

## *How to Experience Community When You Feel All Alone*

Experts say that loneliness is a universal experience. Some people experience loneliness more often than others. For some it is a far more intense experience than for others, but sooner or later everyone is lonely.

It is interesting that a person doesn't have to be alone to be lonely. We can be in a crowd with thousands of people around us and sense our aloneness. We can sit in a well-attended church service or go to a family reunion and still feel desperately disconnected and isolated.

Loneliness is the opposite of connectedness. It is when we feel that there is no one with whom we can meaningfully share our lives. An elderly friend of mine wrote in his annual Christmas letter about how many lifelong friends had died. He wrote that one of the lonely disadvantages of growing old is that there are fewer and fewer people to whom you can ask the question, "Do you remember when...?"

But loneliness isn't simply for those who are old. I remember when my family moved from one house to another. I was five and in first grade. We didn't move very far. Actually the new house was only about a mile from the old house, but it was a different town and a different school district. I experienced loneliness, and for me it was a new and painful experience.

It was six years later, when I was in the seventh grade, that our family moved again. Again it was only a few miles away, but it was into yet another school. No friends; no one to whom I could turn. Loneliness was far harder this next time around.

Probably you've been there and experienced that. Maybe it was through a broken romance or a family conflict or an involuntary job termination or relocation or divorce or death. You know what loneliness is because everybody knows about it.

In modern America we often hide our loneliness under a heavy blanket of busyness. Some busyness is imposed. Some is chosen. We work extra jobs and longer hours. We jam our schedules with activities. We fill the cracks with the car radio or music or the television. There can't be dead space in any part of our lives. We're actually proud of being so busy—it is a modern status symbol.

But busyness can never cure loneliness, for God created us to be social creatures. He meant for us to be connected to others, to have friends, to live in community, to share our lives with others, to need others and to be need by them.

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So how do I experience community and connection when I feel alone? For a Christian, the Bible teaches that community is built around beliefs, ministry, relationships and love. Let's take a quick look at each of these.

There is an amazing paragraph in the New Testament book of Acts. It's the last paragraph of Acts 2. It's a report on the community of the first church in history. It was in Jerusalem. And the report reads like this:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were be-

ing saved.

Please don't get hung up on what's unimportant in this report. While it's true that they shared all their possessions in common, this is not a call to Christian communalism. The point here is that they were so closely connected and became such strong friends that they behaved like a family even though they were not related by blood.

The primary building block for that kind of close community was that "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." In other words, the close Christian community they experienced was because they held common beliefs.

We often hear people say, "It doesn't really matter what you believe"; or, "Don't let beliefs get in the way of friendship"; or, "Doctrine isn't what's important; it's love that is most important."

I guess it depends on what level of beliefs we are talking about. It is certainly possible to have very close friendships and experience truly connected community without agreeing on every detail of religious faith. However, it is unrealistic to think that true Christian community can exist and flourish without essential agreement on key matters of belief.

'The apostles' teaching' included basic doctrine about God, Jesus Christ, sin, salvation and Christian lifestyle. Those who shared those beliefs held a common ground together that saw them through good times and bad times. Those who did not share the apostles' teaching were not part of the community.

How is this translated into our practical experience? Look for Christian friends and a church where the beliefs are the same as yours or where you can change your beliefs to be the same as theirs.

But there's a flaw to that. The flaw is that if you have wrong beliefs and then you find other people who share those same wrong beliefs, they reinforce that error. So far better advice would be to turn to God and the Bible to be sure your beliefs are the right beliefs; then seek a context of friends and community where the right beliefs are taught and reinforced.

There is a helpful old saying that says we should have "unity in essentials, liberty in doubtful things

and charity in all things." What we are talking about here is essentials. Lasting friendships and true community cannot be built on just charity and liberty. There needs to be the unity of basic biblical beliefs.

The short version of all this advice is to believe the Bible and then to connect with other people who believe the Bible as well.

The second building block for Christian community also comes out of this last paragraph of Acts 2 and it is the building block of ministry. The people in the Jerusalem church didn't just hang out together, they did things together for God and for one another. It was their service together that helped them know each other and build strong and lasting relationships.

For many years I have watched people who have tried to connect to churches. For some it seems to work fairly well and for other people it just never seems to happen. Without a doubt, the people who make the most friends, build the strongest relationships and become most solidly connected are those who *do* things together. They teach Sunday School, build a Habitat for Humanity house, work on an overseas missions project, tutor children, help the poor, sing in the choir, serve on a committee or otherwise get involved in ministry.

Let me make a comparison to soldiers in war. Studies have been done on why a soldier in battle would be willing to die for others in his unit. Contrary to first guesses, it is not because of patriotism or loyalty to a commanding officer. It is because of friendship with other soldiers in their unit. When soldiers have trained together, traveled together, worked together and fought together, they have forged a connection that triggers self-sacrifice in the heat of the battle.

The same goes for Christians in churches. Strong connections take more than attending worship services, meeting new people or simply socializing. The kind of connection that chases loneliness away is usually built on ministry together - - doing something together!

This month Wooddale Church has three different groups of people who are on overseas projects - one in Guatemala, one in Romania and a third in Russia. These people have taken vacation time, used

their own money, traveled long distances and are living under less than the best conditions. In many cases they never knew each other before their ministry team was formed. I can almost guarantee you that there will not be a lonely person in the groups and that many lifelong friendships will be formed.

Ministry, serving others, self-sacrifice - - - these are all supernaturally powerful means to experience community when you feel like you're all alone. We all know John Kennedy's famous line from his Inaugural Address: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." That's the way Christian community works. The people who get the most are the people who serve the most. The people who are least lonely are those who don't ask what they can get but what they can give.

If this sounds like a church recruitment speech, it isn't. I'm not trying to recruit anyone for anything in particular. The reality is that the biblical model and the modern reality is that Christian community is built around ministry.

Christian community is built around beliefs, ministry and - - - relationships. There are two sides to how this works . . . one side is similarities, the other side is differences.

Acts 6 tells the story of the first crisis in the first church. The church in Jerusalem had two cultural groups within it. The one group was Greek in background, language and culture. The other was Hebrew in background, language and culture. The Grecian people complained that they weren't being treated fairly in the church. So the leaders appointed a group to give them the special care they needed, but they made sure that the whole committee of helpers all had Greek names. It worked great and the Christian community was strengthened.

The Bible and the church recognized that many friendships are built around similarity of relationships. Greek background people enjoy being with Greek background people. Hebrew background people enjoy being with Hebrew background people.

Many churches today have programs to connect people by similarity. There may be men's groups for men and women's groups for women, groups for singles and groups for married people, groups for young people and groups for older people. Some groups are even divided by zip codes. This is a good and positive way to make friends and lasting connections. Hook up with others who are like you - - - as long as the building blocks of relationships are cemented to the building blocks of beliefs and ministry.

But the Christian community cannot be limited to similarities. In I Corinthians 12:12-27 there's a description of the body as being diverse. It includes all kinds of different people. Again the example is used between Hebrews and Greeks, but also between slaves and those who are free, saying that in Jesus Christ they can find a common connection that otherwise never would have occurred. These are people that, under most circumstances, would never be friends, would never be in a social gathering together, would never do anything together. It is a powerful truth that Christians can connect in community in ways that would otherwise be impossible. It's also the powerful truth that there's a

place for everybody. No one is unimportant; no one is unnecessary. There's no one who does not fit in.

So what

does this mean for those who are lonely and want to connect to the Christian community? It means look for people who are like you, but it also means that you belong with all kinds of people who aren't like you. Together we make up the church of Jesus Christ.

There's a fourth building block in the Christian community and that is the building block of love. Take a look at Hebrews 13:1-3. It tells us:

Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow pris-

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oners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

Christian love is love that seeks the best for the other person. That includes loving people who are already your friends, loving strangers and loving those who are distant and suffering. Love puts me in the other person's place - - - even if that other person's place is prison.

The Minneapolis Star Tribune told a very pointed story about a 32-year old Macalaster College professor who converted from being a devout, conservative Christian to becoming an atheist. Part of the story was from his teenage years when he seriously sought to live for God and was pressured by the drug culture of his city school. So he enrolled in a private Christian school even though he had to get up at 5 a.m. and take multiple busses in order to get there. He said that there were no drugs at the new school, but for the first time in his life people repeatedly called him by a hateful racial slur.

Reading that story broke my heart. To think that the place called 'Christian' was the place of such unloving behavior. All I can say is that it should never have been that way. It isn't usually that way. God doesn't want it that way.

If you are a Christian, love the lonely. Reach out and demonstrate to them what the love of Jesus Christ looks like and feels like. And if you are lonely and have reached out to Christians for love and friendship and connection, but instead you have been hated and hurt and pushed away - - - don't give up. Keep trying and you will find Christians who are truly like Jesus Christ.

Now, can all of this theory be translated into simple advice for those of us who are lonely and want to experience Christian community? Yes, it can. First of all, believe in Jesus Christ and the Bible's teaching and look for Christians who share your beliefs. Second, seek ways to serve others rather than primarily seeking to be served. Number three, look for people who are like you, but also delight in discovering that Christians fit together with those who are different. And number four, look to love others and look to be loved by others.

If you are lonely, take the initiative. Don't give up easily. Go to church. Join a small group. Vol-

unteer. Participate. Ask God for his help and direction. Ask God for friends.

The obituary page of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram ran a 27-inch paid notice with a photograph. It is the largest paid obituary I have ever seen. It tells the story of the lives and deaths of a Fort Worth physician and his wife, Lynn and Louise Perkins. They were married for 43 years and lived successful and prosperous lives. In 1988 Dr. Perkins was diagnosed and treated for prostate cancer. He continued his practice until 1994 when he began teaching full time. There are many details to the story, but there is one thing that makes it unusual. Both the husband and wife died on the same day in their southwest Fort Worth home. He died of prostate cancer; she died of suicide. Apparently she thought that no life was better than a lonely life.

In separate conversations I asked two Christian women what they thought of this story. Both said exactly the same thing. There was no mention of their church.

Is there a connection? Perhaps there is. Perhaps if she belonged to a Christian community with shared beliefs and involvement in ministry with others and relationships and love, she might have chosen life instead of death.

The very best friend that anyone can have is Jesus Christ. And the best way to live without loneliness is to be connected to a community of Christians who are also the friends of Jesus.

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