

The Essentials of Suicide Prevention

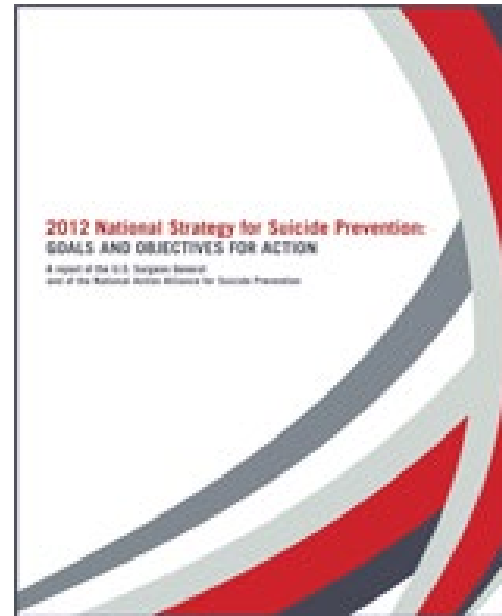
Karen Mason, Ph.D.

Professor of Counseling and Psychology



**Creating Hope Through Action: Bridging the Gap Between
Spirituality and Suicide Prevention**

October 26, 2023



GOAL 1: infused into programs carried out in diverse settings and systems, such as ... faith communities

MY STORY

Religious Service Attendance

Religious service attendance has been found to be associated with lower mortality.



Photo by [Natalya Ukolova](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Religious Service Attendance

Weekly religious service attendance has been found to be associated with:



Less suicidal ideation

Fewer suicide attempts

Fewer suicide deaths



“WHAT IN RELIGIOUS SERVICE ATTENDANCE MATTERS?”

Photo by [Karl Fredrickson](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Five protective factors to prevent suicide



COUNSELING AND VALUES 67 (2022) 225–249



brill.com/cvj

How Counselors Can Help Faith Communities Lower Suicide Risk: a Qualitative Study

Karen Mason

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Counseling Department,
Hamilton, MA, USA
kmason@gordonconwell.edu

Frank Robinson

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Counseling Department, Hamilton,
MA, USA

Zihan Yang

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Counseling Department, Hamilton,
MA, USA

1. a safe, connected community
2. a skilled, equipped community
3. a well-networked community
4. life-affirming teaching
5. personal and communal spiritual practices

Saroglou's dimensions of religion

Believing [*cognitive*] is holding a set of beliefs about transcendent entities, i.e., something larger and more important than me exists, which is meaning-making by aiming to find the truth.

Bonding [*emotional*] is having self-transcendent, emotional experiences like awe through ritual that binds one to others and to a deeper reality that transcends the everyday reality and the self. Awe facilitates spiritual behavior intentions.

Behaving [*moral*] is subscribing to certain moral norms as defined *from a religious perspective*, and exerting self-control to behave in accordance with these norms and to achieve irreproachable virtue.

Belonging [*social identity*] is identifying and affiliating with a certain community or tradition resulting in a social identity.

A safe, connected community = belonging

Naturally-occurring protections & Non-naturally-occurring protections.

Naturally-occurring

- Faith communities can engage a sense of belonging
- Religious social support has been found to be related to decreased suicidal behaviors.



Belonging and mattering

“I’d really want to ... let him know that there are a lot of needs in our church and that there’s a lot of needs in our community and you have a lot of gifts to use and ... we’d love to use you in any way possible, whatever that may be.”

Give him [Jacob] a sense of his worth and dignity and in limiting situations to try to explore what he is capable of and how he can make a contribution and again if he’s a person by faith, we have so many shut-ins that do so much praying for people, and, if that’s where he’s coming from, that’s a beautiful ministry.

Social support in faith communities



Social support in faith communities explains only about a quarter of the association between religious service attendance and health.

A safe, connected community

College students who believe that most people hold negative views of those seeking mental health treatment have increased odds of past-year suicidal thoughts and suicide planning and attempts.



Stigma can be a risk factor for suicide.

Photo by [Brooke Cagle](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Stigma “makes you feel worse. They make you feel less because you want to [kill yourself].

So, you might as well just end it.”

STIGMA

Suicidal thinking in faith communities

30+ adults and adolescents in
a congregation of **500**
are thinking about their own suicide on any
given Sunday, on average.

In a sample of 745 Catholic, Jewish and Protestant congregants, 11.41 percent ($n = 85$) reported having current thoughts of suicide.

Why do so few reach out?



- In a sample of 801 Catholic, Jewish and Protestant clergy, respondents reported being contacted on average by at least one suicidal individual per year, with an average of 2 contacts per year.
- Suicidal congregants may not reach out for help because of stigma.

Photo by [christopher catbagan](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Theologically based stigma

“Only weak Christians become suicidal.”

It's “a failure of faith.”

Suicidal Christians must put on “a façade” of “having it all together.”



Photo by [David Sinclair](#) on [Unsplash](#)

People are more likely to reach out for help when the church fosters a culture of **transparent authenticity** where no one needs to present “their shiny pretty selves” at church or where they can present “warts and all.”

CAN BE NATURALLY-OCCURRING

Naturally-occurring



Photo by [Austin Kehmeier](#) on [Unsplash](#)

“[Asking for prayer] shows a layer of vulnerability, a layer of honesty. I think it shows that we’re not hiding things from each other, like everything’s perfect. ... When people ask for prayer, it is one step towards showing people that, **“Hey, I’m not perfect”** and we still support them and accept them.”

Mason, K., Hu, Y., Kim, E., Korver, D., Xia, L., & Coniglio, N. (2019). Unique experiences in religious groups, in the U.S. and China—a qualitative study. *Journal of Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 21(6), 609-624, p. 616.

Non-naturally-occurring



National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention

Pray for people touched by suicide.

Photo by [Alex Shute](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Stigma after suicide loss

What makes suicide grief particularly difficult is the stigma, which makes it hard “to disclose thoughts and feelings in a supportive context.”



Photo by [Kelly Sikkema](#) on [Unsplash](#)

A skilled, equipped community

Protections are
“hit-and-miss.”

Faith leaders are
undertrained in
suicide prevention



Non-naturally-occurring

“The counseling courses I took for my MDiv were entirely, without doubt, lacking any substance, actual training, or real merit. [We were told to refer. That’s all.](#) And while I agree that I am not trained to serve as someone’s therapist or psychiatrist, I am, all too often, the first person they come to when fighting depression or suicide.”



Photo by [Ben White](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Get training



- be nice <https://www.benice.org/>
- CAMS <https://cams-care.com/>
- Chaplains-CARE
https://millifelearning.militaryonesource.mil/f?p=SIS:9::::::P9_ID:102
- The Connect Program
<http://www.theconnectprogram.org>
- LivingWorks
<https://www.livingworks.net>
- QPR <https://www.qprinstitute.com>
- RemedyLIVE
<https://www.remedylive.com/>
- Soul Shop
<https://www.soulshopmovement.org/>

Photo by [Olena Bohovyk](#) on [Unsplash](#)

A network of safety

- **Everyone**: LivingWorks Start (90 min online)
 - **Ministry leaders**: LivingWorks Faith (4-5 hours online)
-

- **Natural helpers**: safeTALK (4 hours in person)



- **Senior ministry leaders**: ASIST (2 days in person)
-

A well-networked community

*Suicide and Crisis
Lifeline 988*



*Hospital emergency
department*

Mental Health Professionals

Can be naturally-occurring

- “That it is where the gold is ... keeping the identity pastoral, that is what is unique. It is in providing for the needs of the soul and taking into consideration the mental health issues.”

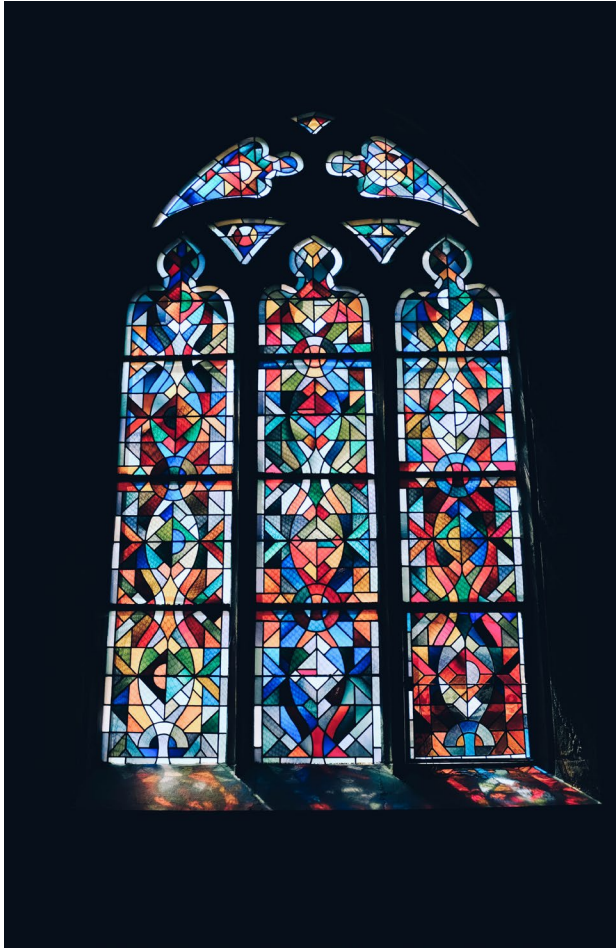
- “Now I am clear about my role. I am a spiritual leader in the situation not the mental health professional.”

- “Behind most cases there is a spiritual wound. I want to hear the lament/the spiritual wound; explore the [spiritual] lament as a coherent part of the picture.”

How could your faith community signal that you are willing to help congregants with thoughts of suicide?

GATHER YOUR REFLECTIONS ON BELONGING

Life-affirming teaching = Behaving



- Moral objections to suicide
- “Religion might reduce suicide risk through shaping a person’s beliefs.”
- Moral objections to suicide may mean fewer suicide attempts.

Photo by [Adrien Olichon](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Naturally-occurring

Acts 16:27-28— "The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, **“Don’t harm yourself!** We are all here!”



The life of a jailer is worth preserving.

Photo by [Tolga Ulkan](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Simple heuristic decision-making strategy

Life-oriented beliefs may provide a simple heuristic decision-making strategy in a crisis, i.e., “Suicidal people of faith don’t kill themselves.”



Photo by [Rahadiansyah](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Behavioral guidance

“Of the different mechanisms that link social ties to health, religious group members focused on the protections of **social influence** (assessing the appropriateness of their behaviors against a standard), **social control** (explicit attempts of social network members to remind a person to adopt or adhere to a standard), **behavioral guidance** and successful role performance.”



Photo by [Tyler Nix](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Moral objections and pastoral care

“I have my theological conviction from Scripture, from the teaching of the Church, from moral theology, and I just try to, with sensitivity and love and caring for the situation, to bring those in as needed. *It's not like you start out there*: ‘don't you know you're seriously breaking a commandment; God says thou shall not kill.’ *That's not the route to go*. Always beginning with the person and then applying the convictions as they can be applicable to the particular person or the situation.”

“I don't find moral persuasion generally . . . works.”

Non-naturally-occurring

Change to Catholic Catechism (2282-2283; St. John Paul II, 1992) allowing funeral and burial following suicide.

Dr. David Satcher, the Surgeon General, investigated the rise in suicide rates among young Black men

Faith communities must have a theology of life: why stay alive in limiting circumstances?



Photo by [Cosmic Timetraveler](#) on [Unsplash](#)

How could your faith community orient congregants with thoughts of suicide to life?

GATHER YOUR REFLECTIONS ON BEHAVING

Communal spiritual practices = Bonding



- In worship, congregants sing, speak, listen, pray, give an offering, and enact rhythms in the life of the church **in synchrony**.
- People who walked, sang, or moved their arms in **synchrony** with each other showed **greater liking, trust, cooperation, and self-sacrifice** than groups performing the same behaviors while not in synchrony.

Activities with synchronous body movements help group members feel more oneness with their group.

Communal spiritual practices = Bonding



Worship binds congregants to each other and helps them **transcend** their sense of self.

Bonding and Believing

- Worship activities that were full of emotional energy, satisfaction, and group belonging were associated with congregants being more likely to retain commitment to the religious group, resulting in **stronger religious tradition affiliation**.
- The synchrony of worship binds religious people into **a moral community**.



Photo by [Adeyemi Emmanuel Abebayo](#) on [Unsplash](#)



Photo by [NATHAN MULLET](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Non-naturally-occurring



“The rituals and structure of worship is an [anchor](#) in the week. It stops the ‘hamster brain.’ It gives me a day to think of something other than whatever it is that is ‘hamstering around in my head.’” — Pastor Talitha Arnold

The rhythm of the faith community can be an [anchor](#) for suffering congregants.

Photo by [Armands Brants](#) on [Unsplash](#)

How could your faith community support congregants with thoughts of suicide in communal spiritual practices?

GATHER YOUR REFLECTIONS ON BONDING

Believing

Religious group members join religious groups to “live a life of faith together.”

The relationship between religious service attendance and mental health is partly the result of people trying to live out their faith in their daily lives.



Photo by [Ismael Paramo](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Believing



“The work group and the ultimate Frisbee group, those are much more surface level connections. We get together and we just talk about the latest movies we saw...I feel if I were to bring [up] something like [work problems] in the Frisbee group, they would listen and be polite, but they wouldn’t really care all that much and they would want to change the subject to something less awkward...If I am going to pick one or the other to have an actual deep connection with, it’s for sure going to be the **faith based groups because we all just get more vulnerable** and share things with each other and we listen to each other.”

Photo by [Raphael Nast](#) on [Unsplash](#)

“The one thing that’s different from [church members] compared to, for example, from my friendship community, with my classmates or co-workers, is that there’s *a spiritual aspect* to it.”

BELIEVING

Bonding around Believing



People who welcome emotional closeness and intimacy can form strong friendships.

Photo by [Yogendra Singh](#) on [Unsplash](#)

How could your faith community support congregants with thoughts of suicide in believing?

GATHER YOUR REFLECTIONS ON BELIEVING

Intertwined

Believing

Bonding

Behaving

Belonging

A safe, connected community, a skilled, equipped community, a well-networked community, life-affirming teaching, personal and communal spiritual practices are **intertwined** in a culture, not a program.

providing them with reasons for living.

“Nothing happens in a church without a pastor’s support but nothing happens in the church if the pastor’s is responsible [because the pastor has so many responsibilities].”

- Rev. Dr. Dennis Goff of The Lutheran Foundation

HOW DO YOU WANT TO MOVE FORWARD?

Faith Communities—What Can You Do?

Join a suicide prevention coalition

Provide the naturally-occurring protections

Keep in mind your suicidal congregants



Photo by [Rosie Sun](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Community Organizations—What Can You Do?

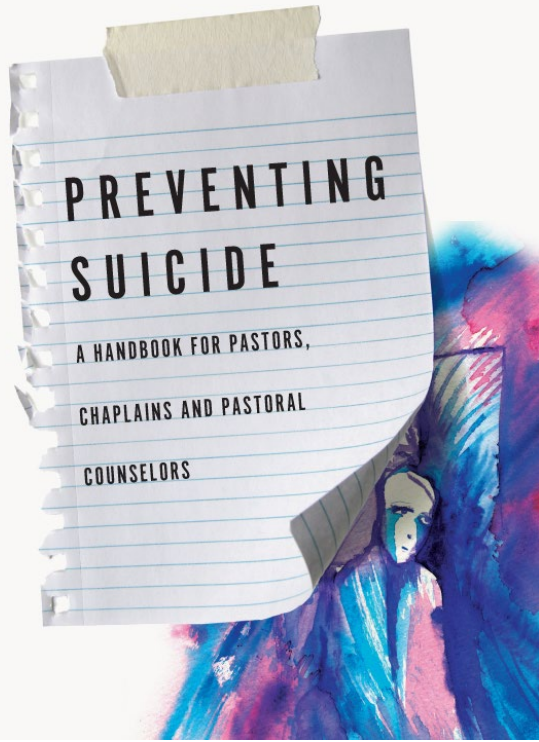
EDUCATE

PROVIDE FAITH-BASED TRAINING



Photo by [Headway](#) on [Unsplash](#)

KAREN MASON



PREACHING HOPE
IN DARKNESS

Help for Pastors in Addressing
Suicide from the Pulpit

SCOTT M. GIBSON
& KAREN MASON

