



In partnership with

Jubilee+

COMMUNITY

Reflections and ideas for practical action, by Jubilee+



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Bible references throughout this booklet have been taken from the NIV version.

INTRODUCTION

We are delighted to have commissioned Jubilee+ to write this booklet on Community for local churches, which includes theological reflections alongside ideas for practical action.

The Trussell Trust is based on, shaped, and guided by the Christian values of justice, compassion, community and dignity. These values have strong roots in Christian teaching and practice, whilst also being accessible and meaningful for people, whatever their background. Our network of food banks brings together volunteers, staff and supporters of all faiths and none to make a difference. These values therefore provide a strong shared foundation for collaboration towards our goal of ending the need for food banks in the UK.

Our network was birthed by local people responding to the needs of their local community, following the call of Jesus to love their neighbour. They built a cup of tea and warm welcome into the food bank model, because they recognised that in

moments of hardship people don't just need to have their tangible needs met, they also need someone to stand alongside them. To be welcomed into community, to be treated with dignity, and to feel a sense of belonging.

This commitment to community remains deeply rooted in who we are today – we are a network of 1,300 food banks, supported by 36,000 volunteers, 12,000 churches, 100,000s of community groups and schools, and millions of people around the UK - all working together to ensure no one in the UK needs a food bank to survive, while providing emergency food and practical support for people left without enough money to live on.

Thank you for taking the time to read this booklet as you seek to love God and your neighbour. There truly is no greater command.

Jess Foster
Head of Church
Engagement,
the Trussell Trust





INTRODUCTORY FILM

Start by watching this short film which introduces the subject of Community.



Scan the QR code or visit
trusselltrust.org/community-film

Everyone, at some point, feels lonely.

Perhaps we've experienced bereavement or moved to a new area and our main source of community has gone from our lives. Or maybe we've become a new parent and found that we lack the time or energy to socialise with those around us.

Loneliness is never easy. For some people, especially with the rising cost of living, a lack of community can mean that they have nobody around them to ask for help and can end up feeling totally isolated.

WE ARE MADE FOR COMMUNITY

When we read the Creation story in Genesis, we hear God say, *“it is not good for the man to be alone”* (Genesis 2:18) and so creates Eve. From the very beginning, we see that God has hard-wired us for connection with others – we have been created for community. So, when we see that there is an epidemic of loneliness across our nation, we recognise that this is not good, and it is not what God intended.

Even God exists within community. As the Trinity, God is Father, Son, and

Holy Spirit – three distinct persons who interact with one another, love one another, and serve one another. We see the community of God in action through the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17) as the Holy Spirit descends on Him like a dove and the Father says, *“this is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”* It is in the heart and nature of God to exist within community, and, as humans are made in His image (Genesis 1:27), it makes sense that we need community too. As poet John Donne once wrote, “no man is an island.”

THE INJUSTICE OF LONELINESS

Unfortunately, stories of isolation and loneliness are not rare. Many people in our neighbourhoods, perhaps including us, are suffering from loneliness because they are disconnected from community. People who are facing poverty are especially likely to experience social isolation due to their circumstances. Recent research carried out by the Trussell Trust found that one in four people

coming to food banks had not had a conversation with a friend or family member for over a month.

The interplay between loneliness and the injustice of poverty is an issue in which the church should be deeply invested. Loneliness doesn't discriminate. Often the adverse life events that push people into poverty, such as bereavement, change in relationship status, or loss of job,

can also be the cause of isolation and a lack of community. Others may experience isolation as a result of poor mental health and are struggling and in need of support.

Reading through Scripture, we can see that this need for community is so important. When God first calls Abram in Genesis 12, God promises that, through Abram, all peoples on earth will be blessed. This cannot be completed by Abram alone, but God says He will make him into a great nation and later tells him that his offspring will be like the stars in the sky – innumerable (Genesis 15). God has always intended to have a people, a group who represents God’s character and nature to the world. Time and time again in the Old Testament, we are shown that God is committed to a people, not just a person, through His repeated works of redemption and rescue for the Israelites.

We also read about God’s heart for any of us who are marginalised. God institutes laws for His people to protect people in need. God is described as *“father to the fatherless, defender of widows”* (Psalm 68:5) and Deuteronomy tells us that *“He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing”* (Deuteronomy 10:18). God is particularly invested in people who are isolated within society due to the other injustices they are experiencing - whether the widow, the orphan or the stranger.

Psalm 68:6 tells us that *“God sets the lonely in families.”* As the people of God, the church is therefore called to care for people on the peripheries of society in our towns and neighbourhoods, for people facing the injustices of poverty and isolation.



COMMUNITY AND THE CHURCH

Jesus' life, death and resurrection brought a new community into being. The community of the church. A community that God intends to use for His purposes. Much of the New Testament letters are dedicated to the church, instructing it on how to love one another well and build community. The Greek word used to express Christian community and fellowship in many of these letters, *koinonia*, is used nineteen times in most versions of the New Testament. The word is used for community but can also be rendered as intimacy, communion, participation, and sharing.

In 1 Corinthians, we read about the interdependency the body of Christ - all are essential to one another, and all are encouraged to work together (1 Corinthians 12). In Romans, Paul urges the church to *“be devoted to one another in love”* and to *“honour one another”* (Romans 12:10). In Ephesians, the church is encouraged to *“be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love”* (Ephesians 4:2). The Bible is packed full of wisdom to show how the church can

live well as community because, fundamentally, that was how it was meant to exist.

As human beings, we are all hard-wired to live in community. As the church, we have this community right at our fingertips – we therefore have a responsibility to love and welcome people because it's what we have been made for. We can be an answer to somebody's longing for community and friendship.

Jesus Himself speaks about the responsibility that His people have to reach out into our community and support those in need. In a startling passage in Matthew 25: 31-46, Jesus explains that some will be welcomed into heaven, and some will not, based on the way in which they loved those in need. He explains *“I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you visited me [...] whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”*

He then describes the fate of those who act differently explaining they will be told *“depart from me, you who are cursed”*. Jesus does not mince His words. It is a responsibility of the people of God to love and welcome those who are marginalised and lonely.

What we read here in Matthew is not an outrageous ask – it’s simply about recognising the image of God and the need for community in each person and responding to this. Each of us can easily make small steps to do this within our own communities and neighbourhoods. But the

repercussions of these acts of kindness, love and inclusion in community could transform someone’s life. As we commit ourselves to these acts, they will inevitably change us.

Sometimes, as the church however, we can place an emphasis on loving and serving people who need support, but seek to keep them at arm’s length, especially if we’ve not experienced poverty or loneliness ourselves. Jesus challenges us to not just meet people’s practical needs, but also to invite them in. To include them in community.



A VISION OF COMMUNITY IN ACTS

When we read about the early church in Acts, we see community in action within the first believers. This can be a helpful paradigm to consider the ways in which the church can embody community today. In Acts 2: 42-47, there is a beautiful description of how the church operated in those early days:

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer... All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need... They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts...”

The early church was not only committed to learning and understanding Scripture about who Jesus was and what He did, and to prayer, they were also committed to meeting and eating together and sharing what they had. Encountering Jesus transformed how they lived and acted together as a community, and how they interacted with and included their neighbour.

For the believers in Acts 2, this included:

Devoting themselves to prayer.

Creating a rhythm of prayer was a core part of their community life together. They knew that God answers prayer, and as they brought the little that they had, and He was able to multiply it – prayer enables us to remember that and trust God for abundant provision. It is also helpful to remind ourselves that God exists within community, embodying the love and compassion that we need to draw upon.

Selling their property and possessions to give to people who had need.

Part of building community is seeing where there are needs and helping provide for them. The early church was able to meet the physical needs of people who had very little because those who had plenty were giving generously. For each of us, this might look different – we might think about giving money where we can, or we might consider giving our time and resources – but it’s important to consider what we might need to sacrifice in order to better love others.

Being together, having everything in common and eating together.

The early believers were not precious about what belonged to them. In fact, everything seemed to belong to everyone within their community. This included their homes and their mealtimes. For some of us, our mealtimes can be precious family times. But consider the impact that it might have on someone who is lonely and in need of friendship and community if you were to invite them into your home for a meal every week. Regular fellowship and meeting with our friends and family is so important, but encouraging one another to welcome new people, particularly those that might be isolated, into these spaces is a vital part of building community. Many food banks would welcome a church community offering hospitality and friendship to people visiting food banks. Why not consider if this is something that your local church could get involved in?

The incredible thing about the story of the early church in Acts 2 is that people became believers because of the community and love that was demonstrated by people. As they enacted these things, and sought God through signs and wonders, they saw that people were being added to their number daily.

As local churches today, these same opportunities are open to us, to embody the sense of community that is at the heart of God and to actively welcome others into this wonderful, life-giving community. Through this story of the early church, we can be encouraged to ask ourselves a few questions:

- How can I commit even more into my existing community? How can I better love those around me within it and share my life with them?
- Are there any aspects of my time, resources, or money that God wants me to be generous with?
- Who are the people that might need community? How can I love them well?

God is deeply invested in community and has created the church to be invested in it too. We can be the agents of compassion and justice, welcoming people who are lonely into our families, and demonstrating the heart of God to a world in need of welcome.

WHAT NEXT?

The following section gives you ideas for how you might be able to take action to build community as an individual or as a church:

REFLECT

Think about some times in your life in which you have felt lonely. Reflect on what led to that feeling and whether there were any outside circumstances that might have triggered it. Note down some of these situations.

Spend some time reflecting on how you came to stop feeling lonely, or if this is your current situation, think about how someone/something could make

a big difference to change the way you feel. If there was a specific person that reached out to you, or a community that welcomed you, take some time to thank God for them. If possible, maybe write a note or card to them to express the difference that they made to you.

As you reflect on each of these times, spend some time praying for God to heal any pain that might still linger from this experience.

RESEARCH

It's hard to know when someone might be feeling lonely. For some, it might be very clear as they can seem isolated and alone. For others, it could be completely hidden, and they could have many people around them but still feel like they lack community. Begin to consider the place in which you live and where people might struggle to form or experience community.

You might want to ask questions such as:

- **If someone were new to this area, would they feel welcomed? Would there be easy ways for them to get involved with existing community activities?**
- **Is this a welcoming place to live?**

- How might people whose first language is not English, find out about community activities and how to get involved?
- What community support is available for people experiencing a significant life event like the birth of a child, a relationship breakdown or a recent bereavement?
- How can people who are housebound or have physical disabilities that impact their mobility, access community?

It is important to ask those around you who might know more – perhaps the person running the toddler group can tell you that they meet parents every week who are isolated; or the community centre manager can tell you about existing community groups; or the food bank can tell you about other support currently available in your area.

Researching where there might be a gap in community can help you to see where your church or community might be able to plug that need.

RESPOND

Together with others in your church and community, spend some time thinking about ways in which you can better welcome people in. Write down the different things that you already do as a church – your Sunday morning meetings, mid-week Bible studies, toddler groups, drop-in cafés, whatever might exist – and consider how you could make each of those things more welcoming. It might be as simple as serving tea and coffee on a Sunday, making sure that nobody sits by themselves or ensuring that there is a crèche available so that parents feel like their child is welcome.

Then take some time to dream big dreams about other things that you could consider doing as a community. You won't be able to make everyone that feels lonely have a sense of community straightaway, but together, you could take small steps toward seeing this vision realised.



REPRESENT

Given that the root cause of loneliness is often augmented by other injustices within society, consider some ways in which you can advocate for people who might be in need, and help them to use their voice.

Perhaps you could consider joining a local government group or residents' association in which you could take some time to share the stories you have heard from people facing hardship in your community. Or if you notice that loneliness seems to be prevalent among children or their parents, consider getting involved as a school governor.

RESHAPE

Being a welcoming church and community can be difficult. It can be difficult to change the church structures and cultures with which we might be familiar. But if we want to walk humbly with people, it will include allowing our churches to be reshaped, giving agency to people who have experienced hardship, and it will transform us all to look more like Jesus. For example, this might mean getting people with lived experience of poverty involved in your leadership teams, contributing and engaging meaningfully in the

You might also want to consider starting a Jubilee+ Voices group that enables you to bring together people experiencing injustices in your community. This could be a good way to invite people who have a past or current experience of facing hardship, and together you can consider how you might want to use your voice and experiences to create change locally. Poverty Truth Commission is another model for doing this that you might want to explore.

If none of these seem like options to you, why not gather with others from your church community to pray for opportunities to love and advocate in your local community?

way our churches are developed. You might want to consider whether there are barriers to this happening within your church community? And if so, how can you begin to overcome them in conversation with your existing church leadership?

As individuals this call to community will likely mean giving up our creature comforts or things that we can be quite protective of – our homes, our money, our time, our possessions. Spend some time thinking about each of these areas

of your life and consider where God might be asking you to sacrifice or do things differently. It might be a relatively small thing, like giving up an extra hour of your week to meet and welcome local people at your nearest food bank. But that small thing could make a huge difference in enabling someone to feel like they

are a genuine member who can also begin to shape your community. Or it might be in a big way, like the early church, and God may ask you to sell your possessions and give to those in need. Whatever God might ask you to do, trust that He is a God of abundance and provision.

RECOUNT

Consider ways in which you can facilitate the stories and experiences of others being heard within your churches. Recounting and sharing stories, sometimes called testimonies, is a great way of helping people to understand the transformative power of belonging. It's likely that many will have stories about ways in which they were welcomed into community. It can be especially transformative to hear from, and about people who have had lived experience of hardship or loneliness, and have seen that change because of their encounter with Jesus and their church community.

You could weave this into the planning for regular events – why not introduce a testimony slot once a month at church, or consider inviting someone to share at one of your coffee mornings? Or you could invite someone to preach, or be interviewed, sharing the ways in which God and the church community have changed their life. Not only will this help others to realise the needs in their community, but it will also help to reshape the way in which you do church, allowing these voices to develop and grow what you do, and the existing church to grow in humility.

RESHAPE

Each day, we have an opportunity to seek to be more like Jesus. Where we have kept people at arm's length, or been neglectful of people, we can ask for forgiveness and remember that God is gracious and merciful. We can spend some

time reminding ourselves of the high calling that God has placed on us as the church, but remember that we do not do it alone, but alongside the *“father of the fatherless, the defender of the widow”* (Psalm 68:5).



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