A Crisis of Community: How an Epidemic of Loneliness is Contributing to Social Disconnection in Churches

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INTRODUCTION

Does the saying "Two are better than one" (Ecclesiastes 4:9 NIV) apply to modern society or have human beings evolved? Whilst the writer of this ancient text advocates for the communal life,[1] contemporary research is discovering a trend of increasing deficiency in social connection across urbanised nations at an alarming rate.[2] In his book *Together*, Vivek Murthy, Surgeon General of the United States points out that social connection is often an "underappreciated force,"[3] which enhances individual and communal well-being. However, the prevailing values which seem to dominate modern culture promote the ideals of self-reliance, self-determination and independence.[4] Given the inherent social nature of human beings, these factors amongst others, inevitably point to the widespread breakdown of social cohesion within society, an issue which is being characterised as a *loneliness epidemic*.[5]

However, relatively little is known about how this modern issue is affecting church communities. Given that Scripture consistently portrays salvation as a community-creating event,[6] to what extent is the prevalence of loneliness in society present within the modern church? The purpose of this dissertation will seek to establish how the loneliness epidemic is affecting church communities, predominately within urbanised areas of the United Kingdom (hereafter UK) and will make suggestions on how clergy persons can practically respond.

Accordingly, this paper will be broken down into four key sections. Firstly, it will establish the research problem, which will aim to illuminate the contemporary situation of loneliness within society and the church. Commonly identified causes and implications will also be outlined in order to examine the extent of the issue. Following this, a methodology of critical correlation along with

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[1] Douglas B. Miller, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2010), chap. Ecclesiastes 4:1-16, Kindle.

[2] John T. Cacioppo & William Patrick, *loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: Norton, 2009), 53-54.

[3] Vivek H. Murthy, *Together: Loneliness, Health & What Happens When We Find Connection* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2020), Preface, Kindle.

[4] Murthy, *Together*, Preface, Kindle.

[5] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 5.

[6] Joseph Hellerman emphasises this point from his own biblical analysis. *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville, B&H, 2009), chap. 6, Kindle.

its materials and application will be outlined in order to address how this paper will treat the research problem. The third section of this dissertation shall undertake an analysis of the problem, utilising both theological and secular sources. Finally, these sources will be brought into a mutual dialogue in order to generate a theological response to the issue of loneliness in the church, which will furthermore shape the concluding remarks of this paper.

1.0. THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

1.1. An Epidemic of Loneliness in Society

Social scientists have discovered a loneliness epidemic in recent years that chronically affects up to 23% of adults in the United Kingdom, which is more than fifteen million people, surpassing the population of Wales, Ireland and Scotland put together.[7] Despite its historical existence, the widespread emergence of loneliness in society as a chronic experience and as a language is considered to be a modern phenomenon.[8] It is an epidemic in every sense, as researchers have found that the long term effects of chronic loneliness increase the risk of an early death by up to 45%, comparable to smoking fifteen cigarettes per day and exceeding the effects of other factors, such as excessive drinking (30%), obesity (20%) and air pollution (5%).[9] Numerous studies have also discovered that chronic loneliness is considered to be a major predictor for various diseases, mental health issues and capricious behaviour which contribute towards social disconnection.[10] Accordingly, in 2018 the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom claimed, "Loneliness is one of the greatest public health challenges of our time."[11] Mrs May appointed the world's first *Minister for Loneliness* in the UK Government which furthermore cemented the severity of this global crisis.

Loneliness has often been presented as an issue amongst the elderly but what is striking about the emerging data is the prevalence of loneliness amongst the young. In 2018, the *Office for National Statistics* found that those aged 16 to 24 years were significantly more likely to report often feeling lonely and least likely to report never feeling lonely when compared with all other age ranges.[12]

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[7] "Loneliness and Social Isolation in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan: An International Survey," KFF, last modified August 30, 2018, https://www.kff.org/report-section/loneliness-and-social-isolation-in-the-united-states-the-united-kingdom-and-japan-an-international-survey-introduction/.

[8] Fay Bound Alberti provides an excellent but brief survey to the historical emergence of loneliness in its modern form. *A Biography of Loneliness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 17-20.

[9] This meta analysis is used in the majority of contemporary literature for loneliness. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Bradley J. Layton and Timothy B. Smith, "Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review." *PLoS medicine* 7 (July 2010), https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316.

[10] L.F. Berkman and S.L. Syme, "Social networks, host resistance and mortality rates: A nine-year follow-up study of Alameda County residents," *American Journal of Epidemiology* 109, no.2 (1979): 186-204 https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwx103.

[11] "PM launches Government's first loneliness strategy," Gov.UK, last modified October 16, 2018, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-launches-governments-first-loneliness-strategy.

[12] "Loneliness - What characteristics and circumstances are associated with feeling lonely?" Office For National Statistics, last modified April 10, 2018, https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/lonelinesswhatcharacteristicsandcircumstancesareassociatedwithfeelinglonely/2018-04-10.

More specifically, *Theos Think Tank* found that they were sixty-three times more likely to describe themselves in this way than those aged seventy-five and over.[13]

The scale of such loneliness may seem surprising given the perceived connectedness of the emerging generations. However, loneliness should not be confused with aloneness. Daniel Perlman and Letitia Peplau define loneliness as, "the dissatisfaction with the discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships."[14] Lars Svendsen adds this description, "It is experienced as a lack of satisfying relationships to others ... because their existing relationships do not provide the desired form of closeness."[15] In other words, loneliness is the pain one feels from the deficiency in the quality of relationships a person has, rather than the quantity or frequency of social contact.[16] In this way, loneliness is a subjective experience rather than an objective one like aloneness.[17]

With this in mind, the experience of loneliness seems to be intensified within urban environments. Almost a century ago, the sociologist Georg Simmel pointed out that, "nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd."[18] A recent index survey of 20,000 global *TimeOut* readers, revealed that 55% of Londoners claim that their city can "feel like a lonely place to live."[19] When compared to those in other cities, such as New York, Tokyo and Dubai, London ranked highest as the loneliest city in the world. Another study found that sixty year olds living in London, Liverpool or Manchester felt significantly more lonely (56%)[20] than their counterparts who lived in rural

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[13] "Fighting the loneliness epidemic," Theos Think Tank, last modified June 17, 2019, https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2019/06/17/fighting-the-loneliness-epidemic.

[14] Daniel Perlman and Letitia Peplau, "Theoretical approaches to loneliness," *Loneliness: A Sourcebook of Current Theory, Research and Therapy* (January 1982): 123-134. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Daniel-Perlman/publication/284634633_Theoretical_approaches_to_loneliness/links/5748c43308ae5c51e29e6b45/Theoretical-approaches-to-loneliness.pdf.

[15] Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Loneliness* (London: Reaktion, 2017), 22-23.

[16] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 1, Kindle.

[17] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 7.

[18] Kurt H. Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York: The Free Press, 1950), 418.

[19] "London is among the loneliest cities in the world," TimeOut, last modified February 16 2017, https://www.timeout.com/london/blog/london-is-among-the-loneliest-cities-in-the-world-021617.

[20] Thomas Scharf & Jenny Gierveld, "Loneliness in urban neighborhoods: An Anglo-Dutch comparison," *European Journal of Ageing,* vol. 5, (June 2008): 103-115, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10433-008-0080-x.

environments (9%).[21] It should be noted that the United Kingdom is one of the most urbanised nations in the world with 83% of people living in urban areas (settlements of more than 10,000 persons), whilst only 17% live in rural ones. In fact, the trend from rural environments towards urban ones continues to increase rapidly.[22]

Now, Fay Bound Alberti cites urbanisation as one of the historic forces behind the systemic nature of this modern epidemic.[23] John Cacioppo adds that the individualism fuelled in urban environments fostered a "rootlessness within society,"[24] which was reinforced by the rise of big businesses, demanding careers, transient jobs, modes of transport and technological advances. Thus, the urbanisation of the United Kingdom and arguably the post-industrial western world, has inadvertently created a landscape which is built for disconnection, yet the need for human connection remains the same.[25] As Walter Lippmann pointed out a century ago, "we have changed our environments more quickly than we know how to change ourselves."[26]

In light of this, urban areas also seem to be the focal point for church growth and modern church planters. A recent *Barna* study of the church in the UK shows that 84% of churches are located in urban environments, with just 16% in rural ones.[27] Whilst overall church attendance is declining in the UK, Peter Brierley claims that, "London is the epicenter for growing churches."[28] He found that between 2005 and 2012, overall church attendance in London grew from 620,000 to 720,000 people, a remarkable 16% increase. Equally, the number of churches planted increased at a staggering rate, doubling each week, from 4,100 to 4,800.[29]

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[21] Jolanthe De Koning, Afroditi Stathi and Suzanne H. Richards, "Predictors of loneliness and different types of social isolation of rural-living older adults in the UK," *Ageing and Society* 37, no. 10 (November 2017): 2012-2043, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X16000696

[22] "Rural population 2014/15," Gov.UK, last modified August 27 2020, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rural-population-and-migration/rural-population-201415.

[23] Alberti, *Biography of Loneliness*, 1-7.

[24] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 248.

[25] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 255 & 53-54.

[26] Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1961), 92.

[27] "The UK Church in Action," World Vision, accessed January 13, 2021, https://www.worldvision.org.uk/files/3515/2775/8312/The_UK_Church_in_Action_FULL.pdf, 26.

[28] "Churches Outnumber Pubs in the UK," Christianity Today, last modified May 28, 2019, https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/may/churches-outnumber-pubs-in-uk-london-attendance-pentecostal.html.

[29] Christianity Today, "Churches."

The emerging picture from the data suggests that the epidemic of loneliness is a widespread, systemic issue felt more acutely amongst the young within urban environments. However, to what extent is this contemporary issue contributing towards the breakdown of social cohesion within growing church communities in urbanised areas? Loneliness is not only a concerning external issue for local churches, rather and perhaps more importantly, it is potentially an internal issue within the church community itself. If the presence of loneliness is found to be systemic within the church then the urgency to address this contemporary issue should not be understated, for if congregations are broken down by the problem of loneliness then the church will cease to function as it should.

1.2. The Loneliness Epidemic within Churches

Dramatic headlines such as, "Half of Your Church Struggles With Loneliness"[30] are beginning to emerge throughout Christian news outlets and blogging sites. Yet, how prevalent is the problem of loneliness within the church? Hitherto, the social sciences have sufficiently established the scope of this social issue within modern society. But comparably, there is limited research on how the loneliness epidemic is impacting churchgoers. On the one hand, it would seem logical to include churchgoing Christians of the UK in the 23% of people who experience chronic loneliness, yet on the other hand, it would equally be fair to assume lower numbers on the basis of the biblical description of Christian community. This chapter then, will seek to establish the problem of loneliness within the church.

In 2013, *ComRes* conducted a loneliness survey with 2598 English adults for *BBC Faith in the World Week*. Surprisingly, they found that practicing Christians (32%) experienced higher levels of loneliness than those without faith (23%). Another 27% of Christians said they felt more lonely than they did ten years ago, which was also higher than non-Christians (22%). Ironically, 59% of the Christians surveyed also thought that people with faith are less likely to feel lonely than those without it. Comparatively, this survey found that overall, churchgoers experienced more chronic symptoms of loneliness yet, expected the opposite to be true.[31]

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[30] "Half of Your Church Struggles With Loneliness (and 4 Things to Do)," Church Leaders, last modified May 8, 2018, https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/325140-half-of-your-church-struggles-with-christian-loneliness.html.

[31] "BBC Religion Loneliness Study," ComRes, accessed January 13, 2021, https://2sjjwunnql41ia7ki31qqub1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/themes/comres/poll/BBC_Religion_Loneliness_Survey_England_October_2013.pdf.

A Christian dating site, *Christian Connection* conducted a similar survey amongst 2,754 of its users, which gathered the responses of their various church experiences. The denominations included were Anglican, Non-denominational, Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist and Roman Catholic, which were located predominantly within urban environments. An alarming 40% of single churchgoers said they often felt "inadequate or ignored"[32] in church services, whilst another 37% said they "did not feel treated as family members."[33] Moreover, the majority of those surveyed felt that their church did not know what to do with them.[34] The research also found that over one third of singles felt more valued and accepted outside the church than within.[35] One personal reported, "I found going to church one of the loneliest places in the world. That is why I no longer attend. I worship my Lord and Saviour outside the established church."[36] David Pullinger, who analysed the data said, "One of the key findings was that they felt embraced but whilst this should be something warm they said they often felt isolated and lonely. They say they are accepted but they are not included socially. They feel invisible and think about leaving."[37]

Now, Jeremy Sharpe, Chair of *Christians Together Against Loneliness* points out, "The Bible teaches us that we are all to care for those on the margins of society."[38] Additionally, a recent report found that two-thirds of Christians in the United Kingdom identify that loneliness will be the most important need to meet within local communities post-Covid-19 lockdown, findings applauded by *The Bishop of London*, Dame Sarah Mullally.[39] Whilst these comments are admirable in one sense, Sharpe and Mullally both point to the loneliness epidemic in society but fail to look at the same issue within the church. The above studies demonstrate the presence and prevalence of

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[32] "The Independent: Single Christians feel unsupported by family-focused churches," Christian Connection, last modified April 24, 2013, https://www.christianconnection.com/dating-advice/the-independent-singles-survey/.

[33] Christian Connection, "Single Christians."

[34] "Feeling part of the church," Single Friendly Church, accessed January 13 2021, https://www.singlefriendlychurch.com/downloads/data-feeling-part-of-the-church.pdf.

[35] "A summary of the quantitative answers to the questions in the survey," Single Friendly Church, accessed January 13 2021, https://www.singlefriendlychurch.com/downloads/data--survey-numbers-summarised.pdf.

[36] Single Friendly Church, "Feeling part."

[37] "Isolated: single Christians feel unsupported by family-focused churches," Independent, last modified April 24 2013, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/isolated-single-christians-feel-unsupported-family-focused-churches-8586640.html.

[38] "Churches urged to increase work of connecting with the lonely," Inspire, last modified June 14 2019, https://www.inspiremagazine.org.uk/stories/view?articleid=3119.

[39] "Hope Beyond Research," Allchurches Trust, accessed January 13, 2021, https://www.allchurches.co.uk/documents/Hope-Beyond-church-survey-results.pdf.

loneliness within local churches across denominations. Indeed, Pullinger describes neglecting this issue as a, "time bomb for the church."[40] If clergy persons are going to meet the needs of those on the margins of society, they must firstly consider how they will meet the social needs of those on the margins of their own congregations.

Paul referred to the daily pressure of his concern for all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:28). He does not express the same urgency of concern for relevant issues within Greco-Roman society.[41] This is not to say that Christians should not address the issues of their day in wider society, for they should, but the well-being of the church community should be of first priority for church leaders in particular (Galatians 6:10).[42] As the wise ruler, King Solomon put it, "Know well the condition of your flocks, and give attention to your herds." (Proverbs 27:23 ESV). Such is the need for pastors to firstly address the social issue of loneliness within their local churches as it is a matter of logical priority. Fortunately, this is not all bad news for the church, as Henry Cloud and John Townsend optimistically point out, "needs are a good thing. God uses them to bind us together so we can grow and heal."[43]

1.2.1. Commonly Identified Causes of Loneliness in Church Communities

Loneliness, as a modern epidemic is a complex problem, driven by a variety of historic, environmental and cultural factors.[44] It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to outline all of the ways in which the loneliness epidemic is causing social disconnection within churches. However, there are some commonly identifiable behaviours and attitudes within local church communities that tend to exacerbate the symptoms of loneliness, namely *exclusion from church activities*, *self-righteous culture* and *individualised theology*. These factors have been chosen because of their consistency across broad spectrums of church life.

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[40] "Single Christians Feel 'Ignored' by Church Community, UK Study Find," The Christian Journal, last modified April 25, 2013, http://tcjonline.org/single-christians-feel-ignored-by-church-community-uk-study-finds/.

[41] George H. Guthrie points out that the whole phrase carries the sense, "apart from other things I could mention." As founder, Paul bears the inescapable weight of responsibility for the Corinthian community. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), IV.C, Kindle.

[42] Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader: How Transforming You Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2015), 213.

[43] Dr Henry Cloud and Dr John Townsend, *Making Small Groups Work: What Every Small Group Leader Needs to Know* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 256.

[44] Cacioppo outlines these meta factors in *loneliness*, 52-54.

i. Exclusion from Church Activities

The data gathered by *Christian Connection* points out that loneliness in single people is often exacerbated by exclusion from church activities, particularly within *family friendly churches*.[45] In fact one person reported, "My church is so family focused I notice that I stand in church alone, and it hurts. In fact so much so that currently I am on a break from church."[46] Another churchgoer said, "I don't think that churches place enough emphasis on the importance of friendship, and give far too much significance to the family."[47] Whilst these reports concentrate particularly on the needs of single people within family focussed churches, it nonetheless demonstrates that minority persons can often feel neglected by being excluded from certain church activities. Consequently, the lack of inclusion can constitute a perceived rejection, which elicits the painful feelings of loneliness.[48]

ii. Self-Righteous Culture

Barna recently found that 36% of young Christians did not feel safe to express their challenges in church.[49] This finding identifies a common cultural issue within church communities, which can also exacerbate the feelings of loneliness. In his experience of communal living described in *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer observes that a Christian can feel lonely in a church community despite their involvement through worship, prayer and fellowship.[50] Genuine connection does not occur he claims, because although the members "have fellowship with one an other as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners."[51] In other words, a self-righteous culture within a church community does not allow people to be themselves nor does it elicit safety. Of these communities, John Burke points out that "The fear of disapproval, rejection, and condemnation often causes adults to pretend... always feeling the need to look a little better or more together than pure

[45] The Christian Journal, "Single Christians."

[46] Single Friendly Church, "Feeling part."

[47] Independent, "Isolated."

[48] Naomi Eisenberger Matthew D. Lieberman and Kipling D. Williams, "Does rejection hurt? An FMRI study of social exclusion." *Science* 302 (October 2003): 290-292, http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.1089134.

[49] "Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church," Barna, last modified September 27, 2011, https://www.barna.com/research/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/.

[50] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 110.

[51] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 110.

honesty would reveal."[52] Murthy adds that this "pretense only intensifies our loneliness,"[53] which deprives people from experiencing genuine connection with others.

iii. Individualised Theology

Finally, Jospeh Hellerman, Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at Talbot School of Theology argues that the apparent social disconnection within the church community is in part an issue of a modern Protestant theology.[54] In his book *When the Church Was a Family*, he outlines a historical theology which examines ancient Middle Eastern culture and the early Christian communities of the New Testament Church. He argues that typical gospel presentations in recent history introduce people to the idea of a *personal relationship with God* and treat the church with what Hellerman describes as a, "sort of utilitarian afterthought."[55] From various places in Scripture, Hellerman argues that "The one-sided emphasis in our churches on Jesus as 'personal Savior' is a regrettable example of Western individualism importing its own socially constructed perspective on reality into the biblical text."[56]

In fact, even the social scientist Cacioppo notes that individualism, "was reinforced by the rise of Protestant theology, which stressed individual responsibility, even in matters of salvation."[57] Now, this is not to argue that God does not care for the individual but such an overemphasis towards an individualised perspective evidently truncates a theology of salvation and offers an inadequate perspective of the church.[58] The rise of individualism is argued to have significantly contributed to the loneliness epidemic in society and it is clear that this is also a factor embedded within, but not limited to, Protestant churches.[59]

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[52] John Burke, *No Perfect People Allowed: Creating a Come As You Are Culture in the Church* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2005), chap. 4, Kindle.

[53] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 4, Kindle.

[54] Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville, B&H, 2009), chap. 6, Kindle.

[55] Hellerman, *Recapturing Jesus' Vision*, chap. 6, Kindle.

[56] Hellerman, *Recapturing Jesus' Vision*, chap. 6, Kindle.

[57] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 53-54.

[58] Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2014), chap. 9, Kindle.

[59] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 248.

1.2.2. The Implications of Loneliness on Church Communities

Now, the implications for more chronic symptoms of loneliness are proven to be significantly detrimental in a variety of ways, not least for the individual but also for a community. Thus, this chapter will outline three ways in which these implications can disrupt social cohesion within church communities. They are as follows, *increase in people transience, decline in mental health and decline in self-regulation*.

i. Increase in People Transience

In 2017, *LifeWay Research* conducted a survey which found that 29% of American Christians (23-30 years) left their church communities because they didn't feel connected to the people within them.[60] This, rather alarming survey, shows that the symptoms of loneliness are directly linked to the transience of people within a church. Although this is an American study, it is very likely that similar findings could be substantiated in the United Kingdom. The UK *Christian Connection* data outlined above, delivered similar reports from some young adults, who purportedly left their churches on the basis of their lack of connection to others. This preventable increase in people transience is shown to disrupt the social cohesion of a church community. One of the key areas is in terms of morale. The feeling of loss is emotionally taxing for those committed members, who are increasingly wearied by the frequent coming and going of people.[61] Consequently, they are more guarded and increasingly reluctant to build new relationships, which intensifies the difficulty for new persons to establish genuine connections. Thus, the cycle of transience continues.

ii. Decline in Mental Health

Researchers have also found that loneliness is a predictor for a decline in mental health.[62] Although loneliness itself is not considered to be a mental health issue, it is commonly paired with intense manifestations of depression, which consequently induces a diminished sense of personal control and a paralysis in forming new attachments.[63] Whilst the feelings of loneliness prompt a

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[60] "Most Teenagers Drop Out of Church as Young Adults," LifeWay Research, last modified January 15 2019, https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/01/15/most-teenagers-drop-out-of-church-as-young-adults/.

[61] "Hug the Parade: Ministry Challenges (and Opportunities) in Transient Places," The Gospel Coalition, last modified February 5 2019, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/challenges-opportunities-transient-cities/.

[62] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 83-85.

[63] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 83-85.

person to reach out to others, depression holds the individual back. The frustration of this conflict increases uncharacteristic hostility towards others and forms a negative feedback loop, which can intensify both sensations and hasten the decline in mental health.[64]

The concern of mental health is a growing area of need within the church, as 39% of Christian young adults say they feel depressed.[65] In light of these alarming statistics, *Barna* even claims that "Mental Health is New Domain of Ministry to the Next Generation."[66] Now, congregants with mental health difficulties will require pastoral attention to some degree. However, if numerous people in the church community are plagued with varying degrees of depression associated with loneliness, this will undoubtably burden many church communities beyond their capacity to provide adequate support.[67] As a result, those who require support may be hurt by the inadvertent neglect and leave, whilst lay persons providing support may be overwhelmed and moreover sidelined by the extent of such need.

iii. Decline in Self-Regulation

Finally, self-regulation is as Cacioppo describes, "the sum total of an individual's mental and physiological efforts to achieve balance."[68] In 2005, Baumeister et al. discovered that loneliness impairs self-regulation.[69] One of the experiments measuring people's responses to loneliness, found that subjects seek to soothe its emotional pain by appeasing the pleasure centres of the brain, even when the activity is knowingly not good for them.[70] This finding demonstrates that loneliness compromises the ability to make good decisions. In addition to this, loneliness increases demanding behaviour and reduces the measure for patience, tolerance and the availability for constructive engagement.[71] Cacioppo points out, "When we feel lonely, people may see us as

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[64] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 83-85.

[65] "How Mental Health Is the New Domain of Ministry to the Next Generation," Barna, last modified October 8 2020, https://www.barna.com/research/mental-health-next-gen/.

[66] Barna, "Mental Health."

[67] Cloud and Townsend, *Small Groups*, 253-256.

[68] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 19.

[69] Roy Baumeister, et al., "Social Exclusion Impairs Self-Regulation," *Journal of personality and social psychology* 88 (May 2005): 589-604, http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.88.4.589.

[70] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 44.

[71] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 242.

aloof, less than empathetic, socially insensitive, perhaps even ungenerous."[72] He adds, "It is these social cognitions and behaviors that go haywire when our sense of belonging takes a hit."[73]

Within a local church, the decline in self-regulation induced by loneliness could contribute towards immorality, addictions, irregular attendance, emotional instability, and attention seeking. Clearly, these behaviours are not congruent with the teachings of Jesus. Moreover, this capricious behaviour may cause other Christians within the community to look less favourably towards the lonely, which shall reinforce a pessimistic perspective for the lonely person towards the wider church community. Consequently, increasing the risk of further exclusion or even departure.[74]

To summarise, the implications of systemic loneliness on a church community are significant in many ways. Paul likens the functionality of the church to a body and argues that each member has a part to play (Romans 12:4-8). However, the factors outlined above diminish a church's ability to function as it should. Rather than making disciples and mobilising them for God's mission and ministry, the church is subtly frustrated by a silent epidemic sweeping through significant portions of its membership.[75] Consequently, the mission of God is hindered, whilst the church is compelled to examine the extent of and tend to the damage inflicted by the neglect of this issue. Indeed, the absence of ethical renewal within the social dimension shall also cause the church to become irrelevant in the conversation of loneliness because there appears to be no difference between the church and society.[76]

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[72] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 169.

[73] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 35.

[74] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 34.

[75] Edward H. Hammett emphasises that the mission of the church is to make disciples that make disciples. Thus, the disruption of social cohesion, induced by loneliness hinders this activity. *The Gathered and Scattered Church: Equipping Believers for the 21st Century* (Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2005), 14-15.

[76] Christopher Wright points out that ethical renewal has a missional quality. It is the means by which Christians represent God in the world. *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 123-126.

2.0. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Practical Theology

This dissertation will locate itself within the discipline of practical theology, as it deals with the practice of Christian life within the church and in relation to wider society.[77] Since the end of the Second World War, there has been an exponential rise of knowledge in many fields, such as the social sciences.[78] It has presented new opportunities for theology to enter into dialogue with specialised areas in order to generate new insight and enhance the competency of clergy and lay persons. Practical theology seeks to make connections between disciplines and instead of divorcing itself from society, views things as a whole. By employing an interdisciplinary dialogue, practical theology can be at the forefront of generating creative insights and making new discoveries which can better serve the church.[79]

2.2. Critical Correlation

In order to engage with the subject of loneliness and the church, this project will utilise a methodology of critical correlation, which shall facilitate a mutually critical dialogue between theology and the social sciences.[80] The methodology emphasises that all truth is God's truth, yet this controversial approach can be hazardous where appropriate discretion is not utilised. The most obvious pitfall for a study on loneliness is that the social science may assert itself to the point where it controls the theological reality.[81] The result being a "total abdication of theological responsibility,"[82] as Ballard and Pritchard point out. On the other hand, if theological imperialism is utilised then the potential for creative insights shall not be realised to the same extent. Such is the tension in using a method of critical correlation. For this reason and in the case of a deadlock between sources, Swinton and Mowat's *Revised Method of Critical Correlation* shall be used,

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[77] Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society* (London: SPCK, 1996), 1.

[78] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology*, 4.

[79] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology*, 116.

[80] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology*, 52.

[81] Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 161.

[82] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology*, 63.

whereby *priority* shall be given to theology as Queen of the Sciences.[83] Ballard and Pritchard add that without weighting authority on the side of theology in the case of a deadlock, "practical theology ceases to be Christian."[84] Thus, theology shall take the social sciences as a critical partner to illuminate the contemporary situation and generate a theological response in order to serve the church community.

2.2.1. Materials

This project shall approach its subject eclectically by utilising a broad spectrum of sources. Now in the last two decades, many substantial works on the loneliness epidemic have been produced by various academics. However, amongst those key figures is the late John T. Cacioppo, Professor and director of the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of Chicago. As a world leader in the biomedical effects of loneliness, Cacioppo and a team of scientists conducted numerous research projects on the problem and scope of loneliness for over two decades. His significant contribution to the field has led the majority of contemporary loneliness researchers to cite his work in some form. For this reason, Cacioppo's work *loneliness*, is a key driver of the social science in this project.

Whilst there are various theological sources utilised in this project, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ecclesial contributions in *Life Together* have reinforced the theological importance of communal life represented in this project. It should be pointed out, that there is a surprisingly small amount of robust Christian material which specifically addresses the problem of loneliness. The majority of theological sources which emphasise Christian community omit the contemporary findings of social science. Thus, these sources stand in isolation to one another. The researcher could find only one credible source which briefly treats an aspect of loneliness both theologically and scientifically.[85] Thus, the lack of existing material in this particular subject offers the potential for new and creative insight.

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[83] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 86.

[84] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology*, 120.

[85] See Eric O. Jacobsen, *Three Pieces of Glass: Why We Feel Lonely in a World Mediated by Screens* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020), chap. 9, Kindle.

2.2.2. Application

Now, in order to respond to the research problem presented in the section above, a thorough analysis will need to be undertaken. Accordingly, both the theological (theology has priority of order) and secular sources will attend to the problem and the key insights shall be summarised.[86] The sources will then be brought into contact, namely a mutually critical discussion, which Whitehead and Whitehead describe as "an assertive relationship of challenge and confirmation."[87] Hence, this approach will seek to creatively reapply existing knowledge to a contemporary problem, which is theologically grounded and scientifically guided. Practical examples will also be offered in this section, which shall seek to illustrate how the material could be applied in a local church context.

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[86] James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method In Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 1995), 13-14.

[87] Whitehead and Whitehead, *Method In Ministry*, 15.

3.0. AN ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEM

3.1. Towards a Theology of Loneliness

The following chapter will attend to the problem of loneliness from a theological position. It shall investigate the origin of God's design of humans, His response to loneliness and His subsequent provision. Lastly, this chapter shall seek to make sense of the nature of loneliness from a theological perspective.

3.1.1. God's Design of Humans

Throughout the course of history the perceived inherent social nature of humans has intrigued men and woman. In ancient Greece, the philosopher Aristotle duly noted, "A social instinct is implanted in all men."[88] In 1624, the vicar and poet John Donne famously observed, "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."[89] Indeed, ancient kingdoms and societies of all kinds have recognised the importance of the social realm, insofar that social isolation has been used as a severe punishment for troublemakers.[90] Paul even utilised this correctional approach in the church when dealing with a Corinthian man who boasted of his incest. An act of expulsion from the community was used as a discipline to bring the man to his senses.[91]

Yet, to what extent are humans inherently social beings? According to Scripture, the account of creation demonstrates that a theology towards community is inherently present in God's design of human beings. In Genesis 1:26 NIV, God says, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness." The choice of the plural pronoun, "us" over the use of a singular one in this text is particularly revealing and it points to the idea that God Himself exists within His own community.[92] A theology of the Trinity later emerges from the Scripture, which describes the nature of the

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[88] Aristotle, *Politics* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2000), chap. Book One, Kindle.

[89] John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions Together with Deaths Duel,* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1959), chap. Devotions, Kindle.

[90] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 11.

[91] David E. Garland, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), chap. IV.A, Kindle.

[92] Bruce K. Waltke points out that the seven preceding creative acts pronounced by the impersonal "let there be" is replaced by the personal "let us." This traditional Christian interpretation is supported by the mention of the Spirit of God, the shift in text from singular to plural and a Christian theology of the Trinity. *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2001), chap. Prologue, Kindle.

Godhead as three persons in one, namely The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit.[93] In his book *Created for Community*, Stanley Grenz makes the observation, "God's triune nature means that God is social or relational— God is the 'social Trinity'. And for this reason, we can say that God is community."[94]

Therefore, if mankind is made in the image and likeness of God, then the need to exist within community shall be reflected in humans. To this extent Grenz argues, "This aspect of the biblical narrative suggests that humans in relationship with each other reflect the divine image in a way that the solitary individual human being cannot." Anette Ejsing adds, "It is the encounter with other people that sets us up to be at our very best: fully human."[95] Now, this point is not to argue for the specific context of marriage, rather it is only in the context of social connection to one another that Adam and Eve had a fuller understanding of what they were capable of being, as creatures made in God's image.[96] In isolation, Adam did not know he could reflect the divine attributes of God as an image bearer towards another, nor did he know the colour of his own eyes or had he noticed any other elemental particulars about himself.[97] It was only within the social reality that Adam's capacity to be fully human was realised. Swinton and Mowat also point out that the social realm of the church is where the gospel is, "grounded, embodied, interpreted and lived out."[98]

3.1.2. God's Attitude Towards Loneliness

Now, the writer of Genesis specifically interjects the creation account with what seems to be described as God's attitude towards loneliness. There is a notable pattern to the whole account, whereby God affirms His daily creation by acknowledging its goodness (Genesis 1:25). However, the pattern is disrupted after He creates man and God points to the incompletion of His own creation in the sin-free world, by announcing, "It is not good for the man to be alone." (Genesis

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[93] Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 89-90.

[94] Grenz, *Created for Community*, chap. 2, Kindle.

[95] Anette Ejsing, *The Power of One: Theological Reflections on Loneliness* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), chap. 3 Kindle.

[96] Ejsing, *Power of One*, chap. 3 Kindle.

[97] John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), chap. Gen 1:13-41, Kindle.

[98] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 5.

2:18 NIV). It was the poet, John Milton who famously pointed out, "Loneliness was the first thing that God's eye named not good."[99]

Now, in order to capture the significance of this assessment, a contrast of opposites must be applied. In his commentary of Genesis, John Walton argues, "When something was 'good,' it was functioning as God intended it to function. Thus the statement that 'it is not good for the man to be alone' is one of nonfunctionality."[100] It is explicitly non-functional insofar that the blessing of God cannot be fulfilled.[101] In other words, Adam's isolated state was one of incompletion. The text seems to underscore this point by its almost comedic attempts to match Adam with a partner amongst the animal kingdom, as though God is subtly making the specific point that Adam is lacking something, or more precisely, someone. Clearly it seems, the nature of loneliness is pointed out specifically in the creation account in order to define God's intended design for humans. In doing so, the narrator subtly introduces the idea that humans are not just spiritual beings, they are wholistic creatures designed with social, emotional and intellectual dimensions.[102] In light of this, Peter Scazzaro points out that, "Denying any aspect of what it means to be a fully human person made in the image of God carries with it catastrophic, long-term consequences — in our relationship with God, with others, and with ourselves."[103]

3.1.3. God's Provision for Loneliness

Following this, a strange thing happens in the Genesis narrative. Adam is put into a deep sleep and God takes a piece of this human being and forms another from it (Genesis 2:22-23). Adam wakes and recognises that there is one like him, formed of human flesh and exclaims at the sight of another human with an outburst of joy, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." (Genesis 2:23 ESV). Adam recognises the woman on the basis of his contribution towards the new social reality but this is not

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[99] John Milton, *Tetrachordon: Expositions upon the four chief places in Scripture, which treat of Marriage, or nullities in Marriage* (London: 1645), 7.

[100] Walton, *Genesis*, chap. Gen 2:4-25, Kindle.

[101] Walton, *Genesis*, chap. Gen 2:4-25, Kindle.

[102] Peter Scazzero, The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship that Actually Changes Lives (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), chap. 3, Kindle.

[103] Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Church*, chap. 3, Kindle.

a cause for pride, rather gratitude for God's gift.[104] From this moment on, as Bonhoeffer points out, "Adam knows that he is bound in a wholly new way to this Eve who is derived from him."[105] Walton adds, "A part of him is missing and is, in effect, beckoning him."[106] Adam is no longer without another, he belongs to her because she belongs to him.[107] This new bond sets the stage for an expansive and harmonious community of humankind which is based on one's share in the other (Genesis 1:28).[108] Thus, the means for human functionality and thriving is set within the social framework.[109]

Now, God continues to use this social framework as a remedy for the problem of human loneliness in His redemptive plans, after the fall of man. In his book, *The Mission of God's People*, Christopher Wright points out that in both Old and New Testaments, "redemption was not just a historical fact of the past, nor just a personal experience to be enjoyed in the present, but a status that was to be lived out in ethical response."[110] This call to distinctiveness is clearly seen after Israel's exodus from Egypt. It is also the theme which sets the foundation for the song of praise in Psalm sixty-eight, which renders an important point in this discussion. The psalm characterises God as Israel's deliverer. As contrasted with Baal, God is portrayed as being present amongst His people and the one who offers protection to the vulnerable, those on the margins of society.[111] It is from this context and perhaps even reinforced from his own lonesome experiences that David claims, "God sets the lonely in families." (Psalm 68:6 NIV). Thus, God's redemptive work calls forth redemptive living, which involves social implications that extend to the lonely.[112]

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[104] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 97.

[105] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 97.

[106] Walton, *Genesis*, chap. Gen 2:4-25, Kindle.

[107] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 97.

[108] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 101.

[109] Jacobsen, *Pieces of Glass*, chap. 9, Kindle.

[110] Wright, *The Mission*, 108-109.

[111] Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, *Psalms: New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 295.

[112] Wright, *The Mission*, 108-109.

This is also reflected within the Christian community. Tim Chester describes the church as a place of liberation and a home for exiled people.[113] In fact, NT Wright points out that Paul infers this theme in how he describes the Spirit's liberation for believers through the imagery of adoption (Romans 8:15).[114] He contrasts a spirit of slavery and fear, which in this case could be the chronic fear of isolation, with the gift of the Holy Spirit who adopts the lonely person into the family of believers through sonship (Romans 8:15). In this way, the Spirit offers an assurance of vertical belonging for the Christian (Romans 8:16).[115] Later, Paul labours the point of horizontal belonging in this way, "each member belongs to all the others." (Romans 12:5 NIV). Accordingly, Grenz claims that "The divine program leads not only to peace with God in isolation; it extends as well to the healing of all relationships—to one another."[116] Thus, the original blueprint of Adam and Eve belonging to one another in community, with God in their midst, is described as being the mysterious nature of the church (Ephesians 5:30-32).[117] In light of this, the church community is as Bonhoeffer puts it, "an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual."[118]

3.1.4. Sin and Loneliness

However, despite the provision of God, loneliness is a recurrent feature throughout the narrative of the Bible. For example, the intensity of Sarah's rejection caused Hagar to flee her home into the desert (Genesis 16:6). Job's destitution lead him to conclude, "I have no one to help me." (Job 30:13 NLT). He lamented of his perceived rejection by complaining, "My voice is as sad and lonely as the cries of a jackal or an ostrich." (Job 30:27-29 GNT). And nearing his death imprisoned in Rome, Paul longingly writes to Timothy, recalling his tears at their last parting and seeking the comfort of his presence, for as he puts it, "everyone deserted me." (2 Timothy 4:16 NIV).[119] Thus, the pain of loneliness has marked the human experience for generations. In describing the nature of the experience theologically, Jeffrey Sobosan has even likened it to a form of hell and uses

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[113] Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor: Sharing the gospel through social involvement* (Nottingham: IVP, 2004), chap. 6.3. Kindle.

[114] N.T. Wright, *Romans: N.T. Wright for Everyone Bible Study Guides* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2011), chap. 9, Kindle.

[115] James D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans 1-8 38A* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), chap. V.C.2, Kindle.

[116] Grenz, *Created for Community*, chap. 9, Kindle.

[117] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 101.

[118] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 20.

[119] Here, Bonhoeffer perceptively points out Paul's desire for connection. *Life Together*, 19.

Dantes poem, *The Inferno* to do so. In fact, he goes insofar to claim that, "The fire which consumes the individual in hell is the fire of loneliness,"[120] which further reinforces the point that loneliness distorts the human experience to be less than what it is designed to be.

With this in mind, how does one make sense of the problem of loneliness from a theological perspective. Loneliness cannot simply be reduced to a spiritual issue, for loneliness was identified in the sin-free world of Adam's garden. Thus, one cannot simply say that loneliness is exclusively a result of sin. The problem of loneliness is inherently a biological one. It is however, a spiritual problem insofar that sin takes advantage of the biological situation. After Adam and Eve violated God's command, their relationship to one another was immediately disrupted by a rift (Genesis 3:12). The destruction of the original human condition induced a sense of estrangement, where Adam and Eve's sense of belonging to one another was fractured.[121] This ushered in the negative emotions of shame, degradation and humiliation (Genesis 3:7-8). Here, Bonhoeffer points out, "He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone."[122] Although loneliness is primarily a biological issue, it is intensified by the divisive nature of sin. For example, if a small split in a plastic paddling pool fixed by tape, is put under too much pressure, the split will expand and the water will run out. In a similar way, sin compromises and exacerbates the biological vulnerability of human loneliness by enhancing the feelings of estrangement to one another.[123]

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[120] Jeffrey G. Sobosan, "Loneliness and Faith," *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 6 (Spring 1978): 104-9, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000766723&site=ehost-live.

[121] Jacobsen, *Pieces of Glass*, chap. 9, Kindle.

[122] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 110.

[123] Burke, *No Perfect People*, chap. 15, Kindle.

3.2. The Social Science of Humans and Loneliness

This chapter shall formulate an analysis for the problem of loneliness by examining human nature, the need for social connection and the nuances of loneliness. Social science is the primary source used, with material drawn from literature, journal publications and empirical research. Whilst some research is dated for authoritative and historical reasons, the writer has sought to utilise the most recent material available for the purposes of this dissertation.

3.2.1. The Need for Social Connection

Matthew Lieberman, UCLA Professor and Neuroscientist, has spent over two decades using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to study the social and emotional activity of the brain. In his book, *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*, he notes that the, "brain is profoundly social"[124] and argues that human beings are "wired for: reaching out to and interacting with each other."[125] He has discovered that the brain is separated into two distinct networks that support social and non-social thinking and according to Lieberman, act "like a neural seesaw."[126] When an individual is attending to non-social activities, the analytical part of the brain is activated and the social part of the brain quiets down. The opposite happens when an individual engages in social activities. However, when a person is relaxing or completes a non-social task, the pathways for the social part of the brain are engaged almost instantly, like a reflex.[127] Thus, it comes as no surprise that one study found that 70% of the content in a conversation is social in nature.[128] Lieberman argues that, "Evolution has placed a bet that the best thing for our brain to do in any spare moment is to get ready to see the world socially."[129] This remarkable discovery demonstrates the social predisposition of the brain.

Another study in 2005, demonstrates the special importance of human to human connection in the wiring of the brain. Pictures of people, objects and pets were viewed by subjects in order to

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[124] Matthew D. Lieberman, *Social: Why Our Brains are Wired to Connect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 241.

[125] Lieberman, *Social*, 9.

[126] "Why We Are Wired to Connect," Scientific American, last modified October 22, 2013, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-we-are-wired-to-connect/.

[127] Scientific American, "Wired to Connect."

[128] Lieberman, *Social*, 20-21.

[129] Scientific American, "Wired to Connect."

measure the brains regional processors for how it responds to various images. Researchers found that the social and emotional processors of the brain interacted and synergised with a greater intensity when subjects viewed images of other humans.[130] The study demonstrates that the brain is uniquely wired to connect with other humans in a way that is distinct from that of objects and even pets.

Social connection is so central to the wiring of human physiology that it has been shown to enhance personal well-being and life satisfaction, which exceed that of the material pursuits of money, fame and desired image.[131] However, what happens when social connection is endangered, deficient or lost? Eisenberger et al. have discovered that the emotional region of the brain (dorsal anterior cingulate cortex) is triggered when a person experiences a perceived social rejection, which is the same region that registers responses to physical pain.[132] Lieberman argues that, "Our sensitivity to social rejection is so central to our well-being that our brains treat it like a painful event, whether the instance of social rejection matters or not."[133] Social pain has often been perceived in terms of metaphors, such as *heartbreak*, however this finding takes the experience of social pain past the point of being just a metaphor and into a physiological dimension. In fact it recognises that social pain, induced by the deprivation of social connection, is just as real as physical pain.

Now, one of the evolutionary theories which emerged from the work of John Cacioppo suggests that the social pain induced by the feelings of loneliness is designed to serve a particular purpose. He argues, "The sensations associated with loneliness evolved because they contributed to our survival as a species."[134] Across the course of history, humans have .depended upon one another for safety, shelter and successful reproduction, all of which contributes towards long term

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[130] Catherine J. Norris et al., "The Interaction of Social and Emotional Processes in the Brain," *Journal of cognitive neuroscience* 16 (January 2005): 1818-29, http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/0898929042947847.

[131] Christopher Niemiec, Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "The Path Taken: Consequences of Attaining Intrinsic and Extrinsic Aspirations in Post-College Life," *Journal of Research in Personality*, vol. 73 (2009): 291-306, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2008.09.001.

[132] Eisenberger, "Does rejection hurt," 290-292.

[133] Lieberman, *Social*, 67.

[134] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 7.

survival.[135] Thus, humans have been marked with an instinctive predisposition to avoid isolation and maintain proximity with other humans.[136] In the same way that physical pain can protect from physical dangers, such as recoiling a burning finger from the boiling pot, Cacioppo argues that "Social pain, also known as loneliness, evolved for a similar reason: because it protected the individual from the danger of remaining isolated."[137] Thus, loneliness acts as a prompt for people to take stock of their social connections and restore broken bonds or initiate new ones.[138]

3.2.2. The Nature of Loneliness

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the nature of loneliness, it will need to be contrasted against the idea of aloneness. It is commonly thought that loneliness is synonymous with aloneness. In fact, the Norwegian Institute of Public Health even defines loneliness in terms of failed social support.[139] However, whilst aloneness is considered to be a risk factor for loneliness, it doesn't necessarily correlate with those who are chronically lonely.[140] For example, although the term solitude has fallen out of favour, it is historically viewed in a positive light, whereby a person voluntarily withdraws from life's busy activities in order to reflect, meditate and commune with God. Historically, it is an act which is broadly enjoyed, encouraged and savoured.[141] Additionally, one researcher who reviewed over four hundred essays devoted to loneliness found that there was no correlation between physical aloneness and the pains of loneliness.[142]

Equally, individuals can experience loneliness despite being surrounded by others. One study amongst high school students found that those who have more friends than what they consider ideal can actually increase the likelihood of loneliness.[143] Gustave Flaubert's famous novel

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[135] Norris, "Emotional Processes," 1818-29.

[136] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 7.

[137] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 7.

[138] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 7.

[139] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Loneliness*, 18.

[140] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 1, Kindle.

[141] Alberti, *Biography of Loneliness*, 22-29.

[142] V. Sermat, *Some Situational and Personality Correlates of Loneliness*, In J. Hartog, J. R. Audy, & Y. A. Cohen, *The Anatomy of Loneliness* (New York: International Universities Press, 1980), 308.

[143] Daniel Russell et al., "Is Loneliness the Same as Being Alone?" *The Journal of psychology* 146 (2012): 7-22, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00223980.2011.589414.

Madame Bovary furthermore illustrates how one can be miserably lonely in marriage, despite marriage being the best predictor against loneliness. Accordingly, Cacioppo argues that on average, amongst young adults, "those who feel lonely actually spend no more time alone than those who feel more connected."[144] In light of this, both loneliness and aloneness are, in Svendsen's estimation, "logically and empirically independent"[145] of one another.

Now, the nuances of social needs vary from person to person in what is considered an ideal amount of human contact. Whilst more extroverted personalities tend to crave larger groups and more consistent human contact, introverted people require more time by themselves and prefer smaller groups.[146] Similarly, some people tend to be more sensitive to social exclusion, whilst others tolerate moving from city to city without too much distress.[147] Accordingly, Cacioppo writes, "whatever our own individual sensitivity, our well-being suffers when our particular need for connection has not been met."[148] Hence, Murthy describes the experience of loneliness in this way, "What's missing when you're lonely is the feeling of closeness, trust, and the affection of genuine friends, loved ones, and community."[149] Its the feeling of lacking the satisfactory human attachments that a person judges to be ideal.

Hitherto, researchers have found there to be three forms of loneliness, namely *transient*, *situational* and *chronic*.[150] Transient feelings of loneliness come and go at almost any moment, whether a person is home alone or surrounded by colleagues in the work place.[151] This common experience has even been likened to the passing sensations of hunger and thirst.[152] Cacioppo points out that, "we can all slip in and out of loneliness. Feeling lonely at any particular moment simply means you

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[144] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 13.

[145] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Loneliness*, 19.

[146] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 1, Kindle.

[147] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 15.

[148] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 15.

[149] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 1, Kindle.

[150] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Loneliness*, 28.

[151] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Loneliness*, 28.

[152] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 7-8.

are human."[153] On the other hand, situational loneliness is characterised by external life changes, such as the death of a spouse. The pain induced from such a situation is proven to be the most intense experience of loneliness due to the immediate cause of loss.[154] If it is not dealt with however, situational loneliness can settle in and evolve into a negative cycle.[155]

Now, chronic loneliness is the form of loneliness which plagues people with consistent feelings of social isolation pains for long periods of time and effects approximately up to 23% of adults in the UK.[156] Cacioppo describes it in this way, "Loneliness becomes an issue of serious concern only when it settles in long enough to create a persistent, self-reinforcing loop of negative thoughts, sensations, and behaviors."[157] The deeply disruptive pain of loneliness can turn an unmet need for connection into a negative cycle, which further isolates an individual from meaningful connection and reinforces the chronic nature of the problem.[158] Each form of loneliness is considered to be problematic, given the special importance of social connection. However, it is the systemic nature of chronic loneliness which is of serious concern to society and the church.

3.2.3. The Dimensions of Human Connectedness
If the experience of loneliness is the subjective deficiency in sufficient social connections then what is missing that should be present and what causes such lack? Hawkley et al. have discovered that there are three dimensions or degrees of social connection, which form the universal structure for loneliness. They are described as *intimate connectedness*, *relational connectedness* and *collective connectedness*.[159] Humans require all three dimensions of these social needs to be met, in order to be socially fulfilled. Now, intimate connectedness refers to a close relationship, such as a spouse or a confidant, which provides a mutual bond of trust and affection. A circle of friends and family form the dimension of relational connectedness, where companionship and support is

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153 Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 7.

154 Svendsen, *Philosophy of Loneliness*, 28.

155 Svendsen, *Philosophy of Loneliness*, 28.

156 KFF, "Loneliness."

157 Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 7.

158 Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 8.

159 Louise C. Hawkley, Michael W. Browne and John T. Cacioppo, "How Can I Connect With Thee? Let Me Count the Ways," *Psychological Science* 16, no. 10 (October 2005): 798–804, https://doi.org/10.1111%2Fj14679280.2005.01617.x.

nurtured. Finally, networks, collectives and communities, such as alumni's, football clubs and churches form the dimension of collective connectedness, whereby people enjoy mutual interests and a shared purpose.[160]

Unsurprisingly, the three dimensions of social connectedness are interrelated. A non-lonely person is fulfilled in all three of these areas, but loneliness can begin to plague a person's well-being even when one of these areas goes unsatisfied.[161] This explains why people who belong to a local church community, can experience feelings of loneliness. Whilst satisfied in the dimension of belonging to a community, it is possible for there to be a deficit in the other two social dimensions and vice versa. When an external event, such as the death of a spouse compromises even one dimension, the feeling of social stability and security can fall away so that even the most connected person can begin to experience the painful feelings of loneliness.[162]

Sadly, there is evidence of increasing deficiency in these three dimensions throughout western society. A study in 1985 found that a sample of the average American had three confidants. Alarmingly, in 2004 the same study was performed and the average number of confidants for Americans dropped to none.[163] In 2007, UNICEF surveyed twenty-one wealthy nations for child well-being. The United Kingdom ranked the lowest, with deprived family structures and troubled relationships amongst family and friends. Data revealed that one-third of children in the United Kingdom don't eat meals with their parents and the majority of children don't find their peers kind or helpful.[164]

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[160] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 80.

[161] Hawkley et al., "Connect," 798–804.

[162] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 81.

[163] Miller McPherson et al., "Social isolation in America: Changes in core discussion networks over two decades," *American Sociology Review* 71 (June 2006): 353-375, https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240607100301.

[164] "An overview of child well-being in rich countries," UNICEF, accessed January 13, 2021, https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7_eng.pdf.

3.2.4. The Stigma of Loneliness

Now, one of the challenges in addressing the problem of loneliness is in contending with the stigma which surrounds it. Loneliness inflicts a silencing effect, whereby those affected would rather hide their pain and suffer in silence than openly deal with it.[165] *The Silver Line* is a 24 hour, confidential telephone line in the UK, which offers information, friendship and advice for the elderly. Since 2013, it has received over two million calls and the numbers continue to increase rapidly by 10% every month. According to Sophie Andrews, president of the charity, "There's such a stigma to loneliness... For many people, we're the only place they can talk to someone."[166] However according to Andrews, most callers tend to avoid the admission of loneliness. Instead, callers phone in at night to say, "goodnight" and ring in the morning to say, "good morning."

Now, loneliness has long been tied to negative connotations with origins in the work of Shakespeare and Milton in the late sixteenth century. If fact, Murthy notes that when Milton described satan's "lonely steps"[167] from hell to the garden in order to disrupt Adam and Eve's paradise, he inadvertently cast a moral shroud over loneliness whereby one is viewed as being less favourable in God eyes.[168] More recently, Cacioppo suggests that much of the stigma surrounding loneliness comes from how it has been talked about.[169] The press has often used the term *loner* to describe criminals and bullies have even employed it to label misfits in the playground. Essentially, being a loner has come to mean being a loser. Svendsen adds, that the connotation of being lonely "is to fail at an essential part of human life."[170] For this reason, loneliness is particularly linked to shame, as if there is something fundamentally wrong with the person suffering.[171] This makes it particularly challenging to identify loneliness and difficult for the lonely person to admit their struggles. However, despite the challenge in overcoming the stigma of loneliness, Murthy points out that the stigma surrounding depression has significantly reduced in

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[165] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 1, Kindle.

[166] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 4, Kindle.

[167] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 3, Kindle.

[168] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 3, Kindle.

[169] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 13.

[170] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Loneliness*, 131.

[171] Brene Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The quest for true belonging and the courage to stand alone* (London: Penguin Random House, 2017), 54.

recent years as more people have talked openly about it.[172] Accordingly, he proposes that the

stigma of loneliness can be challenged "if and when we're willing to speak openly about our

experiences and understand loneliness for what it is: a near-universal human condition."[173]

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[172] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 1, Kindle.

[173] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 1, Kindle.

3.3. Summary

The above sections demonstrate why a method of critical correlation is effectual in the treatment of loneliness, as both the theological and social science sources deal with nuanced aspects of the issue, offering a more comprehensive perspective. Firstly, although the information is interpreted through a different lens, both the Christian traditions and the secular information thoroughly agree that human beings are social creatures by nature and that human thriving takes place within the social framework. The social science enlightens a definition for loneliness as the deprivation of meaningful connection, which both sources observe as a recurrent feature in the human experience. However, chronic symptoms of loneliness create a negative feedback loop which makes it difficult for individuals to find their way back to connection. Whilst, the social sciences illuminate the three degree's of connection necessary for social fulfilment, theology offers the church community as God's provision to the problem of loneliness and the means by which these degrees are satisfied. However, the presence of sin in the human condition and the stigma associated, exacerbates the problem of loneliness which can offer added challenges to how it is identified and addressed.

4.0. AN EXPLORATION FOR POTENTIAL ANSWERS

One common assumption, which is perceived to solve the problem of loneliness is the concept of organised social support.[174] In fact, many universities in America have utilised this approach by setting up social mixers for their new students. However, whilst sociable environments can facilitate connection, loneliness cannot simply be eradicated by putting people together.[175] Crucially, underlying this approach is a misunderstanding of loneliness. This dissertation has already established that loneliness is a subjective experience, rather than an objective one and that people have different sensitivities of their need for connection. Whilst the analysis above provides the means by which a person may recognise the signals of loneliness,[176] Svendsen emphasises the role of personal responsibility as a response.[177] He argues that if an individual blames external factors for their experience of loneliness, then it will be left to external factors to remedy the situation. Albeit, this approach shall render individuals helpless in their response.[178] Thus, by arguing for the role of responsibility, he means to empower people to take control of their situation, acknowledge it and respond accordingly.

However, this argument does not abdicate the church from its responsibility to its people. The church and its clergy can be actively involved in facilitating a culture which promotes connection. According to Cacioppo, churches "reflect the basic human need to gather, connect, and belong. In doing so they adventitiously address human loneliness in each of the three dimensions - intimate, relational, and collective."[179] He adds, "they provide one-stop shopping for human connection in many different forms."[180] According to the social scientist, churches readily possess all of the structural components for addressing the problem of loneliness within. The chapters below represent the means by which a person can build a more connected life. Thus, if nurtured within a

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[174] Cacioppo points out that this is a common assumption within many organisations. "How Loneliness Begets Loneliness," The Atlantic, last modified April 6 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/04/how-loneliness-begets-loneliness/521841/.

[175] Cacioppo emphasises that this type of manufactured social intervention is not a viable solution to the problem of loneliness. The Atlantic, "Loneliness."

[176] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 230.

[177] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Loneliness*, 133.

[178] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Loneliness*, 133.

[179] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 254.

[180] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 254.

church environment, such activities shall strengthen the connectedness of everyone in the community, thus enhancing the functionality of the church.

The five areas of responses below are grounded in theology and guided by the social science. Both sources will be brought into a mutual dialogue, in order to generate fresh insight for the church community in their endeavour to build more connected people. Each of the following responses will be accompanied by a practical step, which is designed to inspire churches and their clergy with an example in how the theory can be applied specifically to local church context.

4.1. Meaningful Connection

The task of eliminating chronic loneliness must be predicated upon meaningful connection with others.[181] Now, reciprocal relationships known as friendships, are considered to be the most mutually beneficial type of relationship which provide a robust security against loneliness.[182] The reciprocal feeling produced by the quality of connection within a friendship provides doses of comfort and creates a positive feedback loop for both individuals. It should be noted that authentic friendships are not transactional for the purposes of career advancement or the like. They are based on a mutual feeling of affinity, common interests and respect for one another.[183] Friends want to spend time together and will make the effort to do so.[184] According to social science, the place of friendship plays a key role in breaking the cycle of loneliness.

Now, the phrase "one another" in the Bible is derived from the Greek word *allelon* and occurs one hundred times in the New Testament.[185] Comparatively, it is found only thirty times in the Old Testament, despite its corpus being three times the word count. It is used predominately within the context of the church community in relation to how Christians should treat one another, which amongst other things, includes loving, serving, forgiving, bearing and encouraging.[186] These

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[181] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 240.

[182] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 7, Kindle.

[183] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 241.

[184] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 7, Kindle.

[185] Stephen D. Lowe and Mary E. Lowe, "Allēlōn: Reciprocal Commands and Christian Development," *Christian Education Journal* 7, no. 2 (2010): 281–98, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001811275&site=ehost-live.

[186] Lowe and Lowe, "Allēlōn," 281-98.

directives facilitate the building of authentic relationships amongst Christians. Significantly, *allelon* infers in its definition the meaning of mutuality and reciprocity.[187] Thus, the biblical writers who shaped the early Christian communities commended a mutual and reciprocal fellowship to the church.

In fact, it was the quality of these mutual relationships which played a vital role in Paul's life and ministry, which were appreciated to an even greater degree amidst his difficulties. To the Corinthians, he writes, "when we came into Macedonia, we had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him." (2 Corinthians 7:5-7 NIV). He adds, "He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever." (2 Corinthians 7:7 NIV). Here, Paul claims that his mutual relationships provided him with the necessary comfort in a challenging time. In fact, he goes insofar to say that his friendship with Titus and the wider church community was the means by which God provided comfort to him.[188]

Although Paul was an immensely tough individual, he was by no means a one-man band on the lonely frontier of church-planting. Evidently, he was convinced of his need for quality connection, which is demonstrated in how he invested large amounts of time into cultivating his relationships. He gives his readers a sense of this in his epilogue to the Roman church. He refers to over twenty-five people as dear friends, companions, co-workers, fellow prisoners and paternal figures (Romans 16:1-15).[189] Clearly, Paul had varying degrees of connection with people, each of which satisfied the three dimensions for human connectedness. What is also clear, is how meaningful Paul's relationships were to him. In fact, when he outlines his plans to come to Rome, he describes a key motive as being the enjoyment and refreshment he expects to receive from their company (Romans 15:24-32).

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[187] Lowe and Lowe, "Allēlōn," 281-98.

[188] Ralph P. Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary: 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), chap. V.J, Kindle.

[189] James D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans 9-16 Volume 38B* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), VII.B.2., Kindle.

However, the goal of meaningful connection is not the quantity of friendships as one might collect stamps or compete in a popularity contest.[190] As Solomon points out, "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." (Proverbs 18:24 ESV) Evidently, it is the quality of connection that matters most.[191] For this reason, Cacioppo argues that selection is an important part of establishing and developing the quality of connection within relationships.

The process of selection helps a person evaluate what prospective friendships may be promising and which would be a wrong investment.[192] Accordingly, Solomon points out, "The righteous choose their friends carefully, but the way of the wicked leads them astray." (Proverbs 12:26 NIV). Even Jesus spent the entire night seeking God's guidance through prayer, prior to selecting His twelve disciples (Luke 6:12-16). Now, selection is particularly pertinent for the lonely person because the eagerness to satisfy their longing for connection may be misguided by an unregulated approach. As a result, the lonely individual may feel pressured to select friends on the basis of materialistic qualities, such as looks, popularity or riches but this often leads to superficial connection, which shall only enhance the feelings of loneliness.[193] Unsurprisingly, materialistic selection can happen even within the church community and James warns against favouritism towards the rich (James 2:9). Thus, meaningful and sustainable relationships require thoughtful selection, which should be predicated upon the compatibility of common interests, beliefs and stages in life.[194]

However, where does the lonely person who is deprived of meaningful connection and satisfactory friendships begin? Rather than feeling the pressure to make a best friend, Cacioppo points out that individuals should, "Play with the idea of trying to get small doses of the positive sensations that come from positive social interactions."[195] Such doses could be sourced from a brief conversation with someone in the church foyer, attending a small group or even short

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[190] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 240.

[191] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 240.

[192] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 240.

[193] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 240-241.

[194] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 241.

[195] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 237.

exchanges in the grocery store. These simple yet transient touch points of connection provide feelings of comfort and an emotional uplift.[196] These connections should not be rushed, which may well be the temptation for the lonely person. The nature of any relationship is that it must proceed at the pace by which all parties are comfortable. Accordingly, these social interactions must be predicated upon an attitude of availability, which shall naturally elicit warmth from others.[197] As the ancient proverb goes, "A man who has friends must himself be friendly." (Proverbs 18:24 NKJV).

4.1.1. Practical Example

Within the context of a local church setting, an environment of connection can be nurtured by establishing accessible connection points for congregants.[198] Where possible, this means organising the community into smaller groups, such as youth, young adults, families and so on. These groups create sticking points which are less intimidating and more accessible for congregants.[199] Although there must be a certain amount of clique within these groups, the cliqueyness must never become exclusive. Naturally, these groups require leaders of their own, people who can nurture connection and provide ongoing guidance.[200]

Additionally, an atmosphere of friendliness should be cultivated across all aspects of church life.[201] This may be unnatural for people who live in hardened urban environments but it is necessary if people are going to feel included rather than excluded. Within a gathered context, this can be facilitated by establishing a team of people who actively engage congregants in conversations, church activities and so on.[202] During the week, small groups can play an

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[196] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 232.

[197] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 242.

[198] Burke, *No Perfect People*, chap. 14, Kindle.

[199] For more on the *Stickiness Factor* refer to Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How little things can make a big difference* (London: Abacus, 2001), 89-132.

[200] Burke, *No Perfect People*, chap. 14, Kindle.

[201] Jacobsen, *Pieces of Glass*, chap. 10, Kindle.

[202] Burke, *No Perfect People*, chap. 14, Kindle.

important role in emphasising hospitality, which will naturally create opportunities for people to establish meaningful connections.[203]

4.2. Vulnerability

A recent study found that loneliness erodes a person's ability trust others.[204] This is because the lonely person interprets the world around them with a heightened suspicion as though it were threatening.[205] The experience of loneliness induces a self protective mode, which is initiated by the fear of being hurt. It causes increased social withdrawal and decreases the seeking of support.[206] Thus, the lonely person passively copes with their difficulties, living in a world where they would rather fit in without causing too much fuss because it seems safer and easier.[207] Modern technology aids passive coping by making it easy to present a kind of pseudo-self on social media platforms.[208] However, the costs for these self protective behaviours are high, as fear and mistrust foster a self-perpetual cycle by which the lonely person holds the people around them at arms length.[209]

Vulnerability, on the other hand is the antecedent for connection, an activity which forges the bonds of trust.[210] It is the means by which a person can overcome the self protective mode in order to build a more connected life.[211] According to Brene Brown, "True belonging is not passive. It's not the belonging that comes with just joining a group. It's not fitting in or pretending or selling out because it's safer. It's a practice that requires us to be vulnerable, get uncomfortable, and learn

[203] Rosaria Butterfield provides an excellent discussion in how Christian hospitality can facilitate meaningful connection. *The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World* (Illinois: Crossway, 2018), chap. 2, Kindle.

[204] Ken Rotenberg, "Loneliness and Interpersonal Trust," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 13 (June 1994): 152-173, http://dx.doi.org/10.1521/jscp.1994.13.2.152.

[205] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Loneliness*, 62.

[206] John T. Cacioppo et al. "Lonely traits and concomitant physiological processes: the MacArthur social neuroscience studies," *International journal of psychophysiology: official journal of the International Organization of Psychophysiology* 35 (March 2000): 143-54, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0167-8760(99)00049-5.

[207] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 102-103.

[208] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 4, Kindle.

[209] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Loneliness*, 70.

[210] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 3, Kindle.

[211] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 3, Kindle.

how to be present with people without sacrificing who we are."[212] Here, Brown means to argue that belonging requires active engagement. Belonging requires vulnerability because vulnerability enables people to bring their whole-selves to a relationship, which enhances the measure of connectivity and builds safety through trust. Whilst independence, autonomy and self-sufficiency are key drivers of the loneliness epidemic, the activity of vulnerability engenders dependence on one's interconnectedness.

Now, Paul utilises the activity of vulnerability with the Corinthian church in order to heal a rift that had come between them.[213] In doing so, he commends his ministry to them but not as one might expect. Rather than boasting of his strengths, Paul opens up to present his whole self and ministry experience to the Corinthians by including both the good and the bad.[214] In one place, he vacillates between the antitheses of his ministry by saying, "through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors;" (2 Corinthians 6:8 NIV). This is a brutally honest account, yet as Murthy points out, "To be real is to be vulnerable."[215] In doing so, Paul does not set himself up to be a "super-apostle" (2 Corinthians 11:5 NIV) but rather as a relatable friend and pastor.

Because the Corinthians had mistreated Paul and perhaps even deeply hurt him in the process, Paul's honestly and vulnerability of his lived ministry experience was risky. Perhaps, it even felt uncomfortable for the apostle. Yet such vulnerability was necessary for Paul, for he sees it as the pathway by which genuine connection is nurtured.[216] He concludes the account by saying, "We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also." (2 Corinthians 6:11-13 NIV). Evidently, Paul's

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[212] Brown, *Braving the Wilderness*, 37.

[213] Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, II.B, Kindle.

[214] Guthrie provides an excellent discussion to the open-heartedness of Paul, *2 Corinthians*, II.B, Kindle.

[215] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 4, Kindle.

[216] Martin, *2 Corinthians*, chap. V.H, Kindle.

vulnerability enables him to appeal to the Corinthians vulnerability, which he hopes will be reciprocated, thus reconciling the damaged bond.[217]

Now, in another place James affirms this practice by guiding the church in the activity of being vulnerable with one another. He says, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." (James 5:16 NIV). Thus, James corresponds the act of reciprocal confession with healing, which encompasses not just physical restoration but extends to the healing of broken relationships as well.[218] As noted above, Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is marked by a message of reconciliation. It is this message which motivates Paul to lead the way in vulnerability with the Corinthian community, an activity which aims to stimulate the healing of their relationship.[219] From this context, Bonhoeffer surmises the role of vulnerability on the community of faith in this way, "The sin concealed separated him from the fellowship, made all his apparent fellowship a sham; the sin confessed has helped him to find true fellowship with the brethren in Jesus Christ."[220] According to Bonhoeffer, the activity of confession, or to put it another way - the activity of being vulnerable with one's weaknesses - promotes healing and enables a person to forge the necessary bonds, required to break through into real community.

Thus, the goal for the lonely person is to develop at least two confidants; safe, intimate and reciprocal relationships, where both parties can share freely with each other.[221] However, these relationships take time to develop and may not be readily accessible for the lonely person. In this case, Cacioppo notes that vulnerability "is best done by experimenting in small steps and in safe environments."[222] It should not be forced and in this way, the community of faith must learn to bear with one another in patience.[223] Like a child slowly learns to walk, so too the lonely person must be encouraged to slowly ease their way back into meaningful connection through the activity of

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[217] Martin emphasises the reciprocal nature of vulnerability, which Paul calls forth from the community in Corinth. *2 Corinthians*, chap. V.H, Kindle.

[218] R. T. France and George H. Guthrie, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Hebrews, James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), chap. IV, Kindle.

[219] Martin, *2 Corinthians*, chap. V.H, Kindle.

[220] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 113.

[221] The Atlantic, "Loneliness Begets Loneliness."

[222] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 237.

[223] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 66.

vulnerability, however this must be done at their own pace. Moreover, this will only be achieved when an environment is judged safe enough to do so. Thus, when a Christian community decides to nurture an atmosphere of vulnerability the grace of God will be required in an abundance.[224]

4.2.1. Practical Example

One of the ways in which an environment of vulnerability can be facilitated is through communal prayer. Naturally, prayer requests prompt the opportunity for people to share their challenges and consequently prayerful support can be offered as well as continued pastoral and practical advice.[225] This can happen before, during or after gathered church services as well as in small groups during the week. It can be done in a variety of ways and should be shaped according to the style and practice of the church. However, a leader must demonstrate their willingness and commitment to vulnerability by 'going first'. This is often the most difficult part for some leaders but it is a necessary step before calling forth vulnerability from others.[226]

Additionally, new opportunities for congregants to share their testimonies during gathered church services and small groups can be a way of reinforcing a vulnerable expression within the community. Testimonies open the vulnerable parts of people's lives to others and promote a shared sense of humanity, which can address the stigma of loneliness and break a toxic culture of self-righteousness. However, this activity should be approached with clear parameters and is best facilitated by a senior leader.

4.3. Solitude

This dissertation has already demonstrated that solitude, as aloneness, doesn't correspond with loneliness. Accordingly, the theologian Paul Tillich draws the distinction between loneliness and solitude by writing, "Our language has wisely sensed these two sides of man's being alone. It has created the word 'loneliness' to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word 'solitude' to express the glory of being alone."[227] Moreover, Richard Foster discriminates between

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[224] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 112.

[225] Cloud and Townsend, *Small Groups*, 78-80.

[226] Burke, *No Perfect People*, chap. 4, Kindle.

[227] Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Scribner, 1963), chap. 1, Kindle.

the two in this way, "Loneliness is inner emptiness. Solitude is inner fulfillment."[228] In light of these observations, Tillich offers solitude as a solution to the problem of loneliness by writing, "Loneliness can be conquered only by those who can bear solitude."[229]

Now, solitude carries predominantly religious connotations. However, despite removing the place of God, secular academics are recognising the value of solitude as a remedy to the problem of loneliness. The philosopher Svendsen claims that the activity, "harbours true recognition."[230] Murthy adds to this point by framing the goal of secular solitude as the confrontation of the self.[231] However, those who struggle with loneliness do not necessarily seek out solitude.[232] In fact, solitude can feel daunting, even overwhelming for the lonely person. One reason for this, is that solitude can bring both positive and negative emotions to the surface.[233] This is where Brown likens solitude to the metaphor of a wilderness and argues for the special place of bravery it takes for a person to enter into it.[234] According to Murthy, the payoff from such bravery is rewarded. He describes solitude in this way, "The space where we confront our demons is not always a space we enter willingly. But it's in the grappling that we work through issues, gain clarity about our feelings, and build comfort with ourselves."[235] Hence, the pathway of self-confrontation through solitude is rewarded by an increased sense of comfort and connection to oneself, which will enhance the ease of making meaningful connections.[236]

Now within the Christian traditions, solitude is considered by many as a spiritual discipline and presents an added dimension of reflection in light of the gospel.[237] It has been practiced within the monastic vocation for over a millennia, whereby monks and nuns stretch the limits of self isolation,

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[228] Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 96.

[229] Tillich, *The Eternal Now*, chap. 1, Kindle.

[230] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Loneliness*, 109.

[231] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 1, Kindle.

[232] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Loneliness*, 108.

[233] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 1, Kindle.

[234] Brown, *Braving the Wilderness*, 36.

[235] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 1, Kindle.

[236] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 242.

[237] Henri Nouwen makes this point in, *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981), 71.

even to the detriment of personal health, in order to connect more powerfully with God.[238] The sixth-century Syrian monk, Saint John Climacus, who spent much of his life praying on Mount Sinai wrote, "The friend of silence draws near to God."[239] More recently, John Mark Comer has pointed out, "In solitude we're anything but alone. In fact, that's where many of us feel most in connection to God."[240] Now surprisingly, this phenomena has even been recognised within noteworthy studies. In 1989, Melvin Pollner found that closeness in a "divine relationship" was associated with significantly greater global happiness, life satisfaction, and even marital happiness.[241] Another more recent study, discovered that a sample of urban adults experienced an increased sense of comfort, solace, and security through a relationship with God.[242] Cacioppo also argues that a belief in a higher power, such as a deity, "provides an intimacy, an affirmation of self,"[243] which is beyond what any other parasocial relationship can provide.

Unsurprisingly, Jesus recognised the value of solitude and amidst the busyness of His ministry, sought it regularly (Mark 1:35). In his Gospel account, Luke notes that "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." (Luke 5:16 NIV). Christ even taught His hearers to follow His example by saying, "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen." (Matthew 6:6 NIV). Nonetheless, even for the Christian, solitude may indeed sound like a counter-intuitive response to the feelings of loneliness. However, Bonhoeffer describes the reward for godly solitude in this way, "The time of meditation does not let us down into the void and abyss of loneliness; it lets us be alone with the Word. And in so doing it gives us solid ground on which to stand and clear directions as to the steps we must take."[244] In other words, solitude has the ability to centre and ground the Christian for the day or week ahead.

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[238] "What is a Monastic Vocation," Saint Bede Abbey, accessed January 13 2021, https://www.stbedeabbey.org/monastic-vocation.

[239] Saint John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), 135.

[240] John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry: How to stay emotionally healthy and spiritually alive in the chaos of the modern world* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2019), chap. 11, Kindle.

[241] Melvin Pollner, "Divine Relations, Social Relations, and Well-Being," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 30, (March 1989): 92-104, https://doi.org/10.2307/2136915.

[242] Louise C. Hawkley and John T. Cacioppo, "How Can I Connect with Thee: Measuring and Comparing Satisfaction in Multiple Relationship Domains," *J Individ Psychol* 66 (Spring 2010): 43-58, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3889142/.

[243] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 262.

[244] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 81.

Solitude also creates opportunities where the intensifying feelings of loneliness can drive a desire to connect with God through reflection and prayer. Whilst experiencing the pain of loneliness, King David was prompted to reach out to God through prayer in this way, "Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted." (Psalms 25:16 NIV). Scripture promises that God draws near to those who draw near to Him (James 4:8) and in this way, He will not allow the needs of His people to go unmet. In light of his own afflictions, Paul makes special mention of the comfort which God provides to His people in the midst of their difficulties (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).[245] Furthermore, at the moment of Jesus' ascension, where the loss of their beloved teacher may well have incited feelings of isolation, Jesus comforted His followers with these words, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:20 NIV). Thus, the Christian can find comfort in these words, which shall enhance the sense of connectedness one feels to God, themselves and others within the community of faith.

Therefore, the lonely person must learn to carve out daily solitude amidst the busyness of life. This can be done by intentionally seeking out short bursts of alone time through the use of various mediums, such as the arts, the outdoors and even sitting at a coffee shop.[246] However, at the heart of Christian solitude is seeking time to open oneself up to God.[247] This could include listening to a podcast, reading the Bible, writing in a journal, singing a song, reciting a prayer and even thinking or waiting on God.

4.3.1. Practical Example

Clearly, solitude is dependant upon the individual, however it can and should be encouraged by clergy persons.[248] This could be done in a number of imaginative ways. An annual sermon series on prayer and solitude could bring focus to this and encourage congregants to engage with it. This could extend to facilitate conversations in small groups, whereby people discuss how solitude is best done amidst the busyness of urban life. A weekly prayer schedule could also be organised into prayer slots and distributed amongst congregants in order to prompt people to set a specific

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[245] Martin, *2 Corinthians*, chap. II, Kindle.

[246] Murthy, *Together*, forward, Kindle.

[247] Comer, *Elimination of Hurry*, chap. 11, Kindle.

[248] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 88.

time aside during the week. Crucially, solitude is not just a means for overcoming the painful feelings of loneliness, it can be used as a tool for continued discipleship which will undoubtedly build stronger and more connected Christians.[249]

4.4. Transcendence

The importance of story on the human condition has recently been established by the likes of neurologist Robert Burton, who claims that human beings are, "hardwired to need stories."[250] It has recently been shown that stories initiate a reaction within the brain, which release dopamine into the body's system.[251] Dopamine functions as a neurotransmitter which plays a major role in rewarding certain behaviours.[252] According to Burton, narrative or story is "the brain's way of piecing together a number of separate components of an image into a coherent picture."[253] Thus, the brain seeks out stories wherever possible, in order for a person to make sense of the world around them and their place in it.[254] Accordingly, the brain rewards this behaviour in terms of a positive learning activity.

Now, Svendsen observes that, "Loneliness tells us something about ourselves, about our place in the world. The emotion tells us how insignificant we are in the greater scheme of things. We feel relegated to a universe where we make no difference, where our being or non-being is devoid of relevance for our surroundings."[255] Hence, the experience of loneliness damages a persons perception of how they make sense of the world and their place in it, which inevitably disrupts belonging, depletes meaning and consequently leads to the decline of well-being and good decision-making.[256]

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[249] Nouwen, *All Things New*, 69, 71.

[250] "Our Brains Tell Stories So We Can Live," Nautilus, last modified August 8 2019, http://nautil.us/issue/75/story/our-brains-tell-stories-so-we-can-live.

[251] Nautilus, "Stories."

[252] Kent C. Berridge, "The debate over dopamine's role in reward: the case for incentive salience," *Psychopharmacology* 191, no. 3 (April 2007): 391–431, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s00213-006-0578-x.

[253] Nautilus, "Stories."

[254] Nautilus, "Stories."

[255] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Loneliness*, 129.

[256] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Loneliness*, 131.

This understanding helps explain the enormous role that storytelling has played throughout the generations. Meaning, identity and values are captured and encoded in stories, which bind people together.[257] Accordingly, Murthy points out that "Even in the absence of others, stories make individuals feel connected and promote a sense of belonging... They give meaning to our struggles, and comfort us when we are suffering or afraid. They bring us together."[258] More specifically, it is the nature of transcendent stories that provide answers to the most enduring questions, such as *who are we and what are we here for?* Wright claims that "We all live the little stories of our own lives on the assumption of some larger story that makes sense to us"[259] Accordingly, he argues that belonging and meaning are sourced from "seeing yourself within a grand story that transcends your own life, and transcends even the material universe."[260] Eric Jacobsen adds that transcendent stories help, "us escape our loneliness and alienation by binding us to others with whom we share a common story."[261] For Christians, this is the transcendent story of the gospel, the good news of God's unfolding plan of redemption stretched out across time. It was within this story that each disciple garnered a sense of belonging and was driven out into the world on mission with a great sense of purpose.[262]

Despite all the advancements of modern secularism, Cacioppo, an agnostic social scientist argues for the value of the transcendent as a solution to the problem of loneliness. He claims that, "Just as finding social connection is good for us, finding that transcendent something appears to be very good for us."[263] In fact, he goes insofar to claim that humans are biologically wired to reach for a sense of meaning in something beyond themselves.[264] Accordingly, a recent study found that a shared transcendent narrative within one church community produced uplifting feelings for its members, which were also accompanied by an increased sense of belonging and meaning. This was compared to a community promoting multiple narratives, which saw a sharp decline in positive

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[257] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 2, Kindle.

[258] Murthy, *Together*, chap. 2, Kindle.

[259] Wright, *The Mission*, 114.

[260] Wright, *The Mission*, 114.

[261] Jacobsen, *Pieces of Glass*, chap. 11, Kindle.

[262] Wright, *The Mission*, 47 & 115.

[263] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 263.

[264] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 262.

responses.[265] It was this kind of plurality of story which muddied a shared narrative and caused division in some of the early churches of the New Testament. It is explicitly clear in the case of the Galatians, where Paul writes to address a conflicting narrative in order to redirect them towards a homogenous message.[266] Accordingly, Jacobsen notes that the communal aspect of a shared understanding in the gospel, "can connect us with others who are part of that same story."[267]

Clearly, Paul made sense of his life story in the context of a larger one, namely the Gospel. Whilst imprisoned in a Roman jail cell all alone, Paul demonstrated the power of this in his own life by writing, "Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:20-21 NIV).[268] Despite facing the prospect of further imprisonment and even death, Paul found a transcendent sense of belonging and meaning in the gospel narrative, which enabled him to face his situation with a more optimistic perspective than one might expect.[269] Here, Cacioppo surmises the role of a transcendent story in this way, "It is only through some ultimate sense of connection that we can face our own mortality without despair,"[270] which is precisely what Paul eluded to in his address to the Philippian church. Thus, subsuming ones own life to a transcendent narrative, such as the gospel, shall help the lonely person gain a necessary perspective, required to nurture an increased sense of belonging and meaning.[271]

4.4.1. Practical Example

Dan Kimble claims that the emerging generations are largely unfamiliar with the story of God. For this reason he argues that "preachers must become storytellers again."[272] This means that

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[265] Hansong Zhang et al., "Exploring Social Belonging and Meaning in Religious Groups," *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 47 (March 2019): 3–19, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0091647118806345.

[266] Scot McKnight, *The NIV Application Commentary: Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), chap, Introduction, Kindle.

[267] Jacobsen, *Pieces of Glass*, chap. 11, Kindle.

[268] Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), chap. Introduction, Kindle.

[269] Fee, *Philippians*, chap. II, Kindle.

[270] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 262.

[271] Jacobsen, *Pieces of Glass*, chap. 11, Kindle.

[272] Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 172.

preachers may have to adopt more of a *plain speak* approach rather than assuming an underlying base of knowledge. Moreover, despite the emphasis of a particular sermon subject, preachers should attempt to weave the transcendent story of God into the sermon at certain points. However, this should not just be limited to the sermon. The story of God can also be woven into the other parts of the service, from worship to prayer and so on. From beginning to end, the various mediums of a gathered church experience can be designed to reflect the narrative of the gospel in order to bind people together.[273] For example, during the close of a service, clergy persons must consider how they send their congregants out into the week with a renewed sense of mission as God's co-workers, who have received the baton of faith from those who have gone before them.[274] This transcendent language in a service can also reduce the extent to which a community individualises theology.

4.5. Altruism

Altruism, lies at the heart of Christian practice. It has been described as the means for faultless faith (James 1:27), productive faith (Titus 3:14) and as the defining feature by which a Christian may be identified (Matthew 7:16 and John 13:35). Numerous parables, examples and instructions are used throughout the New Testament texts in order to illustrate the special importance of altruism in the Christian faith. One particular example of note, is Christ's challenge to the disciples' argument of self-grandiosity. Jesus famously redirected their eagerness towards His own selfless example by stating, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45 NIV). Yet, to what extent is altruism linked to solving the problem of loneliness? Accordingly, the social sciences shall illuminate the effects of altruism on the human condition, which will be discussed in relation to the Christian perspective.

American Psychology published a study in 2003 which found a 25% reduction in early mortality rates for healthy people who regularly attend church services. One of the contributing factors of note towards this increase, is altruism, which many religious services encourage. The researchers, Powell et al. note that, "Regular church/service attendance may encourage meaningful social roles

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[273] Kimball, *Emerging Church*, 173.

[274] Wright, *The Mission*, 47.

that provide a sense of self-worth and purpose through the act of helping. This is in contrast to the more common conceptualizations of social support where the emphasis is on being helped."[275] Additionally, another study in 1976 demonstrated that elderly residents in nursing homes who were given responsibilities were more active with increased alertness and lived longer than those without such responsibilities.[276] Remarkably, it has also been shown that regular high engagement in volunteering, even amongst the elderly, reduces premature mortality by as much as 44%.[277] Thus, multiple studies have proven altruism to increase personal well-being.

Now, when people extend themselves towards others in an act of generosity, such as buying a friend dinner, giving a sandwich to a homeless person, or volunteering at a food bank, the body releases a chemical uplift of oxytocin, which is commonly known as the *helper's high*.[278] In a study of 3000 Americans, 95% of people experienced a euphoric sensation after volunteering and later felt a further rush when reflecting on their involvement.[279] Such is the body's natural way of affirming generosity. The implications for the release of oxytocin in the body are found to strengthen the immune system, bolster feelings of personal control, decrease the awareness of pain and subdue the feelings of depression.[280] In fact, one study found that the increase in well-being from volunteering once a week was equivalent to receiving a quadruple increase in annual salary.[281]

Cacioppo argues for role that altruism plays in breaking more chronic cycles of loneliness. He claims that "altruism reinforces social connection"[282] because it pushes people to extend

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[275] Lynda H. Powell et al., "Religion and spirituality. Linkages to physical health," *The American Psychologist* 58, (January 2003): 36-52, DOI: 10.1037/0003-066x.58.1.36.

[276] Ellen Langer and Judith Rodin, "The effects of choice and enhanced personal responsibility for the aged: A field experiment in an institutional setting," *Journal of personality and social psychology* 34 (1976): 191-8, DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.34.2.191.

[277] Doug Oman et al., "Volunteerism and Mortality among the Community-dwelling Elderly," *Journal of health psychology* 4 (1999): 301-16, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F135910539900400301.

[278] Luks was the first person to coin the term *Helper's High*, which came about as a result of his research. Allan Luks with Peggy Payne, *The Healing Power of Doing Good: The Health and Spiritual Benefits of Helping Others* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2001), chap. Prologue, Kindle.

[279] Luks with Payne, *Doing Good*, chap. Prologue, Kindle.

[280] Neal Krause, Regula A. Herzog and Elizabeth Baker, "Providing Support to Others and Well-Being in Later Life," *Journal of Gerontology* 47 (September 1992): 300-311, https://doi.org/10.1093/geronj/47.5.P300.

[281] Lieberman, *Social*, 247.

[282] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 57.

themselves towards others. One of the key challenges is in addressing the unregulated neediness induced by loneliness, whereby those affected seek to be *fed first*.[283] Altruism provides an achievable pathway for people to get beyond themselves. For example, after Peter had denied Christ three times, Jesus appeared to him on a beach and sought to restore the hurting disciple. Jesus offered Peter these words, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17 NIV) three times over. Instead of just sympathising with Peter's pain, Jesus enlisted Peter into His service by instructing him to serve His followers and in doings so, recognised Peter's value within His Kingdom.[284] Jesus' words of comfort redirected Peter's focus towards others because as Cacioppo points out here, "Real change begins with *doing*."[285]

Thus, altruism extends people beyond themselves and in doing so produces significant psychological and physiological benefits, which can act as a circuit breaker to the chronic nature of loneliness and allow people to take control of their lives.[286] The scientific findings compliment the wisdom of Proverbs which says, "A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed." (Proverbs 11:25 NIV) Moreover, in the case of altruism, Cacioppo explicitly agrees with the ethical role of the Christian traditions by saying, "As evolutionary psychology and social neuroscience converge, more and more scientific findings align with the most basic ethical teaching of the most enduring systems of belief, what we call the Golden Rule. 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'"[287]

4.5.1. Practical Example:

The insights gleaned from altruism contradict traditional conceptualisations for organised social support. Instead of focussing on being helped or supported, altruism elicits generosity from the lonely individual which initiates a positive physiological reaction. Within the context of a local church, Neil Hudson frames this approach in terms of a pastoral equipping model, which is

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[283] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 232.

[284] Colin G. Kruse, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: John* (London: IVP, 2017), chap. 4.B, Kindle.

[285] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 233.

[286] Cacioppo points out that over time the pleasure of the helpers high may compensate for and grant distance from sources of lifelong emotional pain. *loneliness*, 233.

[287] Cacioppo, *loneliness*, 268.

contrasted to a pastoral care model.[288] Now, altruism can be facilitated and encouraged in various ways which can be adapted to different contexts. Examples include, (1) creating leadership and volunteer opportunities for congregants within church life, (2) partnering with local organisations which create further volunteering opportunities, (3) providing opportunities for financial contribution both within the church and towards partnered charities, (4) finally, encouraging a culture and lifestyle of generosity through the mediums of preaching and small groups.

However, facilitated altruism should not be approached blindly or naively, for it can unfortunately result in exploitation and abuse. Sadly, it is a common story within churches and one which Pope Francis addressed within the Catholic Church in 2016 by saying, "When you are asked something that is more servitude than service, have the courage to say no!"[289] Altruism should neither be attended to with alterior motives which seeks to receive applause. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their open shows of piety, whilst their hearts were filled with self serving motivations (Matthew 6:3-5, 16, 18). Such are the tensions which must be held by a leader when generating the opportunities and motivation for altruism.

4.6. Jesus and Loneliness

This discussion will conclude by demonstrating how Jesus responded to the painful experience of loneliness, in order to set an example for how His followers can equally respond. The reason this section is positioned at the conclusion of the above discussion is that all five points are addressed in varying degrees in Christ's response. Naturally, Jesus' application shall provide a clearer pathway for how a response can be enacted.

Now, Christ's loneliness was prophesied before He even came into the world. Isaiah wrote, "He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem." (Isaiah 53:3 NIV). Even John observes the extent of Christ's rejection in his gospel by noting, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." (John 1:11 NIV). However, it is in the garden of

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[288] Neil Hudson, *Imagine Church: Releasing Whole-Life Disciples* (Nottingham: IVP, 2012), 122.

[289] "Nuns speak out about exploitation in Catholic Church," euronews, last modified March 3 2018, https://www.euronews.com/2018/03/03/nuns-speak-out-about-exploitation-in-catholic-church.

Gethsemane where Christ's loneliness and His need of companionship is attended to.[290] Many a preacher, particularly in Pentecostal denominations, has stressed the importance of Christian watchfulness in this text, yet fail to recognise the comfort of companionship. It could be argued that because Jesus was divine, as God's Son, He was somehow dislocated from His human needs. However, this text demonstrates the reality of Christ's humanity and how He sought to satisfy His need for human connection.[291]

After the last supper Jesus took His disciples to the garden of Gethsemane to pray. He invited Peter, James and John, three of His closest friends and trusted confidants, to join Him in close proximity. Arriving at the place of prayer, Jesus confided in His friends, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." (Matthew 26:38 NIV). Although it is impossible to tell facial cues, the invitation of companionship in His darkest moment suggests that Jesus is searching for comfort from the anguish of loneliness, which His mission has forced upon Him.[292] It is clear that this feeling had been building throughout the day as Matthew punctuates Christ's expectation of loneliness during the last supper, where He makes claims of the disciples' desertion, betrayal and denial (Matthew 26:31).

Now, C.S. Lewis makes a case for the design of pain from a biblical perspective in his book *The Problem of Pain*, which aligns with Cacioppo's evolutionary theory on loneliness, albeit through a different lens. Lewis observes quite rightly, "Every man knows that something is wrong when he is being hurt."[293] The pain of loneliness instinctively raises the inquiry in the mind of the sufferer, 'Life is not supposed to be this way.' To this point, Lewis argues, "Pain insists upon being attended to."[294] He adds, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."[295] In this way, the pain of loneliness can serve as God's megaphone to rouse the lonely individual to reach out to others where deficient connection

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[290] R. T. France, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), chap. V.4, Kindle.

[291] France, *Matthew*, chap. V.4, Kindle.

[292] F.F. Bruce, *Matthew: The Open Your Bible Commentary* (Bath: Creative 4 International, 2014), chap. Consecration for Sacrifice, Kindle.

[293] C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Collins, 2012), 90.

[294] Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 91.

[295] Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 91.

is present. Clearly, this is how the suffering Christ responds in the garden. Firstly, He seeks comfort in the *meaningful connection* of His three closest friends and in doing so, is *vulnerable* about the painful emotions He is experiencing. He seeks *solitude* (Matthew 26:36) and endeavours to nurture a *transcendent* story in how He makes sense of His suffering by praying, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." (Matthew 26:42 NIV). Finally, as He prepares to leave, His focus is shifted from seeking comfort in His friends, towards fulfilling the *altruistic* task that lies before Him.

It is clear that although Christ was divine, He did not rely solely on His self-sufficiency. His humanity demonstrates that human survival, functionality and thriving is solved by one's interconnectedness to others. It was the means by which He was cared for in a manger, raised in safety and ultimately reached His end goal. Accordingly, in his book *The Four Loves* C.S. Lewis writes, "We are born helpless. As soon as we are fully conscious we discover loneliness. We need others physically, emotionally, intellectually; we need them if we are to know anything, even ourselves."[296]

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[296] C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: William Collins, 2012), 2.

CONCLUSION

The findings within this dissertation, indicate hitherto an unsuspected prevalence of social deprivation within urban church communities. The significance of this finding demonstrates that the church is afforded no concessions in terms of the loneliness epidemic sweeping through society and that in some cases, the practices within a community can intensify the experience of loneliness. The implications of this issue are shown to disrupt the social cohesion of a church community, which hinders its functionality, undermines its theological grounding and frustrates the mission of God. The lack of awareness and attention for this issue within church leadership is particularly alarming. As churches continue to grow within urbanised areas, it is crucial for leaders to recognise the social needs within their congregations and are equipped to respond accordingly.

Located within the discipline of practical theology, this project utilised a methodology of critical correlation, which proved effectual insofar that it provided both a comprehensive and contemporary picture to the scale and scope of loneliness. The social science sources were well-suited for the purposes of this project and proved to be congruent with the theological ones. At times, this was surprisingly explicit. Indeed, agnostic scholars even emphasised features of Christian practice as trustworthy solutions to the problem of loneliness. With this in mind, a comprehensive biblical survey of loneliness could clarify and strengthen theological responses to this contemporary issue.

Whilst both sources unanimously agree that human thriving is assigned to the social framework, the social science defines this framework by the three dimensions of social connection, namely intimate, relational and collective. Loneliness is thus characterised as a subjective experience of deprivation within these dimensions. However, the church community maintains all of the features by which these dimensions can be satisfied. An exploration for solutions rendered five major areas of response. Each activity has been proven to offer an important contribution in breaking the chronic nature of loneliness. Furthermore, these solutions are shown to be the necessary activities, required to build a more connected life. The practical examples provided, prompt imaginative ways in which these activities can be implemented within a local church context, in order to facilitate a culture of connection. Specifically, if implemented these activities will address each of the commonly identified causes of loneliness in churches.

Finally, if Christ's life and ministry was characterised by interdependence rather than independence, then the findings in this dissertation have the potential to emphasise the importance of the social realm within the lives of Christians and their communities. Whilst the bastion of the modern era is self-sufficiency, the Christian must learn to appreciate their need for one another with a renewed enthusiasm. Social connection within a church community should not be assumed nor overlooked. With environmental, cultural and historical factors contributing towards a decline in social cohesion, the activities which promote connection must be a constant feature of investment and priority for the church community and its clergy.

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