

In this blog, Martin Dickson, Director of Church Relationships at Safe Families UK, describes the immense damage that loneliness causes to thousands of people and suggests that intentional proximity, hospitality, and reciprocal friendship enable churches to address the problem.

Among the multitude of challenges faced by the 6,000+ children and 14,000+ families Safe Families volunteers have worked alongside in the past decade, there is one prevalent issue that presents time and again. When any other issue is combined with this one, regardless of the family's social and economic demographic, the impact on that family is exponentially increased. It's an issue that the church is already ideally placed to tackle, if we are willing to do so, and as such it presents us with both a moral imperative to act and an incredible opportunity.

The issue is loneliness, and it impacts on the lives of thousands of children, families and households across the UK.

In the past 20 years I have worked with many churches who have longed to make a positive impact on the lives of children and families through their services, programmes and social action projects. While these activities certainly have their place and clearly do address local needs, they seldom appear to result in the life changing impact those churches long to see.

I have also worked with churches who have made a long-term, life changing impact on members of their communities while also experiencing growth and development in their membership. What appears to stand these churches apart is their deep rooted, sustained commitment to build genuine relationships that offer belonging to those inside and outside their church family. These churches have found that their event-based programmes and even the most dynamic of Sunday services simply cannot provide the reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationships that changes people's lives. In response they have intentionally prioritised developing deep relationships 'with' people above their programmes 'for' people.

Both scripture and science can help us understand what is happening in these churches and what we can learn from them. In Genesis 2:18 God declares that "it's not good for man to be alone" and so He provides Adam with a companion. Psalm 68:8 tells us that God "sets the lonely in families" and Psalm 133:1 tells us that it is "good and pleasant... when brothers live together in unity". In Hebrews 10 we read of the power of community to spur each other on and encourage us towards love and good deeds and Galatians 6:2 talks of how, in community, we can help bear each other's burdens. The Trinity is perhaps the perfect example of what it means to thrive in communion and the good news is that through God's Grace and Christ's sacrifice we are all invited to become part of the family!

Turning to science, there is a vast wealth of knowledge and research which shows that loneliness is deeply damaging; it has become increasingly recognised that loneliness has the same negative impact on life and longevity as obesity and long-term tobacco smoking. Loneliness also brings considerably greater risk of mental health issues and accelerates cognitive decline. There is however equally clear evidence that the remedy for loneliness can be remarkably simple.

The direct antithesis of loneliness is belonging, and it's hardly a surprising discovery that in order to truly flourish the human heart needs positive, stable, meaningful and sustainable relationships. Psychologists and sociologists alike suggest that we are born with an innate need and desire for belonging. Belonging brings meaning to life, boosts self-esteem, provides a sense of identity, offers moral support, allows us to feel safe and

helps us make sense of the world around us. From early childhood those who thrive are those who feel like they belong to somewhere and to someone. The children who do not thrive are often those who lack this sense of belonging and where belonging is lost or abused a range of deeply damaging effects can occur in our mental, physical and spiritual health and wellbeing. Loneliness causes people to hide who they are and what they have to offer to the world. Belonging encourages people to bring to light all they were created by God to be and all of the good things they can bring.

Given that belonging does have such a profound impact on life there is value in considering what belonging is and how churches can better offer it. Before endeavouring to answer these questions it's important to acknowledge that true, spiritual, belonging can only be found in Christ. With this truth underlined we can then begin to explore how the church can offer social belonging, encouraged in the knowledge that social belonging has been found, time and again, to be a significant waypoint in the journey towards spiritual belonging within the Body of Christ.

To understand what belonging is we must first consider what it's not and this inevitably leads us back to loneliness. There are many definitions of loneliness but in simple terms it is the feeling of being unseen, unheard and unimportant. When loneliness takes hold it leads to shame, fear and a sense of inadequacy, which in turn reduces a person's desire to be seen, heard and understood; the result is ever deepening loneliness. A lonely person's self-talk can quickly become negative and damaging with destructive patterns in thought and behaviour often following as the person desperately seeks something to fill the 'belonging gap' with anything that might temper the pain their loneliness causes. This leads to further shame and thus the negative cycle begins again.

Loneliness holds no regard for age, ethnicity, employment status or financial wealth, it can affect anyone and often it goes hidden and unseen. There are lonely people in your proximity. The likelihood is that there are lonely people in most churches, perhaps the person who intentionally arrives just a little late and sits quietly alone at the back, perhaps a church leader?

Belonging on the other hand is the feeling of being seen, heard, and understood and it leads to a sense of self-worth and value. Like loneliness, belonging too is cyclic; the more a person has a sense that they belong to somewhere, something or someone, the more they feel they are valued for who they really are. Their 'self-talk' is positive and constructive and thus they are more willing to be seen, heard, and understood. The result is that they feel a greater sense of belonging and they are more likely to thrive and achieve their God given potential. This matters because churches are, by their very nature, already ideally placed to build belonging, namely through intentional proximity, hospitality, and reciprocal friendship.

Intentional proximity describes the wilful decision to draw near to people and to allow others to draw near to us. In drawing near our thoughts, experiences, beliefs and understandings, and those of 'the other', are shaped, challenged and informed. Proximity enables us to see, hear and understand others and so it breaks the cycle of loneliness and begins to build a cycle of belonging. I believe as Christians we need to be

intentionally placing ourselves in situations where we will encounter lonely people. Do bookies have chaplains? They should.

The biblical principal of hospitality (Philoxenia, Gk. Philo – to love; xenia – the stranger) plays its part in the building of belonging. Hospitality extends to the stranger an invitation to experience all the benefits that might normally be reserved for a family member. Hospitality can take all manner of forms and I believe that the church corporately, and church members individually, need to get creative in our hospitality. It runs so much deeper than simply inviting our friends to our homes for a meal, although that’s not a bad place to start.

The final building block of belonging is reciprocal friendship in which all parties feel they have something of value to bring; such friendships afford dignity and welcome self-expression. If we focus our efforts on providing services ‘for’ people and communicating ‘to’ people at the expense of building friendships ‘with’ people, then our efforts are likely to have limited impact. We must commit, perhaps even sacrificially at times, to what social impact specialist Matt Wilson describes as a life with porous edges.

The key message here for the church is that while many of the major issues that children, families and households face require specialist intervention, loneliness, as damaging as it is, can be combated through something we can all provide, the offer of belonging. My challenge therefore, to the church and to our leaders, is to intentionally and proactively place more emphasis than ever on encouraging and enabling the body of Christ to live in proximity, to offer hospitality and friendships and ultimately to work together to build life changing belonging.

Martin Dickson is Director of Church Relationships at Safe Families UK, a volunteer-led organisation that surrounds families facing a crisis with caring, compassionate community. The views expressed are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Archbishops or the Church of England.

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