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The bottom half of the cover features a background of a starry night sky with a teal color palette. Overlaid on this are several large, semi-transparent, abstract teal shapes that resemble waves or flowing liquid. The text 'Sounding Board: LONELINESS' is centered in the lower right area of this section.

**Sounding Board:**  
**LONELINESS**

# Sounding Board...

## Loneliness

Before the emergence of Covid 19, another epidemic was spreading quietly and inconspicuously across the world, less contagious but still damaging to health and wellbeing. The epidemic of loneliness targets the connectedness which is at the heart of human flourishing.

Loneliness is an almost universal human experience, albeit often transient and associated with certain life experiences or events. In recent years it has become more pervasive and persistent. The Kaiser Family Foundation Report in 2018 found that twenty percent of adults in the United Kingdom say they often feel lonely or lack companionship. Research by the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness in 2017 found that over nine million adults in the UK are either always or often lonely and two hundred thousand older Britons had not had a conversation with a friend or relative in over a month. The prevalence of loneliness among young people is even higher. Three in five 18-34 year olds feel lonely often or sometimes and nearly half of 10-15 year olds.

Loneliness happens when the social connections people want don't match their experience of the relationships they have. It is a subjective feeling about a person's desired levels of social contact and their actual level of contact. Put another way by Dame Esther Rantzen, whose work with older people often focused on the issue of loneliness, "Somebody once defined loneliness to me as having plenty of people to do something with, but nobody to do nothing with."

Social Isolation on the other hand is an objective measure of the number of contacts that people have. It is about the quantity not quality of relationships. A person who is socially isolated will often feel lonely, but not inevitably so.

By way of contrast solitude is a long established spiritual discipline, a turning away from the noise, bustle and frenetic activity of everyday life to seek God. To quote John Mark Comer, 'Solitude is when you set aside time to feed and water and nourish your soul, to let it grow into health and maturity.' It is a life enriching practice of choice.

### HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Loneliness is not good for your health. We know from research that relationships are beneficial – promoting health, improving the immune system and cardiovascular function and helping us recover more quickly from illness. Married people in general enjoy better health. In 2006, a study of almost 3000 nurses with breast cancer found that women without close friends were more

likely to die than those with 10 or more friends. (1) Meaningful connection with others is clearly something of high value, so the experience of loneliness can be viewed as a psychological prompt to seek out or nurture those relationships which are so fundamental to our wellbeing. But what happens when that is not possible or doesn't occur?

There is a well-established connection between loneliness and poor physical and mental health, similar to other well known risk factors such as obesity or smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. It has been associated with an increased risk of heart disease and raised blood pressure, and of mental ill-health, including dementia and depression. Lonely, middle aged adults drink more alcohol, have worse diets and exercise less. Substance misuse and Bulimia have also been linked to loneliness. It is thought that loneliness weakens willpower, leading to people who feel lonely indulging in behaviour which is damaging to their health.(2)

Loneliness can visit us at any time of our lives but major transitions present particular challenges. These include moving home, a new job, loss of a relationship through divorce or bereavement, a new baby or older children leaving home. These are high risk times for mental ill-health. Circumstances that make us feel cut off from what we perceive to be the mainstream of society, such as poverty or unemployment, can also increase our risk of loneliness.

Two thirds of people with mental health problems feel lonely; they are among the most socially isolated of all. So loneliness is both a cause and a consequence of mental distress; the two aspects go hand in hand often forming a vicious cycle. In February 2020 NISRA published the report Loneliness in Northern Ireland showing that people who reported having worse general health were more at risk of feeling "more often lonely"(3). With poor physical and mental health accessing the services which are in place to help with loneliness can be especially challenging, perpetuating the cycle.

Loneliness itself creates a negative spiral with those experiencing loneliness describing feeling anxious, afraid and ashamed. This can affect how someone interprets their social experiences, making a person more likely to perceive, expect and remember other's behaviour as unfriendly. This can increase social anxiety, leading to fear in social situations and ultimately to pushing others away.

## GOOD MORNING OASIS

Oasis Caring in Action is a non-profit independent charity which began life as a social outreach project within Christian Fellowship Church Belfast. Oasis' mission is to be a practical demonstration of God's love within the community of East Belfast offering support, training and resources to empower people in their personal, family and community lives.

One way in which they do this is through Good Morning Oasis, a telephone befriending and support service to lonely, isolated or vulnerable people living in East or South Belfast. They make up to 260 phone calls a week which can last from 15 seconds to 15 minutes and are as frequent as the client wishes. The calls become an important part of the client's life, providing not just a familiar voice but friendship, security and help. Practical problems such as blocked gutters or frozen pipes can be referred to reliable community services and contact can be made with GP practices or pharmacies if necessary on the client's behalf and at their request. The daily or weekly conversations become a highlight of the client's life. 'It is a lifeline for me' said one client.

'You have to keep smiling. That's hard for four hours a day' said Anne, Good Morning's manager. 'It's emotionally demanding but enormously rewarding.'

This presents a challenge when solutions to loneliness are mainly centred on increased social activity and social interaction. The US sociologist Robert Weiss divided loneliness into two categories: emotional and social isolation. These can be seen in someone who may be married and has a good social network feeling lonely as compared to someone feeling lonely because they don't belong to a social group. Another way to view it is "state or trait" loneliness. Temporary (state) loneliness is caused by something in the environment (eg a bereavement, covid19 restrictions) and will change. Chronic (trait) loneliness is more persistent leaving the person feeling lonely even within a gathering of friends or family – regardless of the surroundings the experience of loneliness persists. (4)

Older people have particular risks through a range of factors including bereavement, restricted mobility or complex medical needs. Many are also caring for others whose needs may be even greater than their own and they therefore experience loneliness as a result of their caring role (5). Older men and women may have different issues regarding loneliness. Whilst research would suggest that more women than men experience loneliness this must be seen against a culture of the powerful male who, having been told from a young age not to express weakness, is slow to acknowledge loneliness. Other groups at higher risk of experiencing loneliness include the disabled, some minority ethnic groups especially if recently arrived in NI and members of the LGBTQ community.

The PSNI has warned that loneliness can make people particularly vulnerable to scams. It has long been recognised that the elderly are targeted by fraudsters; a friendly, empathetic, unknown caller can exploit a lonely person's lack of social contact, winning their trust, then robbing them of savings. The victim is left traumatised, their sense of loneliness intensified.

The reasons behind the rise in loneliness among the young are less clear and more complex. Psychologists believe that teenagers may be particularly prone to loneliness as their brains develop and as they negotiate the years when being loved and accepted is of paramount importance. They can misread social cues and the emotions of others or become isolated due to feeling overwhelmed, trying to establish their own identities. (6) Social media amplifies loneliness when likes, retweets and shares become a measure of popularity and acceptance. The carefully curated public image on Instagram or TikTok is a façade whose distance from reality can cause severe dissonance.

## THE IMPACT OF COVID19

While we are living in a more atomised world, we continue to be shaped by societal 'norms' (7). These are the 'rules' and 'roles' that bring a sense of order, meaning and understanding to society. They help us to connect with others, teach us what is acceptable in relating to others and bring predictability, which can make us feel at ease in talking with others. The Covid-19 pandemic has imposed stark changes to how we operate in society as we adapt to the 'new norms' and has contributed to a feeling of panic, anxiety and chaos as we grapple with change and unpredictable



situations. This has had implications for our mental health and emotional well-being. Using the GHQ-12 to measure mental health, distress and well-being, research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that mental health deteriorated 8.1 percent during the 'lock down' months (8). During the initial phase of the pandemic, increased anxiety and distress was evidenced by 'panic buying' and hoarding of essential items from supermarkets. Analysing this through the lens of inequality, we see that those without economic means to buy items in bulk, or who were affected by reduced salaries, furlough schemes or job insecurity, experienced increased isolation and deterioration in their mental health.

Everyone has been affected by COVID-19. It is useful to consider different groups within society and the specific issues pertinent to them as this can aid us in considering how churches can best respond. Patel (9) reminds us that we are all in the same storm, but not all in the same boat.

For grandparents, shielding regulations and increased risk factors have prevented contact with their family or grandchildren. For many this has led to feelings of low mood and, although not severe, it has affected general health and emotional well-being. Skogrand (10) has highlighted the increase in feelings of loneliness and social isolation in the over 70's population. For grandparents or kinship carers the dilemma over whether to continue to care for their grandchildren, maintaining important family bonds or to shield from the virus has been an emotional tug of war.

The impact upon residents within nursing and residential homes has been well documented. In June 2020, the Guardian reported that a survey of 128 care homes, undertaken by the Alzheimers Society, revealed that 79 percent reported that lack of social contact was causing a deterioration in the health and well-being of residents with Dementia. Older people who exist within a shared living space, surrounded by people, can still experience intense feelings of loneliness if they are unable to connect with others in a meaningful way. Research has shown the negative impact on their health and well-being, with significant decline in their cognition due to the lack of meaningful contact with loved ones. Some homes are finding ways for family to connect virtually or to see the faces of their loved ones through a window. However, this is not the experience for all residents within all homes. The sadness of the situation is deeper still when we consider how close family are often attuned to subtle changes in their loved ones, early signs of deterioration in their health and well-being which are vital for

## THE LARDER FOODBANK

Operating out of the former St Christopher's Church of Ireland Church it began as a response to need in the surrounding streets of East Belfast.

In 2013 an emaciated young woman, recently discharged from hospital, walked into a small sewing class in the church. She had no family support and would have to wait two weeks before receiving any benefits. 'It took us 2 or 3 days to gather up a box of groceries and when we took it to her flat she had no food and almost no furniture,' said Rev Adrian McCartney, the vicar at the time. 'We decided that never again would someone come looking for food and leave the church empty handed'.

From that inauspicious beginning grew The Larder, a reservoir of food and compassion. Individuals, families, churches and businesses support it by giving financially or in kind. A community of volunteers, some of whom live locally, staff it. Louise, the manager, recognises that they are providing more than food for their clients. A friendly smile, a doorstep chat, empathy and friendship are all part of the package. Fifty food parcels are distributed weekly and one hundred and twenty hampers were delivered over Christmas.

Tellingly, Louise commented 'It's easier to ask for food than to ask for a friend, you get someone to talk to with the food.' Within her team of volunteers there are some for whom The Larder is their entire reason for getting up in the morning.

good care. The Campaign to End Loneliness postulates that connection with others, particularly with family, is a human right and it is challenging Government to reconsider its guidance on visitation within care homes, encouraging family to be considered as 'Key Workers' within this setting.

While we often consider loneliness to be an older person's problem, people in the 18-24 age group are prone to intense feelings of loneliness and must not be forgotten in the societal response to the pandemic. Of 2000 people surveyed, 70 percent said that they had felt isolated, left out and lacking companionship during the lockdown (11). Factors said to increase the risk of loneliness were being younger, separated and those with depression or poor sleep due to the Covid-19 crisis. Women and young people are reported to have a higher risk of general psychiatric disorder and loneliness as a result of having or having had COVID-19 (12).

Young mothers, particularly first-time mothers, can feel intense loneliness as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. They often join groups such as breastfeeding support groups, baby massage classes or parent and toddler groups. These women are finding their way through a major change in their personal circumstances and home lives. The collective 'shared experience' of going through a particular life stage together can be a tremendous help and support in adapting to the changes they are experiencing. They feel less isolated, less alone and gain a sense of comfort knowing that others are experiencing similar emotions and having similar struggles. They can be immensely helped by talking to other mums and sharing their experiences, in the process gaining wisdom and practical advice. Living within a family but feeling that no-one else can understand their fears or anxieties leads to increased social isolation, made worse as a result of fewer community support networks. There has been added pressure for single mothers during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly during the 'lock down' phase, due to added roles and responsibilities such as home schooling, while not having any respite through school or working away from the home (13). The feelings of isolation, loneliness and stress, while heightened, are often hidden. The Gingerbread charity has raised these issues at governmental level, but it is important that churches are aware of those most adversely affected by the pandemic in order to best target outreach, compassion and help.

## A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

God's people are uniquely equipped and resourced to respond to the challenge of loneliness. The life of the local church and its message offer answers to both the social and spiritual alienation at the root of loneliness. When God said "Let us make mankind in our image, our likeness," it was a corporate act of creation by a triune God creating man and woman to be in relationship with Him and with each other, and to have dominion over creation as a joint enterprise. The relational nature of human existence was emphasised again when God said specifically "It is not good for man to be alone".

The grievous effects of sin destroyed the purity of those relationships, resulting in separation from God and from one another. Life circumstances, misadventure, illness, rejection and many

other life experiences can add to isolation and loneliness. On occasions the psalmist gives expression to the angst of rejection and loneliness. However the work of the cross, Jesus' death and resurrection, directly addressed the alienation and isolation caused by sin, reconciling us to God through the miracle of the new creation and entrusting to us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5v18).

To be reconciled to God is to belong to Christ and to belong to Christ is to belong to the body of Christ, the church. We are born again into a loving family, a supportive community. The defining characteristic of the early Christians was love. 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.' (John 13v35).

The dislocation, distrust and division which arose from the events around the tower of Babel contrast with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost when language no longer divided, confused and alienated nations and races but initiated a new era and gave rise to a joyful new community of believers. This new community, the church, has been entrusted with a message of reconciliation and friendship, and has been commissioned and empowered to love.

How then should we as individuals and corporately as God's people respond to the increasingly common experience of chronic loneliness and the social isolation that so many find themselves in today? We should begin by recognising that loneliness can be the lived experience of people within our churches or of new members, recently evangelised. Caring for the practical, emotional and spiritual needs of others creates a culture of connectedness where people value one another and feel valued. Kind words and simple gestures of greeting, listening, expressing thanks or appreciation, phone calls, text messages, handwritten letters, emails, offers of practical support, invitations to meals can make a huge difference for people and all foster an inclusive and welcoming environment, building people up and helping some to overcome a natural shyness. By participating and contributing people develop bonds and a sense of kinship. Home groups and service groups in the church create a context in which friendships can grow and flourish.

Looking beyond the church family there is much that can be done to address loneliness in the broader community. The problem has been on the political agenda for years. The government appointed its first 'Loneliness Commissioner' in 2018 as recommended by the Jo Cox Commission. There have been many initiatives such as the social prescribing programme which focus on connecting people with resources and groups in their local community. Local charities, community groups and not-for-profit organisations have programmes aimed at reducing loneliness and social isolation. Many of these rely on teams of trained volunteers, offering Christians opportunities to help in their local community and to meet socially isolated neighbours.

In the era of Covid19 many churches have turned to the digital world to connect with the church family. Live streaming of services is now one of the 'new norms' with social media platforms such as Facebook Live and YouTube, facilitating church gatherings. Zoom prayer meetings and church business meetings are happening. However, as connecting virtually has become more important, it raises the issue of inequality. There are many in society with no access to the internet and many who do not use social media. This can marginalise people further, increasing isolation and

reducing participation. Poor broadband service in rural areas contributes to rural isolation. A 'digital divide' has opened up (11), but also an opportunity for Christians to express love. Churches can support initiatives to provide digital devices to those who cannot afford them. Some families struggle to cope with online school activities while sharing one smart phone. Churches with digitally expert members could offer digital training to elderly isolated neighbours or others struggling to cope with the online world.

Many local churches have embraced the connection with Food Banks such as the Trussell Trust and are assisting with food distribution. This has been a means of connecting on doorsteps, getting to know local neighbours and building friendships. The pandemic has highlighted the inequalities in our society as evidenced in the uneven distribution of the burden of Covid-19; households already in poverty are the most vulnerable to debt and further financial hardship, along with increased feelings of isolation, stress and anxiety. Unsurprisingly there has been an increase in demand for food parcels (14) and many churches have risen to meet the need, supplying thousands of food parcels and hot meals.

Post Covid, churches will be well placed to address loneliness. The Church of England has published a leaflet suggesting top tips for dealing with loneliness and isolation. It points to the importance of prayer; talking about how we are feeling; distraction by focusing on things we can do and change; having a good routine that will enable us to look after ourselves and to look after others. Churches have extensive experience of group gatherings and support groups; mum and toddlers, pensioners lunches, armchair aerobics, Pilates groups, walking groups, youth groups, cycling groups- the list is extensive. Indeed Honcho (15) highlighted that a key pointer for churches in responding to loneliness was to offer support through group-based initiatives as opposed to individual, one-to-one support; the most effective groups for tackling loneliness are those with shared, mutual interests.

Throughout the UK and Ireland the Covid pandemic energised communities to come together ensuring that the most vulnerable were protected and provided for. It resulted in increased community cohesion, but sustaining this in the long term will be more difficult. The pandemic has exposed how vulnerable our globalised, interconnected world is to transmissible disease. Epidemics are as old as human history but the speed of spread has been accelerated by the technological advances of the past century and international travel. A rebalancing of life with a new emphasis on the local rather than the global could ensue. Renewed investment in local relationships, local businesses and a local identity, moving away from gated communities to more socially diverse neighbourhoods could create a greater sense of belonging and community spirit with churches providing an important presence and social infrastructure. Many churches, already embedded in the local community, can be influential in creating a friendly, and welcoming neighbourhood.



## CONCLUSION

The church's message and mission speak directly to the contemporary plague of loneliness. The unconditional love of the Father can overcome the existential loneliness that many experience. The pandemic has brought new opportunities for God's people to show the love of Christ through acts of friendship and kindness, helping to 'set the lonely in families' (Ps68.6) and giving a foretaste of the Kingdom that is to come. Although the task may seem overwhelming small acts of kindness can touch lives deeply. Embodied compassion changes lives and communities. Despite our limited resources God can and will use us to set free those who are held captive by loneliness.

## Next Steps:

Churches might consider ways in which they can respond to the problem of loneliness or encourage church home group discussion about it.

Suggested questions for further discussion:

1. Loneliness is often a hidden problem. Lonely people may have difficulty leaving home or mingling with others. Are there people who live or work in your neighbourhood or church locality whom you are aware of but rarely see? How might you reach out to them?
2. Are there skills or expertise within your congregation (e.g. digital expertise, handyman skills) which could be offered to people who are socially isolated and lacking either the support of family and friends or adequate resources?
3. There is often a stigma in admitting to feeling lonely. Are there ways in which we can destigmatise the problem?
4. Could your church consider a befriending scheme?
5. Are there community organisations known to you through which church members could volunteer to support lonely people?
6. What responsibility, if any, does the Government have in tackling the epidemic of loneliness and what might it do?

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