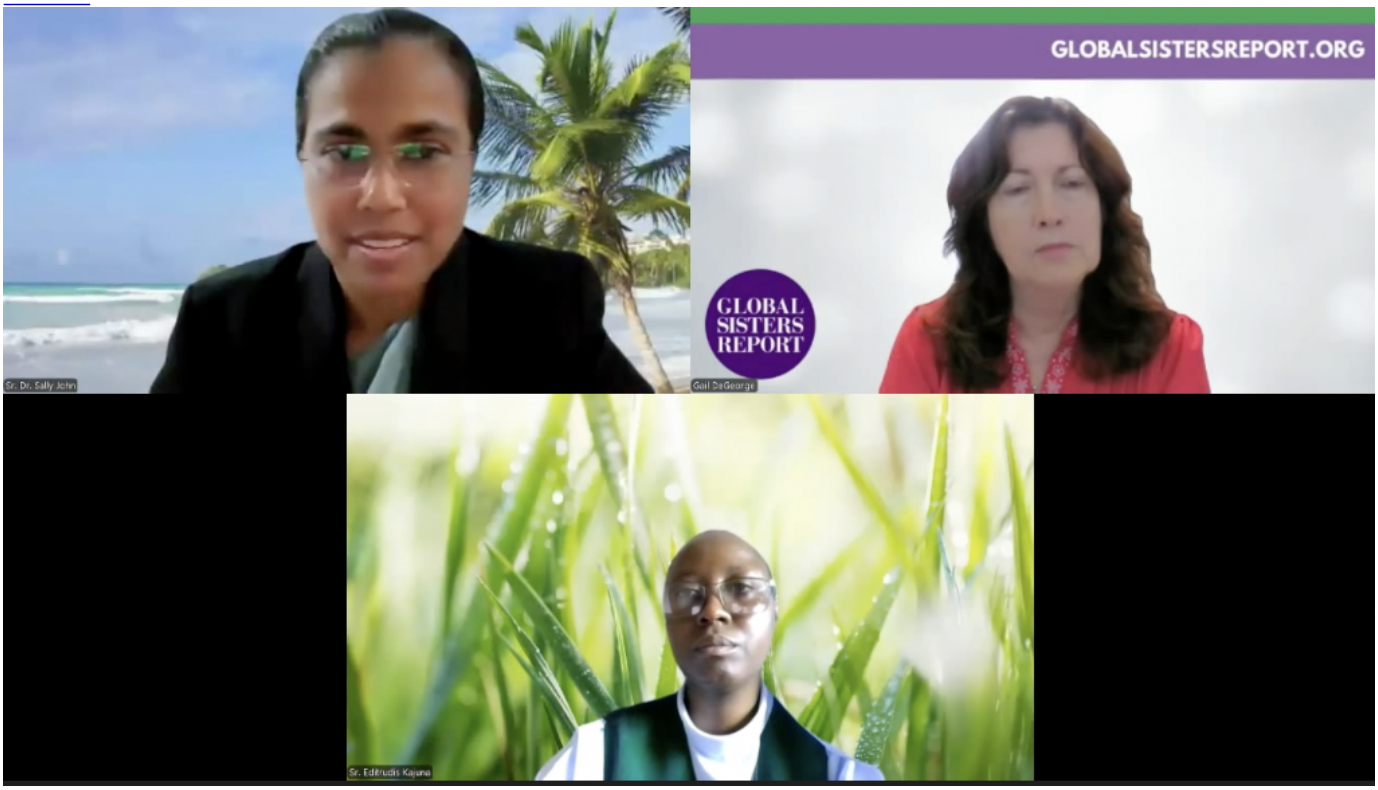
News



The Witness & Grace conversation, titled "A Healthcare Forum on Mental Wellness," included presenters Sr. Editrudis J. Kajuna, bottom center, who leads the Religious Sister Counsellors Network; Sr. Dr. Sally John, top left, founder of the Treasure Network; and Gail DeGeorge, top right, GSR's former editor emerita who organized the event. (GSR screenshot)



by Doreen Ajiambo

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Seeking to shed light on often-overlooked mental health challenges in religious life, Global Sisters Report convened a virtual Witness & Grace Healthcare Forum on mental wellness, drawing hundreds of Catholic sisters from across the world July 1.

Conducted in English and with Spanish translators, the 2.5-hour event brought together religious sisters from Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe, Oceania and North America in an effort to break the stigma around mental health within religious communities. Through keynote speeches, panel discussions and small group sessions, the forum fostered open conversations on issues such as stress, burnout, depression, anxiety, trauma and abuse. It also focused on resource sharing and building support networks for women religious.

"I come to this forum because I carry the silent stories of many sisters close to my heart — stories of grief, trauma, desperation, unfulfilled dreams, hopelessness, fatigue that goes unnoticed, and many other issues that are never named," said Sr. Editrudis J. Kajuna, who leads the Religious Sister Counsellors Network. The initiative, under the All-Africa Conference: Sister to Sister, includes more than 100 trained sisters providing professional mental health support in Uganda, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Cameroon and Nigeria.



More than 600 Catholic sisters from 61 countries participated in GSR's health care forum. (GSR screenshot)

The forum introduced practical tools and new networks of sister counselors who support the mental wellness of women in their congregations. Speakers emphasized that caring for one's mental health helps sisters serve others more effectively.

"I know what it means to smile outwardly while hurting inwardly, to serve faithfully while feeling empty," Kajuna said. "I believe this forum is a sacred space that gives me a chance to encourage sisters and say to all of us: 'You are not alone. Your mental wellness matters. ... It's okay to break the silence and seek help.' "

Related: A journey of healing and hope from pastoral care to mental health counseling

Globally, as of 2019, 1 in every 8 people were living with a mental disorder, primarily anxiety or depression, according to the World Health Organization. That totaled about 970 million people who were living with mental disorders, with significant

increases in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kajuna, who was among the event's presenters, said Catholic sisters often face unique mental health pressures: the emotional toll of working in conflict zones, the loneliness of remote assignments, and the stress of communal living in difficult conditions, among others.

"Nearly half of religious sisters at some point have felt isolated or emotionally overwhelmed but did not seek help due to fear of being misunderstood or judged," she said. "We all know the world is experiencing a lot of changes. These changes affect religious persons just like anyone else."

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Kajuna, a Tanzanian member of the Sisters of Our Lady of Good Counsel from Uganda, added: "Community demands, responsibility expectations, limited resources and the emotional toll of ministering in broken and poor communities can leave even the strongest of us exhausted and wanting. We are women of faith, but we are also human. Mental health is not a sign of weakness — rather, a call to wholeness. When we ignore our pain, we begin to lose the capacity to serve with joy."

A pre-forum survey by GSR found that most respondents reported symptoms of burnout. Nearly half said they had felt emotionally overwhelmed or isolated but had avoided seeking help due to stigma or fear of judgment.

"We surveyed sisters on topics they wanted addressed in health care forums, and stress, burnout and mental wellness appeared quite often," said Gail DeGeorge, GSR's former editor emerita and organizer of the forum. "There is still a stigma about mental health in many countries and societies, which is one reason we were careful to call it 'mental wellness.' "

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> —Sr. Editrudis J. Kajuna
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Sr. Susana Pasqualini, a Redemptorist Missionary Sister from Argentina, said she thinks that "the fact that we are beginning to talk more naturally about these mental issues will help religious communities, since just like in society, they are taboo subjects. Breaking silence and stigma is essential."

Among the initiatives highlighted was the Treasure Network in India, a sister-led mental health platform launched in 2024. In just eight months, the network has engaged nearly 90 Catholic psychiatrists, psychologists and technical aides, formed a listening circle for psycho-spiritual well-being, and created other tools to support sisters, said Sr. Dr. Sally John, a speaker at the forum.

Related: Q&A with Sr. Sally John, promoter of mental health among Catholic nuns in India

"Confidentiality and cultural sensitivity are at the heart of what we do," said John, a member of the Sisters of St. John the Baptist and associate professor of psychiatry at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences in Sevagram, Wardha, in western India. "Sisters need a safe space where they can speak freely, without fear of repercussions within their congregations."



Sisters of John the Baptist Sr. Sally John (Courtesy of Sally John)

Small group discussions at the forum allowed participants to share personal experiences and explore resilience tools such as mindfulness, spiritual direction and peer support.

Several sisters said the forum offered a rare and affirming space to express emotions long held in silence. For many, it was the first time they felt heard without judgment and recognized the importance of collective healing in religious life.

"Every sister needs to be listened to, understood and treated with mercy," said Sr. Florence Chinyere Owunna, of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. "Many fear asking for help, believing it would be seen as weakness. This forum helped me see that self-care is part of my vocation — not a distraction from it."

"It takes a lot of humility to recognize that one is not well and seek help," said Sr. Valerine Marthe Zafindramanana, a formator with the Daughters of Wisdom in Indonesia. "Thank you so much for reminding us how to take care of ourselves —

and how to take care of others."

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