



# Spirituality in the Workplace

**Abstract:** Workplace spirituality has been defined as a framework for organizational values that is part of the culture, connection, and future. AKA is a small woman-owned, spirit-led business. Our mission and vision direct us toward programs, research, evaluation, and communities that match our values, theories, and interests. Because spirituality is essential for wellness, well teams, and well communities, we designed this study to explore AKA team member views about spirituality and how they incorporate spirituality in their work. The following research questions to guide this study: 1) What are some spiritual practices of AKA team members? and 2) How do spiritual practices influence the inner self, outer self, and team/clients? **Methods:** Data for this study were collected from AKA Associates with Zoom interviews from May 2023 to July 2023. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed using Otter.ai, cleaned, and coded using thematic analysis. **Results:** The research team contacted twelve AKA associates; nine were eligible to participate. Two were male, and seven were female. The thematic analysis revealed three major workplace spirituality themes: beliefs, practices, and experiences. Spiritual beliefs varied among the team. Many cited a belief in God or a higher power. Others mentioned goodness, altruism, and a Divine connection to the path they are on. AKA associates' practices vary from prayer, journaling, forgiveness, burning sage, being in nature, attending church, having joy, gratitude, and involvement in church/faith communities. AKA associates talked about their varied experiences, including service, generosity, empowerment, grounding, integrity/accountability, advocacy, and authenticity. **Discussion:** This qualitative study found that beliefs, practices, and experiences create connections and enduring relationships. Within the AKA team, beliefs varied about spirituality. Some believed in a Creator or God; others talked about a higher power, goodness, or nothing. Spirituality in the workplace has the potential to improve the health and well-being of employees and clients served. Spiritual beliefs vary within individuals and organizations; what is most important is the experiences that result from a spiritual orientation. When personal, organizational, and spiritual values align, growth, creativity, and innovation happen.

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# Spirituality in the Workplace: A qualitative study of spiritual practices of a small woman-owned research and evaluation company

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### Abstract

Workplace spirituality has been defined as a framework for organizational values that is part of the culture, connection, and future. AKA is a small woman-owned, spirit-led business. Our mission and vision direct us toward programs, research, evaluation, and communities that match our values, theories, and interests. Because spirituality is essential for wellness, well teams, and well communities, we designed this study to explore AKA team member views about spirituality and how they incorporate spirituality in their work. The following research questions to guide this study: 1) What are some spiritual practices of AKA team members? and 2) How do spiritual practices influence the inner self, outer self, and team/clients? Methods: Data for this study were collected from AKA Associates with Zoom interviews from May 2023 to July 2023. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed using Otter.ai, cleaned, and coded using thematic analysis. Results: The research team contacted twelve AKA associates; nine were eligible to participate. Two were male, and seven were female. The thematic analysis revealed three major workplace spirituality themes: beliefs, practices, and experiences. Spiritual beliefs varied among the team. Many cited a belief in God or a higher power. Others mentioned goodness, altruism, and a Divine connection to the path they are on. Practices have to do with the outer self and what we do, what we see, and what we hear. AKA associates' practices vary from prayer, journaling, forgiveness, burning sage, being in nature, attending church, having joy, gratitude, and involvement in church/faith communities. AKA associates talked about their varied experiences, including service, generosity, empowerment, grounding, integrity/accountability, advocacy, and authenticity. Discussion: This qualitative study found that beliefs, practices, and experiences create connections and enduring relationships. Within the AKA team, beliefs varied about spirituality. Some believed in a Creator or God; others talked about a higher power, goodness, or nothing. Spirituality in the workplace has the potential to improve the health and well-being of employees and clients served. Spiritual beliefs vary within individuals and organizations; what is most important is the experiences that result from a spiritual orientation. When personal, organizational, and spiritual values align, growth, creativity, and innovation happen.

### Background

If you were asked to share one message with the world, what would it be? Would you offer encouragement, advice from your grandmother, or a bible verse about how God loves you? This is how we started understanding spiritual practices and agreements in the workplace. Like many worthwhile journeys, we did not have a destination in mind. We did not consider that this message would lead to interviews, an in-depth qualitative study, and a presentation at the American Public Health Association (APHA) 2023 Conference. But here we are. Twelve months have passed since the message to the world. We talk. What is it that unites us? Is there

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something more than the physical realm? How could we design a research study to find out what people think and practice without being too intrusive? Spirituality is personal, perhaps the most intimate and hidden part of ourselves, that we rarely share with others, especially not in the workplace.

Spirituality means different things to different people and contexts. Spirituality has been described as a belief in God or as a combination of values, opinions, and ideas that impact a person's daily behavior and choices (Lavretsky, 2010). Some link spirituality with a set of beliefs organized by religion and driven by movement in a faith community (church, synagogue, sweat lodge). Others may define their spirituality as a practice of yoga, meditation, a walk in the forest, or stillness. Social scientists recognize the relationship between spirituality and health, where spirituality lowers anxiety and improves coping and various mental health issues. Other researchers report that spirituality enhances the quality of life and recovery and makes people live longer (Sulphy, 2022).

Efforts to bridge spirituality and wellness across disciplines are widely accepted and have drastically changed since the 1990s, when workplace spirituality became a topic of interest. Workplace spirituality has been defined as a framework for organizational values that is part of the culture, connection, and future. Previous authors have explored the role of spirituality in the workplace from multiple lenses. Some feel that spirituality in the workplace is not about faith or religion; it is about recognizing that people consider themselves spiritual beings, and this being requires meaning, purpose, and connection that is beyond the physical realm (Dandona, 2013). Kriger and Hansen identified certain spiritual values and behaviors for employees to practice for thriving and growing teams (1999). Others have explored workplace spirituality from the lens of value-based leadership, where value-based leaders create a vision for a better future based on deep values, inner faith, self-efficacy, and self-worth. Spirituality has been viewed within professional teams as an essential practice for growth, creativity, and innovation (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2010). When employees' personal and organizational values align, there is better performance within the team (Johnson, 2019). This follows Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which is attributed to a level of consciousness self-actualization (Maslow et al., 1987).

Focused efforts to bring spirituality into the workplace could address some issues and empower the workforce. The current US workforce crisis of quiet quitting and the Great Resignation point to a possible spiritual crisis in the workplace. Quiet quitting involves the idea that millions of people are not going above and beyond at work and just meeting their job description (Harter, 2022). The Great Resignation refers to the number of people who left their jobs after the COVID-19 pandemic, creating a record number of open positions in the workforce. A Pew Research survey found that 63% of workers quit their jobs because there were no opportunities for advancement, and 57% quit

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because they felt disrespected at work (Parker & Horowitz, 2022). Embracing spirituality in the workplace may elevate the health and well-being of employees, communities, and clients served.

### About our Team

AKA is a small woman-owned, spirit-led business. Our mission and vision direct us toward programs, research, evaluation, and communities that match our values, theories, and interests.

### About our Clients and Communities

We work with treatment and recovery centers, people with a vested interest in the well-being of others. Many of these centers are in tribal communities and serve tribal nations, clients, participants, youth, and families. Other work includes university efforts to support case management, the prevention of sexual abuse and trauma, and the investigation of deaths, dying, grief, and trauma. Most of our clients and communities are interested in spirituality because they see how it shows up in the mental health, substance abuse, education, and social services milieu. For example, the Medicine Wheel framework incorporates spirituality at the center of the circle to walk in balance and attend to our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs (Kelley et al., 2015).

Because spirituality is essential for wellness, well teams, and well communities, we designed this study to explore AKA team member views about spirituality and how they incorporate spirituality in their work. We designed this study using spiritual leadership, occupational leadership (Lyons & Munro, 2022), and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow et al., 1987). The following research questions to guide this study:

1. What are some spiritual practices of AKA team members?
2. How do spiritual practices influence the inner self, outer self, and team/clients?

### Methods

Data for this study were collected from AKA Associates with Zoom interviews from May 2023 to July 2023. Associates (participants) were recruited by the Principal (AK) via email. Inclusion criteria were as follows: employed as an associate for at least six months, currently working on projects at AKA as an associate, willingness to share thoughts about spirituality and their work. Associates contacted the AKA interview team, who then assessed their eligibility to participate and obtained their

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consent via email. Associates were then scheduled to participate in a Zoom interview with the AKA intern evaluation team. The study did not require IRB approval because it was conducted within the team to understand workplace spirituality.

### Interview

The interview guide was developed with input from three AKA interns and the Principal Consultant of AKA. A structured interview format was utilized, and associates were instructed to reflect on their spiritual practices in the workplace. Before beginning the interview, associates did not receive a definition of spirituality. They were asked to reflect on what spirituality means using their personal definitions. This definition then guided the interview process. The semi-structured interview included seven questions about the following areas: spirituality impacts on the human experience, spirituality impacts on the work experience, and spiritual practices in general.

1. What does your spirituality mean to you?
2. How does your spirituality impact your human experience?
3. When you are struggling, how does your spirituality help you?
4. What was your one message to the world, and where were you when you shared that message?
5. How does spirituality show up in your work?
6. How do you share your spirituality with the AKA team?
7. How can AKA help celebrate and incorporate spirituality in the work?

### Qualitative Thematic Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed using Otter.ai, cleaned, and coded using thematic analysis. Two AKA interns (BC and KM) conducted open coding first to explore concepts based on the interview guide. The AKA Principal Consultant used NVivo 12.0 and axial (focused) coding (Stuckey, 2015) to reorganize concepts based on the dimensions of belief (inner-self), practices (outer-self), and experiences (team/community). The coding process, code book, and themes were discussed among BC, KM, and AK until a consensus was reached.

A conceptual framework for spirituality in the workplace emerged to organize and present codes, themes, and dimensions.

## Results

### Respondents

The research team contacted twelve AKA associates; nine were eligible to participate. Two were male, and seven were female. Associates ranged in age from 22 to 55 and had varying positions at AKA (student interns, senior evaluation associate, grants management, graphic design, and Principal). One participant was Black, one was Hispanic, three were American Indian, and four were white. Educational attainment varied from no degree to a doctoral degree.

The thematic analysis revealed three major workplace spirituality themes: beliefs, practices, and experiences. Table 1 outlines themes, sample narratives, dimensions, and the frequency dimensions in the data.

Table 1. Coding, Narratives, Dimensions, and Frequency of Themes

Open Codes to Concepts	Axial Coding Theme	Sample Narrative	Dimension	Frequency of Themes
Creator, religion, higher power, goodness, unseen guidance, personal meaning	Beliefs	“I need to show up as my best self, and so it goes back to spirituality is making sure that I am taking care of myself so that then I can step into my power and show up and help people.”	Inner-self	17
Thinking, prayer, meditation, church, nature, gratitude, joy	Practices	“Religion has really been like a source of spirituality for me. My spirituality defines who I am.”	Outer-self	17

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Growth, relationships, connection, resilience, accountability	Experiences	“I feel connected to the people we work with because I am in awe of them, and I feel fortunate to be able to work alongside them... all of those things that are motivating to me, it's not just grinding the wheel... building deeper capacity for people and that for me is motivating.”	Team, Clients, and Community	22
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### **Beliefs – The Inner Dimension of Self**

Beliefs are the hidden messages within ourselves that influence how we think, feel, react, and know. Spiritual beliefs varied among the team. Many cited a belief in God or a higher power. Others mentioned goodness, altruism, and a Divine connection to the path they are on.

**God/Creator.** *Knowing that God has put me here like. God has always paved the way... God has put me in this position like it wasn't like I chose it. So knowing that and finding strength from that and finding confidence in that...*

**Goodness.** *You know, spirituality and religion are different. Most people know that. I am not a religious person. Spirituality-wise, I just believe that trying to be the best, most authentic me is all I have to do to be happy and to find that spiritual bliss because I know that deep down, if I do my best and I follow the practices that I believe to be important, then that's all I need.*

**This is it.** *I am agnostic. I think this is the best way to describe it because I don't believe in a higher power, and I do not believe in it. Afterlife or anything like that? So, for me, spirituality means this life force kind of a thing, you know, like what connects*



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*humans and animals, and everything on Earth is just basic life. Like whatever is that little spark that makes people, you know, live like, you know, do stuff is basically like the thing that we connect to. And so. I guess my guiding principle in this is that you only have this one life, and you're supposed to just do the best that you can while you're in it.*

**Higher power.** *I believe connection to something outside of us is essential, and that's my belief. You know, there's power in humbling ourselves to the lack of almost this unknown, and I'm speaking in vague terms, but I feel like that's important. And so spirituality, to me, is having that connection. It's having a connection with something bigger than yourself.*

### **Practices – The Outer Dimension of Self**

Practices have to do with the outer self and what we do, what we see, and what we hear. AKA associates' practices vary from prayer, journaling, forgiveness, burning sage, being in nature, attending church, having joy, gratitude, and involvement in church/fait communities.

**Pray.** *I pray I am a spiritual person.*

**Journaling.** *The Eastern philosophy lens has been helpful, and then practice wise journaling is kind of maybe the main thing that helps me bring everything back. And you know, just grounding myself and thinking more deeply about things.*

**Forgiveness.** *It's practicing forgiveness and granting forgiveness to people who do not deserve it. It's like looking past, like egoic dysfunction. Into the heart of unconscious people and forgiving them and letting them.*

**Burning Sage.** *When I need reassurance or when I am just having a bad day. And I'm like, OK, let me just burn some sage...for me, it impacts me because it is what keeps me grounded in that way.*

**Nature.** *Being with certain people or being in certain environments, like anything outdoors like, I feel God, I feel like. I am just loved by the universe. I, you know, am just a part of this amazing journey. And I'm. I am like, even though there are millions of people in the world or billions, but I am so special and loved.*

**Church.** *Just like happiness, you know joy and just going to church and fellowshiping.*

**Joy.** *I think trying to find humor and joy and laughter will sort of reframe things for you and make connecting to your spirituality easier.*

**Gratitude.** *Enjoy the little moments to keep perspective on what's important. And we all get caught up in the unimportant stuff, but I think it's about stepping away*

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*from it. Then, at that point, to kind of reorient... whether it's to be out in nature or to be, you know, have a conversation with God. I think we all have different mechanisms and ways to do that and really living in gratitude.*

### **Experiences – The Self that Teams and Clients Experience**

Experiences may be reactions, communications, activities, and events demonstrating one's spirituality. AKA associates talked about their varied experiences, including, service, generosity, empowerment, grounding, integrity/accountability, advocacy, and authenticity. These experiences they lived and shared at AKA gave them meaning, purpose, and connection. Here, the goal is generational impacts, transcendence, and renewal.

**Service.** *It really comes down to just the meaning of helping people and really helping them.*

**Empowerment.** *So they're starting to feel empowered and that things are possible even though they're working the trenches and they're constantly facing these really difficult circumstances. We're just like, we're like part of. The light that they see and that's how it shows up in the work. It's like in this relationship that we create and we sustain.*

**Empowered Workplace.** *I really have never worked somewhere where I feel so empowered and supported by such good people, just entirely good, and I feel. It's so collaborative and innovative, and I really enjoy that I think spirituality is a guide for a lot of the people I work with.*

**Accountable.** *If people were just numbers to us, I think it would look a lot different, but I really see that there's actual intentional care and wanting the best for the clients and people we work with and achieving what they want to achieve. I think that's why it's so successful, and I think that's why generally the team works so well because that's like the key, it's not a numbers game or an ROI or, you know, whatever, like big corporations go for. This is like a, it's a heart-to-heart intention.*

**Authenticity.** *I think being authentic is important. I also think like praying, you know, like I'm always happy to pray for meetings or things that are starting. I try to always use words like encouragement or uplift people.*

**Connection.** *It's in the connection with people. So I think the connection is the biggest thing that we need to work on and work on showing up in spirit form so we can connect with one another spirits before we connect with the evaluation materials [and] the task at hand.*

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**Purpose.** *God really relies on us to build each other up and encourage each other. With our clients, too, I think because I've been in instances where we had clients that were having a hard time and a hard day, and it's about recognizing like. You know, God made me a helping person. God made me. He could have made me something else, but he didn't. But like using that for good to support them, too.*

**Encouragement.** Be an encourager to people. I think that is how. I think I'm called to do that. I mean, yeah, I just think we all have different strengths and spiritual gifts that God gives us. And so I try and hone in on those like, for me, my spiritual gifts or hospitality administration.

**Generational Impacts.** *It's about loving the communities that I get to serve and work for, just genuinely remembering them as individuals. You know on a public health scale, right? So we work on like kind of a population scale or population-wide...it's knowing who we're working for and knowing why I'm doing it. It's about having a child myself and recognizing like the life that I want for her and the goodness that I want for her out of life. I think that's really motivating.*

## Limitations

This study included a small sample size of nine associates working within the AKA team. This could limit the transferability of findings presented to other workplaces and teams. Participating in interviews was voluntary. It is possible that those who volunteered to participate in interviews were more comfortable with spirituality in the workplace than those who did not agree to be interviewed. Even with these limitations, findings from this study underscore the importance of spirituality in the workplace and future research in this area.

## Conclusion

### Are spiritual practices in the workplace worth considering?

Unequivocally yes. This qualitative study found that beliefs, practices, and experiences create connections and enduring relationships. Within the AKA team, beliefs varied about spirituality. Some believed in a Creator or God; others talked about a higher power, goodness, or nothing. Here, it is essential to uplift the concept that spirituality is not always religion. In this study, religion was not a focus area and came up in just a few instances where people talked about their Catholic upbringing or practicing Christianity. Practices are what people see, do, and hear. Practices in this study varied, and there were similarities among associates, with prayer, contemplation, and joy mentioned by two or more associates. Experiences are what

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the AKA team lives out and what the team, clients, and community experience as a result of their work. There were common experience-related themes, including service, leadership, and advocacy. Findings from this study build on findings from previous research: Spiritual individuals are often ethical and moral, and they have positive attitudes that empower others (Sulphey, 2022). Other research identified that spiritual orientation, compassion, meaningful work, and alignment with organizational values are related to psychological empowerment (Paul et al., 2020). Findings from this study are similar in that spirituality helps AKA associates empower others and communities. Qualitative themes suggest that a spiritual orientation promotes meaning, and AKA values align with the spiritual foundation of associates and communities served. Spirituality in the workplace at AKA and beyond is essential for those working in healing places with marginalized communities. When difficult things happen, spirituality is the anchor that helps individuals, teams, and communities endure well.

Final thoughts on spirituality in the workplace are:

- Spirituality in the workplace can potentially improve the health and well-being of employees and clients served.
- Spiritual beliefs vary within individuals and organizations; what is most important is the experiences that result from a spiritual orientation.
- When personal, organizational, and spiritual values align, growth, creativity, and innovation happen.

*Just maintaining and continuing to develop internal relationships...being spiritually connected in a different way. But I feel we all try so hard to attain these values that it keeps me spiritually connected that way. Like I understand that this resonates with me. This is who I am, you know?*

## Implications for Public Health

- Spirituality is a core function of well-being and health in individuals and communities.
- Medicine Wheel teachings remind us to walk in balance, with spirit at the center; when mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual are in balance, better health is achieved for all.
- Promotes holistic vision of health in the workplace and in programs and communities served by employees.
- Tells us the spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences of individuals, teams, and communities.

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### Implications for Practice

- Spirituality in the workplace can give meaning and purpose to employees.
- Encourages gratitude and generosity.
- Uplift values like integrity, honesty, accountability, and respect.
- Honors people for who they are as spiritual beings, not just what they do.
- Promotes creativity and innovation.
- Encourages equity, satisfaction, and connection.

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