



Loneliness and Isolation in Faith Communities Best Practices for Creating Connection and Community

Shortly after creating humans, God stated the fundamental principle that it's not good for humans to be alone. Isolation is often seen as a departure from "normal" society. Society has judgments about those who live alone because of religious beliefs, disinterest in societal norms, or exclusion by society. Solitary confinement has long been considered the worst sort of punishment. And yet, there are people who live with loneliness and isolation daily in the United States and around the world.

Loneliness and isolation aren't new problems. However, the impact of loneliness and isolation on society is often underestimated. In the 2023 study released by the U.S. Surgeon General entitled "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," the effects of loneliness and isolation were discussed in terms of cost to society and the individual. According to the study, lack of social connection decreases not just the quality of life but the lifespan. The impact of loneliness and isolation on health is equivalent to that of obesity and smoking, increasing the likelihood of premature death by more than 25%. Lack of social connections also comes at a high monetary cost. In a research project done by AARP entitled "Loneliness and social connections among adults age 45 and older" it is estimated that each year more than \$6 billion is spent by Medicare and more than \$150 billion by employers for issues that are related to loneliness and isolation. As Christians, we aren't surprised that social connection is valuable. In Genesis 2, God recognizes that it is not good for humans to be alone and creates community. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul tells us that the body of Christ is one body with many parts. Community is important.

It is also no surprise that many of the calls for social connection mirror things that are already part of the traditions and practices of the Christian church. The U.S. Surgeon General report calls for things like "Create opportunities and spaces for inclusive social connection and establish programs that foster positive and safe relationships, including among individuals of different ages, backgrounds, viewpoints, and life experiences". When the church is healthy and functioning as one body, we are indeed a place for inclusive social connection with programs that foster positive, safe relationships for people of all ages, backgrounds, viewpoints, and life experiences as followers of Christ.

Many experienced issues related to loneliness before and during COVID. However, in our post-pandemic world, the challenges are even more significant. People of all ages are feeling lonelier and more isolated and fewer are seeking the social connection offered by the church. How can the church be intentional about addressing the lack of social connection in

membership and in the community? Here are some suggestions based on best practices culled from research and supported by the U.S. Surgeon General report.

1. **Be aware.** Loneliness and isolation are worldwide concerns. There is no country, age range, or demographic immune from loneliness and isolation. The number of social supports helps alleviate isolation, but it is the feeling concerning that support that defines loneliness. In the United States, according to the 2023 study, younger people experience loneliness more often and just as deeply as older people. Because loneliness is subjective, it's important to allow people to share their own experiences of loneliness and isolation without judgment or diminishing their experience. Talk to people about how they are experiencing the world. Pay attention when others use words that may indicate loneliness. Boredom and low energy may be loneliness in disguise.
2. **Talk about it.** We live in a society where independence is valued. We can perform many of our daily tasks without interacting with others. We can get groceries and food delivered. Self-checkout is widely available. We can be entertained 24/7 from the comfort of our living rooms. Dependence is not a moral failing. It is part of our biological makeup. We were created by God for community. When speaking of the church, we are particularly created to be a community that learns and serves together. By being open about feelings of loneliness and periods of isolation that we may be experiencing we make safe spaces for others to talk about their own longing for community. When we foster conversation about how it feels to be lonely, how loneliness is a common feeling for all ages not an abnormal reaction to a situation, and how to alleviate loneliness for ourselves and reach out to others who may be experiencing loss of social connectivity, we give people the words they need to share their inner experience and the tools they need to alleviate their suffering.
3. **Be intentional.** Creating opportunities to address loneliness and isolation requires thoughtful planning and preparation. Education is important for understanding the impact of social disconnection and for taking steps to create social connections. Having highly trained facilitators for programs aimed at social connection makes the programs more likely to succeed. Look at the ways that you are already providing resources that might create social connections and think about how you can make them better. Look at areas where social connection has not been addressed and think about ways you can add to that area to provide an aspect of social connection. For example: Before a meeting, you might ask each person to introduce themselves and share something about themselves. This "soft" step is easy to skip when moving toward the business at hand.
4. **Cooperate with others.** Find out what other organizations in your area are doing to address loneliness and isolation. Research what community resources are available for your organization. It seems obvious that addressing loneliness is not something we can do alone. By joining other groups, we increase our connections and create opportunities for those we serve to increase their connections. We make the best use of our resources by not replicating something when we can participate instead. When we join with others

our circle expands and our connection to the community becomes deeper. Especially when addressing loneliness, we don't have to go it alone.

5. **Include participants.** Create opportunities for addressing loneliness and isolation with participants, not for participants. While a program to increase social connectivity may be done with the best of intentions if it doesn't include those for whom the program is intended it misses the mark. Loneliness is about the inner perception of a participant. If a person perceives that their presence and ideas are important to the group they are more likely to feel socially connected to that group. While someone who attends an event they have no ownership of may attend without experiencing any lasting change in their feelings of loneliness.
6. **Make it personal.** As with so many other issues, there is not one size fits all solution for alleviating loneliness and isolation and promoting social connection. In fact, the more layered the approach the more likely it is to be successful. While research indicates that group interventions are most effective in addressing loneliness, research also shows that personal connections and one-on-one relationships are essential. We can't just do one thing to address loneliness and think we are done. In each activity involving people, we need to look at how we plan to provide a sense of connection. It may be something as routine as including a greeting time in worship or asking people to introduce themselves at the beginning of a meeting or wearing name tags when volunteering.
7. **Take the next step.** Once you've recognized the need for intentional social connection and taken steps to invite social connection how can you make it better? Perhaps you want to add name tags as part of your worship routine. If you already have name tags, then encourage those in worship to greet each other by name. If you already do those two things regularly then train members to welcome others by adapting some customer service techniques to your faith setting. For example, encourage members to adopt a 10:5 habit. At 10' from a person smile and make eye contact. If a person is within 5' verbally greet them, by name if you know it or can see their nametag. Model this behavior whenever possible. A word of caution, these ways of inviting people into community are not a call to give the impression that life is perfect, and everyone is happy. Rather these intentional invitations are toward genuine, vulnerable community.

Resources:

See also – Tips to Address Loneliness in Older Adults Quicksheet

- [Surgeon General Report](#)
- [Campaign to End Loneliness](#)
- [What is the 10 and 5 Rule](#)
- [How Faith Based Organizations are Tackling Loneliness](#)
- [Area Agency on Aging](#)

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