

Study links suicide rates, fall in church attendance

By James Kushlan

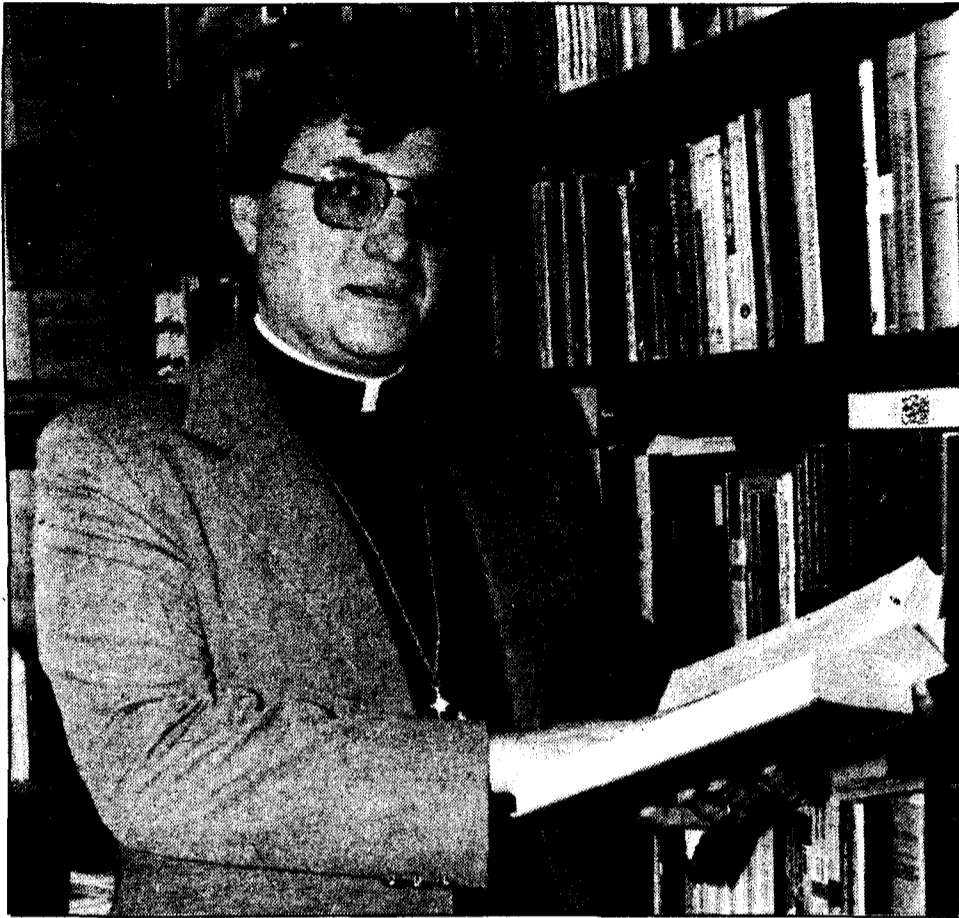
What sounds like part of a sermon is actually the conclusion of a study by a professor of sociology at University Park:

More young adults are committing suicide because fewer of them attend church.

Dr. Steven Stack claims a 300 percent suicide rate increase for ages 15-29 from 1954 to 1978 was linked with a simultaneously decline of institutionalized religion among the same age group. This decline was measured in terms of church attendance, using Gallup Opinion Poll results.

While the rate of unemployment and military participation were also significant, Stack calls the fall in church attendance "the most important factor associated with rising suicide rates."

Stack reached his conclusion by measuring the amount of



Pastor David Newhart of St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Middletown

Photo by Mike Markle

"The fall in church attendance is the most important factor associated with rising suicide rates."

**Dr. Steven Stack
Professor of Sociology**

variance in suicide attributable to each of three variables: the drop in church attendance, military participation and the unemployment rate. Basically the variable which changed the most was the drop in church attendance, representative of a decrease in religious commitment, was that factor, for the 15-29 age group.

Applying the conclusion of the study, Stack suggests several deterrents to suicide a young person misses through lack of religious commitment.

"Religion offers meaning to suffering. It can reinterpret the suffering associated with traumatic life events such as divorce, job loss, etc."

It's easier to bear suffering if you have a sort of buffer between you and the suffering. Without religion, suffering can be viewed as meaningless, and that's kind of hard to take.

"Going to church, one of the things which you might pick up is that you should persevere," he says, adding; "The higher the church attendance, the higher the exposure to the value of perseverance in the face of suffering."

"There are a lot of things in Christian teaching which might act as buffers against suicide," Stack says. The Gospels preach satisfaction -- for example, they condemn greed, which breeds dissatisfaction.

Rabbi Asher Ostrin, of Chisuk Emuna Congregation in Harrisburg, says, "Religion is designed to fit you into the society's fabric." It provides "a sense of community and a built-in support system of people who care."

The person who reaches the point of suicide, he says, often has nowhere to go. Religious involvement provides caring people to turn to. Rabbi Ostrin thinks the phone-in services provided for suicidal people derive from the understanding of this need to have someone to turn to.

"I know that there's a tremendous stigma attached to suicide," he adds, "so for a religious person that's not a viable alternative."

ing to life, and offers hope for a better world or an afterlife."

"On a more practical level," he adds, "an individual who is associated with a church has friends, teachers and clergy in the church who care about him, and that's an important source of support."

France refrains from calling the church attendance drop the most important factor in the suicide rise because Stack's study is a correlational one.

"With correlational studies you can say that certain things occur together, but you can't necessarily say that one caused the other."

France notes the stress in the transition from adolescence into adulthood as an important factor in young adult suicide rates.

"People who are religious have some measure of support and protection because of it."

**Mark Baron
Coordinator of Community Care**

Kenneth France, of the Counseling Center here, and a member of the American Association of Suicidologists, is not sure the decline in church attendance is the most important factor in the young adult suicide increase, but he agrees that it is important.

"Most suicidal people are hopeless," he says. "I think religion does give hope. It doesn't say life is going to be rosy or that everything's going to be alright, but it gives mean-

Mark Baron, Coordinator of Community care, Dauphin County Mental Health and Retardation, says, "The literature is fairly consistent in saying that a commitment to religious values is helpful in maintaining a life-committed outlook. People who are religious have some measure of support and protection because of it."

But Barton, too, questions Stack's conclusion. "An erosion of values or sense of purpose can accompany or forecast

depression or self-destructive thinking," he says. Does lack of religious commitment make a person more likely to commit suicide, or does depression make a person more likely to lose religious commitment? The answer would be very important, Barton says.

Stack's report includes a graph showing a decline in church attendance for young adults, from a high of 48 percent in 1958 to 29 percent in 1978. According to Stack, there are several common theories on why church attendance has decreased.

"There's a notion that religious commitment should decline with scientific development," he says. Other theories claim that careers replace religion today, that mass education takes away from the control of religion, or that materialism influences people.

Pastor David Newhart, of St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Middletown, sees a change in orientation as one explanation for the decrease in church attendance:

"Thirty years ago, the church was the center of the social life of the community. As soon as the 1960's came, the schools started to take over." St. Peter's even used to have its own band, he says, but now sports, cheerleading, bands, and activities involve young people at school.

Rev. Msgr. Hugh Overbaugh, Chancellor of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Harrisburg, says Catholic church attendance in this diocese has been declining for all age groups, but he thinks it's stabilized right now. "Mass attendance is down to perhaps 45 to 50 percent," he says.

Msgr. Overbaugh cites "the culture in which we're living, the whole milieu" as the cause for the decrease in church.

"People are going places, doing things. Before, everything took place in the parish gym, and parish playgrounds. "He also mentioned television as one of the factors in shifting people's orientation in directions other than the parish.

"The church doesn't have as much meaning for them anymore," he says. "They don't feel the need for God until some crisis hits them; then they come running."

"In the end, you can hold out all kinds of things to them, but it all boils down to faith." He adds, "If they had faith in Christ, in the Eucharist, the Sacraments, they'd come crawling to Church."

Another problem lies in family life, he says. "The Church and society is based on the family. The Church is as strong as the family is," and today the families are falling apart.