

Feeling Alone in a Crowded Congregation

Epidemic of Loneliness

Early in my first pastoral position, I was invited to dinner by a family in our church. They talked at length about their marriage and children but said nothing of church community and friendship. I asked a question I had never asked in that context before: “Do you have any friends?”

“Ah,” the husband said, looking at his wife. “No, we don’t really have any friends.” They explained the schedule of two working adults with two children in private schools with additional sports involvement. They said they had friends when they met each other, but in the two decades of marriage that followed, they hadn’t maintained a single friendship. They seemed to shrug this off and smile. I can remember my surprise more than twelve years later: How could Christians be friendless? And just how common is this?

As I’ve continued in my pastoral ministry, I’ve met and ministered among countless people like this. They don’t feel lonely, but they do feel busy, overwhelmed, and fragmented. They want friends but have embraced a lifestyle that makes friendship and community almost impossible. They go to church, attend a small group, pray, and read their Bibles. But their understanding of relationships and community has been far more conditioned by the radical individualism of our society than by the biblical foundation. As a result, deep relationships—beyond marriage and family—seem like an optional add-on to life.

Epidemic of the Twenty-First Century

Americans are lonelier than ever. Even with affordable phone calls and free email, we are talking to one another less. Despite the high prevalence of car ownership and the low cost of cross-country air travel, we are spending less time with our families.

Research demonstrates that loneliness causes “an insidious type of stress” that leads to chronic inflammation and an increased risk of heart disease, arthritis, and diabetes. In fact, loneliness has the same effect on mortality as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. Loneliness may be the epidemic of contemporary Western culture. Most of our other epidemics—from heart disease to pornography use—can trace their roots back to a lonely heart.

Social scientists have been aware of these trends for years. In 2001, Harvard researcher Robert Putnam published an influential book, *Bowling Alone*. He demonstrated that American social trends can be summarized with a simple illustration: While bowling leagues are in decline, more people are bowling than ever. Why? People are bowling alone. In the past two decades, this individualistic trend has not only continued; it’s been supercharged. In our new generation of social media, online shopping, and remote work, people aren’t just bowling alone. We’re scrolling alone.

And this is true not merely of nonreligious people. Church members, too, are increasingly isolated from their neighbors and from fellow believers.

How did we get to this point?

Vanishing Relationships

Loneliness is the unsurprising symptom of an individualistic society. Sociologist Marc Dunkelman has made the case that unexpected encounters in our local communities are key to a sense of belonging. In public spaces like grocery stores, coffee shops, and playgrounds, neighbors connect through healthy discussion face-to-face. But these days, these localized conversations have been replaced by frantic tapping on small glowing screens separated by hundreds of miles. Dunkelman suggests this shift reflects the larger problem of vanishing American community.

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Adults today tend to prize different kinds of connections than their grandparents: more of our time and attention today is spent on more intimate contacts and the most casual acquaintances. We've abandoned the relationships in between . . . "middle-ring" ties.

Dunkelman's research shows that Americans' closest relationships, the "inner-ring" connections of marriage, children, and parents, have not significantly changed over the past half century. And we still have many "outer-ring" ties, those neighbors, coworkers, and drive-thru employees with whom we interact only in small, nonmeaningful pieces. But the frequency and quality of these middling relationships—with friends, church members, close neighbors, coworkers, and fellow students—have been drastically reduced. Without these middle-ring ties, our social fabric begins to disintegrate. When front porches are replaced by back decks, it limits our interactions with our neighbors. When college students choose virtual classrooms, it means far less community at a formative stage of life. When church members watch services from home, it hinders spiritual growth and diminishes the potential for the church to cultivate meaningful community.

Our union with Christ means profound, supernatural unity with one another, yet everything in our culture challenges this fellowship.

We are social beings, and human connection is essential for our brain functioning, physical health, and emotional well-being. We are hardwired to connect, and yet modern American society has severely diminished the frequency of our interactions and the quality of our relationships.

And Then, COVID Happened

Prior to COVID-19, the epidemic of loneliness was in full swing. *And then we were all locked in our homes indefinitely.*

During the pandemic year, the average American's daily time spent with people outside his or her household dropped by a full hour. Over eight months, this amounts to about 244 fewer hours spent in relationships in 2020 versus 2019.

The pandemic saw increases in our texting, phone calls, video conferencing, TV streaming, computer use, and video game use. Not including work and school time, the average American increased daily screen time by about sixty minutes. When we put these two trends together, we discover this: in 2020, the average American traded three hundred hours of in-person time with friends, church members, and neighbors for three hundred hours of social media, TV, and Internet reading.

But it's not just that in-person relationships have been replaced with screen time. The types of relationships we maintain have radically changed as well.

Fewer and More Divisive Relationships

Without the common grace of good friends, we can get lost in a web of so-called friendships (what David French calls "factional friendships") that are based on social-political alignment and little else. Unless we have a healthy network of family, friends, and church—based on something more significant than identical social and political views—then these faction friendships can damage individuals, churches, and society. And without a proper view of God's purposes for our lives together, we'll see church as just another optional social gathering.

Further, social media has sorted us into tiny homogenous cliques. Though it began around the promise of increased connection in a transient culture, social media has instead driven us to connect with people *like us*—and likely an exaggerated

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form of ourselves. As a result, social media has become the ideal platform for rewarding extreme views and muting moderate ones. It's not a great place to present our views, receive alternative views, and engage in civil discourse. Instead, it's just one more way to identify yourself with certain groups (and *not others*) and establish a personal brand. Our experience over the last few years suggests a distinction: there's *passive loneliness* (lacking friends and community) and *divisive loneliness* (rejecting friends and community unless they are in total agreement with one's social, political, and religious views). Said another way, there can be a dark side to belonging.

Unless we can restore our opportunities for shared, generous conversation between two very different people, we'll have little hope for our shared social life seeing any improvement. Just think of the importance for the local church. Our union with Christ means profound, supernatural unity with one another, yet everything in our culture challenges this fellowship.

Why It's So Hard to Have Friends at Church

These shifts even affect us in the church. Our unity in Christ—so wonderfully important across the New Testament—is being threatened by a number of social forces. Reaching depth in our relationships is harder than ever. Cultivating a thriving community in each church has never been more difficult.

Every now and then, I'll be talking with a newer member at Trinity Community Church, Columbia, Missouri, and he or she will express disappointment that after several months he or she has only a few friendships. "That's a great start," I respond. "It will take a while!"

First, we are isolated from the relationships we most need; we have fewer social interactions and less relational connection than previous generations of believers. Second, we are lonelier than we realize; we likely don't appreciate how much of our spiritual and emotional well-being has been disrupted by loneliness. Third, we feel busy, overwhelmed, and disconnected; we desperately need relationships but may feel too busy to take the time to form real relationships with others in the church. Fourth, it's harder than it should be to form meaningful friendships and middle-ring relationships; many of our peers at church are struggling with a misunderstood loneliness as well.

If I'm talking to a leader, I will add a fifth: each church is full of lonely people, and we need to be far more intentional about how we cultivate community. If you are finding it hard to make friends, you're not crazy. Friendship is challenging in a society like this—even in the church. But the answer is not to lower your expectations and prepare for loneliness. The answer is to confront the challenge directly, reject the isolation and division of our times, and embrace real, meaningful, face-to-face relationships with imperfect people. By God's grace and intentional steps, we can do this.