The Loneliness Epidemic: The Call of Christian Communities to Create Meaningful Connection and Transform Loneliness into Belonging

by

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Date: April 30, 2023
Approved:

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Dr. William H. Willimon, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in the Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Loneliness is a common and near-universal experience that causes us to feel isolated and disconnected from others. More and more Americans experience it most or all the time. With at least 30% of the US population experiencing loneliness and 10% of lonely people suffering deeply, even before the Covid-19 pandemic set upon us in 2020, the loneliness epidemic is an issue that the whole society, including Christian communities, needs to combat.

In a capitalist society that emphasizes individual freedom, autonomy, and productivity, we continue to experience economic prosperity and advancements in fields like healthcare and communication technology. At the same time, we have become more self-focused and mistrustful, while polarizing political divisions are growing ever wider. Fewer people join in social communities like church groups and sports teams, and an average person’s social network is declining. As a result, Americans are increasingly disconnected from friends, family, and neighbors.

Loneliness tends to happen due to transitions such as aging, singleness, bereavements, disconnections, and a lack of connectedness, of community, and of belonging. There is a myth that elderly people are the loneliest group; the
truth, however, is that young adults are the loneliest. This ongoing public crisis is not only causing people to suffer silently but also killing them literally, and the general public is not aware of it.

Members of the lonely society are longing for acceptance, purpose, and love, and what they need are meaningful interpersonal relationships. Although Christ has called Christians to share the gospel and participate in his ministry of caring those who suffer and are in need, Christian communities in America are not ready to tackle the issue of loneliness. In order for them to tackle it, they must change their lens on loneliness, because it is often considered bad or undesirable by Christians. How can Christian communities create meaningful connections and transform loneliness into belonging?

At the heart of the loneliness epidemic is the lack of meaningful relationships. The loneliness epidemic is a reminder that living a self-centered life is not life-giving nor sustaining. The fact that we have the loneliness epidemic despite the many opportunities to connect with one another is a reminder that we not only need stronger connections with one another, but also a deeper connection with our Creator. The loneliness epidemic is also a reminder that members of Christian communities cannot be complacent but must follow
Jesus in their neighborhoods and reach out to those who are in need, including the lonely.

I research loneliness from three perspectives: philosophy/theology, mental/emotional/physical/spiritual health, and the intersection of religion and health. In doing so, I explore the issues that can be beneficial to Christian communities in responding to the loneliness epidemic. I focus my research on such issues as how loneliness has an impact on individuals mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually; how loneliness affects demographics like young adults, the elderly, and Christian leaders; the role of psychotherapy and other interventions and approaches for reducing loneliness; and the necessary actions members of Christian communities and leaders can take part in against the loneliness epidemic. I explore the nature and dangers of loneliness from the perspectives of contemporary researchers on loneliness and theologians like Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Thomas Aquinas (1224 – 1274), and John of the Cross (1542-1591).
Dedication

To the glory of God and in deep gratitude to my parents, Rev. Jacob Rodawla and Daw Sarawni Colney; to my siblings Airforcethanga Rodawla and Lilypari Isaac and their families; to my maternal grandparents, Daniela Colney and Lalbiakmawii Kawilam; to the members of Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church in Maryland, The Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor in Michigan, and Providence Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina; to the members of Mizo Society of America; and to the teachers and mentors in my life. This work is also dedicated to the stateless refugees and migrants around the world and to all who are lonely.
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Chapter 1

The Problem of Loneliness

Mother Teresa once said, “The most terrible poverty is loneliness, and the feeling of being unloved.” ¹ Americans live in the richest nation on earth, and yet alarming numbers of us are lonely.² We are rich materially but poor on the inside. Since I began fulltime ministry in the Presbyterian Church of U.S.A in 2013, one common issue I have noticed among church members of different ages, genders, and racial backgrounds is that they are lonely. These members are surrounded by friends and family members; however, something is missing in their lives. They look fine in the pews and in their outer appearances, yet behind closed doors they suffer quietly. The common causes of loneliness among these congregants include grief, relationship issues, trauma, physical and mental health issues, unmet expectations, and major life changes. In addition to these causes, young people also experience loneliness as a result of being bullied, body image issues, and stress. I can relate to the feeling of these people of God because as a child, I experienced loneliness from time to time due to frequent moving and long separation from my parents.

¹ Mark Mayfield, The Path out of Loneliness: Finding and Fostering Connection to God, Ourselves, and One Another, (Colorado Springs: NavPres, 2021), 1, Kindle.
I was born and raised in Myanmar (also known as Burma) where my father
served as an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar. When I
was in first grade, my father came to the United States for further education and
could not go back to Myanmar due to political turmoil in the late 1980s. When I
was in fifth grade, my mother also left Myanmar to be with my father. My two
younger siblings and I then remained with our loving grandparents and uncle’s
family. When I was seventeen, my family was finally reunited with our parents
in Maryland. Being an immigrant came with occasional loneliness as it was a
major transition for me to be in a society where I had to learn a new language,
make new friends, and find jobs to help support my family.

Loneliness doesn’t spare any demographic group. In 2019, I participated
in a gathering of men at a church in North Carolina in which we learned that one
common issue Christian men had was loneliness. One participant in that
gathering said something like, “Men are lonely, and isolation is a terrible thing!”

1.1 The Prevalence of Loneliness

Loneliness is a common and near-universal experience. In the United States, the
high rate of loneliness has become a social problem. In the winter of 2020, before
COVID-19 was surging in the United States, one-third (33%) of Americans felt
lonely at least every day, and a majority had felt lonely in the past week.³ About one in seven (14%) Americans reported they felt lonely all the time.⁴ About one in ten lonely Americans (nearly ten million) were suffering deeply, and they said their loneliness was unbearable.⁵ Over one-third of American adults over age 45 reported being lonely, and even among married couples, 30 percent of their relationships were “severely discordant.”⁶

Although advancements in technology have made it possible for us to communicate in real time and be increasingly connected digitally, statistics indicate that more and more Americans are feeling lonely, and loneliness rates have doubled since the 1980s.⁷ In the 1970s, loneliness among middle-aged and older adults was estimated to be 11-17%; in the early 2010s, the rate increased to over 40%.⁸ Vivek Murthy, the United States surgeon general who has served under Presidents Obama and Biden, said in 2017 that loneliness was an epidemic, and it became a widely recognized problem.⁹

⁵ Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, 25.
⁷ Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, 27.
⁹ Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, 27.
The rates of loneliness likely won’t go down soon. In February 2021, Harvard Graduate School of Education released its national survey of loneliness among American adults and reported that the global COVID-19 pandemic deepened the epidemic of loneliness in America. According to that report, 36% of respondents reported feeling lonely “frequently” or “almost all the time or all the time” in the four weeks prior to the survey; this included 61% of young people aged 18-25 and 51% of mothers with young children. The rates of loneliness among Americans have been the highest ever in record, which means that people are suffering more than ever due to loneliness.

1.2 What Really is Loneliness?

Loneliness is a widespread condition that people have. Jill Landers observes that the Bible presents loneliness as a painful yet common human experience. Notably, loneliness is the first thing God deems as “not good”: “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner” (Genesis 2:18). The Psalmist would cry out to God due to the pain of isolation: “Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted” (Psalm 25:16). Even Jesus

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cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

When people are lonely, there are differences of frequency, duration, and intensity. Transient loneliness comes briefly and goes away. This type of short-term loneliness occurs when we experience a temporary change in our circumstances or environment, causing only momentary distress. 12 This type of loneliness usually goes away as individuals reconnect with other people.13

Situational loneliness often occurs as a result of life transitions, such as a move to a new town, a divorce, or the loss of a loved one.14 Chronic or long-term loneliness, the most troubling type, leads to "feelings of hopelessness and maladaptive behaviors."15 Loneliness researchers emphasize that it is important to prevent transient or situational loneliness from becoming long-term loneliness.

How do people feel like when they are lonely? In his book Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World, Vivek Murthy explains that loneliness can feel like being abandoned or cut off from the people with whom we belong. What’s missing when people are lonely is the feeling of

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15 Lindsy Magee writes, “Chronic or long-term loneliness, the most troubling type, persists and does not remit, leading to feelings of hopelessness and maladaptive behaviors (Jones, Freemon & Goswick, 1981; McWhirter, 1990; Perlman & Peplau, 1984).” Magee, “The Role of Religion,” 1-2.
closeness, trust, and the affection of genuine friends, loved ones, and community. Lonely people miss “the foundation of home that is genuine connection with other people. To be at home is to be known. It is to be loved for who you are. It is to share a sense of common ground, common interests, pursuits, and values with others who truly care about you.” Sharing his experience in the practice of medicine, Murthy writes, “In community after community, I met lonely people who felt homeless even though they had a roof over their heads.” We have a deep need for belonging, regardless of our culture, gender, or age. And when we don’t feel we belong, it can result in unpleasant feelings, including loneliness.

A frequently cited definition of loneliness is from American social psychologists Daniel Perlman and Letitia Anne Peplau who propose that loneliness is “an unpleasant affective state that results from a discrepancy between the quality and quantity of relationships we perceive we have and the quality and quantity of relationships we want to have.” When there’s a gap between our desired quality and quantity of relationships and the actual relationships we currently have, there’s disappointment, and it results in the

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negative experience of feeling alone, distress, and socially isolated, even when we are among friends and family. Since loneliness is based on expectations of social engagement, we don’t have to be isolated to feel lonely.\footnote{In his article “The FAQs: What Christians Should Know About Loneliness,” Joe Carter writes, “Because it is based on expectations of social engagement, a person does not have to be isolated to feel lonely.” Joe Carter. “The FAQs: What Christians Should Know About Loneliness.” \textit{The Gospel Coalition}, November 21, 2020. https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-faqs-what-christians-should-know-about-loneliness/} We may be surrounded by loved ones or be in the middle of crowded Times Square in New York City, but we can still feel lonely.

Vivek Murthy explains that in order not to feel alone, the amount of social interaction we need varies widely by person.\footnote{Mettes, \textit{The Loneliness Epidemic}, 33.} In order to feel a secure sense of belonging, one common thing both introverts and extroverts need is strong relationships. One challenge I’ve observed among working class Americans is that they are not only busy with work but also move frequently, which means they don’t have much time for developing or maintaining friendships. Since the quality of relationships matter, the good news for those who don’t have lots of friends or much time to socialize is that they can meet their needs to belong through focusing on forming a deeper connection with their existing relationships.

Mark Mayfield, founder and CEO of Mayfield Counseling Centers in Colorado Springs, CO, describes the common theme among the feeling of lonely
people as not feeling seen, heard, or understood.\textsuperscript{22} Mayfield defines loneliness as, “the state of being unseen or unnoticed relationally, mentally, emotionally, physically, or spiritually. It can be driven by lack of purpose or meaning, relationship, and/or identity and is marked by a deep sense of hopelessness.”\textsuperscript{23} Mayfield’s definition of loneliness reminds us that loneliness is the absence of the feeling of love and belonging. So, what would help ease our loneliness is through meaningful connections and receiving care from others.

1.3 Causes and Risk Factors of Loneliness

Loneliness is often triggered by life changes, and what makes people lonely will differ from person to person. According to Harvard Graduate School of Education’s loneliness survey report in 2021, there are almost countless, often overlapping reasons why people feel lonely. Some of the reasons for people’s loneliness include feeling empty, unfulfilled in friendships or family relationships, feeling unwanted by others, missing contact with loved ones or close friends, feelings of deficiency and rejection, fewer friends, longing for connection and support, feeling unseen or unheard or irrelevant to others, and feeling one’s existence diminished.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} Mark Mayfield, \textit{The Path out of Loneliness: Finding and Fostering Connection to God, Ourselves, and One Another}, 18, Kindle.
\textsuperscript{23} Mayfield, \textit{The Path out of Loneliness}, 24.
\textsuperscript{24} Weissbourd, Batanova, Lovison, and Torres, “Loneliness in America,” 5.
There is a greater risk of loneliness when people go through major life events and transitions such as developing a health issue, retirement, or bereavement. Moreover, loneliness is more likely in people “who are at risk for social alienation, isolation, and separation,” and these people tend to be older individuals who live alone; patients with psychiatric disorders; patients with long-term health conditions; and/or stigmatized groups. Identifying these risk factors can help us be intentional about getting the connection and care we and others need.

1.4 Loneliness Across Key Demographics

There is no age group or social background that is immune from loneliness. However, there are certain groups of people who have a higher chance of loneliness: those with lower economic status, minority groups, young adults, and residents of urban areas. The summary of Cigna’s report is that nearly eight in 10 Generation Zers (79%) and seven in 10 millennials (71%) are lonely, vs. half of boomers (50%); men (46.1) are lonelier than women (45.3); Hispanic respondents (47.7) and those who identify their race as “other” (47.2) are loneliest, followed by Black / African American respondents (46.3); lower income individuals of

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25 In her article “Charting Loneliness,” Kimberly Smith writes, “Major life events and transitions, such as developing a health issue, retirement or bereavement, are all linked to a greater risk of experiencing loneliness.” Kimberley Smith, “Charting Loneliness,” 41.
27 Cigna Newsroom, “Key Determinants of Loneliness in America.”
$25K or less had a 7.2 point higher loneliness than those with higher income of $125K or greater (50.6 vs. 43.3); and those living in urban (46.7) and suburban (44.7) communities are less lonely than those in rural areas (47.0). Cigna also reported that “loneliness subsides as people move through middle age.”

The demographic often assumed to be the loneliest is the elderly, however, Cigna’s report clearly shows that younger generations (Generation Zers and Millennials) are far more likely to be lonelier than older generations. The very old may be another lonely group among adults. According to Julianne Holt-Lunstad, young adults and people over 85 years of age tend to be among the lonelier people of adult groups.

Being a millennial myself, I would agree with Cigna’s report that young adults are much lonelier than the older generations. But why are young adults lonelier than older adults? Harvard’s loneliness survey report in 2021 explains several reasons why young people may be significantly lonelier than the general population of adults. First, young people have to make important decisions in the midst of uncertainty they often face. They are dealing with stressful decisions

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28 Cigna Newsroom, “Key Determinants of Loneliness in America.”
in relations to work, love, and identity.31 Quite often, they face such situations as who to date, what to be, and where to live. Second, while strong connections with family members are critical to protect against loneliness, young people are often disconnected from their inherited families, and yet they “have not yet created their chosen families.”32 Third, young people are lonelier than older generations because many of them “may not yet have older adults’ capacities to develop mature, reciprocal relationships in which they feel known and affirmed.”33 Fourth, young people may be more focused on the quantity of relationships than quantity. To protect against loneliness, the quality of relationships is more important than the quantity. In comparison to young people, the social networks of older adults tend to be smaller; however, they are more satisfied in their relationships and more like to let go of unhealthy relationships that bring conflict or stress.34

The Harvard study also reported that one common issue lonely young people have is that they appear to lack basic forms of care and support.35 Thirty-six percent of lonely young people said “no one in the past few weeks had taken more than just a few minutes to ask how they’re doing in a way that made them

feel the person genuinely cared.”36 The fact that the majority of young adults suffer the pain of loneliness is a wakeup call for the older members of society to be intentional about taking time to check in on how young people are doing.

1.5 Understanding the Factors that Contribute to the Loneliness Epidemic

If loneliness is a feeling experienced by people of all times and places, why is the rate of loneliness in the United States continuing to climb? Although there are countless reasons why people are lonely, there are particular factors that are contributing to the epidemic currently affecting the American population.

1.5.1 Western Individualism

One of the major contributors to the loneliness epidemic is the culture’s prioritization of the needs of individuals above the needs of others. In their book Resident Aliens, Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas tell how “loneliness is endemic to the human condition” and yet “more intense in our society, where we are taught to call our loneliness “freedom of the individual.”37 Willimon and Hauerwas argue that the Age of Enlightenment’ emphasis on reasoning and individual freedom was “an adventure that held the seeds of its own destruction within itself. . . . What we got was not self-freedom but self-centeredness,

loneliness, superficiality, and harried consumerism.”  

They also note that Western democracies tend to promote a conceptualization of freedom in which individuals are free to create their own meaning: for most of them, this becomes the freedom to consume higher and higher levels. The culture’s emphasis on reasoning and individual freedom itself is not a bad thing; however, our misuse of freedom for selfishness often comes with a diminished capacity for developing meaningful relationships.

Similar to what the authors of *Resident Aliens* say about Western individualism, C. Kavin Rowe, in his book *Christianity’s Surprise*, argues that the story that Westerners have accepted is the story of the autonomous individual, which causes us to be anti-relational creatures. Rowe explains that the autonomous individual believes that “I learn who I am not as a gift from my Creator but by asking myself. . . . The final authority for my identity is myself. I determine who I am.” Trying to find our identity within ourselves gives us a false belief that we can survive on our own. Rowe explains further, “The flip side of this anti-relational self is tragic: I am abandoned. You are abandoned. And we cannot reach each other. We thus lose our common humanity in the attempt to be

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39 Hauerwas and Willimon write, “The Western democracies tend to … promise their citizens a society in which each citizen is free to create his or her own meaning – meaning which, for most of us, becomes little more than the freedom to consume at every higher levels.” Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 78.
ourselves.” The loneliness epidemic has exposed that Western individualism is neither sustaining nor life giving. What is clear from Rowe’s statement about Western society’s acceptance of the story of the autonomous individual is that God is no longer the center of our lives, nor do we include God in our decision making. Our self-centeredness has led us to become anti-relational creatures who are lonely.

1.5.2 The Decline of the American Church

Another major factor that contributes to the loneliness epidemic is the decline of the American Church. According to a 2019 report by the Pew Research Center, 65 percent of American adults describe themselves as Christians, a 12 percent decrease from a decade earlier, which means Christianity continues to decline. What causes the decline of the American Church?

In his book *The Loneliness Epidemic: How the Church Can Cure Our Gravest Sickness*, Thomas Parkinson lists the three top notable factors that fuel the church’s decline as: (1) the rise of the post-Christian age, (2) the privatization of faith and the corresponding loss of community, and (3) the church’s loss of status.

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41 Rowe, *Christianity’s Surprise*, 86.

in the culture. 43 Parkinson argues that these three cultural phenomena have collided to create the loneliness epidemic. 44

Parkinson points out that even though more Americans are becoming less religious, it doesn’t mean we are becoming less spiritual. 45 More and more Americans describe themselves as “spiritual, but not religious” which means people are believing in God or a higher power, but they are “not looking to a faith community to provide any guidance or direction for that belief.” 46 The consequence of more Americans becoming spiritual, but not religious is that more people are without any connections to traditional Christian communities that offer friendships and meaningful relationships that people in the lonely society desperately need.

It is important to note that the decline of the American Church is not solely because people are not interested in organized religion. Parkinson explains how active members of Christian communities contribute to the decline of the church through moral scandals, religious infighting, and outdated institutional models. 47 He points out that while the three factors that fuel the church’s decline are the greatest threat to the future of the church, they are also “the church’s

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46 Parkinson explains, “SBNR means believing in God or a higher power, but not looking to a faith community to provide any guidance or direction for that belief.” Parkinson, *The Loneliness Epidemic*, 8.
greatest opportunity to reclaim its Christ-given mission and be an agent for change.”48 I would agree with Parkinson that the church needs to reclaim its mission. According to the Lifeway research in 2021, 63% of Americans identify as Christian (15-point drop since 2007, Pew Research) and 47% of Americans belong to a house of worship; but only about 22 percent of Americans attend church every week while 31 percent never attend church or synagogue. 49 With only 22 percent of American Christians attends the church weekly, the American society is a mission field itself. To reach out to people in the community, Christian communities need to be intentional about creating missional communities that practice radical hospitality and the ministry of care and connection; I will explore more about that in chapter 5.

1.5.3 The Rise of the Aging Adult Population and More People Living Alone

In the US, single-person households are on the rise, and the fact that more people are living alone is one of the factors of the loneliness epidemic. In 2013, over a quarter of the U.S. population, including 28% of older adults, live alone.50 This increase in social isolation among Americans comes with an increased risk not only for loneliness but also problems related to health. Julianne Holt-Lunstad’s large scale research that was finished in 2015 reported that the people

48 Parkinson, The Loneliness Epidemic, 7.
categorized as lonely had a 26% higher risk of dying, and those people living alone had a 32% higher change of dying.⁵¹ To protect themselves from loneliness, those who live alone need to be intentional about having friends and family members who check in on them.

Another factor of the loneliness epidemic is the rise of older population. In 2016, the National Institute of Health (NIH) reported that the aging adult population was growing dramatically in the US and around the world: 8.5 percent of people worldwide (617 million) are aged 65 and over, and this percentage is projected to jump to nearly 17 percent of the world’s population by 2050 (1.6 billion). The NIH also reported that America’s 65-and-over population is projected to nearly double from 48 million to 88 million by 2050.⁵² Since the elderly population is in the category of the lonelier group among the general population of adults, the rise of the elderly means more people are lonely.

1.5.4 Overuse of Social Media

The increasing use of technology allows us to connect with one another. For example, social media can be beneficial when it’s used appropriately and

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⁵¹ “Julianne Holt-Lunstad of Brigham Young University finished a project in 2015 that studied 3.4 million participants who were followed over an average of seven years. Holt-Lunstad found that those categorized as lonely had a 26% higher risk of dying, and those living alone a 32% higher chance, after accounting for differences in age and health status.” Jack Eason, *The Loneliness Solution*, Baker Publishing Group, 20, Kindle.

sparingly; it allows us to connect families who are geographically far apart. And some people use technology, like Facetime, to spend more time with family and friends. However, the overuse of social media, like Facebook, contributes to the loneliness epidemic. A report by the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* states that people who spent the most time on social media were twice more likely to have greater perceived social isolation.53 Similarly, in 2020, Cigna reported that very heavy social media users were “significantly more likely to feel alone, isolated, left out and without companionship.”54 Advances in communications technology allow us to connect with people across the globe at any moment; however, we cannot rely on virtual connections alone for our emotional needs. We still need face-to-face interactions with one another. To have meaningful interpersonal relationships, we need to balance screen time and in-person interactions with family and friends.

### 1.6 America’s Crisis of Trusting Relationships

In researching the problem of loneliness in America, one common issue I’ve noticed is the lack of trusting relationships. In her article “Charting Loneliness,” Kimberly Smith, a senior lecturer in Clinical Health Psychology at the University

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of Surrey, tells the importance of trusting relationships and our ability to do things together with others. Smith explains, “Loneliness emphasizes the fact that social species require not simply the presence of others but also the presence of significant others whom they can trust, who give them a goal in life, with whom they can plan, interact, and work together to survive and prosper.”

Smith explains further that the physical presence of significant others, like a spouse or someone with whom we share a romantic relationship, in our social environment is not a sufficient condition to not feel lonely; we have to have a trusting relationship with those who are around us. In other words, we need to feel connected to significant others to not feel lonely. Smith’s article reminds us that in the absence of trusting relationships, we won’t meet our need to feel connected with others, which can easily make us feel isolated or lonely. An important question is: how do we build trusting relationships in the society?

In her book The Epidemic of Loneliness, Susan Mettes affirms that intimacy in America is sick, and we have a crisis of relationships. Mettes writes, “The country is sick with respect to people’s ability to have close, trusting relationships—one of the most important parts of our humanity.” To heal this illness, Mettes focuses on our ability to make and keep friendships, and she

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57 Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, 12.
58 Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, 22.
argues that we need to invest more heavily in friendships than in family.\textsuperscript{59} I
would agree with Mettes that we need to invest in friendships, and I would add
that there are also other important things we need to invest in building trusting
relationships. First, we as a society need to relearn how to communicate with one
another. I believe we have lost the art of listening and are not patient with each
other. What we need to learn the skill of productive communication. To have
productive communication, we need to learn to listen to one another, graciously
disagree with one another, and show kindness and compassion to each other.
Second, we need to increase doing things as groups. The Pew Research Center
reported in 2009 that most adults in America do not participate in any kind of
social group, noting that “Less than half of adults participate in a local religious
group, and less than a quarter of adults participate in a social club, community
group, sports league, or other local group.”\textsuperscript{60} If we are to build trusting
relationships, virtual connections are not enough. We need to join small groups
and interact with one another outside of our jobs and family circles.

\textsuperscript{59} Mettes, \textit{The Loneliness Epidemic}, 13. Mettes writes, “In this book, I'll argue that we need to correct for this
by investing more heavily in friendships than in family. That's countercultural, but there's good research
behind it. Researchers discovered that chosen rather than kin relationships tend to help us most with
loneliness.”

\textsuperscript{60} Holt-Lunstad, “The Potential Public Health,” 128.
1.7 Our Need for Love and Belonging

Love and a sense of belonging are crucial to human flourishing. The third level of Maslow’s hierarchy of social needs are love and belonging. In the absence of love and belonging, there’s loneliness. In her article “Belonging and Loneliness,” Saul Levine states that our need to belong is satisfied through different types of relationships, and people with a sense of belonging have meaningful relationships with other people who like and appreciate them.61 For example, we feel a sense of belonging through meaningful connections with neighbors, friends, family, and members of small groups and religious communities. Since meaningful connections matter in fight against the loneliness epidemic, it is vital that we each focus on building a more meaningful connected society.

1.8 Conclusion

Loneliness is a universal condition that can leave people feel isolated and disconnected from others. Left unchecked, transient or situational loneliness can turn into chronic or long-term loneliness which is painful and has negative consequences such as increased risk of suicide and diminished well-being. While the intensity and duration of loneliness for most people may have little

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significance, a large portion of the US population experience loneliness most or all the time. With at least a third of the population experiencing loneliness and one in ten lonely people suffering deeply, it is urgent that the whole society, including religious communities, takes life-giving actions against the loneliness epidemic.

Although loneliness is a feeling experienced by people of all times and places, the combination of Western individualism, the decline of the American Church, the rise of aging population and more people living alone, and the overuse of social media largely contribute to the loneliness epidemic. As the rate of loneliness increases, Americans are becoming less connected. Most of the society members do not participate in any kind of social group, and less than half of adults participate in a local religious group. And a quarter of Americans had no one to talk to about important matters. The increasing use of communications technology such as social media enables us to connect with one another; and yet, it replaces meaningful interpersonal relationships. The overuse of social media even contributes to the loneliness of people. As the rate of loneliness keeps climbing year after year, mistrusts and polarizing divisions are growing wider ever, and we now have a crisis of trusting relationships.

What members of the lonely society needs is meaningful interpersonal relationships. People need to feel that they matter; they need to be seen, noticed,
valued, welcomed, and supported. And we need awareness and acceptance that regardless of age, sex, or racial backgrounds, everyone needs to feel unconditional love and a sense of belonging. All institutions, including Christian communities, need to be intentional and systematic about creating meaningful social connections and providing mutual support and care. With conscious effort, we should care for the lonely and support those who are at risk for loneliness.

Since I started my research on human loneliness in the beginning of 2021, I have intentionally taken time and asked young adults who work in restaurants and coffee shops how they are doing, and I have learned that they do appreciate when we show genuine care and listen to them.

The loneliness epidemic has exposed that the American Church, whose status has been severely damaged by moral scandals, religious infighting, and outdated institutional models, needs to stay true to the gospel. Jesus has called the church to participate in the transformation of society through acts of love and kindness, and despite the decline of the American Church and its influence on society, the church is still God’s instrument for bringing hope and healing to the world. The church has both the good news and community that can transform loneliness into belonging. In 1 John 3:18, Christians are invited to “love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” When Jesus was on earth, he showed love to others with actions – teaching, preaching, healing, reaching out the
outcasts, forgiving others, becoming friends of the friendless, showing compassion, and giving hope to others. Therefore, the act of transforming loneliness into belonging is a response to Jesus’ call to love our neighbors in need.

In the next chapter, I will explore the destructive consequences of loneliness on individuals, society, and Christian leaders.
Chapter 2

Damaging Consequences of Loneliness

Loneliness is not just causing us to feel sad. It also has damaging consequences on our emotional, mental, and physical health. It reduces our task performance, limits creativity, impairs our memories, and impairs our problem-solving and decision-making abilities.1 Moreover, loneliness affects the overall wellbeing of society. Negative impacts of loneliness on members of the society include the risk of emotional disorders like depression, anxiety, and substance abuse, and physical ailments like heart disease, cancer, stroke, hypertensions, dementia, and premature death.2

Loneliness can cause workers to be less productive, so it has an economic cost in lost productivity as well.3 According to Cigna’s 2020 loneliness survey, lonely workers reported that they were missing more days of work due to illness and stress. They had lower productivity than their peers most or all the time (45% vs. 54%) and thought more about quitting their job more than twice as often as non-lonely workers in an average month.4 Cigna’s report on the impact of

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1 Susan Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, (Baker Publishing Group, 2021), 32, Kindle.
3 Susan Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, 32.
4 Cigna Newsroom, “Key Determinants of Loneliness in America,” January 23, 2020,
loneliness on workers confirms Barna Group’s findings on one of the top reasons Christian leaders like Protestant pastors had considered leaving full-time ministry. In April 2022, the Barna Group reported that 42% of pastors considered quitting full-time ministry in the past year, and loneliness was the second reason for pastors to think about leaving their ministry; 43% of pastors who considered quitting ministry reported, “I feel lonely and isolated.”

To understand more on the damaging consequences of loneliness, I focus on exploring the following questions: How does loneliness damage our physical and mental health? How does loneliness impact young adults and ministry leaders like pastors? What is the attitude of Christian communities toward loneliness? And what are the necessary steps Christian communities should take in combating the loneliness epidemic?

### 2.1 Risk of Destructive Behavior

Loneliness comes with a risk of destructive behavior on individuals. Compared to those who are not lonely, lonely individuals are more critical of themselves and others, and they are also more likely to expect rejection. In his book

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5 Barna, “Pastors Share Top Reasons They’ve Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year,” April 27, 2022, 3, Barna Group. https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/

Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World,

Vivek Murthy explains that when we are chronically lonely, we imagine that we are a misfit, question our self-worth, thinking that there might be something wrong with us that is causing the pain we suffer. And when we already feel lonely and see others having fun together, there’s a tendency to withdraw instead of approaching the group because we fear being labeled and judged as social outcasts. Shame and fear then turn our loneliness into self-doubt, which lowers self-esteem and discourages us from reaching out for help. Over time, this unhealthy cycle may convince us we do not matter to anyone and that we are unworthy of love.

Lonely individuals may become self-focused and needy in ways that cause other people not to engage with them. For example, a 25-year-old survey respondent told Harvard’s survey takers in 2020 that when he was lonely, he would text people too much that it would turn people off, and they would stop...
engaging with him.12 Lonely individuals are often ashamed of their loneliness, and that they may work hard to hide their loneliness; they may even falsely project strength.13 Because lonely individuals tend to hide and deny their loneliness, the people who might help – including friends, family, and health professionals – shy away from probing what seems like a sensitive emotional issue.14 The risk of self-destructive behaviors then increases. Murthy explains that to numb the emotional pain they are suffering, lonely individuals often use drugs, alcohol, food, and sex, and he tells the consequence of numbing loneliness with unhealthy behaviors: “In this way, the combination of loneliness and stigma creates a cascade of consequences that affect not only our personal health and productivity, but also the health of society.”15 The loneliness epidemic has no doubt intensified the suffering of Americans, and it also contributes to the increasing destructive behaviors we see in society. The fact that more Americans die from suicide, drug overdoses, and alcohol-related illness at a rate that has never seen before is a reminder that loneliness is not simply a personal problem, it is a social problem. Behind closed doors, lonely individuals in our society are hungry for love and a sense of belonging.

13 Murthy, Together, 5.
14 Murthy, Together, 10 – 11.
15 Murthy, Together, 11.
2.2 Mental Illness and Loneliness

Mental illness has become a major issue among people of all backgrounds across the globe. According to the World Health Organization, around 20% of the world’s children and adolescents have a mental health condition, and suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15–29-year-olds.\textsuperscript{16} The mental health conditions can have a substantial effect on our work performance, relationships with friends and family, and ability to participate in the community.\textsuperscript{17} From her own experience of loneliness and suicidal ideation, Ruth Graham, the daughter of the late Billy Graham and author of \textit{Transforming Loneliness: Deepening Our Relationships with God and Others When We Feel Alone}, tells how loneliness can have impacts on anyone, including practicing Christians. Graham writes, “Loneliness is fraught with dangers to our physical, mental, and emotional health.”\textsuperscript{18} Since mental health can affect all areas of life, it is important to understand the connection between loneliness and mental illness. Does mental illness cause loneliness, or does loneliness cause mental illness? How does loneliness relate to depression and anxiety, cognitive impairment, and suicide?

\textsuperscript{16} World Health Organization, “Mental Health,” accessed April 12, 2022, https://www.who.int/health-topics/mental-health#tab=tab_2
\textsuperscript{17} World Health Organization, “Mental Health.”
\textsuperscript{18} Ruth Graham, \textit{Transforming Loneliness: Deepening Our Relationships with God and Others When We Feel Alone}, (Baker Publishing Group, 2021), 89, Kindle.
In 2020, a UK-based Campaign to End Loneliness (CEL) reported that there is a connection between loneliness and mental illness. According to CEL, loneliness is not a mental health problem in itself; however, having mental illness may lead to loneliness while loneliness can help cause mental illness.\textsuperscript{19} In her book \textit{The Loneliness Epidemic}, Susan Mettes reports that mental illness is usually accompanied by loneliness, and there seems to be a cycle of loneliness, mental illness, socially rejected behavior, and isolation.\textsuperscript{20} Mettes explains that lonely individuals are more likely to have “behavioral pathologies, ranging from eating disorders to suicide. So bad or missing relationships with, for example, a parent might kick off loneliness, which might lead to mental illness.”\textsuperscript{21} What is clear from CEL’s report and Mettes’ explanation is that loneliness is associated with a greater risk of mental illness.

In his book \textit{The Path out of Loneliness: Finding and Fostering Connection to God, Ourselves, and One Another}, mental health counselor Thomas Mayfield tells how more and more Americans are struggling with mental health, and year after year, mental health struggles are continuing to rise.\textsuperscript{22} Mayfield explains the rise of mental illness issues and their connection with loneliness this way:

\textsuperscript{20} Mettes, \textit{The Loneliness Epidemic}, 145.
\textsuperscript{21} Mettes, \textit{The Loneliness Epidemic}, 145.
\textsuperscript{22} Mark Mayfield, \textit{The Path out of Loneliness: Finding and Fostering Connection to God, Ourselves, and One Another}, 32, Kindle.
“Depression, anxiety, and suicide are rising rapidly, and in most cases, these struggles can be traced back to loneliness and lack of connection and relationship.” The high rates of loneliness in America come with the high rates of mental health related issues. According to The Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 40 million adults struggle with anxiety, and 17.3 millions of those eighteen and older have had a major depressive episode in the last year. The sad thing is that suicide is now the second leading cause of death for American teenagers and the tenth leading cause of death for Americans, overall. Since 1999, the suicide rate has increased more than 30 percent in half of the United States’ 50 states.

In her article “Charting Loneliness,” Kimberly Smith, a senior lecturer in Clinical Health Psychology at the University of Surrey, tells how it is possible that loneliness may lead to depression. Lonely individuals are more likely to develop a negative view of themselves and the world, and that kind of negative world view can lead to depression. It is also possible that depression may lead to loneliness as people who become depressed can isolate themselves from

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others and hold more negative feelings about their relationships. Smith also tells how loneliness and depression share common symptoms like helplessness and pain, and that there is an overlap between the presentation of loneliness and depression; up to 50 percent of lonely individuals also report that they feel depressed. Although both loneliness and depression have similar symptoms like helplessness and pain, they are separable; loneliness is characterized by the hope that all would be fine if only the lonely individual could be united with another longed for person."

According to Campaign to End Loneliness, when loneliness and depression co-exist, there is an increased risk of early mortality. CEL estimates that the co-existence of loneliness and depression affects 22% of men and 28% of women aged 65 or over. Since depression and loneliness are greatly associated, by alleviating one, it may be possible to reduce the other. CEL also reports that

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31 Campaign to End Loneliness reports, “This relationship between depression and loneliness means that by alleviating one we may be able to reduce the other.” Campaign to End Loneliness, “The Psychology of Loneliness: Why it matters and what we can do,” 21.
loneliness is associated with anxiety, particularly social anxiety. When Mark Mayfield was a teenager, he was having social anxiety, and from his personal experience, he tells the connection between loneliness and depression and anxiety this way: “Experiencing mental illness causes us to withdraw from one another, and the loneliness that ensues takes a toll on our mental health. No wonder the rates of depression and anxiety are increasing—they subject us to a vicious cycle with no easy off-ramp.”

In their article, “Loneliness, Psychiatric Disorders and Physical Health? A Review on the Psychological Aspects of Loneliness,” researchers Raheel Mushtaq, Sheikh Shoib, Tabinda Shah, and Sahil Mushtaq report that there is a strong association between suicide ideation, parasuicide and loneliness, and that the prevalence of suicide ideation and parasuicide rises with the degree of loneliness. However, suicidal ideation does not always accompany loneliness; one common symptom it shares with loneliness and depression is a distorted view of an individual’s belonging and relationships.

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32 Campaign to End Loneliness reports, “Large-scale longitudinal studies suggest that social anxiety is a particularly important risk factor for loneliness.” Campaign to End Loneliness, 21.
33 Mark Mayfield, The Path out of Loneliness: Finding and Fostering Connection to God, Ourselves, and One Another, 32.
Among older people, loneliness is associated with an increased risk of dementia. In comparison to younger people, older people are twice as likely to develop Alzheimer’s diseases, and older people who feel lonely lose much more of their ability to understand and learn and struggled with memory. According to Campaign to End Loneliness, the relationship between loneliness and cognitive impairment is likely to be two-way. CEL explains:

The pathways to explain this may be neurological, stress related or because people who are lonely have less social participation and so less cognitive and sensory stimulation. It is also likely that having cognitive impairment increases the likelihood of loneliness because of reduced social participation; maintaining community participation and social networks is one way of reducing dementia risk.

Whether cognitive impairment among older people is due to neurological, stress related or social isolation, members of the society cannot ignore the elderly. We need to find ways we can help them connect with the community. From 2013 to 2015, I did a two-year residency in ministry program at First Presbyterian in Ann Arbor, MI, and I used to visit elderly church members in a nursing home where over 60 of the residents were our church members. As I regularly visited and worshiped with the elderly in their facility, one thing I noticed was that they were hungry for human connection. What gave them joy and made them smile was a connection from loved ones like family members,

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36 Campaign to End Loneliness, 21.
37 Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, 30.
38 Campaign to End Loneliness, 21.
fellow church members, and even strangers. I also noticed that when singing hymns and Christmas songs, even those with memory issues would sing along the songs they used to know by heart. There may be several factors that caused cognitive impairment among the elderly, but what always help is care and connection from another human being.

In her book *The Loneliness Epidemic*, Susan Mettes argues that good and stable relationships protect people from many forms of mental illness.39 And Mettes tells how a study that focused on PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) among veterans found that “veterans who felt they belonged seemed far better able to process combat without suffering from PTSD.”40 Mettes also tells how experts in the need to belong point out that many of the reasons people see counselors for anxiety, depression, grief, loneliness, and relationships problems “can be explained by their reactions to the threats they see to their bonds with others.” 41 These people who see counselors are trying to protect their relationships. Mettes explains that her point is not that loneliness is the root of all mental illness, but it is a main cause of suffering, and it weakens the resilience individuals need to be emotionally healthy.42 So what helps in dealing with

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42 Mettes explains, “My point is not that loneliness is the root of all mental illness. But it’s a main cause of suffering and weakens the resilience we need to be emotionally healthy.” Mettes, *The Loneliness Epidemic*, 145-146.
mental illness is nurturing relationships of belonging, as Mettes tells the benefit of it: “Nurturing relationships of belonging could help save lives.” I would agree with Mettes that good and stable relationships protect people from many forms of mental illness, and I would add that they also bring the healing and peace that individuals with loneliness and/or mental illness need.

2.3 Personal Experience with Individuals with Mental Illness

In summer of 2014, I participated in a two-week mission trip to Russia with a mission team from First Presbyterian in Ann Arbor, MI. We spent ten days in an old village called Davydova which is about four hours north of Moscow by car, and we stayed in the house of an Orthodox priest Vladimir and his wife Olga. According to the census in 1903, Davydova was a thriving village with over 1000 people, and there was a beautiful Russian Orthodox Church in the center of the village. The people of Davydova had been worshipping God in the village since the 12th century. During the Soviet era, the communist regime persecuted people who practiced their faith and turned religious buildings into warehouses, gyms, and museums. Vladimir told us that in the beginning of the 20th century, leaders of Russia said to their people, “We can live without religion. So, all over Russia, the communist regime persecuted those who practiced their faith. During the

145-146.

43 Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, 145-146.
Soviet era, over a million Christians and 10,000 priests and pastors were killed because of their faith.” The regime promised the people, “We will clothe you and give you good food, holidays, security, and peace. We will make a peaceful and a beautiful society.” There was so much hatred and corruption without God in the communist society.”

About thirty years ago, Vladimir left his business in selling musical instruments in Moscow and moved to Davydova with his family. He said God knocked on his heart to do the work of rebuilding the community. When he began his ministry, he did several funerals for men and women in their 30s who died of alcohol and substance abuse. Due to the consequence of addictions and poverty, men would leave their wives and young children in the village, and many of them would not return. As Vladimir helped with rebuilding the community, he and his wife, who was a medical doctor, felt that they were also called to make the village a safe space for children with disabilities and other special needs, including children with mentally illness. During the Soviet era, children with special needs and other special needs were dehumanized, and they were put in facilities that were separated from the local communities; in Russian society today, they are still marginalized and discriminated. Every summer, Davydova hosts campers almost the size of its own population. Families mainly came from Siberia, the Black Sea area, Moscow, and other parts of Russia, and
even from Austria, and Ukraine. When these children and their parents arrived in Davydova for a three-week summer camp from all over the Slavic world, many of their parents were already exhausted in dealing with their restless children at home. They were lonely and needed encouragements.

While our mission team was in the village, we met with children with autism, down syndrome, blindness, hearing impairments, mental illness, and other disabilities. These children and their families experienced God’s works through worship and unconditional love from volunteers and the villagers. During our stay in the camp for ten days, our main job was to help with preparing meals and having fellowship with volunteers and the kids and their families. It was a moving experience for us to eat with them, sing with them, worship with them, do some artwork with them, and stack firwoods for winter with them. During our daily worship services, half of the congregation was children with disabilities and special needs, and some of them would make constant noise. The congregation members never thought of it as annoying; in fact, they were glad these kids worshiped with them. Vladimir reminded us that in spite of the noise and strange behaviors of kids during worship services, the Holy Spirit was actively working within each of us.

Davydova has become a thriving village, and God has been doing amazing transformation in Davydova through the church. My point in telling my
Russia mission trip experience is that human connection not only protects us from loneliness but also makes a difference in the lives of lonely individuals and those with mental illness. As a people of God, we are called to be the embodiment of God’s mercy, and it is our Christian duty to reach out to those people with mental health illness, including the lonely.

2.4 Physical Health Problems and Loneliness

Loneliness is associated with an increased risk of physical health problems. In their large-scale studies on loneliness, researchers Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith, and J. Bradley Layton reported that the odds of a person dying from chronic loneliness is quite high. The startling result they reported was that living with air pollution increases a person’s odds of dying early by 5 percent; living with obesity, 20 percent; excessive drinking, 30 percent; and living with loneliness, 45 percent.  

If loneliness can be that much deadly, how does it damage our body?

In his book *Together*, Vivek Murthy explains that one of the main physical health issues loneliness contributes to the body is heart disease. Murthy explains in detail, “When loneliness persists, the same stress hormones that surged to provide short-term protection instead begin to produce long-term destruction as

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they increase cardiovascular stress and inflammation throughout the body.”45

This increase of cardiovascular stress and inflammation in turn damages tissues and blood vessels, and it increases the risk of heart disease and other chronic illnesses.46 The effect of loneliness is so strong on the heart that it can cause takotsubo syndrome, also called “broken heart syndrome.”47 While most of the pain of heartbreaks due to losing someone we love generally subsides over time, “In rare instances, however, the shock of being left behind—abandoned—can literally break the survivor’s heart.”48 When people have already had heart trouble, loneliness will keep them down, and lonely heart failure patients are four times as likely as not-lonely heart failure patients to die. 49 Other heart related problems that are associated with loneliness includes obesity and raised blood pressure.50

Vivek Murthy also explains that another way loneliness can harm the body is by weakening our immune system. Loneliness leads to changes in gene expression in white blood cells, this, in turn, results in increased inflammation and reduced defenses against viruses.51 Another way to explain is that long-term or chronic loneliness weakens our immune system, and it begins to damage our

45 Murthy, Together, 38.
46 Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, 38.
47 Murthy, Together, 39.
48 Murthy, Together, 39.
49 Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, 29.
50 Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, 29.
51 Murthy, Together, 38.
health; we get sick more often and recover more slowly.\textsuperscript{52} In addition to weakening our immune system, chronic stress due to loneliness impairs our ability to make decisions; it hijacks our “brain’s pre-frontal cortex, which governs decision making, planning, emotional regulation, analysis, and abstract thinking.”\textsuperscript{53} What is so dangerous about chronic loneliness is that it causes the society members suffer silently and kills them slowly; sadly, the general public is not aware of it.

2.5 Loneliness and Anxiety and Depression Among Young Adults

In their loneliness survey report that was published in 2021, Harvard Graduate School of Education reported that 61\% of young adults in their survey were feeling serious loneliness in the prior month, compared to 24\% of survey respondents aged 55-65.\textsuperscript{54} During the Covid-19 pandemic, young people were more likely to suffer mental health problems than any age group; 63 percent of them were suffering significant symptoms of anxiety or depression.\textsuperscript{55} Young people tend to be especially dependent both on social media and on peer norms and peer approval.\textsuperscript{56} While social media can be beneficial to people to make new

\textsuperscript{52} Susan Mettes writes, “When we live with long-term or chronic stress constantly, they start to damage us. We get sick more frequently and recover more slowly.” Mettes, \textit{The Loneliness Epidemic}, 30.

\textsuperscript{53} Graham, \textit{Transforming Loneliness}, 63.


\textsuperscript{56} Weissbourd, Batanova, Lovison, and Torres, “Loneliness in America,” 7.
friends or join with others in pursuing shared causes, it can further isolate lonely young adults who overuse social media.\textsuperscript{57}

Compared to other lonely people, lonely young adults are more likely to lack basic form of human attention and emotional sustenance.\textsuperscript{58} And they are more likely to report showing vulnerability to others in the last few weeks; 42 percent of them reported showing vulnerability quite a bit or a lot.\textsuperscript{59} The fact that lonely young people are showing vulnerabilities is a good sign that a large number of them are open to receiving care and connection.

The society cannot assume that being young and physically healthy does not mean young people do not need any help. As depression and anxiety, loneliness, and suicide rates are on the rise, young people are hungry for care and connection. It is time we are intentional and systematic about connecting with young people and protecting them from loneliness.

\textbf{2.6 Christian Leaders and Loneliness}

Ministry leaders like pastors are not immune to mental health issues and loneliness. According to The Duke Endowment funded Duke Divinity School’s report on their study of the wellbeing of United Methodist Church (UMC) clergy in North Carolina since 2008, the percentages of UMC clergy in North Carolina

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\item\textsuperscript{57} Weissbourd, Batanova, Lovison, and Torres, “Loneliness in America,” 6.
\item\textsuperscript{58} Weissbourd, Batanova, Lovison, and Torres, “Loneliness in America,” 2.
\item\textsuperscript{59} Weissbourd, Batanova, Lovison, and Torres, “Loneliness in America,” 7.
\end{itemize}
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who are experiencing elevated depressive or anxiety symptoms are increasing.\textsuperscript{60} In 2021, they saw the highest percentage of clergy experiencing elevated symptoms since our first survey.\textsuperscript{61} The percentage of pastors with depressive symptoms increased from 8.1\% in 2016 to 11.9\% in 2021; at the same time, the percentage of elevated anxiety symptoms jumped from 8\% to 16\%. The study reported that in 2019, only 38\% of clergy with elevated symptoms were currently seeing a professional, meaning 62\% were not currently seeing a mental health professional for support.\textsuperscript{62}

In his book \textit{God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations}, Jackson W. Carroll reported his research findings on the commitment and satisfaction levels of Catholic priests and Protestant pastors and how they felt about their physical and emotional health. Published in 2006, Carroll reported that Catholic priests were significantly less positive about their physical health, while Protestant pastors were low on the positive feelings and energy.\textsuperscript{63} For both priests and pastors, the feeling of isolation was a common

\textsuperscript{63} Jackson W. Carroll, \textit{God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations} (Pulpit & Pew) (Kindle Locations 2559-2562), Kindle.
contributor to a lack of satisfaction in ministry and to health problems, and it was also a key factor that caused them to doubt their call and consider to drop out of ministry or actually do so. According to Carroll, just over half of Protestant pastors who dropped out of ministry reported that they felt lonely or isolated.

According to Barna Group’s report in April 2022, the percentage of pastors who had considered quitting full-time ministry within the past year was 42 percent. The top three reasons pastors are so burned out include: stress, loneliness, and political division. The Barna Group reported that two in five pastors who have considered quitting full-time ministry (43%) say “I feel lonely and isolated.” If loneliness has been consistent in affecting the emotional health of pastors and causing them to be burned out, what are the main causes of their loneliness? What life-giving actions would help pastors in dealing with issues related to loneliness?

In God’s Potters, Jackson Carroll reported that the main source of feeling isolation among Protestant pastors was the difficulty of having a private life apart from the clergy role; these pastors lack time for recreation, relaxation, reflection, and time with children. Carroll also reported that spousal resentment

64 Carroll, God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations, Kindle Locations 2559-2562.
65 Carroll, God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations, Kindle Locations 2556-2561.
66 Barna, “Pastors Share Top Reasons They’ve Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year,” 2.
67 Barna, “Pastors Share Top Reasons They’ve Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year,” 3.
68 Barna, “Pastors Share Top Reasons They’ve Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year,” 3.
of the time that one's ministry takes and of the family's financial situation also correlates to negative feelings and lower emotional health.\textsuperscript{69} One common cause of the feeling of isolation and loneliness among both Catholic priests and Protestant pastors was a lack of friendships. Among the Protestant pastors, feeling isolated and being dissatisfied with family life were highly and significantly correlated.\textsuperscript{70} To protect themselves from loneliness, pastors need a life outside of their clergy role and to curve out time for recreation and time with family. And also, they need to form friendships beyond their families.

In their book \textit{Resident Aliens}, Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas tell two main causes of loneliness among pastors. First, loneliness among pastors is caused by the never-ending needs and expectations of Christian communities. The needs of people are virtually limitless, particularly in an affluent society, and pastors become exhausted and they even “come to despise what they are and to hate the community that made them that way.”\textsuperscript{71} Second, pastors become lonely because they do not set boundaries, allowing themselves to be overly accessible. When pastors do not set boundaries, they try to do everything and be everything for everybody.\textsuperscript{72} It means the pastors’ loneliness is not entirely the fault of the congregation members; the result of trying to do everything or being overly

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{69} Carroll, \textit{God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations}, Kindle Locations 2164-2167.
\textsuperscript{70} Carroll, \textit{God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations}, Kindle Locations 2563-2566.
\textsuperscript{72} Hauerwas and Willimon, \textit{Resident Aliens}, 126.
\end{footnotes}
accessible is that pastors “become exhausted and empty” and even feel self-hatred which is “inevitable in someone who feels abused, prostituted, unfairly criticized.” This is another reminder that pastors need life outside of their clergy roles.

The June 2022 issue of Christianity Today reported that when pastors are burned out, they become vulnerable to all kinds of ethical and moral failure. The more emotionally exhausted the pastors are, the more vulnerable they become to making choices they would not make at healthier times and in a healthier frame of mind. Christianity Today also reported that a lot of the moral failures and spiritual abuse occur in the church because pastors “were searching for some sort of affirmation and ended up in sexual temptation or other types of moral failure because of it.” For example, ministry leaders caught having affairs often use the excuse that they felt they were owed some happiness after their unacknowledged hard work for the church. To protect themselves from moral failures, pastors need those who advise them and those who hold them accountable.

In Resident Aliens, Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas state that loneliness cannot be totally avoided by Christian leaders because leadership

73 Hauerwas and Willimon, Resident Aliens, 125.
always produces some form of loneliness, especially when leaders choose to lead through “vision or loyalty to God” rather than what people want. 76 For instance, leaders who dare to speak the truth “among a people of falsehood” will be lonely, but this is loneliness for the right reasons. 77 To be able to handle the loneliness that comes with leadership, Willimon and Hauerwas suggest that leaders “should develop more self-esteem, be more assertive, learn to say No! Demand a day off, look out for themselves for a change, in brief, become as self-centered as many of the people in their congregations.” 78 Although leadership always produces some form of loneliness, making time for their physical and mental health is necessary to be effective leaders.

Pastors need to feel appreciated and supported of what they do. In God’s Potters, Jackson Carroll reports that pastors who feel that they are loved and cared for by the congregation they serve have positive feelings and energy, and these pastors score high on emotional health. 79 Carroll summarizes the things that will help the satisfaction level of pastors. For positive feelings and energy,

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76 Hauerwas and Willimon, Resident Aliens, 126.
77 Hauerwas and Willimon, Resident Aliens, 126.
78 Hauerwas and Willimon, Resident Aliens, 126 – 127.
79 Carroll, God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations, Kindle Locations 2166-2167.
pastors need to have time for recreation, relaxation, and reflection; for emotional health, they need to have life apart from the clergy role.80

In 2022, when the Barna Group asked pastors who had not considered quitting their ministry, their finding was that some of these pastors are anchored by certain beliefs and experiences of their calling.81 These pastors reported that their families (67%) and community (59%) supported them well, and they highlighted the importance of strong and encouraging relationships in their lives.82 The Barna Group’s report concludes with an emphasis on the positive difference the meaningful relationships and the support have on pastors who have not considered quitting their ministry.

Overall, pastors need to be seen, valued, and loved, just like everyone else. They need meaningful relationship and emotional support as leadership produces a certain amount of loneliness and stress. They need to experience love and care from their congregations. They need friendships outside of family and others who advise them and hold them accountable and remind them that they are not alone.

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80 Carroll writes, “For positive feelings and energy,” the list includes having time for recreation, relaxation, relaxation, and reflection, stress due to congregational challenges, and feelings of loneliness and isolation continued to be important. For emotional health, having a life apart from the clergy role … continued to be important … Experiencing love and care from one’s congregation had a positive effect.” Carroll, God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations, Kindle Locations 3678-3687.
81 Barna, “Pastors Share Top Reasons They’ve Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year,” 7.
82 Barna, “Pastors Share Top Reasons They’ve Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year,” 8-9.
2.7 Loneliness and the American Church

The church has the good news, the relationships, and community that are vital in fight against the loneliness epidemic. Christian communities in America already do a lot of things that address the issue of loneliness like connecting people and caring those who are in need, but to help transform the society members’ loneliness into belonging, Christians need to change our mindsets on the issue of loneliness.

In her research on loneliness, Susan Mettes tells how American Christians seem to have more negative views of loneliness than other religious groups do. The reason is that Christians view loneliness as bad and embarrassing. A quarter of practicing Christians reported that loneliness is always bad, which makes them more likely than non-Christians or nonpracticing Christians to say so.83 Many Christians have an idea about loneliness that if we feel close to God (as a direct consequence of our devotional life), God will meet our needs.84 Christians often conflate feeling bad with sin, although they know that Jesus was “a man of sorrows” (Isa. 53:3).85 Fifteen percent of those who practice the Christian faith reported that loneliness is always embarrassing, three times the rate of non-Christians.

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84 Mettes, “The Riddle of Church Loneliness,” 5.
Christians (5%) and twice the rate of nonpracticing Christians (8%). This embarrassment might be the cause of some practicing Christians to deny their loneliness. I would agree with Mettes that Christians view loneliness as bad and embarrassing. Despite its destructive consequences, the issue of loneliness is not often talked about in Christian communities, and yet many lonely hearts occupy our pews each Sunday. Christians need to change our lens on loneliness as bad and embarrassing and show vulnerability to one another. We also need to take ministry for mental health, including loneliness, as a call to help our neighbors in need and see lonely individuals as those whom we are called to share God’s love with.

2.8 Conclusion

Loneliness increases human suffering by affecting our self-esteem, health, and wellbeing. What is so dangerous about loneliness is that it can affect our immune systems, raises our stress levels, increases the risk of heart disease and dementia, and make mental health conditions like depressions and anxiety worse. Moreover, loneliness can reduce our task performance, limit our creativity and productivity, and impair our reasoning and decision-making. Unchecked loneliness can turn into a chronic condition which increases our risk for

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87 Mettes, “The Riddle of Church Loneliness,” 5.
premature death and a poor quality of life. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the rates of loneliness in the US had already been rising steadily for decades, and they continue to rise as mental health conditions that are associated with loneliness such as depression, anxiety, and suicide are also rising; it means more and more people suffer and more lives are being damaged or lost. Good and stable relationships can protect people from loneliness, so different organizations need to be intentional about creating an environment where people feel connected and a sense of belonging.

Christian leaders like pastors are not immune to the effects of loneliness. In fact, loneliness has been one of the main factors for pastors to be burned out and think about quitting their ministries. Pastors need the awareness that when they feel isolated or loneliness, they are vulnerable to ethical and moral failure. In my denomination of Presbyterian Church (USA), it is mandatory for pastors to have periodic boundary training which reminds them of their vulnerability to all kinds of ethical and moral failures and the need for them to be intentional about taking actions that will prevent them from crossing boundaries.

The loneliness epidemic is a wake-up call for Christian communities to change their mindsets on mental health issues, including loneliness. To save lives and be part of the solution, Christian communities need to change their view of loneliness as bad and embarrassing. They also need to accept loneliness as a
condition that can affect everyone. Even God who became a human being knew what it meant to suffer loneliness. Jesus experienced grief, disconnection, isolation, and loneliness as part of his sacrifice for us. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asked a few of his disciples to keep watch with him and said, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me” (Matthew 26: 39).

It is the duty of Christians not only to care for the physical and spiritual needs of their neighbors but also their mental and emotional needs. It is time Christian communities:

1. recognize that the mental health of people, including loneliness, matter, and that Jesus cares about the spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical health of people.

2. consider lonely individuals as vulnerable ones in their midst who need to be welcomed, accepted, valued, cared for, and loved.

3. raise awareness about issues related to loneliness and be intentional about eradicating the stigma around loneliness and creating meaningful connections.

4. care and support lonely individuals in their journey out of loneliness by making intentional connections grounded in love and compassion.

Jesus has come to set free the afflicted like the lonely and promised a true hope for them. Revelation 21:4 reminds us of the promise of Jesus for those who suffer, “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” It is
important that Christian leaders include mental health issues in their teaching and preaching and share the hope that Jesus has brought to the world. In the next chapter, I will explore what involves in journeying out of loneliness.
Chapter 3

Journeying Out of Loneliness

Loneliness comes as our circumstances shift, so we cannot eradicate it from our earthly lives once and for all. The good news is that we can ease the pain of loneliness and journey out of most lonely situations. So, it is important that Christians know what involves in journeying out of loneliness so that we can take care of ourselves and help others in fight against their loneliness. In this chapter, I explore a few questions that help in understanding the cure for loneliness. What are the steps that involve in journeying out of loneliness? If belonging is our essential need, to whom do we really belong? Do we belong to ourselves? What are effective interventions and approaches for reducing loneliness and social isolation? What are individual responsibilities in the transformation of loneliness? To answer those questions, I divide this chapter into three main sections: (1) what the Bible says about loneliness, connection, relationship, and community, (2) steps toward healing and individual responsibilities, and (3) interventions and approaches for reducing loneliness and social isolation.

3.1 What the Bible Says about Loneliness, Connection, Relationship, and Community

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To have our loneliness transformed into belonging, we need to understand what the Bible says about God’s original design for connection, relationship, and community. According to the Book of Genesis, God made us in his own image and designed us for relationships. When God created the first human being, Adam, God breathed (emphusao) life (zōē) into him.\(^1\) The result of God breathing life into us is that we not only come alive physically but also come alive spiritually.\(^2\) Although Adam was created in the image of God, it was not good for him to be alone (Genesis 2:18-20). God saw that Adam needed a companion, and a helper. God then created Eve to be Adam’s life partner. So, God’s plan from the beginning was connection and relationships.\(^3\)

God not only designed us for connection and relationships with one another but also to live in community, as God Himself lives in community.\(^4\) When Adam was about to be created, God was speaking of Himself, “Let us make human beings in our image and likeness” (Genesis 1:26, NRSV). God spoke to Godself in the plural because God is the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.\(^5\) God designed us for connection and relationships with one another as a

\(^{1}\)Mark Mayfield, *The Path out of Loneliness: Finding and Fostering Connection to God, Ourselves, and One Another*, (Colorado Springs: NavPres, 2021), 73, Kindle.

\(^{2}\)Mayfield, *The Path out of Loneliness*, 74.

\(^{3}\)Mayfield, *The Path out of Loneliness*, 75-76.

\(^{4}\)Ruth Graham, *Transforming Loneliness: Deepening Our Relationships with God and Others When We Feel Alone*, (Baker Publishing Group, 2021), 32, Kindle.

\(^{5}\)In her book *Transforming Loneliness*, Ruth Graham writes, “Have you ever puzzled over this verse? “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). Why is God speaking of Himself in
reflection of the triune nature of God. The is why it is often painful when we feel there is a disconnect in our relationship with others. Sadly, Adam and Eve broke their relationship with God by disobeying God in eating the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden, and when God came seeking out their companionship, they hid from God because they were ashamed (Genesis 2:4 – 3:24). The fall of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden was the beginning of the separation of human beings from God. 7

In his book *The Path out of Loneliness: Finding and Fostering Connection to God, Ourselves, and One Another*, Christian counselor Mark Mayfield explains that God made us to engage in perfect relationships with God and others and that after the Fall, we often experience that something is missing in us. Mayfield explains, “every part of our being—including the depths of our soul—yearns and longs to return to the original design. Perfection was thwarted in the Fall, and ever since, humans have been desperately searching for reconnection.” 8 What is clear from Mayfield’s explanation is that since we were designed to engage in relationships with God and others, there will always be a thirst when we feel a lack of connection with God or others. Mayfield explains further that because of

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7 Graham, *Transforming Loneliness*, 33.
8 Mayfield, *The Path out of Loneliness*, 76.
the original sin, our created nature has been corrupted, and we “chase this primordial longing through meaningless and trivial pursuits.” ⁹ Because of our sinful nature, we often try to fill the void in us with all kinds of things. We become restless and need healing deep within us.

The Bible records men and women of different backgrounds and times experiencing loneliness and a sense of isolation. Some of the causes of their loneliness include social isolation, sin, injustice, grief, persecution, etc. In 1 Kings 19, for instance, Elijah appears to have suffered from a sense of social isolation that made him almost suicidal. ¹⁰ The nation of Israel had turned its back on God, and Elijah stood apart and felt all alone. Because of his faith in God, Queen Jezebel had threatened his life, so he ran away in hiding on Mount Horeb where he was seeking the voice of God, alone, depressed, and waiting to die. The Apostle Paul likely experienced loneliness as he went through difficult circumstances like being beaten, shipwrecks, and imprisonments. He once wrote to his mentee Timothy, “At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me” (2 Tim. 4:16, NRSV).

In her book The Loneliness Epidemic: Why So Many of Us Feel Alone--and How Leaders Can Respond, Susan Mettes tells the loneliness of men and women in the

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⁹ Mayfield, The Path out of Loneliness, 87.
Bible, and she points out two main things regarding the loneliness experienced by people of faith. First, a person can be as close as possible to God and yet feels lonely. For instance, King David was close to God, and yet, David was still lonely. There are multiple scenes in the life of Jesus that reveal loneliness. For example, we hear Jesus’s cry of loneliness on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). We are prone to loneliness because God designed us to have relationships with Him, with other people, and other parts of God’s creation.

Second, although loneliness is mostly with us due to our fallenness, loneliness is not necessarily associated with our sin or even our closeness to God. In other words, not all loneliness is caused by our individual sins. Even our closeness to God will not always cure or prevent loneliness. Even the righteous ones in the Bible are disappointed in their relationships with other people and even with God.

The book of Ruth tells us that after Naomi lost her husband and two sons in the country of Moab where they lived as foreigners, she returned to her hometown of Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law Ruth. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and they asked, “Is this

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really Naomi?” (Ruth 1:19). Naomi’s response to the women in Bethlehem was: “Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” (Ruth 1:20-21, NRSV). Naomi said she became a different person because it was who God had taken away her husband and two sons; what she did with her lonely situation was that “Like Job, she embodied affliction.”¹⁵ Mettes points out that although our closeness to God may not always cure or prevent loneliness, God is not only compassionate on our loneliness but is completely understanding.¹⁶ I would add that although those who follow God in the Bible experience loneliness, their loneliness was not permanent. People of faith like Naomi, Job, and Elijah would express their loneliness to God through crying out, questioning, complaining, and prayer. Their loneliness was like a season, and God would still provide their daily needs to keep going. In the process of waiting on God, their faith grew, and God would heal their loneliness. For instance, after suffering prolonged physical pain and loneliness, Job gives his testimony, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees

¹⁶ Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, 174-175.
you; therefore, I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5-6, NRSV).

3.1.1 The Healing Power of True Love and Belonging

In the previous two chapters, I explored that regardless of people’s age, gender, or ethnicity, one thing we all have in common is that we long to be loved and long to belong. Feeling a sense of belonging and love through meaningful connections is vital in curing or preventing loneliness. But what kind of love or belonging do we really need?

In her book *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*, Brené Brown states that love and belonging are irreducible needs for everyone, and in the absence of love and belonging, there is always suffering. Belonging is critical for us because we are a social species who cannot survive without one another.17 As part of her research, Brown once asked a large group of eighth graders to break into small teams and come up with the difference between *fitting in* and *belonging*. The kids would hold poster-size post-its on the stage of an empty auditorium, and what is written on their posters include:

Belonging is being somewhere where you want to be, and they want you.

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FITTING IN
is being somewhere where
you want to be, but they don't
care one way or the other

Not belonging at
school is really hard.
But it's NOTHING
compared to what it
feels like when you
don't belong at HOME.

NOT
LIVING
UP TO YOUR
PARENTS'
EXPECTATIONS

NOT BEING
AS COOL OR
POPULAR
AS YOUR
PARENTS 18

Brown’s comment on the result of fitting in vs. belonging experiment is
that the eighth graders clearly understand the differences in their bones. Brown
writes, “For many tweens and teens, belonging or not belonging feels like life or
death.”19 Brown’s experiment result with eight graders reminds us of how
painful loneliness can be when we do not feel loved or do not belong. Can other
human beings alone fulfill our need to belong?

Due to the brokenness of human beings and the unpredictability of this world, our need to belong cannot be fulfilled by others alone. Human relationship tends to be conditional. In a world where people are constantly judged based on race, age, gender, economic status, and physical appearance, people often try to fit in so that they feel accepted. There will always be unmet expectations and disappointments in our relationships with God and others. To fully meet our need to be loved and belong, we also need God. We need to feel an unconditional love.

In his article What Our Search for Belonging Reveals, Jeremy Linneman points out that beyond food and shelter, nothing promotes human flourishing like having a people and place of belonging. Linneman also reminds us that in Jesus Christ, we can find true belonging which is being fully known and being fully loved. And it is God who makes that belonging possible. Since Adam and Eve broke their perfect fellowship with God by disobeying and eating the forbidden fruit, God sent His son to earth to pay the price for the sin of humanity on the cross so that we might once again be in fellowship with God. As Jesus was on his way to the cross, he endured loneliness for us; it is because he loved us and wanted to restore the fellowship between God and humanity.

Linneman states that belonging to God is our deepest need, and yet God himself calls creation and life without human companionship and community “not good” (Gen. 2:18). So to belong to God is to belong to God’s family, which means belonging to the church. He then raises an important question: “Is it true we must belong to ourselves?” and argues that as Christians, we do not belong to ourselves. Linneman explains, “When we belong to God, not ourselves, we can then and only then fully belong to others.” Therefore, “We no longer belong to ourselves or to the world. Christ died so that we might no longer belong to ourselves but belong to Christ and bear fruit for God (Rom. 7:4)” Linneman’s statement reminds us of Heidelberg Catechism, 4.001 which states that we are not our own, “but belong — body and soul, in life and in death — to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” In Western society where people are busy with work and being distracted constantly, Christians are tempted to forget that we belong to God and one another. In fact, we often act as if we do not belong to God and one another, and our self-centeredness often leads to self-hatred. The cost of not living as children of God is high. Although we live in the richest nation on earth, we are not content with what we have. Instead of being confident in God, we put

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our trust on ourselves and material things. As a result, we have common issues of low self-esteem, insecurity, and the fear of missing out. The consequence of low self-esteem, as *Psychology Today* reminds us, is that we often compare ourselves to others and believe that we will never be good enough. In short, forgetting that we belong to God and one another leads to loneliness. Therefore, it is important that we remember the fact that we are accepted by a loving God who is with us and has made us members of God’s family.

In his book *The Path out of Loneliness*, Mark Mayfield states that an important step we need in healing our loneliness is obtaining a proper love of self. And in order to have a proper love of self, we must first have a proper love of God. Mayfield explains that we must have the perspective of loving God as a choice and a discipline rather than a feeling, which means we need to be intentional about loving “God with our whole being, our vital breath of life, and our every thought.” And Mayfield explains that the more we intentionally enter God’s presence, the more the chasm of loneliness dissipates. One might argue that a proper love of self is unbiblical as 2 Timothy 3:2 states that in the last days, there will be *lovers of themselves*, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, rather than

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lovers of God. Mayfield, however, does not mean to be loving ourselves in a selfish way. He is stressing how important it is for us to show ourselves compassion, rather than self-hate. Jesus even said, “Love others as you love yourself” (Matthew 22:39).

3.2 Theologians and Loneliness

In his book *The Restless Heart: Finding Our Spiritual Home in Times of Loneliness*, Ronald Rolheiser examines the nature and dangers of loneliness and explains how theologians like Augustine, Soren Kierkegaard, and Karl Rahner understood the purpose of loneliness. Rolheiser shows that although loneliness can be harmful, it has potential value and can have spiritual benefits to Christians. In this section, I explore the understanding of loneliness by three theologians: Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430), Thomas Aquinas (1224 – 1274), and John of the Cross (1542 – 1591).

Augustine of Hippo’s explanation for human loneliness arises from his understanding of the human person. He once prayed, “You arouse him to take joy in praising you, for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”30 Augustine understands that God creates human beings

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because of God’s goodness and love.\textsuperscript{31} And the purpose of God’s creation of us is to participate in “the nature of God’s very life,” therefore, “the only thing that can give us full happiness and completion is, precisely, God’s life, full union with God.”\textsuperscript{32} However, full union with God is not possible yet while we are on earth. Separated from full union with God by our creatureliness and by sin, we live partly within the city of God and living partly within the city of man, which leaves us incomplete and thirsty, restless and lonely.\textsuperscript{33} Therefore, loneliness is both a good and a natural thing.\textsuperscript{34} God’s desire for us is to live inside the divine life, and so God designed us in a way that we have a thirst or a loneliness that forces us to constantly yearn for God and to be frustrated and not content when we are outside of God’s life.\textsuperscript{35} In summary, Augustine’s understanding of human loneliness is that we are built to wander, to be restless and lonely, and that we should not be surprised if we find ourselves in a lonely situation.\textsuperscript{36}

Similar to Augustine, Thomas Aquinas’ explanation of loneliness is based on an understanding of human nature and how he sees it as relating to God.\textsuperscript{37}

Thomas further develops Augustine’s understanding of loneliness on three
points. First, loneliness is not just a thirst for God, but a thirst for other people and the world. Augustine understands that we are lonely because our hearts are restless until they attain God. Thomas goes further and adds that complete rest for our lonely hearts will come only when we are in full union with God and with each other and with all of reality.

Second, loneliness is what makes us dynamic beings. According to Thomas, God has created each of us for a very definite purpose and end. We are built to be in perfect intercommunity with God and others. So we constantly and thirstily reach out for it. But when we do reach out, we can meet and touch only particular persons and objects which can fulfill us to a point, but never completely. Therefore, loneliness becomes the force that drives us outward to keep searching, to keep reaching, to not give up. Third, loneliness tells us of God’s purpose for us. Thomas’s understanding of loneliness is that it is good not only in that it keeps us dynamic, but also because it keeps us focused on the end for which God made us. The purpose of loneliness for us is “to be in

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38 Rolheiser, The Restless Heart, 113.
40 Rolheiser, The Restless Heart, 113.
42 Rolheiser, The Restless Heart, 114.
43 Rolheiser, The Restless Heart, 115.
44 Rolheiser, The Restless Heart, 115.
45 Rolheiser, The Restless Heart, 115.
46 Rolheiser, The Restless Heart, 115.
ecstatic union with God and others." Therefore, in Thomas’s view, loneliness is a good and necessary force within our lives that makes us tick.

Juan de Yepes y Alvarez, a Spanish theologian and mystic, more commonly known as John of the Cross has similar understanding of the human person and loneliness as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and yet he offers some unique perspectives on loneliness. First, there is an immense danger in loneliness. If we do not handle or channel it creatively, loneliness can become a dangerous force within our lives. For example, our loneliness can lead us to a selfish and an unhealthy pursuit of pleasure, and, if not recognized and checked, can ultimately be destructive of our personality. Second, in order to arrive at our real depth, we need to enter into our loneliness. John noticed that we often avoid journeying inward because we are frightened to enter to make that journey alone and enter the unknown. And so, we avoid journeying inward at all costs, distracting ourselves, drugging our pain, and staying busy. But the price we pay for avoiding an inward journey is “a high one: superficiality and shallowness.” Third, when we first do enter into our loneliness, we enter into the pain of

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53 Rolheiser, *The Restless Heart*, 120.
54 Rolheiser, *The Restless Heart*, 120.
purgatory.\textsuperscript{55} And the early stages of journeying inward causes intolerable pain because we have stopped numbing, drugging, distracting, and deflecting our lonely thirst. \textsuperscript{56} Eventually this journey leads to a deep peace and healing we need, and we begin to see ourselves as we truly are.\textsuperscript{57}

### 3.3 Steps Toward Healing

In this section, I explore the steps out of loneliness written by Mark Mayfield, the late Evangelist Billy Graham’s daughter Ruth Graham, and the Dutch Catholic priest, professor, writer, and theologian Henri Nowen (1932-1996). The reason for selecting these three writers is to have a broader understanding of the journey out of loneliness by a professional counselor, a lay person, and a contemporary theologian. I also explore research-based interventions and approaches for reducing loneliness and social isolation.

#### 3.3.1 The Journey Toward Healing

According to Mark Mayfield, there are three main steps toward healing loneliness. Similar to John of the Cross’ explanation of our need to journey inward, Mayfield understands that the first step towards healing is to confront and acknowledge the loneliness we are experiencing. This step involves

\textsuperscript{55} Rolheiser, \textit{The Restless Heart}, 120.
\textsuperscript{56} Rolheiser, \textit{The Restless Heart}, 121.
\textsuperscript{57} Rolheiser, \textit{The Restless Heart}, 121.
reflecting on our mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual health.\textsuperscript{58} The second step is to take ownership of our loneliness and changing our path. Failing to take ownership of loneliness leads to denial and further isolation and loneliness.\textsuperscript{59} On the other hand, taking ownership of our loneliness will lead to lasting change because we have the promise, support, and guidance of God with us.\textsuperscript{60} The third step involves using different tools or available resources to make necessary change. Mayfield gives seven tools for self-assessment, and each tool is a resource to aid in healing loneliness and can be used to rate on a scale of 1 (needs work) to 10 (strong).\textsuperscript{61} The tools include a growth mindset, reflective honestly, grit (mental and emotional toughness), resiliency, humility, teachability, and ability to embrace change.

While the three steps toward healing are critical in the process of healing loneliness, Mayfield stresses that they are not enough. We need to connect with someone or a group and practice self-care. Since we are designed for community, we need to have a mentor, pastor, small group, friend group, meal group, Bible study, counselor, or similar relationship or group of people.\textsuperscript{62} We also need to make sure we are practicing good self-care which is essential when working with

\textsuperscript{58} Mayfield, \textit{The Path out of Loneliness}, 133.
\textsuperscript{59} Mayfield writes, “You can either ignore what you’ve discovered or take ownership of it. One path leads to denial and further isolation and loneliness. The other path leads to lasting change.” Mark Mayfield, \textit{The Path out of Loneliness}, 135.
\textsuperscript{60} Mayfield, \textit{The Path out of Loneliness}, 136.
\textsuperscript{61} Mayfield, \textit{The Path out of Loneliness}, 136.
\textsuperscript{62} Mayfield, \textit{The Path out of Loneliness}, 157-158.
people. Mayfield warns that if we do not take care of ourselves, we will burn out. He explains that loving self well means caring for ourselves, resting, and recharging so that we can love others well. 63

3.3.2 Connecting with God and Others

In her book *Transforming Loneliness*, Ruth Graham explains that loneliness is an attack on our bodies that threatens our survival, and the purpose of loneliness is a God-given alarm system that tells us something needs to change quickly. 64 Graham shares a five-step tool REACH, which individuals can practice when they are confronted with the feeling of loneliness. The first step is to recognize the source, symptoms, and risks of loneliness. Second, we express our loneliness to God and another person. The third step is to anticipate that God will transform our loneliness into something positive. Similar to Thomas Aquinas’ understanding of loneliness as a good and necessary force within our lives, Graham understands loneliness to be an opportunity for us to have a deeper connection with God and others.

The fourth step is to connect with God (reach up) and others (reach out). Similar to Mark Mayfield’s explanation that we do not work on the healing process of our loneliness alone, Graham sees our need for God and others. The

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63 Mayfield, *The Path out of Loneliness*, 157-158.
64 Graham, *Transforming Loneliness*, 63.
difference between the approach by Graham and Mayfield is that Mayfield focuses more on self-reflection and assessment while Graham emphasizes on a God-centered approach. For the transformation of loneliness, Graham stresses the importance of making the choice to partner with God and inviting Him into our loneliness so God can transform it. The fifth step is to honor God in your loneliness by making our loneliness sacred—make it holy by dedicating it to God. 65 In short, we let God transform our loneliness and turn our lonely situation to honor God by doing God’s will.

3.3.3 Connecting with Ourselves through Solitudes

The practice of solitude enables us to connect with God and connect inwardly with ourselves. Solitude is an opportunity for self-reflection and connecting with ourselves without distraction or disturbance.66 The benefit of solitude is that it can lower levels of loneliness and increase levels of well-being. 67

In his book Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life, Henri Nouwen explains that the words solitude and solitary are derived from the Latin

65 Graham, Transforming Loneliness, 106.
word *solus*, which means alone. According to Nouwen, the solitude that really counts is the solitude of heart, which is an inner quality or attitude that does not depend on physical isolation. Nouwen describes our spiritual growth as evolving in three movements, and the first movement is from loneliness to solitude. To reach out to ourselves, Nouwen explains, we need to live a spiritual life in which we first take the courage to enter into “the desert of our loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude.”

Similar to John of the Cross’ observation of how people avoid journeying inward at all cost, Nouwen points out that our culture has become most sophisticated in the avoidance of pain, including our physical, emotional and mental. And we have the tendency to avoid the experience of pain as much as we can, and we try to run away from our loneliness by distracting ourselves with people and special experiences that will not really cure our loneliness. Instead of running away from our loneliness and trying to deny or forget it, we should protect it and turn it into a fruitful solitude which requires both courage and a strong faith.

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71 In his book *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen writes, “By running away from our loneliness and by trying to distract ourselves with people and special experiences, we do not realistically deal with our human predicament.” Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 18.
3.3.4 *Individual Responsibilities*

It is evident from exploring the understanding of loneliness by theologians like Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, John of the Cross, and contemporary writers like Mark Mayfield, Ruth Graham, Susan Mettes, and Henri Nouwen that we as individuals have responsibilities in the healing process of our own loneliness. First, we need to learn how to identity our loneliness and take the courage to admit that we are lonely. Second, we need to accept that as circumstances often shift in our lives, it is perfectly normal to feel a sense of isolation; nothing is wrong to feel lonely sometimes. Third, loneliness should drive us to something better and healthier. Loneliness expert John Cacioppo explains that what loneliness tells us is that we need social connection, which is as critical to our well-being as food and water, and that denying our feeling of loneliness makes no more sense than denying we feel hungry. 73 The sad thing is that we often do deny our loneliness and feel shame around being lonely as if something is really wrong with us. Instead of feeling shame being around lonely, we should accept it, and change our mindset that loneliness is part of God’s creation which reminds us of our need to have meaningful connections. In short, we must confront our own loneliness and take necessary actions.

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3.4 Interventions and Approaches for Reducing Loneliness and Social Isolation

There are different interventions and approaches that are helpful in reducing loneliness and social isolation. Effective interventions that have been devised to help people deal with loneliness include one-on-one interventions, group therapy, and wider community interventions.\(^7\) An example of a one-on-one interaction includes befriending which I will explore in chapter 4. Group therapy involves group activities that help alleviate lonely individuals. Wider community interventions include members of a community that reach out to lonely individuals. In chapter 5, I will explore how Christian communities can reach out to lonely individuals through sharing God’s love.

According to The Suicide Prevention Resource Center at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, approaches to reducing loneliness and social isolation can be grouped into four categories based on the underlying cause they address.\(^7\) The first approach is to increase social skills, including verbal and non-verbal communication skills. The second approach is to increase social support, which involves friendly visitors, virtual connections or groups, in-home support

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services, meal delivery, etc. The third approach is to increase access to social interactions that includes telephone outreach, hearing aids and assistive devices, social activities and events, and transportation assistance. The fourth approach is to change unhelpful thoughts about social situations. Some lonely individuals have negative thoughts (also called cognitions) about others, and they tend to evaluate social situations in extreme or unhelpful ways; an effective way to help them change unhelpful social cognitions is through cognitive behavioral therapy, which is an evidence-based psychotherapy (talk therapy).76

3.5 Psychological Approaches for Loneliness

According to Campaign to End Loneliness, the use of psychological approaches show promise for alleviating loneliness in later life, and the three approaches with the most relevant research evidence are: (1) cognitive behavioral therapy, (2) mindfulness, and (3) positive psychology.77 These approaches are not solely for the elderly; they can also be applied to the general population.

Cognitive behavioral therapy, also known as CBT, enables people to understand their thoughts, feelings and behaviors and helps to change some of these to manage the problems they face.78 A key part of CBT is to identify the

76 SPRC, “Reducing Loneliness and Social Isolation among Older Adults.”
78 Campaign to End Loneliness, 22.
negative thinking patterns that people can feel trapped in and help them to break from these negative thoughts and help them feel better. 79 *Mindfulness* is to help people aware of their own thoughts during difficult times and help them choose to accept or reject them. 80 Mindfulness can alleviate loneliness in both the older people and the wider adult population. 81 *Positive psychology* helps people alleviate their loneliness by focusing on promoting positive emotions. The intention of this approach is to override negative emotions. 82 Positive psychology works with the positive events and influences in the life of lonely individuals. It focuses on experiences like happiness, joy, inspiration, and love; states and traits like gratitude, resilience and compassion; and topics like character strengths, optimism, life satisfaction, wellbeing, self-esteem, self-confidence, and hope. 83

In practice, the three psychological approaches of cognitive behavior therapy, mindfulness, and positive psychology are generally not used as a single approach in isolation, but they are used in a mixture that best suits the situation. 84 There are a few other approaches that show promise in specific

79 Campaign to End Loneliness, 22.
80 Campaign to End Loneliness, 8.
82 *Positive psychology* is to help people focus on “producing a state of wellbeing by using techniques to promote positive emotions, with the intention these will override negative emotions.” Campaign to End Loneliness, 25.
84 Campaign to End Loneliness, “The Psychology of Loneliness: Why it matters and what we can do,” 8.
population or care settings, which include acceptance and commitment therapy, reminiscence therapy, and humor therapy.  

Psychological approaches can be helpful in confronting our own loneliness. Using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), we can explore how loneliness affects our thought, feeling, and behavior, and the risks of loneliness in us. In difficult circumstances, mindfulness can help us aware of our own thoughts and choose whether we should accept or reject them. In changing how we think, positive psychology can be quite beneficial. When we choose to think about positive events and influences like gratitude and joyfulness, our loneliness can go away.

3.6 Engaging in the Anti-thesis of Loneliness

In his book *The Path Out of Loneliness*, Mark Mayfield tells how engaging in what he calls ‘antithesis of loneliness’ can eradicate the loneliness that comes to us from time to time. There are three steps in it. The first step in this journey is to explore our identity.  

When it comes to identity, the typical question people ask is the existential question “Who am I?” Henri Nouwen indicated that there are three typical answers to this question: (1) I am what I do, (2) I am what I have, and (3) I am what others say about me. What Nouwen is saying is that our

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85 Smith, “Charting Loneliness,” 27.
86 Mayfield, *The Path out of Loneliness*, 139.
modern culture answers the question “Who am I?” by externalizing it rather than internalizing it.\textsuperscript{87} The problem with internalizing is that (1) what we do like work often change, (2) what we have like material things or even relationships change, and (3) people often say all kinds of things about us, some of which may or may not be true. To internalize the question “Who am I?”, we need to open all aspects of who we are to the light of who God is and consider the question “Whose are you?” rather than “Who am I?”\textsuperscript{88} We can remember that “our identity is not outside of ourselves but, rather, inside each of our souls as a representation of what Christ did for us on the Cross.” \textsuperscript{89}

The next step in eradicating loneliness, according to Mayfield, is finding our purpose, which flows out of our identity and enables us to engage the world around us with meaning.\textsuperscript{90} The third step in eradicating loneliness is engaging hope. Mayfield writes, “Hope is the ability to look up and see beyond current circumstances, pain, turmoil, and disappointments to what lies ahead. The original lie will shout, It will always be this way! But hope will whisper quietly, It’s okay. Keep going; it will get better.”\textsuperscript{91} I would agree that engaging in the anti-thesis of loneliness Mayfield describes like finding our identity and purpose and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{87} Mayfield, \textit{The Path out of Loneliness}, 140.
\item \textsuperscript{88} Mayfield, \textit{The Path out of Loneliness}, 140.
\item \textsuperscript{89} Mayfield, \textit{The Path out of Loneliness}, 141.
\item \textsuperscript{90} Mayfield, \textit{The Path out of Loneliness}, 141.
\item \textsuperscript{91} Mayfield, \textit{The Path out of Loneliness}, 142.
\end{itemize}
engaging hope are important, but in practical, we need to be intentional about making it a habit and have a consistent connection with a friend or a group of people who practice the same faith.

In summer of 2011, I met Burmese refugees in a poor neighborhood of New Delhi, India, and they reminded me of the power of engaging in the antithesis of loneliness. One afternoon, I was invited to a prayer meeting in a tiny apartment where Chin and Mizo people from Myanmar who spoke different dialects came together. These refugees belonged to different churches in New Delhi, and the purpose of the group was to grow spiritually together and encourage one another as they constantly faced uncertainty in New Delhi where there was no prospect for them to become Indian citizens nor did they know where else they would go. When it was time for sharing their testimonies and prayer topics, they shared their conflicts in their families, their brokenness, their pain, and their needs. They would remind each other that their true identity was in Christ, and that they had their purpose in life, and there was still hope even as refugees. Their worship was so authentic and so contagious that we felt joy and we could feel the work of the Holy Spirit. Their unity, humility, and concern for one another was what healed their loneliness and gave them joy. Since I visited the prayer group in 2011, there have been over 10 similar prayer groups among Burmese refugees in different neighbors of New Delhi. What I learned from
refugees in the capital of India was that when we exercise our faith through worship and fellowship with others, we engage in the antithesis of loneliness. When Christians come together in unity, the presence of the Holy Spirit transforms our pain and loneliness into peace, love, joy, and hope.

3.7 Conclusion

As part of God’s creation in us, loneliness often comes as our circumstances shift. So, it is perfectly normal to feel lonely sometimes. But what we don’t want when we feel a sense of isolation is to do nothing and have our loneliness turned into a chronic condition. Therefore, it is important that we have a strategy and take appropriate actions that will cure our loneliness. The healing process of loneliness mainly includes admitting our loneliness, confronting it, remembering that we belong to God and God’s family, and taking practical steps to have meaningful connections with God, ourselves, and others.

It takes courage to admit that we are lonely, and denying loneliness is like denying hunger and thirst which can be life threatening. In the individualistic society that encourages autonomy and self-reliance, it is common for people to experience feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and low self-esteem. Therefore, we need to be intentional about cultivating a proper love of self (rather than self-hate) and a proper love of God. Rather than feeling shame or something is wrong with us,
we can change our mindset and see loneliness as a gift and an opportunity to turn to God and let God transform our own loneliness from a sad feeling to God’s purposes for us.

In a culture where human-made barriers based on race, class, gender, age, and political affiliation cause divisions, we knowingly or unknowingly attempt to fit in so that we feel accepted. Through her experiment with a large group of eight graders, Brené Brown reminds us that trying to fit in involves trying to live up to the expectations of others like parents which often causes us not to feel at home. In journeying out of loneliness, it is important to choose to be in where we feel we can be our authentic selves and feel we are accepted just the way we are. Theologians like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and John of the Cross remind us that although loneliness can be harmful, it is part of God’s creation which is a good and necessary force within ourselves, meaning there is a spiritual benefit in our loneliness. When loneliness comes, we can remember that it is an opportunity for us to turn to God and apply faith. We can learn from the experiences of people of faith in the Bible like Naomi, Ruth, Elijah, David, and Paul that their connection with God and/or other people don’t always cure or prevent them from loneliness; and yet, reaching out to God and others with whom they feel they belong not only enables them to endure their loneliness but also transformed their loneliness.
In the Bible, there are four main things that involve in the transformation of the loneliness of people of faith:

1. Knowing that God empathizes us in our loneliness,

2. Rediscovering that God is an ever-present God in our loneliness,

3. Finding a like-minded friend or group of people who journey with us in our loneliness,

4. Continuing to do God’s work while we live here on earth as sojourners.

When we feel a sense of isolation, we can remember that the God who comes to us as a human understands our pain and empathizes us. Jesus himself was no stranger to suffering the pain of loneliness and being a stranger, an outsider, and a refugee. According to the Gospel writer Luke, the story of Jesus’ birth begins with his parents being in a town where they were strangers and a town there was no place for them in the inn. When Jesus grew up, he had gone through what we have gone through like grief, loneliness, and rejection. And he promises that our sufferings like loneliness will not be permanent. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:3-4).

The season of loneliness is an opportunity for us to rediscover that God is an ever-present God in our lives. Sometimes nighttime heightened loneliness,
and it is often nighttime when we feel crushed, yet no one is immediately available to connect with. God promises us comfort and strength while we suffer alone and when hope is most needed. In Isaiah 9, for example, the Word of God came in a lonely time of great loss for the nation of Israel which had come through a period of overwhelming violence. Jerusalem had been destroyed by its enemies, and the Israelites were forced to live in exile in Babylon. It was when all hope was gone that the message of hope came to them, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them a light has shined.” (Isaiah 9:2). We can remember that God is with us in our loneliness. The Psalmist was aware of God’s continual presence with her/him and testified, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me” (Psalm 23:4). The psalmist would also invite herself/himself, “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help” (Psalm 42:5).

In a season of loneliness, we can remember to find a like-minded friend or group of people. 1 Kings 19 tells us that the nation of Israel had turned its back on God and Elijah stood apart, Elijah felt a sense of isolation, and his concern was for the people of Israel and that they should be following God. For fear of persecution by Jezebel, Elijah ran away and went into a cave in hiding, feeling cut off from everybody. When we feel a sense of isolation, we can remember that
God is still there and God is listening. The Word of God came to Elijah with an instruction to get out of the cave and stood at the mouth of the cave. God gave him new instructions for his life, and God continued to use Elijah. In his loneliness, Elijah rediscovered God.

Following God’s instruction, Elijah went from where he was hiding and found Elisha (1 Kings 19: 19-21). Elijah and Elisha were companions who loved God, and they were both men of prayer. They had a sense of belonging to one another, which reminds us that God’s transformation of our loneliness includes a like-minded friend or group of people. After God transformed Elijah’s loneliness, God gave him a new assignment. He was to go back to where he came and go to the Desert of Damascus an anoint Jehu king over Israel and anoint Elisha to succeed him as prophet (1 Kings 19:15-18).

In his book *The Path Out of Loneliness*, Mark Mayfield reminds Christians to make sure we continue to work on ourselves by developing our identity, purpose, and hope which requires a deliberate choice of investment of time and energy. The good news for followers of Christ is that the Holy Spirit is always there to help, comfort, and empower us, and our sad emotion can be transformed into something positive. The Gospel writer Luke tells us that on the first Easter Sunday, when the resurrected Jesus entered the room where the disciples isolated themselves due to fear of persecution, they were being transformed into
a people with new identity, purpose, and hope (Luke 19: 20-22). Just as the
resurrected Christ chose the twelve disciples and empowered them for ministry,
Christians have been chosen, known, and claimed as belonging to God and
God’s family. Moreover, Jesus has called us to be bringers of hope to the world
that is full of hurts, trauma, frustrations, and uncertainties.

In the next chapter, I will explore ways we can stop the spread of
loneliness by protecting ourselves and one another from loneliness.
Chapter 4

Protecting Against Loneliness Through Stronger Connections

In the previous chapter, I explored how we can journey out of loneliness by reaching out to God, to ourselves, and to others. While it is important to know the healing process for loneliness, it is equally important to know how we can protect ourselves from unbearable loneliness. The focus of this chapter is to explore the practical frame for Christians to protect ourselves and one another from loneliness so that we can stop the spread of loneliness.

Since loneliness is part of God’s creation in us, there is no formula or practice that will prevent us from ever lonely again. However, strengthening our connection with God, with ourselves, and with others can prevent us from turning occasional or situational loneliness into a chronic or an unbearable situation. Moreover, having a growth mindset and learning new skills, adjusting our expectations, belonging to small groups, and developing a servant’s heart can helpful in protecting against loneliness. This chapter is divided into three sections:

I. Developing a deeper connection with God and ourselves

II. Building stronger relationships with others

III. Belonging to small groups and developing a habit of serving others
4.1 Developing a Deeper Connection with God and Ourselves

Researchers mainly agree we all need one another, and that we are stronger together. For example, John Cacioppo explains that we do not acquire strength from our rugged individualism, but rather from our collective ability to plan, communicate, and work together.¹ Cacioppo explains further that to grow into an adulthood for a social species, including humans, is not to become autonomous and solitary; it is to become the person on whom others can depend.² We need one another to survive and thrive. In her book *Atlas of the Heart*, Brené Brown explains that from an evolution perspective connection was about survival, but today it is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives.³ Brown defines connection as “the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.”⁴ By strengthening our connection with one another, we are healthier, and more resilient.⁵ One of the benefits from human connections includes decreases in the body’s stress response.⁶

While we need a stronger connection with one another, it is not enough to protect ourselves from loneliness. We need to develop a deeper connection with God and ourselves. In a culture in which busyness, greed, unrealistic expectations, and human-made barriers of all kinds intensify the feelings of isolation and loneliness, Christians are constantly tempted to forget who we are as children of God and forget that our lives depend on God and each other. Forgetting who we are and whose we are often leads us to self-centeredness and relying on our own efforts and material possessions. To protect ourselves from loneliness, making the choice to connect with God must be a priority. The Scripture invites us to seek first God’s kingdom above everything else, and the promise is that all our other needs will be given to us (Matthew 11:33). The benefit of having a deeper connection with God is that God gives us the friendship and security we need. Even when loneliness comes, our connection with God gives us the strength we need to handle the pain of loneliness. 7

One challenge among Christians in America is that while the rate of loneliness keeps climbing, the rate of Biblical illiteracy is also increasing. Reading or hearing the Word of God reminds us that we are never alone; it gives us the courage and hope we need daily in an unpredictable world. In his book The

7 Ruth Graham writes, “He [God] offers us friendship that gets underneath the pain of our loneliness. While that pain does not go away, its sting is made fully bearable by the far deeper friendship of Jesus.” Ruth Graham, Transforming Loneliness: Deepening Our Relationships with God and Others When We Feel Alone, (Baker Publishing Group, 2021), 146, Kindle.
Loneliness Epidemic: How the Church Can Cure Our Gravest Sickness, Thomas Parkinson reminds us to think of God’s Word as spiritual food. Just as we need to eat to be healthy, we need to feed on God’s Word daily for spiritual health. Parkinson writes, “The Bible is the primary source of reliable knowledge about God and ourselves. We will never relate well to God, ourselves, or others, apart from the wisdom of God’s Word.”

To develop a deeper connection with God, we cannot ignore the importance of reading the Bible and prayer. In 2018, the Committee on Preparation for Ministry in the Presbytery of Charlotte interviewed a seminary graduate who was on track to become an ordained minister, and she wrote in her faith statement, “God continues to speak to me through scripture, and I will continue to read, re-read, study, and interpret the Word in light of the ever-changing context in which I live.” When we let God’s word speak to us, the Spirit works in us, and like Jesus telling the parable in Matthew 13: 31-31 that a small mustard seed would sprout and grow big, the Spirit helps us in doing what God wants us to do.

An important benefit of reading the Bible regularly is that it gives us a different perspective on our circumstances. In March 2023, I did a language interpretation for a Burmese refugee who was paralyzed from the waist down.

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due to an auto accident in 2012. When her social worker asked if she had an issue of loneliness, she said “No!” because she would make the discipline of reading her Bible daily and prayer and talking to her loved ones over the phone in the evening. Because of her connection with God and loved ones, she did not feel isolated but was full of gratitude and was thankful for her family and her care providers.

4.1.1 The Practice of Spiritual Solitude

In chapter 3, I explored how the practice of spiritual solitude not only enables us to connect with God but also with ourselves. Solitude can be an effective way to protect against loneliness, as it can change the way we see and experience things. In psychology, the shift from loneliness to solitude is seen as a kind of cognitive reframing process, which means we change the way we look at something or receive something, consequently changing our experience of it. The benefit of embracing solitude and having a deeper connection with ourselves is that it enables us to understand ourselves, what we desire in life, and our values; and we are more likely to make better choices. Even in the midst of chaos and busy

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10 Susan Murphy, “How to Reduce the Stress of Loneliness – 9 Tips,” Forbes, Accessed on November 24,
schedule, we can be intentional about carving out time for solitude. While alone, we can think of the qualities we like about ourselves and the things we appreciate in others. Methods of solitude can include journaling, meditating, praying, playing a musical instrument, or learning a new language. Another benefit of embracing solitude is that it helps us in building stronger connections with others. Solitude helps us do that by allowing us to check with our own feelings and thoughts, and to explore creativity, and to connect with nature; once we build a stronger connection with ourselves, we can build a stronger connection with others.

4.1.2 Having a Growth Mindset and Changing Our Actions

An effective way to protect ourselves from loneliness is having a growth mindset and a willingness to change our actions. In his book *The Path out of Loneliness: Finding and Fostering Connection to God, Ourselves, and One Another*, Thomas Mayfield explains that having a growth mindset means we recognize we do not


have it all figured out but that we have the skill needed to move forward.\textsuperscript{13}

When we have a fixed mindset, we do not believe change or growth can happen.\textsuperscript{14} Mayfield writes, “If you have a growth mindset, you will be able to recognize your strengths and weaknesses, and you realize that with hard work and persistence, you can develop your skills and abilities.”\textsuperscript{15} So, having a growth mindset enables us to honestly examine ourselves and see areas in our lives that need improvements, which enables us to identity new skills we need to learn and boost our confidence. The Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center uses increasing verbal and non-verbal communication skills as one of their four approaches to reducing loneliness and social isolation.\textsuperscript{16}

The benefit of having a growth mindset is that it can help us see crisis like a job loss differently. In his article \textit{Transforming failure: how God used a painful season of ministry to change my life}, J.R. Briggs shared important lessons he learned from going through a painful experience in a mega church where he served for

\textsuperscript{13} Mark Mayfield, \textit{The Path out of Loneliness: Finding and Fostering Connection to God, Ourselves, and One Another}, (Colorado Springs: NavPres, 2021), 126, Kindle.

\textsuperscript{14} Mayfield, \textit{The Path out of Loneliness: Finding and Fostering Connection to God, Ourselves, and One Another}, 126.

\textsuperscript{15} Mayfield, \textit{The Path out of Loneliness: Finding and Fostering Connection to God, Ourselves, and One Another}, 137.

two years. Briggs had to leave the church wrestling with loneliness and despair, and his feelings included betrayal, hurt, hopelessness, grief, loss, disillusionment, bitterness, doubt, and anger. From this painful process, Briggs learned valuable lessons that he was having a pleasing personality and had interpreted his experience of being rejected as a failure, which caused him to feel shame and loneliness. Briggs reminds us that being rejected does not mean we fail in ministry. He also reminds us that even if we go through a painful season in life, what is important is that we do not lose hope. We should change our lens on seeing a painful circumstance as an opportunity for growth in faith. In the next few pages, I will explore a few personal growth areas we can improve in.

4.1.3 Learning to Cope with the Pain of Disconnection

Although our relationship with others can heal and protect us from loneliness, they can also be a source of loneliness. In her book Atlas of the Heart, Brené Brown explains that our experience of disconnections can be so painful, and that chronic disconnections lead to social isolation, loneliness, and feelings of powerlessness. Disconnection occurs when an individual misunderstands, invalidates, excludes, humiliates, or injures another individual in some way. The feelings of disconnections due to social rejection, social exclusion, and or

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social isolation share similar neural pathways with feelings of physical pain. 19
And there are a couple of serious watchouts in regard to disconnections. First,
when a disconnection occurs, we need to watch out our feelings and thoughts to
ourselves. To avoid the unpleasant feeling and vulnerability that may occur
when our effort to achieve connection are not successful, we may learn that it is
safer to keep our feelings and thoughts to ourselves, instead of sharing them
with others. 20 Keeping our feelings and thoughts to ourselves due to a
disconnection is a recipe for loneliness and blame. 21 The second thing to watch-
out is perfectionism. There is a perfectionism social disconnection model which
explains that “people who are high on the perfectionistic traits scale behave in
ways that cause perceived and actual exclusion/rejection by others.” 22 In short,
the perfectionism of individuals cause them to show up in ways that lead people
to push them away. 23 When a disconnection occurs, we need to be intentional
about connecting with God and seeking out belonging by reaching out to friends
or small groups.

21 Brene Brown writes, “To avoid the pain and vulnerability that may result when their efforts to achieve
connection are unsuccessful, individuals may learn that it is safer to keep their feelings and thoughts to
themselves, rather than sharing them in their relationships.” Brown, Atlas of the Heart, 172.
4.1.4 Offering Forgiveness and Reconciliation

In a world filled with violence, hate, oppression, and hurt, unforgiveness often comes with the feelings of isolation and loneliness. Some of us are victims of past relationships, and victims of past feelings and emotions that are controlling us in the present moment. Some of us are victims of an unhappy home, victims of a painful marriage, and victims of prejudice and terrible injustice. And some of us are victims of painful experiences in the church! In his book *The Loneliness Epidemic*, Thomas Parkinson tells how our culture struggles with forgiveness and our need for the hard work of offering forgiveness and receiving forgiveness. Parkinson explains, “Unresolved hurt and anger almost always result in some form of isolation. Under such circumstances we do not talk to one another. We avoid contact with each other, stewing in our anger alone.”24 An effective way we can protect ourselves from loneliness due to anger and hurt is by practicing the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation.

In Ephesians 4, the Apostle Paul instructs Christians to put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and be kind and forgive one another (Ephesians 4:31-32). The benefit of forgiveness is that it frees us from our worst impulses and releases us to pursue the life of love and peace God intended.25 It is the right

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thing for Christians to ask for and receive forgiveness. If we have hurt someone in our lives, in humility we need to own up to our wrong-doing and reach out to ask for forgiveness; if someone has hurt us and if we hold onto a grudge, we can ask God the strength to let go and forgive.26

On October 2, 2006, a gunman killed five Amish schoolchildren and wounded five others at the West Nickel Mines School in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and then he killed himself. In the midst of crushing grief, the Amish community offered words of forgiveness toward the dead killer and his family. Forgiveness is not an easy thing to practice, and yet it does relieve us from suffering when we do it with prayers.

4.1.5 The Practice of Self-care

In a world that is constantly on the move, we can be intentional about reducing the stress of loneliness through the practice of physical and spiritual self-care. Having a disciplined physical activity can be an effective way to protect against loneliness. To ward off loneliness, for example, astronauts have a strict schedule for daily grooming, exercising, making healthy meals with other crew members, and having adequate sleep.27 A common practice for people to discipline

26 Parkinson writes, “Ask for and receive forgiveness. If you know that you have hurt someone in your life, in humility own up to your wrong-doing and reach out to ask their forgiveness. If you are holding onto a grudge because of what someone did to you, pray for the strength to let go and forgive.” Parkinson, The Loneliness Epidemic, 100.

27 “Tips from NASA for astronauts to ward off loneliness include a strict schedule for daily grooming,
themselves to be active and protect against loneliness is by adopting a pet, which
gets them up and moving every day. 28

In her book Spiritual Practices for Effective Leadership, Deborah Jackson tells
how spiritual leaders, who are working hard to meet the high demands of
ministries, can practice spiritual self-care for renewal, sustainable, and life-giving
ministry. By engaging in the process of what she calls the 7 Rs of Sanctuary –
retreat, release, review, reconnect, reflect, recalibrate, and return, leaders
experience personal transformation and become more effective in their practice
of leadership. Whether leaders observe daily or weekly Sabbath practices, they
need time apart, and it is commanded by God.29 Jesus himself practiced daily
Sabbath and taking time apart reliefs us from stress helps us in our decision
making, and it provides us refreshment. 30 In my early years in ministry, I had not
been good in taking Sabbath until some of my church members noticed that I
looked exhausted, and I realized that I could not ignore my physical and
spiritual health. Since then, I have been intentional about taking daily Sabbath.
The first thing I usually do each morning is having personal devotion which

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aerobic exercising, making healthy meals to be shared experiences with other crew members, and
establishing a sleeping routine that ensures adequate sleep.” Susan Murphy, “How to Reduce the Stress of
Loneliness – 9 Tips,” 5.

28 Susan Murphy, “How to Reduce the Stress of Loneliness – 9 Tips,” 5.
29 Debora Jackson, Spiritual Practices for Effective Leadership: 7 Rs of Sanctuary for Pastors. Valley Forge, PA:
Judson Press, 2015, 35.
30 Jackson, Spiritual Practices for Effective Leadership, 35.
involves reading the Scripture, reflection, and prayer. After reading the Scripture, I would pray the prayer of thanksgiving and confession for my own flaws. Connecting with God early in the morning gives me inner peace, rest, joy, strength, and confidence I need for the day. After the devotion, I would do a quick physical exercise and plan for the day and then tackle the hardest to-do list in the first two hours while my mind is fresh and I am still full of energy. After long hours of work, I would retreat intentionally from my leadership context and be in an isolated physical space where I feel like I am outside of my work and think freely. I have noticed that I am happier when I am in nature like walking or riding a bicycle in the woods and also have noticed that my creativity increases when I practice daily Sabbath.

Among the 7 Rs of Sanctuary, the second R of ‘Release’ involves slowing down and mentally releasing ourselves from the leadership environment; the goal is “to engage in a period of dormancy – to be rather than do.”31 It is not always easy for me to slow down and relax especially when I feel pressured to finish my to-do list. Practicing ‘release’ involves exercising faith. I need to trust that God is in control. I need to trust that it is God who makes changes in people’s lives. The practice of ‘release’ enables me to enjoy being with God and enjoy doing God’s work.

31 Jackson, Spiritual Practices for Effective Leadership, 56.
In practicing daily Sabbath, being intentional about balancing our time on social media can be helpful in protecting against loneliness. Many studies show that the negative impacts of social media can have on people includes feelings of depression, inadequacy, and isolation; it is due to people comparing their lives with “everyone else’s carefully orchestrated versions.” Social media can lead to FOMO or fear of missing out; people sense that something great is having and they are not included, and that they feel neglected and abandoned. Oxford University reported that of 150 Facebook friends, we can depend on only four.

4.2 Building Stronger Personal Relationships with Others

Since loneliness is about relationships, strengthening our relationship with others is vital in protecting against loneliness. In his book Together, Vivek Murthy reminds us that we are built to be social creatures, and that we are constantly preparing for our next meeting, love affair, confrontation; we spend most of our time thinking about other people. Building stronger relationships with others add joy and meaning to our lives, and they also have positive effects on our health, mood, and performance. Stronger relationships buffer stress and make it more likely that we will have the help and support we need to weather life’s

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33 Murphy, “How to Reduce the Stress of Loneliness – 9 Tips,” 6-7.
34 Murphy, “How to Reduce the Stress of Loneliness – 9 Tips,” 6-7.
35 Murthy, Together, 34.
36 Murthy, Together, 32.
inevitable challenges such as illness, job change, the loss of a loved one, or other major life transitions. An important question is: how do we build stronger relationships that will protect us from loneliness?

In her book *The Loneliness Epidemic*, Susan Mettes tells how initiating three elements that counter loneliness - belonging, closeness, and adjusting our expectations - can protect us from loneliness. Mettes warns, however, that the combination of the three elements is not a formula that will keep us from ever feeling lonely, even from being chronically lonely. She argues that if belongingness is a fundamental need, we need to be intentional about forming new relationships and developing some of those into long-term relationships. She also argues that our need to belong is best met through a variety of relationship types, and people we choose to become close to, rather than people we have natural intimacy with, have the biggest effect on loneliness. These people we choose to become close to are mainly significant others, colleagues, neighbors, and friends. Mettes points out that exclusively depending on our families for belonging sets us up for loneliness; what we need is the capacity to form and deepen new relationships which is essential in a life in which we lose

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41 Mettes, *The Loneliness Epidemic*, 120.
42 Mettes, *The Loneliness Epidemic*, 120.
people. One common cause of the feelings of isolation and loneliness among the society members is not having meaningful friendships. It is because the culture places such a high value on independence that we are losing the art of meaningful friendships. The benefit of forming new friendships is that even if we lose a loved one or a friend moves away, we can find relief from loneliness in new friends. If friendship is that important, how do we develop meaningful friendships?

In general, friendships begin with chance meetings, and getting together with individuals we have met helps us in forming friendships. Most good friendships are developed over time and shared experiences, and we often have to make the first move to grow a relationship from an acquaintance to a friend. In short, we have to make an investment of our time and energy in developing friendships.

People from all walks of life can benefit from developing friendships. In his book God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations, Jackson Carroll reports that pastors need to cultivate friendships to protect themselves

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44 Thomas J Parkinson, The Loneliness Epidemic, 70. In his book The Loneliness Epidemic: How the Church Can Cure Our Gravest Sickness, Thomas Parkinson argues that “At the heart of the loneliness epidemic is the lack of these meaningful friendships. In a culture that places such a high value on independence, we are losing the art of meaningful friendships.”
46 Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, 123.
48 Graham, Transforming Loneliness, 123.
from loneliness and sustain in ministry. Friendships offer the support, companionship, mutual critique, and joy that pastors need; without those with whom one can be vulnerable and share deeply, it is difficult to sustain the kind of excellent ministry that follows in Jesus' path. Carroll also reports that establishing appropriate holy friendships both within their congregation and especially with fellow clergy is a powerful resource that supports and sustains excellent pastoral leadership.

Holy friendships is the kind of friendships that both reduce the possibility of abuse and also support excellent ministry, and they grow out of an individual’s relationship with God. So, friendship with God is the ground for the friendships that Christians establish with one another. Holy friends respect each other’s boundaries and seek the other’s well-being.

4.2.1 How Holy Friends Change Us

In his article “Discovering Hope through Holy Friendships,” Gregory Jones tells how people have positive impacts on each other through friendships, and he uses the story of a woman whose death prompted an outpouring of emotions

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50 Carroll, *God’s Potters*, (Kindle Locations 2584-2585).
51 Carroll, *God’s Potters*, (Kindle Locations 2569-2574).
52 Carroll, *God’s Potters*, (Kindle Locations 2569-2574).
53 Carroll, *God’s Potters*, (Kindle Locations 2569-2574).
from her close friends.\textsuperscript{54} The woman had helped her friends see problems and opportunities in fresh ways, and she had helped them imagine new possibilities and had helped them love more profoundly, think more clearly, feel more deeply; she had helped them become better people.\textsuperscript{55} Her friends had positive influence on her as well. They had helped her reclaim a sense of hope when she was down, and they had helped her become a better person.\textsuperscript{56} The woman and her friends had become holy friends for each other.

Jones points out that there are three things that constitutes holy friendships. First, we need friends who know us well enough to challenge the sins we have come to love.\textsuperscript{57} These kinds of friends are important because we often describe those sins we love in ways that make them sound understandable, even virtuous.\textsuperscript{58} Second, holy friends affirm the gifts we are afraid to claim and help us see potential in ourselves we have not yet seen.\textsuperscript{59} Third, holy friends “help us dream dreams we otherwise would not dream.”\textsuperscript{60} Holy friends would help each other explore issues honestly and fruitfully. So, the benefit of

\textsuperscript{55} Jones, “L. Gregory Jones: Discovering hope through holy friendships,” 1-2.
\textsuperscript{56} Jones, “L. Gregory Jones: Discovering hope through holy friendships,” 2.
\textsuperscript{57} Jones, “L. Gregory Jones: Discovering hope through holy friendships,” 3.
\textsuperscript{58} Jones, “L. Gregory Jones: Discovering hope through holy friendships,” 3.
\textsuperscript{59} Jones, “L. Gregory Jones: Discovering hope through holy friendships,” 3.
\textsuperscript{60} Jones, “L. Gregory Jones: Discovering hope through holy friendships,” 4.
developing holy friendships is that holy friends not only make us feel that we belong, but they also challenge us to grow and help us see our potential and achieve goals we will not be able to do on our own.

In her article “Storytelling and holy friendship,” Victoria Atkinson White, author of *Holy Friends: Nurturing Relationships That Sustain Pastors and Leaders*, tells how storytelling is a vital part of the practice of holy friendship and how holy friends can speak hard truths in love using stories. White explains that stories are how people connect, learn about and share with one another, and in holy friendship, we open ourselves to an honesty that is critical to our growth but can be uncomfortable for us to hear. White reminds us that in the practice of holy friendship, friends not only challenge us, but they also help us re-narrate old stories that we need to hear with a new interpretation and fresh ears. She writes, “Attentive and caring holy friends often sense when we are listening to these old narratives and can re-narrate them in ways that we cannot do for ourselves.” So, using storytelling to speak difficult truths we might otherwise not be able to hear, holy friends help us grow and flourish in our unique individual and corporate roles in God’s ongoing story.

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63 Victoria Atkinson White, “Storytelling and holy friendship.”
Cultivating holy friendships is a process which involves quality and quantity time together through building trusting relationships. As trust deepens, people are able to move from “acquaintance” or “colleague” to “holy friend.” Holy friendships are not only crucial to sustaining individuals personally, but they also need to be cultivated intentionally.

4.2.3 Physical Closeness

Loneliness tends to disappear with physical closeness. According to Susan Mettes, there are three elements of closeness: hospitality, physical touch, and neighborliness. The first form of closeness, hospitality, is about making someone welcome. Another important form of closeness, physical touch, has powerful effects on us. Friendly touching, like a handshake, releases the “cuddle hormone” oxytocin, and it often helps people bond and feel trust and contentment. When it comes to the third form of closeness, neighborliness, Mettes argues that living near friends or someone we feel comfortable with can have positive influence over our loneliness. Mettes explains, “Quite often, that’s for the better. If our main goal was to minimize our loneliness, a good strategy
would be to move into a neighborhood densely packed with friends.”

Neighborliness and closeness do matter to protect us from loneliness. In the congregations I have served, I noticed among the elderly members that when they can live closer to their friends, children, and grandchildren, they seem to be happier and less lonely.

One common thing I notice among new Southeast Asian immigrants is that given the chance, they tend to choose where they live by two important factors. First, they tend to live where they can find a job, and then they would move closer to the people who share the culture with. For example, Burmese immigrants who are new to the country tend stay in affordable apartments and do any job they can find and later move closer to other Burmese immigrants within a city or state.

4.2.4 Adjusting Our Expectations

Susan Mettes argues that since loneliness is a difference between the relationships we want and the relationships we have, we can protect ourselves from loneliness partly by adjusting our expectations. The benefit of adjusting our expectations is that it enables us to “hope for realistic interactions, reducing the demand side of relationships that can otherwise lead to loneliness.”

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73 Mettes, *The Loneliness Epidemic*, 139 - 140.
example, while I am working on DMin program and doing full-time ministry, I can expect a reduction of time with friends for a few years. My expectation should be that I need others, and I will feel lonely with too low-quality or too few relationships.74

People often deal with expectations on themselves or from others which often put them in stressful situations. Some deal with high self-expectations; some deal with expectations that come from family members, clients, and their bosses. These expectations often cause the fear of failure and even cause the feeling of isolation. For example, young people are often in stressful situations because they feel like they are being pressured to succeed in school and extracurricular activities.

Some of the expectations we have on ourselves or expectations from others can be good, and they encourage us to overcome obstacles and grow and achieve our life goals. However, unrealistic self-expectations can be counterproductive and can even result in a feeling of being not good enough. For example, when we compare ourselves to other people in our social circle and have the expectation to be like them, feelings of anxiety and stress can easily occur. Learning to adjust unrealistic expectations can bring a renewed sense of peace and contentment. Rather than trying to meet all the unhealthy

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74 Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, 139 - 140.
expectations, we can be confident in who we are and act without the fear of judgment. We can remember that we are made in the image of God and can be appreciative of the unique gifts that we are given and bring those gifts for the benefit of the community we live in.

Adjusting our unrealistic expectations of God can be helpful in reducing loneliness or disappointments. We live in a society in which there is a high expectation for people to be on time and deliver the things we want when we want them. We tend to be disappointed when things do not go the way we expect. We like consistency, and we like to be in our comfort zone. But if we apply that kind of mindsets in our relationship with God, it can be challenging because God does not operate on our timetable or expectations. When people face crisis like a terminal illness or death of a loved one, they often wonder why God does not do as they expect Him to do or why a good God allows bad things to happen.

In his article “How the Prophet Habakkuk Built an Anti-Fragile Faith” which was published in the Christianity Today in February 2017, Krish Kandiah explained that in the Scripture, God’s people like Habbakuk and the Israelites do not always experience God as predictable. Kandiah wrote, “God is more likely, it seems, to surprise and shock us. We ask him for one thing, and he gives us
another.” He then raised this question: “How can we trust a consistently unpredictable God who continually confounds our expectations?” It can be painful and frustrating when God does not meet our expectation or when it seems like God is late.

Many times, we ask God what we want. We ask for healing of our sickness, we want success, and we ask God to remove our sufferings. God often gives us what we want and ask for, but when God does not meet our expectations, the very core of our beliefs can be shaken or damaged. The truth of the matter is that God will not give us what we want all the time, but God gives us our greatest needs. God gives us eternal life. God gives us food and shelter. And God is present with us. According to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, there are three stages in the life of our faith. Our faith begins with a focus on security, counting on God to provide for us emotionally, physically, and spiritually; inevitably, God shocks us with some unexpected turn of events, like a death, a health problem, or a national crisis. Our faith becomes painfully disoriented. Finally, though, once it seems as if trust in God has been

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76 Kandiah, “How the Prophet Habakkuk Built an Anti-Fragile Faith Lessons on worshipping a consistently unpredictable God.”

77 Kandiah, “How the Prophet Habakkuk Built an Anti-Fragile Faith Lessons on worshipping a consistently unpredictable God.”
shattered, faith can be reoriented, often in surprising ways. Sometimes God may seem late and unpredictable, but we can still trust God in challenging times. What we should do in times of uncertainty is to wait on God patiently and remember that we are never alone. Deuteronomy 31:8 reminds us: “The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” There is always hope for God’s people.

When God does not show up the way we expect him or want him, I believe we can learn to pray like Jesus. In 2019, I visited the garden of Gethsemane near Jerusalem, where Jesus underwent the agony and was arrested the night before his crucifixion. Inside the garden is a small metal plate with two prayers written on it, the first prayer is the prayer of Jesus, a quote from Matthew 26:39. The MSG translation of it says, “My Father, if there is any way, get me out of this. But please, not what I want. You, what do you want?” The other prayer is a prayer by an unknown person with the initial MB, who prayed, “O Jesus, in deepest night and agony you spoke these words of trust and surrender to God the Father in Gethsemane. In love and gratitude, I want to say in times of fear and distress, “My father, I do not understand you, but I trust you.” Jesus would

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78 Kandiah, “How the Prophet Habakkuk Built an Anti-Fragile Faith Lessons on worshiping a consistently unpredictable God.”
face uncertainty with faith and prayer.

In 2018, I attended the Festival of Homiletics in Washington D.C., and during the festival, Craig Barnes, the president of Princeton Seminary at that time reminded us through his lecture that in dealing with uncertainty in our life, our aim should not be to get rid of uncertainty because it will never go away. Instead, we should learn to embrace it and learn to trust that God is still with us in the midst of uncertain future. Barnes also reminded us that while we may be dealing with uncertainty, what is certain is that God loves each of us.

4.3 The Role of Leaders in Protecting Against Loneliness

Since leaders have influence on others, they have important roles in protecting against loneliness. In her book *The Loneliness Epidemic*, Susan Mettes points out that there are several ways leaders can protect against loneliness. First, leaders can create an environment where the people under their influence feel a sense of belonging. When leaders appreciate each person’s whole self and all the roles they are playing, belongingness can take root. Second, leaders can protect themselves against loneliness by developing their own reliability, capacity to both give and receive help, and being with buddies. It means allowing

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80 Susan Mettes writes, “How can leaders be ready for these deep, whole-self relationships? You can
themselves for belonging and receiving help from others. Mettes writes, “In being open to belonging yourself, with people you enjoy being with, you can make it possible for others. You are stopping the spread of loneliness.” Other ways leaders protect against loneliness include: (1) inviting people to their homes, (2) appropriate touch, and (3) being good neighbors who give others every reason to expect cooperation, friendliness, and the look of a place that is cared for.

Since leaders can have influence on the people around them, I believe focusing on personal transformation is important to stop the spread of loneliness. In south Charlotte, NC, I have a neighbor by the name of Howard, a son of a Baptist preacher who is well read and one of the kindest people I have met. Howard told me that he would ask himself daily: How can I become a better person today than yesterday? Then Howard gave me a wise advice: “No matter how young or how old you are, enjoy the moment. Let go of your past mistakes, grudges, and learn to practice forgiveness.” He said with a smile, “Maybe I’m getting old. Maybe this comes from experience. I’m now careful about what I develop your own reliability, your own capacity to both give and receive help, your own time for being with buddies.” Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, 116.

81 Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, 117.
82 Mettes writes, “Those elements of closeness hospitality, physical touch, and neighborliness are most likely to happen if we initiate them. Leaders protect against loneliness by inviting people to their homes. Leaders protect against loneliness through touch (appropriate touch, of course). Leaders protect against loneliness by being good neighbors who give others every reason to expect cooperation, friendliness, and the look of a place that’s cared for.” Susan Mettes, The Loneliness Epidemic, 136.
feed my mind, what I speak, and what I do.” Since a few years back, Howard said he would make peace within his family and with his relatives, and from time to time, he would intentionally call and tell them encouraging words. Howard reminds us when we use our influence on others to create an environment in which others feel a sense of belonging, we stop the spread of loneliness.

4.4 Belonging to Small Groups and Developing a Habit of Serving Others

Being part of small groups and mutually caring communities can be effective in protecting against loneliness; it enables us to bond with others and makes us feel a sense of communal belonging. Our close bonds with others are often based on shared values and activities, customs, and rituals, and these relationships can be in a variety of groups whose members can include family, friends, colleagues, congregants, etc. 83 When individuals feel that they belong to one or more of such groups, their lives feel enhanced and more meaningful. 84 In his book The Loneliness Epidemic, Thomas Parkinson tells how small groups are the church’s way of empowering individuals to share life together. Parkinson explains the importance and benefits of joining small groups this way: “It is in small groups

84 Levine, “Belonging and Loneliness.”
that we find friendships where we can bare our souls and find prayerful encouragement and support. It is there that we can be known, loved, and challenged to grow more fully into the people God calls us to be.”\textsuperscript{85} A few months before COVID-19 set upon us in 2020, men of the congregation I have been serving as the associate pastor since 2015, had Men’s Day, and when we had a group discussion, we realized that one common issue men had was loneliness. One of the actions the group took was to form Men’s Fellowship that would meet on the first and third Friday mornings of each month at 7:00. Four years later, the group continues to meet and learn God’s Word and share our joys and concerns with one another.

In addition to joining small groups and caring communities, developing a servant’s heart can protect us from loneliness. When we connect and reach out others like a sick neighbor or grieving friend, we are reminded of our values and purpose, and our service to them can make us more meaningful and less alone. We can learn lessons on developing a servant’s heart from Jesus. In Philippians 2:5-11, the Word of God teaches us to think of ourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself and live a humble and self-less life like Jesus. And in Matthew 21:1-11, we see the humility of Jesus, as he chose to enter into Jesus as a servant king. Jesus could have entered Jerusalem like a Roman general did to their

\textsuperscript{85} Parkinson, \textit{The Loneliness Epidemic}, 99.
conquered cities and used a stallion, but he rode a borrowed donkey, which is a symbol for humility and peace. The crowd in Jerusalem misunderstood the purpose of Jesus in riding into Jerusalem. In a few days, they would realize that Jesus did not meet their expectation, and they would be very disappointed. It was not just the crowd who misunderstood him; some of the disciples were hoping for a glorious earthly kingdom in which they would reign with Jesus on thrones.

The gospel writer John tells us in John 13:1-17 that after Jesus entered Jerusalem, he surprised his disciples by showing them what true greatness was. When it was time for the Passover meal, Jesus stood up and tied a towel around his waist, grabbed a bowl of water and knelt before the disciples and began to wash their dirty feet. He taught them to serve one another and others in love.

For Jesus, greatness is about humility and making peace, and greatness is doing what God wants even when it is challenging. And he has sent his church, which is us, into the world, to love, to serve, to preach, to teach, to heal, to liberate. In his book, The Choice, Frank Thomas tells why he chooses to do what God wants him to do: “Because Jesus gives me a hope and a future. Jesus fills me with the Spirit of God and gives me everything I need for abundant life on the inside, starting with joy! And it makes me want to live life because I want to, not because I have to. I want to live; I want to serve; I want to love. I want to
sacrifice.” 86 Mother Teresa puts it this way: “Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.” The world today needs that love. Every time I think about service and doing small things with great love, I am reminded of a woman by the name of Eva Kelly. My first committal and Celebration of Life service was for Eva. About 10 years ago, when I first met Eva at a rehab center in Ann Arbor, MI, she was already one-hundred years and one day old. As soon as I introduced myself, Eva said, “Come closer, Lal.” She welcomed me in her room just like we greet people at church, and she would tell me about herself. Eva was active in the churches that she was a member of, and for a long time she volunteered as an English as a Second Language teacher, and she promoted literacy among children of color by teaching English.

When I met Eva, she had lost two husbands, and she also lost her only son who was handicapped; and she was almost blind; and yet she was still praising God every day. After we get to know each other, I asked her, “Eva, what is the secret of joy, happiness; tell me, what is the secret of long life?” She paused for a moment, and she said, “I came to know the love of Christ about the age of 13 and I committed my life to Christ.” Then she joked a little bit and said, “God has been so good to me that I even outlived my visions.”

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One day, Eva’s doctor said she needed a surgery, so they were about to take her to the operating room. When they got near the elevator, she was able to see the beautiful weather outside, and then she began to sing the song, “Oh, what a beautiful morning.” This was hours before she died. The nurses did not know what to do, so they started singing the song with her. Until Eva was ready to meet with the good Lord, she was full of joy. She gave her time for others, she gave her belonging to the poor, and she even gave her house to the church so that those who are in need could benefit from it. All her life, Eva served others. Jesus invites us, “Be like me who has come not to be served, but to serve and give his life for all” (Matthew 20:28). Serving others not only gives us meaning and makes us less lonely, but it is also how Jesus wants to be honored.

4.5 Conclusion

In an increasingly isolated world where there is a high chance for us to be in a vicious cycle of loneliness, it is vital to know how to protect ourselves and one another from suffering the pain of loneliness. There may not be actions that will prevent us from ever lonely again; however, there are practices that can ease and protect us from loneliness.

What Christians need in a society where the practice of Christianity is in decline is to reclaim our call to live a God-centered life. The fact that we have the
loneliness epidemic despite the many opportunities to connect with one another is a reminder that we not only need a stronger connection with one another but also need a deeper connection with our Creator. We often neglect our connection with God due to a variety of things, including complacency and being busy with work, our material possessions, and social events. Our reliance on material possessions and our own efforts gives us a false sense of security, and they do not give us peace nor true satisfaction. What truly gives us a sense of security and belonging is knowing that we are seen, known, valued, and loved by a loving God. Even if our loneliness may not be completely eradicated, our connection with God protects us from being overwhelmed, and it makes our loneliness bearable. Therefore, it is crucial that we are intentional about strengthening our connection with God through the discipline of spiritual practices like prayer, meditation, reading the Scripture, singing hymns, playing a musical instrument, engaging in art activities, and journaling.

In a world filled with hate, discrimination, misunderstanding, and trauma, feelings of pain and anger are unavoidable, and unresolved hurt and anger often result in some form of isolation. Practicing the hard work of forgiveness can protect and heal the feelings of isolation and loneliness. When a disconnection or rejection occurs, it is our tendency to withdraw ourselves from our connections with others. To protect ourselves from being isolated further, we
need to seek out belonging. In addition to connecting with God, we can seek out belonging by reaching out to friends or re-establishing social connections like joining small groups and caring communities.

To protect ourselves from loneliness and stop the spread of loneliness, we have important roles in one another’s lives. First, it is crucial that we value and invest in friendships. The challenge of developing friendships is that it involves showing vulnerability and requires an investment of our time and energy. Since most of the society members are busy having just a few close friends, we need to be intentional about developing new and meaningful relationships. Even if we cannot make new relationships, deepening our existing relationships can ease loneliness. Second, being part of small groups or mutually caring communities enables us to bond with others and makes us feel a sense of communal belonging. We need those who check in on us, listen to our joy and pain, pray for us, and support us when we are in crisis. When we belong to a caring group or community, we feel enhanced and meaningful.

Christian leaders play crucial roles in stopping the spread of loneliness. It requires that leaders are intentional about taking the effort to protect themselves against their own loneliness and creating an environment where the people under their influence feel a sense of belonging. To protect themselves from
loneliness, leaders need to allow themselves to be reached out by others as they often reach out to others.

Developing the habit of serving others is an effective way to protect ourselves from loneliness. Rather than being self-focused, serving others involves stepping out of our comfort zones and attending to the interest of others. When we reach out others and serve them in meaningful ways, we are reminded of our values and purpose, and it in turn gives us satisfaction and fulfillment.

In summary, when we protect ourselves from loneliness and reach out to others, we stop the spread of loneliness. In the next chapter, I will explore practical steps Christian communities and ministry leaders can influence their communities in transforming loneliness into belonging.
Chapter 5

Responsibilities of Christian Communities in Transforming Loneliness into Belonging

In chapter 1, I explored how the loneliness epidemic in the United States is fueled by a combination of our culture’s value of individual freedom and autonomy, the decline of the American Church, the rise of aging population and more people living alone, and the increasing use of digital technology that replaces meaningful interpersonal relationships. I also explored how the society has a crisis of trusting relationships, and at the heart of the loneliness epidemic is a lack of meaningful connections. In this world of isolation, people are longing to belong and longing for love and meaningful relationships. People need Christian communities where authentic worship and compassionate fellowship are offered; they need communities where people worship together, eat together, listen to one another, help each other grow spiritually, and the most vulnerable in society are cared for. In short, the lonely world needs Christian communities that share God’s love through care and connection.

If the culture we live in is not life-giving nor sustaining, how do Christians live authentic lives that do not conform to the culture? How do Christians communities create an environment in which people can make meaningful
connections? To create meaningful connections and transform loneliness into belonging, Christian communities in America need to (1) reclaim their Christ-given mission and be agents for change, (2) create Christ-centered communities in which leaders equip lay members to participate in the ministry of Christ, and (3) change their mindset on mental health issues like loneliness and embrace the most vulnerable ones in their midst.

5.1 Reclaiming Christ-given mission to be an agent for change

The loneliness epidemic is a wake-up call for the American Church to reclaim its Christ-given mission and welcome all with open arms and warm welcome. In 2021, 63% of Americans identify as Christian (15-point drop since 2007, Pew Research) and 47% of Americans belong to a house of worship.¹ But only about 22 percent of Americans attend church every week while 31 percent never attend church or synagogue.² As more and more Americans are unaffiliated with organized religion, one issue researchers have noticed is that people in the society no longer connect like we used to. Our ability to have close and trusting relationships have waned. In his book *The Loneliness Epidemic*, Thomas Parkinson points out that mistrust, polarizing divisions, and a lack of vision for the

common good have paralyzed the nation, with some succeeding and others being left behind. Parkinson argues that it is the church where people can find a cure for deep, polarizing divisions, an end to hate, and a common vision to bring us together to do good. And the church remains God’s primary vehicle for bringing the hope of salvation to the world.

Are Christian communities in America today prepared to welcome the unchurched, lonely, and most vulnerable in their midst? The sad truth is that Americans’ confidence in church has dropped to near a historic low: only 37% Americans have confidence in the church. The decline in the American Church is not simply because people are not interested in religion. It is not uncommon to hear story after story of people leaving local congregations due to conflicts, sexual abuse, and differences in theology or political affiliations. Thomas Parkinson points out that moral scandals, religious infighting, and outdated institutional models have severely damaged the church’s status in American culture. And he argues that while the three factors that fuel the church’s decline are the greatest threat to the future of the church, they are also the church’s

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greatest opportunity to reclaim its Christ-given mission and be an agent for change.  

The world we live in needs the church more than ever. Christ has sent his church into the world to love, to serve, to preach, to teach, to heal, to liberate. Few unchurched have heard a Christian share about their faith, and 33% of them have never heard about the benefit of participating in a local church from a Christian. Members of Christian communities need to continually examine themselves and ask such questions as: What breaks God’s heart in our community? How do we respond to God’s call to provide the needs of the poor, the oppressed, the widows, and the marginalized? How can we be creative and share the good news with the world today? How do we make God’s love visible? 

The Gospel writer Matthew tells us that right after Jesus presented the Beatitudes or blessed sayings (Matthew 5:1-12), he uses two metaphors to let his followers know he has appointed them individually and collectively as his witnesses: to be salt of the earth and light of the world (Matthew 5:13-14). Rose Taylor, the digital content editor at Presbyterian Outlook, who loves to bake

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8 Thomas J Parkinson, The Loneliness Epidemic, 7, Kindle.  
explains what it means to be the salt of the earth: “When used correctly, salt can call out flavors and bring food alive. Just think of a warm brown butter chocolate chip cookie / sprinkled with flakey sea salt. Is there anything better?”¹¹ Like salt, which is used to alter or enhance the tastes of food, Christians are to elicit goodness in the communities we live in. Jesus has appointed us as his witnesses to share God’s love with the world. In the Old Testament, God called Israel to be a light to the nations (Gentiles), and God required that his people do justice, love mercy, and walk with God (Micah 6:33). In Isaiah 58:3-12, God demands his people who pray to God do justice and set the oppressed free, share food with the hungry, and provide clothing and shelter to the poor. Israel is to model God’s covenantal ways so that all people can be blessed (Isaiah 42:1–6; Genesis 12:1–3), and the church is to be such a light among communities across the world. One of the ways the church can be a light among human communities is by sharing God’s love with the world through life-giving actions.

To transform loneliness into belonging, I believe there are a few life-giving actions each Christian can focus on doing in our daily lives. The first one is the practice of hospitality. The Word of God reminds us in Romans 12:13, “Always be eager to practice hospitality.” In a world so divided, members of the Christian

communities need to practice radical hospitality starting with the person they see in the mirror, and then within their communities. We live in a polarized society where many congregation members are wounded due to fights over differences in politics and theology. It is not uncommon to hear long-time church members who leave their congregations because they feel they are no longer welcomed due to different theological or political views. Christians today need to relearn what it means to practice humility, tolerance, kindness, and listening without judging. We need to be intentional about creating room for theological and even political disagreements in our congregations. We can practice radical hospitality in our churches’ parking lots, in worship spaces, and we can get out of our comfort zones and extend hospitality to the strangers, the immigrants, the addicts, and the mentally ill.

In January of 2023, the congregation I currently serve as the associate pastor in Charlotte, NC had a celebration of life and resurrection for a life-long member named Joe Hudson, and the sanctuary of a predominantly White congregation was filled with people of different racial backgrounds and political affiliations. Joe, a business owner, had positive influenced on many lives extending hospitality to his neighbors, his workers, and the people he met in his lifetime. He loved baseball and had coached many little league baseball teams in Charlotte. In the 1960s, schools and churches were segregated, and yet Joe was
intentional about bringing down human-made barriers of all kinds. He would
welcome children from Black and White communities, and these kids would
play and grew up together under his leadership. A close family friend of Joe told
me that when Joe, a Democrat, served in the NC House of Representatives as an
elected official, he was well respected in the house because he could get along
with everybody. He was kind to everyone, even to the opposing party members.
She said, “He was easy to get along with others. He would use his humor and
put people at ease and find common ground.”

In addition to welcoming one another and strangers, Christians today
need to go deeper in how we relate to one another. We need to be intentional
about making meaningful connections, starting within the Christian community.
In his book Faith Seeking Understanding, Daniel L. Migliore states that much of
Christianity in North America is based on a self-centered piety in which the
church is quite secondary and entirely optional. 12 Migliore writes, “Being a
Christian is an individual matter and is not essentially bound to life with
others.” 13 Christians need to change our common attitude that a local church is
no different than a social club or a bowling league. We are called to connect with

12 Daniel L Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology. Grand Rapids,
13 Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding, 249.
the body of Christ to create a Christ-centered community where people worship together, grow spiritually together, and form meaningful relationships.

In a world of isolation where lonely hearts are hunger for meaningful friendships and connections, our culture makes meaningful friendships hard to find. The church may not be perfect, but it is where we can find meaningful friendships and our loneliness can be transformed. In her book *Transforming Loneliness*, Ruth Graham tells how Christians can help transform loneliness through our commitment in the life of a Christian community. Graham writes, “We can use our gifts to create a community for others and thereby enrich our relationships and enrich the family of God. When we do so, our loneliness and longing to feel we belong have been transformed into letting others know that they belong.”

The benefit of being intentional about making the commitment at a local church is that it provides for us the social connections we need, and our friendships with one another pushes us to become more and more the people God made us to be. The friendships formed in the church then become a powerful force that can cure the loneliness epidemic.

To create an environment where friendships are formed and meaningful connections happen, Christians are called to make every

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effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3-6) and understand that the mission and responsibility of the Christian community is centered on Christ. In his letter to Christians in Asia Minor, Peter urges them to build themselves to be a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5). Peter is not pushing them to become a charismatic church. He is teaching them create a Christ-centered community whose unity is grounded in love, a community that is welcoming, and a community in which everyone feels safe and welcomed. In other words, Peter is teaching them to be a spiritual community that is life-giving and a light in its neighborhood. In his letter, Peter calls Jesus a living stone (1 Peter 2:4) because the Old Testament prophecies Jesus to be a stone. In building a spiritual house, Peter teaches those who believe in Christ that we must see ourselves as living stones, not just separate stones, but stones that are connected to Christ so that we are shaped into living stones for use in a spiritual building. Christ is the builder here, and he instructs us how we are going to fit into the spiritual house. The key is to have a connection with the living stone. When Christ is the central focus of the community, meaningful connections occur among its members.

5.2 The Role of Christian Leaders in Transforming Loneliness into Belonging

Christian leaders play vital roles in transforming loneliness into belonging through their practice of Christ-like leadership. In a society where Christian
ministry is often considered a profession, it can be tempted to lead by managing congregations like corporate leaders. In his article “Mediating Ministry and the Renewal of the Church,” Curtis W. Freeman reminds us that the reality about ministry is that it is a vocation, not a profession.\textsuperscript{16} The competence of ministers, therefore, “is not dependent on homiletical eloquence, pastoral skills, nor programmatic innovation. It is dependent on a single criterion—participation in the ministry of Jesus Christ, the mediator of the new covenant.”\textsuperscript{17} As Christian leaders participate in the ministry of Christ, they put their trust in God and, with obedience, participate in Christ’s mission as priests, prophets, and kings so that they can have life-giving impacts on others.

In his book \textit{Leading with a Limb}, Dan B. Allender reminds leaders that the goal of leadership is to be mature like Jesus. In the chapter “Three Leaders You Can’t Do Without,” Allender states that to be like Jesus in character is to imitate his way of relating to others.\textsuperscript{18} Within a leader, there are three offices of priest, prophet, and king.\textsuperscript{19} Leaders are to be all three, all at once, and to mirror Jesus in

\textsuperscript{16} In his article, “Mediating Ministry and the Renewal of the Church,” Curtis Freeman writes, “In American Christianity these days, liberals tend to accommodate to psychotherapeutic models that conceive of the minister’s identity as a therapist, while conservatives tend to adapt to concepts drawn from business and the corporate world which define the minister as a manager. But in either case the ministry is considered to be a profession. Yet Christian ministry understood christologically is a vocation not a profession. Curtis W. Freeman, “Mediating Ministry and the Renewal of the Church,” \textit{American Baptist Quarterly} 31/4 (Winter 2012): 395.

\textsuperscript{17} Freedman, “Mediating Ministry,” 395.


\textsuperscript{19} Allender, “Three Leaders You Can’t Do Without,” 198.
all three of these capacities, and their call is to fulfill all three offices by disrupting complacency, bringing comfort to heartache, and directing others to life. 

In the threefold office (munus triplex) of Christ, the role of the priest is to offer care and enter the heart with a commitment to enhance the value and significance of others. In their role as priests, leaders need to know the people they lead and listen to their story with attentiveness and care. In their book Missional Leader, Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk state that leaders need to pay attention to what is going in the lives of the congregation members from Monday to Friday. Leaders can ask questions like “What kind of pressures the congregants face with family or at work? What makes them anxious?” The goal is for leaders to know them better, show them compassion, and provide the care they need.

In the threefold office of Christ, the prophet (instrumental style of leadership) influences competition and care by motivating others to new ways of seeing and acting. The work of the prophet “exposes our subtle turn to

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21 In his explanation of the threefold office of Christ, Allender states that the call of leaders is “to fulfill all three offices—to disrupt complacency, to bring comfort to heartache, and to direct others to life—in one sermon or a single counseling session.” Allender, “Three Leaders You Can’t Do Without,” 197.
22 Allender, “Three Leaders You Can’t Do Without,” 188.
24 Allender, “Three Leaders You Can’t Do Without,” 188.
indulgence and self-congratulation.”²⁵ As prophets, Christian leaders help the people they lead know and face their true condition and help them change for the good. In his book Leading with the Sermon, William Willimon tells how pastors are not only called to preach, but also to lead with courage. Pastors have unique responsibilities in serving people from both the pulpit and outside of the four walls of the church. Willimon stresses the importance of telling the truth about Jesus, and the need for pastors to be bold mission leader-preachers.²⁶ Leading people in the church context is risky and unpredictable, and practicing leadership in ministry is not easy because Jesus Christ keeps it difficult.²⁷ It requires that leaders are adaptive and continue to reinvent themselves to face new challenges. Reinvesting themselves will require them to learn new skills and new ways to relating to others.²⁸

Churches have the tendencies to reward pastors who do what they want done and punish them for challenging their worldview.²⁹ Instead of following all the expectations of the congregation members, leaders need to say ‘no’ when necessary and be prayerfully listening to God, and from the pulpit, steer the congregation towards where the Spirit is leading them.

²⁷ Willimon, Leading with the Sermon: Preaching as Leadership, 25.
²⁸ Willimon, Leading with the Sermon: Preaching as Leadership, 96.
²⁹ Willimon, Leading with the Sermon: Preaching as Leadership, 37.
Leaders need to be confident and have comfort in exercising pastoral authority in leading the people they serve. They need to speak the truth to power, confront lies, deceit, greed and self-centeredness. They also need to promote peace and reconciliation and lead others to do justice in the society. Since the early 2020s, African Americans like George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and several other African Americans have suffered violence and their death inspired worldwide protests against racial injustice. Christian leaders must reject any human made barriers such as systematic racism and discrimination of any kind because such injustice actions continue to cause the suffering of many people in America and around the world. Christ has called his followers to break down barriers of all kinds and embrace all people - young and old, handicapped and healthy, male and female, educated and ignorant, rich and poor, married and single - with love and grace and treat them as equal.

Every time leaders help others to breakdown human made barriers and reach out to those who feel isolated and show care to them, they make others feel seen and valued. In his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman explains what it means to live a true Christian life, and he reminds leaders that Jesus lived a life that identified with the poor, the outcast, the oppressed, and a life free of

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fear and hatred. The example of Jesus’ revolutionary way of living a life of love enabled those who were under oppression and hate live life to the fullest.

Thurman’s writing reminds us that those who are in leadership must address the social evils that our society is dealing with. Howard is not shy of speaking the evils of racial injustice and oppressions of the minorities of his time. Thurman’s writing also reminds us that the motivations to act as leaders are to come from love, as he writes, “The religion of Jesus makes the love-ethical central.”²² In short, leaders have the responsibilities to teach and preach about treating everyone with deep respect and reverence.

An important task of the prophet is to help lay people to imagine themselves as agents of change. It is important that leaders address that Western individualism is not sustaining nor life-giving and lay people are to rely on the transforming power of the gospel. In his book Christianity’s Surprise, Kavin Rowe tells the importance of recovering Christianity’s surprise and how Christians today can be agents of Christianity’s surprise again. Rowe explains that at its origin, Christianity’s surprise was a person, Jesus the Messiah, crucified and raised, and the transforming power of the gospel can surprise us by “bringing renewed life to established Christian communities, creating new ways of human healing and flourishing, and inviting the world to taste and see that the Lord is

good.” Rowe argues that modern Westerners have to work hard to get free of (unlearn) the story of the autonomous, and only when we get free of the story of the autonomous individual, we will have life-giving and sustaining practices. To be agents of Christianity’s surprise again, Rowe states that Christians need to learn and relearn most fundamentally the story of everything and the commitments and practices that story gives us. The story of everything is a story about the God who “created all things”, “sent his Messiah Jesus”, “(re)formed his people around loyalty to Jesus” and “who would one day fully complete the renewal of creation when there would be no more sin and sorrow.” To recover, Christianity’s surprise, leaders need to encourage Christians to read the Bible together and relearn what it means to be followers of Christ. The stories we read in the Bible will inspire Christians and strengthen the church.

In the three-fold office of Christ, the dimension of a king (direct style of leadership) creates life-giving structure and builds infrastructure to provide for the needs of the people and protect them from harm. As kings, leaders take courageous actions and use pastoral authority to intentionally make every effort

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34 Rowe, Christianity’s Surprise, 85.
35 Rowe, Christianity’s Surprise, 82.
36 Rowe, Christianity’s Surprise, 32-33.
to create and maintain unity in the communities they serve. Leaders also help create safe environments like small groups where members of the community grow together spiritually and have meaningful connections.

In their book *Missional Leader*, Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk tell the importance for leaders to do the work of creating an environment that assists people in discerning what God is up to among them. The process involves creating a small-group environment in which the focus of group attention shifts from the self and one another to God. Instead of the leader having plans and strategies that the congregation will affirm and follow, Roxburgh and Romanuk offer an alternative model in which the leader “works the soil of the congregation so as to invite and constitute the environment for the people of God to discern what the Spirit is doing in, with, and among them as a community.” In this model, leaders help congregants cultivate a biblical imagination that challenges their assumptions about what God is up to in the world, helping them align their expectations with God’s. The congregational environment then becomes a place where God is the center of conversation and where God shapes the focus and work of the people. There are four important elements involved in this process

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41 Roxburgh and Romanuk, *Missional Leader*, 16.
of cultivation: (i) cultivating awareness and understanding, (ii) cultivating co-
learning networks, (iii) cultivating fresh ways of engaging scripture, and (iv)
cultivating new practices, habits, and norms. An example of cultivating a
Biblical imagination would be a leader inviting congregants to read a Bible
passage together with the intention to cultivate new understanding and choose
to live a life that is pleasing God. For example, when lay members read together
Paul’s letter to Christians in Rome, it gives them an awareness and
understanding on how Christians can live daily with peace, joy, love, and hope
under daily temptations and do a positive difference in their community through
making the right choices. In Romans 8:14, Paul said, “all who are led by the Spirit
of God are Children of God.” The verse reminds Christians that we are not to be
guided by the desires of our flesh, including selfishness, nor are we to be guided
by our political leaders but to continuously surrender ourselves to the Spirit of
God and let the Spirit yield ourselves to the desires of the Spirit. When leaders
bring imagination to congregations, they foster hope, and life-giving ministries
occur.

It is important for leaders to aware that the goal of a Christian
communities is not about being comfortable nor having all our needs met. The

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43 Roxburgh and Romanuk, Missional Leader, 34.
44 Roxburgh and Romanuk, Missional Leader, 18.
goal is to be rooted in Christ by abiding in him and doing the will of God. In
their book *Resident Aliens*, Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas warn that in
Western society, people tend to stick together with the people they are
comfortable with, and the church is tempted to be the same. They write, “In a
world like ours, people will be attracted to communities that promise them an
easy way out of loneliness, togetherness based on common tastes, racial or ethnic
traits, or mutual self-interest.”  

The problem with togetherness based on similar interests is that there is then little check on community becoming totalitarian when its only purpose is to foster a sense of belonging in order to overcome the fragility of the lone individual. Willimon and Hauerwas argue that Christian community is not primarily about togetherness. It is about the way of Jesus Christ with those whom he calls to himself; it is about disciplining our wants and needs in congruence with a true story. Rather than trying to fulfil what we want, Christians are to continually seek the will of God and do the things that are pleasing God, which is often challenging. When Jesus walked on earth, he sought the things that were pleasing to God, and his mission was to accomplish what God wanted him to do.

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45 Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 78.
46 Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 78.
47 Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 78.
5.3 Changing Our Lens and Sharing God’s Love with the Lonely World

In chapter 2, I explored how the Church in America is not ready to transform the loneliness epidemic as Christians see loneliness as bad and embarrassing. To engage in life-giving ministries in the lonely society, members of Christian communities need to change their lens on loneliness and embrace lonely individuals with love.

In his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5, 6, and 7), Jesus tells what it looks like to live as members of God’s family and serve others. Jesus’ sermon begins with the kind of people who would be blessed by God, and the list includes the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness (Matthew 5:3-11). What is obvious from the sermon of Jesus is that he is deeply concerned with the most vulnerable in our midst, and he identifies with the pain and loneliness of people.

Christians need to understand that we are not only to care for the physical and spiritual needs of others but also for their mental and emotional needs. In his book The Path Out of Loneliness, Mark Mayfield tells how righteousness involves giving and bringing hope to those who have lost hope and are lonely. Mayfield explains that the Hebrew word for righteousness (tsedaqah) is associated with a
concern for those around us. And the Hebrew word for justice (*mishpat*) carries a similar connotation. So, Mayfield argues that “To be righteous, to enact justice, is to give hope to those who have lost hope and [are] lonely.” Christians are to be bringers of hope to lonely individuals who are within our congregations and outside of our congregations.

In her book *Transforming Loneliness*, Ruth Graham reminds Christians that we do not need to look far to find lonely individuals. Graham then challenges Christians today:

Can you see yourself reaching, like Jesus, for someone else who is floundering, sinking in loneliness? That’s what Jesus would have you do. Just as He reaches for you, you can reach out to someone else. Take the risk. Look around you—at work, in the neighborhood, at the coffee shop, in the salon, at the grocery store. Choose someone to call your friend. Just try it. Be willing to accept them as they are, unconditionally, flaws and all. Identify with them in some way.

Lonely individuals need to be seen, loved, valued, and heard, and reaching out to them is an act of love to our neighbors. When we show love to them in action, we are representing God to them, and we are meeting their needs. Graham explains that in calling us to love others, Jesus is trusting us to feed and nourish and bless others, and that will create the kind of connection to

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50 Mayfield, *Path out of Loneliness*, 170.
51 Ruth Graham, *Transforming Loneliness: Deepening Our Relationships with God and Others When We Feel Alone*, (Baker Publishing Group, 2021), 121, Kindle.
others that satisfies loneliness. \textsuperscript{53} When we reach out to lonely individuals and show love to them, we fulfill the command of Jesus to love one another, just as Christ has loved us (John 15:12).

\textit{5.3.1 Lessons from the Early Church}

As members of Christian communities share God’s love with the lonely world, they can learn important lessons on the thought and life from the early Christians. In \textit{Christianity’s Surprise}, Kavin Rowe tells how the early Christians stayed true to the gospel. For the early Christians, ‘freedom’ was freedom from self-obsession and self-protection and for obedience and service to Christ in every corner of the earth. \textsuperscript{54} And they lived by hope, and they knew their purpose in life. Rowe writes, “Their vision was for eternity, and that gave them remarkable freedom and power in the present.” \textsuperscript{55} Rowe also tells how the good news of resurrection hope had changed the lives of the early Christians and how they went and told the story of the resurrected Christ with word and deed. These early Christians “believed that life would win even when death struck its mortal blow. […] They had good news, and they were going to share it. High and low, near and far, the gospel went to work.” \textsuperscript{56} Christians are reminded to be bringers of hope who radiate the light of God and consequently draw people from

\textsuperscript{53} Ruth Graham, \textit{Transforming Loneliness}, 119.
\textsuperscript{54} Rowe, \textit{Christianity’s Surprise}, 84.
\textsuperscript{55} Rowe, \textit{Christianity’s Surprise}, 84.
\textsuperscript{56} Rowe, \textit{Christianity’s Surprise}, 84.
darkness. No matter how dark the world may be, Christians can make a
difference by following Christ and continuing God’s mission in the steps of the
early Christians. Rowe tells that Christians today in the West are hungry for a
revitalization of our imaginations and practices that show the world who we are
and why we exist.57 It is not just Christians who are hungry for revitalization, but
the world is hungry for authentic witness to truth.58 It means the world is hungry
for the love and care from Christians who practice their faith.

People of different backgrounds are wondering what is going on in the
church and in the lives of Christians. Understanding the link between loneliness
and sharing the good news of Jesus through loving actions, Mother Teresa wrote,
“The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being
unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. [. . .] The poverty in the West is a different
kind of poverty—it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality.
There’s a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God.” 59 The ministry of care
and connection is an effective way to reach out to those who have not yet
attended the church. In Matthew 5:13-15, Jesus warns his followers not to lose

our saltiness nor hide our light. One way to interpret that verse is not to conceal

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57 Rowe. Christianity’s Surprise, 6.
58 Rowe, Christianity’s Surprise, 7
59 In her book Transforming Loneliness, Ruth Graham writes, Mother Teresa understood the link between
loneliness and spreading the gospel. She wrote, The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy;
it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. . . . The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty—it
is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There’s a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for
God.” Ruth Graham, Transforming Loneliness, 166.
our talents or abilities but to keep sharing God’s love to others by using the gifts we are given to show care and make connections. In 2012, I met an African American woman in Ann Arbor, Michigan who was inspirational in sharing God’s love with the lonely world using the talents and abilities God gave us. One evening, a week before Pentecost Sunday, I was preparing children’s sermon at Briarwood Mall’s food court in Ann Arbor while I was having my late dinner. It was around 8:50 p.m., and the mall was about to be closed soon. And there was a woman who was in her 50s cleaning table after table. When she reached my table, she smiled and said her name was Kristina and asked what I was working on. I told her that when the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost, the disciples’ lives were transformed, and the fishermen became super story tellers. Kristina said to me, “I am a storyteller too.” I asked, “How?” She said something like, “For years, I prayed “Lord, help me to be who you want me to be.” The Lord then slowly transformed me, and I have become a motivational speaker for teenagers who are pregnant. Sharing my own personal story, I tell them that there is hope for them.” She also said, “I have been volunteering as a bell ringer for Salvation Army for six years. When I meet people on the street and look in their eyes, I can see that they are children of God. There is so much beauty in them. But you won’t believe what they go through in life. There are so many broken hearts; there are people with addictions; and there are those who are
lonely. People want to see unconditional love from a stranger. The world needs it.”

A few weeks after I met Kristina, I saw her again at the mall, and I was amazed that she was always smiling and everyone who worked at the food court knew her and treated her with deep respect. I said to her, “Kristina, you are an inspiration to many here. What can I learn from you?” She then preached me a short sermon at the food court, saying, “This morning, I didn’t wake up for myself, but I woke up for the Lord. This is the day that the Lord has made, and it is the day of the Lord; so, I will do what God wants me to do. We have something to do, which is to serve the Lord by serving others.”

Kristina reminds us that Christians transform the lonely society by being faithful witnesses for Christ who commands us, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

5.4 Conclusion

There are several life-giving actions Christian communities can take in transforming loneliness into belonging. First, Christian communities need to reclaim their Christ-given ministry and be agents of change. It means the community members participate in the ministry of Christ by engaging the world
the same way Jesus did and expressing their faith in acts of love, justice, and compassion. Christ cares about the suffering of the people God created, and he has called members of his body, the church, to have a genuine heart for God and reach out to their neighbors. If Christians would not reach out to their lonely neighbors, who would?

It is vital that Christians have a missionary mindset and are intentional about creating Christ-centered communities where they practice radical hospitality and form meaningful friendships. People are hunger for agape love, and an effective way Christians show that love to others is through the practice of hospitality. In October 1998, I came to the United States at the age of 17 with my two siblings as political asylees from Myanmar to reunite with our parents whom we had not seen for almost ten long years. As a new immigrant who could not speak English, I often wondered if I would be accepted or discriminated. My siblings and I learned about hospitality through the welcome of Black and White congregation members from Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church in Maryland who welcomed us in their midst, taught us basic English, and gave us school supplies and the clothes we needed for the winter.

Second, to transform loneliness into belonging, members of Christian communities need to make every effort to maintain unity and practice forgiveness and reconciliation. When conflicts arise, Christians need to set aside
ego and personal needs and learn to disagree with one another. There will always be differences among Christians, but we must not allow these differences to interfere with full fellowship in the church. We may not agree each other over how to interpret the Scripture or over political issues, but we can learn to graciously disagree with one another. God’s command for us is to love one another and accept each other in a spirit of love and mercy (John 13:34-35). When Christians practice the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation in a culture that struggles with forgiveness, we bring healing and transformation to our community.

Third, Christian leaders have important roles in transforming loneliness into belonging through their participation in the three-fold office of Christ as priests, prophets, and kings. Leaders need to listen to lay people with compassion and pay attention to what is going on in their daily lives. Leaders need the awareness that the goal of the church in dealing with the loneliness epidemic should be deeper than providing the emotional needs of people through social connections; the goal should be about helping members participate in the ministry of Christ by doing the right thing in all relationships and being faithful witnesses. From the pulpit and through their teaching, leaders have the responsibilities to lead lay people to see others as Christ sees them and embrace people of all backgrounds.
Fourth, Christians who are called to be ambassadors of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20) need to change their mindset on loneliness as bad and embarrassing and accept that reaching out to lonely individuals is an act of love to their neighbors. It requires that Christians need to pay more attention to issues related to mental health, including loneliness, and they need to be intentional about naming and talking about them and offering a safe environment where people feel comfortable about being vulnerable and sharing their own loneliness. The loneliness epidemic is a symptom of the society trying to leave God behind. The only thing that can transform the lonely society in which lives are ruined by issues like anxiety and depression, addictions, suicides, divisions, and mass shooting is through the transforming power of the gospel. The church remains God’s primary vehicle to save and transform the world. Amid all the challenges we see in our society like the epidemic of loneliness, the deep divisions over politics, and even the decline of the American Church, there is hope because we serve the God who can make the bones dance (Ezekiel 37:1-10) and is making a new thing (Isaiah 43:19). In September 2015, I visited Mizoram state in northeast part of India where the state capital Aizawl and villages across the state were experiencing Christian revival, a spiritual reawakening from a state of stagnation in the life of a believer. Christians in Mizoram have experienced a few outpourings of the Spirit that began with the arrival of the 19th century Welsh
revival in Northeast India. In 2015, the pews in more than 3000 churches in that state were filled with worshippers on Sundays and people turned to God and fall in love with Jesus all over again.

While I was in India, I made a three-day trip to the tiny and mountainous village of Kelkang with just one church where the statewide revival began. When I arrived there, the revival that started from years of prayers by lay members had drawn thousands of worshippers daily over a year, and they had so many worshippers each day that they had torn down their church walls and extended the building. And the Christian community there intentionally took down the church sign with ‘Presbyterian Church of India’ in it so that every worshipper would feel welcomed. At Kelkang village, visitors were divided into small groups, and each group was led by a volunteer who would preach and lead a group prayer. On the day of my arrival, the leader for my group was a man in his late 20s who became a lay preacher because of his encounter with God at Kelkang village. Before that young man came to the village, he was struggling with drug addiction, and there was no person who could help him. He was a lonely person like many other young people today. When he came to the village about a year and half prior, he cried out to God and begged for help. After a month long of daily prayers and worship at the church, God slowly changed him. He said for the first time in more than a decade, he was able to sleep
without the need to get high. When I was there, he had not used drug for over a year, and he was still in recovery. He knew that it would take a long time to get healed completely, so instead of going to back to his town, he stayed in the village and became the messenger of God’s grace and mercy. When people rely on God for transformation, God not only take away issues like loneliness or emotional pain, but God will make them whole. We may come to God to be cured of one particular sin or problem or loneliness that controls our daily life, but God is willing to give us the full treatment. When Jesus healed a man with a legion of unclean spirits in the region of the Gerasenes (Mark 5:1-20), he commanded the restored person, “Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19). Jesus sent the man back to his community, and the man is not simply to tell his people about the miracle that happened to him but what that miracle signifies: the Lord has been at work.

The Kelkang revival in India reminds us that God is at work in our lives and around the world. Christ has called Christians to continue God’s mission of reaching out to those who are in need, those who are sick, and those who are going through a deep dark pit. We are called to be the embodiment of God’s mercy. Christians can rely on God for revitalization of our imagination and practices, and when we follow where the Spirit of God is leading us and do what
God wants, people in our society experience agape love that overflows from our hearts.

From her experience of serving the poorest of the poor in Kolkata, India, Mother Teresa once said Christians should never worry about numbers but help one person at a time and always start with the person nearest us. When Jesus walked on earth, he reached out and embraced the people he met daily with love and grace. Everywhere Jesus went, he would liberate people from their fears and heal them, and he would change and give them a new hope. Like Jesus and all the saints who have gone before us, each Christian today can transform the lonely society by bringing hope to one person at a time.
Summary Conclusion

This thesis focuses on creating meaningful connections and transforming loneliness into belonging in the context of Christian ministry in the United States. There are several findings from my study of loneliness. First, loneliness can be caused by a variety of things including circumstances beyond our control like a crisis; however, our self-centeredness largely contributes to the loneliness epidemic. In a capitalist society that emphasizes individual freedom and autonomy, fewer people join in social communities like church groups and sports teams, and that Americans are increasingly disconnected from friends and their neighbors. As the rate of loneliness keeps climbing year after year, mistrusts and polarizing divisions are also growing wider ever, and at the heart of the loneliness epidemic is a crisis of trusting relationships.

Second, lonely individuals need meaningful interpersonal relationships. They need to feel that they matter; they need to be seen, noticed, valued, welcomed, and supported. And members of the society need an awareness and acceptance that regardless of age, sex, or racial backgrounds, everyone needs to feel unconditional love and a sense of belonging. Third, while meaningful interpersonal connections matter in fight against loneliness, it is not enough to solve the loneliness epidemic. The fact that we have the loneliness epidemic despite the many opportunities to connect with one another is a reminder that
we not only need stronger connections with one another, but we also need a
deeper connection with our Creator and ourselves through solitude. At a
personal level, the healing process of loneliness mainly includes admitting our
loneliness, confronting it, remembering that we belong to God and God’s family,
and making the choice to have meaningful connections with God, ourselves, and
others. Christian scholars would agree with secular scholars that in order to not
feel isolated, we all need a sense of belonging. What makes Christianity’s
teaching on belonging unique is that since we have been saved through faith in
Christ who paid the penalty for our sins, we no longer belong to ourselves but to
God and God’s family. Fourth, the church remains God’s primary vehicle to save
and transform the lonely society in which more and more lives are ruined by an
increase of such issues as anxiety and depression, addictions, suicides, divisions,
and mass shootings. The loneliness epidemic is a reminder that members of
Christian communities are called to follow Jesus in their neighborhoods and
reach out to those who are in need, including the lonely. Most Christians today,
however, are not ready to tackle the issue of loneliness as they consider it bad
and embarrassing.

At the center of this thesis rests on one main question, “How can Christian
communities create meaningful connections and transform loneliness into
belonging?” The conclusion of this paper is that since Christ has called members
of his body, the church, to express their faith in acts of love, justice, and compassion toward others, Christians can create meaningful connections and transformation loneliness through their participation in the ministry of Christ by reaching out to those who are in need, which is an act of love and justice to their neighbors.

The church has the good news, the relationships, and community that are vital in overcoming and preventing loneliness. To transform loneliness into belonging, Christian communities need to be intentional and systematic about creating meaningful social connections and providing mutual support and care. First, Christians in America need to reclaim our call to be missional and be agents of change, and it will require changing our lens and readjusting how we see people like Christ sees them and reaching out and welcoming people of all backgrounds into each of our community. It is vital that Christians have a missionary mindset and are intentional about creating Christ-centered communities where they practice radical hospitality. People are hungry for agape love, and an effective way Christians show that love to others is through the practice of hospitality.

Second, in dealing with the loneliness epidemic, the goal of Christian communities need to be deeper than meeting the emotional needs of people through social connections; the goal should be about helping people connect
with Christ and God’s family. Third, members of Christian communities need to change our mindset on mental health issues and loneliness as bad and embarrassing and create an awareness about the destructive consequences of loneliness on the individuals and society as a whole. It requires naming and talking about mental health and loneliness issues within the Christian communities and educating lay members to be part of the solution to the problem. It also requires that Christian communities are intentional about creating a safe environment where people feel comfortable about being vulnerable and sharing their own loneliness.

Fourth, to protect ourselves from loneliness and stop the spread of loneliness, Christians have important roles in one another’s lives. It is crucial that we value and invest in friendships, which involves showing vulnerability and an investment of our time and energy. In addition to investing in friendships, being part of small groups or mutually caring communities enables us to bond with others and makes us feel a sense of communal belonging. We need those who check in on us, listen to our joy and pain, and support us when we are in a crisis. By connecting with a caring group or community, we feel enhanced and meaningful.

Fifth, Christian leaders like pastors play important roles in transforming loneliness into belonging through their participation in the three-fold office of
Christ as priests, prophets, and kings. Leaders bring healing to the community by listening to others with compassion and paying attention to what is going on in their daily lives. An important task of leaders is to help church members participate in the ministry of Christ by doing the right thing in all relationships and being faithful witnesses. Leaders also play vital roles in stopping the spread of loneliness; they do that by addressing the danger of mental health issues in their teaching and preaching, equipping lay members to care for the lonely, and using their influence to maintain unity and make every effort to create an environment where people of all backgrounds feel that they are welcomed, seen, heard, valued, loved, and cared for.
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Biography

Laldinpuia (Lal) Rodawla is the Associate Pastor for Congregational Life and Christian Education at Providence Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, NC and has served in pastoral ministry for 10 years.

Lal was born in Myanmar (also known as Burma) and immigrated to the U.S at the age of seventeen. He graduated from the University of Maryland in 2006, earning a B.S. in finance. After working a few years in the area of asset management in Baltimore, Lal went to Princeton Theological Seminary and graduated with a Master of Divinity and Master of Arts in Christian Education in 2013.

During his time in seminary, Lal enjoyed working with a group of people with autism in the Princeton area, teaching and preaching among immigrants, an internship at the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, and hospital chaplaincy in Edison, New Jersey. Lal’s home church is Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church in Maryland where his ordination took place in March 2014.

Lal served as a Minister in Residence (a two-year program funded by Lily Endowment) at First Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan where he worked with children and their parents, college students, young adults, and residents in a local nursing home.

Lal brings his unique experiences as a Mizo ethnic from Myanmar, and as a son of a church planter in Myanmar and an immigrant PC (USA) pastor, Lal has spent most of his life moving around in different churches among different cultures. From his experience, Lal understands that the mission of the church is the continuation of the ministry of Jesus Christ by proclaiming the good news of salvation to others and reaching out to the poor, oppressed, and people who are in need of help in the community.

Lal enjoys gardening, playing soccer, photography, running, reading, and traveling.