

Researching Peace: Promoting Shalom-Flourishing Through Interdisciplinary Initiatives

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Abstract

Peace is often understood primarily as the absence of conflict. The biblical concept of *shalom*, however, offers a broader understanding that includes wholeness, justice, healthy relationships, and human flourishing. Such an understanding has implications for how complex social problems are studied and addressed. Homelessness provides a particularly important example because it cannot adequately be understood through a single disciplinary lens or reduced either to individual problems or to institutional failures. This paper presents an emerging interdisciplinary approach developed through the Center of Excellence for Homelessness Services and Studies (COEHSS), a collaborative initiative of the American University of Health Sciences and American Theological University. The approach brings health sciences, psychology, theology, public health, clinical research, and institutional analysis into conversation while placing respectful relationships with people experiencing homelessness at the center of service and inquiry. The paper proposes a cyclical model in which service informs research, research improves practice, practice strengthens institutions, and healthier institutions expand opportunities for flourishing and peace.

Keywords: shalom, human flourishing, homelessness, interdisciplinary research, institutional analysis, peace

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Introduction

The theme “connecting research and advancing peace” raises an important preliminary question: **What do we mean by peace?** If peace is understood only as the absence of violence or conflict, research directed toward peace may focus primarily on preventing or resolving disputes. Such work is important, but the biblical concept of *shalom* suggests a more comprehensive aspiration.

Shalom encompasses peace but extends beyond it to include wholeness, well-being, justice, right relationships, and the conditions under which persons and communities can flourish. Plantinga (1995), for example, uses *shalom* to describe the flourishing and harmonious state in which relationships and created goods function as they ought. Contemporary research on human flourishing likewise increasingly treats flourishing as multidimensional. VanderWeele (2017) proposes domains that extend beyond physical and mental health to include happiness and life satisfaction, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships.

This broader conception changes the research question. Instead of asking only, “How can conflict be reduced?” we can also ask, **“What do persons and communities need in order to flourish, and what prevents them from obtaining it?”**

Homelessness illustrates the importance of this question. People experiencing homelessness may face interconnected challenges involving physical health, mental health, substance use, relationships, employment, finances, safety, and housing. At the same time, their difficulties cannot be understood solely as individual deficits. Access to resources is mediated by institutions, policies, organizations, professional practices, families, communities, and social networks. Researching homelessness as a problem of *shalom-flourishing* therefore requires attention both to persons and to the systems in which they act.

Homelessness as an Interdisciplinary Problem

Homelessness is a complex social problem whose causes and consequences cross conventional disciplinary boundaries. Health conditions can contribute to housing instability, while homelessness itself can worsen health. Mental-health and substance-use concerns may intersect with social isolation, economic insecurity, administrative requirements, eligibility rules, transportation, and limited access to appropriate services.

Research consequently benefits from collaboration among multiple fields. Evidence concerning homelessness increasingly points toward integrated approaches involving health, social care, housing, and community organizations rather than isolated interventions (Lee et al., 2023; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2018).

The Center of Excellence for Homelessness Services and Studies (COEHSS) represents an emerging attempt to work within such an interdisciplinary framework. COEHSS is a collaborative initiative involving the American University of Health Sciences and the American Theological University. This relationship makes available several complementary perspectives.

The health-sciences context contributes expertise from nursing, pharmacy, clinical research, and related health disciplines. These fields bring attention to physical health, medication, health disparities, healthcare access, assessment, and evidence-based intervention. The



theological university contributes theological reflection together with perspectives from psychology, public health, and the study of institutions and communities.

No single one of these perspectives is sufficient. A person may need medical treatment, but medical treatment alone does not provide housing. A person may need behavioral-health services, but access to those services depends upon institutional arrangements. Housing is essential, but housing alone does not necessarily restore damaged relationships, social belonging, meaning, or community participation. Conversely, relational support cannot substitute for necessary housing, healthcare, income, or other material resources.

An interdisciplinary approach therefore asks not simply which discipline has the solution, but **how different forms of knowledge can be integrated around the needs and agency of the person.**

Relationships as a Starting Point for Research and Service

COEHSS begins with a relatively simple proposition: relationships matter.

People experiencing homelessness are frequently encountered through institutional categories: patient, client, applicant, beneficiary, resident, or case. Such categories may be necessary for organizational purposes, but they can obscure the person represented by the category. A *shalom-flourishing* approach instead begins by treating the individual as a person possessing dignity, agency, strengths, relationships, hopes, and purposes as well as needs.

Respectful relationship-building also has methodological significance. Researchers and service providers cannot adequately understand needs and barriers without listening. Trust makes possible a richer understanding of what a person identifies as important, what resources are already available, what obstacles have frustrated previous attempts at change, and what forms of assistance may actually be acceptable and useful.

This approach does not imply that relationships alone solve homelessness. Rather, relationship provides a context in which needs and resources can be understood more accurately and interventions can be developed collaboratively.

The distinction is important. A professional may identify a resource that appears objectively valuable, yet institutional procedures, transportation, previous negative experiences, eligibility requirements, competing responsibilities, or the person's own priorities may make that resource inaccessible or inappropriate. Effective intervention therefore requires not merely knowing that a resource exists but understanding the relationship between a particular **need, person, resource, and institutional pathway.**

From Individual Needs to Institutional Analysis

This leads to a second level of inquiry. Homelessness requires us to examine not only the challenges experienced by individuals but also the institutions intended to respond to those challenges.

Institutions structure who may do what, under what conditions, with what information and resources, and with what consequences. Ostrom's (2005) Institutional Analysis and



Development framework provides one useful foundation for studying these arrangements. Subsequent development of the framework has emphasized the ways rules, norms, participants, and outcomes interact and generate feedback over time (Cole, 2017).

This perspective moves analysis beyond a simple distinction between “personal responsibility” and “system failure.” Both persons and institutions act within complex environments.

For example, an individual may be willing to seek treatment but encounter an institution whose enrollment procedures create barriers. A service organization may genuinely want to help but face staffing, funding, jurisdictional, or legal constraints. A family may constitute an important source of support but also experience economic or relational pressures that limit what it can provide. Policies designed for one legitimate purpose may unintentionally make another objective more difficult to achieve.

The relevant research question therefore becomes:

Where, within the network of persons, resources, rules, organizations, and relationships, is access to flourishing being enabled or obstructed?

This question invites contributions from healthcare, psychology, sociology, economics, theology, public health, and institutional analysis. It also requires researchers to listen carefully to the experiences of people who must actually navigate these systems.

Service as a Research Context

COEHSS is still at an early stage of development. Its current work should therefore be understood as an emerging research and service model rather than as a demonstrated solution to homelessness.

This developmental stage nevertheless creates an important opportunity. Service and research do not need to occur in completely separate domains. With appropriate ethical safeguards, research can be embedded in a continuous process of learning from service.

The purpose is not merely to count activities. The more important questions concern processes and outcomes: What needs do participants identify? Which resources appear relevant to those needs? Which resources can participants actually access? Where does access fail? What kinds of interpersonal engagement increase understanding and trust? Which organizational rules facilitate or impede effective responses? What happens after a referral or intervention? Ultimately, do individuals experience greater opportunities for flourishing?

These questions create a learning cycle rather than a one-directional intervention.

Service informs research.

Direct engagement reveals needs, strengths, priorities, institutional barriers, and questions that researchers might otherwise overlook.

Research improves practice.

Systematic analysis can identify patterns in needs, barriers, resource utilization, relationships, and outcomes, allowing interventions to be refined.



Practice strengthens institutions.

When evidence reveals recurring barriers or effective practices, organizations can reconsider procedures, partnerships, resource allocation, and rules.

Healthy institutions expand opportunities for flourishing and peace.

Institutions that respond more effectively to human needs can increase people's practical opportunities to pursue health, stable relationships, meaningful activity, security, belonging, and other dimensions of flourishing.

The resulting cycle can be summarized as:

Service → Research → Improved Practice → Stronger Institutions → Expanded Opportunities for Shalom-Flourishing

The cycle then begins again as strengthened institutions create new forms of service and new questions for research.

Researching Peace

This model suggests a broader understanding of what it means to research peace.

Peace research need not be confined to studying warfare or explicit conflict. If peace includes *shalom*, then researchers can also investigate the social and institutional conditions that enable people to live whole and flourishing lives.

This does not require every participating discipline to adopt theological language. Human flourishing provides an important conceptual bridge. Flourishing research offers empirically investigable dimensions of well-being, while *shalom* contributes a theological and normative vision emphasizing wholeness, justice, right relationship, and the common good. The two concepts are not identical, but their intersection creates opportunities for productive interdisciplinary dialogue.

Such dialogue is particularly useful in addressing homelessness. Health sciences can investigate health needs and interventions. Psychology can contribute knowledge concerning motivation, trauma, behavior, relationships, and change. Public health can examine population-level determinants and service systems. Institutional analysis can investigate rules, incentives, organizations, and barriers to resource access. Theology can contribute questions concerning human dignity, community, justice, moral responsibility, meaning, and the ends toward which human activity should be directed.

The objective is not to collapse these disciplines into one another. It is to connect them around a shared problem while allowing each to contribute its distinctive forms of knowledge.

Conclusion

Complex human problems require more than isolated expertise. Homelessness illustrates the interaction of personal needs, relationships, health, community, resources, organizations, and



institutional rules. An adequate response therefore requires both interdisciplinary research and sustained attention to the experiences of the people whom institutions are intended to serve.

A *shalom-flourishing* framework broadens the goal. Success is not simply the removal of an immediate problem. Nor is peace merely the absence of overt conflict. The larger objective is the development of persons, relationships, communities, and institutions that create genuine opportunities for human flourishing.

The emerging work of COEHSS provides one context in which this proposition can be investigated. Its present contribution is therefore less a claim that a particular intervention has already succeeded than an invitation to a particular form of inquiry: begin with relationships, listen carefully to persons, identify needs and resources, examine the institutions connecting them, test interventions, learn from outcomes, and use that knowledge to improve both practice and institutions.

In its simplest form, the proposition introduced in this paper is:

Service informs research. Research improves practice. Practice strengthens institutions. Healthy institutions expand opportunities for flourishing and peace.

If research can contribute to that cycle, then rightly focused research becomes one means of advancing peace.



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