



Faith Communities as Suicide Prevention Partners

July 12, 2019

News Type: Director's Corner

Brandon Johnson, MHS; Melinda Moore, PhD

Faith communities are an ideal setting to address suicide, promote help-seeking, and mobilize compassionate volunteers to support those who are struggling. To help develop capacity and begin conversations about suicide prevention in communities of faith, the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention ([Action Alliance](#) [1]) [Faith Communities Task Force](#) [2] has developed the [Faith.Hope.Life. campaign](#) [3] and the [National Weekend of Prayer for Faith, Hope, & Life](#) [4] (September 6-8, 2019). These efforts encourage all congregations, parishes, mosques, synagogues, temples, and other faith communities to pray for those individuals whose lives have been touched by suicide. Whether it is for a parishioner or congregant who is struggling with suicidal thoughts, a suicide attempt, or suicide loss, this simple act of prayer fosters hope, a sense of belongingness, and signals a supportive community willing to provide both spiritual and practical support. To help equip faith leaders with the skills to address suicide in their communities, the task force also recently developed [Suicide Prevention Competencies for Faith Leaders: Supporting Life Before, During, and After a Suicidal Crisis](#) [5]. We encourage suicide prevention practitioners to share these resources and form key partnerships with faith communities, and for faith community members and leaders to become involved in the campaign.

Regular religious service attendance is common in the U.S., with as many as 49 percent of Americans saying they attend worship services monthly, compared to Western Europe, where only 22 percent attend at least once a month.¹ With their powerful reach, faith leaders are uniquely positioned to help reduce prejudice and shape healthy norms related to suicide and mental health. Researcher Karen Mason has found time and again that faith leaders are particularly well suited to provide suicide supports:

More than any other professionals, pastors, chaplains and pastoral counselors minister at the intersection of theology and moral practice. They teach people to choose life. They provide guidance in how to build lives worth living. They teach how to manage suffering. They monitor and intervene when suicidal people come to them for help. They guide faith communities in how to support suicide survivors.²



Suicide Prevention Resource Center

Yet, not all faith leaders feel prepared to meet that challenge. A study of Minnesota clergy³ found that 85 percent reported it was their role to educate their congregations about suicide and mental health, but 32 percent reported no or low ability to do so. Most respondents said that if concerned about a parishioner's mental health, they would inquire about suicidal thoughts, but fewer said they would inquire about suicidal intent. They simply did not feel they could or even realize it was within their role.

While the opportunity for clergy and faith leaders to address suicide may be great, navigating that task is not without challenges. Faith leaders need the skills to talk to suicidal congregants, find appropriate help, support families and friends after a suicide death, and conduct a funeral or memorial service for someone who has died by suicide. That is in addition to addressing the ongoing spiritual needs of people of faith who have lost a loved one to suicide or who are struggling with suicidal thoughts or attempts. The task force's [Suicide Prevention Competencies for Faith Leaders: Supporting Life Before, During, and After a Suicidal Crisis](#) [5] aims to equip faith leaders with these capabilities. This new resource presents feasible, practical, research-based actions that faith leaders can adopt immediately to help save lives and restore hope in faith communities nationwide. It was co-led by task force members Karen Mason (professor of counseling and psychology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary) and Glen Bloomstrom (military director of LivingWorks Education) in consultation with leaders from diverse faith communities and national suicide prevention experts.

Faith leaders and communities may provide a variety of mental health supports to congregants, such as starting a mental health ministry, sponsoring a depression screening day, or providing a space for a suicide loss support group, as so many already do. The *Faith.Hope.Life.* campaign has a website full of [resources](#) [6] for communities of faith, including sermon and prayer templates, bulletin inserts, resources for supporting suicidal individuals, and other valuable tools. With so much opportunity for support and healing, the task force encourages all faith communities and their leaders to join our mission as powerful partners in suicide prevention. We invite you to visit [www.faith-hope-life.org](#) [7] and [pledge today](#) [8] to participate in our third annual [National Weekend of Prayer for Faith, Hope, & Life](#) [4]. If you are involved in suicide prevention efforts at the state or local level, we encourage you to reach out to faith communities as key partners in your prevention efforts and share these resources with them.

Brandon Johnson is the public sector co-lead of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention Faith Communities Task Force and public health advisor at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Center for Mental Health Services.

Melinda Moore the private sector co-lead of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention Faith Communities Task Force and assistant professor in the Eastern Kentucky University Department of Psychology.

References

1. Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies. (2010). *The 2010 U.S. Religion Census*. Retrieved from <http://www.usreligioncensus.org/> [9]
2. National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention: Faith Communities Task Force. (2019). *Suicide prevention competencies for faith leaders: Supporting life before, during, and after a suicidal crisis*. Washington, DC: Education Development Center.
3. Hedman, A. S. (2016). Minnesota clergy's attitudes on suicide prevention and likelihood to inquire about suicidal thoughts and intent. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 19(6), 565–573.

Links within this resource

[1] <https://theactionalliance.org>

[2] <https://theactionalliance.org/task-force/faith-communities>



[3] <https://theactionalliance.org/faith-hope-life>

[4] <https://theactionalliance.org/faith-hope-life/national-weekend-of-prayer>

[5] <https://theactionalliance.org/faith-hope-life/resource/suicide-prevention-competencies-faith-leaders-supporting-life-during-and-after-suicidal>

[6] <https://theactionalliance.org/faith-hope-life/resources-materials>

[7] <http://www.faith-hope-life.org>

[8] <https://theactionalliance.org/faith-hope-life/national-weekend-of-prayer/pledge>

[9] <http://www.usreligioncensus.org/>

Printed on 04/17/2021 from <https://sprc.org/news/faith-communities-suicide-prevention-partners>