

The Universe — Comment —



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'Great Get Together' can help tackle problem of loneliness

COMMENT

Ben Bano



Let's organise a Great Get Together. That's the message from the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness for those of us concerned about loneliness and isolation in our society.

Jo Cox was the MP for Batley and Spenningsdale who was tragically murdered as she went about her business as an MP. She cared passionately about the barriers to well-being and in particular, loneliness and isolation.

Before her death she was working on a cross-party basis to find ways of addressing the ever-growing problem of loneliness and isolation.

We all have a need for social connection. And it is so easy to be lonely in a social world.

Our need for connection runs very deep in ourselves and a feeling of isolation can distort our feelings and prevent us seeing the positive aspects of our life. In extreme circumstances it can lead us to feel that 'everyone is against us'.

It's important to remember that being alone and being lonely is not the same thing. In our modern and often hectic lives, we often need time to draw back and reflect.

For those of us who have to balance the demands of work and family the need to draw back and take stock is particularly important.

Our Catholic tradition has a rich heritage of valuing those such as solitaries and others who withdraw from a busy life in a community to draw closer to God. It's when we are unable to manage our emotions when we are alone – or feel alone – when the risk of our feelings of being isolated can spiral.

I might be invited to a party and involved in the conversation around me – or might feel that the company is not for me and develop feelings of isolation.

The problem of loneliness and social isolation is not just confined to those of us who are middle aged and older who can be affected – recent research suggests that many of adolescents are equally afflicted by feelings of loneliness.

Those in vulnerable groups such as refugees and migrants are also likely to experience feelings of loneliness. And the increasing number of us with caring responsibilities are likely to feel lonely and isolated as a result of looking after a loved one.

Those on low incomes or who feel themselves excluded from community life because of problems in making ends meet are also at risk.

As Jo Cox put it, "Young or old, loneliness does not discriminate. It



London Mayor Sadiq Khan (centre) speaks to walkers Mohammad Zaman and Courtney Ireland, during The Great Big Walk at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, London, which is part of the Great Get Together event marking the anniversary of MP Jo Cox's death. Picture by: Victoria Jones/PA Archive/PA Images.

can affect many in our parish community, not least our priest even in the midst of a purposeful life."

There are other statistics that should make us reflect further. A study by the Co-op and British Red Cross found that over 9 million people in the UK consider themselves to be often lonely.

A survey by Action for Children found that 43 per cent of 17-25 year

old people are lonely. As its website explains: 'We believe there is a groundswell of people who reject divisive politics and simply want to bring our communities together and celebrate all that unites us. This is our chance.'

The 'Great Get Together' can take many forms. It can be a party organised by an extended family and

The occasion can be a really effective way of developing a parish community as well as inviting other Churches to take part. At a time when some parishes are being amalgamated as part of diocesan plans for reorganisation, the Great Get Together can be an opportunity to bring people together.

Here are some examples of how the Great Get Together might be used:

- Michelle is the representative of her estate on the parish pastoral group. She is keen to develop a sense of parish identity on the estate where people can meet socially as well pray together.

- She is also keen to make links with members of other Churches on the estate. She uses the theme of the Great Get Together to organise an event in the local community centre.

- Dawn is the organiser of the dementia cafe which is sponsored by her parish. She would like more people in the parish and the local community to be involved with the cafe. The Great Get Together is a good opportunity for the dementia cafe to organise a special coffee morning.

This year's great get together takes place between Friday, 22nd June and Sunday, 24th June.

You will find more information and advice on how to plan an event on www.greatgettogether.org.

Ben Bano is Director of 'Welcome Me as I Am' which promotes mental health and dementia awareness in parish communities.
(www.welcomemeasiam.org.uk)



Support messages laid at a shrine to Jo Cox, Parliament Square, London. Picture by: David Jensen/EMPICS Entertainment.

olds who used their services had experienced loneliness – social media is often a poor substitute for genuine social interaction. A recent survey by the Alzheimer's Society found that a third of people who had acquired dementia were particularly likely to experience feelings of exclusion and social isolation.

It's in this context that the idea of the Great Get Together was developed. It's about tackling loneliness and social isolation. But as impor-

friends, a street party, or a party organised by a parish community, perhaps in collaboration with other local churches and faith communities. Above all it is designed to celebrate all that we have in common.

The practical details are straightforward – the food can be as elaborate or as simple as wanted.

All it needs, as the event website suggests, is a small group of neighbours or friends, a nice spot and good humour.