with their own spirituality. “It gave me permission to explore spirituality and look at my own through the lens of others.”

The sacred COFG space on Tuesday mornings facilitates a virtuous cycle of healing, learning, and spiritual deepening that has profound effects on individuals and the Institute alike.





Organizational Impact

How Fetzer's Sacred-Centered Community is Making a Difference for the Organization

The Fetzer Institute's commitment to individual and communal spiritual growth is creating a more connected and sacred-centered workplace, and this sacred-centered workplace — the Institute's culture of love, trust, and connection to Spirit — is contributing to more sacred-centered work in the world.

The capacities staff build through the COFG — deep listening, fluency with different spiritual and religious traditions, coming into authentic relationships, and a spiritually grounded way of engaging across difference — are showing up in how staff work with external partners, design programs, and steward resources. Furthermore, the COFG is clearly boosting employee engagement and morale, and, by extension, helping to cultivate a healthy and loving organizational culture. It is a generative cycle. Fetzer is showing that, as an organization committed to love, trust, and human dignity, it can operate differently — and that doing so makes their work in the world more authentic, more connected, and reflective of their mission to build the spiritual foundation for a loving world.





Living the Work

For 88% of staff, Fetzer’s spiritual community helps them embrace the organization’s guiding purpose: to awaken into and serve Spirit for the transformation of self and society. One person explained, the Community of Freedom Gathering “has helped heal me spiritually and emotionally. The way we’re doing it is helping us heal together. We’re a microcosm of the work we’re doing in the world.”

Being “a microcosm of the work” is evident in the workplace in different ways depending on function and role. Organizational leaders speak of adopting more “developmental” mindsets, whereby they hold staff in the “fullness of who they are” rather than seeing just their employee identities. Similarly, by humanizing those in leadership, staff speak of feeling more confident that difficult organizational decisions are made from a place of compassion and integrity.

Signs of the effects of Fetzer’s sacred-centered community are visible in teams and functions across the organization. For instance, finance team members prioritize relationship-building over simple transactions with investment managers, and integrate equity and ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) factors into investment decisions. For culinary team members, Fetzer’s sacred-centered culture and community helps them view food preparation and service as an integral expression of the Institute’s mission and sacred hospitality, which in turn affects guest, staff and convening participant experience at the Institute.

The extent of the COFG’s ripple effects can be best understood by taking a closer look at a few specific ways that teams and functions have been influenced, and how that in turn has influenced the outer work. Four such illustrations follow:

Ally Development: Nurturing deep, heart-centered connections

Fetzer’s Ally Development team explicitly draws on COFG values and practices in their work, including carving out time in their own team meetings to reflect on what surfaced during the weekly gathering — a habit they say has changed how they relate to one another. That same sacred-centered approach shapes their stewardship of a funder affinity group and pooled fund that helps changemakers prioritize their personal spiritual well-being. The affinity group’s monthly meetings are loosely modeled on the COFG. They begin with an opening practice or meditation, and in order to balance out the typically head-centric agendas, they often weave in embodied practices, incorporate time for small group reflection, and generally endeavor to slow down and bring a sense of spaciousness to their meetings. The result has been a level of trust and heart-centered connection that members say they aren’t finding anywhere else in the field. Furthermore, the community has grown considerably since it started in 2021, due in part to the uniqueness of its spiritually grounded space.



Human Resources: A collaborative and relationship-centered approach

The skills developed through COFG — honest dialogue, deep listening, and the willingness to stay in hard conversations — flow directly into how HR designs and implements its policies. This was visible in the development of Fetzer’s pay philosophy, where rather than presenting staff with a finished policy, HR invited the whole community into the process through small groups and open forums, using methods introduced in the COFG to help people surface and share their personal relationships with money before working toward shared agreements. That process produced concrete, community-authored commitments that aim to contribute to shared flourishing: that every employee be paid at or above the 50th percentile for their role, that the minimum wage align with living wage for a single person in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and that benefits—from fertility coverage to parental leave to menopause support—reflect where people actually are in their lives.

Leadership Cohort: A container for authentic relationship and peer support

The deep relationship-building in the COFG inspired a group of newly hired directors to form their own peer learning cohort — a space to be in genuine relationship with one another and offer what they call “wise counsel” to each other’s real work situations. The group meets once a month, mostly online, and comes together every 4-6 months for an in-person retreat. Their gatherings borrow some of the intentional structure that makes the COFG work: each session opens with a grounding practice, and they weave in moments that connect participants to themselves, each other, and the natural world. They have crafted a safe space to support one another and to work through leadership challenges they each face within a shared organizational context. The results have been different yet clear for each cohort member, from strengthening supervisory skills, to clearly communicating and upholding departmental priorities, to attending to team members with care during times of change.

Program Staff: Championing spiritually rooted policy

Throughout the year, there are several full community gatherings focused on different world religions in an effort to deepen participants’ understanding of the many ways human beings seek meaning, connection, and the Sacred. One such session featured discussion of the Hindu caste system and how religious beliefs can help guide social change efforts. The session piqued the interest of a program officer working to renew public life through the Sacred, leading her to partner with a Hindu-led nonprofit. This exposure helped her support other external partners rooting their policy positions in the best of their spiritual traditions.



A Workplace Where Staff are Encouraged to Learn, Grow and Flourish

The Fetzer Institute's mission to build the spiritual foundation for a loving world is being enacted in the workplace through the COFG and wraparound efforts to support staff spiritual and emotional well-being and development. The Institute's commitment to helping staff learn, grow, and flourish is, in turn, making a notable difference for employee engagement and satisfaction.

90% feel that spiritual formation and development has a positive impact on their overall sense of fulfillment and engagement at work. The remaining 10% are neutral. As one person said, "The Institute not only encourages staff to find their spiritual path/direction, they help us live it every day. They want us caring for ourselves, taking care of ourselves, finding what it is that brings us alive." Another commented on how prioritizing self compassion and growth has required "a profound mindset shift" away from feeling "like I am doing something 'wrong' if I am using work hours to do something fun, creative, or nourishing for my soul that isn't directly related to doing 'work tasks.'" It has pushed me to take better care of myself and also of the people around me, both at work and beyond."

This is a critical, perspective-shifting posture for an organization. The Institute understands that the whole community thrives and the quality of work is impacted when its individual members are welcomed in their entirety, seen in their complexity, and encouraged to enrich their lives through the work of the soul.

When asked how Fetzer's spiritually-grounded community impacts their experience of the workplace, 55% of staff highlighted that it provides "a sense that the organization is committed to caring for staff in their full humanity." Along similar lines, many staff shared reflections on how unique Fetzer is as an employer; for instance, one person said that "Working for Fetzer isn't like any other institution I've worked for... At Fetzer, they're looking for me not only to do my job but to allow us to work on ourselves."

The commitment to individual and communal spiritual growth also helps shape a mindful approach to work. One person observed that the COFG helps them "remember our essence as beings in the world." Others spoke of the community and its gatherings as a "vessel" that forces a pause in the "go, go, go" hustle of the workplace.

Taken together, these findings point to something organizations rarely achieve: a workforce that feels genuinely cared for — not just as employees, but as whole people. Rather than merely saying the organization values employees and their inner growth, Fetzer is offering leadership support, dedicated resources, time, and practices for inner growth in the workplace. That sense of being seen and supported translates directly into stronger morale, deeper commitment to the institution's mission, and a more resilient, engaged staff.



A Relational Workplace

Fetzer's organizational culture aspires toward what Martin Luther King Jr. called "beloved community" — a community where everyone is treated with dignity, differences are honored, and the shared work is oriented toward justice and flourishing. The goal is not to turn the workplace into a family, which can raise ethical issues in a professional setting. Beloved community is more intentional: built on mutual care and accountability rather than assumed intimacy.

The COFG is central to making beloved community real at Fetzer —offering regular, structured space for staff to show up as whole human beings, practice deep relating, and build caring relationships. For most of the Fetzer community (64%), this experience of being together in a sacred-centered community contributes significantly to more meaningful relationships with colleagues. Staff shared that the Community of Freedom Gathering has allowed them "to think of the workplace as sacred grounds for deep relationship building. To see my colleagues not just as work partners, but as sacred beings working towards a collective good." For another staff member, it has taught them "how to love others and how to come alongside others who are different from me."

These multidimensional relationships extend across organizational silos and hierarchy. The experience of being in a communal space for spiritual development fosters genuine bonds between staff members who otherwise would have limited opportunity to develop this rapport. It can help "humanize the hierarchy" and build trust across departments. At the same time, deepening into such multidimensional relationships can make some staff feel "more perceptive of and sensitive to" the places where departmental and hierarchical walls still persist.





Many full community sessions incorporate intentional skill building or “scaffolding” that help staff connect, communicate, and develop authentic relationships with each other. For instance, **86% of staff indicated that the COFG has contributed to their growth around self-awareness and self-reflection skills. And 83% reported that the COFG has helped grow their ability to be in authentic relationships with others.**

These are clear signs that Fetzer’s aspiration to foster a beloved community is being realized. The findings point not only to greater connectedness and engagement for individuals, but also to an organization-wide community and culture grounded in love and trust, which, in turn, can help shape how staff engage with external partners and communities outside the Institute.

Staff reflections on how the COFG has contributed to communal growth at Fetzer:



COFG is a shared commitment to how we show up with one another every day. It reminds me that our work isn’t just about tasks, deadlines, or processes — it’s about nurturing a community grounded in love, trust, and belonging.

Gathering regularly, helps me recognize when I ought to let silence speak in a conversation, reflect for an extra moment before judgment or response, and is a reminder to be more forgiving towards myself.

We love each other in a way that doesn’t happen normally, not in a work setting.

I no longer feel the need to say something all the time and am content listening to my colleagues for their insight and giving me context to who they are as people.





The Power of Small Groups

Leaders of Fetzer's sacred-centered community have been intentional about shaping opportunities for staff to connect in small groups during full community sessions but also in individual/small group time. The emphasis on small groups is an important methodological choice. According to VP of Organizational Culture Smith-Sengu, small groups serve as an "ongoing structure rooted in ritual, inquiry, and intentionality. They're a form of spiritual practice, as well as an important developmental scaffold where people can practice and cultivate personal and interpersonal skills. Our intention is that this structure will provide a container or holding environment for our personal and relational deepening, which is at the heart of the Community of Freedom's purpose."

Small groups during full community sessions are short-term: spaces for making sense of a presentation, promoting exchange around a topical focus, or reflecting on and experimenting with a spiritual practice. Small groups on individual/small group exploration days are initiated by community members around topics of shared interest and are ongoing. They meet over many weeks and even years. While participants' experience with small groups varies, they typically have profound effects for those who deeply engage.

Small Groups During Full Community Sessions

In regards to the small group sessions during the full community gatherings, 74% of staff say the impact of their experience was positive. Small group sessions offer "a time that we get to connect at a deeper level, which creates stronger relationships with my colleagues. We 'see' each other more clearly." Another community member highlighted how the groups create "rare opportunities to be in real conversation with colleagues in departments like operations and culinary — people who are often too busy keeping the facility running to "drop in" for a casual chat during the day ... It humanizes roles that might otherwise stay 'behind the scenes' and deepens my appreciation for the invisible labor that makes our gatherings possible."

It is important to note that the experience of small group time during full community sessions is variable. As one staff member says, "Some are really engaging, and others fall flat depending on the topic, but also depending on the energy of who is in the group." They can also be challenging for introverts. Another community member said that, "as an introvert with a slow processing brain, I often feel stress in small groups. It is difficult for me to be vulnerable with people I do not already have some sort of relationship with, and we have a lot of pressure to be vulnerable with everyone. I also feel pressure to contribute to conversations while my brain is still processing information and that is difficult."



Small Groups During Individual and Small Group Spiritual Exploration

On the alternating Tuesdays when staff can choose between individual and small group spiritual exploration, small group participation spreads roughly evenly: about a third engage often, a third sometimes, and a third rarely. **For those engaging in small group exploration, 73% report that their experience is positive.** More specifically, these self-directed small groups have:

- Facilitated deeper connection and candor.
 - ▶ “People really open up and speak their truth in small groups, and I have really enjoyed and appreciated the candor.”
 - ▶ “My small group is a significant part of my experience of COFG. The personal, mental, and spiritual engagement I receive from my group has positively impacted my daily life, both at home and at work.”
- Helped people be emotionally vulnerable and connect around a shared spiritually rooted interest in ways that feel authentic and sustaining.
 - ▶ “Liturgical and sacred dance explorations have been a vital part of my spiritual life. This time has allowed me to further explore these practices in a supportive community environment.”
- Created opportunities for community members to share more of their practices and gifts.
 - ▶ “Giving me space to offer my own gifts, rather than only participate as a recipient ... These moments allow me to show up more fully as who I truly am, beyond my formal role, and to have that aspect of my spiritual life recognized and welcomed.”
- Brought joy to the workplace.
 - ▶ “It’s fun and not mandatory, which seems spacious and supportive!”

Not all staff experience the power of small groups. Some groups don’t gel or quickly fade. Also, given the informal nature of the groups, they can be difficult to access: it can be hard to know what groups are meeting and when, and for some remote staff members, participation isn’t seen as a viable option.

Despite these challenges, leaders of the COFG have observed an increase in self-organized small groups over the past few years, as well as some groups that have blossomed into deep, collective spiritual practice. This has been the case for the liturgical and sacred dance group, in which several former professional dancers have reconnected with the transformative power of sacred dance and, by doing so in community, deepened their capacity to see the Sacred in others. (For more detail on self-directed small groups — how they are formed, designed, and a range of illustrative small groups, see the [Template for Small Group Explorations](#) section.)



What if There Were No Spiritual Community? What Would the Loss Mean for Fetzer?

The importance of the Community of Freedom Gathering to organizational culture and vitality came into sharp relief when staff were asked to imagine Fetzer without it. They described an organization that would lose its animating spirit, revert to transactional ways of working, and suffer from less connection and trust. In short, the Institute's core identity would be diluted, and staff ability to embody the mission would significantly erode.

- **Loss of heart.** Staff would lose the special "heart-centered" feeling alive within Fetzer. Without protected and structured time for spiritual development, participants fear that their spiritual growth would be on the backburner. As a result, the organizational culture's unique energy — which a staff member said "doesn't just happen by accident because we're a nice group of people together, but is a direct result of the COFG work" — would deplete.
- **Loss of connection and increased siloing.** Deep connections would vanish. One staff member remarked, "If we were in any other organization, I would not talk to you ever ... there's no business reason for us to be engaging in that way." For remote staff, the loss would be particularly acute as the Tuesday morning gatherings are "the only time [we] get to be in community." One remote staff member noted that without the COFG, everyone would "wander away into our little silos."
- **Eroding collaboration and trust.** One person shared, "I would have never in a million years in my last job ... [asked] a bunch of employees to gather and talk to me about an idea. ... That collaboration and relational experience really impacts the work that I produce." Without the COFG, this impulse to collaborate would diminish. Others shared how the COFG helps them humanize colleagues in senior leadership positions, and "when difficult decisions are made ... I can trust more that they're made from a place of compassion."
- **Diminished sacred hospitality.** The concept of sacred hospitality is revered and unique to Fetzer, and a direct example of a living mission. One person with a hospitality role said, "If I didn't have this community, it would be a lot harder for me to bring the level of hospitality that I need to [for the retreat center guests]."



Societal Impact

How Fetzer's Sacred-Centered Community is Having Societal Ripple Effects

The research conducted for this case study focused on staff experiences shared through interviews and an in-depth survey of all staff. As such, the data primarily point to how Fetzer's sacred-centered community is making a difference for individuals and for the organization. Illuminating the contribution of the Community of Freedom Gatherings to societal impact and, more specifically, how it is helping build the spiritual foundation for a more loving world beyond Fetzer, is a rich area for future inquiry.

At the same time, there is reason to believe that the COFG is, indeed, having societal ripple effects. Early indicators of societal effects can be seen in, for example, how Fetzer extends sacred hospitality to its partners, how staff show up in the field deeply grounded in the organization's mission and values, and how Fetzer espouses a deeply relational and trust-based approach to its grantmaking. Furthermore, individual staff report that the Community of Freedom Gathering extends beyond the walls of the Institute, influencing how they interact with their families and broader communities. In fact, **66% of staff believe that the COFG is helping them contribute to societal transformation.**

Many participants report that the spiritual growth gained through the weekly gatherings changes how they show up in the world. By extension, they contribute to societal transformation as "fractals" of the whole. As one person said, "By healing ourselves, we also contribute to healing nature and our relationships with it, as we are part of the larger web of life and not separate from it."

Community members endorse Fetzer's approach: "I don't believe that any one organization or person creates societal transformation; and societal transformation hasn't happened in the time I've been at Fetzer. However, I fully believe the focus, values, and practices learned/shared in COFG ... are the primary way humans can/should go about achieving societal transformation." This is resonant with the Fetzer Institute's call for [a movement](#) rooted in Sacred Love that "reshapes how we view the world, approach social problems, and imagine solutions."



What does “contributing to societal transformation” look like in practice for individual staff members?

Many community members indicated that the Community of Freedom Gatherings have affected their engagement with family, friends, and communities beyond Fetzer.

- **55% noted improved interpersonal relationships** with family, friends, and/or communities outside of the Institute. As one respondent said, “I have been more curious about others’ beliefs, etc., have become more self-aware and open-minded, therefore contributing to my own worldview [being] less divisive, less fearful, and more loving.”
- **55% reported sharing knowledge** of other traditions with family, friends, and/or communities outside of Fetzer, and 30% said they **introduced sacred-centered practices** to friends and/or communities outside of Fetzer. One community member commented, “I use many of the capacity-building tools and reflections that have been introduced in COFG in my interactions with others outside of the Institute ... with family ... with my volunteer organizations ... in my everyday interactions with strangers.”
- **20%** indicated that their experience in the Institute’s spiritually grounded community led them to **begin, deepen, or grow community engagement**. According to one person, “The practices of reflection, listening, and deepened awareness cultivated in our COFG has encouraged me to anchor my leadership in values of equity, wholeness and sacred reciprocity, opening pathways for me to support community transformation not only through action, but through the quality of presence I bring to the work.”

While nascent and challenging to assess, there are promising signs of the ripple effects that Fetzer’s sacred-centered community is having well beyond the Institute. This will be an important area to explore more deeply through future studies.



Questions and *Creative* Tensions

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Tensions to Navigate and Questions to Hold

Be *patient toward all that is unsolved* in your heart
and try to *love the questions* themselves,
like locked rooms and like books that are written
in a very foreign tongue.
Do not now *seek the answers*, which cannot be given you
because you would not be able to live them.
And the point is, to *live everything*.
Live the questions now.
Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it,
live along some distant day into the *answer*.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

Supporting spiritual growth is an elusive endeavor even in traditional faith-based settings. Engaging in individual and communal spiritual formation in a workplace presents an additional set of challenges, as the aims of inner work and organizational life can surface frictions and layers of complexity that are not easily resolvable.

Fetzer staff highlight a number of challenges and enduring tensions, many of which have persisted since the Community of Freedom Gathering began. While there are active efforts underway to thoughtfully address and manage these tensions, they are unlikely to be neatly reconciled. Instead, they are invitations to ongoing learning and adaptation for the community and its leaders. As the community matures and shifts, so will the nature of the questions and the community's capacity to hold inherent pressure points with grace.



Indeed, the ability to hold “both/and realities,” sitting with complexity as individuals and as a community, is actively being cultivated through the COFG. Notably, many participants’ reflections acknowledge the hard-won understanding that often there is no easy “either/or” answer.

Important tensions the Institute navigates as it cultivates sacred-centered community in the workplace include:

- How can spiritual formation in the workplace be at once mandatory and invitational?
- What does it take to integrate dedicated spiritual time into the rhythms of the workday and workloads?
- How can the realities of workplace power structures and authority be held in a way that supports a sacred-centered organizational culture?
- What does it take to accompany individuals on their varied spiritual paths while stewarding an inclusive communal space?
- What does it take to balance a commitment to inner growth and serving the outer world?

The following sections delve into each of the above questions, the underlying challenges, and what Fetzer has been learning through trial and error about managing such tensions in the workplace. These tensions are not exhaustive. They are reflective of the challenges that are most prominent in Fetzer’s experience and may be inherent to doing sacred-centered work in a pluralistic organizational context. Similarly, the solutions are not comprehensive or uniform. The appropriate response will inevitably be different for different workplaces.

While some tensions have been effectively addressed within the Institute’s unique context, others remain areas of active learning and adaptation. Fetzer’s thirteen-year journey with the COFG has been marked by multiple iterations in response to an evolving practice and community, serving as a reminder to engage in this work with a spirit of grace, humility, and ongoing curiosity.



How Can Spiritual Formation in the Workplace be at Once Mandatory and Invitational?

The Institute's internal spiritually-grounded work is inseparable from how the organization builds the spiritual foundation for a loving world. It is the organization's central work, rather than an ancillary benefit of working at Fetzer. In order to prioritize and protect this critical work, participation in Fetzer's sacred-centered community is compulsory, alongside the expectation that all staff have a commitment to their personal and spiritual growth.

At the same time, spiritual growth cannot be forced. Engagement in the community and its offerings is, by design, invitational. The team that leads the COFG regularly reminds participants that if an upcoming topic, spiritual offering, or practice feels problematic on a personal level, they are free to opt out. According to Director of Spiritual Care Sarah Roelofs, "We are inviting people to participate as fully as they are able by inviting them to stretch, be open and curious, but not to push people towards a breaking point."

The simultaneous mandatory and invitational nature of Fetzer's sacred-centered community, while appreciated by many, raises challenges:

- **Some staff do not feel it is safe to opt out.** "You can opt out" is a difficult message to normalize, and individual staff members have differing levels of comfort with choosing not to engage in a practice. As one community member said (and the sentiment was echoed by others), "I know it has been shared that we can step out of a practice if we don't have the emotional bandwidth to participate, but I don't think we've built a culture where this feels fully doable without sensing that a question or judgment might follow."
- **The responsibilities and structures of some jobs makes full participation impossible.** On the whole, staff appreciate the protection of time for the Community of Freedom Gathering and the expectation of their engagement. In fact, many community members would like to engage more; an often-heard frustration is the inability of staff in certain roles and locations to fully participate, including members of the culinary and hospitality teams who may need to tend to guests and meals if there is a separate convening going on, staff supporting tech during full community gatherings, staff who need to travel and coordinate with external partners, and remote staff.



How Fetzer is approaching the tension of required and not forced participation, as well as structural participation challenges:

Signaling that it is OK to opt out of COFG practices has been a challenge at Fetzer for many years. Gradually, more staff have begun to internalize the message, occasionally choosing to care for themselves by opting out. Other staff see this choice being affirmed and recognize that they, too, can exercise the choice if they so wish. Roelofs underscores that growing community-wide trust is key; trust that individuals are “willing to do the hard and holy” work whether through full community offerings or on their own. Furthermore, Fetzer clearly outlines its expectations for engagement in the COFG when hiring people; having this clarity from the outset and recruiting people who are eager to engage has significantly reduced tensions around mandatory participation, while increasing enthusiasm for the community. According to Organizational Culture VP Shakiyla Smith-Sengu, “All organizations have bodies of work that are central to being employed in that organization, and this is like that. The invitation part is that people get to decide what they participate in, in terms of specific practices and sessions. There is wide spaciousness around people’s developmental journeys at any particular moment. It is mandatory that you do this work, that staff engage in their own development.”

The fact that some staff members have job responsibilities that make them unable to fully and consistently participate is a challenge that cannot be fully resolved. Leaders at Fetzer continue to pay close attention to it and how this structural challenge affects the community and impacts individuals over time. They find that being in direct, open, and ongoing dialogue about it helps so that the entire community can understand what’s going on and collectively hold the challenge.



What Does it Take to Integrate Dedicated Spiritual Time into the Rhythms of the Workday and Workloads?

The COFG asks staff to dedicate a full morning every week to slowing down, opening up, and connecting with themselves, their colleagues, and the Sacred. It is a big ask, especially amid full workloads and a hectic workday. Staff are candid about the friction and challenges it can create, including:

- **Transitioning back to the rest of the workday is often difficult.** One staff member describes a “hangover effect” when transitioning between the communal spiritual space and the rest of their workday. Because the world and other commitments do not pause on Tuesday mornings, employees may feel the need to compartmentalize, putting aside other responsibilities in order to be present in the spiritual space while recognizing that doing so will cause a stressful afternoon.
- **The realities of work can feel at odds with the values being espoused in COFG.** At times the rest of people’s jobs may not accommodate the learning and behavioral shifts cultivated on Tuesday mornings. As one participant shared, “I’ve felt moments of resentment when the realities of work make it hard to honor what I’m learning in COFG. It creates a tension between how I want to show up and what the environment sometimes demands.”

How Fetzer is approaching the tension between dedicated spiritual time and full workdays and workloads:

While Fetzer has not tried to eliminate this friction by, say, shortening the COFG or lightening its content, there are efforts to help staff transition back to their workdays and workloads, and integrate their COFG learning. After the COFG, staff share a meal and they can decompress by joining an “After-party” — an optional Tuesday lunch table for debriefing the morning’s session. COFG staff also actively check-in throughout the week with participants for whom the COFG content may have been weighty or activating, and staff can access additional mental health and spiritual direction supports through Fetzer’s holistic employee benefits. Additionally, the alternating full community sessions and individual/small group exploration days are another way to calibrate intensity and integration needs.

Furthermore, balancing dedicated spiritual time and workload is a tension that staff are willing to hold. There is widespread appreciation for the opportunity to pause, to be in community, and to meaningfully participate in spiritual development during the work week. Some see the challenge of bridging the COFG to the rest of their work as natural and welcome: “Sometimes it feels like two jobs. There’s the work and then there’s the “real work.” I think this is a really cool challenge, not a bad one.” For some, this is an honest reflection of the realities of modern life.



How Can the Realities of Workplace Power Structures and Authority be Held in a Way that Supports a Sacred-Centered Organizational Culture?

The Fetzer Institute's very existence as an organization and employer makes power structure inevitable. Roles with different levels of authority facilitate decision-making and day-to-day functioning. As at most organizations, hierarchy surfaces regularly — during staff and leadership transitions, organizational restructuring, supervision and performance reviews, budgeting processes, and throughout daily operations.

At the same time, the Fetzer Institute's sacred-centered community aspires to be fully inclusive — a space where everyone can engage in the fullness of their humanity, regardless of title or role. On Tuesday mornings, the hope is that staff and leadership can meet one another horizontally — as people, rather than as positions on an org chart.

The concrete realities of organizational hierarchy can feel at odds with the vision of cultivating a sacred-centered community. This presents challenges, including:

- **The hierarchy doesn't disappear just because COFG asks it to; it is hard coded into organizational life.** While many staff and leaders describe COFG as a genuinely horizontal space, the organizational structure that exists the rest of the week doesn't pause for those three hours. As one staff member observed, "We want to recognize each other and share/show up with the safety that we all belong and are on the same level, but after the three hours of COFG, someone else's decision can still affect our work, jobs, and livelihood. We could do a better job at acknowledging this so we can navigate it instead of acting like a hierarchy doesn't exist."
- **Power differentials can make it challenging to embrace the aspiration to be "just one of the community."** A senior leader described what they appreciate most about COFG as "the space where I really try to take my organizational hat off and just try to be one of the community." That experience of shedding a role may not feel as available, or as low-stakes, to someone whose job security or working conditions depend on that leader's decisions the rest of the week. This challenge can go both ways. Some senior leaders find it hard to entirely show up as "just one of the community;" they guard how they speak in the COFG in order to avoid being misinterpreted or unintentionally influencing the space. It's tough to completely shed roles and step out of the hierarchy in a workplace setting.



How Fetzer is approaching the tension between hierarchy and sacred-centered culture:

Holding the duality of a hierarchy and a more horizontal, communal space is not an easy tension to hold. As one leader shared, “We have rightly leaned into a more holistic understanding of the human in the workplace,” and therefore, those tensions are going to be deeply felt when there are moments that feel more “like regular corporate work life.” Staff may say, “Wait. I thought we were doing this holistic thing.”

Fetzer continues to grapple with how to honor the realities of organizational life while cherishing the opportunity to engage as humans — not defined by title or role — on Tuesday mornings. It is a complex challenge not easily solved by standard operating procedures. It is managed, in part, by continuing to see colleagues as sacred beings throughout the week, even when authority is being exercised. While moments of friction persist, a number of efforts are helping manage the tension.

For instance, to ensure the sacred-centered culture is not forced, Fetzer’s hiring process is explicit about COFG participation. Senior leaders intentionally take collaborative and relational approaches to decision-making, such as HR’s use of an open forum to address pay equity. Senior leaders also work to model vulnerability and their own humanness by sharing their personal stories on panels and in small groups during the COFG. Staff can share their experience of the dissonance through anonymous surveys, and they are encouraged to openly share their perspectives during community conversations that are designed with an awareness of hierarchy, like [fishbowl discussions](#). Simply connecting in small groups across organizational roles and levels of authority and cultivating relationships as humans is itself a way of skillfully working with the hierarchy. In fact, 64% of staff report that being in sacred-centered community in the workplace contributes significantly to more meaningful relationships with colleagues.

Unless Fetzer sheds the traditional organizational structure — one where there are individuals with more decision-making power — the organization will need to continue to navigate the tension between the workplace power structure and aspirations for a more horizontal community and culture. Sitting in this in-between space presents an ongoing opportunity for more awareness of power dynamics and more conscious use of power, rather than pretending the hierarchy does not exist. Furthermore, the notable impact on employee satisfaction, healthy workplace culture, and, ultimately, the ability to live Fetzer’s mission make it worth the continued effort to hold this “both/and” reality.



What Does it Take to Accompany Individuals on Their Varied Spiritual Paths While Stewarding an Inclusive Communal Space?

Fetzer's Community of Freedom Gathering aims to foster spiritual growth for both the collective and for individuals, within an intentionally pluralistic community spanning many faith traditions and spiritual worldviews. For COFG leaders and facilitators this means stewarding a shared practice without diluting individual traditions, without imposing a "Fetzer religious experience" and while still going deeper over time. It is a complex endeavor that requires navigating challenges such as:

- **There will never be a single COFG experience that works equally well for everyone.** Participants come to COFG from very different starting points on their spiritual paths, and how supported any individual feels will inevitably vary. Bridging from that diversity of paths to a collective spiritual deepening is an ongoing balancing act.
- **Shared practice in a pluralistic community can default to a diluted or generic spirituality.** One participant summed up a shared frustration that "the COFG still emphasizes a generic 'one size fits all' spirituality ... I know it is difficult but generic spirituality fails to go deeper, in my perspective, and also privileges the [religiously unaffiliated people] over those deeply situated within a particular tradition, and can lean toward a soft universalism."

How Fetzer is approaching the tension between individual spiritual paths and an inclusive communal space:

For starters, COFG leaders are clear that they must avoid elevating a particular religious tradition or type of spirituality while also avoiding introducing participants to traditions and practices outside their own in a way that oversimplifies those traditions' sacred nuance. COFG leaders work to craft a common container for Fetzer's pluralistic community by honoring the diverse spiritual paths, traditions, and experiences that shape community members; for instance, COFG leaders invite staff to share practices they have personally found meaningful, engage facilitators and speakers from diverse religious traditions and spiritual practices, and use a variety of names for the Sacred — such as God, Spirit, Sacred Mystery, the creative unconscious, or more. Leaders also recognize that varied perspectives will inevitably coexist and that it is critical to continuously listen to experiences and feedback from across the community, learn, and adapt. In addition, individual and small group exploration time offers space for community members to go deeper into their own spiritual paths and traditions.

For many, the approach is working. Staff note that Tuesday morning gatherings "accommodate a lot of different learning styles [and] ways of experiencing the Sacred." And, "no matter our role or background, we're each able to connect with the COFG at our own pace and depth."



What Does it Take to Balance a Commitment to Inner Growth and Serving the Outer World?

The Community of Freedom Gathering is, at once, an invitation to spiritual development and a shared practice space for living out the Fetzer Institute's mission. It is not spiritual formation for the sake of spiritual formation, but in service of enacting Fetzer's mission in the world. The outer work requires the inner work, and yet the question of how much time, energy, and resources should go to each persists. Staff call out the related challenges, including:

- **Some feel the balance has tipped too far inward.** This plays out in a couple different ways. Some people feel that the sessions themselves are too focused on capacity building and spiritual formation for individuals in the community. As one person reflected, "I feel that we have too many sessions that are internally focused on ourselves. I would like to see more focus on the outside world, service to others and what it means to live Fetzer's mission." In addition, several community members expressed interest in regularly using Tuesday mornings for direct community service and engagement alongside more financial support from Fetzer to local community organizations.
- **Strategy sessions feel, to some participants, like they don't belong in a spiritual gathering.** Community members note that "strategy-heavy segments can feel out of place and more like an annual briefing than part of a spiritual gathering," and that "deepening into strategy work should be housed within staff meetings." And yet, for staff to fully "live the work," understanding Fetzer's strategy is essential — leaving an open question about where, if not the COFG, that understanding should be built.
- **The wider world doesn't pause on Tuesday mornings, creating scheduling challenges for staff with significant external-facing responsibilities.** Fetzer Institute leaders have to clearly and consistently model their commitment to COFG while also fulfilling responsibilities outside the Institute's proverbial walls. The challenge is real and unyielding, as are the consequences of, in the words of one employee, "undermining the sense of shared commitment" to the COFG.



How Fetzer is approaching the tension between inner growth and outer action:

There is no one formula for the perfect balance of the inner and outer. Holding the tensions between internal spiritual development and external mission engagement — between nurturing the world within and serving the world outside — requires ongoing care, attention, and experimentation. Continuing to hold the inner and the outer work together is, itself, living Fetzer's mission.

So what does it take to do so?

- **Integrating programmatic strategy within the sacred container of the COFG.** Despite pushback from some, staff-wide fluency in programmatic strategy is essential if COFG is to be a space for living the work. Furthermore, sessions that integrate programmatic strategy are not intended to merely update staff, but rather to engage the community in offering input and grappling with questions core to the programmatic strategy.
- **Institutionalizing inner work.** Creating the Organizational Culture department with a VP level role to hold and organize it and hiring a Director of Spiritual Care have been important steps in this direction.
- **Actively applying skills cultivated in the COFG to the outer work.** Fetzer is early in its ability to make such links explicit; however, there are encouraging indicators, like one staff member who reflected that, "The practices of reflection, listening, and deepened awareness cultivated in our gatherings have directly shaped the way I engage in the world, especially in my volunteer and governance roles."

Furthermore, there is strong evidence that the inner-work emphasis is bearing fruit: **92% of staff rated COFG as impactful for their spiritual growth, and 66% believe COFG is helping them contribute to societal transformation.** The question is not whether the inner work matters, but how to keep it authentically connected to and in balance with the outer work it is meant to serve.



Conclusion

An Evolving and Deepening Sacred-Centered Community

The Community of Freedom Gathering's success connects back to the Institute's origins and John Fetzer's belief in the power of collective spiritual inquiry and practice. Since the inception of the weekly all staff gathering in 2012, the community has grown and evolved alongside the Fetzer Institute's mission and strategy. 2020 was an inflection point for the COFG: the pandemic brought renewed purpose to Fetzer's spiritual community and new leadership, and structural and organizational conditions set it on a path toward increasing impact. In years that followed, Fetzer's sacred-centered community and organizational culture have become deeply valued by staff and mission-critical for the organization.

Positive evolution and impact is happening in both inner and outer worlds. Staff report unequivocal signs of spiritual growth, more honest relationships with colleagues, and a unique appreciation for their workplace. At work, there is a distinct sense of sacred hospitality and shared commitment to living into Fetzer's mission of building the spiritual foundation for a loving world. The effects of the COFG extend beyond the walls of the Institute, with a clear majority of staff reporting that the weekly convening is helping them contribute to broader societal transformation.

Sacred-centered organizational community and culture comes with inherent tensions, requiring leaders and all staff to balance individual and collective needs, sacred space and workplace realities, and inner spiritual formation and transformation with outward action and care for the world.

Fetzer's Community of Freedom Gathering will never be a static or completed project. The gathering, the community, and the organizational culture will continue to thrive by adapting to dynamic needs at every level, from the individual to global society, all the while centering sacred love and being guided by Fetzer's purpose "to awaken into and serve Spirit for the transformation of self and society."



An Offering from Fetzer:

Architecting *Sacred Community* in the Workplace

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Introduction

The Fetzer Institute's sacred-centered community has grown out of a deep and long-term organizational commitment to spiritual growth. Our sacred-centered community is made possible by intentional design for individual, small group, and full community engagement; dedicated stewards and resources; and supportive, organizational conditions, including an aligned organizational purpose and mission and leadership committed to living the work.

While both Fetzer's unique circumstances and the level of Fetzer's investment may be difficult for others to replicate, the Institute's journey can offer lessons and starting points for leaders who want to cultivate soulwork or sacred-centered culture in their organizations.

The following sections include principles, practices, and structures that undergird Fetzer's sacred-centered community, including:

- Design principles that have been central to the success of Fetzer's sacred-centered community.
- Detailed information on how we design and guide our dedicated sacred-centered community time, including specifics for full community sessions, small group explorations, and individual explorations.
- Different models for how we have resourced our community over the years.
- Articles and books that have shaped our approach.
- A comprehensive list of all the building blocks for spiritually grounded life at Fetzer in [the appendix](#).

We hope these resources help animate your imagination about what is possible within your organization and inspire you to act. Together we can build a field of spiritually-rooted organizations that are creating the spiritual foundation for a loving world.



Core Design Principles

For Fetzer, the effectiveness of the COFG is not rooted in any single session or activity, but in the larger ecosystem, culture, and commitments surrounding it. The following core design principles shine a light on the organizational conditions that have been central to the success of Fetzer's sacred-centered community and are based on our experiences with fostering sacred community in the workplace since 2013.

While we believe these design principles are crucial when cultivating sacred-centered community across diverse organizations and contexts, only you can design for your context. No doubt, your own core design principles will become clear as you step into this work, experiment, learn, and adapt within the context of your own organization.

What will it take to embrace principles such as these in your context?

What are the natural starting points for your organization? We encourage you to start where you are. Small, authentic, contextually appropriate and consistent practices can become the foundation for deeper organizational transformation over time.

- **Demonstrate clear commitment to spiritual growth and community at the top.** The primary leaders for your organization must be full champions for this work. Senior leaders' visible and consistent dedication to spiritual growth — for themselves and for the organization — establishes trust, legitimacy, and primacy for sacred-centered community.
- **Align your commitment to cultivating sacred-centered community with your organizational values and purpose.** Through the COFG, we are in deep dialogue about the unifying power of love and the Sacred, which is the core of Fetzer's values and purpose.
- **Be clear, consistent, and persistent.** Culture-building is quiet, long-term work that demands both persistence and clear shared expectations for participation. It may feel slow going, and there will be moments of tension. When tended to with care and held within a dependable container, the community will deepen and flourish over time.
- **Uphold religious and spiritual pluralism.** For everyone to feel welcomed, the ethos and design need to be radically open and pluralistic — especially in a workplace setting. Ensure that you do not privilege a particular tradition or practice. Consistently signal your commitment to the full range of religions, spiritual practices, and worldviews.
- **Guide the community with experienced leaders trained in spiritual formation.** Fetzer has done this by engaging external spiritual leaders as advisors and facilitators, and more recently, by hiring an ordained spiritual leader to steward the community.



- **Craft and commit to a developmental approach** — one that is clear about the organizational capacities needed and how they will be cultivated over time.
- **Balance intellectual and experiential learning.** COFG participants are invited to engage in multiple ways of knowing (e.g., embodied, aesthetic, cognitive, etc.). We aim for accessible language and pair ideas with stories, visuals, practices, art, movement, ritual, reflection, and/or sensory experiences.
- **Be invitational.** ‘Do no harm’ is our starting point. While engagement in our sacred-centered community is expected, we don’t force people into specific practices or experiences; if the offering is not a fit, staff members can practice however is best suited to them. Being invitational is also important from a legal perspective. We recommend speaking to your organizational employment lawyers to understand what is permissible in your context.
- **Listen, learn, and adapt in collaboration with the community.** A community is a living being. It will always be changing as new challenges and openings for growth emerge. Regularly collect feedback, identify emerging needs, and adapt practices — and do so in close collaboration with community members.

Templates for Full Community Sessions, Small Group Exploration, and Individual Exploration

Fetzer’s dedicated time on Tuesday mornings for fostering its sacred-centered community includes alternating weeks for full community sessions and for small group or individual exploration. This structure nurtures and deepens spiritual development at the organizational, interpersonal, and individual levels — which together can help individual staff and the organization as a whole “live the work.”

These modalities of full community, small group, and individual engagement amplify each other. While they each have merit on their own, their full benefits are best realized together. Full community sessions are curated to align with organizational priorities and developmental needs, and engage expertise in spiritual formation and adult learning. It is not possible or preferred to “complete” work in the full community sessions — whether that be learning about a world religion, developing a relational capability, or setting intentions for spiritual deepening. To be realized, the seeds planted in the full community sessions have to be cultivated through other facets of life and work. The time for small group and/or individual exploration on the alternating Tuesdays allows for such integration. It is a space for staff to follow their own spiritual and religious paths and deepen according to their own traditions or needs. Staff can then bring their spiritual growth and insight back into full community sessions. It’s a virtuous cycle.



With all of these modalities for engaging our sacred-centered community, we are often asked: What does it look like in practice? In the following sections, we offer our templates for full community, small group, and individual engagement. Like any effective design, these templates were developed for the Fetzer community — with our mission, vision, resources, staff composition, and culture in mind. We offer them here in the hope that their specificity can help inspire other organizations to imagine what is possible within your own contexts. Feel free to use these templates and examples as you see fit.

The full community, small group, and individual engagement is bolstered by intentional stewardship and resources (e.g., staff dedicated to cultivating the community) and enabling organizational conditions, including supportive senior leadership, cultural norms, structures, and benefits (e.g., financial resources and time away from the office for individual spiritual development). These elements are detailed in a comprehensive list of all the building blocks for spiritually grounded life at Fetzer in [the appendix](#).

Templates for Full Community Sessions

On alternating Tuesday mornings, all staff gather for a full community session. To demystify what these sessions can look like and how they are designed, we have compiled the following practical resources: an agenda template that reflects the common components of full community sessions, our notes on what we're learning about what works when designing and facilitating these sessions, and a library of illustrative COFG sessions intended to bring to life the wide range of learning experiences that take place when our community gathers.



Fetzer's Agenda Template for Full Community Gatherings

Timing	Activity	Objectives
9:00 a.m.	Welcome, announcements, framing remarks for today's session	Articulate the session purpose and goals and link to related work within the COFG and the organization
9:20 a.m.	Opening contemplative practice	Transition from doing to being, cultivating presence and receptivity Build individual and communal contemplative capacity Grow fluency with a range of contemplative traditions and practices Grow community engagement and shared leadership (when staff members lead the contemplative practice)
9:30 a.m.	Sharing of content (presentation by guest speaker, panel discussion, fishbowl discussion, video, etc) Q&A and discussion, often including time for silent journaling and sharing in pairs or small groupings	Create a shared body of knowledge and/or experience Then, deepen individual and community spiritual growth based on that shared knowledge/experience
10:30 a.m.	Break, including snacks and coffee	Socialize and connect with one another Metabolize the learning thus far
10:50 a.m.	Integration and application (small group discussions about connection to participants' work and life, use of practical tools and skills, etc.)	Try on and deepen into the concepts and practices elevated earlier during the session Invite participants to carry the insights and practices into their work and lives
11:45 a.m.	Closing thoughts, survey, final announcements	Gather feedback for ongoing COFG learning and improvement
11:50 a.m.	Closing contemplative practice	Mark the closure of the day's gathering and shared learning
12:00 p.m.	Adjourn, followed by lunch with 'After-party' (a space for continuing the conversation)	Ask questions or dig deeper into the session material and practice Support transitioning back to the remaining workday



Roles and responsibilities for preparing, hosting, and facilitating full community sessions:

- **Dedicated COFG staff** hold and host the space. They do the welcome/opening announcements and the closing announcements. Oftentimes they will lead the opening and closing contemplative practices and frame the session.
- **Other community members** often engage with COFG staff to co-design and co-host sessions. Co-hosting often includes (but isn't limited to): leading opening and closing practices, offering opening framing remarks, and personal storytelling or speaking on panels during the 'sharing content' segment.
- **Outside presenters or facilitators** are often invited to facilitate interactive group dialogue and reflective practices, present on topical areas, and offer contemplative practices. COFG staff work closely with outside facilitators to design and collaboratively hold the space in alignment with the larger intentions of the COFG and development arc of the community.

What Works When Designing, Hosting, and Holding Our Full Community Gatherings:

- **Create spaciousness in the schedule.** Resist the urge to try to 'fit it all in.' Spaciousness is an important adult learning and design principle and supports cognitive and spiritual development because it invites better integration. In addition to allocating ample time for each activity, honor breaks and mealtimes as sacred practice.
 - ▶ Breaking for a significant amount of time (~20 minutes) and offering food during that time is an important part of the COFG design. It provides a pause during which participants can recharge, connect, and begin to process their learning and experience.
 - ▶ Sharing a meal creates space for deepening community. At Fetzer, staff can gather for lunch in a shared lunchroom on Monday through Friday. On Tuesdays after full community sessions, we reserve one table in our shared dining room for an 'After-party' where community members can debrief and continue discussion of the day's session.
- **Repetition (plus variation) is vital.** Repeating a similar gathering structure for each session creates a ritualistic experience; it helps participants feel at ease because they know what is coming next. This establishes a familiar and safe container for learning and growth. Within this container, we experiment with novel facilitation methods and approaches to meet different learning styles and activate continued interest — for example, by integrating art, music, poetry, and diverse processes for large group dialogue like [World Cafe](#). This is aligned with adult learning principles.



- **Design for continuity between sessions.** Many of our full community sessions are organized as a series of three or four sessions spread throughout the year. Together they unpack a concept (like world religions), a practice (like contemplative practices), or a competency (like communal discernment). This helps participants longitudinally deepen their learning, cultivate their practice, and build their skills over time.
- **Open doors and invite curiosity.** Many topics related to spirituality and religion are impossible to 'teach' in a single session. We have found this to be especially true for our World Religions sessions; during these sessions we find it most impactful to offer a brief framing, then introduce a key tenet of the tradition, followed by a related practice.
- **Engage practitioners with interspiritual formation skills.** In order to do no harm and advance individual and communal spiritual development within our diverse context, we prioritize engaging outside speakers and facilitators who are fluent with spiritual formation and skilled at engaging a spiritually pluralistic community.

Library of Full Community Sessions

The Full Community Session calendar is intentionally designed around principles of adult learning and development. Through the complementary structures of content and capacity-building sessions (along with resources for individual learning and emotional and spiritual supports), participants develop personal, relational, organizational, and spiritual capacities over time. This development framework takes a holistic approach to guiding our annual curriculum planning. While individual sessions vary from year to year, each contributes to the following broader areas of learning and formation:

- **Engaging with difference and cultivating belonging**
- **Spiritual practice and integration**
- **Capacity building**
- **Strategy**

The following descriptions provide a view into the variety of learning experiences offered during full community sessions. These are a small sample of the full array of actual COFG sessions.



Engaging with Difference and Cultivating Belonging

In these sessions participants develop the capacity to engage differences with curiosity, deepen religious and cultural literacy, cultivate belonging, and build the relational skills needed to work across diverse perspectives. For example:

Islam: A Sacred Pilgrimage

- **Why:** To help deepen religious literacy, authentically engage with difference, and develop a shared language for dialogue about religions and spirituality.
- **How:** A Muslim scholar practitioner led the community through an exploration of the rituals and historical roots of Hajj — the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca. The session included interactive presentation and dialogue, personal reflection, and guided meditation.

Exploring Authenticity

- **Why:** To deepen staff understanding and embodiment of authenticity (one of Fetzer's four core values) both in personal lives and in our communal work at Fetzer.
- **How:** Fetzer leaders shared their personal stories of authenticity, followed by exchange in small groups, journaling and paired reflection, and large group discussion on what it means to bring one's full, authentic self to a spiritually-grounded workplace.

Bridging & Belonging

- **What:** To engage our Bridging & Belonging work as a community and deepen participants' understanding of foundational concepts of [Bridging & Belonging](#); and thereby grow awareness of how core bridging and belonging concepts connect to their everyday work and leadership.
- **How:** Participants were introduced to key concepts for enacting bridging and belonging at Fetzer; then through reflection, art making, and small group dialogue, they explored what these concepts mean for themselves, their teams, and their shared responsibility to create a community of belonging.

Spiritual Practice and Integration

In these sessions, staff cultivate their inner lives through diverse contemplative and spiritual practices. Individuals can then integrate these practices into their life and work, and across the organization. For example:

Setting a Spiritual Intention

- **Why:** An annual opportunity for community members to listen to what is calling them and set an intention for their spiritual development in the year ahead.



- **How:** Two external spiritual leaders and teachers led participants through a series of individual and communal reflective practices, including using music to reflect on what has shaped us and how we would like to shape our future, and small and full group dialogue about emerging hopes for the future. The session was held virtually for all participants.

Suite of [Contemplative Practices](#)

- **Why:** To cultivate internal leadership and ownership of our communal spiritual life, staff share practices that help colleagues know one another more deeply, honor the diverse wisdom and spiritual traditions within our community, and introduce staff to different contemplative practices across traditions. The Suite of Contemplative Practices session is a community favorite that is held two times a year.
- **How:** Community members offer a curated set of contemplative practices, such as improvisational music circle, contemplative pie dough making, eating with intention and reciprocity, lego building, yogic breathwork and nature walking. Participants self-select into two rounds of small groups organized around each contemplative practice.



Seeing Spirit in the Everyday

- **Why:** To expand participants' understanding of the Sacred, promote interfaith dialogue, and cultivate belonging.
- **How:** A guest speaker/facilitator of [interfaith engagement through photography](#) led participants through an activity in which they were invited to bring photos they had taken of what Spirit means to them in their daily life, share their photos in small groups, and together explore the many ways community members can see Spirit in the everyday.

Music is Medicine

- **Why:** To bring love, intention, reciprocity, community, and energy to musical experience and thereby experience the Sacred through music.
- **How:** Members of a local "music medicine" collective offered meditative and contemplative music. The session included story, readings, instruments, call and response, and ancient and traditional songs.

Capacity Building

These sessions are designed around developing the skills and capacities required for fostering a spiritually grounded organizational culture. For example:

Art as a Catalyst for Looking, Listening, Dialogue, and Community

- **Why:** To grow the community's capacity to slow down, listen, notice, and engage in collaborative dialogue across difference, using art as a pathway into dialogue that engages our whole selves.
- **How:** Guest speakers/facilitators of a [research-backed method for looking at art together](#) met with community members at a local museum where they led small groups in an open and collaborative art conversation.



Strategy

These sessions help staff connect their individual work with the Institute's broader mission and strategy, creating shared understanding, alignment, and ownership across the organization. For example:

Programmatic Strategy

- **Why:** To have open conversation about [Fetzer's strategy](#) to empower a movement of funders and organizations that are applying spiritual solutions to social problems; and thereby help staff across all levels of the organization better understand and integrate our programmatic strategy and the rest of our work.
- **How:** Senior leaders facilitated two fishbowl conversations: one among leaders about how the strategy is playing out, and one among staff about what would help them feel more connected, aligned, and effective in bringing the strategy to life.

Looking Back & Moving Forward

- **Why:** An annual opportunity for the community to reflect on the year that is coming to a close, and dream about what could be possible in the year ahead — for their own spiritual growth and for the community. In addition to community-building, it also offers another way for the COFG planners to get input and feedback from the community in the design of the upcoming year.
- **How:** COFG staff share a 'year-in-review' — reminding the community of the year past and the collective spiritual journey we've been on, what was learned and achieved; followed by self-reflection and collaborative intention setting for how the community can, together, center the Sacred in the coming year.

Templates for Small Group Explorations

On alternating weeks, Fetzer staff can choose to direct their own spiritual formation through small group or individual exploration. Engaging with each other in small groups is a core spiritual practice at Fetzer. Small groups are a shared container for going deeper on what matters most to community members: supporting their social, spiritual, and emotional development, and helping them connect, at once, to themselves and to each other. In fact, small groups organized around a shared inquiry are an evidence-based method for adults to learn and grow (Smith and Nicolaides, 2018).

Small groups are self-directed and, as such, they do not follow a singular format. To provide a view into how small groups at Fetzer are created and the range of forms they can take, we have compiled overviews of how small groups are formed, designed, and facilitated at Fetzer, as well as a library of small groups that offers a view into the myriad ways staff are choosing to learn and grow alongside their colleagues and making the COFG their own.



How Small Groups are Formed at Fetzer

- **Small groups are catalyzed by community member interest.** Most are wholly self-organized based on people's interests and needs. One to two people identify an area for shared exploration and initiate the group by inviting interested parties or the whole community. Occasionally COFG staff will observe a shared need among community members and/or support a community member in catalyzing a group.
- **Participation and access to small groups varies.**
 - ▶ Many small groups are open to participation by all community members. However, affinity groups are not open to everyone. They offer a safe space for people with shared identities. For example, it was decided to restrict participation in a domestic violence survivor group to survivors of domestic violence and close relations of survivors.
 - ▶ Some small groups exist entirely under the radar. There is no requirement to make them known to COFG staff or the rest of the organization.
- **Small group duration also varies.** Most small groups have an end point, after meeting about four times. However, several small groups have stayed together for multiple years, in response to continued interest.

How Small Groups are Typically Designed and Facilitated at Fetzer

Small groups are typically designed and facilitated with the following components:

- A clear and intentional shared focus guides most small groups.
- Most meet for 60-90 minutes of the three hours held for COFG on Tuesday mornings. Participants can use the remaining time for their individual spiritual exploration.
- When a small group is getting established, participants often find it helpful to align on how the group wants to spend its time, where it wants to gather (e.g., in the dining room, outside, online), and group norms for how members want to be in relationship and dialogue with one another.
- Most groups are self-facilitated. Occasionally groups engage the support of outside facilitators. Some best practices structuring and facilitating small group time include:
 - ▶ Be intentional about the configuration of your meeting space (e.g. sit in a circle).
 - ▶ Rotate responsibilities for managing and facilitating the group.
 - ▶ Start with an opening practice to help people ground and connect.
 - ▶ Ensure everyone in the group has time to share.



- ▶ Incorporate a shared learning or experience (e.g., a text/reading, a dance piece to work on, a facilitated process).
- ▶ ‘Break bread’ together. Some groups strengthen bonds by bringing snacks to share.
- Small groups ideally meet regularly (as opposed to one-offs) over a period of time.
- Small groups are invited to share their learning with the wider community. At Fetzer, this sharing back is often experiential, such as leading a related practice in a full community session.

Library of Small Groups

The following descriptions offer a view into the variety of experiences Fetzer staff are crafting during their dedicated time for spiritual exploration in small groups. It is noteworthy that many of these small groups were sparked by an experience in a full community session, which is part of the hope — that participants will deepen into topics and practices introduced to the full community on their own.

Grief

- **Why:** To explore the many forms of loss — from death to life transitions — through reflection, community, and creative expression.
- **How:** The Grief group was catalyzed by the Director of Spiritual Care in response to observing many staff grappling with loss. The group gathered for a three-part series facilitated by a grief and change coach. The series resulted in a compassionate, low-pressure community space for staff to explore their loss.

Ethnoautobiography

- **Why:** An affinity group for white-identifying staff members to understand and unlearn whiteness using their own stories and Indigenous approaches. By understanding and integrating their own stories, members of the Ethnoautobiography group are able to further their inner growth and development.
- **How:** The Ethnoautobiography group has been gathering for a year and a half. The five members meet about once a month. They use [a book on ethnoautobiography](#) to guide their meetings. They rotate facilitation responsibilities for each meeting; the person on point for facilitation decides how to frame and hold the session. The group’s work led one of the members to use her remaining spiritual exploration time to delve into her family’s genealogy.



Music Improv

- **Why:** To engage in spontaneous and collective Spirit-led creation of music. The Music Improv group understands their creations not as performance, but rather as pathways for deep listening, growth, creativity and connection with Spirit.
- **What:** About seven staff members have been gathering for over a year. They meet at least once a month. At the start of each meeting, they set a shared intention; one member starts making music, others listen and join in when moved to do so. The musical creation ends when it organically comes to an end. Afterwards, group members reflect on the experience. Their musical creations are never repeated, reflecting a shared belief in the power of impermanence.

Prayer Group

- **Why:** To offer prayer in the Christian tradition for the joys, concerns, and needs of Fetzer staff.
- **How:** The Prayer group meets when there is need for prayer in the Fetzer community. Sparked by requests from community members to pray for them or their loved ones, the group has been ongoing for several years. While the group prays in the Christian tradition, it is all open to anyone regardless of one's personal faith tradition or spiritual path.

Spiritual Parenting

- **Why:** To support one another in spiritually-rooted parenting — exploring how our children stretch, challenge, and shape us into more patient, loving, and understanding human beings.
- **How:** Inspired by Dr. Lisa Miller's research and book, [The Spiritual Child](#), the group initially read the book together, reflecting on how the research and stories mirrored their own experiences as parents. From there, the group evolved naturally. Some sessions centered on universal themes like love, compassion, patience, and forgiveness. Others explored different faiths and spiritual traditions, exploring what each one teaches about raising children and what we might carry into our own parenting.

Lego Therapy

- **Why:** To engage in an accessible and collective contemplative practice that supports emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being. Participants report that the disciplined focus of Lego building encourages a sense of calm, opening them to deeper spiritual connection and reflection and helping them reconnect with God, love, and inner peace.
- **How:** Based on the practice of Lego mindfulness, the Lego Therapy group sits together as each member works on their own Lego set. Participation is very diverse, connecting together members of teams who, otherwise, are unlikely to connect.



Liturgical and Sacred Dance

- **Why:** To explore how liturgical dance and spiritual movement can serve as powerful mediums to perceive and honor the Sacred in one another, elevating how the arts connect to what it means to be human.
- **How:** The [liturgical and sacred dance group](#) connected together four former professional dancers all on staff at Fetzer to explore the transformative power of sacred dance. They met for about 18 months, during which they taught each other dance, worked with a somatic coach and former dancer on mind-body-spirit connection, and reflected together on the connection between dance and the Sacred. Their engagement as a small group culminated in performing a liturgical dance during a service at one of the group members' houses of worship, Saint Peter's Church in Manhattan, a congregation long known for its liturgical arts programs, including dance.





Templates for Individual Exploration

On the alternating weeks when small groups gather, community members can also opt to pursue their own inner work with topics and practices of their own choosing. It is an opportunity to practice, learn, and grow in the way that is best suited for each person. Making space for individual spiritual exploration is an important balance to and catalyzer for our communal work at Fetzer. The ability to focus on self is part of spiritual life. We come together in community and we also deepen individually and develop personal relationships with Spirit or God.

Individual community members nurture their spirituality through contemplative practices like meditation, yoga, prayer, and journaling. They write poetry, walk Fetzer's wooded paths, paint, and knit. Some staff study and deepen their own faith traditions and practices. Some engage in interfaith explorations, studying Islam, Hinduism, Jewish scripture, African philosophies, liberation theology, astrology and tarot. Others dedicate their time to community service and care for others. Staff can request funding for materials to support their personal spiritual development activities.

Fetzer's Director of Spiritual Care is available to help staff shape how they choose to use their individual spiritual exploration time. At Fetzer our Director of Spiritual Care is an ordained spiritual leader. Her training and expertise have been invaluable. By asking questions, pointing staff to intention setting resources (e.g., art supplies, intention setting apps, conversation cards, individual spiritual directors or companions), and making connections amongst colleagues, the Director of Spiritual Care helps people identify the elements that help them feel more connected to Spirit.

It is important to note that the Director of Spiritual Care is not directing, supervising or taking responsibility for individuals' spiritual formation or beliefs, as may be the case in a house of worship or faith community. Instead, her role is to create the conditions, offer support, and connect people with practices and opportunities that empower them to chart their own spiritual path.



How Individuals Are Guided in Shaping Their Inner Work

Individual spiritual exploration is highly personalized. Staff are invited to be playful, to try things out, and to follow what piques their interest. They are encouraged to:

- Contemplate how the Sacred can be found in all aspects of life and that different people connect with the spiritual in different ways.
- Consider the many different options available for personal growth and connecting with that which is larger than oneself.
- Start to explore practices that cultivate curiosity, wisdom, and connection by taking a range of initial steps, such as:
- Talking with colleagues about activities and resources they have found helpful. Organic sharing and connection is one of the main ways of opening up new avenues for individual spiritual exploration.
- Consulting Fetzer's library for books and resources that others have found useful.
- Taking an online course using one of Fetzer's recommended resources.
- Doing a contemplative art activity such as coloring or using clay.
- Watching a spiritual film and taking time to reflect, talk, or write about the themes it explores.
- Working with a Spiritual Director or Coach either during COFG time or their own time.

In addition, we create scaffolding for individual spiritual exploration when we come together as a full community. For instance, on individual/small group exploration days, we come together as a full community for an opening practice before stepping into self-directed exploration (whether in small groups or as individuals). Then, we close the morning with a shared lunch. These bookends help create an intentional container for the self-directed work.



Recommended Reading

The current design of Fetzner's Community of Freedom Gathering has been shaped by action research approaches and theory about adult development and learning, organizational design, leadership, and systems transformation.

A short list of resources that have been particularly formative for Organizational Culture and the COFG follows.

Kegan, R. and L. Lahey. (2016). *An everyone culture: Becoming a deliberately developmental organization*. Harvard Business Review Press.

Laloux, L. (2014). *Reinventing organizations: A guide to creating organizations inspired by the next stage in human consciousness*. Nelson Parker.

School of System Change. (2025.) *Action inquiry: A learning approach for systems change*. <https://www.schoolofsystemchange.org/school-resources/learning-materials/action-inquiry-publication>

Smith, S. and A. Nicolaides. (2018.) Mirror, mirror: Learning to "become" together. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2018(159), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ace.20287>

Wilber, K. and D. DiPerna. *Toward a deliberately developmental civilization: Illuminating the three key elements of spiritual transformation*.





Resourcing Sacred-Centered Community and Culture

We often get asked, “What does it cost?”

2025 COFG costs included \$105,000 in program operating costs, plus full salaries for two FTE (our COFG coordinator and our spiritual care director), 20% of our Organizational Culture VP’s salary/time, and three hours a week for all staff participation. We appreciate that Fetzer’s investment in its sacred-centered community is significant.

Here’s the good news: our experience suggests that there are different models requiring differing levels of resourcing that organizations can entertain. At Fetzer, our intentional embodiment of a sacred-centered community started with the support of a part-time consultant/spiritual formation practitioner while mobilizing shared leadership across staff. As our commitment to the community and the aligned organizational culture has grown, so has our commitment of financial resources.

Below we outline three different models for consideration, all of which we have experimented with at Fetzer, and our estimate of associated costs (based on our experience and context).

These economic models include:

- **Program operating costs** — guest honoraria and travel, contracted partners, full community gathering materials, and supplies and resources to support small group and individual spiritual exploration.
- **Dedicated staffing** — salaries, benefits, and development for staff whose role it is to lead this work.

These economic models do not include:

- **Participating staff time** — the hours the whole staff spends in the practice each week. Of course, this is highly variable depending on your organization’s size and salaries.
- **Wrap-around spiritual formation benefits.** At Fetzer, we offer a suite of benefits that help deepen individual staff members’ spiritual growth and well-being. These include access to a \$2,000 stipend and time off for all staff to pursue a spiritual formation opportunity once a year. Similar to professional development investments at other institutions, such benefits help staff deepen into their own spiritual journeys, which also reinforces the work of the COFG.

We offer our calculations as a starting point — one input for your planning, in your context. As you review these models, we invite you to consider:

- Is leadership ready to commit the resources — both staff time and direct program operating costs — needed to make this a reality?
- What assets do you have in your organization? How might staff members come together to co-create your spiritual community?



- Do you have the capability (via internal or external expertise and capacity) to facilitate meaningful spiritual learning and practice across diverse religious, spiritual, and wisdom traditions? In our experience, expertise in adult learning and development and in facilitating such interspiritual formation has been critical to ensuring that community members are not harmed and feel invited into spiritual growth. We recommend prioritizing dedicated resources here.
- What is a 'good enough' starting point for your organization and your context? Allocate just enough resources and evolve your resourcing to match shifting needs, as you're able.

	Model A: Staff Shared Leadership Group + Consultant	Model B: 1 FTE Coordinator + Co-creation with Staff	Model C: 2 FTE + Dedicated Dept.
What it looks like	Internal committee with part-time external practitioner.	One staff coordinator curates programming; staff partners and outside facilitators support.	Formal department with dedicated staff, budget, and accountability for the practice.
Total operating costs <i>(as a percentage of Fetzer's total org budget)</i>	<0.1%	~0.6%	~2.7%
Where the money goes	Light consulting, basic supplies, small meeting costs Does not include staff committee time	Honoraria, books and resources, modest travel for guests Salaries, benefits, professional development, and travel for dedicated staff Does not include staff committee time	Honoraria, contracted partners, curated resources, guest travel, venues Salaries, benefits, professional development, and travel for dedicated staff Increased allocation of senior leadership time Professional memberships Evaluation and learning Does not include staff committee time
Right for organizations that ...	Are curious and want to start small	Have committed and are ready for an internal champion	Are ready to institutionalize the practice with dedicated leadership



Model A: Shared Staff Leadership and Part-Time Consultant

When Fetzer began convening its weekly spiritually-rooted gathering for all staff, it was a full community effort. Staff assumed a range of roles and it was coordinated and facilitated by a committee that included staff leaders and a contemplative educator (who engaged as a part-time consultant).

The cost for this model was less than 0.1% of Fetzer's organizational budget (not including time for staff who were collaboratively guiding the work).

This model could be a helpful entry point for organizations getting started with cultivating sacred-centered community. It offers space for experimentation and cultivated shared community ownership while responsibly stewarding spiritual formation opportunities.

Model B: One FTE Coordinator and Co-creation with Staff

Eventually Fetzer decided it was time to invest in consistent and dedicated coordination for the COFG. The internal coordinator organized and curated programming; outside guests were invited to present at and facilitate sessions; and staff members supported planning, community-building, and provided some session facilitation.

The cost for this model was approximately 0.6% of Fetzer's organizational budget (including the coordinator's salary, but not including time for staff engaged in co-creation).

Model C: Two FTE and Dedicated Department

This is Fetzer's current and most developed model, where the sacred-centered community and its associated staff are part of a dedicated organizational culture department. (For more information see [section on the evolution of the COFG](#).)

The full cost for this model is about 2.7% of Fetzer's budget. The increase in cost over Model B is due to the additional staff person, a larger budget for engagement in the field (e.g., memberships, conference attendance and travel), resources for COFG evaluation and learning, and Fetzer senior leadership engagement.

Importantly, Fetzer did not begin with this fully developed model. The organization evolved into it over many years through experimentation, reflection, leadership support, and growing recognition that individual and communal spiritual formation meaningfully shape the organization's external work and relationships.



Appendix: Building Blocks for Spiritually Grounded Organizational Life

Fetzer's sacred-centered community is made possible by intentional design for individual, small group, and full community engagement; dedicated stewards and resources; and supportive organizational conditions. We outline each of these elements and their underlying 'building blocks' below. Much of this content can be found sprinkled throughout [the core design principles and templates](#). Our intent is to provide, in one place, a comprehensive list of the many enablers for Fetzer's community.





Organizational Conditions: Supportive Leadership, Culture, Structures, Practices and Benefits

Leadership and Culture:

- Aligned and shared guiding purpose and mission that includes dedication to embodying the change they seek.
- Commitment to being a [deliberately developmental](#) organization and community.
- Long-term, consistent allegiance to cultivating sacred-centered community. Willingness to stay with it, confront and hold persistent challenges, experiment and iterate.
- Leadership modeling their own spiritual engagement.
- Cultural permission for staff to prioritize and dedicate time to spiritual growth, without negatively impacting their workload.

Organizational Structures and Practices:

- [Organizational culture department](#) that weaves together efforts across various functional areas, including Human Resources and Bridging & Belonging, to do the work internally that Fetzer seeks to catalyze in the world.
- Intentional hiring processes support prospective employees to understand Fetzer's guiding purpose, mission, organizational culture and expectations for engagement in spiritual development at individual and communal levels.
- Shared meals. Daily offering of lunch and the opportunity to gather with colleagues and guests in the dining room.
- 2 p.m. quiet time. An invitation to take 20 minutes each day for stillness, renewal and care of Spirit.
- Sacred Practice Room. A quiet room in Fetzer's main building where staff can meditate, pray, rest, and engage in movement practices.
- The ritual of starting meetings and convenings with a grounding, reflective practice.



Staff Benefits:

- Time and financial support for individual spiritual development (e.g. participation in retreats, courses, spiritual direction).
- Free opportunity for personal and family retreat at [GilChrist](#), a Fetzer operated retreat center.
- Well-being benefits, such as access to a subsidized healthy lunch at the office, wellness consultations, fitness center, fitness classes, monthly massage/bodywork.
- Access to mental health and trauma resources.
- Flexible time off.
- Paid volunteer time and 2:1 donation matching.

Stewardship and Time for Communal and Individual Spiritual Growth

Dedicated COFG Stewardship:

- Staff who are wholly dedicated to community members' spiritual care and growth, which involves:
 - ▶ Ongoing spiritual care for the community.
 - ▶ Designing and holding the COFG with community member input and creation.
 - ▶ Coordination of holistic spiritual development program.
- Monthly meetings to guide the development of the COFG with Institute leaders who are experts in adult learning and development, as well as spiritual development and formation.
- An advisory group of key stakeholders and leaders at Fetzer who meet twice a year to offer feedback, insight, and connections with developments in the field of spirituality.

The *individual spiritual development benefit* is highly valued by staff, with 80% reporting that these resources significantly help them *deepen their spiritual, social, and emotional development*.



Dedicated COFG Time:

- Every Tuesday from 9 a.m. to noon for full community or individual/small group time.
- An “After-party” following the Tuesday morning session, which functions as an optional extension over lunch for community members to continue the dialogue, connect with session facilitators, and transition to the rest of their workday.

Full Community: Full Community Sessions Every Other Week that are Invitational, Inclusive, Co-created, Consistent, Developmental and Adaptive

Invitational

- While holding Tuesday mornings for spiritual exploration is required, staff have the freedom to choose how to engage. They can always opt out if the practice or nature of engagement does not feel right for them.

Inclusive

- Full community sessions are designed with an expansive understanding of spirituality and related journeys. Participants are invited to explore faith and spirituality in the everyday through practices that incorporate art, music, nature, and play. They are also exposed to a wide range of faith traditions, including those not commonly practiced by staff.
 - ▶ Participants are invited to use the spiritual, religious, or moral language most authentic to them and to speak from lived experience rather than abstraction or debate.
 - ▶ Session facilitators use expansive and inclusive language and practices in order to provide a wide range of entry points for inviting in Fetzer’s diverse community members.
- Session facilitators and speakers come from a wide range of spiritual traditions, cultures, identities, disciplines, ages, and teaching styles. Diversity of perspective deepens the community’s capacity for belonging and spiritual imagination.

Dedicated time ensures that *work across the organization is not a distraction* and *creates a blessing of time* that staff might otherwise fill with emails or vendor calls.

— Fetzer Staff



Co-Created

- Gatherings are guided and designed collaboratively, using advisory bodies, session-specific planning communities, and ad hoc engagement.
- Community members are regularly invited to share their experiences and practices.

Consistent, Values-Aligned Container

- Grounding in Fetzer's core values: love, trust, authenticity and belonging.
- Consistent design of full community time (opening practice, sharing/presentation/experience, connection and discussion in small groups, closing practice).

Developmental

- Ongoing attention to the overarching learning potential, with sessions that build on each other and weave in priority topics.
- Intentional capacity-building related to organizational mission and values, such as cultivating authentic relationship with the Sacred and engaging in contemplative practices.
- Attention to scaffolding for productive communal dialogue, including fostering capabilities like the growing comfort with "both/and" realities and the ability to engage across differences.
- Offering a range of ways to interact with presented material, emphasizing experiential learning.

Reflective and Adaptive

- Formal and informal practices for seeking and incorporating feedback, including surveys after full community sessions and ad hoc check-ins with community members throughout the week.
- Annual review process that informs priorities and planning for the coming year.

Opportunities to contribute to the full community
COFG are most significant for me because I tend to *learn and connect best through offering* — sharing a practice, serving on a panel, or helping plan a session.

— Fetzer Staff



Small Groups: Self-organized and Resourced Small Groups During Individual/Small Group Exploration that Make Space for Deep Connection and Mutual Support

Self-Organized

- Community members are free to identify areas of shared interest for spiritual deepening. Past examples include liturgical dance, prayer, spiritual parenting, and connecting to pursue other shared interests. Members of these small groups determine the structure and duration of their gatherings.

Resourced:

- Financial resources are available for session facilitators and to support small group spiritual explorations.

Deep Connection and Mutual Support

- Small groups typically open up possibilities for members to connect deeply and support one another in their respective social, emotional, and spiritual development.

The structure, *grounding in core values*, and *integrating contemplative practices* create a consistency that is helpful in knowing what to expect.

— Fetzer Staff



Individual: Space and Resources to Explore One's Own Spiritual Path in the Way that Best Meets Individual Needs During Individual/Small Group Time

Self-Directed

- Staff have the freedom (as well as access to guidance) to shape how they want to explore their faith and spirituality and pursue related activities at their own discretion during self-directed COFG time.

Resourced

- In addition to the above-mentioned individual spiritual development benefits, staff are invited to request resources or materials such as books, art supplies, altar items, contemplative tools, or virtual spiritual direction for use during COFG time. These resources are intended to honor the many ways individuals engage in spiritual and faith development across diverse traditions, expressions, and stages of life.
- Ability to commit time to individual spiritual exploration.

The resources have particularly *helped me explore what works and resonates with me*. Without the fear of financial drain or “mistake,” *I can try something without the pressure of perfection* or even liking it, which has deepened my practice significantly.

— Fetzner Staff



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