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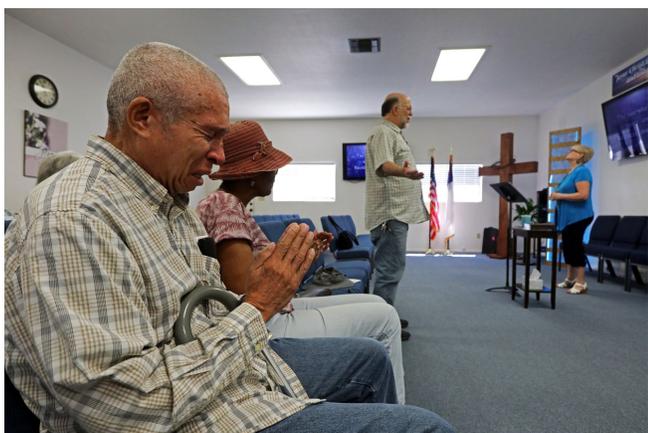
OPINION | COMMENTARY | HOUSES OF WORSHIP

Is God the Answer to the Suicide Epidemic?

Someone who attends religious services is significantly less likely to kill himself.

By *Erica Andersen*

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Oscar Wickliff prays at a church in Ridgecrest, Ca., July 7.

PHOTO: DAVID MCNEW/REUTERS

The rate at which Americans take their own lives has been climbing for 20 years, prompting policy makers and medical experts to search for novel suicide-prevention practices. But one approach is as old as civilization itself: religious faith. Encouraging the most vulnerable Americans to attend religious services could reduce the suicide rate, and a new type of church growing in the U.S. shows particular promise.

A 2016 study published in *JAMA Psychiatry* found that American women who attended a religious service at least once a week were five times less likely to commit suicide. The findings—based on data from 90,000 women from 1996 to 2010—are consistent with 2019 Pew Research findings that regular participation in religious community is clearly linked to higher levels of happiness. It's true that correlation doesn't prove causation, but there's strong evidence that people who attend church or synagogue regularly are less inclined to take their own lives.

Church attendance rates have fallen considerably in recent decades. That's partly the fault of the faithful. Religious leaders have sometimes alienated those who might be receptive to their message, barking from the pulpit without humility, grace or love. For some prospective parishioners, church elicits thoughts of judgment and doom.

"Startup churches," also known as "church plants," are turning this narrative on its head. Such bodies are usually made up of only a few dozen attendees. They meet in rubbery middle-school gyms or local businesses after hours. They're planted strategically by committed faith leaders in vulnerable geographic and demographic populations. Think of places where suicide rates may be higher than average—rural, poverty-stricken and isolated communities.

Some 42% or more of church-plant attendees have not been to church in many years, or ever before, according to a 2015 study by Lifeway Research. It's not that startup churches are necessarily more effective at helping attendees than established mainline Protestant or Catholic congregations. Rather, these new churches are more effective at simply getting more vulnerable people through the door.

Traditional congregations are closing at historically high rates in vulnerable places, while older churches become little more than museums in America's biggest cities. Policy makers should recognize that the decline of church in the U.S. affects far more than Christians. It affects the social and even physical health of entire communities.

Certainly millions of Americans are indifferent to the decline of organized religion, or even welcome it. When I have spoken about church plants and their ability to help fight suicide, naysayers quickly surface. Many point to the community aspect of church—rather than faith—as the reason for its effectiveness. It's true that a community center or library may provide a vulnerable soul with the human connection he craves. But that's not a reason to exclude churches from the solution to suicide. Forty-five thousand Americans take their own lives each year and 25 times as many attempt to. A crisis of this magnitude requires every possible effort.

Some nonreligious folks also see the church solution as nothing but an excuse for the faithful to proselytize. But religious animosity can't be allowed to obscure the

powerful connection between church attendance and suicide prevention. It's a deadly prejudice that's unfair to those who might be saved. An atheist should appreciate the positive value church attendance can bring, even if it's for something they don't believe in.

The Bible says that "the dwelling place of God is with man." Put another way, churches are nothing but people meeting together for spiritual communion. The setup might look simple, but a house of worship is a transcendental doctor's office offering preventive care, support group therapy and a healing hope.

Every year, institutions and organizations devoted to reducing the toll of suicide in America's communities publish resources devoted to prevention. Some of the most prominent ones come from Suicide Prevention Lifeline and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Yet attending religious services isn't included on these lists of resources. It's time for these and other groups to consider faith as an legitimate prevention method.

People living in our increasingly secular culture are hungry for spiritual wisdom and transcendent purpose. For the already vulnerable, this drought of meaning and connection can have deadly consequences. For thousands of years, practicing a shared faith was a principal way to meet these spiritual needs. It can be again.

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