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The loneliness of the digitally connected

By Patrick Parkinson

Summary
Loneliness used to be identified as an issue particularly for the very elderly who have lost partners and friends through death; but now the loneliest age group in our community is the under-30s. These are the digital natives who typically have a large number of connections with people through social media. This paper explores the problem of loneliness in western societies, particularly among young people, and the reasons why digital connections with others are insufficient to satisfy the human need for relationships. Finally, it suggests some of the implications for the work of churches in pastoral care and outreach.

The paradox of loneliness in a digital age

Ours is perhaps the most socially connected generation in history. We live in an age when people can communicate almost instantaneously by email and messaging programs, talk with one another over video, and be in contact with a large number of others through social media. We have the possibility of maintaining friendships not only in our locality, community groups and workplaces, but all over the world.

The endless possibilities for social connection have many benefits. However, the paradox is that loneliness is an increasingly serious problem in western societies, and especially amongst the generation that is most digitally connected. While others, such as divorced or separated men, are also highly vulnerable to loneliness, young people are actually more lonely – as a group – than the very elderly.

What then can the Church do better or differently, in meeting this growing social need, both within our congregations and beyond?

The problem of loneliness

Loneliness can be measured by the gulf between the degree of social interaction a person desires and the amount that they experience. We can be lonely in the midst of a crowd, or we can be alone but not feel lonely.

People may be lonely for relatively brief periods of their lives, particularly when moving to a new location for work or study. Such seasons of social isolation are part of life in a geographically mobile society. We can gain resilience from such experiences, as we do from illness and other adversities. However, prolonged loneliness is likely to have profound impacts, not only on people's mental health, but their physical health as well. It has been estimated that lack of social connection affects the odds of mortality by at least 50 per cent, exceeding other known risk factors such as obesity, physical inactivity, or diabetes.[1] Because those with chronic health problems may also experience greater levels of social isolation as a consequence, the direction of causation is not always easy to discern. Nonetheless, recent research

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1 J. Holt-Lunstad, T. Smith & J. Layton, 'Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review'. *PLoS Med* 7, e1000316 (2010).

has demonstrated several ways in which loneliness has physiological impacts.[2]

The extent of loneliness

One reason for loneliness across the community is that so many people live alone. In 2021, 30 per cent of households were single occupancy in the UK.[3] Going back to the 19th century, living alone was very unusual. No more than about 5–6 per cent of homes were single occupancy across the country, and some communities had no-one who lived alone.[4]

The extent of social isolation today is indicated by a recent Australian study involving a national sample of 1,678 adults.[5] Nearly 25 per cent of respondents reported that they rarely or never were able to find companionship when they wanted it, while 21 per cent said they rarely or never felt close to people. Respondents in this survey were also asked specific questions about the amount of contact with others they had had in the last month, and whether they had anyone to talk to about private matters or from whom to get help. The researchers found that around 8 per cent had not had contact with relatives in the last month and a similar percentage had not had contact with friends. Nearly half said that they could not look to neighbours as a source of help.

Connection with Family, Friends and Neighbours, Australia 2018

	Did not have contact at least once in last month	Could not discuss private matters	Not a source of help
Family	7.6%	17.1%	12.5%
Friends	8.1%	11.8%	12.3%
Neighbours	34.1%	69.8%	46.7%

Source: Australian Loneliness Report (2018)[6]

Death, dementia and divorce

The extent of loneliness is affected by age and circumstances. Those over about 75 years of age are particularly prone to loneliness, as people lose a partner through death, or experience more gradual loss if a partner declines with dementia. That experience of loss is likely to be exacerbated as friends also pass away.[7]

Loneliness is also a recognised problem among the divorced and separated. It is a particularly devastating issue for many men. One Australian study found that separated men were over thirteen times more likely than married men to experience serious loneliness. For separated women there was also a greater degree of loneliness than married women, but the difference was not nearly as great.[8]

One explanation for this could be how couples manage their social lives. A single man in his twenties is likely to have friends who are at a similar life stage; but when he marries or forms a cohabiting partnership, and particularly when children come along, his relationship network within the local community is likely to change. Often it is mediated through his partner's relationships – in playgroups, the school community and in relationship with neighbours. While he and his partner have joint relationships with other couples at a similar life stage, typically those relationships were first formed between the women – and it is those bonds that are the strongest. The separation of a couple puts their friends in an awkward position where loyalty conflicts are hard to avoid. If the marriage breaks down, the man may find himself quite isolated.

Loneliness amongst the under-30s

That people might be lonely if they have lost a partner through death or divorce is only to be expected. What is more surprising is the consistent finding in many countries that young people aged 18–24 are the loneliest age group of all, and that the problem of loneliness in adolescents and young adults is increasing year by year.

This does not seem to be an issue only for individualistic societies. It is a problem throughout the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). In a study of loneliness among one million 15–16 year olds in the OECD, loneliness at school increased between 2012 and 2018 in 36 out of 37 countries (the one exception being South Korea). Nearly twice as many adolescents reported high levels of loneliness in 2018 as they did in 2012.[9] The increase in loneliness was particularly high in girls.

Loneliness amongst young adults

Loneliness is also a growing problem amongst the 18–34 age group. A recent British survey of university students found that a quarter of students said that they do not have any friends at university. More than a third did not participate in extracurricular activities.[10] In an Australian study of nearly 1,500 adolescents and young adults, more than one-in-three (37 per cent) young adults aged 18–25 indicated a problematic level of loneliness.[11]

An indicator of how greatly loneliness has increased in a short period comes from a study by UK Onward. There was a threefold rise in the proportion of 18–34s who said that they had only one close friend, or none at all, between 2011 and

2 Y. Yang et al, 'Social Relationships and Physiological Determinants of Longevity Across the Human Life Span', (2016) 113 *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 578.

3 <www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/datasets/familiesandhouseholdsfamiliesandhouseholds>, Table 5. Data from Labour Force Survey.

4 K. Snell, 'The Rise of Living Alone and Loneliness in History', (2017) 42(1) *Social History* 2.

5 Australian Psychological Society and Swinburne University of Technology, *Australian Loneliness Report* (2018): <https://apo.org.au/node/202286>.

6 Ibid, data drawn from various tables.

7 Office of National Statistics, Loneliness – *What characteristics and circumstances are associated with feeling lonely?* (2018). Data accompanying Figure 3, online. <www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/

8 A. Franklin & B. Tranter, *Loneliness in Australia*. Paper no. 13. University of Tasmania (2008).

9 J. Twenge et al, 'Worldwide Increases in Adolescent Loneliness', (2021) *Journal of Adolescence*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2021.06.006>.

10 <www.timeshighereducation.com/news/four-five-uk-students-affected-mental-health-issues>.

11 M. Lim, R. Eres & C. Peck, *The Young Australian Loneliness Survey: Understanding Loneliness in Adolescence and Young Adulthood*. (Swinburne University, 2019.)

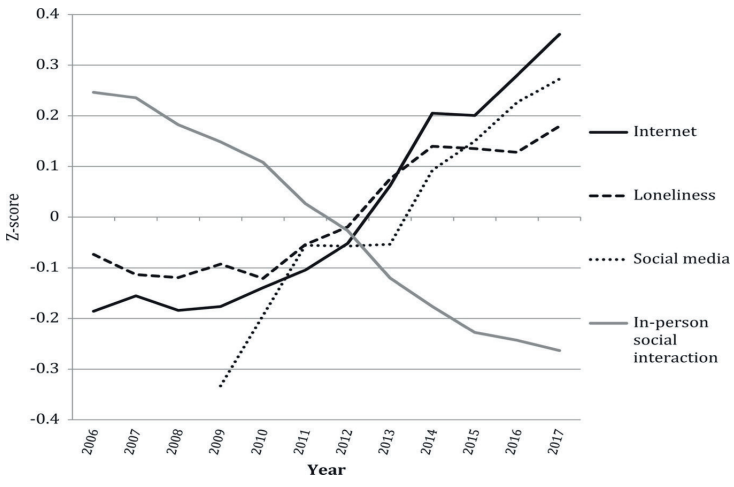
2021. Now 21 per cent of this age group say they have no more than one friend.[12] The Community Life Survey, which is a nationally representative survey of adults aged 16 years and over in England, found a similar pattern of loneliness amongst younger age groups.[13]

The limitations of digital connection

Few could doubt the enormous benefits of social media in allowing us to keep in touch with so many people around the world who are, or have been, part of our social circle. However, it seems evident that interconnectedness through digital means has not ameliorated the problem of loneliness. Indeed, it may have increased it.American research has shown that limiting social media use to about 30 minutes per day decreases depression and loneliness amongst university students.[14] High use of electronic communication and screens is correlated more generally with decreases in self-esteem, life satisfaction and happiness for young people.[15]

This is for at least four reasons. First, there has been a trade-off between digital connections and actually getting together with friends. Australian data indicate that young women aged 14–24 spend an average of nearly two hours a day on social media, and young men in the same age group spend more than one hour per day.[16] US data indicate that between 2006 and 2017 there was a sharp drop in the proportion of 15–16 year olds who said that they got together regularly with friends, either at home or going out to parties, movies, shopping malls or dating. During the same period, internet and social media use had increased greatly.The decline in face-to-face contact was roughly equally matched with increased use of the internet and social media:

US 15–16 year olds, 2006–2017



Source: Twenge et al, 2019[17]

Second, social media tends to promote quantity of relationships over quality. Vaughan Roberts observes that there is a difference between friending – relationships which are conducted almost exclusively in cyberspace – and friendship.[18] In friending, he notes, more is always better. In friendships, it is quality that matters.

Third, digital communication involves social distance.[19] Friendships develop in at least some of the ways that relationships of love develop. Gary Chapman identified five love languages that are means by which different people give and receive love. These are loving words, kind actions, quality time, thoughtful presents and physical affection.[20] Relationships with children and teenagers likewise benefit from love expressed in these different ways.[21] The love languages can have their application to friendships as well. Few of them are well-enabled by digital communication. Speaking the love languages in friendship will necessarily involve engaging with others in personal interactions.

Fourth, social media can cause young people to feel isolated whether or not they have a lot of engagement with it. If they are not high social media users then they may feel cut off from communication with their peer group. Conversely, when they are on social media they may observe what their friends are doing without them, and this may increase feelings of social isolation.

Pastoral implications

The loneliness of so many people, notwithstanding their connectedness in cyberspace, provides both a pastoral challenge in caring for those within our congregations, and an opportunity for connection with others outside of the church

12 W. Tanner, F. Krasniqi & J. Blagden, The Age of Alienation (UK Onward, 2021), p.15.
13 ONS, above n 7.
14 M. Hunt et al, 'No More FOMO: Limiting Social Media Decreases Loneliness and Depression', (2018) *Journal of Social & Clinical Psychology* 37, 751.
15 J. Twenge et al, 'Decreases in Psychological Well-being among American Adolescents after 2012 and Links to Screen Time during the Rise of Smartphone Technology', (2018) *Emotion* 18, 765.
16 Roy Morgan Research (2018) at <www.roymorgan.com/findings/young-women-the-queens-of-social-media-in-australia>.
17 J. Twenge, B. Spitzberg & W. Campbell, 'Less In-person Social Interaction with Peers among US Adolescents in the 21st Century and Links to Loneliness', (2019) *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 36, 1892.
18 Vaughan Roberts, *True Friendship* (10Publishing, 2013) p.32.
19 Michael Schluter and David Lee have drawn attention to the variety of different facets of what they call 'relational proximity'. One of them is directness. We relate differently to those we see face to face compared with those we talk to on the phone or through an intermediary: *The R Factor* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), pp.72–75.
20 Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages* (Northfield Publishing, 1995).
21 Gary Chapman & Ross Campbell, *The Five Love Languages of Children* (Northfield Publishing, 1997); Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages of Teenagers* (Northfield Publishing, 2000).

community. Particular attention needs to be paid to the needs of those who are single. People may be lonely in marriages, of course, but the busyness of family life mitigates against having much time for unhappy solitude.

It is not good for people to be alone

Relationship is at the heart of the Trinity, and as humans are made in the image of God, so we are made for relationship with others. The Genesis creation story tells us that it is not good for a man to be alone (Genesis 2:18), and so God created Eve to be with him. The human need for companionship, as well as reproduction, is central to the creation account of why God made us male and female.

Christians have long placed a great value on marriage as the foundation for family life and the raising of children. However, as Paul so strongly emphasised, it is not for everyone. Singleness is a Christian calling also. 'I wish that all of you were as I am', he wrote, referring to his single status, 'But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.' (1 Corinthians 7:7). Jesus, of course, never married.

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Christian community

In the new covenant, God's answer to loneliness is for the Church to be a caring and cohesive Christian community of people. Jesus told his disciples at the Last Supper (John 13:34–35): 'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'

In an age of loneliness and alienation, that manifest love may well be very powerful in helping people come to a recognition of their need for God and the relevance of Christianity for their lives.

Peter identified the transformation that being in Christ brings: 'Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God' (1 Peter 2:10). Paul, in 1 Timothy 5:1–2, uses the language of biological connection to describe how we should relate to one another in God's family. 'Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.' He went on to give Timothy instructions on the care of widows.

Paul's letters to the various churches provide at least some indication of how mixed the community of these churches was. Paul sent greetings to whole households, to couples such as Priscilla and Aquila, and to individuals (see e.g. Romans 16). Some of these individuals might have been married to unbelieving partners, while others were single, separated, divorced or widowed (1 Corinthians 7).

Churches were to be communities of caring for everyone. This was illustrated in practical, financial ways in Acts 4:32–35 and 6:1–6. Elsewhere, Paul's teaching emphasised giving attention to people's emotional needs and vulnerabilities as well as their physical needs. 'Encourage the disheartened', he wrote, 'help the weak, be patient with everyone' (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

Given current societal needs and circumstances, do pastors need to consider changes in how churches operate that will better contribute to a sense of community in which everyone, whatever their relationship status and life circumstances, finds a place?

Family-centred churches

While there is no doubt some variation across the churches in the English-speaking world, there is a recognisable pattern for local church organisation to be based substantially around nuclear families. This is evident in the groups that local churches have typically sought to provide (to the extent needed). Commonly, larger churches offer a crèche and groups for children and teenagers on Sundays. They also run a youth group as part of their mid-week programme. They may also have mid-week playgroups for pre-schoolers and social groups for the elderly. Community, in church life, has therefore been structured, to a very significant extent, around families and children, although churches that have mid-week Bible study or fellowship groups cater for a broader cross-section of the church community.

To what extent do these structures meet the needs of today's congregations and those to whom churches reach out? In many churches, it may be a reasonable assumption that as much as half of the adult congregation is not currently married or in an ongoing dating relationship. Furthermore, many people who might be encouraged to come to church may also not be married or in an intimate partnership. Across the population, fewer people are marrying or forming intimate partnerships than a few decades ago. In England and Wales, the marriage rate per 1,000 unmarried men and women dropped by 50 per cent between 1972 and 2019. The 2019 marriage rate was the lowest on record since data was first collected in 1862.[22]

Cohabiting relationships have not filled the void. Yes, more people are living together outside of marriage than a few decades ago;[23] but a substantially smaller proportion of the population is now living with any married or cohabiting partner than was the case in previous generations. US census data is illustrative. In 1990, 29 per cent of adults aged 25 to 54 were neither married nor living with a partner. By 2019, it was 38 per cent.[24] People are also marrying later. In 2019, the median age at first marriage in England and Wales was 31.9 for men and 30.4 for women.[25]

22 Office of National Statistics, *Marriages in England and Wales: 2019*, at <ons.gov.uk>. 2019 is the last year for which data is available.

23 House of Commons Briefing Paper (Catherine Fairbairn, ed), *'Common Law Marriage and Cohabitation*, (May 2021) p. 7, at <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN03372/SN03372.pdf>.

24 R. Fry & K. Parker, *A Rising Share of US Adults are Living Without a Spouse or Partner* (Pew Research Center, 5 October 2021).

25 Data from ONS, above n 22.

The Christian community is not unaffected by broader societal trends. One question is whether the single, separated and divorced may feel at the margins of a church congregation that seems to be oriented around children and families, particularly if they sense an expectation that this is the normal pathway of Christian living. Singleness needs to be recognised as a calling that God may place on our lives for long periods of time, if not indefinitely. It should not be marginalised in our teaching on discipleship, or our church activities.

Healthy togetherness

The question arises then, how to promote healthy togetherness, in a way that helps single, separated and divorced people, and those who are relatively new to an area, to feel included.

Building healthy togetherness may involve paying special attention to the needs of those who live alone, encouraging invitations to other people's homes and helping them to feel welcome within family group settings. Psalm 68:6 says that 'God sets the lonely in families'. The writer to the Hebrews reminded his readers not to forget to show hospitality even to strangers (Hebrews 13:2).

Developing a culture of hospitality will take a conscious effort, particularly given the very busy lives that so many career-focused people lead. This is one way that those with partners and children can reach out to those who are, for whatever reason, without a partner.

Ministry to young adults

There may also be a need to rethink ministry to young adults, given the evidence of loneliness as a serious problem in the 18–30 age group. Groups for young people usually cater for the under-18s, the implicit assumption being that after finishing school, and perhaps spending a few socially active years at university, young adults will embark upon the next stage of their lives – that of family formation. Once such an assumption was probably valid. Young people might expect to enter into marriages in their early to mid-20s, and might live in the family home until that time; but now there is, for a great many at least, a lonely decade after leaving school, during which they may or may not find a long-term intimate relationship.

A challenge in addressing loneliness in young people is social anxiety. Studies of the mental health issues of those under 25 indicate very high levels of anxiety, especially for young women.[26] The gregarious and socially confident are willing and able to join groups, even groups of strangers. But many others may find that too difficult, preferring the safety of being able to ponder their response in a text message, rather than be exposed to the immediacy of face-to-face and real-time communication.

It seems unlikely that the problem of loneliness, particularly among young people, can be addressed without tackling the social limitations of digital communication.

Helping those young people who are socially anxious to form new relationships with others in their age group may require thought to be given to the scaffolding that helps them to overcome social anxiety. How can they be supported to take the risk of participating in groups where they do not know others well? That may be achieved by structuring activities in which young adults can do things together in ways which allow for communication to happen incidentally. This could include opportunities for volunteering, or social activities built around common interests that may appeal to a number of more introverted people within this age group.

It seems unlikely that the problem of loneliness, particularly among young people, can be addressed without tackling the social limitations of digital communication. We are not present in community if our heads are in our screens. Pastors may need to encourage adolescents and young adults who are struggling with loneliness to replace some of the time spent messaging a range of friends and acquaintances digitally with time spent meeting a small number of people in person, building friendships.

The importance of friendship

There have long been extensive resources available to the Christian community teaching about marriage and parenting. There are fewer resources about what it means for Christians to be friends. The rich teaching from Scripture about friendship indicates that true friends are likely to

26 M. Asher, A. Asnaani & I. Aderka, 'Gender Differences in Social Anxiety Disorder: A Review', (2017) *Clinical Psychology Review* 56, 1.

be few in number, but rich in quality; for there are only so many people who can know us well, and with whom we can be vulnerable. Conversely, there are only so many people to whom we can offer such a level of friendship.

Developing such friendships takes time. Jesus, in particular, invested a large amount of time in building relationships with a relatively small number of people. It was after some three years on the road together, sharing experiences, that Jesus spoke of his twelve disciples as his 'friends' (John 15:15). However, even amongst these, there were just a few with whom he was especially close. John was described as the disciple whom Jesus loved (John 13:23). Jesus chose only Peter, James and John to share the mountain-top experience of the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2–13). Paul too, seems to have had just a small number of people with whom he was particularly close, notably his 'dear friend', Luke (Colossians 4:14), Timothy, whom he regarded as a son (2 Timothy 1:2), and his 'dear fellow servant', Epaphras (Colossians 1:7). Silas, too, was amongst Paul's closest companions.

Friendships may be facilitated and maintained by modes of digital communication, but are not built by them. As C. S. Lewis observed, friendships develop from doing things together, sharing experiences and having common interests.[27] Yes, that can occur online. For example, young people may form bonds with others through multi-person computer games; but messaging and texting programs are designed to facilitate brief exchanges. Deep friendships involve the sharing of hearts and minds.

Is there a need for more teaching in churches on how to be friends? Practising listening, showing empathy, learning forgiveness, dealing with difference, are all aspects of marital relationships; but are they not aspects of successful friendships as well? The book of Proverbs has particularly rich teaching on the importance of friendships, and wisdom about how to maintain them.

Christian solitude is, for many of us, a lost art; but it can be a way towards finding that peace which passes all understanding.

Christian solitude

Finally, we need to consider afresh the benefits of Christian solitude. Jesus took time to be alone with his Father and with himself – most obviously in his forty days in the wilderness of Judaea, but also at other times in his earthly ministry. Paul spent some fourteen years in Arabia, no doubt much of it alone, before commencing his public Christian ministry. As singleness is a calling, so solitude is a Christian virtue. Christian solitude is, for many of us, a lost art; but it can be a way towards finding that peace which passes all understanding, even if our life circumstances are such that we do not have the social contact that we need or desire.

Conclusion

With Christ, we are never truly alone; but God has made us also with the human need for companionship, friendship and love. If those basic human needs are not met for extended periods of time, we risk suffering severe consequences in terms of both physical and mental health. The Church can provide answers to these deeply felt human needs, as with other human needs; but to do so effectively, in an age of alienation and social isolation, may require some recalibration of our ministries.

Patrick Parkinson is Executive Director of Publica (www.publica.org.au), a Christian organisation concerned with strengthening family and community in a post-Christian society. He is an Emeritus Professor of Law at the University of Queensland.

27 C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Harper Collins, 1960) p.58.

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Next issue: Technology and God's creative joy