**‘Not Being Alone’ - Devon churches tackling Loneliness**

At the end of June, Healthwatch Devon, in cooperation with the Diocese of Exeter held an initial conference at County Hall to explore how local churches can better address issues of loneliness in their communities and congregations.

Devon County Council’s Public Health research suggests that as many as 50,000 people in the county experience some kind of loneliness, often brought about by social isolation in an increasingly mobile society. This has detrimental effects on human health and well-being, and can contribute to poor quality of life – for younger people as well as for older ones living on their own. Children can be lonely as well as those in their nineties or older.

Rural remoteness brings its own challenges, but equally it is possible to feel extremely lonely in the centre of a city like Plymouth, as well as living in a hamlet in the north Devon countryside.

In this context, the Archdeacon of Exeter (Ven. Christopher Futcher) reminded participants that the church offers a safe space for bring people together – not just for worship – but for social events and community gatherings. Loneliness can affect everyone from time to time, yet for some it can be a chronic or long-term occurrence, a time when we become ‘self-consumers of our own woes’ (John Clare).

Churches can offer specific actions he proposed:

***Comfort*** - meaning having someone near, someone to listen and support.

***Volunteers*** – unpaid friends to visit and spend time in purposeful conversation.

***Encouragement***– participation and taking responsibility for one another. Enabling people to come together for meals, games, hobbies, gardening, exercise, festivals, and so on make for the fabric of sharing and breaking down isolation.

***Home***– for those trapped at home, we can take new life to them and show an interest in lives that feel lost.

Participants talked of how excess solitude can result from transport and mobility restrictions, tackling the causes of loneliness, the importance of using church buildings for welcoming activities, speaking out and intervening for others, encouraging ‘social prescribing’ from doctors and others, and developing personal budgets that enable people to pay for socialising as well as medication!

A recent Church Urban Fund report was referred to which outlines three key findings:

1. Group based activities are better than one-to-one interventions
2. Activity groups based on mutual interest are more effective than groups that target lonely people
3. Groups are most effective when they allow members to take responsibility for leadership

<https://www.cuf.org.uk/blog/how-can-the-church-respond-to-loneliness>

Loneliness is a key priority for Healthwatch Devon, which is running an ongoing surevy at present and will be holding a further stakeholder consultation later in the year and churches are encouraged to attend this. It is also running a photo competition on what loneliness and feeling lonely means to you (see: <https://healthwatchdevon.co.uk/loneliness/>)

Martyn Goss, Director of Church & Society, concluded that *“if the emphasis from our faith is on caring relationships, there is no room for loneliness. God creates us as social beings and our humanness is realised through the lives of those around us. We all need to feel loved and to return that love to others, and that is why the church has to tackle loneliness in Devon”.*

I Am! (by John Clare)

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—

They rise and vanish in oblivious host,

Like shadows in love’s frenzied stifled throes

And yet I am, and live—like vapours tossed

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,

Into the living sea of waking dreams,

Where there is neither sense of life or joys,

But the vast shipwreck of my life’s esteems;

Even the dearest that I loved the best

Are strange—nay, rather, stranger than the rest.

I long for scenes where man hath never trod

A place where woman never smiled or wept

There to abide with my Creator, God,

And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept,

Untroubling and untroubled where I lie

The grass below—above the vaulted sky.