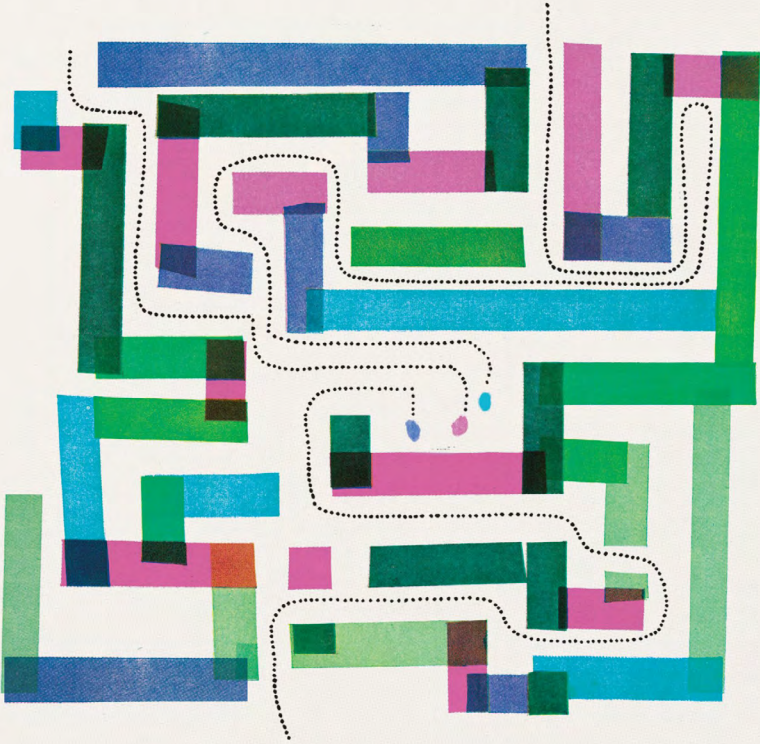


FOREWORD BY CRAIG GROESCHEL

THE WAY BACK TO ONE ANOTHER



How to Live as People
Created for Community

JEFF GALLEY | PHILLIP N. SMITH
WITH JILL HEISEY



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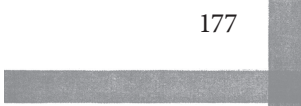
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1

EYES OPEN TO A BETTER WAY

It is not good for the man to be alone.

GENESIS 2:18

I (JEFF) RECEIVED JAKE'S NAME and address in 2020 from The Education and Employment Ministry (TEEM), an Oklahoma City-based nonprofit that prepares men and women for release from incarceration by providing employment and life skills training and establishing positive connections. Jake was my tenth mentee.

Normally I would visit mentees in prison and get to know them face-to-face, but because prisons were closed to visitors during the pandemic, Jake and I became old-fashioned pen pals. He was quick to write back when I reached out, and we got to know one another over a span of several months as he prepared to leave prison. Jake was winsome and engaging. He loved literature and learning, so I'd send a copy of books I was reading, and we'd discuss them in our letters, like an informal book club.

In one early letter, he spoke openly and with great clarity about the role of isolation in his past, present, and future. "I don't have any consistent contact with my family," he wrote. "I'm completely



and irrevocably isolated.” He went on, “Having a pro-social relationship with anyone is new to me. Regardless, I want to attempt it.”

In Jake’s final letter, he informed me that he had been granted early release for good behavior and would be transferred to another facility across the state in preparation for release. Though long-awaited, his taste of freedom was coming sooner than either one of us had anticipated, and Jake was both hopeful and nervous about what came next. I quickly penned a reply that included my contact information so he could reach out after release, hoping he’d receive it in time.

Several weeks went by without a word from Jake. I thought perhaps his transfer had come before my letter arrived. Then one day, he texted me. He’d been released the day before on the other side of Oklahoma with only the clothes on his back and a few dollars in his pocket. He was hoping to travel by bus to Oklahoma City, where he could access TEEM’s waiting resources. We arranged transportation, and I had the privilege of meeting Jake for the first time when I picked him up from the bus station.

The month that followed was filled with highs and lows. Jake quickly found a job. He moved into safe housing, learned to navigate the bus system, and received some overdue medical attention. We spent significant time together, and I heard more of his life story. Jake’s family had blown apart when he was a young child, and he spent most of his formative years bouncing through the foster care system. Jake couldn’t recall a single long-term relationship, and he often referred to the same sense of isolation he had referenced in that early letter. In his early days of freedom, Jake was searching for connection. Unfortunately, he found meth.

Despite many factors working in Jake’s favor and a wealth of natural talent and intelligence, he fell under the grip of addiction. Jake stopped answering my calls and texts, and I learned that he



was living on the streets, adrift in an ocean of addiction and homelessness. I haven't managed to reach him since.

Researcher and journalist Johann Hari has argued, "The opposite of addiction isn't sobriety. It's connection."¹ The truth of Hari's assertion seemed so evident in Jake's example, as his words "irrevocably isolated" reverberated in my mind. Jake is a casualty of the loneliness epidemic. His example is among the more extreme outcomes of isolation, but it is nowhere near rare.

We're Lonely

We're lonely. Or at least half of us are.

According to multiple research studies, roughly half of Americans report that we are sometimes or always lonely, feeling left out, lacking companionship, or that no one knows us well.² When asked how close we felt to others emotionally, only 39 percent of us said we felt very connected.³ But this is by no means an American problem alone. Based on a survey including 142 countries, over 2 billion people say they feel very or fairly lonely.⁴

We have fewer friends than we used to. In 1990, almost three-quarters of Americans had more than three close friends. By 2021, that number had dropped to 49 percent. Meanwhile, the percent of Americans who claim to have no close friends increased fourfold.⁵ Fewer than half of us can affirm, "My relationships are as satisfying as I would want them to be."⁶ Both the United Kingdom and Japan have established dedicated cabinet positions to address loneliness, indicating a growing recognition that loneliness is a public health issue warranting governmental intervention.⁷

Though the younger generation has been termed "the connected generation,"⁸ it's a misnomer in all but the most superficial sense of the word. The rate of loneliness among younger generations is roughly 50 percent higher than that of those over age

sixty.⁹ Only one-third of those between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five indicate they “often feel deeply cared for by those around me.”¹⁰ Only 17 percent report feeling a deep social connection with others.¹¹

We are lonely and getting lonelier.

Dire Impacts, Dire Implications

Loneliness has captured researchers’ attention for decades. In 1939, Harvard University began what is today the longest continuous longitudinal study of human development. Over and over again, the study has revealed and validated that “the strength of a person’s connections with others can predict the health of both their body and their brain as they go through life.”¹² In other words, healthy relationships contribute to a healthy body and mind, and the converse is also true.

More than three decades ago, in a groundbreaking essay which later became the book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam prophetically sounded the alarm of our society’s drift toward social disconnection and isolation.¹³ Putnam made a striking observation about American identity: We’re increasingly engaging solo in formerly social activities. To illustrate his point, Putnam cited a simultaneous increase in people bowling and decrease in bowling league participation. People were bowling alone. Putnam claimed that this shift weakened our national character and threatened our ability to build social connections.

In 2023, then-Surgeon General Vivek Murthy confirmed loneliness and isolation had reached dangerous levels in the United States, issuing an eighty-two-page advisory on the crisis. He warned that if we fail to build more connected lives and a more connected society, “We will pay an ever-increasing price in the form of our individual and collective health and well-being.”¹⁴ That price

encompasses some of the most pressing problems our society faces: including substance abuse, incarceration, and homelessness, as Jake's story illustrates.

It also threatens our physical health. A meta-analysis (compilation of multiple studies) indicates that social isolation is as detrimental to our physical health as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day.¹⁵ Insufficient social connection is also linked to a roughly 30 percent increased risk of heart disease and stroke.¹⁶

On the psychosocial front, social isolation and loneliness are primary risk factors for suicidal ideation and suicide. In the United States, suicide rates have climbed roughly 40 percent since 2000.¹⁷ Similarly, loneliness is a direct contributor to depression, which has nearly doubled since 2015.¹⁸

It's not a pretty picture.

Researchers often draw a distinction between *social isolation* and *loneliness*, and it's helpful to understand the nuance.

Social isolation is the *objective* state of having few or no social relationships or experiencing inadequate meaningful social connectedness.¹⁹ A socially isolated person doesn't get much interaction with other people—or maybe no interaction at all—and what interaction they may have doesn't lead to connection.

Loneliness is an *emotional* state of feeling alone or separated from others, marked by sadness, emptiness, and longing. It is the emotional response to the unmet need for meaningful relationships that provide connectedness, trust, reciprocity, and belonging. A lonely person feels disconnected, even if they regularly interact with other people and aren't physically isolated.

What About the Church?

We'd like to imagine that churchgoers fare better, with some (super) natural immunity against isolation and loneliness. After all, church



affords myriad opportunities for consistent connection—yet the research doesn't bear that out:

- Fifty-four percent of both practicing Christians and non-Christians say they experience loneliness at least weekly, with 18 percent of practicing Christians (compared with 15 percent of non-Christians) indicating they are lonely all the time.²⁰
- When practicing Christians between ages eighteen and thirty-five were asked what is missing from their church experience, the leading unmet need they expressed was friendships.²¹
- Another study (2022) found that our church leaders are not immune, with 65 percent of pastors indicating they often or sometimes feel lonely or isolated from others, an increase from 42 percent in 2015.²²

“Christians are generally as lonely as non-Christians,” summarizes Susan Mettes, author of *The Loneliness Epidemic*.²³ We agree. Our churches can be very lonely places, not just for those on the fringes.

Christianity Today editor-in-chief Russell Moore recounts a conversation with a middle-aged man who was very active in his church's activities. “I don't know how to say, ‘I'm lonely,’ without sounding like I'm saying, ‘I'm a loser,’ and I don't know how to say it without sounding like I'm an ungrateful Christian.”²⁴

Surrounded by Christian community, this man was expressing to Moore his longing for the “something more” that God created each one of us to crave. We recently spoke with a young couple whom we knew to be deeply committed to their faith and active in their church. After a decade of investment in their congregation—including serving as small group leaders and church board members—they were leaving their church. They weren't burned out or wrestling with theological differences, nor was there a crisis

of faith. Rather, they explained that despite all their service and activity, they felt deeply disconnected. They knew most fellow congregants by name, and they had warm conversations during Sunday morning greeting time. But that was all. Relationships remained shallow and superficial, and they couldn't escape the feeling that no one truly knew them (or wanted to), nor did they truly know others despite their longing.

They weren't exactly isolated or lonely, but they craved deeper, more meaningful relationships and struggled to find others who shared not only the longing but also the commitment to pursuing true community. For them, the relational deficit far outweighed the church's preaching, teaching, events, activities, and programs. After ten years, and with great sadness, they left their church.

The experiences of the middle-aged man, the young couple, and so many like them point to a spiritual component to this phenomenon that neither the term *isolation* nor *loneliness* captures. Throughout our writing, we'll use the term *aleness* to refer to this broader reality. *Aleness* is the absence of interdependent relationships God designed us to experience. We'll unpack this definition at length in the chapters to come, but in brief, we believe that many who are not objectively isolated and may not describe themselves as lonely are still not experiencing God's rich design for relationships. God said it isn't good to be alone—yet so many of us are.

Perhaps even more than loneliness and isolation, our aleness can go unnoticed by others and even by ourselves. Fundamentally, we may not know what we're missing. We (Jeff and Phil) couldn't articulate our desire for something richer and deeper in our relationships until we observed a better way among the savings groups. We needed to see that what we'd accepted as normal was neither God's design nor his best for our lives. Our most compelling



glimpses of God's beautiful design for community came as we spent time outside our home culture where we were exposed and awakened to something immeasurably better than our former vision of community. Our discontent or vague dissatisfaction points to a different, better design for community.

In the almost two decades that I (Jeff) have spent overseeing small groups for Life.Church, a multicampus church in the United States, I've had a front-row seat to a dramatic increase in aloneness. I've seen how this challenge impacts our churches and our congregants, sometimes without their conscious recognition. It's not because church leaders aren't creating the opportunity to build relationships. But too often it eludes us. Church leaders across the country confirm this problem is far-reaching and severe in their communities and congregations alike.

Driven by our interest in this topic, we scheduled conversations with pastors from Denver to Dallas to Philadelphia to gain their input. We wanted to know if the rather discouraging statistics on loneliness and isolation—and our observations on the unstudied phenomenon of aloneness—represented their experiences as pastors in their communities. While each shared bright spots where people were experiencing community, their overwhelming response was, “Yes, lack of connection is a huge problem within our church, just like it is in our broader community!”

Stephen pastors a church in a walkable neighborhood near downtown Fort Worth, Texas. Packed with condos and lofts mixed with shops, bars, and restaurants, the area seems to be designed for community, yet Pastor Stephen sees hints that people—including those who attend his church—are alone. “Everybody is connected digitally but not emotionally or personally. Everything can look great on the outside, but there's not a depth of relationship that people are experiencing.”²⁵

In fact, when Pastor Stephen surveyed his church on their top stressors in life, the number one answer, given by 28 percent of respondents, was their relationships—or lack thereof.

Ryan, who serves as executive pastor at a church in West Philadelphia, shared that his congregation includes many college students and young families. “Many are high-performing, over-scheduled students and young professionals who work a lot,” Pastor Ryan explained.²⁶ Many of these young professionals are second- and third-generation Korean immigrants whose tradition and culture profoundly value community. But even with that influence, congregants struggle to connect due to the pace of their lives.

Coming to Grips

We’ve been awakened to the growing loneliness and aloneness in our communities and churches. From the scourge of addictions that attempt to fill the void in relationships; to our rapidly growing reliance on social media as an arms-length alternative to face-to-face relationships; to the proliferation of streaming services that keep us tethered to our screens; to the rise in medications for depression and long waiting lists for counseling services, the signs are there.

Equally concerning are the aloneness and loneliness that we don’t see. One out of every two people we work with, pass in the aisles of the grocery store, or sit next to in church on Sunday would say in one form or another, “I’m lonely.” Yet our aloneness, our longing for deeper, more meaningful relationships and a safe and accepting community of friends isn’t something we’re likely to lead with in our conversations.

We’re culturally conditioned to “put our best foot forward.” As singer/songwriter Wayne Watson put it in his song “Friend of a Wounded Heart,” “Smile, make ’em think you’re happy. Lie, and say



that things are fine. And hide that empty longing that you feel. Don't ever show it, just keep your heart concealed."²⁷ Whether secular or Christian, powerful cultural conditioning works against admitting—and solving—the problem of aloneness. We know people who are lonely or alone, probably lots of them. The paradox is that often we don't know that we know them, as their aloneness remains undetected and loneliness unshared.

Coming to grips with this bleak and veiled landscape has been a difficult journey for us. As we said earlier, it's not a pretty picture. Yet as stark as that reality may seem, in our experience, conversations, interviews, and research, we've also witnessed the depths of God's transformation. We've seen examples here in the United States and around the world of aloneness replaced by joyful belonging as a result of God's work in and through followers of Jesus. We've seen people rediscovering God's beautiful design for relationships and community. We've learned from the successes of the global church in creating these contagious communities that are not only welcoming the lonely but eradicating aloneness. In spite of the bleak landscape we've described, we have ample reason to "take heart" (John 16:33).

A Call to Something Immeasurably Better

If you're currently more alone than you'd like to be, we recognize you may be starting this book and this journey from a place of pain rather than conviction, and we applaud your courage in taking this initial step. (If you are in a state of crisis, we urge you to put the book down now and reach out to someone to share what is happening in your life: a pastor, counselor, friend, doctor, or anyone you trust to offer encouragement and partnership as you move forward. You can also dial 988 to reach a caring counselor free of charge, anytime day or night.)



Or it could be that you're experiencing meaningful relational connections and community and feel drawn to come alongside others who are not, to help them experience the same. That could take place at work or in your home, neighborhood, or church. In effect, you want to be a catalyst of relationships and community as God intended.

Or perhaps you haven't thought of yourself as being lonely, yet you recognize that your own relationships aren't as deep and fulfilling as you wish they were. We're with you.

We have found ourselves straddling each of these categories in different seasons of life. We've experienced periods of loneliness. In my early adulthood, I (Jeff) at times felt embarrassed that I didn't have any close friends, even though I was on a pastoral staff and spent my days surrounded by people. Later, I wrestled with crushing doubts about whether I'd be accepted as a trustworthy person (a story I'll share in chapter four).

Particularly in two of our frequent relocations, Becca and I (Phil) experienced the gaping void and prolonged, gnawing loneliness and isolation of leaving family and close friends behind, of being "friend-less." As I will share in a later chapter, an especially dark season left me not only in physical peril but also in a state of utter despair. By God's grace and the intervention of a couple who showed me I was not alone, I am penning these words today.

Even now we find ourselves in the tension of longing to experience deeper, more meaningful connections and create safe havens for others, yet struggling to find time for dinner with friends or relationship-building with neighbors. Our journey to trade our aloneness for the community God intends continues.

Wherever you're coming from, this book is written to encourage you to create and experience the relationships and community God



envisioned, starting where you are today. Think for a moment about how many people you interact with each day: family, neighbors, and coworkers as well as people you encounter while shopping, recreating, or attending church. For many of us, it adds up to a lot of interactions. As we work through the chapters in this book, we'll point out specific ways you can approach these daily interactions with greater awareness and clarified intention. Every one of us can contribute to solving this problem.

Most importantly, we believe Christ's followers—his body, the church—are best positioned to respond to the crisis of aloneness. In fact, the church has a long history of stepping into moments of crisis with compassion and courage.

In AD 260, at the height of a deadly plague, the people of Carthage, a major city in the Roman Empire, fled for their own protection, leaving their sick and dying behind. While most rushed *from* the infected city, early Christians, in contrast, rushed in, caring for those who had been left behind. They became first responders to the epidemic, taking the biblical call to love one another so seriously that many sacrificed their lives to fulfill it. Historian Rodney Stark writes that their countercultural response catalyzed the spread of Christianity.²⁸

We live in a very different context today. Many in our society are familiar with Christianity, but far fewer see its relevance to their lives. They don't see God's body, the church—*us* living in community—offering hope amid the challenges of our day. But we believe they would if we, like our ancestors in the faith, became first responders to the epidemic of our era.

The Surgeon General's report on the loneliness epidemic makes scant mention of the church as a solution, in a subset of a section targeting community-based organizations: a seeming afterthought. We beg to differ! Addressing the loneliness epidemic and

our broader crisis of aloneness should not be outsourced to government social service agencies or community organizations. It is not to be relinquished to “the experts” like professional counselors, therapists, or even our church staff. While each of these individuals and groups has an important role to play, we believe they are secondary. It is *our* primary calling—yours and mine as followers of Jesus—to create and be part of something that is immeasurably better than our current personal and cultural experience.

We’ll spend the next chapter diving deep into God’s design for relationships and community. In chapters three through seven we’ll jump into the postural and practical shifts we’ll need to make to pursue the way back to one another, rediscovering how to live as people created for community.

Jesus’ invitation to another way beckons. We want more for our neighborhoods, workplaces, churches, families, and ourselves—and if you do too, we hope you’ll join us on this journey to discover how to live as people created for community, finding in the serious challenge of the loneliness epidemic a compelling opportunity to create and experience the kind of connection God has always intended for us.

Reflection Questions

We firmly believe that individuals can take many steps to address aloneness and even become catalysts of community, but we also recognize that, by definition, relationships and community require others. At the end of each chapter, we’ve included reflection questions to help you consider steps that you can take on your own, as well as discussion questions to facilitate conversation among a small group of friends or fellow believers. We’re confident that reading, discussing, and practicing these principles together in a small group setting will enrich the experience.



Reflect Individually

- Where do you notice increasing aloneness in our society? Where do you see signs of aloneness in your own life and the lives of those around you?
- How satisfied are you with your relationships? What, if anything, is missing?
- To what degree do you feel you are fully experiencing the relationships God designed us to experience?
- Describe the connection you feel to others in your church. What contributes to that feeling?
- What small, intentional efforts can you make this week to get to know someone around you better?

Discuss Together

- What can we do together to increase our awareness of the people around us who might be experiencing aloneness?
- The US Surgeon General's report on loneliness gave little focus to the church as a potential solution. Why do you think that is? What role can the church play in addressing loneliness and aloneness?
- What factors might contribute to feelings of aloneness felt by people within our church?
- (For the brave!) When you think about our group, what changes could we make to cultivate the deep, meaningful relationships God intends for us?

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