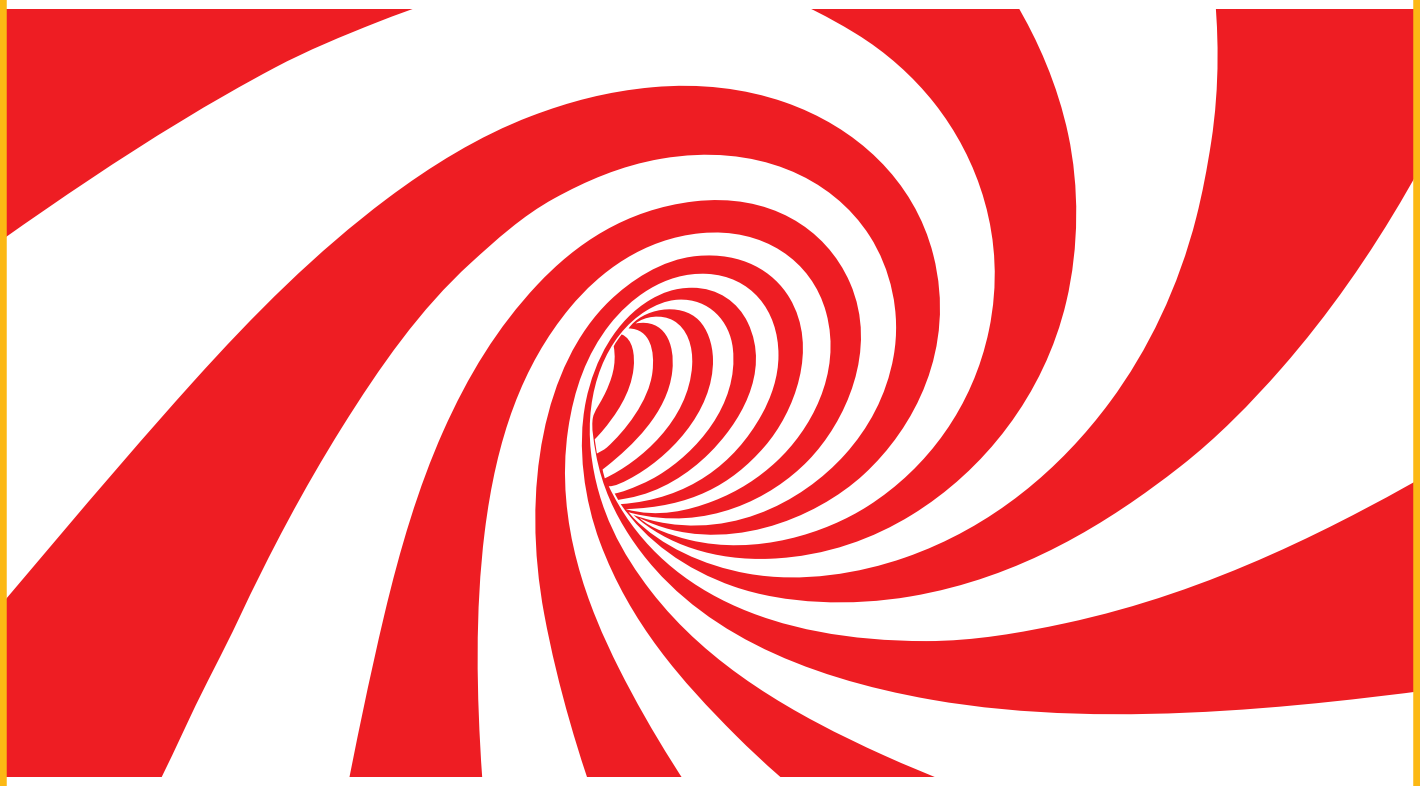
LONELINESS

ACCIDENT OR INJUSTICE?



EXPLORING CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO LONELINESS IN THE THAMES VALLEY

BY **JO IND**

ON BEHALF OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF MISSION
CHURCH OF ENGLAND
DIOCESE OF OXFORD

The Archway Foundation

LIVING FAITH MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD

DIOCESE OF OXFORD

Loneliness is the ultimate poverty

(Abigail Van Buren, The Buffalo News)

CONTENTS

MARY'S STORY *

*"**I never expected to be lonely.** I was one of five children and grew up on a farm. There were always people coming and going. It was a very gregarious childhood. I went to university, where I met the man who became my husband. We had three sons together and led a very active life. He worked in engineering and I was a teacher and did a lot of voluntary work too.*

Almost 35 years ago, we moved to our village in Oxfordshire. We chose to live in a house on the main street, near to the pubs, post office and village shops, so we would always have friends who were nearby. But now I'm 85-years-old and people rarely call.

My husband died six years ago. I've never lived on my own before and I find it very, very peculiar. I want somebody to talk to about the news or about a book. I enjoy debating, getting different opinions and trying to work things out – but it doesn't happen I'm afraid.

The only people I see each week are the people I pay to take care of me. My sons are very caring and come when they can, but they don't live nearby. We used to have a lot of friends, but I've lost almost all of them through death or dementia.

I can't get out to meet people because I have mobility problems. My lower lumber spine has degenerated, compressing the nerves to my legs. I can't get to the bus stop because it's several hundred yards away. I still have a car but I've had two cataracts removed and my sight is still unreliable, so I'm reluctant to use it.

People say I should use the internet and I do. I have an iPad and I have one friend that I email. I email my sons too but nobody else I know uses the internet. And the signal is poor where I live so on a Saturday or Sunday you can't get on it because everybody else is using it.

A helper comes twice a week, but I'm alone for a long weekend, most of the time. I start off, when she leaves on a Friday, feeling upbeat and positive. I knit. I sew. I go to the garden with my three-wheeled trolley and balance the watering can on top and water my containers as best I can. But then I start to get low and I tend to stay low until I see someone again on Tuesday.

I have always been busy and useful. I wasn't somebody who wasted time. Now I feel as though all I do is waste time. My sons say I should move into sheltered housing where there are other people around but wherever I would be, I would be amongst strangers. At least here I've got my garden and if I do see somebody on the street, it might be someone who knew me before I was disabled.

I know Esther Rantzen has set up Silver Line service where you can call someone and have a chat. But I don't want that. I want friendships. I want company."

Mary, aged 85, lives in a village in Oxfordshire.

* Throughout this publication, where the first name and only the first name has been used, the name has been changed to protect the person's identity.

INTRODUCTION

Eric was in his 60s. He lived alone. He had lost contact with what little family might have remained. His only friends were people from the Archway Foundation, a Christian charity based in Oxford to serve those hurt by loneliness. When Eric died, it was left to social services to arrange his funeral. There were just three mourners – his social services support worker and two people from Archway who had befriended him. Without them, there would have been no one to honour his passing. There would have been no one to say: *"He lived. We loved him. He mattered to us."*

PREVALENCE OF LONELINESS

Loneliness is arguably the most prevalent social concern of our time. In 2014, the Church of England and Church Urban Fund surveyed church leaders asking about the social issues facing people in their communities. Loneliness or social isolation was the most common concern with 64 per cent of church leaders saying it was significant and only three per cent saying it was not an issue, or at least not one of which they were aware[1].

The problem of loneliness is not restricted to a particular parish size or social class. It's more often noted in deprived parishes (81 per cent) than affluent ones – but even amongst the well-off, 55 per cent of leaders say loneliness is a significant cause of concern[2].

What's more, loneliness seems to be getting worse. There's been an increase in the proportion of church leaders who say social isolation is a major or significant problem – up from 58% in 2011 compared with 64% in 2014 [3]. This tallies with figures from the Mental Health Foundation which found 48 per cent of us believe people are getting lonelier[4].

WHAT IS LONELINESS?

Loneliness is not the same thing as solitude, nor is it the same thing as living alone. Many can, and do, choose solitude and even experience it as luxurious for certain periods of time. And some live on their own very happily, while others are lonely within their marriages and families.

Many people feel lonely during life changes – the kind of life changes we cannot avoid, like bereavement, or leaving home, or retirement. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation claims loneliness is as normal and as useful as hunger and thirst: *"It is our internal trigger, letting us know it's time to seek company as hunger lets us know it's time to eat*[5]*."*

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[1] Eckley B, Sefton T, Church of England and Church Urban Fund, Church in Action: A National Survey of Church-based social action p 4 (2015)
[2] As reference i p 5
[3] As reference i p 5
[4] Griffin J, The Lonely Society? The Mental Health Foundation p 21 (2010)
[5] Let's Talk About Loneliness, The Joseph Rowntree Foundation p 1 (2013)

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, says we experience loneliness within every relationship: *"Loneliness has to do with the sudden clefts we experience in every human relation, the gaps that open up with such stomach-turning unexpectedness. In a brief moment, I and my brother or sister have moved away into different worlds, and there is no language we can share*[6]*."*

The loneliness we're investigating in this publication is the kind that isn't inevitable, that isn't chosen and isn't fleeting. It's what we will call "chronic loneliness." It's the loneliness that goes on and on. The kind that wears us down. The sort that "settles in long enough to create a persistent, self-reinforcing loop of negative thoughts, sensations and behaviours[7]."

IMPACT OF LONELINESS

This kind of loneliness, this chronic loneliness, *"kills people and kills communities*[8]*."*
That might seem like an over-statement, but it is one borne out by facts.

John Cacioppo at the University of Chicago has shown that persistent loneliness leaves a physical mark on us. It affects our stress hormones, immune function and cardiovascular function in such a way that being lonely or not has an impact on our health that is equivalent to being a smoker or non-smoker[9]. A separate study of women with breast cancer found that those without close friends were four times more likely to die of the disease than women with ten friends of more[10].

Research shows loneliness:

- is more detrimental to our health than obesity and is as bad for us as smoking
- increases the risk of high blood pressure
- puts people at a higher risk of developing a disability
- increases the chances of developing clinical dementia by 64 per cent
- makes people more prone to depression
- increases the risk of suicide

(Figures collated by the Campaign to End Loneliness. See campaigntoendloneliness.org/threat-to-health/ for references)

Loneliness is therefore not just a personal sadness, it's a public health issue. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which has worked in communities on a Neighbourhood approaches to loneliness programme, claims: *"Loneliness also damages our wider community infrastructure. As people become more and more lonely they lose their confidence, and they withdraw more and more. In time people withdraw from their communities. Those communities then lose out on these individual's skills, resources and contributions, and over time they become poorer for it*[11]*."*

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[6] Williams R, A Ray of Darkness, Open to Judgement: Darton, Longmann &Todd pp 121–26. (1994)
[7] Cacioppo J, Patrick, W, Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection, New York: W W Norton and Company, p 7 (2008)
[8] Let's Talk About Loneliness, The Joseph Rowntree Foundation p 1 (2013)
[9] Cacioppo, J, Hawkley L, Aging and Loneliness: Downhill Quickly? Current Directions in Psychological Science (2007)
[10] Parker-Pope, T, What Are Friends For? A Longer Life. The New York Times (2009)
[11] www.jrf.org.uk/topic/loneliness

WHAT THE CHURCHES ARE DOING

Nationally, 90 per cent of parishes offer organised or informal help to those who are at risk of being isolated [12]. This publication was commissioned in response to that and in particular to a Justice Forum, hosted by the Diocese of Oxford and The Archway Foundation in April 2015 called Loneliness: Accident or Injustice? The forum recognised the key role churches have to play in combating social isolation.

It also recognised that not all churches are good at all aspects of this. People within churches can be cliquey and unwelcoming to new-comers, while others can be hostile to those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, unmarried parents or divorced.

Nonetheless, throughout the Diocese of Oxford, prophetic work is being done to combat loneliness in ordinary and extraordinary ways. One of the roles of this publication is to celebrate that work, to share it and to learn from each other ways of doing it better.

Activities being done by churches to combat loneliness:

- 87 per cent of parishes offer organised or informal help to combat loneliness or social isolation
- 66 per cent help run a food bank
- 60 per cent provide a parent and toddler group
- 52 per cent run a lunch club or drop in centre
- 32 per cent provide a befriending service
- 14 per cent do a street patrol
- 10 per cent offer support to asylum seekers

(Figures from Eckley B, Sefton T, Church of England and Church Urban Fund, Church in Action: A National Survey of Church-based social action p 6 (2015))

Another purpose of this publication is to look at some of the prevalent causes of loneliness within the Diocese. It focuses on older people, younger people, those in rural communities, new communities and those with mental health issues. By framing loneliness within these themes, it helps make connections between loneliness and social infrastructure. It therefore encourages action to address the social causes of loneliness as well as to meet individuals' needs.

Campaigning to keep a post office open, taking communion to housebound people, holding a mid-week café for any who want a cup of tea, petitioning a developer for a community centre, smiling at a visitor and saying: "You're very welcome" – these activities are the stuff of which churches are made. They are the 'glue' that binds people together and that is vital for building healthy, resilient communities [13].

Loneliness: Accident or Injustice? recognises the ordinary but radical ways in which churches in the Diocese of Oxford help combat loneliness. It celebrates them and it offers theological and practical resources to encourage and empower them in the small acts of kindness which can make the difference between belonging and despair.

[12] As reference i p 6

[13] As reference i p 7

MENTAL HEALTH

Loneliness can be both a cause and a result of mental illness. We know that when people are lonely, they're more vulnerable to common mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, paranoia or panic attacks. These conditions can then cause people to become even more isolated and lonely, leading to a downward spiral of unhappiness and despair.

HOW MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS CAN LEAD TO LONELINESS

There are many different reasons why having a mental health problem can exacerbate people's experience of loneliness. These include:

- low self-esteem as a result of the condition causing withdrawal from others
- experiencing stigma or discrimination
- having an anxiety or phobia that makes it difficult to leave the house
- taking medication that causes shaking or slurred speech which is misunderstood
- losing a job and the self-esteem and sense of belonging that can go with it
- behaving aggressively because of the condition which can strain relationships.

SOCIAL CAUSES OF POOR MENTAL HEALTH

While anybody of any social class or background can develop a mental health condition, we also know that poor mental health is related to factors such as poor transport, neighbourhood disorganisation and racial discrimination [14].

Wealth inequality is another factor. The World Health Organisation has found that unequal societies, such as Britain, have more pronounced levels of mental health problems than more equal ones [15].

> *"There's an element of shame to do with mental health – one's sense of self-worth is reduced. People don't want to spend time with you."* **(Bill, who has had depression.)**

This is true at a local level too. Dr Dave Furze, has researched what happens where neighbourhoods at the bottom of the UK Index of Multiple Deprivation are in close proximity to those in the top two per cent [16]. *"There's increased stigma and isolation and there's often an associated lack of hope,"* he says. *"When people see those nearby living in big houses and driving fast cars, they feel there's no way out and they just sort of accept it – unless there is some kind of catalyst for community development."*

[14] Singleton N, Bumpstead R, O'Brien M, Lee A, Meltzer H, Psychiatric Morbidity Among Adults Living In Private Households, 2000 London: The Stationery Office p77, (2001)

[15] Prevention Of Mental Disorders Geneva: World Health Organisation p29, (2004)

[16] Buckinghamshire Sure Start Partnership: Deprivation Amongst Affluence (2000)

Combating the loneliness that causes and is caused by mental health conditions is not just about dealing with individuals, however important that is. It also demands paying attention to the inequalities that lead to poor housing, poor transport and unequal community services and facilities. The church is well placed to be a presence in areas where there is need for friendly spaces through which people can belong.

PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS SAY WHAT HELPS

"Gardening. Being able to plant things and watch things grow, especially if this is done with other people."

"The existence of people of good will who want to understand what it's like for someone else and who can get them to reach a level of relationship that's right for them."

"Having somewhere to go, that's near with friendly people. When you have a mental health condition, there's a fence that goes round you. You can very easily get into the habit of getting isolated and never leaving the house. It happens so quickly."

FACT FILE

- Social isolation is a factor in mental health problems. 20% of people with common mental health problems live alone, compared with 16% of the overall population [17]
- More than half of people with depression or anxiety have said the health condition has caused them to isolate themselves from family members [18]
- A person with a severe mental health problem is four times more likely than average to have no close friends [19]
- 1 in 4 people using mental health services has no contact with their family, and 1 in 3 has no contact with friends [20]
- People with a common mental health problem are twice as likely to be separated or divorced as their mentally healthy counterparts (14% compared with 7%) [21]
- Factors that increase the likelihood of mental health problems include poor transport, neighbourhood disorganisation and racial discrimination [22]
- Factors that support robust mental health include community empowerment and integration, provision of social services, tolerance, and strong community networks [23]
- Good social support increases the likelihood of recovery – 54% of women and 51% of men with mental health problems and good social support recovered over an 18 month period, compared with 35% of women and 36% of men with a lack of social support [24]

[17] Singleton N, Bumpstead R, O'Brien M, Lee A, Meltzer H, Psychiatric Morbidity Among Adults Living In Private Households, 2000 London: The Stationery Office p77, (2001)
[18] Griffin J, The Lonely Society: The Mental Health Foundation p37 (2010)
[19] Huxley P, Thornicroft G, Social Inclusion, Social Quality And Mental Illness, British Journal Of Psychiatry 182 pp289–90, (2003)
[20] National Health Service: National Service Frameworks London: NHS p46, (1999)
[21] Singleton N, Bumpstead R, O'Brien M, Lee A, Meltzer H. Psychiatric Morbidity Among Adults Living In Private Households, 2000 London: The Stationery Office p77, (2001)
[22] Prevention Of Mental Disorders Geneva: World Health Organisation p29, (2004)
[23] Prevention Of Mental Disorders Geneva: World Health Organisation p29, (2004)
[24] Singleton N, Lewis G. Better Or Worse: A Longitudinal Study Of The Mental Health Of Adults Living In Private Households In Great Britain London: The Stationery Office p33, (2003)

FOCUS ON OUR PLACE COMMUNITY HUB *

Stacey wishes that Our Place Community Hub had opened years ago. She's sitting on a sofa knitting and nattering with other women. She lives with agoraphobia. At its worst, she has been unable to leave her house. On good days, she can walk down a few streets to get to Our Place which has a weekly well-being support group on a Tuesday and the chance to knit and natter on a Wednesday.

Around eight people go to the well-being support group, which is for people with conditions like anxiety, depression, schizophrenia or simply feeling alone. It's managed by an occupational therapist and a psychologist who live in the area.

"If only this had been here before," says Stacey. *"We meet each other and we talk. They can explain their situation and you can explain yours. I've learnt things like how to control a panic attack. People don't normally talk about things like that."*

The ladies agree that the well-being support group is effective because the support comes from peers – neighbours, people who live on the same estate in a similar situation. They have found each other and they have found friendship and that makes all the difference.

Micklefield is an estate in which many of the residents are housed through Red Kite Community Housing. It's an area with few community facilities. It has a school, a petrol station and supermarket and three churches but nowhere where people can just come and hang out. It sits on the edge of the Wycombe Valley amongst some of the most affluent areas in the country.

WHAT: Our Place Community Hub is a charity shop, drop-in centre, internet café and advice centre with a well-being group for people with mental health conditions or a vulnerability to them.

WHO: Founded by Community Transform, a Christian social enterprise

WHEN: Our Place opened in July 2014. The well-being group meets weekly as does the knit and natter group.

WHERE: Gayhurst Road, Micklefield, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire.

WHY: Dave Furze, director of Community Transform, believes in *"crossing places"* – friendly places run by local people, where people can meet and through relationships find services provided by the church and voluntary sector.

Our Place Community Hub is in the centre of the estate in two disused shops, loaned to Community Transform by Red Kite. The once disused shops have become a charity shop, an internet cafe, an information and advice centre. There's a painting course, an opportunity to work in the garden and a group that goes on a simple walk around the neighbourhood.

The shop gives Our Place a visible presence in the area. People pop in and browse around and are greeted by a friendly face. From there it is literally just a few steps to the information centre and a welcome to join some of the groups.

* Our Place closed in July 2015 because Red Kite withdrew its loan of the disused shops.

OLDER PEOPLE

Loneliness is not an inevitable part of old age, but older people are at particular risk of becoming lonely due to the increased likelihood they will experience bereavement and ill health. What's more, the risks of being lonely are increasing due to changes in our social structure, including:

- families becoming more scattered so there is less chance the elderly will be living close to their sons or daughters [25]
- families becoming smaller, so there are fewer sons or daughters to visit parents when they become less mobile [26]
- increasing numbers of households where both partners go out to work, so people are less available to call in on parents than they were in previous generations [27]
- cuts in social services – an estimated two million people aren't getting the care they need [28]

WHAT CHURCHES ARE DOING

In a survey of Church of England membership, in 2007, it was found that the average church-goer is aged 61, while the average age in the population as a whole was 48. In some rural parishes, the average church-goer was older than 65 [29]. This can be seen negatively – indeed it usually is – but it could also be an indication that the church is good at serving the needs of the elderly.

> *"I was a postman for more than 20 years. Sometimes I could tell somebody was alone in their house, so I would knock on the door to deliver the letters, just so I could see if they were alright. I might have been the only face they had seen all day"*
> **(Alan, member of Broughton Church)**

James Woodward, author of Valuing Age, says: *"The deepest roots of loneliness are spiritual. The distinctive gift of the church is that it helps us engage with the vulnerabilities we become so aware of in old age."*

It also provides an intergenerational community. *"When I worked with a care sheltered community at Temple Balsall, people would often say it was very nice, but they didn't want to live only with other older people,"* says James. *"The church creates community, across generations, between young and old, which many older people enjoy and need."*

[25] Scattered families make aged care decisions harder: BUPA (2015)
[26] Childbearing for Women Born in Different Years, England and Wales: Office for National Statistics (2013)
[27] Women in the Labour Market: Office for National Statistics (2013)
[28] Health and Social Care Information Centre (2013); Personal Social Services: Expenditure and Unit Costs, England, 2012–13
[29] Celebrating Diversity: Research & Statistics Department Archbishops' Council (2007)

But Ruth Swift, Age UK Oxfordshire, cautions against complacency. *"Churches can inadvertently make older people feel invisible by not asking their ideas, by publishing youth events far and wide while assuming everyone knows about activities for older people, by providing information in a small font that older people can't read... All these things subliminally contribute to loneliness by communicating that older people aren't as valued. But churches do care and when they think about these things, they care fantastically well."*

LINK VISITING SCHEME

Churches wanting to set up a befriending service for the elderly, can use a model of best practice provided by the Link Visiting Scheme.

The Scheme, a registered charity, was initially set up by a Baptist Church in Berkshire when it recognised loneliness was a desperate problem for older people in the region.

Volunteers visit isolated older people for between one and two hours each week. The charity now works with more than 30 churches supporting more than 160 older people in Wokingham. It shares its expertise with churches nationwide.

See page 27 for contact details

COMMUNITY INFORMATION NETWORK (CIN)

Finding out what services are available for the elderly in Oxfordshire has been made easier, thanks to Age UK.

The CIN is a central hub of information, partly funded through a donation by the church's Mission Outreach Fund, listing services for older people in the county, including faith groups. It was set up in response to research showing duplication in some services, such as benefit advice, and gaps in others.

Churches can use CIN to signpost older people to care and identify organisations with which to partner.

See page 27 for contact details

FACT FILE

- As many as 13% of people aged 75 or over said they were always or often lonely [30].
- More than 40% of people aged 65 and over in the UK feel out of touch with the pace of modern life and 12% say they feel cut off from society [31].
- Nearly half of older people say that television or pets are their main form of company [32].
- Five per cent of people aged over 65 say they spent Christmas Day alone [33].
- More than 10% of over 65s said they never spend time with their family [34].
- Only 35% of people aged over 65 spend time with friends most days or every day in the last two weeks, and 12% never did [35].
- A third of people aged 55 or over (33%) would like to live closer to family so that we could see them more often [36].

[30] Later Life in the United Kingdom: Age UK (2015)
[31] [32] [33] [34] [35] As above
[36] Griffin J, The Lonely Society? The Mental Health Foundation p 41 (2010)

FOCUS ON MORE + COFFEE SHOP

More + stands out on Broughton's shopping parade. Next door to Cartridge World in an outlet that used to be Blockbuster Express, the independent coffee shop looks chic, professional and well cared for.

The feeling of being well cared for extends to the interior as well. It's a Tuesday morning and there's a clatter of happy voices and scrabble tiles as four tables of people play board games.

More + is the *"visible presence"* in the community of Broughton Church, which worships in a school hall. The church wanted to create a space in which people in Broughton and beyond would feel welcome. A coffee shop seemed like the obvious way to do that.

More + has two part-time paid members of staff. The rest of the work is done by 25 volunteers, mainly church members, who serve, wash up, bake cakes and chat to the people who come.

The volunteers know that however delicious the cakes are, the people don't really come for them. They come for the something more – hence the name. *"Really people want someone to talk to,"* says Phyllis, a volunteer. *"They can just have a glass of water. We don't mind. We're here."*

WHAT: More + is a coffee shop selling home-made cakes and light lunches. It offers different activities each day – knit and natter, board games, baby friendly Friday. Police community support officers and town counsellors hold *"Have Your Say"* sessions there and there are themed evening events on special occasions.

WHO: Broughton Church, a church planted by Holy Trinity, Aylesbury in 1989. They formed Broughton Community Action, the charity that created and operates More +

WHEN: The coffee shop was launched in July 2014. It opens 10am-4pm Monday to Friday and 10am-1pm on Saturday.

WHERE: More +, Parton Road, Broughton, Buckinghamshire.

WHY: Phil White, Vicar of Broughton Church, says: *"We wanted people's lives in Broughton to be changed."*

The coffee shop is not just for older people but about one third of the customers are aged over 60. Two volunteers are in their 70s and two in their 80s. Young and old alike appreciate the mix in age.

"We have set up some specific elderly gatherings in response to a need and a request," says Phil White, vicar of Broughton Church. *"But by creating a café for everyone, community amongst the elderly just happens naturally."*

Sherry, a member of Broughton Church, says: *"We used to visit people who were lonely and we still do if they are housebound – but this is one stage up from that. It brings people together."*

"We have a chat and a laugh," says Enid, who is aged 87. *"It keeps the brain working,"* says Maggie, who is aged 87 too. *"It gets me out of the house. You've got to get out and join people,"* says Rose, who as it happens, is also aged 87. *"The three of us are 87,"* explains Enid – and they all laugh together. **See Gerry's story on page 25**

YOUNGER PEOPLE

It's a little known fact that the younger adults are, the more likely they are to feel lonely. Those in the 18 to 24-year-old age group are more vulnerable to loneliness than those in any other age bracket. (48% feel lonely often compared with 25% aged over 65 [37].)

One reason is that younger people are more likely to be unemployed than older adults. The unemployment rate for 18 to 24-year-olds is 14% compared with 4.2% in the 25 to 49 bracket and 3.2% in the over 50s [38]. Rachel Green is project manager for Starting Point, a charity based in Reading, Berkshire, providing mentoring and work experience to young people not in education, employment or training. She says loneliness is a pervasive issue amongst her clients.

> *"At our age, people try to associate themselves with a group of people. They think: 'He's cool. Let's hang out with him.' And they think that makes them cool. But it isn't real and it doesn't make you cool but you can feel lonely if you don't realise that."*
> **(Owen, aged 20, Oxfordshire)**

"If you don't get a job or go to university, you lose your peer group when you leave school and you can feel isolated very quickly. If our young people are applying for jobs, they might be getting constant rejections which can affect their self-esteem and make them feel lonely. They can then get into isolating habits like sleeping all day and being awake at night. It's very easy to go on a downward spiral from there."

> *"If you don't go to university, it can be hard to find Christians your own age. People your own age go off and find their new friends at university. You're left with a church that's full of people who are over 30."*
> **(Steve, aged 22, Berkshire)**

But even young people who are surrounded by thousands of peers, like students, are vulnerable to loneliness. Kate Ward-Perkins, University of Reading Peer Support Co-ordinator, says: *"Our sense of belonging comes from being known. When you arrive at university, you might be in a context where nobody knows you. That feeling of not being recognised can mean you lose your internal moorings and don't know who you are. That's a lonely feeling and people respond by either becoming frantically social or withdrawing.*

It's also a time in life when the task is to separate from parents. This separation means you become more dependent on your peers for your sense of well-being. That can make it difficult to acknowledge your vulnerability to your peers. 'Face' becomes important – not losing face. There's a tendency for young people to develop a personae that others find acceptable. It can feel very lonely behind that face."

37 Aviva Healthcheck UK Report p 30 (2014). Also The Lonely Society? Mental Health Foundation p 22 (2010)
38 Labour Market Statistics, May 2015

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON LONELINESS

There are mixed views on whether the technology that connects people increases or decreases loneliness. Social media can reduce isolation by making it easy to stay in touch but it can compound loneliness when it's used as a substitute for face-to-face contact. Almost one third of 18 to 24-year-olds (31%) say they spend too much time communicating with friends and family online when they should be seeing them in person [39].

Psychologist Dr Aric Sigman has argued that social networking sites undermine social skills [40]. Rachel Green, of Starting Point, has noticed this too. She says some young people develop relationships online around a niche interest, like Japanese movies, at the expense of face-to-face friendships. *"When this happens they aren't developing their social skills,"* says Rachel. *"So if they get a job and there's a difficult situation, they might not have learnt to deal with a confrontation and they might just walk out. You learn these skills through face-to-face relationships."*

> *"Facebook is handy because if you meet a girl you like, you don't have to get her phone number before you go home. So long as you know her name, you can always find her through Facebook later."*
>
> **Luke, aged 21, Berkshire**

> *"Sometimes if I get bored, I post something on Facebook and I get a mild thrill if people like it, but it's a fake thing. It doesn't cost anyone anything to click 'like' so you shouldn't feel that it means anything."*
>
> **Oscar, aged 21, Oxfordshire**

On the other hand, social media can connect people who might otherwise feel lonely. Reading University has a society called R U Not Drinking Much? for students who don't want to get smashed. Its presence on Facebook helps students find each other before they even arrive. *"I'm not a huge drinker,"* posted a fresher-to-be. *"I'm so glad I found this group."*

FACT FILE

- More than a third (36%) of 18 to 34-year-olds worry about feeling lonely [41].
- More than half (53%) of 18 to 34-year-olds have felt depressed because they have felt alone [42].
- More than a quarter (27%) of 18 to 24-year-olds have suffered anxiety in the past year compared with 23% of 35 to 44-year-olds and 11% of people aged over 65 [43].
- And yet 42% per cent of 18 to 34-year-olds would be embarrassed to admit feeling lonely, compared with 23% of those aged 55 or more [44].

[39] Griffin J, The Lonely Society? The Mental Health Foundation p 41 (2010)
[40] Sigman A, The Biological Implications of Social Networking, The Biologist Vol 56, 1 (2009)
[41] [42] Griffin J, The Lonely Society? The Mental Health Foundation p22 (2010)
[43] The Aviva Healthcheck UK Report p 29–40 (2014)
[44] Griffin J, The Lonely Society? The Mental Health Foundation p 41 (2010)

FOCUS ON READING UNIVERSITY CHAPLAINCY

David doesn't do parties. The 21-year-old graduate from Reading University has to lip-read because he lost his hearing when he had meningitis at the age of two. As it's almost impossible to lip-read in a group, it makes parties a challenge.

"If I'm in a group I tend to stay at the back because I can't hear what's going on at the centre. That makes me feel as though I'm on the outside looking in," he says. "I told myself I didn't mind not going to parties, but then I'd find I wasn't invited and I'd think: 'Why wasn't I invited?' It would be nice to feel that someone was inviting me."

On his first day at Reading, David discovered the chaplaincy, a homely place where you could go to be quiet or chat or just chill.

"The kind of people you find at the chaplaincy are people who also feel on the outside of groups," says David. *"People go there to find a connection with somebody and that's what I would find there. It's where I met Mark (Anglican Chaplain) who became my confidant and counsellor."*

The chaplaincy at Reading University is a cottage on the campus managed by chaplains from a range of denominations. It offers activities, like meditation and bread-making, but it's also a space where people can talk or catch up on sleep.

WHAT: A red-brick 1900s cottage with a kitchen, quiet room, library and meeting room where students are welcome to sit, talk, eat, pray, sleep, cook, meditate any time they want.

WHO: Students are invited to make the space their own. Revd Mark Laynesmith, Anglican Chaplain, Sabine Schwartz, Catholic Chaplain and chaplains from other denominations curate it.

WHEN: Between 8am and 6pm Monday to Friday

WHERE: Reading campus

WHY: Mark Laynesmith says: *"It's a structure around which communities can thrive – a mixture between a surrogate home and a monastery with hospitality and prayer."*

"The chaplaincy is little place of belonging," says Mark. *"There aren't many of those left on the campus now. Broadly speaking when people come to university, they are awaiting the emergence of character – of being able to say 'This is who I am' and finding others who are like them. We become a temporary holding place while this happens."*

David says he used to be lonely. *"When I was a teenager, I was overweight and behind my computer all the time. I needed company."*

But he isn't lonely now. *"I think loneliness is a state of mind,"* he says. *"I've got a few very close friends. Even people who know lots of people and go to lots of parties have only got a few very close friends. So I'm no different from anyone else. And what do you need to be happy? You don't need lots of things. You just need to be glad to be alive."*

NEW COMMUNITIES

When post offices in rural communities were shut down[45], it was not just the inconvenience that residents complained about. People who lived in the affected villages regularly reported that the *"heart had been ripped out of their community*[46]*."* The housing estates being built in the Diocese of Oxford have never had post offices. Known as new communities (euphemistically perhaps), they don't even have post boxes at first. Most don't have pubs, shops, community centres, doctors' surgeries or schools either.

> *"Even the design of the houses can make people feel isolated. They are so well insulated it's like being inside an aircraft. When the windows are shut, it's totally sealed. You can't hear anything outside. Then it's easy to feel: 'I don't know anybody. I don't know what's going on next door'."*
>
> **(James, resident, Great Western Park, Didcot)**

Research has shown that when people have spaces in which to meet, friendships and social networks are sustained. People living in Manhattan, New York, for example, experience it as an urban village even though half of them live in lone households. This is because there are cafés and alternative places to hang out[47]. When people have nowhere to go, they experience a void rather than a heart. There's a sense of isolation that generates a particular kind of feeling alone.

And these places in which people are vulnerable to loneliness, are being built right across the wider Thames Valley. In the Oxford Diocese, there are 38 new communities being created in ten Oxford deaneries affecting 48 parishes. Bicester will double in size, so will Aylesbury. Milton Keynes will get considerably larger[48].

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN NEW COMMUNITIES

Within these estates, the church has a significant role to play. *"Developers build houses, but churches seek to engage communities,"* says Peter Morgan, New Communities Development Officer, Diocese of Oxford. By moving in, baking cakes as welcome gifts, writing newsletters, holding street parties and setting up mother and toddler groups, the church can help create places where people can flourish.

It can also act as a bridge between the developers and those who live on the estate. Developers have to provide schools and community centres but not before people have moved in and not necessarily in the way they need. There is a role for the church in forming

[45] The Network Change Programme was announced by the UK Government in May 2007 in response to declining use of post offices which was leading to unplanned closure of branches.

[46] Post Office Closures: Impact of the Network Change Programme, Consumer Focus Wales (2010)

[47] Weiss, R. Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation Cambridge. MA: The MIT Press (1975)

[48] New Communities Group, Summary of Large-Scale Housing Development, Diocese of Oxford (2015)

relationships with planners and builders to help ensure the appropriate community facilities are written into plans and delivered on time. *"There is no other resource on the estate,"* said Captain John Bentley, New Community Minister, Kingsmere, Bicester. *"We have created a means by which people can find out what's happening, where to go and be a community."*

THE ROLE OF FACEBOOK IN DEVELOPING NEW COMMUNITIES

PROS

- A residents Facebook page can be a way of letting people know about activities. A survey in Great Western Park showed it was far more effective than newsletters or word of mouth.
- Residents can use the page as a way of sharing information and advice.
- Many residents find Facebook a natural way to find others on the estate and suggest meeting up.
- A Facebook page can be used to conduct surveys on residents' hopes and experience of facilities which can be used as data to present to developers.

CONS

- Not all estates have the broadband infrastructure meaning some residents can't easily get online.
- Sometimes residents use Facebook to communicate where a face-to-face conversation would work better – such as complaining about the way a neighbour has parked a car.

FACT FILE

- There is pressure on government to build houses. In 2004, the Barker Report recommended building 245,000 private sector homes per year [49]. This target has never been met. In England, 118,760 homes were completed in the 12 months to December 2014, which is 8% higher than the previous year [50].
- The wider Oxford Diocese is a popular place to live because it offers employment. For example, Berkshire is the most profitable part of the country aside from London. It has the fourth highest proportion of adults educated to degree level or above and the fifth lowest unemployment rates in the UK [51].
- Between 2001 and 2011, parts of the Oxford Diocese had some of the largest population increases in the country – Milton Keynes (17%), Slough (16.3%), Oxford (12.1%). By comparison the population across the whole of England and Wales increased by just 7% [52].
- It's estimated that between 2015 and 2020, the population of Slough will have increased by 14.7%, West Berkshire by 7.9 per cent, Reading by 6.4% and Aylesbury Vale by 5.4%. By 2030, the population of Slough will have increased by 35.3%, West Berkshire by 22%, Reading by 18.8% and Aylesbury Vale by 14.7% [53].

49 Barker K, Review of Housing Supply Final Report – Recommendations Delivering Stability: Securing our Future Housing Needs: HM Treasury (2004)
50 House Building: December Quarter 2014, England: Department for Communities and Local Government (2015)
51 Housing Supply: Opportunities for Economic Growth: Barton Willmore p3 (2013)
52 Population and Household Estimates for England and Wales: Office for National Statistics (2012)
53 Subnational Population Projections, 2012-based projection: Office for National Statistics (2014)

FOCUS ON GREAT WESTERN PARK

It's quiet on the Great Western Park estate. Not quiet in the way that dawn is quiet, with the whisper of leaves in trees and birdsong. The quietness at Great Western Park has a different character. *"It's really odd,"* says Alison who has lived on the estate for three years. *"It's just so quiet. There's nobody about."*

Alison says it's easy to feel cut off. The centre of Didcot is only a mile away, but there's no road through so it's a 25 minute walk to get there. Residents have to leave the estate to get anything – even a pint of milk – so when they do, they get in the car. And the estate's growing fast. *"It will have changed from an empty field to a 'town' in just ten years,"* says Alison. *"People can feel swamped in a sea of anonymity."*

But it's changing. The community centre, which has been promised for 18 months, will open one day. There will be shops. Mark Bodeker, New Community Minister at Great Western Park, has been building relationships on the estate and there is now a summer activity week for children and weekly fellowship group in people's homes. *"It's about building trust,"* says Mark. *"It takes time but it comes."*

Last Advent, Alison organised a travelling nativity. With fellow church members, she put flyers round the estate, inviting residents to have a crib in their window, with a candle, for one night and then take it to somebody else's house the following day. She organised it so that people were passing the crib on to people they didn't know. *"It was very popular,"* she said. *"People have asked to do it again next year."*

When the community centre eventually opens, the churches will run a café right there at the heart of the estate. *"There will be no barrier to people coming in,"* says Alison. *"There will be toys for children and people to listen."*

WHAT: A weekly fellowship group, a summer activities week, a travelling nativity, plans for a community café and regular worship

WHERE: Great Western Park, a new housing development on the edge of Didcot, Oxfordshire. It currently has 900 new homes but 3,500 are planned. When the adjoining Valley Park estate, is complete, there will be 5,700 new houses in total. The fellowship group meets in people's homes, the activities week in a school on the edge of the estate.

WHO: Mark Bodeker, New Community Minister, working with Sovereign and Soha housing associations and other Christian denominations

WHEN: Mark has been developing community on Great Western Park since April 2014. He moved into a house on the estate in June 2015.

WHY: Mark was struck by just how disconnected residents are from traditional church and wanted them to know about a God who truly loves them.

RURAL COMMUNITIES

Living in the countryside brings its own risks of isolation. The perception that close-knit rural communities provide a buffer against loneliness might be the reality in some areas but it's by no means true for all.

Rural communities are becoming older communities as people move to the countryside to retire and young people, unable to afford the rising house prices, find they have to move out. In rural areas 23% of the population is over retirement age compared to 18% in urban areas [54].

"In rural areas, you find people whose families have lived there for three or four generations," says Glyn Evans, Rural Officer, Diocese of Oxford. *"When their children have to live elsewhere, they experience a loneliness that is about more than not being able to see much of their grandchildren. There's a sense of bewilderment and failure that their children weren't able to stay as they had expected."* The younger generation can feel dislocated too. Many move to new estates, where the housing is affordable, but they mourn the loss of being close to their families and the rural way of life.

POOR SERVICE INFRASTRUCTURE

Older people living in the countryside are vulnerable to loneliness in the same way as those who live in cities (see page 9) but in rural areas, the loneliness is compounded by poor service infrastructure. A lack of public transport is the most significant issue facing older people in the countryside [55]. Services like pubs, village stores, post offices and healthcare are declining at a faster rate in rural than in urban areas, making it difficult for those without cars to get what they need, including company [56]. Even the church can be seen as a depleting resource, with one vicar now serving as many as 12 parishes.

> *"There are no buses. The church takes me to Soup Saturday once a month and my neighbour takes me out for a coffee. I use dial-a-ride to do my shopping once a week. Without those things, I'm stuck here."*
>
> **(Sarah, aged 90, Oxfordshire)**

A CHURCH'S RESPONSE

Recognising that weekends can be particularly lonely times in the countryside, parishioner Lin Mills set up a monthly Soup Saturday at St Mary's, Bloxham, Oxfordshire, where more than 40 people share soup made and served by people in the village. Local taxi driver, Jimmy, picks people up free of charge. Judy Marshall, Soup Saturday co-ordinator, says: *"There seems to be a growing awareness at the church of the need to look after people who are on their own. We have always done it, but there's a movement to do it more."*

54 Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion, for Cabinet Office (2009)
55 The Housing Support Needs of Older People in Rural Areas, Commission for Rural Communities and the Housing Corporation (2006)
56 Smalley k, Warren J, Mental Health in Rural Areas found in Rural Mental Health (2014)

STIGMA AND LONELINESS

There is a stigma around loneliness. Psychiatrist Jacqueline Olds has noted that many patients seeking help for anxiety or depression are reluctant to admit that loneliness is their real problem. *"We found it was very difficult for our patients to talk about their isolation, which seemed to fill them with deep shame*[57]*,"* she says.

The evidence suggests this is particularly true in rural communities. *"The impact of stigma is well-recognised in rural areas,"* say Smalley and Warren[58]. *"The level of stigma increases as the size of the community decreases."* There is also less anonymity. In rural areas, it's more likely a resident's car will be spotted at a GP surgery or counselling service and that word will spread. *"As a result, rural residents with mental health concerns face increased burdens of isolation and loneliness."*

As a way of avoiding stigma, Age UK recommends providing opportunities for groups that focus on an activity rather than being advertised as a way of combating loneliness[59]. *"In rural areas you can feel as though you live in a goldfish bowl as it is,"* says Glyn Evans. *"The Farming Community Network tries to get over that stigma by emphasising that it's OK to tell someone about your worries. We encourage people not to wait until they are at the end of their tether before they seek help. We say it's OK to say you are feeling lonely."*

FACT FILE

- The Diocese of Oxford is classed as rural[60].
- Extrapolating from the rural-urban calculations, it is estimated that 75% of the population in Oxfordshire, 40% of those in Buckinghamshire and 85% in West Berkshire live in a rural community[61].
- The reduction in local amenities such as shops, post offices and doctors' surgeries is greater in rural areas than in urban ones, resulting in exclusion from service provision[62].
- Broadband is not available in many rural areas. The average download speed in urban areas is 40 MB per second, compared with 14 MB per second in rural areas[63].
- People in rural areas receive less social care per head than those in urban areas. Expenditure across the 12 inner London boroughs in 2009–10 was £1,750 per person aged 65+ compared to £773 per capita across the 27 shire counties[64].
- And yet older rural residents tend to downplay their experience of disadvantage[65].

[57] Olds J and Schwartz R, The Lonely American: Drifting Apart in the Twenty-first Century (2009)
[58] Smalley k, Warren J, Mental Health in Rural Areas found in Rural Mental Health (2014)
[59] Davidson S, Rossall P, Age UK Loneliness Evidence Review (Revised July 2014)
[60] Stronger as One? Amalgamations and Church Attendance, Church Growth Research Programme p14
[61] Department for Food and Rural Affairs, Rural-Urban Classification of Local Authority Districts in England, Office for National Statistics (2011)
[62] Burgess S The Report of the Rural Advocate, Commission for Rural Communities (2008)
[63] ISP Review July 2015
[64] The implications of national funding formulae for rural health and education funding, All Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Affairs, 2010
[65] Scharf T and Bartlam B, Ageing and Social Exclusion in Rural Communities, Rural Ageing: A Good Place to Grow Old? P97–108 (2008)

FOCUS ON THE FARMING COMMUNITY NETWORK

"By its very nature, farming is a solitary activity. When you work on a farm, you tend to work alone," says Fi, who has a mixed farm in Oxfordshire. *"If you plough a field, you're spending eight hours a day on a tractor on your own. But that doesn't mean we're lonely. I don't feel lonely because I feel at one with nature. There's no joy like the joy of a beautifully ploughed field, all ready for planting."*

The solitary nature of farming only becomes an issue in desperate times. If farmers are facing financial ruin they are left with no one to talk to. Lyn Kemsley, FCN helpline co-ordinator, says approximately half those who call the helpline are managing farms on their own.

"Farmers don't congregate in the way they used to," says Glyn Evans, FCN regional director for Central England. *"Many are farming by themselves, so they can't afford to stay for a chat and a drink when they go to market. They have to get back to the farm."*

The sense of isolation is intensified by feeling at the mercy of those who don't understand farming. *"We know we are at the mercy of the weather and we handle that,"* says Fi. *"It's being at the mercy of DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) that drives some farmers to desperation."*

For example, most farmers depend on the Basic Payment Scheme, for which they have to declare what is produced on every acre of their farm. The form was totally revised in 2014 and farmers were told they had to complete it online with maps – even though many do not have access to broadband. *"Advice from DEFRA was to 'get an agency to do it for you', but do you know how much agencies charge? £250 per hour and it takes days,"* explains Fi. The system collapsed, DEFRA admitted it had made a mistake, asked farmers to submit the maps by post – but then said payment would be delayed by up to four months. *"This is the sort of scenario that turns coping into desperation,"* said Fi. *"If only it were not a 'one off' situation."*

There is another kind of loneliness experienced by farmers when they have to give up their farms and the intimate relationship with nature that has sustained them. Lyn says that care homes are increasingly asking for someone to come and talk to residents about farming. *"When farmers move to care homes, they are cut off from the way of life they have known all of their lives,"* she says. *"They need somebody to talk to about farming and the countryside."*

WHAT: A confidential, national telephone helpline and local support made up of volunteers closely linked to farming who visit farmers offering help with business, farming, family and health issues

WHO: The Farming Community Network, a registered charity formed in 1995.

WHEN: The helpline (03000 111 999) is open from 7am until 11pm every day of the year.

WHERE: There are volunteers based in 28 counties in England and 4 areas in Wales.

WHY: FCN was founded at a time of change for the industry, when high debt, a change in the public perceptions about farming and increasing animal diseases led to bankruptcies, and a rise in suicides. A group of Christian agriculturalists wanted the churches to have a way of providing specialist pastoral support.

CONCLUSION

My research into loneliness began with a visit to the Archway Foundation's Wednesday Welcome (page 24). I arrived as a journalist with a clear idea of the two groups of people I needed to interview – service users and volunteers; the lonely and those who befriended them. But despite my clarity, as I looked around the people chatting at tables, I realised I'd no idea who was in which category. No one was wearing a badge saying: *"Lonely"*. No one was wearing one saying: *"Volunteer"* either.

Wading into the sea of conversations without knowing who was who, was a moving experience. I found my perception began to change. The distinction between the lonely and those that befriend the lonely became first blurred and then unimportant. I became aware of my own loneliness. I also became aware of my ability to listen and meet people in theirs. This awareness of being both the lonely and the one who can attend to others in their loneliness, seems to be a good place from which to reflect. When we are talking about the lonely, we are not talking about "them" and "us". We are talking about a dynamic, an interplay between a sense of aloneness and a sense of connectedness that somehow seems to make us human and in which the church has a significant role to play.

CHURCH AS PLACE

A striking theme of this publication has been the intricate connection between loneliness and place. In New Communities it was shown how challenging it is creating community when there's no shared space in which people can meet (page 15). Stacey, who lives with agoraphobia, has explained it's essential for that shared space to be near to where she lives (Our Place – page 8). Through the Rural Communities it was clear that when services are far away, there's an impact on people's well-being and experience of isolation (page 18).

Combating loneliness is therefore not about setting up a big ambitious project in some far off metropolis. It's about building community right where we are - in our parishes, our neighbourhoods, our villages and farms. *"We are present in every community of England,"* say the Bishops of the Church of England, alluding to the church's parish system. *"We therefore see day by day how important 'place' is to all kinds of people*[66]*."* Combating loneliness involves thinking near and thinking small. It's about creating *"little places of belonging"*, grasping the sacred potential of *"here"*.

CHURCH AS COMMUNITY

But place is not all. At its best, the church is a welcoming community. I saw church at its best in places like the Wednesday Welcome (page 24) and Our Place in Micklefield

[66] Who is my neighbour? a pastoral letter from the House of Bishops of the Church of England in preparation for the General Election 2015

Buckinghamshire (page 8). The projects could not have been more simple or low key – women sitting on a sofa doing crochet – and yet the kindness with which people were greeted, the open space in which people could come just as they were, was radical.

One person, who has experienced depression, told me he found little comfort from his community psychiatric nurse because she was paid to care for him. He wanted to be loved for who he was, not because it was somebody's job. When a church is functioning as a loving community, welcoming and connecting those of all ages and degrees of frailty, it can reach the parts that the statutory services cannot.

CHURCH AS INTIMACY

Joanna Collicutt, Oxford Diocesan Adviser for Spiritual Care for Older People, has noted that we need more than community and social stimulation to counter loneliness. We also need intimacy[67]. The fact younger people are vulnerable to loneliness even when surrounded by thousands of peers would support that observation (page 12). When the church communicates a God who is nearer to us than our breath, it offers intimacy.

From the start of this publication, it's been noted that loneliness is part of the human condition. Philosopher and poet Rachel Mann has said: *"There is a profound sense in which to be a human being is to live in a place of exile. To become part of our symbolic order is to lose our fundamental connection with the unity of God*[68]*."* For whatever reason, it seems inevitable that we experience ourselves as separate and therefore alone. We think of ourselves as individuals. We imagine we are distinct from the earth. We define ourselves against other people. We conceptualise God as *"up there"*.

But this sense of being separate is far from the understanding of God as the one *"in whom we live and move and have our being*[69]*."* The Franciscan theologian Richard Rhor says medieval theologians tried to communicate a fully connected and inherently dignified world called the Great Chain of Being, which included the earth, the waters upon the earth, the plants and trees, all animals, humans, the heavenly realm of angels and the Divine Creator, the Connecting Mystery, the Source from which and to which all life flows[70].

When we know ourselves to be part of the divine flow, we don't feel alone, because we aren't. We know ourselves as belonging to the earth, each other, the angels and the one who created all things and in whom all things hold together[71]. *"I believe that the primary healing of human loneliness and meaninglessness is full contact with full reality itself,"* says Rhor[72].

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67 68 Loneliness: Accident or Injustice? 28 April 2015

69 Acts 17: 28

70 Richard Rhor's Daily Meditation, Center for Action and Contemplation, 1 February 2015

71 Colossians 1:17

72 Richard Rhor's Daily Meditation, Center for Action and Contemplation, 12 June 2012

It takes a lifetime of practice to grow from experiencing ourselves as individuals to knowing ourselves as flowing from the divine source, but the church can and does give us glimpses. It does this through offering shared spaces in nearby places, through knitting and nattering and loving communities, through cafés and coffee shops and free lifts to Soup Saturdays, through listening, through waiting, through being alongside, through reminding us that – however desolate it might seem – the deep truth is that we belong, we are never alone.

TOP TIPS

People in the Diocese of Oxford share what works

- Give people what they want, rather than what you think they want or think they ought to want. If people are drawn by Peppa Pig rather than a Christingle, give them Peppa Pig. (Claire Hann, Resident, Great Western Park)
- Get involved with some of the organisations that are already there – Archway, Age UK. Don't feel you have to set up something new. (Louise Longson, Befriending & Buddying Co-ordinator, Archway Foundation)
- Use people's names. If you see somebody wearing a name badge, like in a shop or a hospital, use it when you talk to them. (Alex Osborn-King, Reading University)
- Listen and take note of what your community says – don't "do to" but "walk with" your community. (Dave Furze, Community Transform)
- Don't exclude elderly people from helping – many of our volunteers are in their 70s and 80s and are the backbone of what we're doing. (Phil White, Vicar of Broughton Church)
- Use a large font on your church notice sheets. If you use videos in your services, make sure there's no background noise, so it can be heard by people using a hearing aid. (Ruth Swift, Age UK Oxfordshire)
- Enjoy your neighbourhood. If you enjoy the place you're in, that will rub off on other people. (Mark Bodeker, New Communities Minister, Great Western Park)
- Getting to know farmers can help them feel less marginalised from the local community, less isolated. Invite local farmers to a farmers' breakfast before the Harvest Festival to ask them what the harvest has been like for them. Make contact at the time of the other three agricultural festivals of Plough Sunday, Rogation and Lammas or for Open Farm Sunday to further cement church and farmer links. (Glyn Evans, Diocesan Rural Officer)
- Listen to people. Just let them talk to you. Be non-judgemental about the things that they're telling you. (Louise Longson, Volunteer Coordinator, Archway Foundation)
- Spend time with people building trust and I mean genuine trust – not trust just so you can give them something saviour-related. Once the trust is there, people will ask you to tell your story. (Mark Bodeker, New Communities Minister, Great Western Park)
- Be consistent and gently persistent without being pushy. When we have been hurt we erect self-protection barriers that can take years to penetrate. (Sheila Furlong, Director Archway Foundation)

FOCUS ON ARCHWAY

There is a quality about Archway's Wednesday Welcome in a wooden-panelled church hall in Oxford that is almost as tangible as the chequered table-cloths and chairs. It's a quality that changes mood and lowers blood pressure. That quality is kindness. Jean, who has been coming to Wednesday Welcome, for about nine months, describes it.

"It exudes kindness," she says. *"If you go to another café, you don't expect people to approach you, or if you do, it seems a bit odd. But here you can just sit and chat to people. Nobody looks you up and down. You feel relaxed. They're just so nice here."*

Wednesday Welcome is very simple. Tea and cakes are served through a hatch. Volunteers and Archway friends (service-users) arrive. They sit down and they chat. That's all.

But the striking thing is that, at a first glance, it's impossible to figure out which are the volunteers and which are the friends. Archway director Sheila Furlong, says: *"There's fluidity. Some people who come as friends become volunteers and some volunteers become friends as circumstances in their lives change. There are times when any of us feel wounded and broken. We learn from each other and belong together."*

Claire, who has been a volunteer for three years, says: *"I went away for an operation and when I came back, it was one of the Wednesday Welcome friends who hugged me and gave me support and encouragement. This is my community."*

Jean, who used to have a full time job and was her mother's carer, has felt alone since her mother died and she retired from paid employment. *"I would sit on my own in the house looking out at other people,"* she said. *"I would keep dwelling on the sad things in life."*

Wednesday Welcome has helped to change that. *"I look forward to it,"* she says. *"That's good isn't it? To have something to look forward to. And through it I got an invitation to Christmas dinner. That's the first time I haven't spent Christmas Day on my own in years."*

WHAT: Archway supports those hurting through loneliness. It does this through befriending schemes, a Wednesday Welcome café and two evening socials.

WHO: The Archway Foundation is a charity founded on the Christian faith. It's for anyone hurt by loneliness irrespective of religion, culture or background. It has five part-time members of staff and around 80 volunteers.

WHEN: Archway has been running for more than 30 years. The social groups meet on Monday and Friday evenings and Wednesday mornings.

WHERE: St Columba's Church, Alfred Street, Oxford on Wednesdays. Various venues in Oxford and Abingdon in the evenings.

WHY: Founder Paul Hawgood said: *"The whole purpose of Archway is to be alongside those who feel hurt by loneliness, to serve by offering support, friendship and a listening ear."*

GERRY'S STORY

*"**If it wasn't for the church, I honestly think I would have just chucked it all in.** Three years ago in October, my wife passed away but it feels like yesterday. People just don't understand what loneliness is. When my wife died, a part of me died too.*

We were married for 46 years but I have known her for almost all my life. We used to walk to school together. You just can't explain the sheer loneliness of those who are left behind. I didn't know whether I was coming or going. I would ask people how they coped when their wife died and they would say: "You just have to carry on" – but I can't.

Every time I go out of the house I'm reminded of my wife. That doesn't help with going out. It's the silly things. I go to Marks & Spencer and there's a jumper hanging up that's light blue. My wife loved light blue and light green. I think: "My wife would have liked that." And then I go home and everything in the house reminds me of my wife as well.

When my wife died I didn't think there was a God. If there was a God why had he taken my wife from me? Why? Why? She didn't smoke. She didn't drink. Why had she been taken?

If this coffee shop hadn't been here, I don't know what I would have done. I went to my GP and asked him for a shot in the arm to end it all. But then the coffee shop opened and now I come here every day.

All the people here know me and I know them. I can't tell you their names because I'm no good at that, but they know mine.

One day Phil (Phil White, Vicar of Broughton Church) asked if I had thought about going to church. I said: "Not a lot." But after a bit, I thought, why not? And so I went and then I went on an Alpha course. That was really, really good. I could ask the question of why my wife had been taken from me and now I think maybe she went so she could do some good elsewhere. Now I don't need to ask that question any more. I'm so pleased I went.

Now I help out in the coffee shop. I do the washing up. It's something for me to do. I'm lucky I can still get about. I didn't know how many really nice people there are around. I've known some people who are – well, I don't want to swear – but you know what I mean?

If only all the people in the world could understand what loneliness is. Please could you put over to people what loneliness is like? If people knew, the world would be a heck of a lot better. We wouldn't just be friendly to one or two people, we would be friendly to everyone."

Gerry, aged 74, lives in Broughton, Buckinghamshire. He was speaking at the More + coffee shop founded by Broughton Church featured on page 11.

RESOURCES

INCLUSIVE CHURCH
Founded to help churches welcome people whoever they are. www.inclusive-church.org

JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION
Resources to help individuals and neighbourhoods combat loneliness. bit.ly/jrf-loneliness-pack

MENTAL HEALTH FOUNDATION
Information to support well-being, including The Lonely Society report. www.mentalhealth.org.uk

UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH
Summary of all aspects of mental health to help parishes respond better.
bit.ly/oxford-diocese-mental-health

FAITH IN ACTION: FRIENDLY PLACES
Enabling organisations to be welcoming to those struggling with mental health.
bit.ly/faithaction-friendly-places

NEW COMMUNITIES
Information collated by the Diocese of Oxford for building new communities.
bit.ly/oxford-diocese-new-communities

RURAL ISSUES
Information from the Diocese of Oxford.
bit.ly/oxford-diocese-rural-issues

VILLAGE SOS
Practical support for those setting up projects in rural communities. www.villagesos.org.uk

ARTHUR RANK CENTRE
Christian charity serving the spiritual and practical needs of the rural community, including a resource for churches on combating loneliness in rural areas.
www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk

RURAL COMMUNITY COUNCILS
Developing communities in rural areas.
Berkshire: bit.ly/ccberks
Oxfordshire: oxonrcc.org.uk

CAMPAIGN TO END LONELINESS
A wealth of statistics, tools and ideas for combating loneliness in old age.
www.campaigntoendloneliness.org

AGEING
Fact sheets on the spiritual care of older people from the Diocese of Oxford. bit.ly/oxford-ageing

LONELINESS IMPACT MEASURING TOOL
A tool to help organisations measure the impact of their initiative to end loneliness.
bit.ly/campaign-to-end-loneliness

COMMUNITY INFORMATION NETWORK
Services and activities for older people compiled by Age UK Oxfordshire. bit.ly/ageUK-info

LINK VISITING SCHEME
Best practice for churches offering a befriending service to the elderly. bit.ly/link-visiting

CONTACT DETAILS OF FEATURED ORGANISATIONS

Page 3, page 24
ARCHWAY FOUNDATION
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Page 8
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LINK VISITING SCHEME
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Page 10
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Page 11
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Page 12
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Page 15
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Page 20
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ABOUT

ABOUT THE DIOCESE OF OXFORD

The Church of England Diocese of Oxford covers the counties of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire – the Thames Valley region. The diocese sits between the Cotswolds in the west and London to the east. It extends from tiny rural communities to the vastly different cities of Oxford and Milton Keynes. There are 815 churches in our diocese – more than in any other diocese in the Church of England.

ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Diocese of Oxford believes the church should be *"making a difference in the world"* and has a small team to encourage and resource this activity. Challenging unjust structures, speaking out for those who are marginalised, and connecting with the needs and the potential of our local communities are all key to the holistic mission of the church. The Mission in the World Team of the Diocesan Department of Mission is co-ordinated by Alison Webster, the Social Responsibility Adviser, and includes specialists in rural issues, the spiritual care of older people, new communities, and global justice and world development. This publication aims to share ideas and expertise in combating loneliness and social isolation, a key focus for many churches. This is an area of work that expresses our passion for social justice, and our call to be *'good news'* for the communities in which our churches are set. Having had a close working relationship with the Archway Foundation for many years, it has been a delight to work in partnership with them on this project.

ABOUT JO IND

Jo Ind is a journalist and theological writer. She has written for *The Independent*, the *Guardian* and *Third Way magazine* and been Women's Editor and Investigative Correspondent for *The Birmingham Post*. Her theological work includes *Memories of Bliss* (SCM) and *Fat is a Spiritual Issue* (Mowbray). She is based in Birmingham and also works as a trainer and consultant in digital media.

CONTACT US

If you would like more copies of this publication or want to tell us about some work you are doing on loneliness, contact **alison.webster@oxford.anglican.org**

A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows,
is God in his holy dwelling.
God sets the lonely in families
he leads out the prisoners with singing.

(Psalm 68:5–6)

I believe that the primary healing of human loneliness
and meaninglessness is full contact with full reality itself.

(Richard Rohr)

"We are made to belong, to love and to be loved. The loss of these experiences can usher in the excruciating pain of loneliness. This welcome publication highlights the damaging impact of loneliness and some inspiring examples of what is being done to alleviate or prevent it."

Sheila Furlong, Director, The Archway Foundation.

"This is an excellent and wide-ranging publication which will help the churches across the Diocese of Oxford to see the many disguises, causes and effects of loneliness. Loneliness can often be hidden and unacknowledged. It affects people of all kinds, of all ages, and in many different contexts. I hope this publication will give permission to people to talk about the issues facing them, and to churches to take appropriate action to alleviate loneliness."

Glyn Evans, Oxford Diocesan Rural Officer.

The Archway Foundation

Charity Number 299533

LIVING FAITH MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD

DIOCESE OF OXFORD

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