



CENTER FOR  
PUBLIC JUSTICE

Research Brief

# Faith <sup>in</sup> Child Care Settings

A Survey of Georgia and Massachusetts Child Care Providers



by Rachel Hope Anderson

# About the Center for Public Justice

The Center for Public Justice (CPJ) is a nonpartisan, Christian, civic education and policy organization based in Alexandria, VA. Working outside the familiar categories of right and left, conservative and liberal, we seek to help citizens and public officeholders respond to God's call to do justice.

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## Contact Us

Center for Public Justice  
1305 Leslie Avenue  
Alexandria, VA 22301

202.695.2667  
[www.cpjustice.org](http://www.cpjustice.org)





# Acknowledgements

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Conducting research into faith-based child care in the states of Massachusetts and Georgia has been an enlightening journey. We extend our sincerest gratitude to the numerous individuals and organizations who contributed to the completion of this project.

First and foremost, we acknowledge the support and cooperation of all the individuals and organizations within the faith-based child care ecosystem of Massachusetts and Georgia who graciously participated in our study. Without their willingness to share their insights and experiences, including through qualitative interviews, this research would not have been possible.

We express our deep appreciation to Rachel Hope Anderson, CPJ's senior consultant on this project. Rachel embodies decades of commitment to shape better understanding of family-supportive policies and ecosystems, both in her scholarship and in her work as a practitioner.

We also extend our thanks to Baylor University's Institute for Studies of Religion, including William Wubbenhorst and Alfreda Wubbenhorst, and its director, Byron Johnson, for their involvement in this project. Under Byron's leadership, Baylor ISR is well-known in the field for their research to understand the role that faith plays in society.

We are grateful for a number of project advisors whose subject-matter expertise is widely known: Mona Abo-Zena, Lisa Cummins, Rachel Fulcher-Dawson, Abby Foreman, Brad Fulton, Zachary Price, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Linda Smith. These leaders' contributions at the outset of the project helped shape the research agenda in ways that substantially enriched it.

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We take full responsibility for the analyses and conclusions presented in this report. Any errors or omissions are solely ours.

It is our sincere hope that this research will contribute to a better understanding of faith in child care settings and help to inform public understanding, future policies, and practices in this field.

With gratitude,

Stephanie Summers, CEO  
Center for Public Justice





Understanding the role of faith in the child care ecosystem requires a nuanced approach that goes beyond simplistic labels of faith-based or faith-affiliated programs.



## Overview

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Every year, millions of families select a child care provider. A portion of these families will find their way to a child care provider who is affiliated with a faith institution or tradition. According to a survey conducted for the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC), a faith-affiliated child care center was the preferred child care option for about 15 percent of American households.<sup>1</sup>

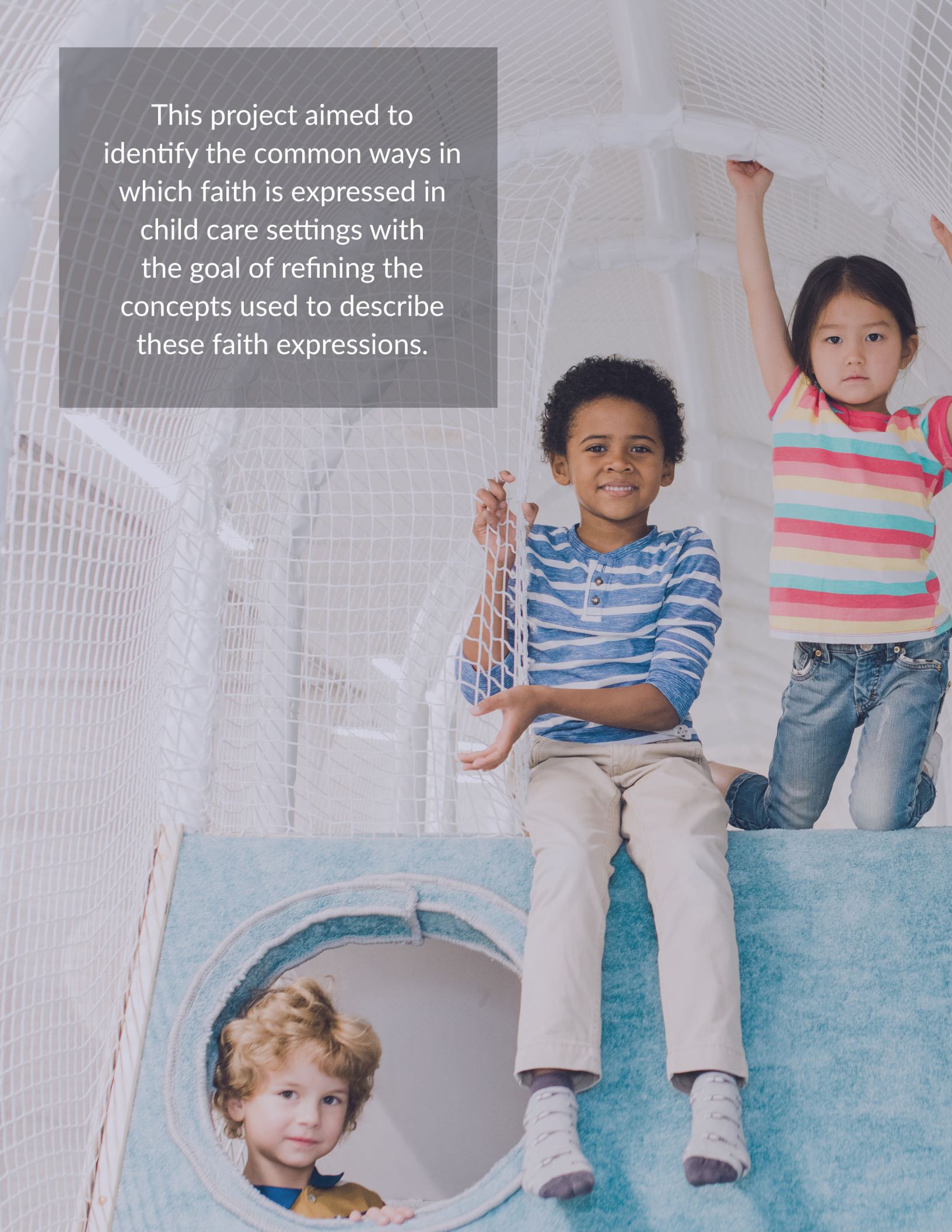
Despite indicators, such as the BPC survey, that faith plays a role in effectuating parent preferences, there are gaps in public knowledge about the topic of faith in child care settings. What does it mean to be a faith-affiliated child care provider? Is faith-affiliation the predominant way that faith plays a role in child care? Are there a variety of ways that faith, religion, and spirituality are expressed in child care settings? How might these various expressions of faith be described and measured?

Most research on faith and child care focuses on child care centers and addresses faith by way of relationship with a religious entity. The National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) inquires about the sponsorship of child care programs by “a church, religious group or private religious school” as well as the location of child care in religious buildings.<sup>2</sup> The BPC survey solicited parent opinion about child care centers “affiliated with a faith-based organization.”

In order to address knowledge gaps concerning faith and child care in the United States and to identify common ways that faith is expressed within child care settings, the Center for Public Justice initiated a survey of child care providers, both child care centers and family-based centers. The survey results provide a snapshot of the prevalence of faith-affiliated child care while also contextualizing faith-affiliation as one of several ways faith plays a role in child care settings. Faith motivation and the incorporation of religious practices were also present in child care settings and were more common than faith-affiliation.



This project aimed to identify the common ways in which faith is expressed in child care settings with the goal of refining the concepts used to describe these faith expressions.





## Research Method

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A research team affiliated with the Baylor University Institute for Studies of Religion distributed surveys to child care providers in two states: Georgia and Massachusetts. The survey was distributed to licensed child care centers and family-based care centers in each state, as well as to child care centers that had been granted an exemption from licensing due to religious reasons.<sup>3</sup> Survey recipients served children between the ages of zero and five in a full-time program. 813 surveys were collected and analyzed. Semi-structured interviews with child care providers guided the interpretation of survey results and recommendations for future research.

## Key Terms\*

### Faith-motivated

Providers who indicated that their program is “motivated by faith values or traditions.”

### Faith-affiliated

Providers who indicated that their program “is affiliated with a faith entity (a church, synagogue, mosque, or other faith-based organization).”

### Occasionally incorporates religious practices

Providers who indicated that their program “occasionally incorporates religious practices - such as dietary guidelines, holidays, and religious teachings, and/or faith stories - into its activities and routines.”

### Regularly incorporates religious practices

Providers who indicated that their program “regularly incorporates religious practices - such as dietary guidelines, holidays, and religious teachings, and/or faith stories - into its activities and routines.”

### Some faith

Providers who indicated that their program has one or more faith descriptions: regularly incorporates religious practices, faith-motivated, faith-affiliated.

### Personal faith, not incorporated

Providers who indicated that they “personally have religious motivation or identity, but do not incorporate any explicit religious or faith components into [their] activities and curricula.” This option was only offered to family-based care providers.

\* Providers received the following survey question and could select as many descriptions as were relevant to their program: “Please select from the following statements which best describes your daily child care structure: operations, curriculum, activities, and practices.”

# Findings

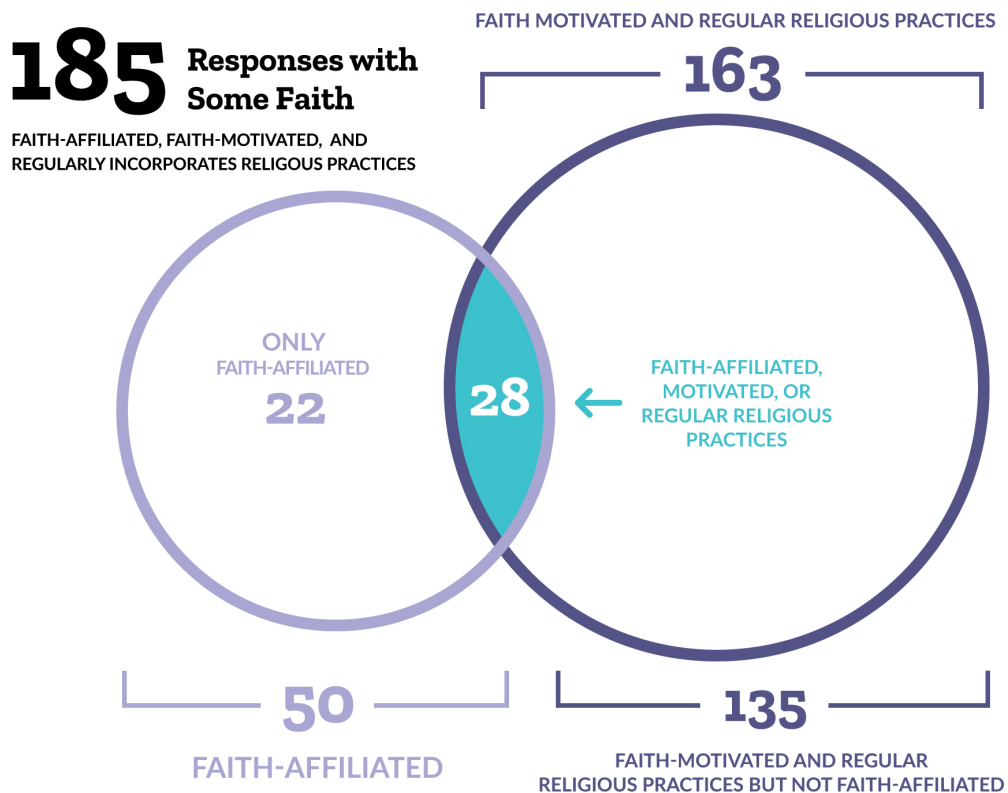
**More than one in five child care providers described their program in faith terms.** Child care providers who described themselves as motivated by faith, regularly incorporating religious practices, and/or faith-affiliated made up 23 percent of all child care providers surveyed.

**Faith motivation and regular incorporation of religious practices are more prevalent in child care settings than is faith affiliation.** Operating a child care program that is motivated by faith values or traditions was the most common program description in relation to faith selected by providers. Fifteen percent of providers described their programs as faith-motivated. Nine percent regularly incorporated religious practices into their program. Six percent of providers said their program was affiliated with a church, synagogue, mosque, or other faith-based organization. These providers were primarily child care centers.

Altogether, three times as many child care providers said they were motivated by faith and/or incorporated religious practices as said that they were affiliated with a religious entity.



**FIGURE 1.**  
**Overlapping Program Descriptions with Respect to Faith**





**TABLE 1. Overview of Program Description with Respect to Faith**

	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Number</b>
Faith-motivated and/or regularly incorporates religious practices	20	163
Faith-affiliated	6	50
Faith-affiliated, motivated and/or regularly incorporates religious practices ("some faith")	23	185

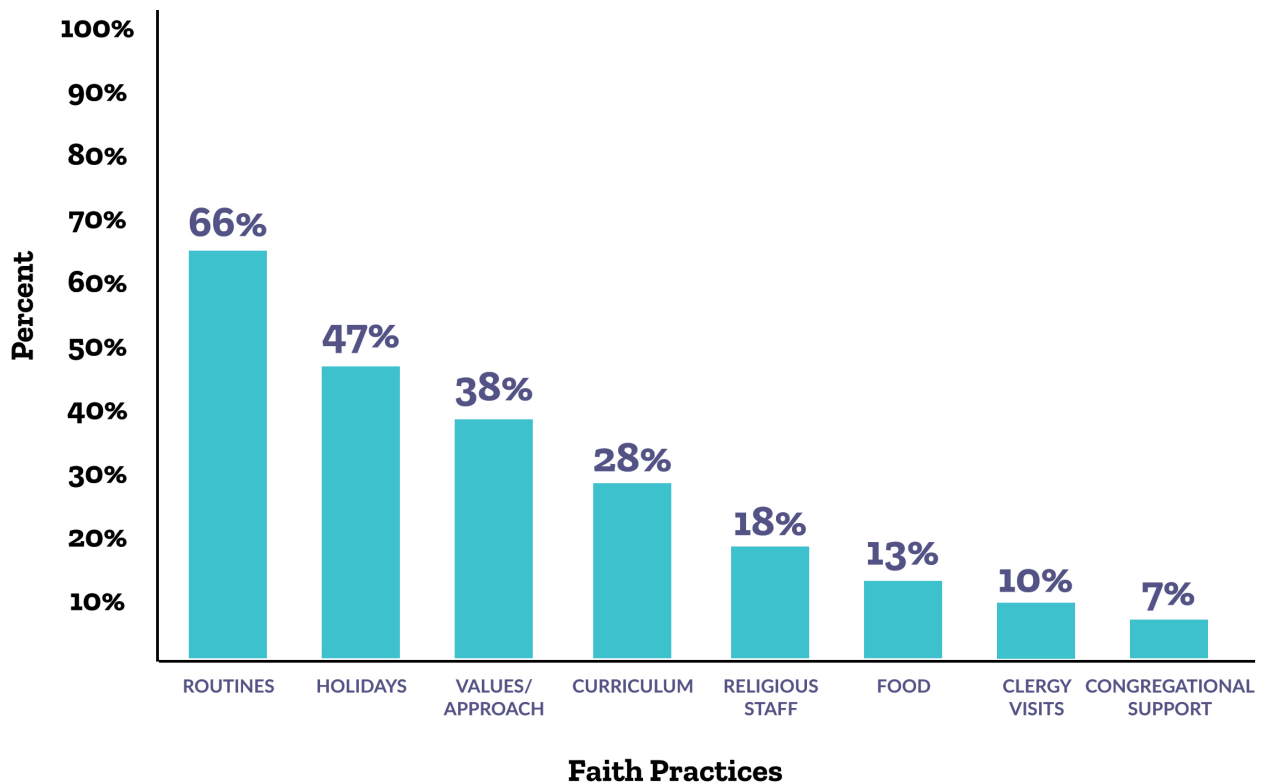
Note: n=813

Daily routines such as music, stories, or prayer are the most common way child care providers—faith-motivated, faith-affiliated, and/or regularly incorporating religious practices—express their faith, followed by observing religious holidays, and having a values approach.

**FIGURE 2.**



**Faith Practices in Programs Described as Faith-Affiliated, Faith-Motivated, and/or Regularly Incorporates Religious Practices ("Some Faith")**







Analysis of survey data provided a broad account of child care program descriptions with respect to faith as well as faith practices in child care settings.

The themes raised by providers in semi-structured interviews informed the interpretation of survey responses.

These interviews, along with answers provided to open-response fields in the survey, guided the project's recommendations for future research on faith and child care.



**A meaningful portion of family-based care providers expressed a connection between faith and their daily work.** Few family-based care providers (2 percent), were faith-affiliated. But 14 percent said that their program was motivated by faith or values or traditions. Twenty-nine percent of family-based care providers described themselves as having personal religious motivation that was not explicitly incorporated into their program. Only 40 percent of all family child care providers said that none of the religious attributes offered in the survey applied to them.

Because family-based care providers are very rarely affiliated with a religious entity, they may incorporate faith in ways that differ from institutionally-driven approaches, weaving faith through their daily routines and in the domestic settings in which they provide care. As a family-based care provider in Massachusetts explained,

*“Now that I’m working out of my house, the children and their families obviously see the signs of my faith. I have a blessing over the door... they’ll see the Christmas tree. They’ll see the Advent wreath.”<sup>4</sup>*

For others, faith spurred their entry into the child care field and remains a source of motivation. “I promised God I [would do] something else with my life,” explained a provider who left a job in a corporate setting in order to open a child care program in her home. For this provider, nearly being injured in a car accident led to a sense of calling “do something where I’m going to make a difference with kids.”<sup>5</sup>

**Institutional religious support for child care programs was rare.** Among those programs with some relationship to faith—faith-motivated, faith-affiliated, and/or regularly incorporating religious practices—only 7 percent receive congregational support and 10 percent receive clergy visits.

The infrequency of institutional support also appeared in questions about the use of religious buildings. Seventeen percent of child care centers said they used religious buildings, a finding consistent with NSECE’s national survey. Most of these programs paid rent for use of the space. Only 5 percent of all child-care center providers were faith-located and did not pay rent.<sup>6</sup>

## Discussion

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### **Child care providers' own choices and cultures are important drivers of faith in child care settings.**

Affiliation with an external religious entity is not the only source of faith expression in child care settings. Three times as many programs had faith motivation and/or regular incorporation of religious practices as were faith-affiliated. Practices such as incorporating stories, songs, and prayer into daily routines and expressing faith through curriculum were reported by providers without formal religious affiliation or other institutional ties as well as by faith-affiliated providers.

Several interviewees spoke about religious practices occurring as part of the ebb and flow of the day or the culture of one's home. One family-based care provider remarked, simply: "We worship. We dance our dance time. [We have] prayer at lunch."<sup>7</sup>

Others incorporated a spiritual perspective in their work as did a family-based care provider who explained: [I teach] "there's something out there bigger than yourself and you are here to do something special in this world..."<sup>8</sup>

Child care providers take varied and nuanced approaches to religious diversity and child spirituality. Providers navigated their personal faith, familial context, and child spiritual development in nuanced ways. Responses to open-ended questions in the survey and the qualitative interviews indicate that providers have varied and nuanced approaches to faith in the child care setting.

*"I can hold my own beliefs ... while still accepting other people's beliefs and letting them believe what they would like."<sup>9</sup>*

*"I just think children are far more imaginative and even spiritual just in their own spontaneous beings than people give them credit for a lot of times."<sup>10</sup>*

None of the providers who were interviewed described what might be called religious instructions in a single faith tradition. This may have been a feature of the project's framing or contextual constraints. However, it could also reflect providers' considered decisions about how to navigate their personal faith, the diverse backgrounds of the families they serve, and providers' working knowledge of child development and child spirituality.



Concern about the perception of bias in relation to faith led some providers to reject the term “faith-based.” A family-based care provider who considers herself motivated by faith explained why she does not call her program faith-based: “to me, it’s hard to do that without discriminating.”<sup>11</sup>

*“I am not a faith-based program, but as a woman of faith, I incorporate faith into our day through conversations, blessings during meal time and any other opportunity that allows faith to be shared.”<sup>12</sup>*

*“I work with love for others, I speak of God’s love for my children. I don’t talk about church titles”<sup>13</sup>*

Ultimately, the term “faith-based” seemed to signal attributes such as being part of a religious institution, focusing on only one faith tradition, or, potentially, exercising bias. Many providers - even those with some relationship to faith - felt these attributes were inconsistent with their approach to child care work.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

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To understand the role of faith in the diverse child care ecosystem, it is important to consider institutional religious affiliation as well as child care providers' faith motivation and daily practices.<sup>14</sup>

Child care providers' own accounts suggest that research and communication about faith and child care would benefit from more nuanced categories relating to faith. The label "faith-based" should be re-examined and, potentially, discontinued.

This survey's findings point to four overlapping categories that could be used to examine faith and child care settings. Two of these categories describe providers' expression of faith and two describe providers' intention relative to faith.

- ▶ **Faith-motivated** - the program is motivated by the provider's faith traditions or values
- ▶ **Faith-practicing** - the program regularly incorporates religious practices
- ▶ **Faith-responsive** - the program incorporates religious practices that are responsive to children's family contexts and the community in which the program operates
- ▶ **Faith-formative** - the program incorporates faith practices and faith teachings in order to introduce children to a particular religious tradition and shape their character

These categories might combine in the child care setting in a variety of ways. For families that share a religious tradition with their child care provider, a faith-formation approach may best meet their preferences. Parents who want their children to encounter children from different faiths than their own may seek out a faith-responsive program.

More research is needed to test these categories and their correlation with other components of quality child care. Does a providers' faith motivation affect the quality of provider-child relationships? Do faith attributes strengthen provider well-being and the sustainability of their work? How might providers that wish to be faith-responsive develop the requisite skills and capacities?

A child care ecosystem that supports diverse families will incorporate diverse types of child care - including settings that incorporate faith. Attention to faith in the child care setting will help researchers and administrators assess the supply of child care now available, how closely it reflects parent preferences, and how to extend the setting in ways that mutually benefit and respect providers, families, and children.



## Endnotes

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1. “Parent Child Care Preferences: Are They Changing?” Bipartisan Policy Center. Accessed May 1, 2024. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/event/parent-child-care-preferences-are-they-changing/>.
2. Joshua Borton and Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, “2019 NSECE Snapshot: The Role of Faith-based Organizations in Center-based Child Care and Early Education,” report (Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, September 2022), [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/2019\\_nsece\\_faith\\_based\\_snapshot\\_nov2022.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/2019_nsece_faith_based_snapshot_nov2022.pdf).
3. Programs operating without a license for any other reason (such as operating a part-day or seasonal program, operating in a public school setting) were not included in this survey.
4. WM, Interview, Transcript on file.
5. WM, Interview, Transcript on file.
6. Providers were not asked about arrangements other than not paying rent, such as receiving a reduction in rent or sharing administrative services with a religious institution.
7. WM, Interview, Transcript on file.
8. SE, Interview, Transcript on file.
9. JB, Interview, Transcript on file.
10. SE, Interview, Transcript on file.
11. Write in Q6/13
12. Write in, Q20
13. Write in Q6/13
14. John Nimmo, Mona Abo-Zena, and Debbie Leekeenan, “Finding a Place for the Religious and Spiritual Lives of Young Children and their Families: An Anti-Bias Approach,” [antibiasleadersece.com](https://antibiasleadersece.com), accessed April 17, 2024, <https://antibiasleadersece.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Nimmo-religion-YC-2019.pdf>; Jennifer Mata-McMahon, Michael J. Haslip, and Shahin Hossain, “How Early Childhood Educators Describe Children’s Spirituality: A Framework of Essence, Origin, and Action,” Springer Link, March 19, 2024, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10643-024-01642-8#citeas>.

## Contact Us

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1305 Leslie Avenue  
Alexandria, VA 22301

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