**‘Not being alone’ – Devon’s churches tackling loneliness**

**Conference 28 June 2017 Opening address**

I am very pleased to be attending this conference today. I am delighted that this important subject of loneliness is gaining increasing public attention. I look forward to learning more about loneliness and more about how we can as Christians in Devon respond helpfully.

I have been lonely. I have been lonely when alone. I have been lonely while with others. For me it has usually not been of long duration. I expect most of us have some understanding of loneliness that comes from our own occasional experience. It is a feeling. It is subjective. It is miserable, sapping life’s energy.

‘I wandered lonely as a cloud’. Well, possibly it is very good poetry, but it is also nonsense – a cloud cannot experience loneliness - loneliness is not a thing, it is always about a person.

Rather more hitting the mark, the poet John Clare wrote:

“I am – yet what I am, none cares or knows;

My friends forsake me like a memory lost:

I am the self-consumer of my woes –“

I phoned my mother in Sussex on Saturday evening. I try to phone her fairly regularly, but I am not that reliable, fortunately I am one of 4 and my siblings do better. My mother was grumpy, I could tell immediately by her tone. And so it came out - she had not seen anyone all day, as the friend she sees most days was out with family. Our conversations are hard work. She does not believe that her life is interesting anymore. She does not go out very often or very far. Nothing much happens. So I had to dig deeper into things to tell her about from my life and make sure I produced enough news and interest to be the moment in the day for her that was better. We talked about what we had watched recently or that we might watch on television. Twenty minutes later she signed off quite cheerfully.

During that same Saturday I had led a Quiet Day in North Devon. It was delightful. I was fulfilled and contented. I chose to spent time in silence, when I was not leading the talks. In a busy life silence and solitude have for me a high value and are restorative. The feeling they give me is contentment, they give me energy. That is quite different from my mother’s feelings the same day. I chose silence, she did not.

I had what I wanted, she did not.

Let me offer briefly a few thoughts about why churches can be good at addressing loneliness in our society.

1. **Comfort**

It sounds like something I will only need when I am ill or upset, but the word and the ideas around are richer than that. The word comfort literally means in the Greek of the New Testament ‘to call someone near’. The idea of one person being with another, speaking words which will alter the way they face their situation. It means that through the comfort of companionship, new possibilities, new hope, new ways forward can be found.

We can trust that beyond an individual who seems isolated is the love of God going out to embrace the world in Christ. We are all held, enfolded in the comfort of the divine embrace. But sometimes, even often that divine embrace needs a human visible expression; An embrace that is not just spiritual but real – it comes to us through a person, for Paul on one occasion when he was feeling isolated away from all his friends and companions, it came through the actual arrival of Titus.

Often it is simply a matter of being near a person who is lonely or in pain or dealing with trouble. Often saying little, but listening.

Occasions of real contact for sympathy, compassion and listening, absorbing anger and hurt, sharing what we know of the compassionate heart of God for his children in their need.

So much pastoral care with each other is rooted not in telling but listening, being slow with advice, and not immediately turning someone else’s story into one about ourselves

It is often a quiet, uncelebrated, unrecognised ministry for which the real listeners get little credit, an exhausting ministry because listening is a deep kind of giving.

It does not come always come as naturally to many of us as we would hope. Real listening is skilled, attentive and tiring! But it is part of sustaining Christian friendships and community with comfort, it is part of what we offer as faithful service.

1. **Volunteers**

Real community depends on generosity, on what is offered and provided on the basis that it is given, not available because of regulation. Genuine friendship that sustains our spirits cannot be commanded or bought.

The church has long experience, skill and wisdom at relying on volunteers.

When we are generous with ourselves towards each other and those beyond the church, we are close to the character of God, showing his generous and self-giving love.

The theologian John Swinton put it well, when he said that ‘Unpaid friends are better than people who are paid to befriend’.

In my previous parish in Hertfordshire, before I came to Devon, we ran a café in the church hall, open 6 mornings a week, managed and staffed by a rota of volunteers. Mothers gathered after they had dropped off children at school, carers would come in with those they were taking out for a walk, relieving the isolation of their work, and bringing the one they cared for into a range of human contact. Adults with learning difficulties felt safe to come in, assured of a welcome as well as reasonably priced homemade refreshments. I would often loiter there to connect to visitors. Twice a month a bereavement tea was held there during the afternoon for lonely widows and widowers. They would serve refreshments and bring the cakes by a rota, taking responsibility and growing in a safe hospitality that opened the prospect of a couple of hours of company and friendship and understanding. It was the brainchild of one person, widowed herself, who was always there to open up and welcome in friends she made among the more recently bereaved.

1. **Encouraging - participation and responsibility**

It is the root of Christian discipleship that Jesus did not call for onlookers, but participants. There is no retirement from that. I think part of the learning in that is that finding an activity or task for everyone, no matter how small, can be part of the way we respond to people’s loneliness.

In one church in which I served we were fortunate in having access to a trust fund from the sale of some almshouses. The fund allowed the purchase of a minibus with a tail-lift in partnership with Help the Aged. It was used locally virtually every day of the week by many different groups, with maintenance costs met by the trust. At St Stephen’s we were able to use it in support of a weekly lunch club in our modern church hall. People with mobility issues could be collected from their homes, even the wheel-chair bound and brought to lunch. 30-40 meals were prepared every week. A charge was made for a delicious two course dinner, prepared and served by volunteers. We came to realise that for some people this was the highlight of their week: Sometimes their one time of conversation face-to-face and not by phone. We established a rota of about 4 people who would sit at the entrance to the hall collecting the money and taking the names of who would be coming next week. Being in a wheelchair did not mean that you could not take money and give out change. We observed some of those people’s faces open up as they came into the hall and those managing the door came to know the names of everyone else. Friendships grew and newcomers were always welcomed. People in the community and church were able to suggest people who might value a visit and an invitation to the lunch.

1. **home**

‘Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me’. Rev 3: 20

Most of the time for my mother her flat is the nest she has created just how she likes it. Most of the time she chooses and likes a lot of her own company. It is for her a lovely place when she is in her chair on the phone to one of her children or when her friend sits with her. But sometimes like any place when you are lonely it becomes less like a home, where you are contented and at peace.

There is a strong theme in the Christian faith of God in Christ making his home among us and inviting us in spirit to make our home in him, through those beautiful biblical words of dwelling and abiding.

Being at home is a place of being valued in relationship. It is an experience of belonging in a relationship, belonging in a community, whether in a chosen activity such as Christian worship or many other kinds of shared activity. My mother and her friend often play scrabble.

Communicating, sharing, creating this experience of being at home is a contribution churches are motivated to offer to those whose needs are rooted in loneliness.

Our two great sacraments are baptism, when we are brought into the community of faith, the community of the body of Christ, and Holy Communion when together we are nourished by eating bread and drinking wine together.

Loneliness in Devon is not a thing, it’s personal. It is people in Devon who are lonely.

Our calling and our joy is to serve them and seek their well-being. Loneliness is not part of God’s plan for us.