

Dealing with loneliness in the church

This is a subject which many people, both Pastors and church members try to brush under the carpet and pretend that it just doesn't exist. There is here a similar problem with those who feel suicidal, all they want is for somebody to talk to who has an inkling of sensitivity and understanding. So many times when people raise this subject with ministers they are told to "Pull themselves together" which only makes their condition worse.

The fact is that there is a huge problem with loneliness in the church as a whole, and most churches in particular. In this the first of two studies we look at how loneliness can be caused by insensitivity by ministers, and a lack of understanding on behalf of the people who are lonely, whether through bereavement, divorce or many other different causes.

For instance, a single man living alone who is made redundant may find himself suddenly cut off from the people he counted on as his friends, finding that his contact with them comes to an end once he leaves the company. That person may find that his social contacts were mostly his work colleagues, but now that he is redundant he finds himself suddenly cut off and excluded from their company.

For others, people involve themselves in church activities for the wrong reasons, not because they feel called to do the work that they are doing but because they want some good Christian company. Unfortunately for this sort of person there is a great danger of them becoming negative speakers, and then they find that their church friends isolate him because they do not want to be around negative people.

This is understandable, although some could have a great deal of sympathy with people who do these things, the more they speak and think negatively the less people are going to want to be in their company. Sometimes people can get into situations where there is no sign of a happy ending or the cessation of their problem of loneliness. In churches almost everywhere there are meetings for couples, bible study groups and courses offered to their congregations, which are in a very real sense, all bias to the married person, not a single one.

Another problem is that sometimes the Minister or the person leading the communion at a church service will mistakenly think it a good idea, just for a change, to get into families and have one member of the group collect the bread and non-alcoholic wine for their group. Immediately the single person feels excluded since he is probably not there with anyone of his family.

In situations like this the person leading communion could say "God puts the lonely in families" so the single people should join themselves to one of these groups for communion. Having already been isolated and hurt by discrimination is it any wonder that these single people skip the communion and do not join together in a group? You might say that if these people got involved in activities they wouldn't be lonely.

This is extremely naïve and completely untrue. There would be a scandal in the church if a person from any of these groups if they were to be found literally sleeping together or frowned upon if the two of them of different sexes were to be under the same roof for one night, irrespective of whether any sexual activity took place. Therefore the lonely and isolated person still has his problem since he has to go home and sleep in his bed alone.

When he wakes up in the morning, the feeling of loneliness is brought home to him when he finds that he has nobody to get up for, no more scheduled meetings during the day and the prospect of once again returning from a trip to the Job Centre or other place and finding that he has nothing but junk through the post, nobody has left a message on his phone and nobody has left an intelligent message on any of his e-mail sites.

He will (after lunch) sit down and find that for the rest of the day nobody will telephone him, nobody will call at his home for a chat, and if a problem with the home comes up there will be people standing in endless rows having sympathy for him, but never lifting as much as a finger to help, because they do not have the time, with families of their own which they must look after.

Out of boredom in order to take their mind off things they might pick up a holiday brochure and find they can have 2 weeks in Spain for as little as £187 but that this is based on two people sharing, and if only one person goes then there is a surcharge of up to 50 percent. If they go to the church house group they will see at the meeting many people they know **with their wives** thus exaggerating once more the loneliness of the single man.

They might see dozens of restaurants giving special deals and greatly reduced prices for their meals – but that these "offers" apply only to two people eating together. Sometimes when someone else learns how much they are finding it difficult to manage on Job Seekers Allowance, the person will be told by a man wearing a wedding ring on his finger: "You're lucky you're not married." Really? Is marriage so bad? if so why do so many people go for it?

Others have heard how depressed they have become having to cook for themselves a meal at the end of the day, when really it takes a titanic effort and come out with startling advice that they should go to cookery classes. These people must have a different translation of the bible than most others have, which says "It is not good for man to be alone, I will therefore arrange for him to go to evening classes."

Even if he did do this, no doubt there would be other cookery students of both sexes who would pair off and ensure that the single person is made to feel more isolated than ever. Others have a different theology to most people and tell the person "Oh it's alright for you, you've got The Lord." Jesus in Matthew chapter 19 supported His Father's idea that a man should leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife.

In Genesis chapter 3 God Himself gives His own interpretation of the situation that man is faced with and speaks the words "It is not good for man to be alone." These words were spoken at a time when Adam had such a close relationship with God that He and The Lord walked in the Garden of Eden together during the cool of the evening. If this were what God intended He would never have spoken the words quoted above.

In some churches people are nominated as Deacons and/or elders in their church but never come up for election because of a misunderstanding of the words of Paul to Timothy and his own letter to one of the churches which they interpret as saying that to fulfil either of these offices you have to be a married man whose children are well behaved and believers. Another way of making a single man feel isolated.

What about if they want to get involved in counselling people? Oh well if they do that we will have to ensure that it is only a case of a man counselling another man or a woman counselling another woman – Isolation again, since if he were a married man they would be delighted for him to counsel people of either sex. Don't you usually find that those who commit adultery are either married women or married men, or both are married?

The fact is that almost 50 per cent of the people in this country are now single, weather through divorce, bereavement or other. What is the church doing to reach the lonely with the gospel of Jesus Christ? If one of these persons comes to a church meeting not knowing anybody and nobody speaks to them either before or after the meeting how likely is it that such a person will come for a second time?

Suppose people find out that the person coming for the first time is either a bad time keeper, has a problem with alcohol or literally smells, are we going to make these people feel welcome or increase their sense of isolation because of a problem that could quite easily be caused by a medical condition which was and is not their fault?

One of the reasons why many people stay away from church going today is because they fear that as soon as they turn the corner of the road the church is in they will immediately be judged by the people in that place – be it a righteous judgement or an undeserved one> In most churches this comes under the category of gossip and should be dealt with at the earliest opportunity.

In Part 2 of this study we will look at what the church and its members can do to reduce the problem of loneliness in their congregations to the minimum possible amount.