News
Analysis



Members of St. Moses the Black Orthodox Church worship together during service on Nov. 9, 2025, in Pittsburgh. (AP/Jessie Wardarski, File)

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May 4, 2026

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Worldwide, the landscape of religion is not serene. Many denominations have been racked by divisions. In some regions, believers are targeted with violence. Countless faith leaders have betrayed their flocks via corruption or sexual abuse.

Against this backdrop, there has been a long-running discussion about the role that religion can play in enhancing personal well-being and lowering the risk of mental health problems.

A positive view of religious faith's relation to mental health is shared by several prominent U.S. mental health organizations, including the National Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health America.

"Religion gives people something to believe in, provides a sense of structure and typically offers a group of people to connect with" those with similar beliefs, according to NAMI. "Research suggests that religiosity reduces suicide rates, alcoholism and drug use."

The American Psychological Association takes a nuanced approach, reflecting the views of several experts who shared theirs with The Associated Press. The APA says its Handbook of Psychology, Religion and Spirituality "sheds light on the many purposes religion serves, the rich variety of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, and the capacity of religion and spirituality to do both good and harm."

At St. John Fisher University — a Catholic school in Rochester, New York — visiting psychology instructor Timothy Powers says he sees that duality in his own counseling practice.

"While faith community participation can confer real and well documented protective benefits, those same communities can also be sources of shame, spiritual bypass, trauma, and significant barriers to seeking help," Powers said via email. "Clinically, both realities show up in the counseling room, sometimes in the same person."

"The task for therapists is to approach the subject without assuming that religion/spirituality is a resource or that it is a wound, to be open to ambiguity, and to ask rather than presume," Powers added.

Charles Camosy, a professor of moral theology and bioethics at The Catholic University of America, also shared nuanced thoughts.

"We expect on the one hand that being faithful will bring with it good things in this life," Camosy said in an email.

Yet "living out the Gospel doesn't lead to healthy, flourishing lives for everyone. People still get sick, including mentally ill," he added. "Christians, and especially faithful Christians who are salt and light in a world full of violence and injustice, are not promised mental health as a reward for faithfulness in this life."

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On Monday, there was a new contribution to the discussion, a report assembled by a team of professors and researchers for the Wheatley Institute at Brigham Young University. The institute describes as its basic mission: "Research-supported work that fortifies the core institutions of the family, religion, and constitutional government."

Citing an analysis of hundreds of previous studies, the report says that committed religious involvement — corresponding to at least weekly attendance at worship services — was linked to lower suicide risk, better stress management, reduced substance misuse, and higher levels of hope.

"Although harmful or coercive forms of religion do exist, the overall pattern across the best available studies is clear: religious belief and practice are overwhelmingly associated with better mental and emotional well-being," the report said.

The executive director of the American Humanist Association, Fish Stark, said he had no quibble with the assertion that religious engagement may have psychological benefits. But he stressed that nonreligious people had ways to fare equally well.

"If you have a strong secular, atheist identity, and actively participate in a nonreligious community, you get the same benefits," Stark said.

"The key is whether you have core convictions and participate in social groups," he added. "Those with strong religious identities and strong secular identities are equally happy."

Sociology professor Ellen Idler, director of Emory University's Religion and Public Health Collaborative, suggested that the effect of religion on mental health should not be measured solely among those who attend religious services regularly.

"Those who have been, or perceived that they have been, harmed by religion will stay away, leaving those less troubled in the pews," she said, citing people who had been sexually abused by clergy as children or were stigmatized by their congregations because they were LGBTQ+.