

Article

The Impact of Pastoral Care on Students' Religious and Psychological Well-Being in a Christian Tradition-Based Residential Hall in Hong Kong

Xunqian Liu ^{1,*}  and Xiaoqing Liu ²¹ School of Humanities, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai 200240, China² Faculty of Arts, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong 999077, China; uid30028173@connect.hku.hk

* Correspondence: lxunqian@sjtu.edu.cn

Abstract: This study investigates the impact of pastoral care on the religious and psychological well-being of students residing in St. John's College, a Christian tradition-based residential hall in Hong Kong. The research employs a mixed-methods approach and comprises two complementary studies: a quantitative analysis (Study 1) involving 98 participants and a qualitative investigation (Study 2) with 26 participants. Study 1 utilised the Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (RCI-10) and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) to measure religious commitment and psychological well-being, respectively. Initial findings revealed significant correlations suggesting that higher levels of religious commitment engender improved psychological well-being. Study 2 explored these relationships further through semi-structured interviews, providing deeper insights into how pastoral care influences students' religious practices and mental health. The qualitative data underscored the nuanced role of pastoral activities in fostering a supportive community atmosphere, enhancing both personal and communal religious experiences.

Keywords: university; religious education; psychological well-being; residence education



Citation: Liu, Xunqian, and Xiaoqing Liu. 2024. The Impact of Pastoral Care on Students' Religious and Psychological Well-Being in a Christian Tradition-Based Residential Hall in Hong Kong. *Religions* 15: 1061. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15091061>

Academic Editors: Charló Camilleri and Glen Attard

Received: 27 July 2024

Revised: 21 August 2024

Accepted: 27 August 2024

Published: 31 August 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

There is a long history of universities perceiving residences as pivotal in students' learning processes. As early as the late 13th century, a university residential model known as the Oxbridge model included provisions for student residences, catering, socializing activities, and academic support. It emerged from two medieval universities in the UK: the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge (Cheng and Chan 2020). From early on, the University of Hong Kong (HKU) followed the Oxbridge model by requiring all undergraduate students to live in a hostel. The university believed that doing so complemented university education regarding character formation and all-round learning (Cunich 2012).

In 1911, Sir Frederick Lugard, then Governor of Hong Kong, helped establish St. John's College in collaboration with the Anglican Church, making it HKU's first residential hall (Loong 1952). In the early stages, this Christian missionary college aimed to promote Biblical doctrine and spread religious beliefs, teaching students to be "good people", guiding them towards God as the source of "goodness", and perceiving Jesus Christ as their role model.

Religious education aims to teach students different faiths, which is crucial for developing a tolerant society. It traditionally falls into two types: confessional, which focuses on adherence to a specific religion, and non-confessional, which provides a broader understanding of various religious beliefs to foster tolerance (Estrada et al. 2019). St. John's College aligns predominantly with Christian teachings but upholds the Oxbridge tradition of embracing a broad spectrum of religious perspectives. It fosters an environment where Christian students and those interested in Christianity effectively navigate and express their faith within a dynamic community environment.

Despite the growing body of literature on religious education in secular universities (Estrada et al. 2019; Niemi 2018; Rymarz and Cleary 2018), its specific role within university residence halls remains under-explored. Moreover, one can observe a shift in research from viewing residences as housing to regarding them as educational environments (Parameswaran and Bowers 2014). Scholars assert that the benefits of living in a hall include access to a variety of educational and community programmes that encourage organic interactions between students (Graham et al. 2018). Additionally, the hall setting enables students to develop a sense of belonging (Brown et al. 2019). In this context, the residence hall is ideal for evangelisation and religious education among students.

This study examines the effectiveness of pastoral care, which encompasses both formal guidance—such as spiritual counselling and religious instruction—and informal Christian community activities, including fellowship and festival events within the residential hall setting. The study focuses on three primary research questions:

- (1) How does pastoral care influence resident students' religious practices?
- (2) How does pastoral care impact these students' psychological well-being?
- (3) How do students perceive the role of pastoral caregivers and Christian community practices in their personal and spiritual development?

With this background in place, the study delves into the roles and impacts of pastoral care on religious and psychological aspects of student life at St. John's College.

2. Background and Context

2.1. A Brief Note on St. John's College

The Church Missionary Society founded St. John's College under the auspices of the Church of England as part of its evangelical and missionary work through education. When HKU opened, it offered the first and only hostel available for student accommodation (Loong 1952). As Bishop R. O. Hall, one of St. John's earliest advocates, wrote in 1965,

Your concern here on this hillside must be to always ensure that graduate members of the University have been infected in their undergraduate days, by the tone, temper, and practice, of a faculty with a deep and humane concern for mankind. (Hall 1965)

St. John's has a remarkable history; in 1959, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher (1887–1972), who presided over Queen Elizabeth's coronation, visited St. John's to focus particularly on strengthening international ties with other Anglican churches. (Webster 2004)

Currently, St. John's College provides accommodation for HKU students. Its student body comprises about 200 undergraduates and 100 postgraduates. Resident students proudly refer to themselves as "St. Johnians". Constitutionally, the college is a body corporate founded by a statute—St. John's College Ordinance (Chapter 1089, Laws of Hong Kong)—on 27 April 1956. Consequently, unlike other residence halls HKU directly administers, the college enjoys financial and administrative independence. Its aims, as the Preamble of St. John's College Ordinance specifies, are as follows:

The pursuit of virtue and sound learning with faith in God and within the order of the Anglican Communion; and to this end, to provide accommodation for teachers and students of all races where they may live, study and worship together; and to promote extramural activities in Christian learning and service, that the members of the college may better understand and fulfil their duty to God and their neighbours.

The college features several key facilities, including a dining hall, a library, and the Chapel of Epiphany. This chapel serves as a space for prayer and reflection for students and staff. Additionally, it welcomes non-believers to participate in divine worship. The chapel holds regular prayer services during the term and organises a Bible study group, a fellowship, and other seasonal activities during Easter and Christmas. While the nearby local churches usually offer Cantonese services, St. John's Cathedral provides English and Mandarin services for non-local students.

St. John's College works closely with the Hong Kong Anglican Church (Sheng Kung Hui, SKH). Apart from the college's alumni and fellows, its council members include representatives from the Hong Kong Anglican Church, the vicar of the parish, and the principals of the Anglican schools. The college considers the Church's involvement vital to nurturing and forming the students' character with Christian values. It currently has two chaplains: one who works full-time and another who works part-time. They support the members of the college by listening to their concerns and offering guidance on spiritual matters and college life.

At St. John's College, pastoral care includes both formal guidance—provided by college chaplains through structured counselling, professional advice on life and academic issues, and assistance with personal or academic challenges—and informal Christian community activities, such as lectures and festival worship. Additionally, the hall hosts numerous purely academic and artistic activities, enriching the spiritual and cultural environment and creating a nurturing religious atmosphere. Participation in these activities is entirely voluntary. However, the intense competition for on-campus housing in Hong Kong, driven by the high cost of living off campus, compels students to actively engage in hall activities to secure continued residency. This residential education system fosters a deep-seated philosophy of community engagement among students (Ong et al. 2020). As a result, students at St. John's College hold the hall traditions in high esteem and actively participate in their community. On average, each student engages in approximately two activities per week, totaling at least one hour of engagement during the spring and autumn semesters.

It is important to note that a significant aspect of pastoral care at St. John's College is its emphasis on community building. These programmes foster a sense of belonging, helping students feel integrated and valued within the university community. Such efforts are crucial, as they support students' personal and spiritual growth, thereby enhancing their overall university experience by creating a supportive and inclusive environment.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

2.2.1. Subjective Well-Being and Its Measurement

In psychological literature, subjective well-being is defined as the overall evaluation of an individual's quality of life based on their emotional responses, life satisfaction, and sense of purpose or meaning (Ryff and Keyes 1995). This concept encompasses both mental and emotional health, reflecting how individuals perceive and assess their lives in terms of positivity and fulfillment (Meehan 2020). Subjective well-being is typically measured using validated scales that assess key aspects such as emotional stability, life satisfaction, and fulfillment (Hu et al. 2022). These measures are crucial for understanding the general quality of life and psychological resilience among individuals, particularly in challenging environments such as higher education.

2.2.2. The Role of Religiosity in Enhancing Well-Being

Religious engagement has been extensively studied in the field of psychology of religion, with research consistently showing that religiosity enhances coping strategies, provides social support, and contributes to personal meaning-making. These elements are essential for psychological resilience, helping individuals manage stress, find purpose, and maintain emotional stability (Davis and Kiang 2016). Religious practices, such as attending worship services, engaging in community activities, and personal spiritual practices, have been linked to improved mental health outcomes, including greater life satisfaction and lower levels of anxiety and depression (Green and Elliott 2010; Ai et al. 2016).

Numerous studies have demonstrated that religious behaviours or practices are positively related to various indices of health and well-being. For example, Koenig et al. (2012) found that religious involvement, including participation in religious services and community-based religious activities, was significantly protective against emotional disor-

ders such as depression and substance abuse, while also being positively associated with well-being, happiness, and a sense of meaning and purpose.

2.2.3. Pastoral Care as a Form of Religious Engagement

Pastoral care, as a specific form of religious engagement within university settings, plays a pivotal role in shaping students' well-being by providing both spiritual and emotional support (Sawir et al. 2009). It encompasses a mix of formal guidance, such as spiritual counselling and religious instruction, and informal Christian community activities, including fellowship and community events within residential settings such as St. John's College. Research has shown that pastoral care initiatives, such as counselling services, prayer groups, and meditation sessions, contribute to students' sense of belonging and community, which are essential components of psychological well-being (Walker 2022). These activities not only help students cope with the challenges of university life but also foster personal growth and self-reflection. By aligning with the students' personal values and beliefs, pastoral care provides a framework for students to navigate stress, enhance their coping mechanisms, and maintain their psychological resilience (Spears and Green 2022).

Moreover, the supportive environment provided by pastoral care, including structured counselling and community-based activities, reinforces individual and collective well-being. The therapeutic benefits of pastoral counselling, as discussed by Pargament et al. (2013), highlight how integrating spiritual dimensions into counselling practices can effectively address the spiritual needs that contribute to an individual's overall well-being. These interventions are particularly effective in managing stress and anxiety, enhancing students' ability to cope during challenging times, and fostering a supportive community that is aligned with their personal and collective values (Tsai 2005).

3. Material and Methods

3.1. Research Design

This article's research is part of a broader study on residential education at the University of Hong Kong (HKU). During extensive interviews concerning residence education, students spontaneously highlighted St. John's College's religious education atmosphere. They provided detailed narratives to underscore the significant role of pastoral care in influencing their mental health and religious attitudes. Consequently, the authors focused on the unexpected theme of the Christian tradition in residence halls that emerged during the interviews to align with the qualitative research's openness and flexibility (Patton 2015).

We utilised a mixed-methods exploratory sequential design for this study, beginning with quantitative research (Study 1) to establish baseline correlations and patterns. We followed this phase with a qualitative study (Study 2) that delved deeper into the thematic elements we identified in the initial phase. This methodological approach is illustrated in Figure 1, which outlines the integrative framework of the mixed-methods process, starting from hypothesis generation in the quantitative phase through to theory development in the qualitative phase.

3.2. Ethical Considerations

This study employs a cross-sectional research design targeting St. John's College students as survey participants. The authors adhered to all ethical requirements during the data collection. All research participants had to fill out and return an informed consent form that emphasised that participation was voluntary and that all information obtained would be kept strictly confidential and used solely for research purposes.

Notably, the residential halls at the University of Hong Kong, including St. John's College, operate on a voluntary, bidirectional selection process, where students apply and choose their hall. St. John's College residents may be Christian, non-religious, or follow other faiths. Some local students from Hong Kong may practice folk religions, which typically coexist with other religious beliefs without exclusion. Therefore, this study does not explore how students from different religious backgrounds perceive and interact with

Christian-focused pastoral care, as conflicts between Christian practices and other religious beliefs are not prevalent.

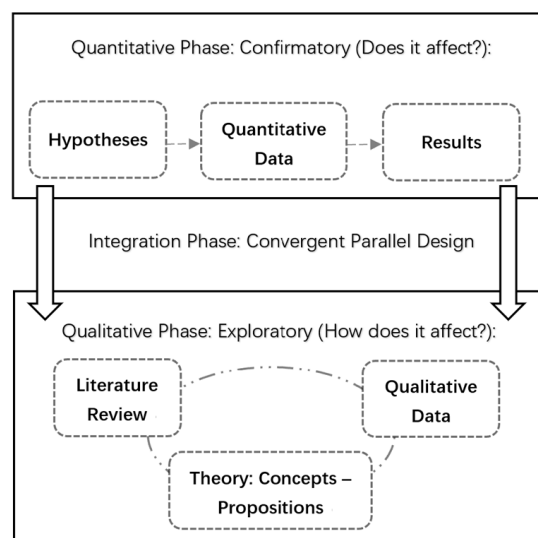


Figure 1. Mixed-Methods Research Process Diagram.

3.3. Study 1 (Quantitative Research)

3.3.1. Measurement Tools

1. Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (RCI-10)

The Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (RCI-10) is a concise assessment tool consisting of ten items designed to gauge an individual's level of religious commitment. This assessment utilises a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Not at all true of me") to 5 ("Totally true of me"). Koenig et al. (2012) define "religious commitment" as reflecting an individual's level of involvement in their religion.

The RCI-10 evaluates two distinct dimensions of religious commitment: intrapersonal and interpersonal. Six items cover the intrapersonal component to assess personal engagement within one's religious context. For example, a typical item on this scale is, "I enjoy working in the activities of my religious organisation". Four items comprise the interpersonal component and measure the extent of religious socialisation, such as how much one enjoys spending time with others of the same religious affiliation.

Worthington et al. (2003) and Hu et al. (2022) support RCI-10 as a reliable and valid measure of religiosity, predominantly within Christian demographics. In the current study, the reliability values for the intrapersonal and interpersonal subscales were exceptionally high, recorded at 0.95 and 0.90, respectively.

2. Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS)

The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale measures psychological well-being. It comprises a 14-item scale featuring positively worded statements that address the feelings and functioning aspects of mental well-being. Respondents rate these statements based on their experiences over the previous two weeks, using a five-point scale that ranges from "none of the time" to "all of the time" (Clarke et al. 2010). The WEMWBS exhibits a one-factor structure, and its high internal consistency suggests it reliably measures a single construct: mental well-being (Taggart et al. 2015). Tennant et al.'s (2007) application of this scale in research on UK university students dovetails with this study's University of Hong Kong context since it is pertinent for assessing students' mental well-being in a similar academic setting. Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.87, indicating good internal reliability (Hunter et al. 2015).

3.3.2. Procedure

This study collected data using a professional online survey via Google Forms, which included a demographics questionnaire and two scales. Recipients completed the demographic questionnaire anonymously. The entire process took about 20 min.

Two steps ensured the fidelity of administrative management. Initially, researchers contacted the tutor of the residence hall (a role filled by a graduate student from HKU) to explain the survey in detail, including how it would benefit the students. Subsequently, the tutor distributed the survey link to the students via WhatsApp groups, as each hall floor has a group. One hundred and ten students received the survey, and 98 provided valid responses, yielding a response rate of 89.1%. The distribution of demographic characteristics such as gender, grade level, and major were relatively even (see Appendix A, Table A1).

We used SPSS 26.0 for the correlation analysis of related variables. Before conducting the data analysis, we performed a power analysis to ensure that the sample size was sufficient to detect statistically significant effects. Given the complexity and potential variability within the data, this step was crucial. In handling missing data, we employed listwise deletion, ensuring we analysed only complete cases to maintain the statistical tests' integrity.

3.4. Study 2 (Qualitative Research)

3.4.1. Semi-Structured Interview

In the quantitative phase, we observed significant correlations between scores from the Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (RCI-10) and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS). They suggested a potential link between students' religious commitment and psychological health. However, the RCI-10 and WEMWBS alone could not isolate the specific effects of pastoral care from other external influences, such as general psychological health and participation in religious activities outside the residence hall. To address this limitation, we conducted qualitative interviews that allowed us to delve deeper into the personal narratives and specific instances where pastoral care directly impacted students, enriching the context of our statistical data and helping to differentiate the effects of pastoral care from other external factors.

Open-ended questions facilitated the semi-structured interviews and allowed participants to articulate their perceptions individually (Creswell 2012). During these interviews, we explored students' views on the influence of pastoral care on their religious practices and mental health. We aimed to uncover the personal narratives underpinning the statistical data, seeking insights into how and why pastoral care might enhance religious commitment and psychological well-being.

We recruited the 36 interviewees during the last high-table dinner of the 2023–2024 academic year. As the residence hall recruits new lodgers every academic year, all students at this event had lived there for at least one year. The term "high-table dinners" originally refers to a formal meal in the dining room of a British college, reserved for the residential master, fellows, and their distinguished guests. This tradition began at Oxford and Cambridge and has since spread to many colleges and universities in Hong Kong. These two-hour dinners from March to June 2023 provided ample time for our interviews. Conducting interviews in such a relaxed dining environment allowed students to express their views more naturally. During the dinners, we randomly selected interviewees to avoid bias. Each interview lasted approximately 15 min.

The guide included a mix of open-ended questions, allowing participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences while ensuring that key areas of interest were consistently covered across all interviews. The questions were organised to cover the following areas: "How do you perceive the role of Christian traditions in the hall's culture and community life?" "Can you share any experiences where participating in religious events or discussions has impacted you?" "Have you participated in any religious activities

or festivals in the hall?” and “Have you sought counseling or guidance from the hall’s tutors or chaplains? If so, how has this experience influenced your personal or spiritual growth?”

The interview guide was structured to begin with introductory questions to build rapport, followed by the main thematic questions, and concluded with reflective questions. Additionally, follow-up questions such as “Could you elaborate on that experience?” or “What do you think led to that outcome?” were used to probe deeper into responses as needed, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of each participant’s experience.

3.4.2. Data Analysis

We subjected the data we collected from the interviews to qualitative content analysis in line with the theoretical propositions of [Graneheim and Lundman \(2004\)](#), who indicated that qualitative content analysis may reach the level of interpretation reflected in themes that answer the question “How” and are “a thread of underlying meaning”.

The following six steps informed the entire analysis ([Graneheim and Lundman 2004](#)):

- (1) Reading the transcribed interviews multiple times to understand the entirety of the interview’s content;
- (2) Extracting texts concerning religious education experiences into one text to create a unit of analysis;
- (3) Dividing the text into meaning units that we subsequently condensed;
- (4) Abstracting the condensed meaning units and labelling them using a code;
- (5) Discussing and reflecting on the meaning units with codes to achieve consensus regarding the codes’ classification;
- (6) Formulating themes to reflect the latent constructs of categories.

We ensured that the interpretation of qualitative data remains grounded in the data and avoids researcher bias from Study 1. We undertook the procedures of conducting interviews, data analysis, and reporting and interpreting the obtained results in consultation with an independent researcher uninvolved in any of the steps of the present investigation ([Nowell et al. 2017](#)).

To enhance the credibility and reliability of the qualitative data collection and analysis, interview transcript coding was conducted by multiple coders to ensure intercoder reliability ([Miles et al. 2019](#)). Both authors of this study independently analysed a subset of transcripts and then discussed their coding choices to reconcile differences and refine the coding scheme. Additionally, the study employed reflexive journaling throughout the data collection and analysis phases. Researchers maintained detailed records of their observations, reflections, and decisions made during these processes ([Creswell 2012](#)), allowing for critical reflection on potential biases and assumptions that could influence the interpretation of the data.

4. Results

4.1. Study 1

4.1.1. Correlation Analysis Results

The researchers performed descriptive statistical analyses to understand the distribution of responses on each scale the study utilised. A summary of the means and standard deviations for the Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (RCI-10) and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) appears in Table 1. For detailed descriptive statistics of the RCI-10, see Table A2; data for the WEMWBS can be found in Table A3.

Further analysis involved exploring the relationship between the scales using Pearson’s correlation coefficient.

The results presented in Table 2 reveal a statistically significant positive correlation, with a correlation coefficient (r) of 0.585 and a p -value of less than 0.001. This substantial correlation indicates a strong association between higher levels of religious commitment and enhanced psychological well-being among students. These initial quantitative findings provide a foundation for the more detailed qualitative research discussed in subsequent sec-

tions, which explores how pastoral care and other contextual factors within the residential hall may influence or modify the impact of religious commitment on student well-being.

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of RCI-10 and WEMWBS Scores. (calculated on a 5-point Likert scale).

Scale	Mean	SD
Religious Commitment Inventory-10	3.17	0.91
Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale scores	3.51	0.71

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Analysis.

Sum Variable 1	Sum Variable 2	Correlation Coefficient	<i>p</i>
RCI-10	WEMWBS	$r = 0.585$	$p < 0.001$

4.1.2. Regression Analysis Results

We conducted a regression analysis using the summed scores from RCI-10 dimensions—Intrapersonal and Interpersonal—and WEMWBS to investigate the influence of religious commitment on psychological well-being. The WEMWBS score, which serves as the dependent variable, has a Cronbach's α of 0.92 and reflects overall psychological well-being. The Intrapersonal and Interpersonal scores from the RCI-10, both of which are sum variables, serve as independent variables. The Cronbach's α values are 0.86 for Intrapersonal and 0.80 for Interpersonal.

The analysis shown in Table 3 reveals that both dimensions of religious commitment significantly predict psychological well-being. The coefficients indicate a positive relationship, with the interpersonal dimension exhibiting a stronger effect on the WEMWBS scores than the intrapersonal dimension. This result suggests that personal religious practices and social interactions within the religious community are crucial in enhancing students' mental health.

Table 3. Regression Analysis of RCI-10 Dimensions on WEMWBS.

Variable	Beta	Std. Error	t-Value	<i>p</i> -Value	95% Confidence Interval
Constant	0.886	0.301	2.945	0.004	[0.289, 1.482]
Intrapersonal	0.311	0.062	5.045	<0.001	[0.189, 0.434]
Interpersonal	0.458	0.058	7.873	<0.001	[0.343, 0.573]

The regression model accounted for approximately 48.1% of the variance in psychological well-being ($R^2 = 0.481$), highlighting religious engagement's significant role in students' lives. The statistical significance of the model (F-statistic: 44.02, Prob (F-statistic): 2.95×10^{-14}) reinforces the findings' reliability.

These results corroborate the hypothesis that higher levels of religious commitment, encompassing personal engagement and communal interactions, are linked to St. John's College students' improved psychological well-being. This analysis underscores the importance of pastoral care and a holistic approach that integrates individual and social-religious experiences in fostering a supportive environment that contributes positively to university students' mental health.

The findings from this regression analysis provide a robust quantitative foundation to argue that pastoral interventions are vital components of educational settings, particularly in residences where religious activities markedly influence students.

4.2. Study 2

The interview results fell into three subthemes: interest in and fondness for Christianity, respect for Christian traditions, and spiritual growth and personal development (see Table 4).

Table 4. Thematic coding framework (n = 26).

Subtheme	Open Codes	Definition
Interest in and Fondness for Christianity	Interest in religious activities	This theme captures the students' initial and developing interest in Christianity through engagement in various religious activities and exposure to Christian practices and symbols within the hall.
	Positive reception of Christianity	
Respect for Christian Traditions	Respect for religious practices	This theme reflects how students, regardless of their personal religious beliefs, respect Christian traditions and rituals as integral parts of the hall's culture and community life.
	Non-Christian engagement	
	Community and belonging	
Spiritual Growth and Personal Development	Personal reflection	This theme explores how religious counselling and participation in religious events contribute to students' personal growth and spiritual development.
	Counselling with religious integration	

4.2.1. Interest in and Fondness for Christianity

Most respondents answered positively about their experiences with Christianity, including religious involvement in fellowships, religious festivals, community participation, and counselling services. All names mentioned are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the interviewees.

In the 26 interviews, nearly half of the students expressed interest in Christianity, the Bible, or the hall's religious activities (n = 17). The hall distributes pamphlets to encourage students to participate in such activities. Moreover, one can observe elements associated with Christianity throughout the dormitory, especially at the building's entrance, and each floor boasts constantly updated posters of religious activities. Many students reported receiving background information about Christianity through their living experiences (n = 21).

Some students reported that the hall's religious activities and rituals were extremely formal and complicated (n = 6), but the rituals made them feel the solemnity of Christianity. One student said,

In some folk religions in Taiwan, if you tell someone that you believe in this religion, you go to worship it and then you easily become a follower of that religion. However, judging by the hall's activities, Christianity is not that simple. You must go to church and be formally baptised and promise the Lord to serve him forever. Therefore, Christianity is more systematic and respectful. If I'm going to be a Christian in the future, I also need to be well prepared. (Seakay, female student, 23)

Sheau Wei from Malaysia mentioned that the Biblical phrases on the pamphlets captured her interest, and she found them beautiful to read. She said, "Our [Bible study group's] hope is that together we can 'pursue righteousness, faith, love [and] peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart'" (2 Timothy 2:22). She described the hall staff as extremely kind and gracious, probably due to the Christian influence, and believed that Bible teachings can lead people towards goodness and help them develop good morals. Another student commented on the staff's hospitality: "They are all very nice people. With their companionship and support, I overcame many difficulties, both in my life and research" (Lau, female student, 24).

Some students said that the most significant impact of hostel life was community service, which entailed helping older people in the surrounding areas (n = 4). One student explained,

After I started graduate school, I was very confused about what else to do except research. As the master told us, serving the community is about practising the Christian spirit of “serving people” and “benefitting mankind”, which had a huge impact on me. (Mok, male student, 21)

The students added that while other halls also require students to participate in community service, St. John’s has a unique interpretation of service: practising the Spirit of Christ. This interpretation increased their favourable impressions of the hall’s religious activities.

Overall, the residence hall’s broad Christian culture, rituals, and atmosphere positively impacted the students’ religious perceptions.

4.2.2. Showing Respect for Christian Traditions

Several students interpreted Christianity as a feature or symbol of the hall ($n = 18$). They supported its Christian element to connect with residents in the community. Many associated their positive experiences in the hall with religious festivals, such as Easter and Christmas ($n = 16$). Representative views included the following:

Every residence hall has a theme in our university—either serving the community or protecting the environment—and the theme of our hall is apparently Christianity. Even if I am not a Christian, this [sic] can be used as an element of the hall, as a sense of belonging. I believe not just me; many of us see here as our second home. (Alex, male, 23)

I think Gospel Nights are a fun way to get all members involved. It’s not only a chance to bring new faces to visit the Chapel of Epiphany but also a fun time to get to know people in the community. (Ng, female student, 20)

Several students reported that although they were not considering converting to Christianity, they understood the enthusiasm for the hall’s promotion of religion. Moreover, they tried to maintain a good relationship with the master and the hall staff ($n = 15$). One student, Chu, said he bowed his head during the prayer session at the orientation party. He interpreted the act as a sign of respect for the hall’s tradition and the exquisitely prepared orientation party:

I needed to respect the tradition of the hall, so I did it their way. My high school, a public school in South Africa, also had prayer sessions before meals. Muslim and Hindu students chose to ignore this. But I thought I should respect the tradition of the school, so I cooperated with my eyes closed and my head down, as if I were praying. Participating in prayer also brings me closer to the other people in the hall.

Chu’s words are consistent with [Shillitoe and Strhan’s \(2020\)](#) findings that non-religious students may use prayer as a communicative tool in a religious community. In other words, some students strive not to offend the master or chaplains of the residential hall.

Ethan, from mainland China, claimed he initially joined the fellowship out of curiosity. The tutor knew that he understood (but could not speak) Cantonese. However, he worried he could not partake in discussions, so he advocated for communicating in English supplemented by Mandarin. Ethan felt well cared for and welcomed, stating the following: “Even if I do not believe in Christianity at the moment, I think I will have a good opinion of Christianity for the rest of my life”.

A few students remarked that the hall was merely a place to live ($n = 11$). They noted St. John’s College’s strong Christian atmosphere and respected this tradition, but it had little influence on them ($n = 8$). These students often had a lot of homework and were less likely to participate in the activities. Researchers attribute such findings to residential experiences becoming less immersive. Living in the hall no longer guarantees pervasive peer communication and interactions. Instead, ubiquitous social media makes it much

easier to interact with friends on the outside, suggesting that students living in a residence might not rely as heavily on those in their domestic environment for social interactions (Parameswaran and Bowers 2014).

4.2.3. Spiritual Growth and Personal Development

Significantly, the interviews revealed students' experiences with counselling services incorporating religious interventions. The residential tutors at St. John's College dedicate themselves to guiding students through their daily challenges and integrating spirituality and religion into their counselling practices. Previous research supports the comforting effect of religious counselling (Barnett and Johnson 2011). One student shared her personal experience with spiritual counselling:

The residence tutor comforted me about my academic issues by quoting the Bible: "God clothes the grass in the field, which is alive today but tomorrow is thrown into the fire. Thus, you can be even more sure that God will clothe you. Don't have so little faith!" [Matthew 6:30] This [sic] made me feel relieved. (Irene, female student, 20)

Irene's testimony that scripture alleviated her academic concerns underscores the pastoral approach and illustrates the profound personal impact such practices have on students grappling with everyday stresses. Another student reflected on the peace and clarity he gained from participating in worship services:

Participating in the worship services and fellowship here brought me a sense of inner peace and satisfaction. After each event, I felt I had a clearer understanding and direction for my life and future. (Jacob, male student, 23)

Together, these narratives highlight how spiritual growth and personal development play essential roles within the context of residential life at St. John's. They reveal how religiously infused environments can powerfully catalyse significant personal transformation, enriching the students' educational journey and overall well-being.

5. Discussion

This study highlights the significant role that pastoral care plays in enhancing both the religious and psychological well-being of students at St. John's College. The observed positive correlations between religious commitment and psychological well-being underscore the profound benefits that engagement in structured religious activities can have on students' mental health. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that spiritual engagement enhances coping strategies, providing individuals with a crucial sense of purpose and community during their university years (Musa 2015; Davis and Kiang 2016).

Moreover, the notable impact of interpersonal religious commitment emphasises the importance of community and shared experiences in spiritual practices. This suggests that universities should proactively foster strong community networks through their pastoral care programmes, recognizing these networks as vital for enhancing student well-being. At St. John's College, the pervasive presence of Christian symbols, structured environments for worship and fellowship, and the integration of spiritual practices into daily routines collectively create an environment that bolsters spiritual and emotional well-being.

The study reinforces the crucial role of pastoral care in supporting mental health, echoing extensive research that demonstrates the positive correlation between religious involvement and psychological well-being (Hoogeveen et al. 2022; Tsomokos and Dunbar 2023; Garssen et al. 2020). The provision of counselling services by pastoral care programmes is particularly vital in addressing the mental health challenges often encountered in higher education settings. For instance, the integration of pastoral counselling at Taiwan's Chang Jung Christian University, situated within the East Asian cultural sphere, effectively supports the spiritual and emotional health of its students, serving as a model for similar initiatives (Tsai 2005).

Furthermore, regular participation in worship and fellowship activities has been described as especially fulfilling, providing students with a sense of peace and contentment. As [Dar and Iqbal \(2019\)](#) suggest, religious commitment can significantly influence a person's sense of meaning in life, which in turn affects their well-being. Students reported feeling more centered and directed in their personal lives following these activities, underscoring the powerful impact of ritualistic practices on mental clarity and emotional stability.

Pastoral care is essential for the holistic development of students, addressing not only their academic needs but also their emotional and spiritual well-being ([Cowie 2022](#)). This approach helps higher education institutions foster a more supportive and nurturing environment, which is crucial for a community that respects and celebrates religious diversity.

In terms of practical implications, the findings of this study suggest that universities would benefit from developing pastoral care programmes tailored to the diverse cultural and religious backgrounds of their student populations. By fostering an inclusive environment that respects and nurtures students' varied spiritual needs, universities can enhance overall well-being and strengthen students' sense of belonging. This underscores the importance of holistic residential life planning that extends beyond academic support to include spiritual and emotional care.

In summary, the role of pastoral care at St. John's College is integral to both spiritual engagement and psychological support, enriching the religious and emotional dimensions of the students' college experience. This integrated support system not only nurtures a well-rounded and supportive community but also resonates deeply with the college's Christian values.

6. Conclusions

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the impact of pastoral care on St. John's College students' religious and psychological well-being. The quantitative analysis revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between religious commitment, as measured by the Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (RCI-10), and psychological well-being, as assessed by the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS). These findings indicate that higher levels of religious engagement predict improved mental health among students. Furthermore, the regression analysis underscored that both intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of religious commitment significantly contribute to students' psychological well-being, with the interpersonal aspect exerting a more substantial influence.

Qualitatively, students reported that pastoral care and religious activities at St. John's College significantly fostered their spiritual growth and personal development. Many participants noted that their involvement in religious practices comforted them, facilitated deeper community connections, and enhanced their reflection. Collectively, these findings illustrate the profound impact of integrated pastoral care on fostering a supportive educational environment that promotes spiritual and psychological health, thereby enhancing the overall university experience for students at St. John's College.

This study recognises several limitations. Firstly, the small sample size results from the residential hall's capacity, accommodating fewer than 200 students. Additionally, the high turnover rate among residents further complicated efforts to expand the participant pool. Secondly, we confined the research to a single residential hall, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences and impacts of pastoral care across different student demographics. Future studies would benefit from broader case studies to explore these aspects more comprehensively. Thirdly, using a cross-sectional study design enabled us to examine correlations and mechanisms of action among variables but did not allow us to determine causal relationships. Longitudinal intervention experiments will be necessary in the future to investigate these causal relationships further.

Future research could build on the findings of this study by exploring how the broader application of pastoral care, as defined in different cultural and religious contexts, impacts student well-being. Specifically, longitudinal studies could investigate the long-term

effects of pastoral care on students' spiritual and psychological development. Additionally, examining potential moderating factors, such as cultural background, social support, or gender, could provide insights into how these variables influence the strength or direction of the observed relationships.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, X.L. (Xunqian Liu); methodology, X.L. (Xunqian Liu); software, X.L. (Xiaoqing Liu); formal analysis, X.L. (Xiaoqing Liu).; resources, X.L. (Xiaoqing Liu); writing—original draft preparation, X.L. (Xunqian Liu); writing—review and editing, X.L. (Xunqian Liu). All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This work has been supported by The National Social Science Fund of China, grant number 22CDJ003.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval for this study were waived by the Human Science and Technology Ethics Review Committee of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, in accordance with their guidelines.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, and further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. The Distribution of Participants by Demographic Data (n = 89).

	N/Percentage
University Class Level	
First year	37(41.6%)
Second year	30(33.7%)
Third year	22(24.7%)
Gender	
Male	41(46.1%)
Female	47(53.9%)
Academic discipline	
Social science	47(52.8%)
Science	36(40.4%)
Humanities	6(6.74%)

Table A2. Descriptive Statistics of RCI-10.

	Items	Mean	SD
1	I often read books and magazines about my faith.	3.40	1.02
2	I make financial contributions to my religious organization. *	2.38	0.88
3	I spend time trying to grow in understanding of my faith.	4.58	0.83
4	Religion is especially important to me because it answers many questions about the meaning of life.	4.14	0.83
5	My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life.	2.85	1.22
6	I enjoy spending time with others of my religious affiliation. *	2.86	0.54
7	Religious beliefs influence all my dealings in life.	1.56	0.89

Table A2. *Cont.*

	Items	Mean	SD
8	It is important to me to spend periods of time in private religious thought and reflection.	4.23	0.92
9	I enjoy working in the activities of my religious organization. *	3.37	1.23
10	I keep well informed about my local religious group and have some influence in its decisions. *	2.33	0.73

The four items marked with * represent Interpersonal Religious Commitment, while the six items that are unmarked pertain to Intrapersonal Religious Commitment.

Table A3. Descriptive Statistics of WEMWBS.

	Items	Mean	SD
1	I've been feeling optimistic about the future.	3.99	0.89
2	I've been feeling useful.	3.73	0.66
3	I've been feeling relaxed.	3.55	0.57
4	I've been feeling interested in other people.	2.47	0.82
5	I've had energy to spare.	2.17	0.67
6	I've been dealing with problems well.	3.43	0.52
7	I've been thinking clearly.	3.05	0.54
8	I've been feeling good about myself.	4.34	0.48
9	I've been feeling close to other people.	3.87	0.73
10	I've been feeling confident.	3.13	0.88
11	I've been able to make up my own mind about things.	4.73	0.67
12	I've been feeling loved.	4.31	0.99
13	I've been interested in new things.	3.61	0.65
14	I've been feeling cheerful.	2.75	0.68

References

- Ai, Amy L., Hoa B. Appel, and Ethel G. Nicdao. 2016. Differential Associations of Religious Involvement with the Mental Health of Asian-American Subgroups: A Cultural Perspective. *Journal of Religion and Health* 55: 2113–18. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
- Barnett, Jeffrey E., and W. Brad Johnson. 2011. Integrating Spirituality and Religion Into Psychotherapy: Persistent Dilemmas, Ethical Issues, and a Proposed Decision-Making Process. *Ethics & Behavior* 21: 147–64.
- Brown, Joshua, Fred Volk, and Elisabeth M. Spratto. 2019. The Hidden Structure: The Influence of Residence Hall Design on Academic Outcomes. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 56: 267–83. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Cheng, Michelle W. T., and Cecilia K. Y. Chan. 2020. Do University Residential Experiences Contribute to Holistic Education? *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 42: 31–48. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Clarke, Aileen, Tim Friede, Rebecca Putz, Jacquie Ashdown, Steven Martin, Amy Blake, Yaser Adi, Jane Parkinson, Pamela Flynn, Stephen Platt, and et al. 2010. Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS): Validated for teenage school students in England and Scotland. A mixed methods assessment. *BMC Public Health* 11: 487. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Cowie, Helen. 2022. Pastoral care in education today: Its continuing role in promoting mental health in children and young people. *Pastoral Care in Education* 40: 321–27. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Creswell, John W. 2012. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Cunich, Peter. 2012. *A History of the University of Hong Kong (Volume I: 1911–1945)*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Dar, Kaiser Ahmad, and Naved Iqbal. 2019. Religious Commitment and Well-Being in College Students: Examining Conditional Indirect Effects of Meaning in Life. *Journal of Religion and Health* 58: 2288–97. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
- Davis, Richard F., III, and Lisa Kiang. 2016. Religious Identity, Religious Participation, and Psychological Well-being in Asian American Adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 45: 532–46. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
- Estrada, Crystal Amiel M., Marian Fe Theresa C. Lomboy, Ernesto R. Gregorio, Jr., Emmy Amalia, Cynthia R. Leynes, Romeo R. Quizon, and Jun Kobayashi. 2019. Religious Education Can Contribute to Adolescent Mental Health in School Settings. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems* 13: 1–6. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

- Garssen, Bert, Anja Visser, and Grieteke Pool. 2020. Does Spirituality or Religion Positively Affect Mental Health? Meta-analysis of Longitudinal Studies. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 31: 4–20. [CrossRef]
- Graham, Polly A., Sarah Socorro Hurtado, and Robert M. Gonyea. 2018. The Benefits of Living on Campus: Do Residence Halls Provide Distinctive Environments of Engagement? *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 55: 255–69. [CrossRef]
- Graneheim, Ulla H., and Berit Lundman. 2004. Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: Concepts, procedures and measures to achieve trustworthiness. *Nurse Education Today* 24: 105–12. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Green, Morgan, and Marta Elliott. 2010. Religion, Health, and Psychological Well-being. *Journal of Religion and Health* 49: 149–63. [CrossRef]
- Hall, Ronald Owen. 1965. 64th Congregation. Available online: <https://www4.hku.hk/honggrads/speeches/mc-ma-ronald-owen-hall-the-rt-rev-ronald-owen-hall> (accessed on 21 March 2023).
- Hoogeveen, Suzanne, Alexandra Sarafoglou, Balazs Aczel, Yonathan Aditya, Alexandra J. Alayan, Peter J. Allen, and Eric-Jan Wagenmakers. 2022. A many-analysts approach to the relation between religiosity and well-being. *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 13: 237–83.
- Hu, Xiaozhong, Senyin Cheng, and Yueshan Lai. 2022. Impact of Religious Involvement and Religious Commitment on Post-Pandemic Well-Being among Chinese University Students. *Religious Education* 117: 221–34. [CrossRef]
- Hunter, Scale Simon C., Stephen Houghton, and Lisa Wood. 2015. Positive Mental Well-being in Australian Adolescents: Evaluating the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale. *The Australian Educational and Developmental Psychologist* 32: 93–104. [CrossRef]
- Koenig, Harold, Dana King, and Verna B. Carson. 2012. *Handbook of Religion and Health*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Loong, Shiu-kee. 1952. *St. John's Hall, University of Hong Kong: History and Register, 1912–1952*. Hong Kong: Man Cheung Printing Co.
- Meehan, Amalee. 2020. Religion as a Source of Well-Being: Implications for Second-Level School Programs in Ireland and Beyond. *Religious Education* 115: 507–21. [CrossRef]
- Miles, Matthew B., A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña. 2019. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Musa, Ahmad. 2015. Spiritual Beliefs and Practices, Religiosity, and Spiritual Well-Being among Jordanian Arab Muslim University Students in Jordan. *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 17: 34–49. [CrossRef]
- Niemi, Kristian. 2018. Drawing a Line Between the Religious and the Secular: The Cases of Religious Education in Sweden and India. *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 39: 182–94.
- Nowell, Lorelli S., Jill M. Norris, Deborah E. White, and Nancy J. Moules. 2017. Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16: 1–13. [CrossRef]
- Ong, Elsie, Sam Chu, Albert Chau, and Robert Chung. 2020. The Impact of Relationships with Hall Mates, Tutors, and Wardens on the Residence Hall Experience in Hong Kong. *Higher Education Quarterly* 47: 35–48.
- Parameswaran, Ashvin, and Jack Bowers. 2014. Student Residences: From Housing to Education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 38: 57–74. [CrossRef]
- Pargament, Kenneth I., Julie J. Exline, James W. Jones, and Annette Mahoney. 2013. *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association (APA).
- Patton, Michael Quinn. 2015. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 4th ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Ryff, Carol D., and CoreyLee M. Keyes. 1995. The Structure of Psychological Well-Being Revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69: 719–27. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Rymarz, Richard, and Anthony Cleary. 2018. Examining Some Aspects of the Worldview of Students in Australian Catholic Schools: Some Implications for Religious Education. *British Journal of Religious Education* 40: 327–36. [CrossRef]
- Sawir, Erlenawati, Simon Marginson, Chris Nyland, Gaby Ramia, and Felicity Rawlings-Sanaei. 2009. The pastoral care of international students in New Zealand: Is it more than a consumer protection regime? *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 29: 45–59. [CrossRef]
- Shillitoe, Rachael, and Anna Strhan. 2020. 'Just leave it blank': Non-Religious Children and their Negotiation of Prayer in School. *Religion* 50: 615–35. [CrossRef]
- Spears, Barbara A., and Deborah M. Green. 2022. The challenges facing pastoral care in schools and universities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Pastoral Care in Education* 40: 287–96. [CrossRef]
- Taggart, Frances, Sarah Stewart-Brown, and Jane Parkinson. 2015. *Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) User Guide*. Version 2. Glasgow: NHS Health Scotland.
- Tennant, Ruth, Louise Hiller, Ruth Fishwick, Stephen Platt, Stephen Joseph, Scott Weich, Jane Parkinson, Jenny Secker, and Sarah Stewart-Brown. 2007. The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS): Development and validation. *Health and Quality of Life Outcomes* 5: 63. [CrossRef]
- Tsai, Wei-min. 2005. The Relationship Between Christian University Chaplaincy and University Management: A Case Study of Aletheia University and Chang Jung Christian University. *Journal of Humanities Aletheia University* 3: 23–53.
- Tsomokos, Dimitris I., and Robin I. M. Dunbar. 2023. The role of religion in adolescent mental health: Faith as a moderator of the relationship between distrust and depression. *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 1–18. [CrossRef]
- Walker, Charles T. R. 2022. Wellbeing in higher education: A student perspective. *Pastoral Care in Education* 40: 310–20. [CrossRef]

- Webster, Alan. 2004. Fisher, Geoffrey Francis, Baron Fisher of Lambeth (1887–1792). In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Worthington, Everett L., Jr., Nathaniel G. Wade, Terry L. Hight, Jennifer S. Ripley, Michael E. McCullough, Jack W. Berry, Michelle M. Schmitt, James T. Berry, Kevin H. Bursley, and Lynn O'Connor. 2003. The Religious Commitment Inventory–10: Development, refinement, and validation of a brief scale for research and counseling. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 50: 84–96. [[CrossRef](#)]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.