Pathways to Connections: Overcoming Loneliness
Through Creating Communities of Concern

Great spiritual traditions attempt to define what it means to be human and how to properly live in this world. In the Biblical narrative of creation, God declares at the end of each of the six days that the creation "was good." When is the first time in which God declares something is *not good*? "It is not good, a human being alone."

In the opening chapters of Genesis, human beings are understood as fundamentally social and the state of being alone is at odds with the design of creation itself. The Divine declaration is not only a statement about the quality of our lives, but also an existential statement describing the contours of human nature. Without a "help mate," someone to stand aside and opposite from another, it is hard for a human being to actually understand what it means to be human. In truth, human beings are relational creatures who gain a sense of purpose and meaning from the environments around them.

Theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel voiced the truth that "no man is an island" and yet all too often the lived experiences of so many in the contemporary world is the experience of loneliness. Many cannot identify even one individual they would consider a close friend and the numbers are increasing by the year.[1] Meanwhile, according to the same study, those with strong social networks of 10 friends or more in 1990 (33%) have decreased to 13% in 2023. These trends point to a country in which being alone is becoming the rule and not the exception.[2] Long working hours, the corrosive impacts of social media and the decline in civic and religious institutions exacerbate this trend; the isolation impact of COVID-19 only deepened the fraying of social capital so critical to human flourishing.[3]

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[1] Number of close friends had by US adults, 2021 | Statista

[2] The British government has established a Ministry of Loneliness, underscoring the acute crises in Western society.

[3] Moreover, on a more global level, human beings are not atomized units, but part of a larger fabric of the universe itself. We are in dialogue with our personal, family and national histories, as well as the world around us and many of us with a sense of the Transcendent. We are not only social creatures seeking connection, but also spiritual creatures seeking meaning. Modern science has demonstrated that all reality itself is a manifestation of energy, constantly evolving and changing; we are part of this fabric. Deeper spiritual grounding, which creates resilient meaning structures for many, are largely absent. In our society, in which education increasingly is seen as instrumental in flourishing in an impersonal market economy, we have often neglected questions of meaning and purpose.

Much has been written about the lack of social connectivity among young adults, the so-called digital natives, many of whom spend increasingly more time online. However, many older adults also experience acute loneliness. Increasing numbers of older adults are uncoupled or do not have children. The surgeon general in a special report records that only 39% of Americans report feeling strong connections with others and close to half of Americans report experience loneliness.[4]

These dynamics are not merely a problem in terms of how we live as individuals but also have been identified as a public health crisis. It is not surprising that social isolation and loneliness increase the risk of anxiety, depression and even dementia. However, loneliness impacts more than simply mental health. One survey of medical literature encompassing more the 300,000 participants concluded that the lack of interpersonal relationships is comparable to mortality risk factors like smoking and alcohol and exceeds the dangers posed by physical inactivity and obesity.[5]

The solutions to this crisis ultimately are not about health or about this or that medication, but rather how we as a society embrace a more holistic sense of how our own personal health is reflective of the societies in which we choose to build. As professionals, whether in health care, mental health care, geriatric care, spiritual care or congregational life, we need to strategize how to increase social connectivity as a modality of healing. In other words, the subject of our healing work must not only look at individuals' clients, but also the cultures in which they are embedded. We need to increase the social capital of those with whom we come into contact, as well as create societies and cultures rooted in empathy and concern with the other.

We will welcome two scholars at this Ministering to the Elderly Conference. **Eileen Kranz Graham, PhD**, is a scholar at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine. Her research is focused on building a knowledge of how persistent and increasing loneliness in midlife and older adulthood can negatively impact a person's memory and risk of dementia. She seeks to understand how individuals are different: some people are socially resilient and can be relatively isolated without the expected accompanying feelings of loneliness, while others are more vulnerable. What are the personality traits that are predictive factors in who is more prone to risk?

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[4] *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The Surgeon General's Advisory of the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*, p. 9

[5] Study quoted in Gabor Mate and Daniel Mate, *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness and Healing in a Toxic Culture* (USA: Random House, 2022), p. 58

M. Gary Neuman, **LMHC**, is a noted Miami Beach therapist who will address the issue from a clinical perspective, discussing the need for older adults to be heard and valued. His experience testifies that parts of our society have lost the art of active listening to the stories and experiences of others. He will suggest avenues and strategies to increase the quality of our relationships, drawing on his work in family systems therapy.

Our conference will look at successful models, both locally and nationally, that are addressing these needs and challenging us as clinicians, community leaders and stakeholders to consider how we might implement some of these ideas in our respective organizations and environments.

Our conference will explore the roots of this crisis and chart paths and models that increase social connection among populations at risk. As a spiritual care program, the conference will consider models of spiritual community that can more effectively engage an increasingly diverse population.