A SILENT EPIDEMIC:
HOW CAN WE SHARE ONE ANOTHER'S LONELINESS?

Part two, August 2015

In July 2015, Church Urban Fund and Edinburgh University's Divinity School hosted an event on the theme of loneliness. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, this event was one of a series of four that will be held in different locations and on different themes around England.

This series of events aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice, bringing together academics, clergy and practitioners in order to share their diverse expertise and experience on various poverty-related themes.

This paper is a summary of the presentations delivered in the second event and has been written in order to share the learning and hopefully, to encourage similar discussions around the country.

A NEIGHBOURHOOD APPROACH:

Tracey Robbins, Programme Manager, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

There is a difference between loneliness, which is the pain of being along, and solitude, which is the joy of being alone. Loneliness is the result of a mismatch between the relationships we have and the relationships we want. It is caused by an internal trigger and so there is a danger that organised activities and networks will merely increase a sense of loneliness.

Loneliness is bad for us. It almost doubles the risk of dementia and is twice as harmful to health as smoking. It is linked with an increased likelihood of alcoholism, smoking and obesity and a decreased likelihood of eating fresh fruit and vegetables and of exercising.

At the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) we take a neighbourhood approach to loneliness. We believe this works best because it uses informal, place-based networks and begins where people are. We recently conducted an action research project that explored the experience of loneliness in four neighbourhoods. (To find out more see *www.jrf.org.uk/topic/loneliness*)

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We recruited 32 community researchers who spoke to and held participatory learning sessions with more than 2,000 people and gathered almost 8,000 individual comments on people's experience of loneliness in their local community. We then used this data to identify the factors that people felt were most significant in causing loneliness. These included being alone, bereavement and loss, being older and a lack of youth facilities (see the diagram below). We also found that loneliness was a significant problem for people aged 15 to 25 as well as for older people.

> *The stepping stones to engagement and education, which funding cuts have removed, need to be put back in place. Anyone can be lonely, even busy people, and anyone can reduce loneliness.*

At the end of this action research project more than 1,000 ideas for reducing loneliness were received; 65 were prioritised in each neighbourhood and these were then distilled to five initiatives. In the course of this process the researchers became activists.

New community initiatives to reduce loneliness included:

- **the Carr Estate:** a café, work with churches and work with a children's centre
- **New Earswick:** a parents' play group and community allotments
- **Denholme:** a walking group, a film club, health outreach and intergenerational drama
- **Bradford Moor:** a community market, a confidence group and home visiting

This research showed us that regulation can often make community organising difficult. It kills kindness and reduces social activity through an intolerance of messiness and risk. While lonely people are vulnerable and there can be safeguarding implications, we also need to build people's confidence to take action.

The stepping stones to engagement and education, which funding cuts have removed, need to be put back in place. Anyone can be lonely, even busy people, and anyone can reduce loneliness. We need to find ways to give time to others even when busy, to talk about loneliness, to resource its prevention and to ensure that community assets are available for community use.
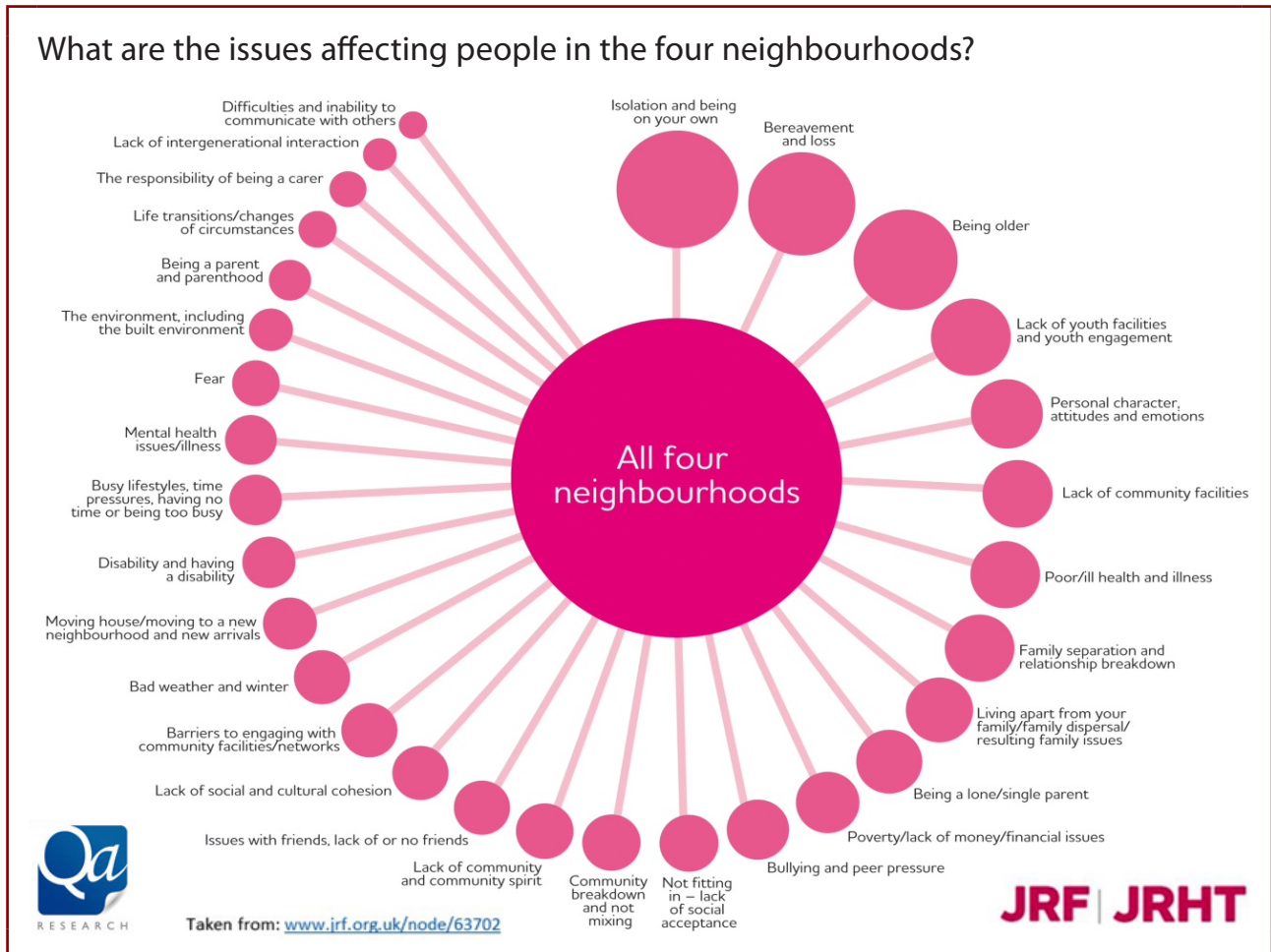
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What are the issues affecting people in the four neighbourhoods?

Difficulties and inability to communicate with others
Lack of intergenerational interaction
The responsibility of being a carer
Life transitions/changes of circumstances
Being a parent and parenthood
The environment, including the built environment
Fear
Mental health issues/illness
Busy lifestyles, time pressures, having no time or being too busy
Disability and having a disability
Moving house/moving to a new neighbourhood and new arrivals
Bad weather and winter
Barriers to engaging with community facilities/networks
Lack of social and cultural cohesion
Issues with friends, lack of or no friends
Lack of community and community spirit
Community breakdown and not mixing
Not fitting in – lack of social acceptance
Bullying and peer pressure

Isolation and being on your own
Bereavement and loss
Being older
Lack of youth facilities and youth engagement
Personal character, attitudes and emotions
Lack of community facilities
Poor/ill health and illness
Family separation and relationship breakdown
Living apart from your family/family dispersal/ resulting family issues
Being a lone/single parent
Poverty/lack of money/financial issues

All four neighbourhoods

Qa RESEARCH

Taken from: www.jrf.org.uk/node/63702

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RESPONSE:

Dr Keming Yang, Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Durham University

Loneliness is a social problem and therefore its solutions are social. Although it isn't viewed as an illness, it impacts on health services, especially through increased GP visits. To free up doctors' time, surgeries need to offer social provision.

The known risk factors don't fully explain who is lonely. A common attributes profile is needed, including a greater understanding of the intensity and duration of loneliness. A 'loneliness map' of the country would also be informative.

We need to build our resilience. Most of us suffer 'transient loneliness' for short periods; this experience should help us to recognise more serious loneliness in others.

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A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION IN THE CONTEXT OF MENTAL HEALTH:

Prof John Swinton, Chair in Divinity and Religious Studies, University of Aberdeen

About one half of people with serious mental illness have not had a close social relationship in their life. This could easily be seen as a consequence of their illness, but the reverse is also true: loneliness causes mental illness. Although the medical account of mental illness tends to overpower all others, most healing in communities is non-professional. Unpaid friends are better than people who are paid to befriend.

The medical account of mental illness is founded on the process of diagnosis, which is the filtering of experience through a theoretical framework. The only justified purpose of diagnosis is to help professionals do their job yet, unfortunately, diagnosis migrates into society and into its cultural and social fabric. As such, your diagnosis can easily become a part of you, actually making a situation worse by the stigma attached to it.

In contrast, the social ties that religious communities provide can help people avoid depression. Yet churches are attended mainly by women and have to some extent become feminised. This means that young men, who are most at risk of drinking, fighting and suicide and are also at risk of being lonely, are often alienated. We need to consider how we can build relationships with different groups and people.

We also need to take care of how we talk about people. Language has the power to create - when we name something it comes into existence. It needs to be used responsibly.

> *Jesus didn't sit with the marginalised but shifted where the margins of society lay. God is at work at those margins and churches must also be places of belonging that allow friendships to grow across divides.*

Three specific theological points are important in relation to our use of language:

- **Faithful, redemptive naming** is seen in Genesis, when Adam names the creatures with God's guidance. This contrasts with improper, fallen naming, which brings stigma.
- **The Body of Christ is diverse.** Its unity comes from Christ not from the members, allowing for different ways of understanding what it means to be human.
- **Friendship across difference** is at the heart of the Gospel. The incarnation entails the bridging of divides, with the unlike attracting. We aren't bound to common interests.

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A PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE:

The Revd Canon Peter Kenney, *Director of Pastoral Care and Counselling, Diocese of Newcastle*

Loneliness is lethal. We are social creatures and need to go beyond welcome to befriending. We can sometimes be too alert to the dangers of becoming too involved with people and situations. However, we need to become nosier and not be afraid of being 'sucked in'.

So many people long for human encounter and quality conversation. Calculated risk taking is needed, balanced with caution where appropriate. We should also be willing to talk about difficult things and create opportunities for non-superficial conversations.

Loneliness is one of the most difficult social issues to deal with because it is in fact a person. It is as if the lonely person is someone other, who reminds us of the underlying existential reality of our own situation. Interest in another person is an emotion of intention that leads to an encounter with depth. Through it we see the other person as made in the image of God. It is in this kind of sharing that we live.

SNAPSHOT ON PROJECTS

HenPower is supported by Equal Arts and began in 2012 after a sheltered housing resident, who had previously kept hens, requested one and received a positive response from the housing manager. Since then 'hensioners' have got together to look after and talk to others about hens. Taking part in this project has got residents out of their homes, helped them to get to know others and given them opportunities to visits schools and other care homes to talk about their work. Research by Northumbria University indicates the project has reduced depression and loneliness and increased mental health and wellbeing. See more at *https:/equalarts.org.uk/our-work/henpower*.

GOALS is part of Developing Initiatives Supporting Communities (DISC) and aims to help people with learning disabilities Go Out And Live. For twenty years it has provided befriending and community experiences, currently it runs a day service in a community centre. Most users have no other regular social activity, are unable to go out on their own and don't see their friends outside of the day service. The social opportunities provided by GOALS are of vital importance. See more at *www.mygoals.org.uk*.

Places of Welcome, based in the Birmingham area, is a growing network of hospitality run by local community groups who want to make sure that everyone in their area has a place to go for a friendly face, a cup of tea and a conversation if and when they need it. The network has developed a set of guiding principles, that every network member has to sign up to, that ensure a suitable building and regular opening time, inclusivity and volunteer staffing, active listening, free refreshments and basic local information, and the recognition that everyone brings talents, experiences and skills that might be shared locally. See more at *www.placesofwelcome.org*.

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POINTS FROM DISCUSSION

The event ended with an extended time of discussion, reflecting on the day's presentations and identifying key learning points, including:

Women are more likely to report loneliness than men. This could be because more women are lonely, but women are also more likely to acknowledge the fact. However, loneliness among people aged 15–25, especially males, is a growing issue.

Clergy can help teach the language of hope for a town. Conversations in congregations need to begin with possibilities, not problems.

Whereas formal networks can be undermined by regulation, informal networks are not.

'Give permission' to others to acknowledge their loneliness by acknowledging your own, addressing the problem by sharing it. Recognise professional loneliness.

Depending on spiritual resources and relationships, the home may be experienced as a prison or as a hermitage. Within loneliness there can be room for creativity.

Nurture networks as well as groups. Mixed groups are needed rather than just groups of lonely people together.

Funders can be too quick to criticize institutions, assuming they are ghettoes. As the problems around 'community care' have shown, people need institutions and these can become homes. There is a big difference between institutionalisation and living in an institution.

To develop relationships, use stepping stones. Build links by being visible in cafés and pubs, letting people suss you out in a normal environment.

The Church should primarily be itself, acting as a catalyst rather than initiating lots of activities.

Churches need to be homeful, taking time and trusting people and their stories. They need to create opportunities for intimacy, such as doing nails. There is great power in small things.

Befriending schemes work well if matching people by interest and personality. However, human relationships shouldn't be professionalised and befrienders shouldn't be paid.

We must learn to receive the gift of friendship from all.

We hope that this event was an encouragement for the people who attended, and also for those who read this summary. We would like to thank all the speakers who contributed to the day and look forward to working more closely in partnership with many of the people and organisations who work so hard to build flourishing communities.

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