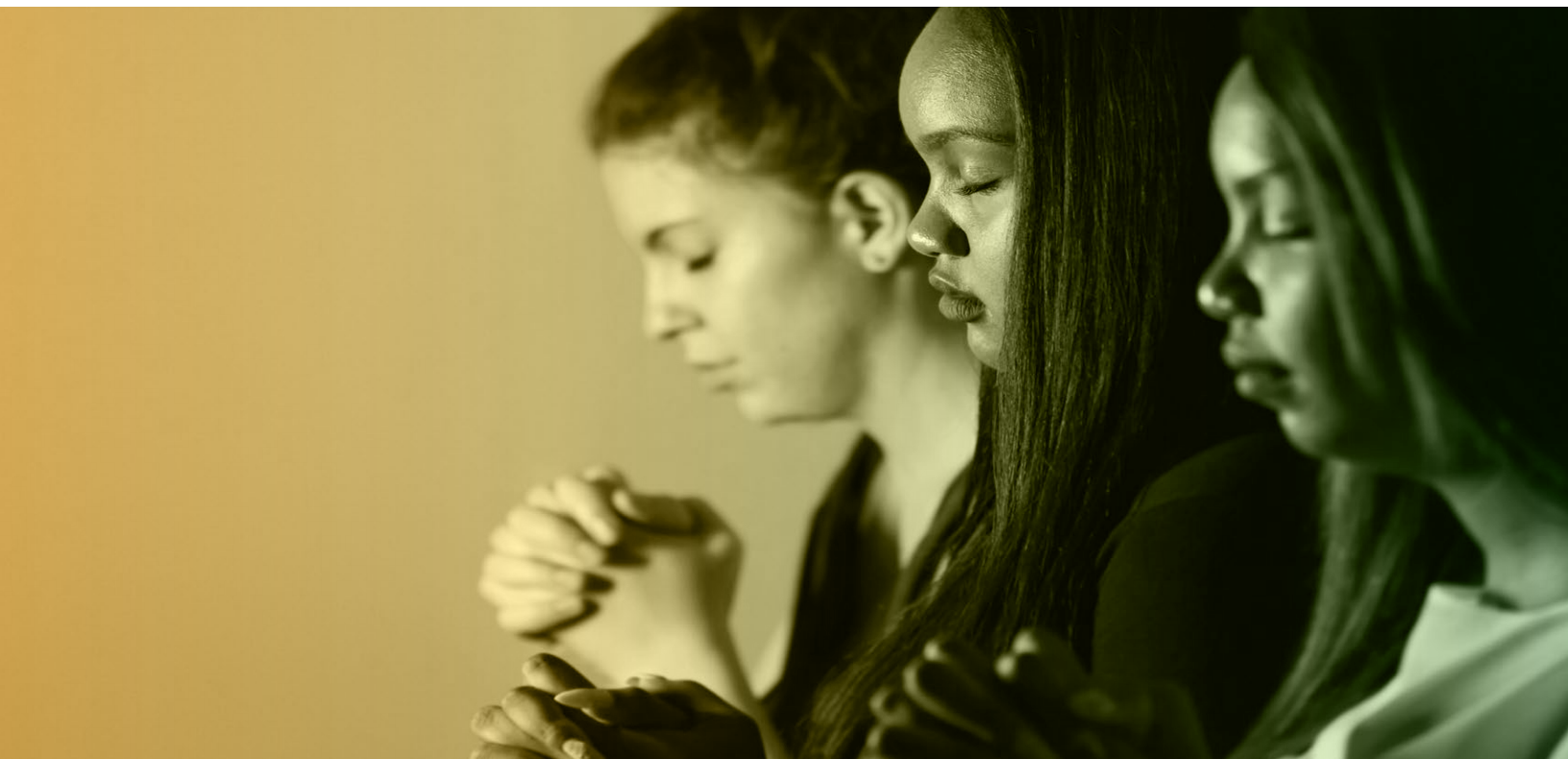


# Survivor Perspectives on Faith Practices

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A National Study of Sex Trafficking Survivors'  
Experiences in Faith-Based Shelters



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## Executive Summary

Roughly 66% of the anti-trafficking shelter landscape are agencies that identify as Christian, not only in their leadership and staffing, but also in how they administer care to survivors. In our increasingly irreligious society, some may wonder what it means to provide care from a Christian worldview or assume that this expression of care must be coercive or a guise for religious indoctrination.

The Institute for Shelter Care is committed to ensuring that survivors have access to qualified, compassionate care, in a way that is not injurious to those who have already suffered so much. With this study we sought to hear from survivors themselves, about their experiences in faith-based shelters, relative to the religious practices offered therein. This study yielded an overwhelming positive regard for agencies who intentionally offer spiritual care and faith practices as part of their overall programming.

An invitation to the survey was sent to the 153 faith-based trafficking shelters in the Institute's database. These shelters were asked to share the invitation with their current or former residents. We received 158 responses from survivors aged 15 to 69 with an average age of 20-49 and average tenure of 12.06 months.

### Some of the key findings from the study are:

- 81% of this survivor population grew up with some exposure to faith/religion, but “falling away” (29.75%) or a bad experience with religious people (22.78%) were reasons that they had left the faith
- Many of these survivors chose to apply for a faith-based program because they either wanted to reconnect with their faith (47%) or wanted to become a person of faith (28%)
- 91% of these survivors reported that they never felt pressured to engage in a faith practice
- Only deliverance from demonic oppression was reported over 10% as being an uncomfortable/distressing practice (18 individuals or 11%)
- 90% of agencies offer reasonable accommodations or alternatives from any faith practice in which the survivor chooses not to participate
- 92% of survivors who had been in a program 1 year or more reported feeling accepted, not feeling judged, as a positive contribution to their healing
- A word analysis of write-in comments from 48 individuals reported that the hardest part of being in a faith-based program was learning how to walk out the journey of the Christian faith
- 84% of these survivors now identify as Christian

These data suggest that the majority of faith-based trafficking shelters (90%) are compliant in offering reasonable accommodations or alternatives to religious practices, while also being true to their faith identity. Overwhelmingly, this sample of survivors report positive experiences with various faith practices and a direct correlation of those practices to positive personal outcomes. The shelter landscape should continue to study how these practices, and others, prove to be vital to survivors' recovery and restoration.

NOTE: Throughout this report, survivor write-in comments will be presented as submitted including any grammatical or typographical errors. Only identifying information has been omitted.

#### IN THEIR VOICES

*“...the hardest part about being in a faith-based shelter program is the healing.”*



## Premise

According to the Institute for Shelter Care’s landscape of shelters for trafficking survivors in the U.S. at the time of this study, there are 231 residential agencies, of which 66% identify as faith-based or religious (specifically, Christian). It is not surprising to have the majority of these nonprofits be faith-based as, after government, religious organizations are the most prominent providers of social services in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Christians also have played a prominent role in history for the abolition of slavery, against the prostitution of women, and against the exploitation of children. Christians have also been at the forefront with care for those who are marginalized and oppressed. Even in light of its impact on society, people are curious—if not skeptical—about the influence religion has on the delivery of those services. What Christians are often accused of is “having an agenda” or “seeking converts.”

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**At the time of this study, there are 231 residential agencies, of which 66% identify as Christian.**

### Changing Religious Landscape

Part of that skepticism may be fueled by an overall decline in religious affiliation in the United States. In 1990, roughly 90% of adults in the U.S. identified as Christian. However, in 2022, Pew Research found that only 65% of adults in the U.S. identify as Christian.<sup>2</sup> A recent Barna study revealed that 25% of US Adults in the Gen Z (1997-2012) generation identify as “No Faith” and Millennials (1981-1996) at 15% “No Faith.”<sup>3</sup> In the book *The Great De-Churching*, authors Jim Davis and Michael Graham found that more adults “don’t attend church than attend church.”<sup>4</sup> Without question, the U.S. is witnessing a decline in faith conviction and that has significant bearing on how faith-based shelters understand the next generation of individuals who may cross the thresholds of the shelter home, and how the general public understands what it means to deliver services from a Christian perspective.

Individual experiences can also contribute to a skepticism about institutions of faith and their practices. In the Ahrens, et al study, sexual assault survivors indicated low levels of support from their church and clergy who were insufficiently trained to respond to sexual assault, which may have led to subsequent struggles with religion for some of these women.<sup>5</sup> In a 2022 Barna study, they found that among three population groups, the “hypocrisy of religious people” caused them to doubt the tenets of Christianity: among Christians (22%), among people of other faiths (26%) and among people of no faith (42%).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cnaan, R.A. & An. S. (2018). Even priceless has to have a number. Congregational halo effect. *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion*. 15(1), 64-81

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center (2022). How U.S. Religious Composition Has Changed in Recent Decades, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/>

<sup>3</sup> Barna Research. (2022) *Five Insights: Faith trends among non-Christians today*

<sup>4</sup> Jim Davis and Michael Graham (2023): *The Great De-Churching*

<sup>5</sup> Ahrens, C., Abeling, S., Ahmad, S., Himan, J., (2010). Spirituality and well-being: The relationship between religious coping and recovery from sexual assault. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 25 (7). p.1257

<sup>6</sup> Barna Research. (2022). Embodied faith: following Jesus is more than talk. p.4

## Spirituality and Trauma Care

Despite this decline in Christian beliefs in the general population of the United States, it has been noted through various studies that religious beliefs can be an aid to coping with tragedies, and can lead to positive mental health outcomes. It has been found that “survivors’ spiritual and/or religious resources are considered one of the significant sources of meaning, hope, strength, healing, and connection.”<sup>7</sup> Specifically for trafficking victims, there is emerging research to suggest the importance of faith among critical interventions.

For the survivors of sex trafficking, the journey from trauma to a state of well-being and eventual re-entry can be long and fraught with difficulties. The trauma inflicted on the survivor can break down basic humanity. “Through terror, the perpetrator seeks to destroy the victims’ sense of autonomy. Traffickers often force victims of trafficking to violate their basic moral values and betray their connection to other human beings.”<sup>8</sup> The experiences that a victim goes through engender a “plethora of health challenges among survivors.”<sup>9</sup> Compounding those challenges can be compromises to a victim’s spirituality.

“Several studies have found that about 10 to 65% of religiously oriented people experience discontent (including anger toward God, fear and anxiety, or a sense of abandonment) or a weakening of spiritual beliefs in the wake of trauma.”<sup>10</sup> Pressley and Spinazzola reviewed several studies that found “that complex trauma significantly disrupts the spiritual well-being of individuals, in a way that is distinct from acute/situational trauma.”<sup>11</sup> We must recognize that “spirituality forms an important phenomenological value system by which clients view themselves and their world that ignoring this value system may be detrimental to building proper therapeutic rapport.”<sup>12</sup> If we are to be truly trauma-informed in our responses to victims, we must include all forms of wounding that may have occurred, including those which are keenly spiritual in nature.

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<sup>7</sup> Thanh Tu Nguyen, Christian R. Bellehumeur, and Judith Malette (2014). *Women Survivors of Sex Trafficking: A Trauma and Recovery Model Integrating Spirituality, Counseling and Spirituality*

<sup>8</sup> Farah Deventer-Noordeloos and Srdjan Sremac (2018): The Lived Religion of Polish Sex-Trafficked Survivors: A Targeted Investigation for Practical Theological Analysis, *Theological Reflection*

<sup>9</sup> Hodge, D. (2020). How Do Trafficking Survivors Cope? Identifying the general and spiritual coping strategies of men trafficked into the United States. *Journal of Social Science Research*

<sup>10</sup> Ahrens, C., Abeling, S., Ahmad, S., Himan, J., (2010). Spirituality and well-being: The relationship between religious coping and recovery from sexual assault. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 25 (7). p.1256

<sup>11</sup> Pressley, J., Spinazzola, J. (2015). Beyond survival: Application of a complex trauma treatment model in the Christian context. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*. 43(1) p.8

<sup>12</sup> Harris, K, Howell, D. and Spurgeon, D. (2018). Faith concepts in psychology: three 30-year definitional content analysis. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 10(1) p. 5

## Value of Faith Practices

Research continues to demonstrate that religiosity and faith practices are beneficial to human flourishing. Religious beliefs can be an aid to coping with tragedies and can lead to positive mental health outcomes. “Over 4,000 quantitative studies have examined the relationship between religion and spirituality and a wide array of health outcomes. In the realm of mental health, religious participation is associated with lower levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness and higher levels of happiness, hope, and meaning in life.”<sup>13</sup>

Warria and Chikadzi state: “Without taking away or minimizing traumatic experiences resulting from trafficking, inclusion of spirituality in post-trauma processes can promote growth and understanding as well as provide victims with alternatives for positive reconstruction of the world and ways of coping.”<sup>14</sup> In one study, it was found that 60% of women who survived sex trafficking “reported becoming more spiritual. Spirituality was found to be related to increased well-being over time and [was] a core aspect of the healing process.”<sup>15</sup> Hodge reported that “in general, the results indicate that spirituality is positively associated with health and wellness.”<sup>16</sup> It has been found that “spirituality may improve post-trauma outcomes through: (1) reduction of behavioral risks through healthy religious lifestyles (e.g., less drinking or smoking), (2) expanded social support through involvement in spiritual communities, (3) enhancement of coping skills and helpful ways of understanding trauma that result in meaning-making, and (4) physiological mechanisms such as activation of the relaxation response through prayer or meditation.”<sup>17</sup> In a study of male survivors of human trafficking, 76% of survivors stated that religious beliefs and practices assisted them with coping with the trauma of being trafficked.<sup>18</sup> Of those men surveyed, practices such as Bible study, prayer, and listening to Christian music were cited as helping them to overcome the stigma related to trafficking. These studies lend credence to the assertion that religious beliefs can be assistive to the process of recovery from victimization in trafficking.

The Institute for Shelter Care embarked on this study to explore the lived experiences of those in shelter care and glean from those who are the least biased and the most invested: the survivors. If we in the Christian care community are doing harm, we need to hear it and have the humility to make corrections. If what we believe to be true—that attending to the wounds of the spirit—is as vital (if not moreso) than the wounds of the mind and body, then those efforts need to be encouraged. We turn to the survivors themselves to tell us.

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<sup>13</sup> Hodge, D. (2020). Religious congregations: An important vehicle for alleviating human suffering and fostering wellness. *Journal of Religions & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*. p.10

<sup>14</sup> Warria, A. and Chikadzi, V. (2019). Guidelines for Social Work Spiritual Counselling in Human Trafficking Cases, *Journal of Social Development in Africa*. p.48

<sup>15</sup> Thanh Tu Ngyuen, Christian R. Bellehumeur, and Judith Malette (2014). *Women Survivors of Sex Trafficking: A Trauma and Recovery Model Integrating Spirituality*

<sup>16</sup> Hodge, D. (2020). Religious congregations: An important vehicle for alleviating human suffering and fostering wellness. *Journal of Religions & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*. p.10

<sup>17</sup> National Center for PTSD (2023): Spirituality and Trauma: Professionals Working Together

<sup>18</sup> Hodge, D. (2020). Religious congregations: An important vehicle for alleviating human suffering and fostering wellness. *Journal of Religions & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*. p.10





# Methodology

## Research Design

A 17-question survey instrument was drafted by the Institute for Shelter Care based on questions about shelter practices that have been raised. The draft was shared with a group of shelter leaders to ensure that the questions were appropriate and accurately reflected the services provided. The language of the survey was also reviewed by a subset of trafficking survivors to ensure that each question was framed in an accessible and trauma-informed manner. Once finalized, the instrument was put into an online survey tool.

There are presently 231 shelters included in the Institute for Shelter Care’s nationwide shelter database.<sup>19</sup> These represent the residential agencies that are (1) open and actively serving survivors, and (2) those who define their service population and programming to be specific to the sexually exploited. Of that population of shelters, 153 (or 66% of the landscape) identify as either religious or faith based. According to the Institute’s database, all of the religious/faith-based programs identify with Christianity as their faith affiliation.

For this survey, the Institute sought to obtain feedback from two groups of individuals: survivors who are currently residing in a faith-based trafficking shelter program and those who had experienced placement in a faith-based trafficking shelter at some time in their recovery. The survey took, on average, 14 minutes to complete. To appreciate respondents for their time and contribution, the Institute received a grant to provide a \$25 gift certificate to each valid response. TruCentive was used to facilitate the respondent’s selection of a preferred electronic gift card.

## Anonymity

Considerable attention was paid to ensuring the anonymity of survivors, so that we could be confident the responses were willful, authentic, and not corrupted by a relational affiliation. The following measures were taken.

- Survey respondents were instructed not to provide personal identifying information, agency name or location, or dates of tenure in the shelter. In the open comments field, three respondents voluntarily referenced an agency name, and those references were omitted from the final dataset.
- The invitation to participate was sent to the executive director and (if known) the program director for each agency in the Institute’s database. Explicit instructions were provided to ensure that the Institute would not be privy to who chose to participate. Staff were also instructed not to read or interpret the questions for survivors, but to let the instrument stand on its own.
- Shelter staff were encouraged to provide a means by which the survivor could engage with the survey independently and privately. A number of shelters reported back that they launched the survey on a tablet device and “passed it around” to circulate the opportunity within the shelter home.

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**153**

Faith-based shelters

**17**

Question Survey

**158**

Survivor Responses

**14**

Minutes Completion Time

**\$25**

Remuneration

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<sup>19</sup> <https://instituteforsheltercare.org/shelter-map/>

- Upon completion of the survey, survivor respondents were instructed to provide a staff email to whom the gift card would be sent. Based on this protocol, the Institute only knows how many gift cards were issued to each agency.
- For survivors who had been in a shelter prior, they were given the option to provide any email (a friend, relative, or other agency) in order to maintain anonymity and still receive the gift card.
- Finally, the data file provided to the analyst was stripped of IP address and gift card recipient emails to ensure anonymity.

Responses were collected over the course of a two-month survey period (August – September 2023) and 159 responses were received. One response was omitted based on being insufficiently complete, for a total of 158 qualified responses. The survey results were downloaded into Excel where the necessary omissions of disclosures, IP address and emails were conducted. It is from this “clean” file that the data was analyzed for reporting.

# Respondents

## Demographics

Of the survivors who responded to the survey, their disclosed age ranges were as follows.

<b>1</b> (1%) 15 years old or younger	<b>43</b> (27%) 40 – 49 years old
<b>6</b> (4%) 16 – 19 years old	<b>10</b> (6%) 50 – 59 years old
<b>39</b> (25%) 20 – 29 years old	<b>4</b> (3%) 60 or older
<b>55</b> (35%) 30 – 39 years old	

Exact respondent age was not captured; respondents were only asked to provide response within a banded age group. Despite the lack of specificity, it is still easy to grasp that the vast majority of the survey respondents (89.5%) fell within an age range of 20 – 49 years, with the majority falling in the Millennial (age 27-42) generation.

It is worth noting that this study did not explore the intersection of racial characteristics with spirituality, yet that is an additional consideration, as “in recent years, psychologists have come to view religion and spirituality as a multicultural competency.”<sup>20</sup> As several studies have born out, “religion is especially important to African Americans in terms of shaping their social identity”<sup>21</sup> and more prevalent among certain cultural groups. Likewise, this study did not collect data on the sex of the respondents, although given that the victim population for sex trafficking continues to prove in the 94-98 percentile as female, it would be a fair assumption to conclude that the majority of these respondents were female. Both race/ethnicity and sex are important aspects of being that warrant further study.

## Length of Stay

Tenure at Current or Former Shelter Program	# of Respondents	% of Respondents
0-6 months	<b>54</b>	<b>34.2%</b>
7-11 months	32	20.3%
12-18 months	38	24.1%
19-24 months	22	13.9%
25-36 months	11	7.0%
36+ months	1	0.6%

Based on using separate links to the survey for current versus prior residents, this survey realized 125 responses (79%) from current residents and 33 responses (21%) from former residents. All respondents were asked to provide their length of stay (current or former) by months and/or years. To arrive at a basis for common comparison, an imputed value in months of stay was created. The results were then combined into banded lengths of time to facilitate comparison.

<sup>20</sup> Harris, K, Howell, D. and Spurgeon, D. (2018). Faith concepts in psychology: three 30-year definitional content analysis. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 10(1) p. 1

<sup>21</sup> Hodge, D. (2020). Religious congregations: An important vehicle for alleviating human suffering and fostering wellness. *Journal of Religions & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*. p.9

In this survey, the average length of stay in a shelter was 12.06 months, but the largest band of responses was between 0-6 months (34.2%). It is worth noting that we did not ask what type of shelter program they were in/had been in. Some program types (Emergency-Stabilization) can be only a few days or month in program duration, whereas Restorative programs can be 12-24 months and Transitional programs even longer. Respondents with shorter tenures may have been in Emergency-Stabilization programs only. The shortest tenure reported was only 2 days. Nine individuals reported a tenure of only 1 month, and 7 respondents reported a tenure of 3 years or more. This wide range of tenures provides us with a helpful diversity of perspectives. Where appropriate, this report will subset responses based on tenure.

Current Religious Affiliation

Respondents were asked to identify their current religious affiliation, if any, based on a variety of choices. Results are presented below in descending order of frequency. It is worth noting that Atheist, Islamic, Jewish, Muslim, and New Age were also offered as options and received zero responses. From this we see a high percentage (84%) of respondents who themselves identify as Christian. This survey did not ask when that religious affiliation was first claimed, but later findings suggest a strong correlation to the survivors’ shelter experiences.

With which of the following religious beliefs do you currently identify?	Responses	Percentage
Christian: Protestant (Ex: Baptist, Methodist, AME, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Disciples of Christ, Nondenominational, etc.)	133	84.18%
Christian: Catholic	10	6.33%
Other (please specify)	6	3.80%
None of the above	5	3.16%
Agnostic (I don’t identify with any religion)	4	2.53%

Six individuals identified as “Other” with the following responses: *Pursuing spiritual journey; Not sure; Messianic Jew; Not really anything; Christian, but no specific denomination; and Orthodox Christian.*

Faith History

As noted earlier, the U.S. has seen a decline in religiosity over the past two generations and – depending on the age or generation in which the survivor was raised – respondents may be coming from very different backgrounds in religious/faith practices. We entered into this study with the hypothesis that if a survivor had a strong faith background, that individual might not perceive faith practices as foreign, and likewise, if the survivor’s faith background was “none,” we might anticipate more resistance to those practices. Therefore, we sought to obtain a baseline understanding of the respondents’ faith histories prior to program participation. In order to do this, the question was asked, “Which of the following statements best describes what your faith experience has been?” Respondents could select multiple options.

80%  
of this sample of  
survivors had some basis  
of faith in their histories.

Which of the following statements best describes what your faith experience has been?	Overall Responses	Overall Percentage	Under age 30 (N=46)
My family regularly attended church when I was young, but I fell away from the faith.	47	<b>29.75%</b>	<b>20%</b>
My parent(s) believed in God, but we didn't have regular faith practices.	36	<b>22.78%</b>	<b>35%</b>
I had a bad experience with religious people, and that turned me away from faith.	36	<b>22.78%</b>	13%
My family regularly attended church when I was young, and I continued to practice my faith.	30	18.99%	<b>26%</b>
My grandparents are/were people of faith, and I was influenced by them.	29	18.35%	11%
I didn't have any exposure to faith growing up.	24	15.19%	17%
Other	17	10.76%	

On this question, respondents were able to choose all of the responses that applied to their past religious experiences. As a result, 219 total responses were collected from the 158 respondents; therefore, we do not have a single characterization of their histories from which to compare subsequent questions. The following chart suggests the patterns after all 219 were coded.

Coded Faith Experience	Number	Percentage
Some history with faith but a bad experience caused a change in faith	36	22.78%
A history with faith practices when young, but deceased over time	34	21.52%
A family that upheld religious beliefs, but no consistent religious practice	33	20.89%
A history with faith practices when young and continued to practice faith	23	14.56%
No exposure to faith growing up	20	12.66%
Other	12	7.59%

There were some history patterns that emerged through coding. Most notably, roughly 80% of this sample of survivors had some basis of faith in their histories, either through family members or personal practice. Recall that a majority of these respondents fell in the Millennial generation and the Barna report suggested about 15% of Millennials identify as No Faith. In other words, Barna's findings suggest 15% as No Faith and 85% as declaring some faith affiliation, whereas this study found 20% and 80% respectively.

## Choosing Shelter Placement

Some might wonder if Christian shelters use faith conviction as a discriminating condition for accepting survivors into their programs. According to the Institute's 2022 study, *Referral and Intakes Report*, none of the participating shelters (N=42) indicated that there was a religiously based reason that they would decline (or accept) a referral. Fifteen percent of responses indicated that they might decline a referral if the individual had been a party to ritualized abuse (which can, but does not necessarily, have religious overtones).<sup>22</sup>

Knowing that shelters are generally not discriminating based on faith conviction, we wanted to ascertain whether faith expression would be viewed by the survivor as a favorable or unfavorable attribute of the program, and whether survivors felt compelled to accept a faith-based program for any other reason. Respondents could select multiple options.

<sup>22</sup> Institute for Shelter Care. (2022). *Referral and Intakes Report*.

What made you choose to participate in a faith-based shelter program?	Responses	Percentage
I wanted to reconnect with my faith.	74	<b>46.84%</b>
I wanted to become a person of faith.	45	28.48%
This program was chosen for me by someone else.	42	26.58%
I heard that faith-based programs were better.	39	24.68%
This was the only program that accepted my application.	21	13.29%
Other (please specify)	19	12.03%
This was the only program available.	14	8.86%
I didn't know the program was faith-based when I entered.	8	5.06%

These respondents indicated that they *chose* to enter a faith-based shelter based on a personal aspirational goal, either “reconnecting with my faith” (46.84%) or desiring “to become a person of faith” (28.48%). This is important as one of the key tenets of victim-centered care is ensuring that the individual can exercise self-determination and pursue personal goals. In these responses, we find that integrating faith into (or back into) one’s life was a goal among 75.32% of survivors.

Here are some of the write-in comments provided for the “Other” option. Note that most of these comments echo the desire to have some form of faith expression in one’s life.

- *I knew I needed more healing and I thought maybe it was time to reconnect with my faith as well*
- *God convicted me that I needed a community of like minded (spiritually) in order to get well.*
- *It's what I knew was right for me because though I had fallen, my love for God was still true.*
- *I was aware that it was a faith based program however, I had no feelings about it at the time. I found my reconnection with my faith while I was there.*
- *Nothing else had worked. I had gone through 7 different programs that were not faith-based and nothing helped in finding freedom from addiction and a myriad of different things that perpetuated this addiction.*
- *I prayed that God would answer me and close all doors need be and open and this particular one came available.*
- *I was in jail and i was at rock bottom and ready for a new life with Jesus*
- *I had wasted so much time finding what I was in search of that I needed a new approach and at my level of broken I finally surrendered that MAYBE GOD was the missing piece*
- *This is helped me feel more comfortable applying and coming in, knowing that it is faith based. When being referred, I was told the place was directed by Christians who are good people.*
- *wanted to try something different*
- *God is the only reason I want to live*
- *I know they work.*
- *I found out though outside sources about the program and then upon interview and arrival I learned it was faith based and still decided to proceed with the process!*

**Integrating faith into  
(or back into) one’s life  
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survivors.**

IN THEIR VOICES

*“I knew I needed more healing and I thought maybe it was time to reconnect with my faith as well”*

IN THEIR VOICES

*“God is the only reason I want to live”*

Nearly half (48.73%) reported less of a sense of personal agency if the program was chosen by someone else, if the program was the only one that accepted their application, or if it was the only program available. This should encourage the landscape of shelter care providers to do a better job of making referrers aware of their services so that a wider range of options can be presented to survivors, encouraging choice and ownership.

## Impression of Christians Before

Mahatma Gandhi is often quoted as saying, “I like your Christ; I just don’t like your Christians.” While there is no evidence Gandhi actually made that statement,<sup>23</sup> we all perhaps know people who ascribe to a particular religion who are not the best examples of those convictions. In this study we wanted to understand the impression that survivors held towards Christians, not only prior to entering a faith-based program (considering how that impression might influence their decision to accept a faith-based program), but also today.

Roughly one-quarter of respondents indicated they had previously had a negative experience with people of faith, therefore, we expected their prior impressions of Christians to lean negative. Upon analysis, responses fell into one of four categories: negative, neutral, conflicted-curious, or positive. Below is a tally of the responses that aligned with each type of impression and a sample of their write-in comments.

### Negative Responses (N=46)

- *They crazy judgmental. They weird and all good looking on the outside an all.*
- *they were hypocrites, viewed themselves as better than, judgmental, scared of me and my presentation, wanted nothing to do with sinners, blamed me, good at applying guilt, condemning, demeaning, rejecting, all for show or keeping up appearances, and so on*
- *That they judge you and that they stare at you when you go to church*
- *I thought they were really boring and judgmental, and maybe a little nuts.*
- *i was abused religously in my past so i was scared of them*
- *They were perfect and if I wasn’t perfect I was going to hell*
- *They didn’t accept people coming out of the back ground I came from*
- *That they were fakes, but since being here I’ve actually seen the love of God poured out on me by the staff and volunteers and its been amazing!*

#### IN THEIR VOICES

*“I thought they were really boring and judgmental, and maybe a little nuts.”*

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/did-gandhi-say-this-about-christians/>

### Neutral Responses (37)

- *They just didn't even cross my mind. The darkness barricaded all of me.*
- *I had mixed feelings because I knew that there were some good Christians but I knew too many who pretended to be Christian's in front of people but were evil behind closed doors.*
- *Just like all people, some are good and some are not the best. I'm lucky or blessed to be surrounded by the good ones.*
- *I was raised in the Faith, however, I saw it as "work". I had some negative experiences in a church as a young Christian. But really what is boiled down to was that I did not understand that it was about a relationship with the Creator of my being.*

### Conflicted-Curious Responses (N=17)

- *Because of the religious based trauma i've had in my childhood & into adulthood I was very fearful of Christians and their beliefs. I was taught to only love, pray & listen to my "father" (figure). I took a huge leap of faith when choosing to face those fears and allow myself to learn of God, his love for me and all those that follow Him and his Word*
- *I wasn't really sure but it was definitely attractive to me*
- *I didn't know what a Christian was*
- *I admired them but thought I wasn't good enough*
- *I had mixed feelings. I grew up in a lot of spiritual abuse, but I also love the Lord*
- *I admired them but thought I wasn't good enough to be one*
- *I was afraid of being in a cult like environment, but that's not the case here where im at. They are very open minded and all that I checked above were voluntary*
- *I envied their unwavering faith and wanted that for myself*
- *They had something I wanted, just didn't fully understand*
- *I wasn't sure how I felt about Christian's, I knew of God and I suppose I thought Christian's were better than me and that I couldn't be one because all I knew is I thought I wasn't good enough*

#### IN THEIR VOICES

*"I wasn't sure how I felt about Christian's, I knew of God and I suppose I thought Christian's were better than me and that I couldn't be one because all I knew is I thought I wasn't good enough"*

### Positive Responses (N=23)

- *I was a Christian before coming here, so I had a good impression of them*
- *I am a christian too. i believe that some christians are hypocritical but some do represent there name well. eveyone has there own spiritual journey*
- *i had good feelings about christians*
- *My impression was I liked how they were*
- *Wanted to be a Christian as well and follow them*
- *I LOVED THEM CAUSE THEY LOVED ME FIRST AND SAW THE ME THAT I WANTED TO BE*
- *They are helpful and kind. Sometimes can be self centered, but overall have pure intentions*
- *I know that true Christians love sinners and spread the gospel of Jesus. They are a family of support in times of struggle and walk alongside one's who are weak in their faith*
- *That they lived a good life*



## Faith Practices

Early in 2023 the Institute for Shelter Care conducted a survey of trafficking shelter programs on the various case management services offered to survivors. The survey garnered 59 responses from (at that time) 235 shelters, or 25% of the landscape. In the domain of Spiritual Services, this sample of shelters offered the following to survivors.<sup>24</sup>

Which of the following SPIRITUAL SERVICES do you provide?	Offered Internally	Offered Externally	Do not offer
Bible Study	74.57%	15.25%	10.17%
Biblical/Pastoral counseling	53.45%	32.76%	13.79%
Community/Small group affiliation	43.11%	46.56%	10.34%
Spiritual director	44.83%	36.20%	18.97%
Spiritual formation	55.15%	27.58%	17.24%
Worship attendance	49.15%	44.06%	6.78%

In this survey, we sought to understand the services and practices that were available to survivors based on their experience. The following table shows the faith practices that survivors reported were in existence during their tenure.

Which of the following faith practices are (or were) a part of your shelter program?	Responses	Percentage
Going to church	148	93.67%
Attending Bible study	141	89.24%
Listening to Christian music	137	86.71%
Morning devotions	133	84.18%
Journaling	122	77.22%
Praying out loud	121	76.58%
Attending Christian sobriety groups (e.g., Celebrate Recovery)	118	74.68%
Praying silently	118	74.68%
Watching Christian movies	109	68.99%
Reading other kinds of religious books	95	60.13%
Getting baptized	90	56.96%
Meeting with a spiritual advisor	78	49.37%
Going to Christian concerts	72	45.57%
Deliverance from demonic oppression	18	11.39%
Other (please specify)	12	7.59%
Confessing to a priest or other clergy	5	3.16%

Of the specific practices that survivors reported, eleven were offered in 50% or more of these shelters. Survivors were also given the opportunity to choose “Other” for a faith practices at their shelter, and while their write-in entries were not religious practices, per se, their comments are worth sharing:

<sup>24</sup> Institute for Shelter Care (2023). *Case Management Practices Services*.

- *Knowing the staff was praying for me*
- *Getting close to people in the program*
- *Christian volunteers who poured into it*

## Uncomfortable/Distressing Practices

In a follow-up question, we asked survivors to reflect on these same faith practices and note any that may have made them feel uncomfortable or provoked feelings of distress.

Do (or did) any of the following faith practices make you uncomfortable or provoke feelings of distress?	Responses	Percentage
<b>None made me feel uncomfortable or distressed</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>65.19%</b>
<b>Deliverance from demonic oppression</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>11.39%</b>
Praying out loud	14	8.86%
Attending Bible study	12	7.59%
Other (please specify)	10	6.33%
Confessing to a priest or other clergy	10	6.33%
Going to church	10	6.33%
Attending Christian sobriety groups (e.g., Celebrate Recovery)	9	5.70%
Praying silently	6	3.80%
Getting baptized	6	3.80%
Morning devotions	5	3.16%
Meeting with a spiritual advisor	5	3.16%
Journaling	4	2.53%
Going to Christian concerts	4	2.53%
Watching Christian movies	3	1.90%
Listening to Christian music	3	1.90%
Reading other kinds of religious books	2	1.27%

The majority of respondents (65.19%) stated that None of the faith practices listed made them feel uncomfortable or distressed. Among those with shorter tenures (6 months or less), over 69% reported that None of the practices made them feel uncomfortable. Of those under the age of 30 (N=47), 59% reported that None of the practices made them feel uncomfortable.

### The Other comments offered were:

- *At first learning to pray outloud or larger crowds like at Church did. The number of activities was also overwhelming to me, I couldn't process that much information as rapidly as I was being exposed to it.*
- *everything is faith based, I thought a faith based program was things included in day to day activities.*
- *I have been praying out loud more and beginning to be more comfortable with it. Also, attending church twice a week is a bit excessive for me right now and feels too forced. I would be more interested in church once a week and bible study in a home environment once a week.*

- *its not necessarily that any of them made me uncomfortable, but I think having them be REQUIRED was triggering*
- *None of the above particularly made me uncomfortable however I know for some it was difficult for them to be required to attend church services and or Bible studies when they weren't quite ready for all of that however over time it opened the door for them to take their step out on faith over time*
- *Not talking to my family!!!!*
- *prophetic prayer*

What should be universal is that faith-based agencies are meeting the letter of the law when it comes to not using government funds for explicitly religious activities<sup>25</sup> and offering reasonable accommodations without undue hardship to the agency<sup>26</sup> for those who choose not to participate in certain activities. Particularly for a traumatized population, it is important that the faith practices are non-coercive or result in punitive action. Based on the few write-in comments, some agencies might take a look at whether they are introducing “too much too soon” for some survivors.

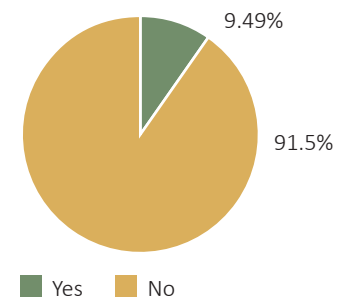
But central to the objective of this study, we wanted to know if survivors were, in any way, being coerced into faith practices, therefore, we asked these survivors this direct question: Have you ever had someone at the shelter pressure you to engage in a religious activity?

The vast majority (91.5%) of respondents stated that they have never had someone at the shelter pressure them into participating in a religious activity. Of those who responded in the affirmative—that they had experienced pressure (9.49%)—the following descriptors were given:

- *Every conversation and activity every day is about faith. I started going to church so that they would lay off me.*
- *There were things taught that I did not agree with and when I expressed such things I was rebuked. Now, I am actually participating in running the program and those things and the approach have since changed dramatically.*
- *Not necessarily pressure - certain activities are a requirement of the programming here. But I knew that before I committed to the programming.*
- *Baptism of the Holy Spirit, but I'm not sorry I did it. I just struggle with alter calls. It's getting better.*
- *Having to participate in Christian-based 'yoga,' but-[believing that] yoga was made for Buddhism and not Christians.*
- *In [shelter name redacted], they forced you to go and you had to leave if you didn't go.*

Perhaps what we need to consider, based on this quote from Warria and Chikadzi, is that “religion [itself] is not coercive, but the interpretations of texts and teachings can be exploited and used to coerce and control.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, they argue that how religion is conveyed and practiced is what can be coercive. As will be observed in later comments, some survivors clarify that being required to adhere to a schedule or program rules is what was felt as uncomfortable, not the faith practices themselves.

Have you ever had someone at the shelter pressure you to engage in a religious activity?



<sup>25</sup> <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-45/subtitle-A/subchapter-A/part-87>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/what-you-should-know-workplace-religious-accommodation>

<sup>27</sup> Warria, A. and Chikadzi, V. (2019). Guidelines for Social Work Spiritual Counselling in Human Trafficking Cases, *Journal of Social Development in Africa*. p.48

Only one practice, deliverance from demonic oppression, received more than a 10% response as provoking discomfort or distress. And yet – as will be noted later in this report – some survivors indicated that deliverance has been beneficial to their recovery and three respondents reported that they wished they had more instruction on deliverance. So, we must honor not only the highly unique impacts of trauma, but also the highly personal nature of the experience of faith.

It is advised that every shelter have a mechanism by which survivors can report any distressing practice and have assurance those reports will be properly handled. A periodic resident survey may be advantageous.

## Shelter Response

What often matters most in situations of distress is how the people around us respond. Therefore, we asked survivors to share their impression of how the shelter would respond in those instances where the resident felt uncomfortable or distressed.

If you felt uncomfortable or distressed by a particular religious activity, how was the shelter likely to respond?	Responses	Percentage
They would offer me an alternative activity	66	47.14%
I could be excused from the activity	60	42.86%
We could stop doing the activity	17	12.14%
I would have to do it anyway	21	15.00%
Other	32	22.86%

The majority of these agencies are providing alternatives, or reasonable accommodations, for activities in which survivors chose not to participate. In the responses noting “I would have to do it anyway,” it is worth mentioning that the survey did not inquire as to which practices resulted in the residents having to comply.

If there are areas where these shelters are failing to provide reasonable accommodation, corrections need to be made. And yet, there can often be other extenuating circumstances beyond the scope of this survey. For example, a number of shelter programs report that because they have limited staff and a policy against leaving residents in the home alone, all residents are required to go on scheduled outings. Residents are not, however, required to participate in the activities of that outing. What is not being compromised here is safety and supervision, but from the survivor’s perspective, this could be interpreted as a compelled activity. We would expect each shelter would explain its protocols and reinforce the survivor’s agency in these situations.

Many of the write-in responses to this question were “N/A” or “I didn’t feel uncomfortable,” but some of the substantive comments suggest that these survivors, even if hesitant, maintained an openness to trying something new.

- *Going to church was mandatory but it was interesting and enjoyable even if you were uncomfortable with the idea of being in the church at first. A non denominational church was chosen and the atmosphere was there was very welcoming. I’m sure it was chosen for those reasons and it was beneficial.*
- *We would talk about it to find out why and find a way to ease into it*
- *I’m worrying about having to give a testimony of my sins*
- *I would still be required to attend/be present but not forced to engage.*
- *Encourage me to give it a chance*

It is reasonable to assume that some residents may find certain practices uncomfortable or distressing initially merely because they are new. The reader will recall that 34.2% of this sample included survivors who had been in their faith-based shelter program six months or less, and 12.6% of survivors with no faith backgrounds. Many may still be acclimating to routines and activities that are foreign to them. And – as will be illuminated in the next section – some of the practices that were reported as initially uncomfortable turned out to be some of the practices that survivors noted as being the most impactful to their healing.

## The Hardest Part

Survivors in restorative care are often working on changing multiple facets of their lives simultaneously. That can be extremely difficult, so we wanted to understand what might be the most difficult aspect of being in a faith-based program. Overall, their write-in responses suggest that they interpreted the question as not specific to faith. This is perhaps an error in wording on our part; nonetheless, their responses were still informative. Examining patterns across their responses, we noted that difficulty presented in six key areas. Twenty-eight respondents (18%) indicated that “Nothing” was hard about the program. The other responses clustered as follows.

1. It’s hard to adjust to **new rules or structure** (15) such as being on a schedule or having activities prescribed for you.
  - *Some of the books can be hard*
  - *feeling pressure to be a certain way and do prescribed activities*
  - *The hardest part was getting up and going to church even when you didn’t want to or getting up for morning devotions when you may have had a really rough night sleeping or something but at the end of the day I’m glad that it was part of our routine cause I always walked away with so much compared to when I showed up! Even when I felt terrible in the beginning I would feel good by the end and grateful I was there for a reason!*
2. It’s hard to **be apart from certain relationships** (10). Respondents most frequently noted being away from family members and a couple mentioned being isolated from society in general.
  - *At first its hard to get used to being so separate from the world. But this proved to be one of the most beneficial things!*
3. It’s hard to **give up certain privileges** (13). Respondents mentioned not being able to cuss or not having access to a phone, music, or dating and men.
4. It’s hard to **live in community with others** (12), including such important sentiments as:
  - *[being around] others [who] don’t really pursue it wholeheartedly*
  - *The fear of letting the staff and other girls in the program down*
  - *We broken people and just cuz you know God and all, don’t mean you don’t still mess up and have affect on people. People be messy no matter what and that part is hard.*

### IN THEIR VOICES

*“I got baptized while in the program although it wasn’t a requirement but during my process there I developed a relationship with God so strong I felt compelled to be baptized it was available to any and everyone if they chose to take that step but as I said before it wasn’t required we were allowed to move at our own pace nothing was ever forced on us which I think made a huge difference for a lot of us there!”*

5. It's hard **having to change** (15).

- *Not being able to numb out my feelings and having to deal with them*
- *Surrendering to the idea that I can do it all by myself.*
- *Sometimes I felt like they assumed that I was trying to be devious or get around rules . I was truly done living in the past and just didn't know how to operate normally. at a year sober I have finally built a good enough relationship with the advocates, staff and God that the program has become a safety net to guide instead of a program designed to seek out problem behaviors and correct issues.*
- *Sometimes I do what I don't want to do and I want to rebel. Being angry - I need a safe and constructive place to express and get out my anger - God is angry with what has happened to me, I need more outlets and opportunities to express and release negative emotions.*

6. It's hard to **walk the journey of the Christian faith** (48).

- *Adapting to bible study, devotions, church etc when you were previously living a completely different life.*
- *Dealing with shame and guilt Gods way*
- *Going from having little faith to engaging in relationship with God*
- *The challenges I face within myself by accepting Jesus as my savior. It was hard for me to understand he accepts me and I deserve his love.*
- *Letting God down*

### Areas for Correction

There were certainly comments that suggested some programs need to examine their practices. Of the few offered, there was an appeal for continuing to honor the individuality of each resident.

- *"Just let me do it in my own time"*
- *"I think options with everything is important. The program I was at required everyone to attend everything. I think options to be able to opt out or go to something alternative should be provided. Not just when it comes to faith based things, but everything. We all have different life stories and need different things. Not having options and being forced to go to any group - religious or not, can be really harmful."*
- *"If the program isn't trauma informed, and if they are sensitive to religious trauma. Any kind of talk of demons, possessions, deliverances, etc is NOT OKAY and should not be happening in a place for survivors. Same for saying stupid things like "If you have anxiety that means you don't trust God". I guess that would be more considered not understanding mental health and not having mental health. None of that though was my experience in the faith based program I was at, but I know it happens in others [name of shelter redacted]. There are good faith based programs, and bad faith based programs. Just like any other program out there."*

#### IN THEIR VOICES

*"At first learning to pray out loud or large crowds like at Church [was uncomfortable]. The number of activities was also overwhelming to me. I couldn't process that much information as rapidly as I was being exposed to it."*

#### IN THEIR VOICES

*"I wasn't sure how I felt about Christian's, I knew of God and I suppose I thought Christian's were better than me and that I couldn't be one because all I knew is I thought I wasn't good enough"*

## Contributions to Spiritual Growth

Complimenting the question of what was most difficult, we asked survivors to share what aspects of their program's faith practices contributed most positively to their spiritual growth. For this question, we also pulled responses from survivors who had been in a program 12 months or more to see if tenure offered any significance.

What, if anything, has positively contributed to your spiritual growth while in the program?	Responses	Overall Percentage	Tenure of 12+ mos (N=72)
Feeling accepted; not feeling judged	138	87.34%	92%
Being around positive people who care about me	135	85.44%	90%
Being around Christians who speak the truth of God to me	124	78.48%	85%
Learning about Jesus and His love and forgiveness	120	75.95%	81%
Finding a church where I feel welcome	113	71.52%	83%
<b>Learning about people in the Bible who were as messed up as I think I am/was</b>	112	<b>70.89%</b>	<b>74%</b>
Listening to positive, Christian music	96	60.76%	69%
Learning how to pray	93	58.86%	65%
Getting baptized	63	39.87%	57%
Other (please specify)	13	8.23%	4%

The top six responses – which all have a response rate over 70% – dealt with being a part of a community. Respondents reported feeling a sense of belonging, inclusion, and acceptance. The need for community is a common theme in both the psychological and spiritual research on survivors. In a detailed study of sexual violence survivors, the communal aspects most important to them were “(a) getting together with others in settings that were seen to be spiritual in nature, (b) connecting to others in very deep and spiritual ways, and (c) connecting with God.”<sup>28</sup> In Ahrens, et al, they found that increasing participation in church activities increased psychological well-being through a sense of belonging, personal empowerment, and receiving social support.<sup>29</sup> Community may not be unique to faith-based programs, but these results suggest that it is a vital component of the healing formula.

Finding a church where I feel welcome ranked high, and is consistent with academic findings on its value in areas beyond community. In the book *The Great De-Churching*, Davis and Graham state, “there is strong scientific evidence that supports the correlation between church attendance and improved physical and mental health.” They go on to quote work by Tyler VanderWeele, professor at Harvard University, who states that, “compared with those who never attended religious services, individuals who attended services at least once per week had lower risk of all-cause mortality by 26%, heavy drinking by 34%, and current smoking by 29%.”<sup>30</sup>

### IN THEIR VOICES

*“The most impactful for me is the staff and the way they sacrifice for us.”*

<sup>28</sup> Knapik, G., Matsof, D., Draucker, D., Strickland, K. (2010). Attributes of spirituality described by survivors of sexual violence. *Qual Rep* 15(3) p. 7

<sup>29</sup> Ahrens, C., Abeling, S., Ahmad, S., Himan, J., (2010). Spirituality and well-being: The relationship between religious coping and recovery from sexual assault. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 25 (7). P. 1256

<sup>30</sup> Davis and Graham (2023). *The Great De-Churching*.



It is worth contrasting a prior data point here: 19 of the “Negative” write-in responses to how survivors perceived Christians *prior* to their program were related to feeling as though they were being judged. In these responses we see that their experiences differed from their preconceived ideas. Survivors, by and large, reported feeling accepted and not judged (87.34%). This disposition towards non-judgement is critical to survivors’ healing. “When clients can tell their story to an empathetically engaged and trusted ally, the anxiety and shame begins to decrease, and the stories become less powerful and controlling over their everyday lives.”<sup>31</sup>

**Some of the Other responses offered were:**

- *People be praying for me and speak into my life because of what the Holy Spirit reveals to them. It is dead on too.*
- *Learning to take my thoughts captive and in obedience submit them to God. Practicing the means of growth. Developing a theology of failure & suffering. Learning about my identity in Christ. Repenting for believing lies. Learning about the adversary and his tactics, how to stand firm in the face of spiritual warfare.*
- *uncovering the lies i was taught about God as a child.*

Among those with a shelter tenure of 12 months or more, the percentages were consistent, if not slightly higher, than the full sample.

**The Other comments were:**

- *Being loved by the staff and volunteers with a Godly love*
- *Being prayer for and prayed over and the ppl praying genuinely meaning it*
- *People showing the character of Jesus*

## **The Best Part**

We invited respondents to reflect on the best part of being in a faith-based shelter program. Across all write-in responses (N=128), the most common word used was “love” at 30% frequency, often in the context of feeling loved, or embracing the love of Jesus. Other responses included:

- *Knowing that I was surrounded by people who truly cared and didn’t judge me. And reconnecting with my own faith in process*
- *Learning the truth and not just religious beliefs*
- *Being taught that it is okay to be broken, that God will build you back up with all his goodness*
- *It just made me realize there are still good people in the world.*
- *One of the best things about being in a faith based program is being able to watch other women encounter Jesus and grow spiritually and being able to walk beside them in their journey and help them where I can.*

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<sup>31</sup> Pressley, J., Spinazzola, J. (2015). Beyond survival: Application of a complex trauma treatment model in the Christian context. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*. 43(1) p. 16



## Perception of Christians Now

Earlier in the survey we asked survivors about their impression of Christians prior to entering their faith-based program. Twenty-six responses expressly stated, “no change”. A deeper analysis of their comments noted that among those who had an initial favorable impression of Christians, there was little change in their impressions today. Of the 52 respondents who had an initial unfavorable impression of Christians, 50 later stated that their impression had changed: 48 conveyed a favorable impression and 2 expressed mixed feelings. The following represents some of their entries.

### Neutral (8)

- *they are okay, just had to find the rite church that met me where i was emotional and spiritually*
- *Yes. Some are just talk. But the true ones demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ.*

### Positive (87)

- *I know that everyone has some issues but there are truly some amazing Christian's out there that are inspire me.*
- *I was just miss guided and hated myself and couldn't see the true love of God Christian's show*
- *I've learned that God is still good even when people are not*
- *Well yes. This shelter is really real, like real Christians. It's the real thing and it's a lot to take in.*
- *Yes , I met some great people when I was in the program who accepted me despite my past and who prayed for a better future for me .*
- *Yes my impression of Christians has changed! I found nothing but love at my program. As well as understanding and compassion. That fear had lifted, my ability to finally see the truth had come. My program saved me from the life long beliefs that had tormented me, lied to me and kept me open to further attacks from the devil.*
- *Yes, to some extent They are sinners and each has their own version of messy. We are all imperfect. Grace is not permissive nor abusive or authoritarian/controlling - God disciplines those he loves - this discipline is not controlling or aggressive, it is firm, speaks the truth in love, holds accountable, is forgiving, reconciling, redemptive, etc.*
- *yes, Christians don't judge me or stare at me at our church*

#### IN THEIR VOICES

*"I met some great people when I was in the program who accepted me despite my past and who prayed for a better future for me ."*

Some might argue that the objective of Christian care is proselytizing or converting. Comments from this survey would suggest that—at least the majority of these programs—do not impose that agenda and make space for each person to walk out his/her own spiritual journey.

- *Myself and or anyone else would still have to be present during said activities as a group however we weren't forced to speak or answer on anything we didn't feel comfortable participating in. But over time for those that it was the most difficult, the more time past and they became more and more comfortable they slowly began to participate more. So just by simply being present something was clicking within them. They were free to do the rest on their own time which definitely helped for a lot of others around me*
- *...we were allowed to move at our own pace nothing was ever forced on us which I think made a huge difference for a lot of us there!*
- *I'm still figuring it out*
- *I have been more confident in knowing that I should not convert like I was thinking in previous years. Christianity is what I know and what I was born into.*

An overriding theme in the write-in responses was the importance of authentic, committed, and non-judgmental relationships. This is reinforced in the literature where it has been studied that “spirituality associated with community can offer emotional and practical support in the context of feeling abandoned, exploited or devalued.”<sup>32</sup> Appreciation for the value of having people walk alongside the journey of recovery is perhaps best framed by this survivor response: *“Yes, they are in it with me. They committed and they deep. They suffer for my sake. They care about me. They forgive me and they apologize when they do shit too..” [Amen].*

## What More?

We asked survivors “Is there anything more you wish the shelter would have offered you to help you grow spiritually?” Forty-eight write-in responses said “no,” there was nothing more that could have been offered. A few responses mentioned material goods or privileges, such as a car, a phone, etc., but in the realm of spiritual growth, the most common responses sought an approach to Scripture in a slower, more detailed, or more interactive way, as well as introducing them to more people who can help them grow. What follows are some of their desires expressed.

- *A family or host home so I can learn what health body/family life is and have a safe place to land long term. This is an aftercare thing, but most of us didn't and don't have permeance or a healthy family life to return to. It is rare if one does.*
- *Hire more spiritually people who have the passion to help woman get over there trauma.*
- *I don't know, maybe like help my family come to know God in a real way, you know the personal kinda way*
- *I honestly think that the program was perfect for me. It kept me on my toes for sure but for me to heal and grow it was important to constantly stay busy especially when taking time to connect spiritually with god and congregate with other people to grow.*
- *I just wish I would have left in better standing*
- *I think Gods plan for me was what I needed and I believe he prepared each one of the staff members for me. I learned from all of them.*
- *In my opinion the program has exceeded my expectations in helping grow spiritually. :) I am truly blessed!*
- *They literally provided everything I needed to begin my new journey in Jesus.*
- *To have accepted me completely and not given up so easily.*
- *truthfulness prior to coming in*
- *Yes, a slower way of understanding the Bible; or maybe a more interactive way. I struggled to understand greatly but felt so eagerly too. I needed a more “hands-on” approach or the option to learn with a “one-on-one” approach.*

### IN THEIR VOICES

*“I don't know, maybe like help my family come to know God in a real way, you know the personal kinda way”*

It is worth reiterating that we need to approach faith journeys with the same kind of respect for diversity as other attributes. Noted prior in the study were 18 survivors who indicated that deliverance was uncomfortable. Later, three respondents indicated that they would have liked more instruction on spiritual warfare and deliverance. Another wrote that s/he would have liked *“A deeper deliverance ministry that focuses on demonic activity, generational curses and prayer sessions of confession to another Christian other than my counselor.”* What seems most important is to calibrate faith practices based on the level of reception of each, individual survivor.

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<sup>32</sup> Van Hook, M. (2016). Spirituality as a potential resource for coping with trauma. *Social Work & Christianity*. 43(1). p. 16

## Personal Choice

Finally, we wanted to know if the various faith practices resulted in any personal transformation for survivors. We asked, “As a result of being in a faith-based program, have you made any personal decisions about your own faith journey?” and then offered a couple of examples. Five respondents reported that they had not made any personal choices based on the program, but 123 respondents did share a choice(s) they had made. Those responses clustered into the following five categories.

### 1. Personal Commitment or Reconnection to Faith (36)

The majority of responses demonstrated an alignment with the primary reasons for choosing a faith-based program: 47% of respondents indicated they wanted to reconnect with their faith and 28% indicated they wanted to become a person of faith. In this collection of responses, we saw that many of these survivors have been able to achieve those personal goals.

- *I have come to realize that I never really fell away from faith. I was mad at God because I felt like at times, he did not protect me. He actually never left me.*

### 2. Forgiving Others (35)

Interestingly, the concept of forgiveness was not mentioned anywhere in the survey except in one example to this question, and yet, between Forgiving Others and Forgiving Self, this was the single most common personal choice voiced. A few respondents mentioned wanting to forgive specific individuals such as “my mom, my dad, my abuser” but most commented in general terms about learning how to forgive others and let go of pain.

- *I spent so long holding onto my anger at the ones who hurt me the most. God taught me to forgive them and it continued hurting myself. I accepted Jesus as my savior. I truly believe I would not still be here if it wasn't for him and his plans for me. He teaches me on a daily basis to use my mess as my message.*

### 3. Adoption of Practices (23)

In this collection of responses, we saw choices from individuals who have committed to reading the Bible, attending church on their own, being less judgmental themselves, and committing to regular prayer.

- *To always be real in my prayers no matter how it may sound because Jesus is my friend and meets me where I am.*
- *I have developed natured and uncovered a relationship with GOD and I'm never alone. I have learned how to speak Jesus whenever I am afforded the opportunity. I pray and seek direction and guidance most importantly I know he hears my prayers.*

### 4. Forgiving Oneself (16)

In anti-trafficking culture, there can be such a focus on helping the individual move from “victim” to “survivor” that we overlook the deep wounds of self-blame. In this sample we see that forgiveness towards self is a critical part of spiritual healing.

- *i have forgiven myself and let go a lot of shame and guilt*
- *i have accepted that im forgiven which helps me grow from my past and that includes the wrongs ive done and others have done to me*

#### IN THEIR VOICES

*“I spent so long holding onto my anger at the ones who hurt me the most. God taught me to forgive them and it continued hurting myself. I accepted Jesus as my savior. I truly believe I would not still be here if it wasn't for him and his plans for me. He teaches me on a daily basis to use my mess as my message.”*

## 5. Change in Perspective (9)

A small number of comments invite us into how these survivors are thinking differently about their histories, their futures, and their relationships.

- *My life is completely different. i am free from past identity and now I believe what God say's about me. People no longer are my god and they don't give me my worth any longer. I try to love others the right way now as Jesus did. It had changed all of me.*
- *I love differently, and I recieve love differently. I am able to open a bible and read and understand it*
- *I now only look to my future instead of dwelling about my past.*
- *When I distanced myself from God bc of my disappointment in him for all of the adversity in my life, I never stopped believing in him and by having that anger directed at him was simultaneously reassuring to me bc I still remained a believer.*

## Conclusion

Research continues to prove that attention to the spiritual dimensions of being contributes to higher levels of psychological and relational well-being.”<sup>33</sup> Knapik et al and Parkinson set forth:

For many survivors of sexual violence, spirituality is an integral aspect of the healing process. Having a strong spiritual connection creates for survivors the possibility of being supported and guided in their struggles, obtaining new insights that aid their recovery, and acquiring strength as a result of passing spiritual challenges.<sup>34</sup>

The survivor’s problems with God are not merely at the cognitive level. It is not a problem about doctrines. It is at the dimension of the heart that the Holy Spirit must do a gentle work of healing, helping the abuse survivor to work through the feelings of sadness, loss, and abandonment by God. The danger to the survivor is that these emotions will remain repressed. If they remain hidden because the survivor does not have a supportive environment in which they can surface, then they will continue to affect the [survivor’s] life and faith in subconscious ways, and the process of healing will be hindered.<sup>35</sup>

And yet some “mental health practitioners including social workers and psychologists [and we would add government agencies seeking to regulate victim care] tend to under-estimate the importance of spirituality in coping with psychosocial challenges brought by clients.”<sup>36</sup> What resounds in these voices is what Van Hook’s research also found, that “spirituality provides a sense of worth and being cared for to counter being devalued and dehumanized and the crushing of one’s spirit.”<sup>37</sup>

As the anti-trafficking victim services landscape continues to seek to understand the needs of trafficking survivors and provide the supports to aid in their full healing and restoration, we cannot abandon the importance of spiritual expression. Concurrently, we should not gloss over the fact that while this study was intentional to use language that was not denominationally specific (“faith,” “spirituality,” “religion”), the majority of survivor respondents were specific to the Christian faith in their write-in entries and clearly attributed their spiritual growth to a relationship with Jesus and those called by His name.

Therefore, these results—offered by the survivors who experienced these programs—directly challenges the assumptions that faith practices are unnecessary or harmful to those survivors who willingly and intentionally seek to have a life inclusive of faith.

<sup>33</sup> Ahrens, C., Abeling, S., Ahmad, S., Himan, J., (2010). Spirituality and well-being: The relationship between religious coping and recovery from sexual assault. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 25(7). p. 1255

<sup>34</sup> Knapik, G., Martsof, D., Drucker, C. (2008). Being delivered: spirituality in survivors of sexual violence. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*. 29. p. 346

<sup>35</sup> Parkinson, P. (1997). *Child sexual abuse and the Churches*. Hodder & Stoughton. p. 148

<sup>36</sup> Warria, A. and Chikadzi, V. (2019). Guidelines for Social Work Spiritual Counselling in Human Trafficking Cases, *Journal of Social Development in Africa*. p.48

<sup>37</sup> Van Hook, M. (2016). Spirituality as a potential resource for coping with trauma. *Social Work & Christianity*. 43(1). p. 16



## Postlude

*"I'm so grateful to everything that was done for me in the program that lead me to my faith in God my relationship with him is as a direct result of the program and everyone in it! I couldn't have asked for anything more than what they had to offer! For any future faith based programs I pray they are how mine was. That they treat the people there like a family and not like clients... not create a barrier between them as staff and clients although everyone has their role it needs to feel like family that is so important especially for people like myself that came along and had no family or were a stranger from their family. Help them to learn and or remember the meaning of family and what it should look like!"*

*"I have learned how to forgive many whom have hurt me and or betrayed me! I have days that I struggle more than others which I may need to do it more than once! I have forgiven myself! I continued to follow my believe and regularly go to church and do morning devotions! I bring my children to church and Sunday school! I give back and do as much outreach as I can manage! I live with love in my heart and try to share my experiences with others who don't know God or know very little! I've committed to reading the word of God to my children! Any challenges I come across in life I know that I can give it to God and trust him and his plan know that he has had me this whole time and hasn't failed me yet and I believe he isn't going to choose to do so now!"*

### About the Institute for Shelter Care

The Institute for Shelter Care is a national Christian nonprofit that seeks to equip and resource residential programs serving the sexually exploited. Founded in 2007 as The Samaritan Women, we provided comprehensive residential care to adult and minor female victims of exploitation, prostitution, and trafficking. In 2019, after studying the national landscape and seeing the need for improved access to care and quality of care, we began our pivot into becoming the Institute for Shelter Care. Today we provide profession-specific training for shelter leaders and staff, conduct industry research, build shelter-specific tools to promote data-driven decisions, and convene shelter leaders to support and guide the future of this work. Our missional statement is:

*We equip the people of God, for the works of God, to the glory of God.*



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