

## Practical and Pastoral Responses to Loneliness

The Salvation Army's Overview on Loneliness and Isolation report of 2023 noted that 'Person-centred community infrastructure is vital to combating loneliness, especially where this supports strong social networks. There is work to be done in challenging the stigma attached to being lonely – as well as the perception that it only affects older people – and opportunities to utilise technology, encourage intergenerational solidarity and improve accessibility to services, programmes and activities.'



In our pastoral response to loneliness, the first consideration must be to open our eyes to the potential reality of loneliness in other people's lives, and our own.

God made it clear in the Bible that it is not a good thing to live alone. Right at the beginning of creation, God makes it clear that living a life of isolation is not good for anyone:

'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him' (Genesis 2:18).

Yet we live in a society where many people do live alone, often living away from family network groups, and many people admit to feeling lonely at some point in their lives.

Loneliness and isolation does not treat everyone equally. Therefore there are inequalities that affect certain groups of people more than others. Examples of this would include older people, people living with a disability, carers, young people aged between 18-25 years old, asylum seekers, refugees, and the LGBTQ+ community. These groups would form the focus of a Salvation Army response across the UKI Territory in the foreseeable future. However, it is recognising that anyone can be lonely.

As pastoral carers, we need to acknowledge this fact and work towards tackling the loneliness and isolation that people within our corps/churches and communities are facing, and reaching those who have not yet stepped over the threshold of our churches due to their own lived experience of loneliness.

The Loneliness Hub has been developed on the [Salvationist.org.uk](https://salvationist.org.uk) website [insert link] to highlight ideas, good practice and further research, and reading that will be helpful to local practitioners. What we know is that in 2023, just 20 per cent of all our corps and centres provided nearly 10,000 pieces of practical help and assistance relating to loneliness and isolation, and this statistic will only continue to worsen if we do not effectively tackle this situation.

## Practical and Pastoral Response to Loneliness

The local corps/community has many opportunities to do so, and what may be considered as regular weekly community services/activities such as lunch clubs, Cameo clubs, weekday services, Singing by Heart groups etc are what can make a difference to someone who is experiencing loneliness.

The psalmist states that God 'sets the lonely in families ...' (Psalm 68:6). The family of God, his Church, his people, is where God has set the lonely, and we need to work to really see how we can support people in the best possible way. How many of your community attend a worship service on a Sunday or midweek, then go and eat a meal alone whilst others eat with family? How many of your community are living in neighbourhoods where they don't know their neighbours and have no network of support from family or friends? How do we even find that out? We must carefully ask well-crafted questions, so as not to appear as though we are making a 'project' of someone who is single / living alone or living in a difficult situation.

Another Older People's Ministries resource, 'The King and I', has helpful tips and suggestions, including a service outline, to help dig a little deeper and find out more about those within our own communities and congregations. Download this resource from 'A Closer Look At Loneliness and Isolation' resource page on Salvationist.org.uk

In our pastoral care it is right and proper to remind people that God truly does understand our feelings of loneliness. Matthew 6:8 reminds us that our loving heavenly Father is aware of our needs. Jesus said, 'Your Father knows what you need before you ask him' (Matthew 6:8). Praying with someone and reminding them that they are not alone as God is with them is the truth. However, when someone feels extremely lonely, this may be the last thing they want to hear. Our words, however well meaning, need to be covered with grace, love and compassion to those experiencing loneliness.

As a pastoral carer, you may yourself have or have had moments of feeling lonely, and therefore may understand the isolation this can often bring. If you feel that you struggle with understanding loneliness, you may want to visit Mind, a mental health organisation, teaching about loneliness and the impact it can have on people:

[www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/loneliness/about-loneliness/](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/loneliness/about-loneliness/)

Taking time to consider loneliness in your own context will help you look a little deeper into your community's needs. Age UK has some great advice and support and provides 'Heat Maps' which show areas in England where loneliness is statistically a high-risk factor for older people. Follow the link below for further support; you will be able to put in your postcode (England only) to use this facility:

[www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/loneliness-research-and-resources/loneliness-maps/](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/loneliness-research-and-resources/loneliness-maps/)

Speaking to your local 'social prescriber' might also be another way of finding out what else is going on in the community to tackle loneliness, and you will be able to highlight your offer to the community for those who may be experiencing loneliness and isolation.



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Speak to your GP's surgery to find out who is your local prescriber and get in touch with them. This could be a very beneficial and mutual relationship that will aid your ministry.

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We often bring the words 'loneliness' and 'isolation' together. However, we need to understand that someone may feel lonely even though they are not isolated. In our church groups we need to be aware of people who may be sitting on the fringes of our services and groups. For whatever reason, they may not feel able to fully participate in worship or an activity due to their loneliness.

Loneliness can be defined as a negative experience resulting from the perception that our social relationships are not as we would want them to be (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Loneliness is therefore a subjective experience that occurs most often when we feel that our social relationships, including work relationships and personal friendships, are not as fulfilling as we would wish. This is irrespective of the number of friends we have or the size of our social interactions with others.

Social isolation, however, is different and comes about through lack of social interactions with others. For some people, this will be a choice, but we would think of this more as someone who has chosen solitude. Perhaps take time to think about those in your community who are isolated through no choice of their own. It could be the locality in which they live, perhaps a high-rise block of flats or in a rural area. Is transport a factor to their isolation, meaning they have no way of getting to groups or even worship on a Sunday? Speak to members of your congregation about what might be done to help those who are isolated – not forgetting a simple visit to someone who is unable to get to your corps/centre. There are many who have made The Salvation Army their spiritual home for many years and found it a place of social gathering, yet due to frailty or now living in a care facility, these people can often be forgotten. Regular visitation by members of the corps/centre can be a lifeline for people.

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Mother Teresa wisely said:  
*'The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy, it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love.'*



Salvationists in the Australia Territory have produced a resource that helps to highlight this topic of loneliness and isolation, and this toolkit link below can be used to educate your corps/centre to gain a better understanding of this topic and how to tackle it as a church community. <https://my.salvos.org.au/toolkit/resource/2380/download/11/>