



The Arthur Rank Centre
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Rural Isolation and Loneliness

A practical resource for rural churches



Contents

What is isolation and loneliness and why is it important in rural communities	3
1. Definitions.....	3
2. Statistical Information	4
3. Impact on health and well being	4
4. Implications in rural areas.....	5
5. Unique position in local churches.....	5
Making a start on isolation and loneliness	7
1. Understanding your local area.....	7
2. Finding isolated or lonely people in your community	7
3. Responding to the Findings	9
4. Why address isolation and loneliness.....	11
Case Study: Pilling, Wyre	12
Annex: Useful sources of information and advice	13

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What is isolation and loneliness and why is it important in rural communities?

It seems that scarcely a week goes by when the local or national media are not expressing concern about isolation or loneliness in our society. In a significant development during July 2014, it was announced that local authorities in England will now be measured according to their effectiveness in addressing social isolation in their communities and GP's are being encouraged to 'prescribe' activities which will address health concerns of social isolation.¹

So what do we actually mean when we talk about loneliness and isolation?

"The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love."

Mother Theresa

1. Definitions

The terms 'isolation' and 'loneliness' are often used interchangeably, but it is important to recognise that they are distinct concepts, and a good understanding of each is required.

Isolation is defined as 'the absence of social contact' e.g. friends, family, community involvement or access to services. It is therefore a tangible and measurable concept and isolation can often lead to loneliness. Practical steps can often be taken to address isolation such as improved transport links, increased use of internet or localisation of services and resources.

Loneliness is a 'subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want.'² Loneliness, therefore can be manifested very differently from person to person because each of us responds differently to circumstances around us. For example, some people are very happy and comfortable if they have no contact with others for days at a time and others begin to struggle if they see nobody else during the course of a day.

¹ BBC News (7th July 2014) 'GP Prescriptions to tackle loneliness'
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-28202717>

² Perlman, D and Peplau, LA, 'Toward a social psychology of loneliness'. In R. Gilmour and S. Duck (eds), *Personal Relationships 3: personal relationships in disorder*, 1981, Academic Press, London, pp. 31–43

2. Statistical Information

Because of specific concern for older people in relation to isolation and loneliness, much of the statistical information on the subject relates to this age group. Some of the most startling figures find that:

- **Half of all older people (about 5 million) consider the television as their main form of company**
- **Over 500,000 older people spent Christmas Day alone**
- **12% of older people (over 1.1 million) feel trapped in their own home**

Across the broader population, however, there is also evidence to show that at least 5% of people often feel lonely.³

In rural areas of England , one in four older people lives alone currently and this is forecast to increase to nearly one in three (32%) by 2020. Also, farmers and farm workers – many of whom live in very remote locations – are at high risk of stress, depression and suicide. Farmers who develop mental health problems rarely approach mental health services, because of the perceived stigma and the shame of being seen as “not coping”. Mental health services may also be difficult to reach geographically. In addition, farmers work long hours and may not be able to take time off to use mental health services when GP surgeries or health clinics are open.

3. Impact on health and wellbeing

There is increasing research being carried out internationally to explore the impact of isolation and loneliness on the health and wellbeing of individuals, as well as assessing the impact of various interventions.

A major study carried out in the US in 2010 found that lacking social connections can be as damaging to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, being alcoholic, or not exercising and is twice as harmful as obesity.⁴ Other studies have found that loneliness can lead to increased risk of high blood pressure, physical disability, cognitive decline, depression and dementia (one study found that there is a 64% increased likelihood of developing dementia if you are lonely). Sadly, loneliness and low social interaction are also predictors of potential suicide among older people.

As a result, it is more likely that those struggling with isolation or loneliness will:

³ Victor, CR *et al*, 'The prevalence of, and risk factors for, loneliness in later life: a survey of older people in Great Britain', *Ageing and Society*, 2005, 25, (3) pp. 357–375

⁴ Holt-Lunstad JTB, Layton JB, 'Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review', 2010, *PLoS Medicine* 7 (7)

- Visit their GP more often; have higher use of medication; higher incidence of falls; and increased likelihood of long term care⁵
- Undergo early entry into residential or nursing care⁶
- Use accident and emergency services independent of chronic illness.⁷

4. Implications in rural areas

Much of the information and evidence on the subject of isolation and loneliness is generic in nature and consequently does not provide a comprehensive picture of the specific impact in rural areas. One key report produced in 2013 by DEFRA however, recognises that 23% of the rural population are over retirement age compared to 18% in urban areas, and as a result, rates of disease, disability and mortality are far higher in rural areas than urban. The same report highlights that rural areas have a unique set of circumstances that can exacerbate the social isolation of older residents, leading to poor health, loss of independence and lower quality of life. These factors include lower per capita expenditure on social care; greater reliance on car ownership - particularly for visiting family or the getting to the shops; and poor broadband access.⁸

A report produced from Northern Ireland examined isolation, poverty and wellbeing in the farming and rural communities. The study found that those who are isolated in rural areas and on farms experience significant negative impacts including mental health issues, the risk of suicide and potentially reduced life expectancy.⁹

5. Unique position of local churches

It is estimated that there are 13-15,000 rural churches in England. Although some have a small attendance, there remains a unique opportunity for churches to respond to issues of social isolation as they often provide the key community facilities and social interaction in rural communities.

The church is ‘An utterly unique institution with enormous reservoirs of good will’

Respublica 2013

⁵ Cohen, G.D. et al ‘The impact of professionally conducted cultural programs on the physical health, mental health, and social functioning of older adults’, 2006, *The Gerontologist* 46 (6)

⁶ Russell DW, Cutrona CE, de la Mora A, Wallace RB, ‘Loneliness and nursing home admission among rural older adults’, 1997, *Psychology and Ageing* 12 (4) pp.574-89

⁷ Geller J, Janson P, McGovern E and Valdini, A, ‘Loneliness as a Predictor of Hospital Emergency Department Use’, 1999, *Journal of Family Practice* 48 (10)

⁸ DEFRA *Social Isolation Experienced by Older People in Rural Communities*, 2012, p.3

⁹ Allen M, *Rural isolation, poverty and rural community / farmer wellbeing*, 2014, p. 14
<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RalSe/Publications/2014/general/7314.pdf>

At a time when squeezed local authority budgets are leading to youth centres, children's centres and lunch clubs being closed or reduced in size, there is an increasing need and opportunity for churches and faith groups to explore ways in which they can become part of the answer to some of the challenges being faced by local communities. In many rural areas, the only buildings available (if any) which enable local people to meet socially and/or provide community activities are pubs, village halls and church buildings. Often, church members have good links with the wider community and – along with other residents – can be a lifeline to identify and support those with limited mobility. This is underlined in a report produced in 2013 by Respublica in which the church is described as 'an utterly unique institution with enormous reservoirs of good will, education and capacity, as well as an asset base that – because it can be put to the use of all of our communities – can transform every community.'¹⁰

So having begun to make the case for why the churches should be involved we need to address some of the practicalities.

¹⁰ Noyes J and Blond P, *Holistic Mission: Social Action and the Church of England*, 2013, p.8

Making a start on isolation and loneliness

1. Understanding your local area

There are various ways to address isolation or loneliness in your local area but it is important to understand the specific issues, needs and resources available before making concrete plans. Carrying out some straight forward research will enable you to gain a fuller understanding of local circumstances.

Understanding the needs

A useful way of understanding your local area is through the Church Urban Fund website which provides a breakdown of key data relating to poverty in local areas. Entering your postcode into the website¹¹ will provide you with details which include pensioner and child poverty, ethnicity, life expectancy, qualifications and social housing.

If you want to discover more detailed information to ward level then you can gain access to the results of the last (2011) census through the Office for National Statistics¹².

Understanding resources available

You are likely to have a good understanding of the availability and skills of members of your congregation, but it can be difficult to maintain an awareness of others in the area. Developing links with local community groups or organisations such as village halls, schools and sports/leisure facilities will enable you to discover those willing and able to invest in existing initiatives. Volunteer Centres (if available) can also be a good way to recruit volunteers to your project.

2. Finding isolated or lonely people in your community

One of the biggest challenges when addressing social isolation is that – by definition – those who are isolated or lonely are often ‘hidden away’ from the wider community either because of geographical factors or by physical or psychological restrictions. It is therefore likely that those experiencing the most extreme levels of isolation or loneliness will not be attending community events, church services and activities or be widely known to local residents. Therefore churches wanting to reach the most isolated and vulnerable will need to be proactive and find a variety of means to make contact, as well as to gain the confidence of lonely and isolated neighbours. We also need to be sensitive some people are quite content to lead what to us may appear isolated lonely lives.

So how do we identify people in need?

¹¹ See www.cuf.org.uk/poverty-england/poverty-look-tool

¹² See www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk

Review Existing Networks

Within every church there exists a comprehensive web of networks which together provide a good starting point to look at your local community. Church members living in the local community will know a considerable amount about their neighbours, the infrastructure in terms of employment, schools, shops (if any), the pub and the social activities. So make use of this local knowledge.

- Consult members, who might they have noticed who appears to be lonely or isolated? Remember this may be people who are not obviously lonely.
- Talk to people who run the shop or pub, or who organise the community events. Who do they know who might be isolated?
- Are there parents of young children or carers for older people at home who may not see another adult during the day?
- Set up some community events such as a coffee morning, afternoon tea, barbecue or other informal events which create an opportunity to bring people together. Look out for who comes and who does not come?
- Is there a neighbourhood watch scheme in the community? This provides a network of people on the look out who also meet on a regular basis. Who do they know who might be lonely or isolated.

Consult Local Agencies

Even in small communities there are likely to be some people who represent statutory agencies and authorities; whilst they will be bound by issues of confidentiality you may be able to set up a referral system whereby they can inform clients of activities you are hosting. So who might it be worth talking to in order to let them know of your plans?

- Local Councillors they will perhaps be able to provide useful links to the Adult Social Care team.
- Police Community support Officers may well know those who are vulnerable, and they might also be happy to attend events in order to pass on crime prevention messages.
- GP surgeries although unable to talk about specific people, are likely to be willing to help gauge the level of need in the locality, and can help to advertise events and resources on offer.
- Voluntary organisations, some charities such as AGE UK may already be involved in your community can you work together to enhance what can be offered?

Use Local Media

For many people unable to venture out of the house, television and radio become their main form of company. Therefore, if you are running events or starting up a project aimed at isolated or lonely people then using the local media is a good way of communicating.

- Write a press release explaining your event or project and send it to local newspapers, radio stations and parish magazines. Make sure that full contact

details are provided and do not assume everyone has access to email or the internet.

- Approach your local radio station asking for a short interview to talk about what you are doing.
- Door to door leaflet drops can be helpful in some circumstances.

3. Responding to the findings

It is important to do the ground work in order to get an accurate picture of the needs of the community, the resources already available and other groups and organisations that could become partners. It is important not to duplicate what is already available, or provide something that is not relevant or helpful. A good consultation process, inviting people from the community to come to a public open meeting to discuss ideas and agree what could be done together can help people to own and support the outcome. It is also a good way of encouraging more people to get involved.

Here are some ideas to get you thinking about ways to reach the lonely and isolated in your communities.

a. Children:

- Toddler groups can be a very effective way of engaging with parents with young children and providing a means of social support
- Messy Church can also reach out to parents and children providing fun and support as well as an introduction to faith
- Family Fun Days are a great way of supporting families with young children particularly in the summer holidays

b. Young People

Isolation amongst young people in rural areas can be a significant problem. Streetspace is an organisation which supports churches in reaching young people on the margins.¹³ Whilst some congregations might find the idea of working with young people a bit daunting simple ideas and an open offer can often work best.

- A film night for young people, using a popular suitable film in the church or village hall.
- Occasional trips providing transport to events in a nearby town, to the leisure centre for example.
- If young people congregate at certain locations, arrange occasional outreach sessions aimed at providing hot drinks, support and information. This helps break down barriers and building relationships. ‘The Granny Wagon’ supplied hot

¹³ www.streetspace.org.uk

chocolate and biscuits every Friday night to a group of young people that used to congregate in the play area of a market town.

- Maybe your church could support a detached youth worker for a regular session in the community. A detached youth worker engages with the young people where they are on the street or in a bus shelter, building relationships with the young people.¹⁴

c. Adults

The important thing is to provide hospitality in ways that people can access it easily. Something as simple as a coffee morning or afternoon tea with good quality refreshments and homemade cake are a good starting point. This provides an opportunity for conversation in a safe environment. You may need to provide lifts for some with limited mobility.

A group are reaching out to the lonely in their area by hosting a Saturday afternoon tea party every six weeks.

“We started by inviting people we already knew from church and provided them with sandwiches, cakes, tea and coffee along with a bit of entertainment in the form of a sing song or poetry reading. Others came through word of mouth and we put leaflets through the doors of a nearby block of flats. Up to 25 people now come to each party, which is about as many as we can fit into the space at the back of church. The team pick up those who need transport as well as take them home afterwards and provide all the food themselves. We’re here if they want to talk, or people can just sit quietly.”

Another rural church has weekly afternoon teas with homemade cakes, timed so that parents picking up children from school can also come in for a chat, as well as older people.

The church can facilitate activities and end up being a catalyst for local people to run events such as:

- Local walking group
- Pub lunches
- Hobby clubs
- Lunch clubs
- Befriending projects in which isolated adults receive regular home visits
- Set up a pastoral visiting team for the whole community (not just the congregation).

¹⁴ For more information see www.detachedyouthwork.info

Carry out pilot projects

Before launching a major new initiative, pilot the idea for six months to assess the way in which it works, the demand and any unintended outcomes.

Review progress

Once a project has been set up to address isolation and loneliness, carry out regular reviews to assess areas for improvement and to ensure that it is still needed.

4. Why address isolation and loneliness?

So why do we as churches want to be involved in this agenda, what is it that fires us? Perhaps the starting point is that God loves us and we are all made in the image of God (Genesis 1. 27) and that we are so special to God that even the hairs of our head are numbered (Matthew 10. 30). If that is the case for us so it is for others, we need to offer care so that through our care they may glimpse the God who loves them and created them.

In Matthew's Gospel the story of the last judgement 25. 31-46 reminds us that what we do is important because as we help others, we serve Jesus himself. Hospitality was a sacred obligation in biblical times and was certainly something that Paul urged the early church to take seriously see Romans 12. 13 and the letter to Timothy 1 Timothy 3. 2 and 5. 10. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that by offering hospitality we may entertain angels 13.2.

As the first letter of John reminds and challenges us we are to love one another because love is of God. How can we love God who we cannot see, if we don't love a brother or sister who we can see (1 John 4. 7-12). So let us learn to love and care for the lonely and isolated and in doing so we will join in God's Mission to the world.

Case Study - Pilling, Wyre

Pilling is situated on the southern corner of Morecambe Bay covering around 13 square miles, much of which has been reclaimed by improved sea defences. It is largely flat agricultural land and the parish area has a population of around 2,000, half of which is made up of those aged 55 and over.

In April 2014, an Open Meeting was attended by around 20 local residents and representatives of charities, churches and parish/district councils. The aim was to discuss issues relating to rural isolation in the area and begin to identify some relatively quick and easy initial solutions. The main issues raised were:

- **Transport** - It was agreed that Pilling has inadequate public transport routes which have a significant impact on levels and perceptions of isolation and loneliness. For example, a trip to the nearest market town takes 20 minutes by car. However, the shortest bus route involves two buses and a round trip of 2 hours 40 minutes!

There were also concerns about pedestrian mobility within the village itself. Many roads do not have pavements and this can be dangerous particularly for older people and parents with young children.

- **Finding isolated/lonely residents** - Despite Pilling being a village where many people look out for each other, it was recognised that there are many properties that are very remote and where there may well be those struggling with isolation and loneliness.
- **Difficulties accessing healthcare** - Many people raised the problems of accessing Accident and Emergency facilities as well as GP surgeries. The nearest A and E unit is 10 miles away and the nearest GP surgery is 5 miles away. (See **Appendix 3** for other issues raised)

Action Taken

During the Open Meeting, an appeal was made for volunteers to form a new Action Group which would take forward some of the suggestions made. An group called 'CLIP' (Community Life in Pilling) was created with members including a pub landlord, Chair of the Parish Council, the local parish vicar, church members and other residents. 'CLIP' selected the most pressing and straightforward concerns to address and as a result, the following actions have been taken:

- Increased publicity made available concerning an existing community minibus scheme
- Parish Council is investigating the possibility of hard surfacing some footpaths across local fields.
- A telephone information line has been set up in which a mobile phone will be held by different volunteers each week, who will have access to appropriate services, information and resources
- A Neighbourhood Challenge Week is being set up in 2015 in which residents visit one other person to build links, and a community event will be held at the village pub

The group reported that it was helpful to have an outside facilitator to encourage new ideas and to suggest initial priorities. It was also recognised that there was potential for making this a deanery-wide project and this is therefore being considered.

Annex: useful sources of information and advice

It is important that proper **safeguarding** checks and procedures are in place. For full information see www.churchsafe.org.uk/

Tackling Isolation and Loneliness – Link Visiting Scheme

If you are concerned about loneliness and isolation amongst older people, the Link Visiting Scheme has a range of excellent resources available which enable churches to respond effectively.



This national Christian befriending charity supports the mission of local churches by helping them to set up projects to help lonely older people re-connect with their communities. On 1 July Link Visiting launched the Build-A-Link Challenge. This resource raises awareness of social isolation and provides some suggested responses for churches, including ideas for projects and activities that could help address the issue locally.

The charity has also developed a model of operating a befriending project for churches in urban and rural settings, based on its own experience of running a successful scheme since 1998. Full support, training, documentation and advice are provided to churches seeking to set up a project in their community.

For details of the Build-A-Link Challenge go to www.linkvisiting.org/challenge and information about setting up a befriending project can be found at www.linkvisiting.org/national-scheme/setting-up-a-link-visiting-scheme/ ‘Getting started’ case studies from churches that have set up a project in partnership with Link Visiting Scheme are available at <http://linkvisiting.org/category/getting-started/>

Other sources of information, ideas and support

The Plunkett Foundation - Helps rural communities through co-operatives and community-ownership to take control of issues affecting them.

www.plunkett.co.uk/

Rural Coffee Caravan Information Project - Befriends people and offers them access to the information they need to empower them.

www.ruralcoffeecaravan.org.uk/

Campaign to End Loneliness – National body supporting organisations to address loneliness and isolation and campaigning about the issues.

www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/

Over the Hill Campaign - Offers innovative solutions to the problems faced by people who are growing older in the English countryside

www.overthehillcampaign.org.uk/pdf/over_the_hill_report.pdf

Parish Nursing - Christian charity helping churches to appoint nurses, who in turn support people and communities towards whole person healthcare.

<http://parishnursing.org.uk/>

Neighbourhood Approaches to Loneliness (Joseph Rowntree Foundation) – A comprehensive report and toolkit produced following a three-year action research programme exploring and identifying what makes us feel lonely where we live and work and what we can all do about it.

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/topic/loneliness>

Streetspace – Provide ideas, support and networking opportunities for churches engaging with young people on the margins of society

www.streetspace.org.uk

Connections Bus Project – A charity providing youth work services across Cambridgeshire including two bespoke double-decker buses converted into youth friendly venues, open-access, universal services, building based youth clubs, support for smaller community youth projects, youth consultations for Parish Councils, community groups and others

<http://www.connectionsbusproject.org.uk>

Rural Expression - Rural mission initiative that recruits, equips, deploys and networks self-financing teams pioneering creative and relevant expressions of the Christian church among under-churched groups and communities in rural areas

<http://www.ruralexpression.org.uk/>