

BELONG, BE KNOWN AND BE LOVED: THE MANDATE FOR CHURCH COMMUNITIES IN AN AGE OF *loneliness*

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THE GROWING PROBLEM OF LONELINESS

Loneliness has been described as an epidemic.¹ In a recent Australian study,² nearly 25% of respondents reported that they rarely or never were able to find companionship when they wanted it. Over 20% said they rarely or never felt close to people.

Loneliness has long been an issue for the very elderly who have lost a partner or reached old age without finding a life partner. However, it is also a major problem in other age groups, not least those aged between 18 and 25.³

Churches are one of the places that people can find community and connection, whatever their age, life circumstances or marital status. Churches, of various

kinds and traditions, have “branch offices” in every community in Australia. Indeed, there are often several churches in a local community. The network of churches is far more extensive than any other organisation in Australian life. Banks, sporting clubs, schools, franchised restaurant chains and many other entities are to be found in most towns and large suburbs, but none have as extensive a reach into local communities as churches.

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What then, can churches do to create a stronger sense of community within the local church, and to reach out to those who are lonely and socially isolated? To discuss the pastoral issues for local churches, *Publica*, in partnership with the PM Glynn Institute of the Australian Catholic University, brought together about 60 church leaders, both women and men, from a wide variety of church backgrounds to discuss the issues at meetings in Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney, and a rural area of South Australia. Churches represented by pastors or other leaders at these lunchtime meetings included Anglicans, Baptists, Catholics, Churches of Christ, the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, Lutherans, various



¹ Susan Mettes, *The Loneliness Epidemic: Why So Many of Us Feel Alone and How Leaders Can Respond* (Grand Rapids, MI, Brazos Press, 2021). ² Australian Psychological Society and Swinburne University of Technology, *Australian Loneliness Report* (2018): <https://apo.org.au/node/202286>. ³ M Lim, R Eres & C Peck, *The Young Australian Loneliness Survey: Understanding Loneliness in Adolescence and Young Adulthood*. (Swinburne University, 2019.)

Pentocostal churches, Presbyterians, the Salvation Army, the Seventh Day Adventists and the Uniting Church.

DEFINING LONELINESS

Loneliness can be measured by the gulf between the degree of social interaction a person desires and the amount that they experience. We can be lonely in the midst of a crowd, or we can be alone but not feel lonely. Loneliness is an emotional state. As one church leader put it, “loneliness is a sadness which settles on a person”.

LONELINESS AS A COMMUNITY PROBLEM

Many pastors identified loneliness as a very significant problem in their communities. This was the case not only in inner city urban environments but also in regional Australia. Two church leaders in South Australia, both of whom had food banks run by the churches they led, reported that people were coming less for the food than for the connection that collecting food provided to them. One pastor indicated that her food program was seeing a lot of lonely single males who can't join organisations that cost money. The food bank provided the church with an opportunity to care for them and to help them know that they have people to whom they can turn when they have difficulties. Another reported that the church was seeing more fathers with children coming into the food pantry for help than women, and again, loneliness was a bigger need than their financial circumstances.

Loneliness was also identified as a largely hidden problem. The environment and economy are tangible issues for many people. Social isolation is much less easy to observe and is not solved by providing more government money. Wesley Mission reported that its Lifeline service is flooded with calls from lonely and isolated people.

One leader identified many in the 45-64 age group as being particular in need of support. These are people whose relational lives haven't worked out as they had hoped and expected. They may have experienced separation, divorce, or haven't been able to find a partner. People in this age group, she said, get lonely, disoriented and lost.

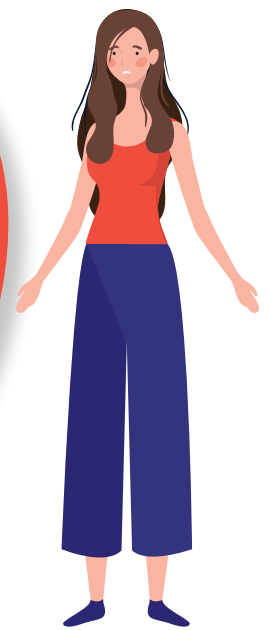
Another hidden form of loneliness is that experienced by the growing number of couples who can't have children. In the main this growth in infertility is a byproduct of long-delayed family formation. If women marry in their 30s, their window of fertility is that much smaller than for those who marry younger in life.

One pastor spoke also of widowers as particularly vulnerable. He observed that the most palpable lonely groups are widowed men “who rattle around bereft forever”.

STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CHURCH COMMUNITY

So how warm a relational environment is the local church for people who are socially isolated and looking for connection? How do we build a community in which, as one pastor put it, we can “belong, be known and be loved”? Many pastors reported that there was a real hunger for community

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and connection that was leading people to be more involved in church life.

However, modern life creates some challenges for building community in the church. A major issue named by several church leaders was the shortage of time. For families with children, some of the pressures arise from the number of different activities in which they are involved, including weekend sports. Covid lockdowns, for all their difficulties, had the advantage that such activities were not available. Both parents and children appreciated the rest that this brought; but as soon as these constraints were lifted, the pattern of busy life commenced again. The hectic pace of family life makes it more difficult for families to get together with other families or single people.

Some of this busyness may be difficult to avoid, particularly for couples in which both parents work, and need to work, due to housing costs. However, as one leader put it, we always prioritise the things we value. What priority do we need to give to relational time beyond the nuclear family? Pastors described various ways of so doing with the aim of building community.

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNHURRIED TIME

One pastor has responded to the issues by focusing upon unhurried time – with God, with family and with other people. People are encouraged not to look at the clock when engaged in these activities.

Another pastor pointed out that having unhurried time is the purpose of the Sabbath. He noted that if you take the rests out of a Beethoven symphony,



you finish the piece earlier, but you haven't really experienced the work.

Another leader reported that in her church, they shut down a whole lot of programs because people were too busy. This was not popular, but it created more time to build relationships and new connections. There may be also issues that need to be considered about creating more unhurried time in family life. One pastor observed that we are teaching children that we must be busy the whole time.

MEALS TOGETHER

Another way of building connection is to have open-invitation social occasions after church. For one inner city church, this meant having a regular pattern of going for meals. One group would go regularly to a local hotel after the 4pm service, and would invite others to join them. It was not uncommon for those new to the church to join this group. After the later evening service, another group would go regularly to a restaurant, again inviting others. The pastor observed that some of those who



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go to these after church gatherings may be socially awkward, but this problem can be managed within a larger group. For this church, meals are a core part of how they reach out to people and create a space for connection and hospitality.

The importance of meals was echoed by many other church leaders. As one put it, “we are trying to make eating together a core value”.

HOSPITALITY IN THE HOME

It is not necessary of course, to go out for a meal. However, the standards we set ourselves for hospitality in the home may be an impediment to building community. One pastor calls on her congregation constantly to ‘lower the bar on hospitality’. It doesn’t matter if the house is in a mess. The meal might be just toasted sandwiches. It is not “Better Homes and Gardens”. The purpose is to offer hospitality and build connection, not to demonstrate superb culinary skills and household management.

INCLUDING SINGLE PEOPLE IN FAMILIES

Another key theme was including single people in couple and family social activities. One pastor indicated that he and his wife regularly welcome into their family life an older person with a brain injury. He also goes out for meals with them. Another reported that, in their church, they try to include single people by inviting them on family holidays. To be welcomed into a family like this can be very meaningful. Psalm 68:6, in the NIV translation, says that “God sets the lonely in families”.

However, some realism is needed in relation to people who may not be all that safe or have seemingly limitless demands for attention. While being welcoming, parents need also to look out for their

children’s safety and wellbeing, and maintain appropriate boundaries about what they can give to people who may need professional help with their problems.

MEETING THE PARTICULAR NEEDS OF MEN

Other initiatives reported by pastors included programs specifically to support men who might otherwise be quite isolated. One church is starting a playgroup for fathers, on the initiative of one of its male members. Many churches run playgroups during the week, but these are usually populated by mothers. Men, while no doubt welcome, may feel a little out of place. So, the new group will meet on Saturday mornings. Men can bring their small children, and enjoy a coffee and chat together while their children play.

Another church has a particular ministry to the bereaved. It organises a roster to visit people who have recently lost a partner. Once a month, it organises a barbecue for widowed men. In that context, the pastor indicated, men really open up about how they are coping with their loss.

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INTERGENERATIONAL CONNECTION

Churches, and other faith communities, are almost uniquely well-placed to build connections between generations that would otherwise not be possible. One pastor observed that there is a tendency in churches to compartmentalise activities for certain age groups. We don't emphasise how an older person can be such a significant mentor in the life of a younger person.

Intergenerational connection can be of great benefit to both the young and old, giving the young someone beyond the family who will take an interest in their lives, while addressing some needs of older people for connection with younger age groups.

THE WELCOMERS AND THE WELCOMED

A more profound issue raised by a leader of a large multicultural church is

how to build community across cultures. Churches may be less counter-cultural than "subcultural". That is, churches can create a little cultural bubble which fosters community within the group, but does not reach out to the city as a whole.

He asks some pertinent questions. What does it look like to be connected to one another in ways which are not culturally dependent? What does it mean to find Christ in the life of other cultures? How can they impact our congregational life? Who is doing the welcoming? Who really belongs and who are we seeking to include who does not belong? Who belongs by default? What does it mean to belong together only because together we belong to Christ?

CONCLUSION

It is evident that, in an age of loneliness, people are hungry for connection and community. Churches have a unique capacity to offer that community, not only to those who want to join in with the spiritual life of the church, but also as a ministry to others. If we are to build strong communities, we will need unhurried space and the willingness to invite others into our homes and lives.

One church leader said that his vision for his church was that the local community would be disappointed if they ceased to be there. In a world of so many who are isolated, vulnerable or have experienced adverse life events, the Church may be able to offer an oasis of care.

