

Life and faith in rural Britain...

COUNTRYWAY



Rural isolation and loneliness

Just before I headed off to Greenbelt in the summer of 2019, I wrote a tweet asking if any clergy had ever felt lonely and would they be prepared to talk to me about it. If so, they could message me privately. In my head I was hoping I'd get loads of folk replying; in reality, there wasn't a single response. Now, of course, there might be a hundred good reasons why this was the case – not least, that they might not have seen the tweet – but it did leave me wondering whether loneliness is still something that we struggle to talk about. I believe there is a stigma about it.

For the past eighteen months I have been accompanying four churches in Yorkshire who have set up projects to combat rural isolation and loneliness. One of the surprising things that began to emerge, even before their projects got off the ground, was that none of the churches had ever spoken about loneliness or isolation in their PCC or Church Council meetings. They all knew it existed, they knew there were probably isolated people living nearby, but they had never actually talked about loneliness or isolation and acknowledged its reality.

What does it feel like to be lonely? What makes us lonely? Is being alone the same as being lonely? Do isolation and loneliness go hand in hand? It seemed important that these were conversations that the churches needed to have, before they thought about how they might reach out to lonely and isolated people in their own communities.

The current climate of loneliness and isolation

It is over half a century since the Beatles brought Eleanor Rigby and all the lonely people to our attention. One might imagine that over the course of those fifty years we might have found ways to combat loneliness, but in October 2013 the then Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt described loneliness as 'a source of national shame', that 'the problem of loneliness is that in our busy lives we have utterly failed to confront it as a society.'¹ It doesn't look like things will improve in the future either. Age UK predict that the number of over-50s experiencing loneliness will reach two million by 2025/6 compared to more recent figures of around 1.4 million in 2016/7, a 49% increase in 10 years.²

¹ [bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-24572231](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-24572231)

² [ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/articles/2018/october/all-the-lonely-people-report](https://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/articles/2018/october/all-the-lonely-people-report)

For many people in rural communities, especially the young and the elderly, rural life is difficult: lack of public transport, shopping opportunities, services, employment or training all deepen the effects of loneliness and isolation. The lack of high-speed broadband in rural areas has led to a growing digital gap between urban and rural dwellers. This digital exclusion was highlighted in 2017 in a study by the Local Government Association (LGA) and Public Health England (PHE) which highlighted the fact that 13% cent of the adult UK population (6.4 million) had never used the Internet and 18% say that they do not have Internet access at home. 'Rural social networks are breaking down with a consequent increase in social isolation and loneliness, especially among older people,' the report stated.³

The stigma of loneliness has made it harder for people to talk about or own up to. Research into the loneliness of young people (14 –25 year olds) by Manchester Metropolitan University in the report *Loneliness connects us* states 'loneliness is often a source of shame and stigma in a world which seems to require the performance of happiness and success'.⁴

How do we define loneliness and isolation?

Perhaps it is important here to highlight exactly what is meant by loneliness and isolation: are they the same, do they go hand in hand? Loneliness can be described a subjective feeling when there is a disparity between quantity and quality of social relationships that we have and those we want. In contrast, isolation is defined as the absence of social contact e.g. family, friends and access to services or community involvement. It is tangible and measurable, and can often be alleviated by practical steps: improved transport links, increased use of the internet and localisation of services and resources. It can, however, often lead to loneliness.

It is clear that they are different but related concepts. One can lead to the other and both may occur at the same time. It is possible to experience different levels of isolation and loneliness and these levels change as people's personal circumstances change.

Care Connect and Age UK stress the importance of distinguishing between the two: 'It's important for policy makers, practitioners and researchers to understand the distinction between loneliness and social isolation in order to ensure that solutions are not focussed simply on increasing opportunities for people to meet or speak, but on helping to build, maintain and re-establish meaningful relationships.'⁵

The facts on loneliness

(campaigntoendloneliness.org/the-facts-on-loneliness)

Loneliness is seen by many as one of the largest health concerns we face. Why? Here are the facts.

Health risks

- Loneliness, living alone and poor social connections are as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. (Holt-Lunstad, 2010)

³ local.gov.uk/health-and-wellbeing-rural-areas

⁴ mmu.ac.uk/metmagazine/story/index.php?id=10337

⁵ ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/loneliness-research-and-resources/loneliness-isolation-understanding-the-difference-why-it-matters

- Loneliness is worse for you than obesity. (Holt-Lunstad, 2010)
- Lonely people are more likely to suffer from dementia, heart disease and depression. (Valtorta et al, 2016) (James et al, 2011) (Cacioppo et al, 2006)
- Loneliness is likely to increase your risk of death by 29%. (Holt-Lunstad, 2015)

Loneliness and older people

- The number of over-50s experiencing loneliness is set to reach two million by 2025/6. This compares to around 1.4 million in 2016/7 – a 49% increase in 10 years. (Age UK 2018, *All the Lonely People*)
- There are 1.2 million chronically lonely older people in the UK. (Age UK 2016, *No-one should have no one*)
- Half a million older people go at least five or six days a week without seeing or speaking to anyone at all. (Age UK 2016, *No-one should have no one*)
- Over half (51%) of all people aged 75 and over live alone. (Office for National Statistics 2010. General Lifestyle Survey 2008).
- Two fifths all older people (about 3.9 million) say the television is their main company. (Age, U.K., 2014. Evidence Review: Loneliness in Later Life. London: Age UK)
- There are over 2.2 million people aged 75 and over living alone in Great Britain, an increase of almost a quarter. (24%) over the past 20 years (ONS)

Loneliness and people of all ages

- A study by The Co-op and the British Red Cross reveals over 9 million people in the UK across all adult ages – more than the population of London – are either always or often lonely.
- Research commissioned by Eden Project initiative The Big Lunch found that disconnected communities could be costing the UK economy £32 billion every year.

Loneliness and families

- A survey by Action for Children found that 43% of 17 – 25 year olds who used their service had experienced problems with loneliness, and that of this same group less than half said they felt loved.
- Action for Children have also reported 24% of parents surveyed said they were always or often lonely.

Loneliness and disabled people

- Research by Sense has shown that up to 50% of disabled people will be lonely on any given day.

Rural Isolation and Loneliness toolkit

In 2017, Germinate: The Arthur Rank Centre updated its Rural Isolation and Loneliness toolkit in recognition of the fact that local churches play an important role in the life of local communities and are therefore in a unique position to respond to issues of social isolation and loneliness.

The toolkit has been piloted in four churches in Yorkshire, with each one offering a different service for the local community:

- In Oxenhope, the Methodists and Anglicans have come together to host a weekly Community Café
- Kirbymoorside Parish Church is reaching out to young families and children with regular events
- The Parish of Swaledale with Arkengarthdale is working in partnership with Age UK to run a drop in centre offering advice and resources for locals as well as an opportunity for tea, coffee and a chat
- The Methodist Church at Littlebeck has hosted a memories day inviting people together to share and listen to the lived experience of the local community.

Four Churches, four different projects, each responding to a local need.

Oxenhope Community Café

Oxenhope lies in the heart of Bronte Country and is probably best known for the iconic role of its railway station in *The Railway Children* (1970).

Methodist minister Revd David McAloon and Church of England vicar Rev Cat Thatcher had realised that, compared to nearby Howarth, Oxenhope didn't have many places where folk could come together apart from the local pubs. The Methodist Church sits in the heart of the village opposite the local primary school and so they decided to set up a weekly café, open for a couple of hours in the afternoon, in the hope that it would reach out to the mums and dads waiting at the school gate, as well as locals of all ages. 'We just opened the Church and waited to see what happened!' said David. Seed money from Germinate and a weekly gift of food to the value of £10 from the village Co-op enables them to serve tea, coffee, biscuits, cake and ice creams on a 'donations only if able and wish to' basis.

When I visited the café, Sam Mawer, a volunteer, talked to me about its success. 'Today we had 24 adults and two toddlers attend with ages through to 90-plus. This included two people who had not attended before, one of whom has recently been bereaved. People volunteer to help serve, appear spontaneously with home baking and assist in setting up and tidying away, and as they work together new friendships develop. Looking outward we have been able to donate a small but reasonable sum to three charities – agreed with the guests – which has brought added community spirit to the cafe.'

David and Cat describe the café as more than a place where folk can come and get tea and coffee. 'It's a safe environment where people can come and chat and know that they will find someone they can talk to. There are folk who come regularly and those who drop in once a month,' said Cat. It is also a place that has been beneficial for their ministry: 'People know that we will be here on a Wednesday afternoon and it's provided a space and opportunity for folk to come and talk if they want to.'

Caroline, a volunteer, summed up the feeling of the success of the café: 'We didn't realise we needed it, until we did it!'

Kirbymoorside Parish

In June 2019, the Parish Church at Kirbymoorside ran a Teddy Bear's Picnic in the grounds of the Church. It was a gorgeous sunny day that saw mums, dads, grandparents and children gather in the church to sing and play parachute games and to enjoy food and drink outside with more games and fun for all. The event was organised by Linda, a retired member of the congregation, with a couple of the local mums.

'We realised we didn't have very many young families in church and so last year we ran some events around the deanery. They weren't very well attended, so we asked the young mums what they would like and they suggested a Teddy Bears Picnic! Somebody was heard to say that this is exactly what a village community should be doing. It was generous and hospitable, and the church was offering something without asking for anything back.'

This outreach to families will continue with more events planned throughout the year for children of all ages.

What now, what next?

One of the great successes of the Yorkshire pilot projects is that the churches are beginning to talk about loneliness and isolation. A stigma stays a stigma until people begin to open up the conversation in an honest and vulnerable way. With all the evidence pointing to loneliness becoming a national epidemic, one might ask why the Church nationally is not talking about this. Perhaps it is that we assume we should never be lonely because we have God or Jesus by our side, or that we too are scared of failure in a world which places value on success. And yet the Bible makes it clear that we are called to have a special care for the vulnerable, the widow, the stranger and that in enabling relationships to form and deepen, community thrives.

I asked Cat and David what advice they would give to anyone wanting to start their own project and their response was unambiguous: 'Just do it!'

That sounds like an invitation the Church can't refuse!

Fiona Fidgen

If you would like to explore ways in which your church could engage with the challenge of isolation and loneliness in rural communities, download our Rural Isolation and Loneliness toolkit (germinate.net/rural-isolation-and-loneliness-toolkit) or request a printed copy by emailing debs@germinate.net or phoning 024 7685 3066. Single copies are free; we suggest a donation of £1 per copy plus postage for multiple copies.

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