

Belonging becomes believing



More than 4,000 children contacted Childline in the past year because they were lonely.¹ At the other end of the age spectrum, elderly people are also suffering from loneliness and isolation: there are 1.8 million people over 75 in the UK who are profoundly lonely, according to Linking Lives UK, which is working with churches and Christian agencies to set up befriending schemes to combat the issue.

HOPE's dream is of a growing church, showing Jesus' love and telling the Jesus story at the heart of every village, town and city. Psalm 68 says God 'sets the lonely in families' and churches are playing a significant role in combatting isolation in every community.

Churches across the spectrum of denominations are working together with HOPE towards 2018 and a whole year of mission in words and action to make Jesus known. The Talking Jesus research (talkingjesus.org), which HOPE commissioned together with the Church of England and the Evangelical Alliance, shows that one in five of the people we talk to about Jesus is open to knowing more. So HOPE is encouraging every Christian to pray specifically for five friends or family members, and to have something to say, something to give and an invitation to offer.

But, often Christians avoid talking about Jesus with non-Christian friends and someone who comes along to church to avoid loneliness might never find faith for themselves if there is not an intentional invitation for them to respond to Jesus.

The Talking Jesus research showed that two-thirds (67%) of non-Christian adults, and more than half (55%) of young people, say they know a Christian. We asked this group whether the active Christian they know has ever talked with them about their faith in Jesus Christ. Four in 10 (41%) of these adults told us that the Christian they know has never spoken with them about Jesus. And half (48%) of these non-Christian 11-18 year olds have not heard about Jesus from the Christian they know.

Roy Crowne, HOPE's executive director, says, 'We need to be intentional in making Jesus known: intentional about talking to friends, family and others about Jesus, intentional about inviting them to church events, and intentional about providing opportunities for people to hear the gospel and respond.'

That intentionality can combat isolation, and ultimately, can lead to people of all ages becoming part of the solution to the loneliness crisis.

Unconditional love

In Meads, a village on the edge of Eastbourne, the parish church is working to combat loneliness in its community. At one end of the age spectrum, isolated elderly people come together in the village hall for a coffee club, where a volunteer expert runs a computer clinic once a month, and a hearing aid specialist is on hand some weeks to solve problems for the hard of hearing. A series of interesting talks at a Cameo club for women and regular men's breakfasts keep connections going throughout the year. The club and the breakfast are events to bring friends to, who might otherwise be lonely.

¹ bbc.com/news/uk-39580234

But this isn't just a church-based WI or Rotary Club. As well as openings to talk about faith in everyday conversations, occasional, more overtly Christian talks can lead to an invitation to a church service. The Christians in the group offer to pray about issues that are troubling club members.

Roy Crowne says, 'If we are to be more than just a social club, we need to be intentional about making Jesus known, loving and caring unconditionally, but making the most of every opportunity to point people to Jesus, giving a reason for the hope we have.'

Belonging and believing

At the other end of the age spectrum, it is the same with the parish toddler group. Parents wanting their children to gain a place at the church school attend the toddler group and bring their children to church on Sundays. The parents are happy to take a turn on a crèche rota and helping in Sunday school, but the church's families worker realised that some of them had had no opportunities to develop a living faith of their own.

In some churches that might exclude them from belonging to the children's workers' team. But in this context, the families worker invited them to join a special home group just for the children's workers. One mum, who had been part of the team for years, admitted that she had never been in a context where lay people prayed out loud. Her only Bible knowledge had come from her preparation for children's church. But in the context of this special home group, she came to faith. Belonging became believing.

Rhythm of mission

Churches can play a crucial role linking lives. A village church can be the glue that holds a community together, but sometimes a special focus can give the people we are connected with the opportunity to respond to Jesus for themselves.

HOPE has devised a rhythm of mission through the church year to keep the mission momentum going. Seasons of prayer at New Year, Lent, Pentecost and Ascension – drawing on initiatives such as Thy Kingdom Come – can lay a foundation. Seasonal events and activities in the summer and at harvest – including Germinate's Rural Mission Sunday initiative each July – can help us build bridges through acts of service as varied as clearing up a community's waste ground to holding a summer street party or a karaoke evening in the village pub. Christianity Explored or Alpha courses can give people the space they need to ask questions. Then special guest services at Easter and Christmas create space in which people can respond.

'Often it's not about doing more, but it's about our focus,' says Roy. 'We need to focus on the people in our village, town or city who don't yet know Jesus, inviting them to be part of the church family, loving and serving them unconditionally and taking every opportunity to introduce them to Jesus.'

To find out more about HOPE Revolution and HOPE 2018, sign up at hopetogether.org.uk/signup to receive regular news updates.

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