



Bridging Science and Spirit

Lessons and Research from the ProSocial Spirituality Initiative



<https://prosocial.world>

Project funded by the **Issachar Fund** and



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ABOUT

ProSocial World

We're a non-profit dedicated to enabling individual and collective action for positive cultural change and widespread cooperation through our unique framework built on science and compassion.

What makes us unique?

We've been working on the theory and practice of a ProSocial framework since 2011. We decided it was time to expand our efforts and founded our non-profit in 2020.

While many organizations have a prosocial mission and vision, what makes us unique is our focus on bringing together modern evolutionary and behavioral science with Elinor Ostrom's Nobel prize-winning design principles to inform our process. Our work focuses on empowering individuals, groups, and communities at all contexts and sizes to make positive cultural change possible.

Our Belief

We believe that to catalyze rapid, positive cultural change we need to recognize our interconnectedness and continuously improve the relationships we have with ourselves, each other, and the planet.

Our Purpose

We exist to consciously evolve a world that works for all.

Our work focuses on **three key areas**

Research

Our research explores the integration of modern evolutionary science, spirituality, and community - providing an inclusive framework that can help groups to become cooperative and adaptive.

Courses

We provide a number of learning opportunities that enable and support individuals and groups to collaborate, co-create, and tackle issues together.

Community

We've created a global community so we can work together to accelerate a major, multi-level evolutionary transition and better adapt to our rapidly changing world.

Introduction

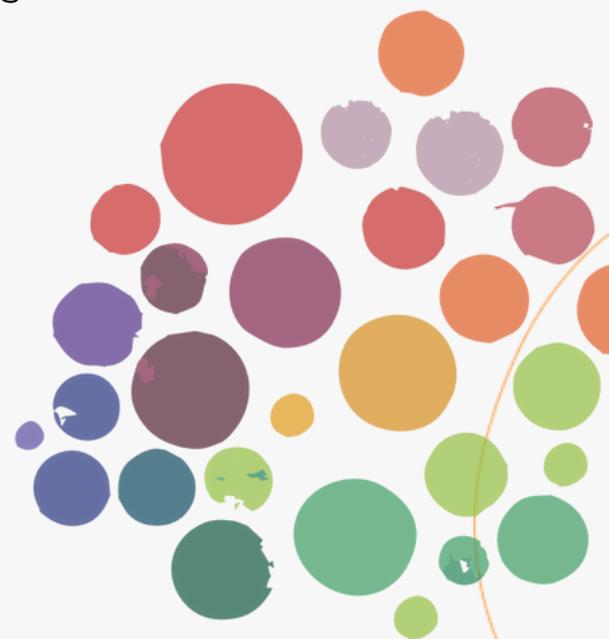
The aim of this initiative was to integrate science and spirituality in real-world settings, based on the conceptual foundation of modern evolutionary science and the practical framework for working with groups pioneered by ProSocial World. The research was framed in terms of a “vertical” and “horizontal” dimension of all meaning systems. The vertical dimension describes how the meaning system animates the person psychologically, especially in relation to being part of something larger than oneself. Words such as “sacred”, “worship”, and “god” are some examples of the vocabulary of the vertical dimension of meaning systems.

The horizontal dimension describes the governance of people who share the same meaning system, along with a separate set of rules for people who are classified as “other”. An effective meaning system needs to be strong in both dimensions for the psychic energy of the vertical dimension to be channeled into effective action by the horizontal dimension.

ProSocial previously developed a framework for working with groups along the horizontal dimension, based on a generalized version of the “Core Design Principles” (CDPs) approach of the Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom. ProSocial also addresses the vertical dimension within our ProSocial Spirituality initiative and accompanying courses.

This project, funded by a grant from TRT/Issachar, proposed to further address the vertical dimension by introducing groups to core spiritual principles in addition to Ostrom’s core design principles. Specifically, we drew upon “nine elements of universal spirituality (EUS)” listed by Brother Wayne Teasdale in his book *The Mystic Heart*.

Our experimental design was used with a number of groups, allowing us to compare the performance of groups with CDP training only, EUS training only, or both.



Adapting the research design: Lessons from the pandemic

Like many initiatives in the SSSSR program, our project encountered significant shifts during the COVID pandemic. The disruption required us to pivot from our original plan of working with a large number of groups and instead focus deeply on a smaller set. This shift proved valuable: it allowed us to see more clearly how our methods were being received and to refine our experimental design accordingly.

Our initial expectation was that CDPs and EUSs could be introduced quickly and that measurable outcomes would soon follow. However, participant feedback made it clear that more time was needed to meaningfully engage with and integrate these practices. This insight prompted a rethinking of our approach. Spiritual training—whether traditional or science-based—is inherently a long-term process.

In real-world group settings, there is an important transition to be recognized: at first, participants see themselves as too busy and require concise trainings with immediate benefits; only after deeper engagement do they begin to recognize the transformative value of extended practice, making the investment of time and effort worthwhile. Our task, then, was to build a methodology that could effectively support groups on this journey.



To that end, we developed a revised protocol:

- As before, we prioritized groups working toward real-world goals, rather than those meeting solely for spiritual practice.
- We created an eight-week course with two-hour sessions plus an additional hour each week for preparation and practice. This represented a significant commitment from participants, but one they consistently found meaningful and worthwhile given the depth of outcomes it produced.

- We developed a new research strategy that included reflections on the inner experiences of group members in addition to quantitative surveys and performance outcomes that were included in the original design. In the spirit of Participatory Action Research (PAR), which is genuinely oriented toward the welfare of the participants in addition to the advancement of knowledge, our research was guided by the following questions:
 - In what ways do the participants make sense of the experience provided by the course (vertical)?
 - In what ways do the participants apply what they are learning in their life (horizontal)
 - What challenges have the participants experienced and in what ways can our program be developed to meet those challenges (adaptation) better?



To explore these questions, a mixed-method approach was utilized. Specifically, we analyzed the content of weekly reflection sets completed by participants, participant responses from a longitudinal survey, and key moments from session recordings. Participation in research was voluntary, as called for by both human subject review guidelines and the spirit of participatory action.

Of the 46 course participants from groups described in more detail below, only four opted out, indicating a high degree of buy-in. Some participants even commented that the research component of the course enhanced their experience. This suggests that participating in scientific research can itself be a fulfilling spiritual practice. For example, traditional spiritual practices often involve reflecting upon one's experience in writing, which parallels the reflective elements built into the research process.

When people share their reflections in a trusting group and look at them together, common themes often emerge that individuals might not notice on their own. Far from diminishing the personal value of reflection, this process can actually deepen it. And when these insights are used to identify challenges and improve the process over time, the cycle of reflection becomes even more powerful.

To help with this kind of analysis, we used Structural Topic Models (STMs) – a statistical method for identifying themes in a collection of written material. In simple terms, STMs look at how words tend to occur together and uses that information to suggest possible themes. This makes it a kind of machine learning: the computer builds a model of the text, but human judgment is always needed to guide the process.

One key choice is how many topics to ask the model to identify. This decision shapes the level of detail in the results. A helpful way to think about it is like looking through a microscope. Everything on the slide is real, but depending on how much you zoom in, you'll see different kinds of structure. In STMs, the text is like the material on the slide, and the number of topics (known as k) is like the microscope setting: it determines the “magnification” at which patterns become clear.

Across the five groups studied, we collected results on six key variables: connectedness, emotional valence, frequency of practice, noticing inner experiences, insights, and applications. While sample sizes were modest, the findings provide clear evidence that these dimensions can be



measured in real-world group settings. Importantly, the results demonstrate the feasibility of building a scientific infrastructure capable of capturing both the *vertical* (inner experience, insight, transformation) and *horizontal* (group connectedness, application, collective practice) dimensions of group life. This represents a significant step forward in developing a robust methodology for studying groups engaged in spiritual training and action.

Participating Organizations in the Initial Cohort

We successfully piloted our training and research materials with five diverse organizations:

- [Charter for Compassion](#)
- [Osage Forest of Peace](#)
- [Stillpoint Center for Spiritual Development](#)
- [All Souls Interfaith Gathering](#)
- [San Antonio PeaceCENTER](#)
- [Alamo Community Colleges District](#)

These groups spanned the spectrum from a global network of cities (Charter for Compassion) to single retreat centers, each working to advance their mission while navigating critical challenges.

For example, the Charter for Compassion had established a remarkable network of “compassionate communities” worldwide. Yet, these communities varied in how effectively they functioned, how well they translated compassionate attitudes (vertical) into concrete action (horizontal), and how actively they collaborated with one another. Our integrated vertical-and-horizontal coaching was designed to strengthen these dynamics and elevate the network to a new level of impact.

Similarly, the San Antonio PeaceCENTER was transitioning from a long-standing all-volunteer structure into a new partnership with the Alamo Community Colleges District. This merger brought both opportunities and challenges, including bridging generational and cultural differences between the largely older, white PeaceCENTER members and the younger, Hispanic college community. Our work supported them in finding common ground and building a shared path forward.



These cases underscore a central reality: conscious cultural evolution in real-world settings is demanding, even for groups with strong prosocial commitments. Supporting organizations to grow in both vertical and horizontal dimensions while they pursue their real-world goals is challenging—but it is precisely this challenge that makes the work transformative. Moreover, pairing this work with rigorous scientific research ensures that insights can be scaled and shared.

Far from being a limitation, this dual focus represents a core strength of the project. It advances the missions of both the Issachar Foundation and the Templeton Religion Trust by demonstrating that high-quality research and real-world transformation can proceed hand-in-hand, yielding both immediate benefits to participating groups and long-term contributions to the scientific study of spiritual growth.

What Came Next: Connected Projects

Two spiritually oriented collaborations within ProSocial World highlight the broader impact of this work. The first, in partnership with the nonprofit [Human Energy](#), builds on Teilhard de Chardin's concept of the Noosphere by placing it on a modern scientific foundation. This collaboration has produced a 24-part video series titled [“The Science of the Noosphere”](#) and a 2023 article with commentaries in Religion, Brain, and Behavior titled [“Re-introducing Teilhard de Chardin to Modern Evolutionary Science.”](#)

The second, in partnership with Plum Village, the monastery founded by Thich Nhat Hanh, explores the theme of “Spirituality, Science, and Action.” Highlights include a week-long retreat in May 2022 and a [published dialogue](#) between PW President David Sloan Wilson and Brother Phap Linh. This project is already generating follow-ups, including a grant from the [Frederick P. Lenz Foundation](#) to support emerging institutions of American Buddhism.

Together, these projects show real progress toward a unified view of spirituality, science, and action—one that embraces diverse traditions while catalyzing conscious cultural evolution in practice.

Further reading: [Evaluation Report](#)