

Reducing Loneliness

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*“Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.
Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distress.”*

(Psalm 25:16-17)

As many Canadians rush through their days, they cannot imagine what it is like to be truly lonely. But for many, loneliness is all they have, day in and day out. A 2019 Angus Reid survey found 40% of respondents reported they long for but do not have others to talk with them, while 62% would like family and friends to spend more time with them. Loneliness is described as a disconnect—a feeling of not belonging anywhere or to anyone.

Since the survey was taken, the world has experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, which has greatly increased anxiety and depression caused by extreme isolation and loneliness, leading to a sharp increase in mental health challenges. The American Psychological Association states that loneliness and social isolation cause an equal or even more significant health risk than other common risk factors such as smoking, obesity and substance abuse. In terms of the heightened mortality risk, loneliness is equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes daily.

The rapid expansion of technology, while creating a more connected world, has sometimes caused people to be so engaged with the online community that they no longer take part in person-to-person interactions. These relationships are vital to people’s health and well-being. People are meant to have relationships and thrive on being involved in relationship-based activities. The absence of this social part of life negatively affects individuals’ mental and physical health.

While members know of many older adults who suffer from loneliness, Statistics Canada (2021) reveals that, “More than 1 in 10 people aged 15 and older said that they always or often felt lonely...” Who are those most likely to live in a state of loneliness? They are those who are marginalized, living in poverty, Indigenous Canadians,

visible minorities, people with mobility issues, LGBTQ persons and, of course, the elderly.

As Catholic women, members are called to reach out to those suffering through the despair of loneliness on a continual basis. Members must constantly be aware of those around them who are sometimes invisible, to be the ones who make the telephone call, send the card and be willing to listen. Through patient listening, members will hear those who are lonely. Some may gratefully receive an invitation to come to a meeting, volunteer activity or another event. Others may be overwhelmed by such suggestions and prefer a one-to-one visit for some time before venturing further. Be very attentive to individual needs.

Parish councils should inform members and parishioners alike by inviting speakers from various organizations to speak on how to address the issue of loneliness. The national theme of *Catholic and*

Living It! urges members to leave the comfort of their own lives and to become involved with those in need of companionship. It is easier to give money to a homeless person as one walks by rather than stop and listen to his or her story. To get really involved takes courage, compassion and a certain amount of wisdom. Members have these qualities and willingly use them to carry out their mission to serve Christ.

In the words of Pope Francis, “At times like these, more than ever do we need the reasons of the heart, which alone can help us understand the mystery which embraces our loneliness. How much sadness we see in so many faces all around us!”

I want to thank the Ontario Provincial Council for the gift of its research on the serious issue of loneliness and its effects on mental and physical well-being. †

