**Rural isolation and loneliness statistics**

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.

The UK government decided to act after the publication of the [Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness](https://www.jocoxloneliness.org/), a detailed study into the scale and extent of the problem. The Labour MP, who had begun the work, after she personally experienced loneliness following the birth of her first child. The Commission set up in her name after her death, was intended as a legacy of the power of politics to unite, rather than divide, communities.

Its key recommendations included not just the creation of a specified Minister for Loneliness, but also more research and evidence-based work on how to find solutions to a problem that Prime Minister May said was “for far too many people…the sad reality of modern life”.

In 2014 the Arthur Rank Centre produced a report and launched a toolkit for churches to use to help tackle loneliness and isolation within their communities. With the recent swell in awareness and action to tackle the issue Germinate Arthur Rank Centre are currently piloting the toolkit with the intention of a national re-launch. You will receive copy of the toolkit at the end of the session.

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.’

Campaign to end loneliness has pulled together many of the statistics on the subject and I will highlight just a few.

**Loneliness and older 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).

**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.

**Loneliness and disabled people**

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

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. Other studies have found that loneliness can lead to increased risk of high blood pressure, physical disability, cognitive decline, depression and dementia.

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

* Visit their GP more often
* Undergo early entry into residential or nursing care
* Use accident and emergency services independent of chronic illness.

Interactive work

We can all have times when we feel lonely, maybe we have moved to a new house, job or school. Until we make new friends in our new situation it can be easy to feel lonely.

With the person next to you spend about 5 minutes to consider the following. You can choose one or all.

1. How easy is it for you to travel in your area?
2. How many people do you speak to each day?

Where do you find them?

1. Think for a moment, have you been lonely?

What did it feel like, what would have helped you? Only sharing what you are happy to.

Any thoughts – 5 minutes

It is estimated that there are 20,000 churches in UK. 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.

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.

Before we rush to action it’s always good to think what we as churches can bring to this issue, what is it that inspires us to get involved?

Interactive Work

Let’s look at what the bible says: Spend 10 minutes in groups.

**How do we identify people in need?**

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.

It is therefore likely that those experiencing the most extreme levels of isolation or loneliness will not be attending e.g. church services and activities. Therefore, churches wanting to reach the most isolated and vulnerable will need to be proactive.

Involving others

Make use of local knowledge

* 1. Consult members; have they noticed anyone who appears to be lonely or isolated.
  2. Talk to people who run the shop or pub or who organise the community events.
  3. Are there parents of young children or carers for older people at home who may not see another adult during the day
  4. Set up some community events: coffee mornings, barbeques other informal events which bring people together.

**Help from other 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 be worth talking to in order to let them know of your plans?

* Local councillors
* Police Community Support Officers
* GP Surgeries
* Voluntary organisations

**How to make a start – summary, full guide in the toolkit**

Understanding your local area.

It is important to understand the specific issues, needs and resources before making concrete plans.

Carrying out some straight forward research will enable you to gain a fuller understanding of local circumstances.

The resource Equipping for Rural Mission has ideas on surveying your community and is available on our website.

**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.

**Consultation**

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.

**Publicity**

For many people unable to venture out of the house radio and television become their main form or company. So, using local media is a good way of communicating events or start up projects aimed at isolated or lonely people.

**Pilot Project**

Before launching a new initiative, pilot the idea for 6 months to assess the way 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.

ACTIVITY

There are many different groups that can be isolated and lonely. In your groups I would like you think about some projects to help isolated and lonely people in the following groups.

* 1. Children
  2. Young People
  3. Adults
  4. Multigenerational events

5 Minutes and then we will capture some of your ideas

In conclusion that was a whistle stop tour of isolation and loneliness. I hope that it has made you think, and you will consider how we, together can be involved in encouraging churches to embrace the toolkit.

If you have any comments, please either see me after the session or during lunch or put your thoughts on one of the postcards with your contact details.

Thank you for your time.