

From loneliness to friendship



I recently ran a project to commemorate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation and Martin Luther's 95 Theses. Together with friends from the ecumenical Mission Theology Advisory Group we produced 95 Missional Theses. One of our new 'theses' reads:

'We believe in a Church where the lonely can find friends'.

When this statement was posted on social media, it immediately provoked an avalanche of comment and discussion, especially from those clergy and lay people following us from rural situations. Loneliness has been called 'the last taboo' and it seemed that posting a statement about loneliness made the unsayable possible.

Here is one of the most poignant stories...

Everyone gritted their teeth when Agnes (not her real name) arrived at church on Sunday. Aged 86, she turned up, started talking... and didn't stop. She talked about everything and anything, never pausing for a response or to hear from anyone else. She talked through the hymns and the liturgy, through the silences and through the prayers. She talked randomly about what she had for dinner and about the price of eggs. She talked about the flowers on the altar and about the previous vicar. People in the pew near her edged away slowly. At coffee time, people veered away from her so as not to get caught in the flow. So she orbited the room, talking at anyone who accidentally made eye contact with her. She was still talking when she got into her lift home. The driver went out of her way to take her, but was mercifully somewhat deaf. There was a little sigh of relief when she was safely gone. A lot of people speculated that she was eccentric or that 'her mind is going'.

Agnes' mind was fine. The truth was, however, that Agnes didn't often talk to anyone else all week, except to the presenters on her little radio. She lived in an isolated cottage between two small villages. She had no family, no friends and no visitors. She could cycle to one of the villages to do a bit of shopping but was not robust enough to cycle further afield. She was chronically lonely and the lack of everyday human contact meant that when she came to church everything that was on her mind simply spilled out inappropriately in the midst of this, her only community.

Agnes was a pain. Agnes spoiled the service for others. Agnes was a problem. She was also someone who desperately needed friends, and not just on Sunday. Agnes needed her church to be the source of human interaction and care for her every day.

Apart from Sunday, Agnes was practically invisible. She wasn't housebound. She wasn't sick. She didn't 'need' visiting as such. She was capable and independent. She got about on her bike. But the community she lived in has changed. The places she would meet people have closed down; the community centre, the library, the post office in the nearest village have all gone. The main road has been rerouted so that buses no longer stop near the track where she has her house. The cottage hospital has gone. The community where Agnes met people and talked about her daily life has changed shape and moved away from her, leaving her high and dry. And beyond that is her small means. She wasn't living in poverty but she wasn't well off enough to travel much. So she did not attract attention, but neither was she getting the companionship and care from human interaction that she needs. She was just... lonely. And then she died.

This heart-breaking, human story echoes much of the *Loneliness: Accident or Injustice?* report produced by Jo Ind for the Diocese of Oxford¹. In villages where younger people have moved away and older people become more disabled, loneliness can creep up on those whose lives were previously marked by gregariousness and community. Nor is this limited to older people; I have come across children and young people who are cut off from their school friends and peer groups because they may not have the money, parental help or the transport to reach them. Loneliness and rural isolation are markers of poorer mental health. One person I talked to recently said that she has regular GP appointments, not because she is actually ill, but because she gets to talk to the receptionist and have a one to one with the doctor for ten minutes. This is a recognised common denominator in illness² and comes with an economic cost too³. There is often a deep shame associated with being lonely, as if it were a failure, something to apologise for.

So what's our response to this, if 'we believe in a Church where the lonely can find friends'? It's got to be more than being a place where the chronically lonely can, like Agnes, splurge on community. Jo Ind talks about the intimacy of Christian community, an intimacy that comes from God. But that intimacy, closeness, care and love cannot be limited to inside the church doors. Something else has to happen to enable friendships and face-to-face relationships extend to where people are and how they are living. We have to imagine those living with loneliness and then go and find them. There are models of good practice: the Archway Foundation (archwayfoundation.org.uk) in Oxford is one such group working to address loneliness.

It's not just the vicar's job to visit people and check on their wellbeing; thinking about who might be hidden from everyday life, waiting for some simple, human contact to brighten their day is the Christian responsibility of all of us. It will take up our time. It will break up our busy lives. It will pull on our resources. But Jesus calls us to follow his example and step outside the crowds that surround us to find the person who is lonely, overlooked, excluded, shut out, unseen and unheard, and extend to them the hand of friendship.

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¹ oxford.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/OD701-loneliness-book.pdf

² hbr.org/cover-story/2017/09/work-and-the-loneliness-epidemic

³ bbc.co.uk/news/education-41349219