

# **ALL THE LONELY PEOPLE**

By Steve Aschmann

## **Loneliness**

Fifty years ago the Beatles released *Eleanor Rigby*, one of their sad songs, lamenting a culture which forgot and isolated people with the words, "Look at all the lonely people." Now, a half century later, we find that those words are even more applicable. There is an Epidemic of Loneliness spreading among older adults. The affliction presents a spiritual challenge and a ministering opportunity for congregations and faith communities. Loneliness is often defined as "a psychological state of mind or feeling of being excluded from other people and/or God," and it impacts more people than generally acknowledged. Active members of faith communities are often unaware that a growing percentage of the senior adult population find themselves experiencing deep and painful loneliness.

Between 1980 and the present, the number of older adults experiencing loneliness has increased by 20 percent. Alarming, it's the Boomers, the youngest older adult generation, who appear to suffer from the highest incidence of severe loneliness. Loneliness is not only an emotion or the sensation of feeling isolated and empty, it often produces a negative effect on lifestyle, health, and even life expectancy. Studies have determined that the consequences of isolation and loneliness include higher incidences of chronic health conditions, heart disease, weakened immune systems, depression and anxiety, cognitive decline, dementia including Alzheimer's disease, admission to nursing homes, use of emergency health services, poor dieting, physical inactivity, being scammed, and even death.

## **Eye-Opening Numbers (From 2010 AARP Survey)**

- 35% of adults age 45 and over are lonely. Based on the 2010 Census, that equates to 42.6 million older adults suffering from chronic loneliness
- 76% of those who reported having no supportive people in their life experience loneliness
- 34% of those who reported having 1 or more supportive people in their life experience loneliness
- 17% of American adults and older are isolated, detached and disconnected from support groups like family, friends, and churches
- 51% of people 75 and older live alone
- Studies show a 26% increased risk of death due to subjective feeling of loneliness
- 6 million adults 65 and older have a disability that prevents them from leaving their homes without help
- Prolonged isolation can be as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day
- Older adults who describe themselves as lonely have a 59% greater risk of functional decline

## **Sources of Loneliness**

Loneliness has been characterized as "the leprosy of the modern world," but unlike epidemics spread by mosquitoes or through the air, there is no one source. The origins of loneliness among older adults are many. Here is a partial list: we live alone, we lose our spouse, we are divorced, we retire from our job, we relocate from our old neighborhood, friends move away, friends pass away, health issues eliminate or restrict our driving, hearing loss limits our communications, we live in a rural or dangerous

neighborhood. Loneliness can be triggered when caregivers feel unable to step away from their duties, or by an over-reliance on social media such as email and texting which may diminish our human contacts. Loneliness crosses socioeconomic and ethnic lines. Wealth and privilege do not ensure relief.

### **Scripture and Loneliness**

“It’s not good!” When we turn to the Bible, we discover that our loneliness has been an ancient concern of God, addressed throughout the biblical record. The 16<sup>th</sup> century poet John Milton noted, “Loneliness is the first thing which God’s eye named ‘Not Good’.” Indeed, in Genesis 2:18, we overhear God declaring, “It is not good that man should be alone.” God is serious about alleviating loneliness. Just as God raised up a partner for Adam, in the Gospels we come to recognize that God reaches out to all lonely by sending us a best friend who we know as Jesus. The Gospel of John draws us to Christ when we hear him say, (15:15) “I have called you friends.”

Still, key biblical figures suffered from a sense of isolation and lack of a supportive community. In Psalm 25 attributed to David we hear the supplication, “Turn to me and be gracious for I am lonely and afflicted.” In I Kings 19 we find a lonely Elijah who has all but given up, “I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” Jeremiah reminds us that often it is our service to God and care for others that brings on loneliness. In Jeremiah 15, the prophet laments, “I never sat in the company of revelers, never made merry with them; I sat alone because your hand was on me.” In the New Testament, in 2 Timothy 4, Paul’s loneliness is derived from being deserted in a time of trial. He writes, “At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me.” Matthew 27:46 reports that Jesus’ anguish on the cross was accentuated by the pain of desertion and denial, and he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

### **Steps You Can Take**

God declares that people do not thrive when we experience loneliness, lack social contacts, and human interactions. If we experience loneliness, there are proactive steps which many of us can take to build relationships and stay connected. Here’s a partial list:

- Schedule a time each day to phone a friend or visit someone.
- Make an effort to meet your neighbors. Invite them for coffee or a snack.
- Take a class to learn something new. Meet some new people.
- Compose a letter to an old friend or family member, or use social media to connect.
- Get out of the house, even if you are a non-driver. Discover your transportation options.
- Enrich your spirit, attend worship. Participate in congregational study groups, ministries, or social activities.
- Volunteer in your community or your community of faith. Help others.
- Stay fit -- Especially fun with others. Find a group exercise class, join the Y.
- Even if homebound, ask your pastor for ways you might contribute and help.

### **Challenge and Opportunity**

Christian congregations are intended to be friendship circles reflecting the love of Christ, marked by care and togetherness. Luke describes the early church saying, “All

believers were together and had everything in common.” The word “together” suggests an intimate unit, often describing the physical intimacy of husband and wife. The earliest believers were all together, socially intimate, inclusive and respectful of all. It was a closely knit community of believers who held up as a priority the mutual care of all members. No one was excluded or left isolated and alone.

Congregations and faith communities are well equipped to protect older adults from the tragedy of loneliness. Studies have shown that religious participation and church attendance have a positive impact, both preventing and alleviating loneliness. Churches which recognize the seriousness and devastation of loneliness can be healing agents. Congregations which intentionally address loneliness will work to create inclusive, inviting, welcoming, "together" communities.

People who are lonely are often reluctant to speak to others about their condition, feeling stigmatized by the admission. So forming a “lonely hearts club” isn’t an answer, but what’s needed are opportunities for the lonely to connect and join in. A lonely individual may be interested in participating in an activity like a lunch or coffee club, respond to an invitation to help arrange flowers, fold newsletters, perform light maintenance tasks, join a class, volunteer for a mission, or support a ministry. The key is for church leadership to be attentive to those who may be prone to loneliness, and to make the effort to see that they stay connected. Encouragement offered by members in the church family remains crucial. It makes a difference if a lonely older adult perceives that their presence and talents are valued by pastors, staff, and other members.

### **Ideas for Ministry to and with Lonely**

- Listen – Tune in to their concerns, fears, and needs. Value their thoughts. Give them a place and space to talk.
- Stay Connected – Try to do everyday things with persons who appear lonely or isolated, i.e. grocery shopping, a ball game, a movie.
- Provide Transportation – Offer rides to worship, church activities, doctor's appointments, etc.
- Encourage – Help them to find a place in the faith community: an important cause or mission, a fellowship activity, a service opportunity.
- Visit – Over half the population over 75 years old live alone. Millions are homebound.
- Pairs – Great conversation and socialization occur when two people invite a lonely person out for lunch.
- Regular Contact – Ensure that lonely are contacted each week by a representative of the congregation.
- Socialization and Fellowship – Provide opportunities for informal gatherings: café in the church basement or Saturday soup in the fellowship hall.

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