

The Meros Center



Ready, Set, Engage!

A Field-Defining Study of Congregational Readiness for Faith-Based Health and Flourishing

Why This Project Matters

Faith communities play a powerful role in people's lives. They build trust. They create belonging. They support people through illness, recovery, and hardship. Many congregations want to help improve health and strengthen their communities. But here's something we don't fully understand:

Why do some congregations thrive when launching health or support programs, while others struggle—even when they have similar size, resources, and enthusiasm?

The missing piece may be **readiness**.

Some congregations are deeply prepared—culturally, relationally, and organizationally—to support health and connection. Others may need different kinds of preparation before programs can succeed. Yet "readiness" has never been clearly defined or carefully studied.

This project fills that gap. Before testing programs, we must first understand what makes engagement possible.

Research Question

Before we can design better faith-based health programs, we need to answer a basic question:

What does it actually mean for a congregation to be "ready" to engage in health, recovery, and flourishing work?

Instead of assuming the answer, we are listening directly to congregations.

Our Approach

We will:

- Interview clergy, lay leaders, and congregants across diverse faith communities
- Survey hundreds of participants nationwide
- Identify common patterns of what helps—or hinders—engagement
- Clarify the real-world factors that make programs sustainable
- Map how readiness shapes participation, flourishing, and long-term impact

This project builds the foundation for stronger, more effective faith-based health and community work. It is not a program trial, but a crucial first step—creating the shared understanding that all future work depends on.

Why Readiness Matters

Faith & Flourishing ultimately seeks to understand how meaningful congregational engagement improves health and well-being. Research suggests that belonging, social support, and reduced stigma can significantly shape recovery and resilience. But engagement does not happen automatically.

Readiness may include factors such as:

- Leadership alignment
- Cultural openness
- Inclusion practices
- Volunteer capacity
- Trust and relational depth
- Willingness to address stigma
- Organizational flexibility

By studying readiness directly, we can better understand:

- How engagement actually forms
- Why some efforts take root and others stall
- What conditions allow belonging and inclusion to flourish

Four Potential Areas of Application

While this study focuses on defining readiness itself, the findings will inform future work in four key areas where congregations often seek to make a difference:

1. Dementia & Cognitive Health

Supporting individuals and caregivers through memory-friendly practices and relational support.

2. Mental Health

Reducing stigma, strengthening peer support, and promoting emotional well-being.

3. Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities (IDD)

Increasing accessibility, participation, and valued roles.

4. Substance Use & Recovery

Creating supportive recovery environments grounded in dignity and belonging.

Understanding readiness ensures that future efforts in these areas are realistic, ethical, and sustainable—not one-size-fits-all.

Project Aims

Aim 1: Elicit Congregational Engagement Readiness

To empirically define congregational engagement readiness using a parallel qualitative-survey elicitation design that captures both depth and breadth of congregational perspectives.

Specifically, the project will:

- Conduct in-depth interviews (~25-35 across 10-15 congregations) with clergy, lay leaders, and congregants to understand how readiness is recognized, debated, and enacted

- Deploy a parallel, broadly distributed survey (target n=500-800 responses) that asks substantively equivalent questions using structured, open-ended and forced-choice prompts
- Integrate interview and survey findings to identify shared patterns, boundaries, and domains of readiness

Outputs: Empirically grounded readiness definition, taxonomy of facilitators and barriers to congregational readiness, decision-making maps, and Congregational Engagement Readiness Assessment item language.

This project is intentionally designed as the foundational first step of *Faith & Flourishing*, a multi-year initiative to strengthen health and belonging through faith communities. It will generate field-shaping insights and establish a shared language and practical understanding of congregational readiness. By grounding future measurement, training, program design, and evaluation efforts in the lived realities of congregations, this study ensures that what comes next is both evidence-informed and community-centered.

Impact

Your support will help us:

- Define congregational readiness in clear, practical terms
- Identify key facilitators and barriers
- Create a shared language for faith-based health engagement
- Develop tools that can guide future program design and evaluation

Why it matters:

For Science

Establishes readiness as a measurable concept and creates a shared language for *Faith & Flourishing* and future research.

For Communities

Captures diverse congregational voices and ensures interventions are feasible, inclusive, and grounded in real practice.

For Practice

Helps funders and practitioners understand why some programs succeed, reduces misalignment, and supports more ethical, effective engagement strategies.

Your Investment Makes a Difference

Faith-based health programs often fail not because people don't care—but because the groundwork isn't right.

By investing in this early-stage research, you are:

- Helping ensure future programs are realistic and sustainable
- Supporting more ethical and culturally grounded engagement
- Amplifying the voices of congregations themselves
- Strengthening communities for years to come

Your support now helps build the foundation that will shape how faith-based health, recovery, and inclusion programs are designed, evaluated, and scaled for years to come.

Total Budget

\$8,000

Every dollar helps build the foundation for stronger, more inclusive, and more effective faith-based health and flourishing efforts.

Timeline

Project Start Date:

May 2026 (or when funding is available)

Help Congregations Make a Real Difference

When congregations are truly ready, they can transform health, recovery, and flourishing in their communities.

Your support helps define what readiness really means—and ensures that future programs work better, reach further, and last longer.

Together, we can help faith communities flourish—and help communities flourish through faith.