

THE GLOBAL HEALTH CRISIS OF LONELINESS AND THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE

By Anne Mackie Morelli, BPP, MA, RCC

Traditionally the church has been perceived to be a place of belonging and rich community. More recently, there are indications that this view does not match every person's church experience. There is increasing evidence to suggest that much like the significant loneliness being reported in the secular world, there is loneliness and social isolation being experienced within the church. It appears the church is not exempt from the crisis of loneliness. The degree of loneliness being experienced within the church and wider community is noteworthy because loneliness is more than a subjective feeling, it has serious consequences for people's mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Additionally, from a Kingdom perspective tolerating loneliness and social isolation within the church setting is contrary to how God envisioned humanity existing in loving, relational community.

This paper explores the topic of loneliness within the church through a theological and counselling framework. First, the paper examines the crisis of loneliness and social isolation being reported within the secular world and ways it has responded. The second section discusses how mental health professionals perceive the issues of loneliness. The third section references what research reveals about the loneliness being experienced within Canada. The following sections narrow the focus. It examines the loneliness being experienced within the church and defines loneliness, social isolation, solitude, and belonging. From this vantage point, it explores how God views loneliness, relational living, and belonging, and it reflects on what ways the church has responded to the crisis of loneliness both within the church and larger community. The final section presents practical ways the church and the people of God can embody God's "agape love," fulfill his vision of relational living, and create spaces where everyone can contribute and experience belonging. It proposes that for the church to thrive and realize God's design for humanity, it must first acknowledge and respond to the degree of loneliness and social isolation being experienced within congregations. When churches cultivate the type of loving, inclusive, hospitable communities envisioned by God and characterized by the early church, they will become places of belonging and social connection for all of God's people.

Paul cast a brilliant vision of and for the church that has the potential to dispel loneliness and cultivate belonging. Paul used a metaphor of the human body to explain how the church ought to function. He submitted that like the human body, the church body is composed of many diverse parts. These parts are interconnected,

depend on one another, and are designed to work together.^[1] Each part has been given unique gift(s) or strengths that are to be used to encourage, support, and strengthen the body. Although every part is unique and diverse, each is essential to the body's well-being and functioning. When the church body is connected, supportive, and united in its function and purpose it will embody God's vision for his church, and its radical belonging will be made tangible to the secular world and to every believer.

The Loneliness Epidemic: The World Health Organization Report

If people were asked to name a recent global health issue, some might recall the HIV/AIDS or SARS pandemic, others may mention diseases like cancer or contagious diseases like influenza, measles, Ebola, or dengue fever, and a majority would likely recollect the recent COVID-19 pandemic. However, people may be surprised to discover is that in November 2024, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that loneliness is one of the most “significant global health threats.”^[2] Here is why: apparently, the widespread lack of strong and healthy relational connections is causing widespread suffering in a variety of ways.

In response to the scale of this health issue, the World Health Organization “launched an international commission – led by the US surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy and 11 advocates and government ministers” from around the world.^[3] The Commission on Social Connection was created to foster worldwide awareness of the seriousness of the loneliness epidemic and to prioritize “a global agenda on social connection that will highlight solutions and help assess the progress of addressing the issue.”^[4] Further, on June 30, 2025, WHO hosted a worldwide webinar to launch their flagship report on Social Connection and share how they envision “charting a path to healthier societies.”^[5]

^[1] 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. NRSV

^[2] Sarah Johnson, “WHO Declares Loneliness a ‘global Public Health Concern,’” *The Guardian*. November 2023, 8:00 GMT edition, sec. News, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/nov/16/who-declares-loneliness-a-global-public-health-concern>.

^[3] Ibid., 1.

^[4] WHO Commission on Social Connection, *World Health Organization*. Accessed June 13, 2025, <https://www.who.int/groups/commission-on-social-connection>.

^[5] World Health Organization. Launch: “*WHO Commission on Social Connection: Launch Flagship Report*,” Webinar, Accessed June 30, 2025. https://who.zoom.us/rec/play/DrdMnVFxc3jd5FQv1RzAnPpe4noxkZGXZccZ71useycI0szpRuWb8rRS6xut60rH8VgzFXEHNTbjCv.uLSLYKQ-OXoxr-ZX?eagerLoadZvaPages=&accessLevel=meeting&canPlayFromShare=true&from=share_recording_detail&startTime=1751288051000&componentName=rec-play&originRequestUrl=https%3A%2F%2Fwho.zoom.us%2Frec%2Fshare%2FgF0MmElSH0RejvZnJHcDakfoOedlFGuBLMuqLow3t_zujVf5p7wbizdRnaNq3hGFzNdDjuhAoJmE6YOJ%3FstartTime%3D1751288051000. The World Health Organization's main goal for the worldwide webinar was to introduce their flagship report on the crisis

On the one hand, the global health issue of loneliness differs from the more familiar worldwide pandemics. On the other hand, while loneliness does not share all the characteristics of other pandemics or contagious diseases, research shows it is similar in the way it severely impacts people's physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being.^[6] The World Health Organization reports that loneliness is linked to health issues like dementia, cardiovascular problems, anxiety, depression, and suicide, and the quality and longevity of a person's life.^[7] Loneliness is as hazardous to people's health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, obesity, and physical inactivity.^[8]

Studies have been done to date to help illuminate the breadth and depth of the loneliness epidemic. The WHO reports "people across all age groups and all regions of the world are affected by loneliness and social isolation," to the extent that "global estimates suggest that 1 in 4 older adults experience social isolation and between 5 and 15 percent of adolescents experience loneliness."^[9] Research suggests that there are identifiable groups more likely to experience loneliness, including minorities, immigrants, people with disabilities, caregivers, adolescent mothers, young adults, the elderly, or those who have lower income or less education.^[10]

of loneliness and social isolation, share their major findings and provide narratives of loneliness, and discuss how they envision charting a path forward to healthier societies where social connections and belonging are fostered.

^[6] Linda Givetas, "U.K. Appoints 'Loneliness Minister' to Tackle Social Isolation, Experts Say Canada Needs One Too," Global News, January 18, 2018, <https://globalnews.ca/news/3972668/u-k-loneliness-minister-canada/>. Givetas discusses how the UK government recognized that the crisis of loneliness and its impacts on physical and mental health was so significant it created a government ministerial position, entitled the Minister of Loneliness. The minister's responsibilities include tackling the issue of loneliness and focusing on building social connection to address the resulting health issues. Further, the article reported that experts suggest Canada needs such a ministerial position. Statistics Canada data would support this contention.

^[7] World Health Organization, *Social Isolation and Loneliness*, <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/social-isolation-and-loneliness>. Accessed, January 14, 2025.

^[8] Ibid., 1, 1. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith, and Mark Baker, "Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 10(2) (March 2015): 227-37, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1177/1745691614568352>. Holt-Lunstad, a professor of psychology and neuroscience and director of the Social Connection & Health Lab at Brigham Young University, and others did a meta-analytic review on loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality. They reported that a lack of social connection is as big a health risk as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and it can lead to serious health risks such as cardiac arrest, dementia, hypertension, and premature death.

^[9] WHO, *Social Isolation and Loneliness*, 1. Kendra Cherry, "Loneliness: Causes and Health Consequences," *Very Well Mind*, December 5, 2023, <https://www.verywellmind.com/loneliness-causes-effects-and-treatments-2795749>.

Benedict T. McWhirter, "Loneliness: A Review of Current Literature, With Implications for Counselling and Research," *Journal of Counselling and Development*, 1990. Accessed June 18, 2025.

^[10] Linda Gilmore and Monica Cuskelly. "Vulnerability to Loneliness in People with Intellectual Disability: An Explanatory Model," *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*, Volume 11 Number 3, pp 192-199, September 2014. <https://research-ebsco-com.twu.idm.oclc.org/c/bljv25/search/details/gfjiwtg64z?limiters=FT1%3AY&q=AU%20Gilmore%20and%20cuskelly%20loneliness%20and%20disability>. Accessed July 30, 2025. Vivak H. Murthy, MD, *Together, The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World* (New York, New York: Harper Wave, 2020). Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *When God Became White, Dismantling Whiteness for a More Just Christianity* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2024).

The Mental Health Perspective

The WHO and several federal governments raised concerns about the negative impact of loneliness on health and wellbeing. Mental health professionals have also flagged the issue. Author and psychologist Gary Collins' observations about loneliness in his book, *Christian Counselling: A Comprehensive Guide*, align with the WHO's concerns. He states loneliness has been "studied by hundreds of researchers," and been called the world's most common mental health problem.^[11] Collins confirms counsellors frequently see loneliness, and its causes and effects in their clients, including mental health issues, low self-esteem and self-worth, depression, substance abuse, anger and violence, and physical problems such as high blood pressure or health disease.^[12] Likewise, an American Psychiatric Association poll revealed "early in 2024, 30 percent of adults say they have experienced feelings of loneliness at least once a week over the past year, while 10 percent say they are lonely every day."^[13] Their poll showed that younger people, single adults, and seniors are most likely to report loneliness.

Robert Waldinger, psychiatrist and current director of the Harvard Grant Study on adult development, aptly summarizes the immense costs of loneliness when he stated, "the experience of loneliness turns out to be toxic. People who are more isolated than they want to be from others find that they are less happy, their health declines earlier in midlife, their brain functioning declines sooner, and they live shorter lives than people who are not lonely."^[14]

Loneliness is much more than feelings of isolation. Its ramifications include serious health issues and early mortality.

The Loneliness Epidemic in Canada

Statistics Canada confirms Canada is suffering from the loneliness epidemic. In November 2021, Statistics Canada reported "more than 1 in 10 people aged 15 and older said they always or often felt lonely," and over half of those surveyed who shared that they were lonely also reported poorer mental health and a lower rate of

^[11] Gary Collins, *Christian Counselling, A Comprehensive Guide* (Wheaton, Illinois: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 196.

^[12] Ibid., 202-203.

^[13] "New APA Poll: One in Three Americans Feels Lonely Every Week." *American Psychiatric Association*, January 30, 2024 <https://www.psychiatry.org/news-room/news-releases/new-apa-poll-one-in-three-americans-feels-lonely-e>

^[14] Robert Waldinger, "What Makes A Good Life? Lessons from the Longest Study on Happiness," November 2015, TEDxBeaconStreet, https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness. This long-term study, running from the 1940s until today, following 268 Harvard educated men, has been researching what contributes to a good life. The clearest message from the study has been that it is not wealth, power, fame, or high achievement that makes a good life, but the quality of our relationships and social connections. Good relationships protect us; loneliness kills.

life satisfaction.^[15] Their survey found that the groups most likely to report loneliness were women, those who lived alone, singles, youth aged 15 to 24 years, college students, and seniors.^[16]

While research indicates loneliness is a significant health concern in Canada, some experts have expressed concern that although Canada is “ranked the loneliest of 11 comparator developing nations, it currently has no comprehensive national policy framework to strengthen the social connection among older adults and other vulnerable populations including immigrants and indigenous communities.”^[17] In addition, the World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed in a recent webinar that, “according to their review of national policies, Canada has not adopted a policy at the federal level. But it is possible – even very likely – that it has adopted policies at the subnational, local level, but it was not covered in the report.”^[18]

It is noteworthy that in September 2024, the *BC Medical Journal* acknowledged the endemic of loneliness and noted how physicians witness the “burden of loneliness from day to day” in their patients.^[19] Yet, the authors stressed physicians’ efforts to specifically assess and resolve their patients’ issues around loneliness are inconsistent and insufficient. They suggested one way health professionals could address some of these issues is to prescribe social connectedness and refer patients to one of the social connection programs that are beginning to roll out across British Columbia.^[20]

^[15] Canadian Social Survey: Loneliness in Canada, *Statistics Canada*, November 24, 2024. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/211124/dq211124e-eng.htm>.

^[16] Ibid., 2. Susan Mettes, “Who is Most Likely to Experience Loneliness and How Can Churches Help?” *Barna Group*, December 8, 2021. <https://www.barna.com/mettes-loneliness-blog/>.

^[17] “Recommendations for Action to Tackle the Loneliness Epidemic among Older Adults in Canada,” *Women’s College Hospital Toronto, Canada*, March, 2024. <https://www.womensacademics.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Recommendations-for-action-to-tackle-the-loneliness-epidemic-among-older-adults-in-Canada.pdf>

^[18] WHO Webinar. The webinar invited questions from participants, so I inquired, “What specific government policies/programs have been implemented in Canada?” Their response was that no policy on loneliness has been implemented at the federal level to date. This contrasts with other countries who have created a ministerial position in their federal government, whose responsibilities include creating awareness of the loneliness health crisis and developing programs to address and build social connections.

^[19] A. Hoverman, K. Schudd, and H. Baille, “Social prescribing for the loneliness epidemic,” *BC Medical Journal*, Vol. 66, No. 7, September 2024, 237-238. <https://bcmj.org/premise/social-prescribing-loneliness-epidemic>. The authors suggest those involved in health care, need to become more aware of loneliness and its adverse outcomes, because health is more than the absence of disease and better efforts need to be made to improve patients’ mental, physical, and social well-being through linking them to community, cultural, and recreational connections. One of the solutions they offer is a movement called, “social prescribing which connects seniors at risk of loneliness and its complications with activities and people in the community.” They also refer physicians and readers to the WHO, Red Cross, United Way, UK National Health Services for more information on the issue, the health consequences of loneliness, and the importance of creating social connections.

^[20] Ibid., 2.

The Church's Response to the Loneliness Epidemic

Given the overwhelming research, the response from the WHO, and numerous countries launching federal government-level responses, several questions arise regarding the local church and the people of God. To what degree are the people of God aware of the pervasiveness of loneliness and the threat it poses to health and wellbeing? What does God's written and living word say about loneliness and belonging? Have churches and the people of God responded to the loneliness being experienced within their congregations and communities? Finally, how might the church dispel loneliness and foster a greater sense of belonging and community? To answer these questions, this essay will define loneliness, social isolation, solitude, and belonging, examine research on loneliness and the church, discuss both God's and secular views of relational living, and provide answers for how the church might respond to the crisis of loneliness and social isolation.

Defining Loneliness, Social Isolation, Solitude, and Belonging

Differentiating loneliness, social isolation, solitude, and belonging provides the necessary context before exploring possible answers to these questions. Academics and health care professionals typically define loneliness as the subjective feeling of "psychological discomfort people experience when their network of social relationships is significantly deficient in either quality or quantity."^[21] Collins expands on this definition when he writes, loneliness "is the painful awareness that we lack close and meaningful contact with others."^[22]

Because loneliness is an individual, subjective experience, it is essential to note that it is possible for someone to feel lonely even when they are in the company of others. This occurs when a person experiences a lack of closeness or connection in the relationship(s) due to feeling marginalized, misunderstood, and/or unseen. Further, what meaningful contact looks like, in terms of the number of relationships and the frequency of connection, depends on the individual, and thus, it varies from person to person. It is important to note that while people of God experience loneliness when they feel disconnected from others, they also experience loneliness when they feel disconnected from God.

Social isolation occurs when social barriers have generated conditions where specific individuals or distinct groups experience an inequality or "othering" that denies them belonging. These barriers are frequently formed out of perceived differences, "relating to gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sex, age, disability, or sexual

^[21] Daniel Perlman and Letitia Anne Peplau, "Loneliness," *Encyclopedia of Mental Health*, Vol. 1, Academic Press, 1998, 571. <https://peplau.psych.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/141/2017/07/Perlman-Peplau-98.pdf>.

^[22] Collins, 196.

orientation.”^[23] Kim Samuel describes this phenomenon in her book, *On Belonging, Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation*:

Social isolation isn't only about our individual lives but, rather, entire groups of people and the systems that fail to support them. Social isolation occurs when wider socioeconomic, political, and cultural structures and processes create conditions in which people, including distinct groups of people, are isolated from systems that support belonging and inclusion...That's because with social isolation, we are really talking about the obstacles that impede us from experiencing things like meaningful relationships, exercising agency, engaging in authentic expression, and having a stake in collective outcomes. These obstacles can affect individuals and entire communities.^[24]

In contrast, solitude is essentially being alone. It is generally perceived as a positive experience that occurs when someone chooses to be alone. Solitude is a deliberate withdrawal from people, daily routines, and all kinds of media to spend time on solitary pursuits like reading, being in nature, or engaging in hobbies. Solitude is perceived to be nourishing for one's wellbeing because it provides a necessary balance to the busy, fast-paced demands of daily life. It creates space for rest, quiet, regulation, and rejuvenation. The people of God also view solitude as an opportunity to spend time alone with God. Engaging in spiritual practices like reading the Bible, praying, journaling, meditating, taking nature walks, and self-reflection are viewed as ways to strengthen one's faith and deepen one's relationship with God.^[25]

Belonging happens when people feel seen, safe, valued, and accepted by God, another person, or a group of people. Samuel expands this understanding by suggesting, “belonging is manifested in our connection to people, place, power, and purpose.”^[26] While she concurs social connection and relationships lead to belonging, she also asserts that there is a sense of belonging that occurs when people feel connected to a physical place and develop a reciprocal relationship with the land and creation. In addition, she maintains belonging is cultivated when people are allowed to “participate meaningfully in the decision-making structures,” because they feel some agency over their circumstances and future.^[27]

Finally, a purpose or calling gives life meaning, an opportunity to share strengths, form relationships, and be socially connected. Samuel explains that when these four dimensions are in place and working together, it widen[s] our circles of

^[23] Kim Samuel, *On Belonging, Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation* (New York, New York: Abrams Press, 2022), xii.

^[24] Ibid., 20-21.

^[25] Collins, 197.

^[26] Samuel, xv.

^[27] Samuel, xvii.

belonging to include all people and shapes a vibrant community where every person can flourish.^[28] With respect to the people of God, it is important to note that in addition to these dimensions of belonging, the belonging that arises from being in a loving and everlasting relationship with God is always a priority.

Research on Loneliness and the Church

There has been minimal research to date that has specifically examined the degree of loneliness, social isolation, and social connection being experienced within churches. However, while there are some current researchers, pastors, academics, writers, and theologians who have offered valuable observations on the loneliness being experienced in churches today, substantive research is required if the church is to fully grasp the scale of loneliness within the church, why believers are leaving the church, and assess what churches are doing in response.^[29]

The urgency for methodical study of loneliness within the church also stems from the suggestion that observations and previous studies may not be reliable. This is because church attendees may underreport their loneliness due to the stigma and shame attached to loneliness. Susan Mettes, in her book, *The Loneliness Epidemic*, addresses this hypothesis when she writes, “What if they underreported their loneliness because they want to be ‘good’? They may believe that Christians ought not to be lonely.”^[30] She explains,

a quarter of practicing Christians (25%) said loneliness is always bad” [and] “[f]ifteen percent of practising Christians said loneliness is always embarrassing, at three times the rate of non-Christians (5%) and twice the rate of non-practicing Christians (8%). This embarrassment might have caused some practicing Christians to deny their loneliness.^[31]

However, Mettes references some research findings that conclude, even with the possibility of underreporting, loneliness is a significant issue within the church. In the winter of 2020, “about one in six people (16%) who attend church regularly said they were lonely all the time” and a “majority were lonely at some point in any week.”^[32]

^[28] Ibid., xviii.

^[29] Brian D. Dufton and Daniel Perlman, “Loneliness and Religiosity: In the World but Not of It,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, Biola University, 1986, Vol. 14, 2, 135-145, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/009164718601400205?icid=int.sj-full-text.similar-articles.2> Accessed, Jun 17, 2025. While Dufton and Perlman reference several studies that specifically focus on religiosity and loneliness in the article, it is important to note that most of the studies were done within the early 1980s. While their article provides several valuable insights, it is vital that more research is done to capture a current picture of how people of faith are coping with loneliness.

^[30] Susan Mettes, *The Loneliness Epidemic, Why so Many of Us Feel Alone - and How Leaders can Respond* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2021), 94.

^[31] Ibid., 94.

^[32] Ibid., 14.

Overall, research seems to confirm that “Christians are as generally as lonely as non-Christians.”^[33] This signals a challenge and opportunity for churches.

Other researchers, like Brian D. Dufton and Daniel Perlman, report similar findings in their article, *Loneliness and Religiosity: In the World but Not of It*.^[34] Their study sought to examine the relationship between loneliness and religiosity by reviewing research done around the “proposition that religious faith is associated with less loneliness.”^[35] Their study found that “religiosity did not influence the degree of loneliness reported by these particular subjects.”^[36] In addition, their review suggested the way people of God responded to loneliness was not significantly different than non-believers.^[37]

The idea that people of God experience loneliness to the same degree as non-believers is disquieting. It challenges the commonly held assumption, both within the church and the secular world, that the people of God experience less loneliness and more belonging than non-believers due to their faith, relationship with God, and being connected to a congregation.^[38]

Numbers indicate church attendance in North America has declined over the last two decades.^[39] This prompts the question: has loneliness and/or social isolation influenced people’s decision to stop attending church? Research focusing on finding answers to this question has potential to gather information on loneliness that could be informative and instructive for the church. It could help illuminate the full extent of loneliness and isolation being experienced within churches and whether it is

^[33] Ibid., 106.

^[34] Dufton and Perlman, 135.

^[35] Ibid., 136.

^[36] Ibid., 144.

^[37] Ibid., 144.

^[38] Mettes, 106.

^[39] Jeremy Linneman, *Why do We Feel Lonely at Church?* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2023), 1-2. Linneman states that many organizations and researchers give two reasons for the decline in church attendance over the last decades: “Christian beliefs have become increasingly unpopular in our secular culture” and “the church’s moral reputation has been brought into question, as key leaders and political figures have claimed Christianity yet lived opposite to its teachings.” While Linneman is convinced these two claims are valid, he personally believes the primary reason is “a lack of belonging. People don’t feel connected, known, or loved. So they leave,” 2. Louis Cornelissen, “Religiosity in Canada and its Evolution from 1985 to 2019,” *Statistics Canada*, October 28, 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00010-eng.htm>. This report concurs with Linneman’s observations that, “in recent decades, there has been a decline in religious affiliation, participation in group or individual religious or spiritual activities, and the importance of religious and spiritual beliefs in how people live their lives.” The report reveals that the proportion of people who attended group religious activities at least once a month was nearly halved from 1985 to 2019. “National Trust Endangered Places List – A Year in Review,” *National Trust for Canada*, 2020. <https://nationaltrustcanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/EPL-2020-Year-in-Review-Web-Posting-Final.pdf>. This review suggests that one-third of Canada’s churches will permanently close within the next decade, highlighting a decline in both an affiliation with churches and in church attendance.

influencing church attendance. This information could also help guide how the church responds.

God's View of Loneliness, Relational Living, and Belonging

What does God's Word reveal about loneliness and how humanity ought to live? While the word "loneliness" does not appear in the Bible, nor is it an explicit topic or specific extended or systematic teaching focus, its presence pulsates throughout the Bible. In the psalms and the narratives, heartbreaking loneliness surfaces in their circumstances and laments. Jesus also experienced moments of extraordinary loneliness throughout his life, suffering, and death on the cross.

However, scripture also reveals that God's antidote for loneliness is love, relational living, and belonging. God's love and desire to be in relationship is the overarching theme from the first pages of the Old Testament to the last pages of the New Testament. Its importance is overtly stated when a Pharisee asked Jesus what commandment in the law was the greatest. Jesus replied that the first and greatest commandment is to "love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind. And the second command is to love all others, as we love ourselves." He concluded by saying, "On these two commandments hang all the law and all the prophets."^[40] The type of love Jesus is talking about is not the superficial, romantic love that is portrayed in movies, on television, romance novels, and social media. It is "agape" love; the kind of sacrificial, lavish love revealed in Christ.^[41] In his gospel account, Luke describes this love as being so expansive that it includes loving one's enemies, without expecting anything in return.^[42] Agape love is perceived, "as an essential quality in God and as a model for human imitation."^[43]

While there are extensive examples throughout scripture that could be referenced to illustrate "agape love" and highlight the priority God places on relational living, this paper will focus on the following examples: the nature of the Triune God, the creation accounts, and the way Jesus lived while on earth. This discussion provides a necessary context for examining if and how the church and the people of God are currently living out God's vision for humanity.

Genesis 1 bears witness to God creating the world and all that is in it. Six times, God repeats how "it was very good." Then in verses 26 to 27, God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness ... God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. In the second creation account, God forms the first human from the topsoil of the fertile land and breathes life's breath into his nostrils. He settles the

^[40] Matt 22:36-40 NRSV

^[41] F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, Ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 26.

^[42] Luke 6:27-36 NRSV

^[43] *Ibid.*, 26.

human in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it, and then says, “It’s not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper (ezer) as his partner.”^[44]

The use of plural pronouns in the phrasing, “let us make humankind in our image; according to our likeness,” provides a glimpse of the Triune God’s nature. While much remains a mystery about the Triune God, Trinitarian theology is the belief that God is one eternal God, existing in three equally divine, differentiated beings (God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit), all of one substance. In his book, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life*, Simon Chan describes the Trinity as being eternal, in inseparable relationships to one another, as and in love, intimacy, unity, mutuality, reciprocity, and self-giving.^[45] Gilbert Bilezikian, in his book, *Community 101, Reclaiming the Local Church as a Community of Oneness*, adds how scripture reveals the nature of God as a “community of oneness”, “from whom all other communities derive life and meaning.”^[46]

The Trinity’s nature and inner life reveal the archetype of relationships and community. First, the three persons of the Trinity act in love, unity, reciprocity, equality, and mutuality.^[47] Second, they collaborate and submit to one another, as they care for each other, humanity, and creation. Third, the Triune God graciously extends itself to humanity, inviting each believer to be in a relationship and join the ever-expanding circle of fellowship. Finally, because God created humans in his image, there is anticipation that they will seek to emulate the Trinity’s loving nature and fellowship.^[48] This is where humankind embodies the image of God, reflects the fellowship of the Triune God, and relationships are characterized by love, unity, inclusion, and mutuality. A high calling indeed.

God’s prioritization of relational living also emerges in the creation accounts. After God declares it is, “not good that the man should be alone,” he creates another human to be a suitable helper and partner fit for him (ezer).^[49] God knew the human needed companionship, because there “was no one else with whom [the solitary being] could be together in oneness.”^[50] And so, the human made in the image of the Triune God, was given a companion. Bilezikian emphasizes that “God’s supreme achievement was not the creation of a solitary man, but the creation of human community.”^[51] It seems where God is, community, loving community, is there also.

^[44] Gen 2:18 NRSV

^[45] Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology, A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 1998), 51-53.

^[46] Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101, Reclaiming the Local Church as Community of Oneness* (Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997), 16-17.

^[47] Ibid., 18-19.

^[48] Chan, 53.

^[49] *English Standard Version Study Bible* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 54.

^[50] Bilezikian, 19.

^[51] Ibid., 19.

It is also important to note that the Hebrew word “ezer,” when translated, means someone who helps and shares their strength(s) with others. “Ezer” is used several times in scripture to convey that God is a helper who “rescues humans when they are in need.”^[52] It is also used numerous times in the Old Testament to describe situations where a person or a nation was lacking something and others were summoned to provide what they needed, including military assistance.^[53] God’s creation of an “ezer” for the first human not only acknowledges humankind’s wiring for social connection, it highlights God’s desire that they live in relationships characterized by a willingness to support, protect, share their strengths, and defend someone when they are in need.^[54]

Jesus’ life and teaching personified God’s relational living. He not only preached about the importance of loving God and all others, but he demonstrated it through deeds and actions. He role-modeled how to love abundantly by incarnating mutuality, inclusion, intimacy, respect, kindness, generosity, compassion, forgiveness, empathy, and self-giving. He pursued harmony, peace, inclusion, and justice. Jesus embraced outcasts, sinners, lepers, children, widows, tax collectors, doubters, betrayers, people with disabilities, the disadvantaged, and the foreigner.

^[52] D. A. Carson, Ed., *New International Version Biblical Theology Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2018), 28.

^[53] Hebrew Word Lessons, *Understanding the Hebrew Bible, Helper: Defining the Ezer Woman*, May 13, 2018, <https://hebrewwordlessons.com/2018/05/13/helper-defining-the-ezer-woman/>. The lesson teaches that the word, “ezer” comes from the “root ‘azer’, to help, and it means to help, comfort, protect, aid, or rescue. It describes an “ezer” as, “someone who comes running when the people cry out for help” and who “drops everything to save those in need... An ‘ezer’ is a hero.” They cite the word “ezer”, “shows up twenty-one times in the Old Testament:

- 2 times to describe the Edenic woman (Genesis 2:18 & Genesis 2:20)
- 1 time to explain that the Hebrew people would not be considered a help to Egypt (Isaiah 30:5)
- 1 time to explain how the Prince of Jerusalem would be removed and taken to Babylon, and his helpers scattered to the wind (Ezekiel 12:14)
- All other times “helper” was used as a descriptor of YHWH

The article notes that in the 16 times the word “ezer” was used to describe God, it conveyed he was a “rescuer (*help*) and a defender (*shield*).” *God calls his followers to be ezers –to help, connect, comfort, defend, and rescue others.*

Carol Custis James, “The Ezer-Kenegdo: Ezer Unleashed.” *Faithgateway*, <https://faithgateway.com/blogs/christian-books/ezer-unleashed#:~:text=Long%20before%20I%20started%20digging,sixteen%20times%20for%20God%20as.> Custis James concurs when she writes, “twenty-one times *ezer* appears in the Old Testament: twice in Genesis for the woman (Gen 2:18,20), three times for nations to whom Israel appealed for military aid (Isa 30:5; Ezek 12:14; Dan 11:34), and here’s the kicker – sixteen times for God as Israel’s helper (Exodus 18:4; Deuteronomy 33:7, 26, 29; Ps 20:2; 33:20; 70:5; 89:19 [translated “strength” in the NIV]; 115:9, 10, 11; 121:1 – 2; 124:8; 146:5; Hos 13:9).” Custis James also describes how the word is used in military contexts, where “Israel seeks military aid from her neighbours, where God is His people’s ‘shield and defense,’ and ‘better than chariots and horses,’ standing ‘sentry watch over His people.’”

^[54] Gal 6:2; Rom 15:1-3; Matt 25:35-40; 1 John 3:17-18; 1 Thess 5:11. While the word “ezer” does not appear in the New Testament, these passages are a few examples of passages in the New Testament that continue to emphasize God’s expectation that people will be helpers, lend their strength to the needy, carry each other’s burdens, offer hospitality, build each other up, and love generously.

There are numerous instances throughout the gospel accounts that could be used to illustrate the importance Jesus placed on loving and caring for others. However, the following three examples serve to illuminate his model of relational living. In his gospel account, the disciple John described how Jesus noticed, and then approached, a person who had lain beside the Pool of Bethesda for 36 years. Jesus asked him if he wanted to be made well, and the man responded, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am making my way someone else steps down ahead of me.” Unlike the people who for years had ignored the man who had mobility issues and was treated as unclean, Jesus intentionally stopped, listened, and used his power to heal him, so that he was able to take up his mat and walk.^[55]

Mark describes another interaction. This one was with a woman who had suffered from a flow of blood for 12 years. Despite all her efforts, she had found no cure or relief. She had been declared unclean and had been socially isolated for those 12 years because the law stated a bleeding woman could not be near or touch others as they too would become unclean.^[56] The woman had heard about Jesus, and in her desperation to be healed, she jostled her way through the crowd teeming around Jesus and touched his cloak. Immediately, feeling that some power had left him, Jesus stopped, turned, and asked who had touched his cloak. When Jesus inquired, “Who touched my clothes?” the disciples were dismissive because the crowd had been pressing in around Jesus and they encouraged him to keep moving.^[57] However, Jesus would not be distracted and continued to look for who had touched him. The woman, while afraid, fell before Jesus and told him the whole

^[55] John 5:1-9. NRSV

^[56] Lev 5:19-33. Specifically, the law stated, “whenever a woman has a bloody discharge for a long time, which is not during her menstrual period, or whenever she has a discharge beyond her menstrual period, the duration of her unclean discharge will be like the period of her menstruation: she will be unclean.” This would also include bleeding after childbirth. This meant that a woman who bled or anything she touched, including what she sat on or any human with whom she had physical contact, would be deemed unclean. Therefore, a woman who was bleeding had to isolate from others, so she would not defile them and make them unclean too. As a result of this law, the bleeding woman in this narrative had been religiously and socially isolated for 12 years.

^[57] Mark 5:25-34. NRSV

^[57] Mark 5:34. NRSV

truth. Jesus responded to her and said, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease”^[58]

The ultimate example of Jesus’s “agape love” and sacrificial behavior was his willingness to take on human form, bear our griefs and sorrows, suffer for our sins, and die on the cross so that humanity’s broken relationship with God could be repaired.

God’s character, the written word, and Jesus’s relational living all demonstrate how the people of God ought to live: love and serve God and all others; form supportive relationships that allow every individual to belong and to flourish; become “eizers”, willing to lend their strength to those who are struggling or on the margins; notice someone’s suffering or loneliness, lean into it, and provide empathetic witness; create communities where there is no shame or stigma in anyone asking for help; view social connection and living in oneness as the antidote for loneliness.

Secular Views of Loneliness, Relational Living, Belonging, and Its Impact on the Church

Extensive secular studies also support the notion that humans are wired for

^[58] Extensive research and experts in the secular helping professions, concur with the religious belief that humans are hardwired for relationships and belonging, although for different reasons. In his book, psychologist Gary Collins discusses how studies have shown that all human beings need to experience close bonds with other human beings, 199. He examines how research findings led to the formation of attachment theory, which proposes that the bonds a child forms in early childhood are essential and the quality of those bonds will determine their social and emotional development and the quality of their relationships throughout life, 199. R.F. Baumeister PhD, & M.R. Leary PhD, “The Need To Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation,” *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 1995, <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1995-29052-001>. Baumeister and Leary reported that, “existing evidence supports the hypothesis that the need to belong is a powerful, fundamental, and extremely pervasive motivation.” Kelly-Ann Allen et al, “A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework and Directions for Future Research,” *National Library of Medicine*, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8095671/>. Allen et al assert, “A sense of belonging—the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences—is a fundamental human need that predicts numerous mental, physical, social, economic, and behavioural outcomes.” Jeremy Linneman, “Where do we Find True Belonging”, *The Gospel Coalition*, October 23, 2023, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/find-true-belonging/>. Linneman aptly sums up these comments when he argues, “Belonging is a core human need. Nothing promotes human flourishing like having a people and a place. Research confirms that income level, marriage and children, and perceived security all pale in comparison to belonging for promoting sustained happiness in one’s life.”

connection and belonging is a basic human need.^[59] However, research also affirms that pervasive individualism, independence, and self-reliance, all dominant themes in North American culture, are preventing people from experiencing that connection and belonging. In a Time Magazine article entitled, “We’ve Put Individualism Ahead of the Common Good for Too Long,” the authors summarize the negative impacts of individualism on human relationships and community:

In America today, far too many of us are disconnected from each other, lonely, self-protective, or at each other’s throats. Sacrifice for the common good feels anachronistic. Everything not nailed down has been commoditized or turned into a source of personal enrichment. The daily “shout” shows and nonstop social media hostility push us into corners and reward balkanization. Sacrificing personal gain for the common good or treating people with different views respectfully or prioritizing collective success over individual success—it’s all for the suckers.^[60]

^[59] Extensive research and experts in the secular helping professions, concur with the religious belief that humans are hardwired for relationships and belonging, although for different reasons. In his book, psychologist Gary Collins discusses how studies have shown that all human beings need to experience close bonds with other human beings, 199. He examines how research findings led to the formation of attachment theory, which proposes that the bonds a child forms in early childhood are essential and the quality of those bonds will determine their social and emotional development and the quality of their relationships throughout life, 199. R.F. Baumeister PhD, & M.R. Leary PhD, “The Need To Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation,” *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 1995, <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1995-29052-001>. Baumeister and Leary reported that, “existing evidence supports the hypothesis that the need to belong is a powerful, fundamental, and extremely pervasive motivation.” Kelly-Ann Allen et al, “A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework and Directions for Future Research,” *National Library of Medicine*, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8095671/>. Allen et al assert, “A sense of belonging—the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences—is a fundamental human need that predicts numerous mental, physical, social, economic, and behavioural outcomes.” Jeremy Linneman, “Where Do We Find True Belonging,” *The Gospel Coalition*, October 23, 2023, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/find-true-belonging/>. Linneman aptly sums up these comments when he argues, “Belonging is a core human need. Nothing promotes human flourishing like having a people and a place. Research confirms that income level, marriage and children, and perceived security all pale in comparison to belonging for promoting sustained happiness in one’s life.”

^[60] Richard Weissbourd and Chris Murphy, “We Have Put Individualism Ahead of the Common Good for Too Long,” *Time Magazine*, April 11, 2023. <https://time.com/6269091/individualism-ahead-of-the-common-good-for-too-long/> The article discusses the pervasiveness of individualism and how they believe that the United States’ “survival may rest on [their] ability to restore the prior balance between individualism and the common good.” They contend that, “the question of how we restore in Americans a stronger sense of responsibility for others and their communities is one of the central cultural and civic concerns of the moment.” Further, they maintain, “we see this as two critical, distinct challenges. One is to restore community at the local level. Put simply, one cannot have a sense of community if the community doesn’t exist. Healthy, inclusive communities have all sorts of benefits, including increased safety; a greater sense of belonging, identity and pride; and a buffer in times of crisis. They’re also a vital antidote to pervasive loneliness in this country, which takes a large physical and emotional toll and is distressingly common among the young. Soon-to-be published results from a recent Making Caring Common national survey indicate that 34% of adults aged 18-25 suffer serious loneliness.” They propose that, “the other, perhaps more important challenge, is to expand Americans’ circles of care and obligation.”

In his book, Linneman suggests that the secular world's pervasive, radical individualism, has leaked into the church and influenced the way believers relate to each other.^[61]

This may be one explanation for why the people of God are currently experiencing loneliness to the same degree being reported by non-believers in the secular world.^[62] It is also possible that other characteristics of the secular world, such as the divisive and polarizing influences of mainstream media and social media, economic standing, education, politics, ethnicity, racism, ableism, and ageism have also leaked into the church. Any or all these factors may be preventing believers from finding and experiencing the belonging God envisions for his people.^[63]

Pastor and author Lamar Hardwick addresses a few of these issues in his book, *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion*.^[64] Hardwick notes that people with disabilities experience the same type of discrimination as racism, and he makes the bold claim that “when it comes to the church and disabled, they have become a people without a place.”^[65] While the experience of those with disabilities is just one example of a marginalized group reporting exclusion and loneliness within the church, it helps highlight the profound loneliness that the marginalized can experience within the church community.

Hardwick cites research that shows individuals and families impacted by disabilities are significantly less likely to attend religious services due to exclusion. This marginalization is caused by a lack of accommodation in the service, the shame or discomfort that can be experienced when disability is talked about within the church, buildings that are not easily accessible, children's programs that are unwilling to make adaptations, the lack of freedom to ask questions and wrestle with their faith, and the noticeable lack of disability represented in ministry leadership.^[66] Other groupings, formed by those who are single, single mothers, 2SLTGBQ+, divorced, young adults, seniors, women, different ethnicities or cultures, immigrants, Indigenous, or those who are suffering loss or hardship, report experiencing similar feelings of marginalization and loneliness within the church.

The authors challenged their government to respond by establishing a social infrastructure and national strategies, like the UK and Japan, as avenues to combat loneliness. Other suggestions encouraged physicians to ask patients specifically about loneliness or developers to build housing that promotes community living.

^[61] Linneman, 3, 6.

^[62] Dufton and Perlman, 142-143. Mettes, 88-89.

^[63] Ibid., 2-5.

^[64] Lamar Harwick, *Disability and the Church, A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion* (Downers Grove, Illinois, Intervarsity Press), 2021.

^[65] Ibid., 76-77.

^[66] Ibid., 91-120. 103.

The Church's Response to the Loneliness Epidemic

So, how do the people of God and the church step into God's vision for humanity? How do they become the loving, united, and caring community that characterized the early church?^[67] How do they too become renowned for the way they manifest love and help one another?^[68] How can there be a sense of oneness, no one marginalized, excluded, or lonely? How can God's people notice, pause, lean into, and bear witness to suffering?

The few studies conducted on loneliness within the church suggest most churches and believers do not significantly embody God's vision for relational living in ways that distinguish them from non-believers and the secular world. Further, there is research that reports, "Christians said they were lonely all the time at twice the rate of non-practicing Christians (18%, compared to 9%), "there is a connection between loneliness, meaningfulness, and church attendance," and there are articles and theologians who suggest churches are dying due to unfriendliness.^[69] These findings beseech the church and the people of God to pay attention, reflect on ways to respond, and mobilize.

Moreover, since the secular world has identified loneliness as a worldwide health crisis and responded by appointing ministers of loneliness or developing programs to address social connection, it begs the question: why aren't churches also prioritizing social connection and belonging within their congregations and communities? And if they are, through the appointment of discipleship, spiritual formation, and/or community group and outreach pastors, why are so many people still lonely in these churches?

^[67] Acts 4: 32-37. *ESV Study Bible*, 2008. In reference to this passage, the commentary explains how the early community of believers were united in their efforts to make sure that "there should be no poor in the community of faith." Their commitment was so strong, they sold their possessions so their earning could be distributed amongst the needy. Drew Jackson, "Choosing Common Life," *The Center for Action and Contemplation*, June 23, 2025 <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/choosing-common-life/>. Accessed Jun 23, 2025. Drew Jackson expounds on this passage when he writes, that the "people have a new way of relating a to one another that is based on oneness not separateness, which, in and of itself, is a radical shift in consciousness." He notes that this theme weaves throughout the book of Acts where the divisions between Jew and Gentiles are ended, wealth gaps narrow, the understanding of kinship is transformed, the sense of ownership and possessions shift, and believers genuinely care for on another. Jackson contends that the current, pervasive societal views of individualism, injustice, and inequity, have infiltrated the contemporary church. As a result, he contends the church needs to prioritize the beliefs and behaviors of the early church and re-integrates their revolutionary love and sense of belonging. John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina, *Biblical Social Values and Their Meanings, A Handbook* (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody: Massachusetts, 1993), 89. Pilch and Malina also discuss the biblical value of their group orientation, which among many other attributes, indicated that "individuals should always seek the good of the neighbour (1Cor. 10:24), and not pursue individualistic objectives."

^[68] Bielzikien, 37. Beilizikien discusses John 17:23, where Jesus prays, "I am in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know you have sent me." Beilikien interprets this to mean that "Jesus' heart ached for his followers to band together in communities that would reflect authentic oneness so their witness to the world would be effective."

^[69] Mettes, 89, 99.100. Michael Frost, "The Lonely Crowd: Churches Dying Due to Friendlessness," *Michael Frost*, July 22, 2020. <https://mikefrost.net/the-lonely-crowd-churches-dying-due-to-friendlessness/index.html>

Church Leadership's Responsibilities

While volumes could be written on how the church and believers can respond to the crisis of loneliness and isolation, this paper will conclude by raising a few simple approaches that have the potential to begin shifting the relational culture within the church and help re-establish faith communities as beacons of genuine love and belonging.

Church leadership could start with four main steps: raise awareness of the loneliness crisis, gather information about the degree of loneliness and isolation being experienced within their congregation, use this information to formulate a response, and introduce dimensions that create belonging. These steps could be achieved through simple but effective strategies. Creating awareness could begin with a topical sermon or sermon series that introduces the themes of worldwide loneliness endemic, the health consequences of loneliness, and the specific research focusing on loneliness within the church, all while highlighting how God envisions belonging as the antidote. Concurrently, leadership could provide safe spaces that encourage discussion, questions, sharing, and feedback. Community group leaders could facilitate these discussions within their groups. Books and study materials that focus on themes of loneliness, suffering, and belonging, primarily through a Christian and biblical lens, could be springboards for these small group discussions. A simple questionnaire could be created that solicits feedback both on the degree to which congregants have experienced loneliness or isolation at church and how they envision the church could establish belonging. These steps have the potential to create awareness, validate congregants' experiences and opinions, foster a sense of agency, provide feedback that can help form relevant solutions, and ultimately develop a sense of purpose and belonging.

Further, when church leadership is willing to share their own experiences with loneliness and isolation, it has the potential to nurture a similar level of comfort within the congregation. This shift could help erase the stigma and shame that often accompanies suffering and loneliness, even amongst God's people.^[70] In this atmosphere, congregants would feel safer and more open about sharing their struggles, asking for help, and accessing support.

^[70] Brene Brown, *Braving the Wilderness* (New York, New York: Random House, 2019), 54-55. Brown discusses the shame attached to loneliness. She asserts that, "we feel shame around being lonely - as if feeling lonely means there is something wrong with us. We feel shame even when our loneliness is caused by grief, loss, or heartbreak." She maintains that much of the stigma around loneliness exists because people don't talk about loneliness nor do people understand it. Further, her research findings revealed that due to the stigma around loneliness, people are unlikely to reach out to others.

Further, when leaders are willing to create an environment that invites discussion and involves congregants in decision-making and goal setting, they offer rich opportunities to validate diverse backgrounds, perspectives, experiences, and needs, foster meaningful connection, and deepen the sense of belonging. In turn, the insights gleaned from these discussions can help guide the planning and goal setting, determining programs of support, preaching series, and even making decisions around staffing needs, in ways that the church embodies God's vision of relational living. Recent research done by Fuller Youth Institute with over 1000 churches, discovered that having such agency, purpose, and connection is especially important to the younger generation. They concluded that young people, "aren't so eager to get on board with a pastor's pre-written program. They want to help write it. They want to play a part in developing something meaningful together. Put simply, people support what they help create."^[71]

Church leaders could also create a ministry that exclusively focuses on care and compassion. Programs such as Stephen Ministries provide ready models for setting up a ministry that trains and equips volunteers to offer "Christ-centered care to people in the community experiencing life difficulties."^[72] This type of ministry pursues openings to create social connections and dispel loneliness within the congregation and the surrounding community.

Leaders could also reference loneliness whenever it appears in scripture to emphasize how both God and the people of God have been "ezers". Highlighting God's abundant love, his desire to be in a relationship, and his omnipresence will also reassure congregants that no matter how alone they feel in their horizontal relationship(s), they can always depend on their vertical relationship with God. When God's people are reminded of God's love, his promises to go before them, to

^[71] Kara Powell, "Three Surprising Advantages Small Churches Have with Gen Z," *Christianity Today*, August 22, 2025, https://www.christianitytoday.com/2025/08/three-surprising-advantages-small-churches-have-with-gen-z/?utm_medium=widgetsocial. The article suggested that "leadership begins with listening." They advocate that leadership needs to regularly ask the congregation questions, using a method they call "appreciative inquiry." This strategy uses questions focusing on strengths and action, such as: "When do you feel like you belong in our church?" "How can we see and support you better?" "What would you like to see God do through us?" "What is important for others in our church to know about your perspective?" "What do you hope or dream for the future of our church?" They conclude that when leadership asks questions, invites discussion and input, it will build belonging, purpose, and a tangible love of neighbour.

^[72] *Stephen Ministries*. "Equipping God's People for Ministry since 1975." <https://www.stephenministries.org/default.cfm>. These types of ministries are modelled on Acts 6:1-6, where the apostles were confronted by complaints that widows were not receiving their daily food allotment. The disciples acknowledged the demands of their roles as preachers and teachers were stretching them to the point they had neglected this important ministry. To solve the issue and ensure that the widows were supported, they chose seven men of "good repute, full of Spirit and of wisdom" and "turned this responsibility over to them." In the same way today, these types of programs train and equip church members "to provide high-quality, one-to-one, Christ-centered care to people in the congregation and the community experiencing life difficulties."

always be with them, and to never fail or forsake them, they can find a measure of comfort.^[73]

When the church is aware of the individuals and/or groups experiencing loneliness, it can be more responsive to their unique stories and needs. In addition, leadership can become more intentional as they form their staffing, leadership teams, elders' boards, and lay leadership. Robust inclusion confirms that all are welcome, all have gifts to share, and all belong. When there is congruence between God's vision for belonging and the church's conduct, people will begin to trust the church genuinely believes all people bear the image of God, all have inherent worth and dignity, and all have strengths to contribute.

Church programs and church services that provide the necessary adaptations for people with disabilities and churches that ensure their buildings and parking lots are fully accessible, extend tangible invitations to people with disabilities. These endeavors radiate acceptance, signalling people with disabilities are a valued part of the church and God's family. They help create the spaces where everybody belongs, and *everyone* can contribute.^[74]

Finally, churches must acknowledge their limitations whenever a congregant's emotional, physical, mental, or spiritual needs exceed the staff's training and/or the church's capabilities to provide support. These are situations where a congregant is in crisis, has chronic health issues, or has severe or complex mental or physical health issues. This may range from depression, anxiety, profound grief, trauma, abuse issues, eating disorders, suicidal ideation, to chronic loneliness. These individuals must be linked up with the appropriate psychologists or registered clinical counsellors, certified medical practitioners, hospitals, community resources, and/or specialized programs. When churches link a congregant to community expertise and resource(s), it not only ensures the individual will obtain essential and appropriate support, but it also communicates the church is sincere in its efforts to help people find healing. As this professional support is provided, ongoing relationship with the church community is essential. It says, 'you are one of us,' and acts accordingly, as the person is undergoing the professionally guided care journey they are on.

The Community's Responsibility

Yet, it is not only the church leadership who bears responsibility for mobilizing a response to loneliness. God expects all his followers to be "eizers" and

^[73] Deut 31:8 NRSV

^[74] 1 Cor 12:12-27 NRSV. In this passage, Paul casts a vision for the church, where he declared that for the church to function properly, it needed *every* member to use their unique gifts and strengths and become a functioning part of the church body and God's kingdom.

lend their strength to the needy. When God's people respond to God's call, spaces of social connection will form, and loneliness will be vanquished.

However, given the fast-paced, driven, individualistic society, it is commonly expected that a sufferer can pull themselves up by their own effort. This belief has prevented people from engaging with others' suffering, which in turn, resulted in sufferers managing their distress on their own. This has resulted in a hazy understanding about how to handle suffering and loneliness. Generally, people are apprehensive and underconfident, not only about how to resolve their own suffering, but also about how to comfort or help someone else. Most people struggle to listen with their full attention or respond in empathetic ways. People's attempts to comfort others can become so misguided that they end up resembling Job's "miserable companions."⁷⁵ Hence, their consolation only serves to compound the sufferer's sense of abandonment, isolation, and loneliness.⁷⁶

Therefore, a vital piece of the church's response is to follow up the initial efforts by teaching the congregation a few basic communication skills and ways to provide practical help. A starting point could be a sermon series focusing on the Book of Job and the Book of Lamentations. These two books, seldom referenced or preached upon, are invaluable resources regarding individual and corporate suffering. They have the potential to teach a much-needed theology of suffering and a Christian perspective of loneliness. They also demonstrate how Job's community and companions did and did not provide consolation. This teaching could transition to practical ways to help and communication skills that offer comfort. Ideally, a psychologist or a registered clinical counsellor could be brought in to teach and

^[75] Job 2:11-13 NRSV. In this passage,

Job's companions left their homes when they heard of Job's troubles. They "met together to go and console and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they wept aloud and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great."

At this point the companions did several things well. They went to Job as soon as they heard the news of Job's trial. They communicated about meeting and going together to comfort him. By joining Job as he grieved on the ash heap, they affirmed their willingness to enter his distress. Their quiet, physical presence offered Job their strength, reassured him that he was not alone, and was a witness to his grief. Further, choosing to remain silent for the first seven days allowed Job the time to process his grief, at his own pace, in his own way. However, when the companions started talking the tenor of their consolation shifted (Job 16:2-3). Job's response: "I have heard many such things; miserable comforters are you all. Have windy words no limit? Or what provokes you that you keep on talking?" Job's angry comments communicate that their insensitive words of consolation, (mis)use of scripture to argue their points, their attempts to control the conversation, talk more than listen, and give unsolicited advice weren't helping, and only serving to compound his misery. Unfortunately, these types of misguided responses are still used within the church today. Thus, teaching the congregation some compassionate responses and basic communication skill - such as providing presence, lending strength, empathetic responses, active listening, open-ended questions, and allowing ample space/time for the sufferers to process their grief, would help to ensure that sufferers feel seen, supported, and consoled.

^[76] Vivek Murthey, xix-xx.

model basic communication skills to the congregation. In addition, books or resources that focus on suffering from a Christian perspective and how to offer empathetic support could be recommended to community groups or retreats.⁷⁷ Giving people a theology of suffering, some communication and practical skills, and creating a level of ease with entering into suffering all have the potential to transform “miserable comforters” into consoling comforters.

In addition, churches and individual believers share the responsibility to notice when someone is absent over time. Jesus’s parable of a lost sheep conveys how a shepherd cares for every one of his sheep and notices when even one goes missing.¹⁷⁸ Likewise, believers can help by noticing when someone is missing and searching for them. Reaching out to the absent or the lost will provide information about what has contributed to their absence. This information can guide how the church might provide support and avenues to draw them back into the fold. In addition, the mere fact that their absence has been noticed and someone cares enough to seek them out, communicates they are not alone or overlooked. Frequently, this alone is enough to bring them home.

Believers can also foster social connections and belonging by supporting others in practical ways. These could include inviting someone for coffee or a walk, praying with and for others, extending hospitality and lengthening their tables, providing a casserole, sitting by someone alone at a church service, checking in by showing up in person, or making a phone call. Research shows that even something as simple as saying hello or engaging someone in what might seem like a superficial encounter or conversation has the power to alleviate loneliness. These “micro-interactions” or “localized conversations” that occur in the public sphere, with someone at the coffee shop, in a grocery store line up, on a playground, or as we walk into church, all have the power to decrease loneliness and create a sense of belonging.¹⁷⁹

The Individual’s Responsibility

As much as they are capable, believers have the responsibility to nurture their own wellbeing and to establish social connections. As evidenced in scripture, God’s

⁷⁷ Anne Mackie Morelli, *When Grief Descends, Suffering, Consolation, and the Book of Job* (United States: As You Wish Publishing, 2020.) This is an example of the type of resources that are available for use with a church staff and community groups. This book introduces a Christian theology of suffering, discusses loss and grief, and offers practical and timeless ways to support others. Ideally, these types of rich resources would be used to help congregations learn how to enter someone’s distress or loneliness in ways that offer comfort and solace.

⁷⁸ Luke 15:1-7 NRSV

⁷⁹ Linneman, 8. Zara Abrams, “The Science of Why Friendships Keep Us Healthy,” *American Psychological Association*, Vol. 54 No. 4, June 2023. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2023/06/cover-story-science-friendship>. Accessed May 23, 2025.

people are frequently invited to participate in their healing and take the first steps.^[80] The Old Testament tells of Naaman having to bathe in the Jordan River to heal his skin disease. The New Testament tells of the person at the side of the Bethesda Pool and the woman who had bled for 12 years.^[81] Their willingness to partner with God led to miraculous healing. Taking some form of action began their healing process. The first step towards building social connections may be as simple as telling another person they are lonely, asking for help, volunteering at the church or in the community, joining a prayer group, community group, or Bible study, accepting someone's hospitality, participating in a community activity, pursuing a hobby, or walking in nature.

However, loneliness and its consequences can persist despite one's best efforts to develop social connections and achieve healing. In these situations, seeking professional counselling, medical help, and/or spiritual direction can provide solutions. Instead of "trying to eliminate the symptoms or urging more social involvement," those who are lonely can seek health care professionals who are trained to help clients identify and process any underlying issues or causes of loneliness. Causes may include low self-esteem, weak communication or social skills, trauma, depression, or anxiety.^[82]

Summation

The people of God can respond to the pervasive loneliness and social isolation being experienced globally, as well as within the church. For "there is a clamor for the church to rediscover its identity as community," where "servanthood becomes a joyful, mutual way of life, where leadership is worn lightly and offered as a humble gift, where there is 'neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for [people] are all one in Christ Jesus.'"^[83] To achieve this vision, many churches will need to shift some of their priorities. The current tendency to focus on goals related to programs, numbers, charismatic speakers, uplifting music, financial stability, or building programs will not specifically address loneliness issues.

^[80] Gal 6:1-10 NRSV

^[81] 2 Kings 5:1-14 NRSV. In this narrative, Naaman was initially angry that Elisha, the man of God, didn't simply "wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy." Perhaps because Naaman wanted an easy or fast solution, he felt annoyed when he was told to go to the Jordan River and bathe seven times. Naaman protested, "Aren't the rivers in Damascus, the Adana and the Pharpa, better than all the Israel waters? Couldn't I wash in them in to get clean?" He was so disgruntled he was not going to follow the instructions and proceeded to leave. However, his servants convinced him to engage in his own healing and do as Elisha's messenger had directed him. When Naaman finally decided to comply, and he bathed in the Jordan, his skin was restored like that of a young boy, and he became clean, just as the man of God had said.

^[82] Collins, 204.

^[83] Bilezikian, 9, 11.

Solutions for loneliness will only be found when churches begin to prioritize God's call to love generously and live in Christ-like relationships that are characterized by respect, dignity, inclusion, reciprocity, generosity, and collective care. Only as churches focus on becoming a community of believers who embrace the marginalized and the imperfect, the similar and the diverse, the suffering and the lonely, will they become places of belonging for all God's people. Through unity and rich fellowship, the church can become more evangelistic in its outreach and attract people into the church. People will be drawn through the doors when the church embodies love and Christ-like relationships, not because the church will be known for its inclusion and welcome, but because of how well it loves and serves all those being included.

Responsibility for this shift in focus lies with the church leadership and each believer. When Jesus expanded his ministry to include seventy others he sent them out on a "mission of healing and gospel proclamation."^[84] He instructed them to go in pairs to every town and place he intended to go, telling them that while the harvest is plentiful, the laborers are few.^[85] In the same way today, the people of God are called to participate in a mission of healing and gospel proclamation, within the church and the larger community. Labouring for God is when believers combine faith with action; loving not only in word or speech, but in truth and action.^[86] "For, what good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have work?"^[87] It is not enough for people to hear and talk about Christ-like love, compassion, and caring; they need to see it being embodied.

^[84] ESV Study Bible, Luke 10:1-24, 1975-1976.

^[85] Luke 10:1-12. NRSV

^[86] 1 John 3:18. NRSV

^[87] James 2:14-26. NRSV In this passage James challenged believers that it was not enough just to talk about faith, but faith had to be put into action by supplying whatever others needed. He claimed that faith apart from works is meaningless. Therefore, it is not enough to claim we love all others. God demands that our love for others must be reflected in our actions and how we care for one another. This challenge is a theme that flows throughout scripture. An example from the Old Testament is where God not only alludes to this theme, but he rebukes his people about their hypocrisy and calls them to repent (Isa 1:10-20). The prophet Isaiah chastises the people, telling them that God declared their religious practices, declarations of faith, sacrifices, burning incense, praying, and festivals were meaningless, because at the same time they were socially and economically oppressing others and ignoring the needs of the vulnerable, suffering, marginalized, and unprotected. Their avowals and pious worship was disconnected from their primary responsibility to love one another and ensure each other's well-being. Isa 1:16-17 describes how God is offended by their behavior and calls them to repent:

When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean:
remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
learn to do good;

The church and the people of God are uniquely positioned to create belonging. When people are offered a vertical relationship with the loving Triune God and a horizontal, Christ-like relationships with others, it is possible to build communities where everyone can experience the genuine, expansive fellowship that dispels loneliness and builds belonging. And when they do, the harvest will be plentiful.

Anne Mackie Morelli earned her MA in Counselling Psychology from Simon Fraser University, her Bachelor of Physical Education and Teaching Certification from the University of British Columbia and Registered Clinical Counselling status with the British Columbia Association of Clinical Counsellors. Following her retirement, she began an MA in Christian Studies at Trinity Western University.

In her late teens to her mid-twenties, Anne represented Canada as a member of the Canadian Track and Field Team and the Canadian Olympic Team. During her professional career, Anne had a range of experiences, including being a high school principal, counsellor, and teacher, and a counsellor in the community setting. Anne's ministry experiences include leading programs and initiatives as a women's pastor, leading community groups, mentoring young leaders, and preaching. Her book, *When Grief Descends: Suffering, Consolation, and the Book of Job*, was published in 2020. More recently, she was a contributing author to *Jesus Was: Not What We Expected, But Better Than We Imagined*, published by Kregel Publications, in September 23, 2025. Anne's blog, *Anne Mackie Morelli*, explores a range of topics including the intersection of theology and counselling, and women in leadership within scripture and the church.

Author Copyright.

Morelli, Anne Mackie. "The Global Health Crisis of Loneliness and The Church's Response." Northwest Institute for Ministry Research. www.nimer.ca (retrieved Date Accessed).

seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow (Isa 1:16-17) NRSV