

You're lonely, I'm lonely: We are created for communion

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [January 26, 2010](#) issue

Could loneliness be as contagious as the H1N1 virus? Is loneliness dangerous to the public's health? Usually we think of "infection" or "contagion" only in relation to medical viruses and define lonely people as those who keep their feelings to themselves.

Yet in a ten-year study researchers have found that loneliness is contagious and that it spreads through social networks. A lonely person can affect people as many as three degrees of separation away. If someone directly connected to me is seriously lonely, for example, I am 52 percent more likely to be lonely. A second degree of separation leads to a 25 percent increase; a third degree, 15 percent. I may be affected by the emotional reactions of my co-worker's spouse's brother.

Joseph Cacioppo, one of the researchers of the study, argues in his book *Loneliness* that people who are lonely tend to view things as more threatening than they really are. Apparently the part of the brain that processes feelings of loneliness also processes physical pain. So those who are feeling lonely can easily convey to others feelings of fear or threat as well as feelings of pain.

We experience loneliness because we have felt rejection or shame or been physically or emotionally wounded, or as the result of our sin. We carry around with us a complex set of reactions to our woundedness and wrongdoing. As poet Michael O'Siadhail wonders, "How many faces must a wound wear?"

Feelings of loneliness can be intensified by illusory descriptions of human life, a tendency in a country where we subscribe to a myth of individualism and underplay the significance of family, friendship and community.

Often we confuse being alone with being lonely. Loneliness is not the same thing as introversion or of spending one's time with a few or no other people. Many introverts are comfortable spending time alone; their happiness depends on having alone time.

Conversely, the presence of many other people does not preclude loneliness. Loneliness is *perceived* social isolation, and that can occur even when one is surrounded by people. The issue is the quality of relationships, not the quantity. Facebook and other social networking media can enhance relationships, but they don't necessarily prevent loneliness or offer a remedy for it.

In the *New York Times*, Nicholas A. Christakis, another of the study's researchers, observes that "like pulling a single thread could unravel a sweater, a lonely person could destabilize an entire social network, spreading loneliness to others before moving to the periphery of the group." Christakis argues that it is in everyone's self-interest to pay attention to those on the fringe of a group.

Reading about this study led to both "aha" and "oh no" moments. The "aha" was the discovery that experiences of loneliness are contagious, and that we need to pay attention to the larger social ramifications when people express fear or show other signs of loneliness. Contagion has enormous implications for how we think about social networks as well as such issues as planning neighborhoods, constructing front porches on houses and creating other social gathering spaces. My own university is creating and re-creating physical "common rooms" and other social spaces when undergraduates can gather. High-tech young people adept at social networking also long to be "high-touch" interpersonally. We can either construct common areas and intentionally foster community or we can construct additional buildings for counseling and other treatments of the consequences of loneliness.

I also experienced an "oh no" feeling. Why do we need a longitudinal study from social-scientific researchers to reveal something that is central to Christians? How have we bought into myths of American individualism, "me and Jesus" as well as "me and my personal feelings" spiritualities, and failed to recognize the consequences of our own woundedness and sin? Why have we trivialized the gospel's invitation to discover that we are created for communion with God and with others, and that we are neither wholly victims nor unredeemable sinners but rather people called out of ourselves into transformed community as the body of Christ? Why have we underemphasized practices such as forgiveness and reconciliation and hospitality and mission, practices that are as contagious in cultivating holy friendships as loneliness is infectious?

I discovered the loneliness study the same day I was pondering the Advent lectionary reading from Philippians 1:3-11. I was struck by the profound connections between Paul and the Philippians, even when Paul is in prison and physically

separated from his friends in Philippi. He emphasizes the importance of their common life and expresses joy and gratitude for their relationships. The contrasts to the loneliness study were striking. Once again I felt the call to cultivate contagious friendships.