

It's time we talked about the problem of loneliness

Ben Bano

Let's start a conversation this Christmas – that's the message from the Jo Cox Commission on loneliness for those of us concerned about loneliness and isolation this Christmas.

Even at this time – or perhaps because of – this season of peace and goodwill, many of us will be experiencing feelings of loneliness or even despair, particularly those of us who have no families to be with, for a variety of reasons.

Over the last year the Welcome Me as I Am Project has been working with Parish Communities to be present to those members of our communities who so often feel 'on the margins'.

In our ever changing society which places so much emphasis on the digital world rather than face to face contact, loneliness is an increasingly significant issue. And it 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.

Vulnerable groups 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 result of looking after a loved one. As MP Jo Cox, who was murdered last year, put it so well: "Young or old, loneliness does not discriminate. It can affect many in our parish community, not least our priest even in the midst of a purposeful life."

The Jo Cox Commission on loneliness, set up after the MP's death, provides some statistics which should make us think further. A study by the Co-op and British Red Cross found that over nine 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 olds who used their services had experienced loneliness. A recent survey by the Alzheimers Society found that a third of people who had acquired dementia experienced feelings of loneliness.

The key message from the Jo Cox Commission is that we need to get talking and start a conversation, whether it be with a neighbour or colleague, instead of turning to social media and digital communications.

Hence the promise "I pledge to be #happytochat". It's worth remembering that according to Age UK, 3.9 million people agree that the TV is their main form of company. 200,000 people have not had a conversation with friends or family for a month.

There are a number of helpful initiatives and projects across the Catholic community. The St Joseph's welfare befriending service, which is part of Caritas Salford, provides a vital befriending service through volunteers in the communities of North Manchester.

Working with elderly people, they have found that perhaps the most needy group are the 'oldest old', those aged over 85, who are most likely to suffer from social isolation and exclusion. The St Joseph's service offer a free, needs led service to meet the needs of the individual rather than offering a 'one size fits all' approach. Social care packages increasingly provide a 15 minute 'pop-in' with no time for the chat and reassurance that frail elderly people need so much.

A new initiative – the 'Embrace' Project, also addresses loneliness and isolation in older people. The aims of this project are to encourage and

develop befriending services where there are high levels of deprivation which affect older people. Each local project will recruit and train volunteers to support up to 50 older people – including those who are housebound as well as those who can participate in group activities.

The Embrace project operates in four dioceses – Salford, Birmingham, Leeds, as well as Arundel and Brighton, and it is hoped to develop a toolkit to enable other parish communities to develop the same approach. Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN) is playing a key role in co-ordinating these various activities as well as promoting best practice.

Our spiritual lives can also suffer through loneliness and isolation. In the depths of despair God can feel so far away. It's often hard to pray in these circumstances whether we have a mental illness or are suffering a feeling of loneliness – in the experience of loneliness and depression God sometimes seems to disappear. At times, perhaps following the illness or loss of loved one, we might even feel that God has betrayed us. In our being different we might feel rejected and wonder if God cares about us.

Loneliness and depression are not necessarily the same experience. Whereas depression might make us feel apathetic and lacking in energy, loneliness can bring about a motivation to change. The words of T S Eliot in *Four Quartets* come to mind: 'In the darkness shall be the light, and stillness the dancing'. Whereas depression pulls us back, loneliness can sometimes act as a spur to make us go forward. Social and spiritual support from the parish can be a great comfort for people experiencing loneliness.

Daniel O'Leary, the *Tablet* columnist, has written: "There is a fierce emptiness in God that only our freely given loving presence can fill. In the end, when fully felt and accepted, maybe human loneliness is the divine invitation to the most intense intimacy of all."

At times when we are feeling down, prayer does not always come easily. Prayer can be a source of strength but in the experience of mental distress, it is often hard to concentrate. It's at these times when it's not always easy to pray.

At these moments short prayers which are full of meaning can be helpful, for example:

Do not be afraid, you are Mine

*Do not be afraid, you are mine
Jesus, help me make it through today –
tomorrow will take care of itself.
Lord, you are close to the broken hearted
Jesus, I trust in you*

Daniel O'Leary also writes movingly of the feeling that God is distant in times of loneliness and emotional distress. He writes of Vincent van Gogh's description of loneliness: 'One may have a blazing hearth in one's soul, and yet no one ever sits to come by it.'

Another devotion in which many people have found much comfort in times of distress is the following prayer to Our Lady of Mental Peace.

Prayer to Our Lady of Mental Peace

*O Lady of Mental Peace
Mother of Tranquillity and
Mother of Hope
Look upon me in this time of disquiet
and weakness.
Still my restless spirit.
Teach my searching heart to know that
God's love for me
Is unchanging and that the suffering*



Ben Bano
Director of the Welcome Me as I Am Project is pictured above addressing a group workshop on dementia. Left, Jo Cox, who was shot and stabbed to death in June last year. She was the Labour MP for Batley and Spenningsdale and is pictured here during a parliamentary tug of war event

The story of Margaret and Andrew

Every year Margaret and her husband Andrew would travel to be with their close family to spend Christmas together.

But Andrew suffered a debilitating stroke earlier this year and is confined to his bed or a wheelchair.

Margaret is worried that she will feel lonely this Christmas without her family who mean so much to her and that she will be isolated in the house.

She has talked about her concerns with her parish priest, who has helped

her to see that she can still have a special time with Andrew in spending time together even if they are not with their family.

As her priest explained: "Sometimes you need to see yourself not just as Andrew's caregiver, but as someone able to share his love and give thanks for all the blessings you have had so far."

"And my grandchildren have been in touch to make sure that I know how to use Skype!"

*which He may will for me now
Is to draw me ever closer to Him.
Let thy gentle peace and His – which the
world cannot give –
Be always with me, that I may be
sanctified, and then:
I beseech thee for the grace to bring this
peace to others.
Jesus, my Saviour, I give myself entirely
to Thee through Mary.
Our Lady of Mental Peace, pray for me!*

For those who may need our prayers in our parishes, here is another devotion which could help.

A Parish Prayer for this Christmas

*There are people close to us this
Christmas
Perhaps they are feeling overwhelmed by
loneliness and despair
Perhaps we are overwhelmed by their
feelings. Help us Lord to bring our*

*healing to them
Bond us through what is holy and
sacred.*

*Help us to journey with them in our
parish community*

*Help us to be share their pain and
uncertainties.*

*Let the gift of words flow through us,
dear God.*

*Help them to experience your love and
healing.*

*Let our acquaintance be an encounter
Where the balm of your grace is ever
present.*

*Send forth your Spirit
To inspire and nurture all those
experience loneliness and mental
distress. We ask this in your name's sake.
Amen*

There are also many practical ways in which those of us involved in parish ministry can be of help this Christmas. These are just some ideas – there are many others.

1 Making sure that parishioners are aware of locally organised Christmas and Boxing Day meals of the holiday. Working with other local churches to ensure that information is co-ordinated – for

1 Working with parish organisations such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul to ensure that those who would like a visit over the holiday period can receive one.

1 Organising a Christmas event or party for those who might be lonely or isolated (or in the New Year which can often be an empty time.

1 Looking beyond Christmas to provide a coffee morning or drop-in on a regular basis.

1 Ensuring that refreshments are available after Mass over the holiday period – not everyone wants to return home to their families straight after Mass!

1 Ensuring that prayers of intercession have a special mention for those who might be feeling lonely and isolated.

1 Ensuring that welcomers keep an eye out for those who might be feeling vulnerable.

1 As suggested by the Jo Cox Commission, encourage parishioners to have a 'mince pie moment with someone who is lonely at Christmas'.

There are a number of ways in which we can deal with potential loneliness this Christmas and at other times during the year. There is no one way of dealing with loneliness but some of these ideas might help:

1 Try not to isolate yourself because you think that your friends and family may not want to see you – we can so often become the victims of distorted perceptions. Self fulfilling prophecies are never good for us!

1 Don't let your perceptions spiral into negativity. Make a list of a few people you have not seen for some time and resolve to make contact.

1 Take a positive approach – in contacting people you have not seen for some time be positive rather than reproach someone.

1 Make sure you set up and keep to a routine – and make sure that you continue to take exercise to keep physically fit – staying indoors can worsen our feelings of isolation.

1 Make sure you keep warm – and don't forget to treat yourself every now and then.

1 Keep up links with your local church – and remember that your prayer life can help to sustain you through difficult times. There many internet based prayer resources such as 'Pray as You Go'.

1 Make a list of resolutions for the future which will give you a positive outlook, perhaps helping other people in the same situation. For example Age UK run services which need volunteers to visit or call older people (www.ageuk.org.uk) You can phone 0800 055 6112.

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