



Executive Summary

The Fetzer Institute's Community of Freedom Gathering: A Case Study on Cultivating Sacred-Centered Community

Every Tuesday morning Fetzer Institute staff engage in individual and communal spiritual discovery so they can be the change they aspire to spark in the world. The full staff gathers in sacred community, together exploring world religions, contemplative practices and capacities for fostering a spiritually grounded life and organizational culture. They gather in small groups with shared spiritual formation interests, ranging from parenting to prayer. They also hold space for individuals to learn, practice and grow in ways that are best suited for them and their particular religious and spiritual paths. Fetzer calls this dedicated space for cultivating sacred-centered community and culture their Community of Freedom Gathering (COFG).

The COFG models Fetzer'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 spiritually grounded, interconnected and flourishing world. It does so by supporting and convening sacred-centered social change organizations and by living the change it wants to see in the world. Fetzer's Community of Freedom Gathering — 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.

The COFG is part of a suite of activities and functions — such as well-being benefits, individual spiritual development resources and organizational practices for centering the Sacred and growing a sense of belonging — that reinforce and help fuel Fetzer’s spiritually grounded community and work in the world. 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.”

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.

IMPACT

In the fall and winter of 2025-26, a participatory evaluation revealed that 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 individual staff members, across the organization and into the world.

- **INDIVIDUAL GROWTH:** Fetzer’s commitment to cultivating sacred-centered community and culture 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. Moreover, 67% reported that the COFG led them to engage in, deepen or expand sacred-centered practices like meditation, mindfulness, or prayer.
- **ORGANIZATIONAL SHIFTS:** The Fetzer Institute’s dedication to individual and communal spiritual growth is creating a more connected and soul-centered workplace, which 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. 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. As 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.” Furthermore, the COFG is clearly boosting employee engagement and morale, and, by extension, helping to cultivate a healthy and loving organizational culture. 90% feel that spiritual formation and development has a positive impact on their overall sense of fulfillment and engagement at work.

- **SOCIETAL RIPPLE EFFECTS:** This research focused on how Fetzer’s sacred-centered community and culture are making a difference for individuals and for the organization. However, early indicators of societal effects can already 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 and practices a deeply relational and trust-based approach to its grantmaking. In addition,, 66% of staff believe that the COFG is helping them contribute to societal transformation, influencing how they interact with their families and broader communities.

TENSIONS

While staff experiences of the COFG are overwhelmingly positive, there are also ongoing challenges to be expected of this work. The act of weaving inner work and organizational life together can cause friction. Fetzer staff highlight a number of such 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. Important tensions the Institute has had to navigate as it cultivates sacred-centered community and culture in the workplace include:

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

Some of these tensions have been effectively addressed within the Institute’s unique context and 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.

CORE DESIGN PRINCIPLES

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 culture:

- **Demonstrate clear commitment to spiritual growth and community at the top.** 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 commitment to cultivating sacred-centered community with organizational values and purpose.** Through the COFG, all Fetzer staff 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.
- **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.
- **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.).
- **Be invitational.** While engagement in Fetzer's sacred-centered community is expected, staff are not forced to participate in specific practices or experiences.
- **Listen, learn, and adapt in collaboration with the community.** Fetzer regularly collects feedback, identifies emerging needs, and adapts COFG practices — all in close collaboration with community members — in support of the community's ongoing development.



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.”

We invite you to learn more about Fetzer’s journey to foster sacred-centered community and culture as chronicled in our [case study](#). We also offer detailed information on how we design, guide, and scaffold our work for those embarking on similar efforts in their own context.