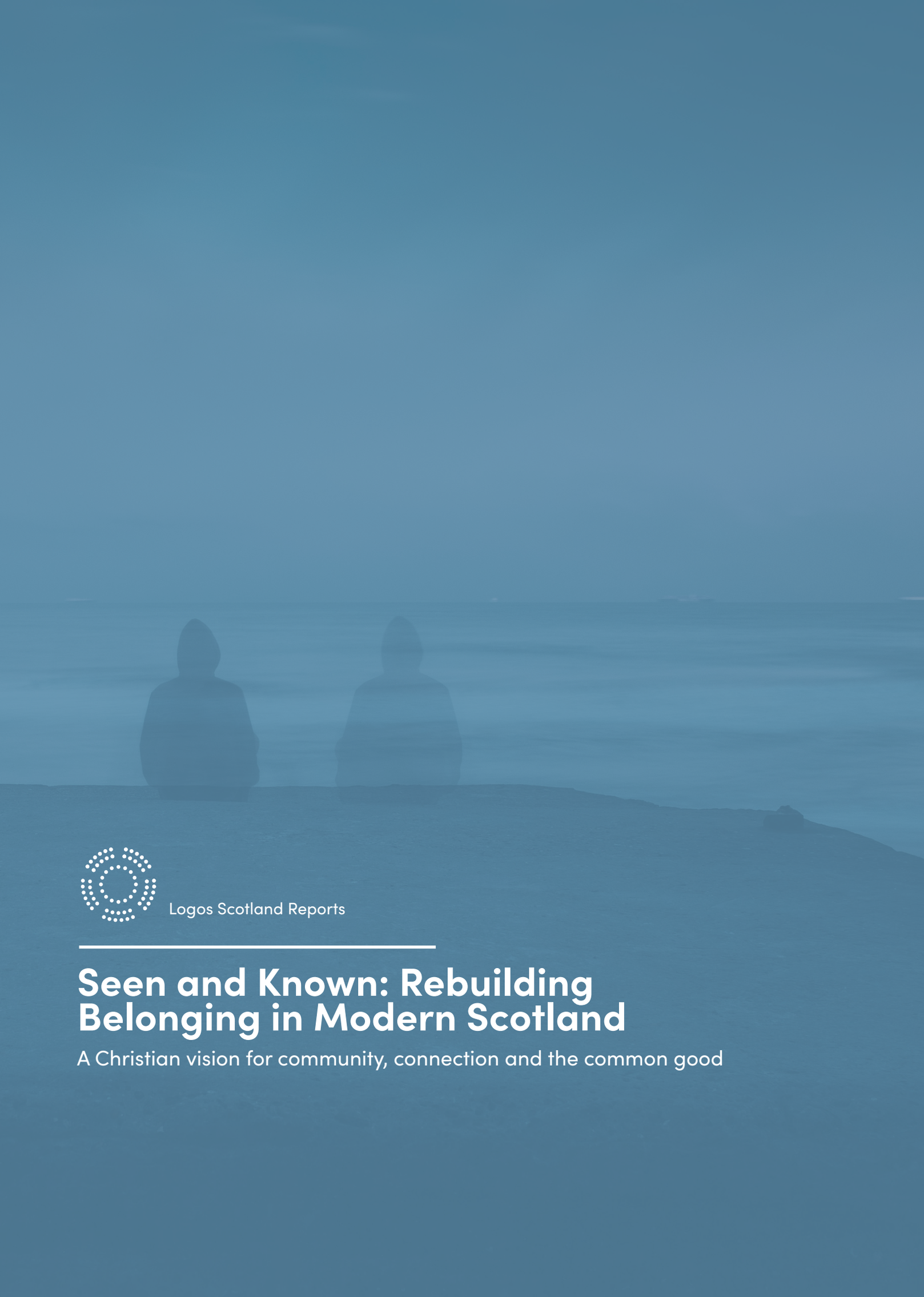

Logos Scotland Reports

Seen and Known: Rebuilding Belonging in Modern Scotland

A Christian vision for community, connection and the common good

Contents

Foreword

The number of people experiencing loneliness in Scotland is increasing. Statistical data shows that an average of 35% of Scotland's population will have experienced loneliness at least some of the time in the previous week.[1] Loneliness (and a corresponding lack of belonging) is, in other words, a major societal issue demanding careful consideration.

While there are sociological factors that help account for the rise in cases of loneliness, there are underlying philosophical and theological trends that require exploration. Not least among these is the modern emphasis on the autonomous individual, a focus which threatens to break down 'the original destination of the human being to life in community.'[2] One consequence of this fragmentation of society is an increased likelihood of experiencing a struggle to find belonging.

With regards the compilation of this report, it is important to note the theological understanding of the purpose of civil government: to 'promote general peace and tranquillity'[3] and to 'provide for [humans] living together.'[4] Clearly in mind here is that government serves to ensure a functioning society that combats fragmentation to the end that men and women find belonging in community with one another. 'It belongs to the task of government to serve the common good – the *shalom*, the flourishing, of the people.'[5]

Logos Scotland's report provides a Christian contribution to this political work. In the following pages we set forth a theological case in favour of belonging, followed by a discussion of the current crisis of loneliness in Scotland. A focus is then given to the spiritual factors that are increasingly recognised as contributing to the issue, arguing for a politics of recognition as a challenge to autonomous and competitive individualism. Three research essays are then included for further consideration, exploring, i) a biblical theology of isolation and the function of lament, ii) a theology of marriage and the family as the primary societal unit of belonging, including it benefits to the wider community, and iii) on Thomas Aquinas' understanding of friendship and its importance for life together.

The report ends with realistic policy proposals for discussion and deliberation.

- Samuel Norman, PhD candidate at St Andrew's (Chapter 5)
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- David Nixon, Associate Pastor at Carrubers Christian Centre, Edinburgh (Chapter 2)
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1 Cited in The Scottish Government, Social Isolation and Loneliness: Recovering our Connections 2023 to 2026, §3. Available at https://www.gov.scot/publications/recovering-connections-2023-2026/pages/1/

2 Jandejsek, "The Human", p. 327

3 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. J.T. McNeill, trans. F.L. Battles, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 4.XX.2

4 Calvin, Institutes, 4.XX.3

5 Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Theological Foundations for an Evangelical Political Philosophy" in Toward an Evangelical Public Policy: Political Strategies for the Health of the Nation, eds. R.J. Sider & D. Knippers, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), pp. 140–162, p. 150

Introduction. The Theological Case in Favour of Belonging

The Christian faith recognises that loneliness (as opposed to solitude – see Chapter 2) is deeply problematic. The Bible contains numerous exhortations to fellowship, most notably in the New Testament epistles. Paul urges unity amongst the Corinthians, encouraging them to 'strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace' (2 Corinthians 13:11). Whilst he is not addressing loneliness and isolation explicitly, there is an implicit encouragement to live together. Hebrews 10:25 provides another example, with the author's instructions that his readers do not neglect to meet together but rather encourage one another.

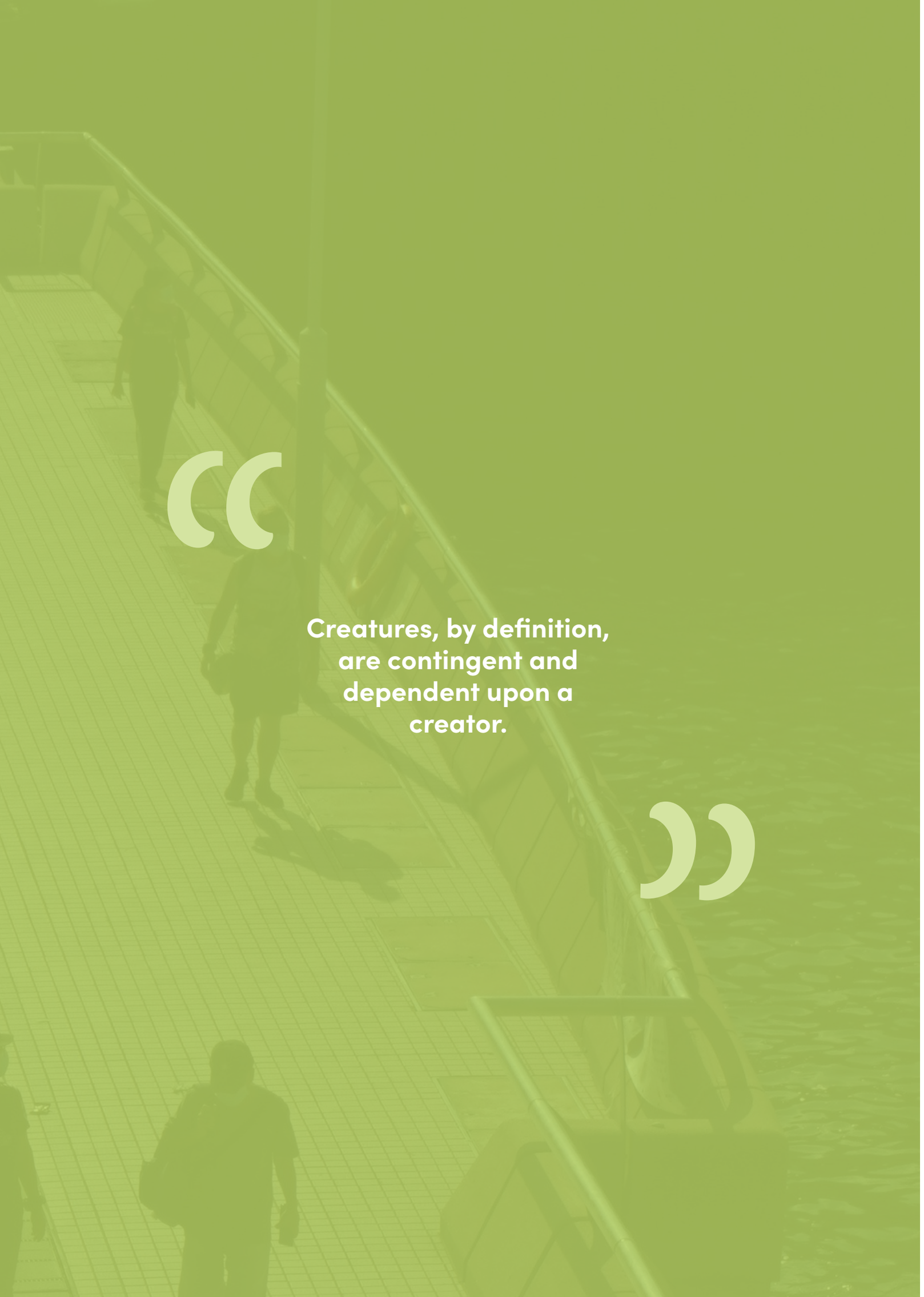
Beyond direct appeals for human fellowship, there is an overarching biblical theme of the companionship of God with his people. On the verge of entering the Promised Land, Moses reminds the Israelites that God will never leave them nor forsake them (Deuteronomy 31:6). The Psalmist recognises that, even were his mother and father to abandon him, 'the Lord will receive me' (Psalm 27:10). Through the prophet Isaiah, God declares 'fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God' (Isaiah 41:10). In the New Testament, the Great Commission announces Christ's assurance that he will be with his people 'always, to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20).

Calvin interprets Genesis 2:18 as applying not simply to Adam in relation to the creation of Eve but to all human beings in relation to one another. Genesis 'now explains the design of God in creating the woman, namely, that there should be human beings on the earth who might cultivate mutual society between themselves.'[6] He proceeds to state that, 'although God pronounced, concerning Adam, that it would not be profitable for him to be alone, yet I do not restrict the declaration to his person alone, but rather regard it as a common law of man's vocation, so that everyone ought to receive as said to himself, that solitude is not good.'[7]

Elsewhere in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Calvins argues that, among the 'appointed ends' of civil government are 'to adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behaviour to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another.'[8] While this clearly involves provision of basic amenities, the task set before the government is to 'provide for [humans] living together.'[9] He further contends that the proper end of judicial law, justice and equity is that people 'might live *together* blamelessly and peaceably.'[10] Calvin, in other words, makes the argument that a primary function of government is to ensure togetherness – to make sure that the *polis* functions in such a way that none are neglected, forgotten or, in a word, lonely.

Furthermore, human beings are creatures. Creatures, by definition, are contingent and dependent upon a creator. The current narratives concerning selfhood, however, arguing that human beings are independent and autonomous, where identity is understood to be a matter of self-determination

6 Calvin, A Commentary on Genesis, ed. & trans, J. King, (London: Banner of Truth, 1965), p. 128
7 Calvin, Genesis, p. 128
8 Calvin, Institutes, 4.XX.2
9 Calvin, Institutes, 4.XX.3
10 Calvin, Institutes, 4.XX.15 (my emphasis)



Creatures, by definition, are contingent and dependent upon a creator.

and personal choice, stands in stark contrast to the idea of creatureliness. To be a creature suggests dependence upon the power of the Creator, existing within divinely established limits proper to human being. Such a recognition counteracts 'the myth of self-creation and isolated self-regulation'[11] whereby loneliness is far more likely. It means, in fact, that our creatureliness, 'properly understood… is the most liberating affirmation we could ever hear,'[12] fostering a deep sense of belonging with God and fellow creatures. We do not actualise, determine and realise our own being; rather, 'we *are*, because of the look, the word, the act of God.'[13]

It is evident, then, that on both the horizontal (human > human) and vertical (God > human) planes, Scripture and the Christian tradition denounce loneliness and social isolation as unintended elements within a fallen creation, and promote togetherness, fellowship and belonging.

11 Rowan Williams, On Christian Theology, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 76

12 Williams, On Christian, 72

13 Williams, On Christian, 72

Chapter 1. Loneliness Today

Defining Loneliness

'In the classic definition from psychology, loneliness is defined as the negative emotions that accompany a discrepancy between one's desired and achieved levels of social relations.'[14] The following will work with this definition but aspire to an alternative, more theological definition in chapter 3.

Loneliness:

We live in a world in which loneliness is an increasing problem. It has always been widely recognised that loneliness impacts the elderly – those 70+ encounter issues concerning mobility, accessibility of services, and the death of spouses, siblings and friends becomes more frequent. Of late, however, loneliness has been reported with more regularity across all age groups and, most strikingly, amongst those aged between 16-34. That age group report being lonely more than any other, including the elderly. This is corroborated by Logos' Scotland own statistical data where 13–24-year-olds reported more regular experiences of loneliness than any other age groups (see Appendix 1). Young and lonely is now more common than old and lonely. Numerous reports, surveys, and statistical data sets covering the last seventeen years demonstrate that loneliness is pervasive across society, and now disproportionately impacting young adults (16-34).[15]

> **"Young and lonely is now more common than old and lonely"**

This age range is probably the most connected generation ever ('super connected' to use Jean M. Twenge's term[16]) via digital technology and social media, resulting in the paradoxical possibility of

14 Batsleer & Duggan, Young and Lonely: The Social Conditions of Loneliness, (Bristol: Policy Press, 2021), p. 2

15 See, for example: 2009 Action for Children - 25% of 6-13 year-olds reported feeling lonely; 2010 Childline case notes - Between March 2008 and April 2009, 9,924 children (6,835 girls and 3,089 boys) contacted Childline to talk about loneliness (6% of total calls); 2010 Mental Health Foundation 18-34 year-olds more likely to feel lonely than older people. 12% feeling lonely often, 53% having felt depressed due to loneliness and 14% having sought help due to feeling lonely; 2015 Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) "Coming in From the Cold" - Mostly London focussed. Introduced idea of "grey zone" where loneliness progresses from an individual problem through a process of contagion to affect the community at large; 2016 Red Cross and Co-Op Group "Trapped in a Bubble" - found that 32% of 16-24 year-olds were "always/often lonely". This report also highlighted loneliness affecting young single parents; 2019 Campaign to End Loneliness (not youth specific) claimed that the health impact of loneliness is worse than smoking 15-20 cigarettes a day; 2018 BBC Loneliness Experiment. Largest survey of youth loneliness yet undertaken (55,000 over 16-year-olds). 16-24 year-olds feel lonelier than those over 75 (40% compared to 27%). People with more online friends are likely to feel lonelier; 2018 UK Government policy paper: 'A connected Society: A Strategy for Tackling Loneliness.' This selection of studies is listed in Batsleer & Duggan, Young and Lonely, pp. 12-14. See also, World Health Organisation Commission on Social Connection, From Loneliness to Social Connection: Charting a Path to Healthier Societies, Geneva: World Health Organisation, 2025). Available at https://www.who.int/groups/commission-on-social-connection/report

16 See Jean M. Twenge, iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood, (New York: Atria, 2017)

being 'lonely in a crowd… isolated among abundant potential connections.'[17]

Data from the Office of National Statistics (January 2026), reported that 27% of Britons aged 16-29 reported feeling lonely 'often, always or some of the time' (compared with 16% of over-70s).[18] The *UK Loneliness Report* (January 2026) confirms these findings, noting that 16–25-year-olds are the most affected group. Indeed, the report 'challenges the [long held] stereotype that loneliness is mainly an elderly issue. These are working, socially active, urban residents, yet deeply disconnected.'[19] Indeed, the ONS statistics suggest that those aged 70+ are now the group least likely to report feelings of loneliness. (That suggests that targeted action can make a difference. Since the extent of elderly loneliness became known, numerous policy decisions and initiatives in the public, private and charity sectors were designed to tackle social isolation and loneliness amongst the elderly. If the figures are accurate, these have been successful.)

Whilst affecting the young more than others, loneliness is an issue across all age-ranges – it is a widespread societal problem, as demonstrated by The Scottish Government's "A Connected Scotland" report (2018)[20] and its "Social Isolation and Loneliness: Recovering our Connections 2023-2026" report (2023).[21] In line with other reports it, demonstrates that the factors contributing to the experience of loneliness and social isolation are multi-faceted.

Contributing Factors

Whilst there is little doubt that Covid-19 restrictions amplified experiences of isolation for many, there is considerable evidence that widespread loneliness predates the pandemic. The Scottish Social Attitudes survey of 2018 reported that the average percentage of people experiencing loneliness at least once a week was 35%. The most affected groups, the survey found, were disabled people or those living with long-term conditions (48%), people on low incomes (44%), people who are digitally excluded (though no precise percentage given), Black Asian and Minority Ethnic people (though, again, no precise percentage given), people living alone (single parents [64%], single adults under pensionable age [63%] and single adults over pensionable age [46%]), people living in deprived areas (44%) or areas with little access to green space (37%) and young people aged 16-24 (48%).[22]

The *Loneliness Connects Us* study conducted by researchers from Manchester Metropolitan University demonstrated similar findings a year later (2019)[23] – still prior to the pandemic – as did the YouGov survey on loneliness on behalf of the British Red Cross in 2020[24] and the Scottish Household Survey,

17 Batsleer & Duggan, Young and Lonely, p. 2

18 Office of National Statistics, "Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: January 2026", available at https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/publicopinionsandsocialtrendsgreatbritain/january2026

19 COHO, "The UK Loneliness Report: A national study on loneliness and the role of shared living, 2026", available at https://d19qeljo1i8r7y.cloudfront.net/misc/documents/The-UK-loneliness-report-2026.pdf

20 The Scottish Government, "A Connected Scotland: our strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections", (2018), available at https://www.gov.scot/publications/connected-scotland-strategy-tackling-social-isolation-loneliness-building-stronger-social-connections/

21 The Scottish Government, "Social isolation and loneliness: recovering our connections 2023 to 2026," (2026), §3. Available at https://www.gov.scot/publications/recovering-connections-2023-2026/pages/1/

22 The Scottish Government, "Social isolation and loneliness", §3

23 See Batsleer & Duggan, Young and Lonely

24 The British Red Cross, "Lonely and left behind", Available at https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/lonely-and-left-behind

also of 2020.[25] It is too simplistic, in other words, to state that Covid-19 and its associated lockdowns caused the high levels of loneliness being experienced today. What can be said is that, as social isolation became mandated in law, Covid-19 lockdowns caused the realisation of how important social connections are.

The question remains, then, as to what has caused the increase in loneliness? There is little doubt that government austerity measures in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash have increased experiences of loneliness significantly, evident particularly in relation to provision for young people (which might explain why that age range reports more experiences of loneliness than any other).

As of 2019, there was a 73% reduction of funding to youth services (equivalent to more than £1 billion), 14,500 youth and community worker jobs have been cut since 2007, and 750 youth centres have been closed across Britain since 2013.[26]

People living in poverty or in areas of deprivation report experiencing loneliness well above the national average. When people 'are unable to take part in everyday life and the small celebrations and get-togethers that others take for granted, this leads to shaming and isolation and loneliness.'[27] It is abundantly clear that a lack of basic resources, primarily financial, makes it hard for people to make and maintain connections with others.

Poverty, however, is marked by more than low income. The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation[28] includes measures in relation to income, employment, health, education and skills, housing, geographic access and crime. All of these, typically, go hand-in-hand and all contribute to loneliness. Consider, for example, geographic access – if you live in an area where transport links make it difficult to get places (including, for example, daycentres, youth clubs or more general social spaces) then that will inevitably contribute to an experience of loneliness. If you live in an area of high crime, you are less likely to go out of your house for social purposes – '"keeping yourself to yourself" seems the safest option.'[29] If you suffer from ill-health the same will be true. If you lack educational qualifications or skills, you are less likely to be in employment where you might be able to socialise with colleagues and make friends. That is to say, poverty (understood broadly, including poverty of opportunity [which impacts rural areas as much as urban centres]) is the primary social condition of loneliness.

A further cause of loneliness is increased political centralisation. A move by successive governments to centralising policy and power has continued to move responsibilities away from the local and relocate it centrally, local initiatives designed to address local issues, including that of isolation and loneliness, are disempowered. Given that the factors that foster loneliness are often location and context specific, local people are best placed to understand them and to address them. This is most obviously seen when centralised governments in urban hubs make policies that impact rural communities, where the issues are as prevalent but present themselves differently and demand solutions distinct from those which are effective in urban areas. Regarding loneliness in particular, a case in point

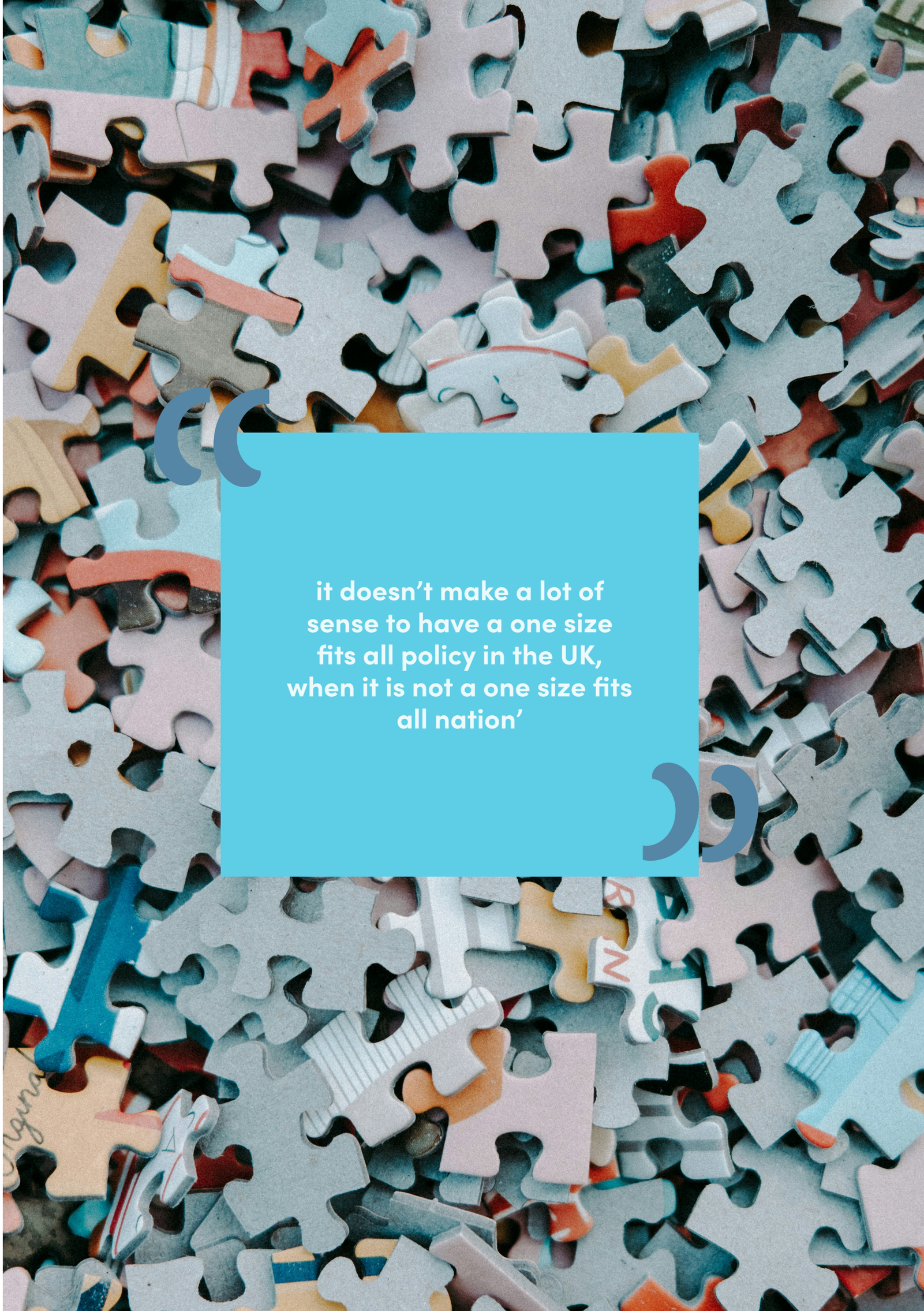
25 The Scottish Government, "Scottish Household Survey: results", (2020), available at https://www.gov.scot/collections/scottish-household-survey-publications/#resultsofthe2020telephonesurvey

26 Batsleer & Duggan, Young and Lonely, pp. 16-17

27 Batsleer & Duggan, Young and Lonely, p. 43

28 See https://simd.scot/#/simd2020/BTTTFTT/9/-4.0000/55.9000/

29 Batsleer & Duggan, Young and Lonely, p. 46


it doesn’t make a lot of sense to have a one size fits all policy in the UK, when it is not a one size fits all nation’

would be that of the Zielsdorf family (Canadian citizens) who ran the local shop in Laggan in the Scottish Highlands (53 miles from Inverness, 38 miles from Fort William, 23 miles from Aviemore). The family invested more than £200,000 in Laggan stores, which included a café, and was as a lifeline to the remote community. The Home Office, however, ordered the Zielsdorf's deportation to Canada in 2017. Civil servants in London made the decision despite, presumably, having no understanding of rural highland life and the drastic impact (not least in terms of loneliness and isolation) that the closure of a local shop and café would have on a small Highland community. The Home Office's response was simply: 'All visa applications are carefully considered on their individual merits, in line with the UK immigration rules and based on evidence provided by the applicant'.[30] Mr Zielsdorf's response was that 'it doesn't make a lot of sense to have a one size fits all policy in the UK, when it is not a one size fits all nation.'[31] Centralised decisions such as this reflect little scope for contextual flexibility. Another example would be in relation to policies concerning increased transport options, where rural infrastructure may make this unviable, requiring more creative and local approaches.

The shift to a digital economy is another social factor behind the rise in experiences of loneliness. People who are digitally excluded, as the statistics above demonstrate, experience higher than average levels of loneliness. The digitally excluded can include those on low incomes but also older people or those who live in areas where internet connection is less reliable. Even low-level social interactions are impacted by the relentless move to digitisation (the face-to-face interaction with your bank clerk, for example). Digitisation also enables employers to promote working-from-home, and whilst the argument here involves economic benefits to the company while allowing employees flexibility, the reality can be that staff feel isolated and never actually meet their colleagues in real life.

"And while the reality rarely matches up to the post, this intensifies loneliness, fear of missing out (FOMO) and isolation among those who view such posts and feel their life is falling short of the ideal."

Closely related to this is the impact of social media, the full effects of which are beyond the scope of this report. Studies amongst young people testify that the development and all-pervasive nature of social media have intensified experiences of loneliness in the 21st century. Interestingly, researchers in Manchester noted that social media appears to have caused a re-drafting of the bounds of relationship statuses. It has caused a narrowing of the definition of friendship ('people you know who

30 Anonymous, "Laggan's Zielsdorf family to be deported next month", BBC, 20th April 2017, available at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-39657447

31 The Newsroom, "Ex-Fife family battle against being deported", Fife Today, 9th May 2017. available at https://www.fifetoday.co.uk/news/politics/ex-fife-family-battle-against-being-deported-1126711

will *never* let you down'[32] – making finding a true friend very difficult indeed) as opposed to someone whose company you enjoy and whose presence provides a sense of belonging. Social media also appears to pressurise users to communicate themselves in particular ways, needing to be seen as leading an interesting and enviable life. One responder in Manchester stated, 'social media is social pressure.'[33] And while the reality rarely matches up to the post, this intensifies loneliness, fear of missing out (FOMO) and isolation among those who view such posts and feel their life is falling short of the ideal.[34]

Loneliness: An Issue of National Concern

It is clear from the above that loneliness and social isolation are a significant issue in Scotland today. Such is the prevalence of loneliness today that Dr Vivek Murthy (the former US Surgeon General) believes it to be a public health risk, both mentally and physically,[35] resulting in financial implications for the public purse.

Along with the Scottish government publications of 2018 and 2023, clarifying in no uncertain terms that loneliness is a national concern, the UK government appointed a Minster for Loneliness in 2018 (Tracey Crouch [2018-2022]; Stuart Andrew (2022-present) – the first country in the world to do so. Japan followed suit in 2021. In December 2025, John Swinney committed £3 million of funding 'so people can get early help close to home to improve their wellbeing and tackle loneliness.'[36]

It is clear, then, that loneliness is a significant issue facing society today, with deep rooted conditions and causes. It is often described as an 'epidemic'. The next chapter will discuss whether such medicalised language tells the whole story and whether there are theological considerations to be brought to bear.

32 Batsleer & Duggan, Young and Lonely, p. 108

33 Batsleer & Duggan, Young and Lonely, p. 108

34 Batsleer & Duggan, Young and Lonely, p. 109

35 Katty Kay & Dr Vivek Murthy, "Loneliness is public health risk", The Interview, BBC World Service, 20th October 2025, available at https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3ct7x08

36 The Scottish Government, "Supporting mental health and tackling loneliness", 29th December 2025, available at https://www.gov.scot/news/supporting-mental-health-and-tackling-loneliness/

Chapter 2. A Theology of Loneliness: The Impact of Secularisation

Loneliness: More Than Medical

In 2018 *The Economist* tweeted: 'Loneliness is the leprosy of the 21st Century'.[37] In 2023 the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the epidemic of loneliness as a leading 'global public health concern'.[38] Then, in June 2025, the WHO Commission on Social Connection published its landmark report entitled 'From Loneliness To Social Connection'.[39] The headline announced that 1 in 6 around the world suffer from loneliness or isolation, especially young people or those in low-income countries. It warns that loneliness reduces life expectancy, contributing to an estimated 870,000 deaths each year. In addition, it is costly in its impact on individual physical and mental health, as well as societal costs through healthcare and unemployment.

"Loneliness is the leprosy of the 21st Century"

However, the medicalised language used to describe this rising phenomenon may obscure both its origins and solutions.[40] During the 2020 global pandemic and its associated national lockdowns, the cultural historian Fay Bound Alberti wrote: 'This biological approach ignores the histories of the body, and emotions. It overlooks the fact that loneliness is not a universal human condition, but a historically specific one'.[41] She develops that thesis in her study *A Biography of Loneliness: The History of an Emotion.*[42]

37 The Economist, X, 12th February 2018, available at https://x.com/TheEconomist/status/963146224684580865

38 Sarah Johnson, "WHO Declares Loneliness 'A Global Health Concern'", The Guardian, 16th November 2023, available at https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/nov/16/who-declares-loneliness-a-global-public-health-concern

39 See World Health Organisation Commission on Social Connection "From Loneliness"

40 The medicalised language is understandable. But it is dangerous too. The language of contagion (often used in the research of loneliness – the idea being that the lonely spread negativity and more loneliness) can induce 'feelings of shame, disconnection and doubt, causing entrenched loneliness, causing people to fear that they might 'infect' others' (Batsleer & Duggan. Young and Lonely, p. 19). Describing loneliness in these terms creates stigma, which in turn silences those who suffer and prevents them reaching out for authentic connection. By stigmatising loneliness through the language of contagion, we silence those who experience it. Furthermore, the use of 'epidemic,' though a powerful way to describe the scale of the problem, locates the solution well and truly within the domain of public health practices. And whilst, of course, we need their input, this medicalised language does not tell the whole story, as this chapter demonstrates.

41 Fay B. Alberti, "Loneliness is a modern invention", TIME, 29th April 2020, available at https://time.com/5828736/loneliness-coronavirus-history/

42 Fay B. Alberti, A Biography of Loneliness: The History of an Emotion (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2019)

Alberti distinguishes between the experiences of solitude and loneliness: 'Loneliness is not the state of being alone, then, though it is often mistaken as such. It is a conscious, cognitive feeling of estrangement or social separation from meaningful others; an emotional lack that concerns a person's place in the world'.[43] Whereas solitude is an objective condition, experienced by an individual isolated from other social contact. Loneliness can be experienced subjectively by an individual, even when in close proximity to other people. It is the negative emotional experience of feeling disconnected socially or spiritually.

Alberti traces how the language and perception of 'aloneness' has changed over time: 'There was little mention of 'loneliness' in published texts in English prior to the end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, its appearance is almost negligible. Yet from around 1800, the term began to be used with increasing frequency, rising to a peak at the end of the twentieth century'.[44] Prior to this Alberti contends that the language of aloneness referred to the physical state of being alone (which can be positive and productive), rather than an emotional state (which is negative and undesirable).

There are many factors that explain this shift in terminology and the increase in the problems associated with it. The change of demographics in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, which changed the make-up of extended family networks as more people moved into urban centres for work would be one example. Nevertheless, these circumstantial changes are not sufficient to account for it. Instead, Alberti identifies two spiritual changes introduced by secularism that significantly contribute to the contemporary problem of loneliness.

Firstly, starting in the mid-1800s, secularism promoted emerging ideas about the evolutionary origins of the human race. Charles Darwin's landmark book *On the Origin of the Species* was published in 1859, and the social implications of his biological ideas began to be rapidly explored by others. Alberti explains: 'Underpinning the economic and social change was the work of Charles Darwin and the rise of evolutionary biology, which was manifested and communicated through a range of fictional plots and social metaphors. The philosophy of the individual predominated; the individual was more important than, and opposed to, society'.[45]

If human progress is driven by the engine of natural selection and the survival of the fittest, that can result in a mindset shift about the nature of society. Society becomes viewed as a collection of individuals in pursuit of their own self-interests and in competition against others, rather than as a community of neighbours collaborating towards the common good. These evolutionary principles began to dissolve the bonds that bring and bind communities together – neighbours can be perceived as competitors. While in an evolutionary worldview there is still a place for altruistic or selfless care for neighbours, for example it has been suggested that co-operation in groups increases the chances of individual survival. Nevertheless, notice this appeals to individual self-interest and reinforces the individualistic motives that threaten social cohesion.

Secondly, secularism benefitted from the decline of religious belief and practice. Alberti considers 'the impossibility of being alone in a world filled by God,' and that 'with the decline of religion, or

43 Alberti, Biography, p.5
44 Alberti, Biography, p.18 and Appendix Figure 10
45 Alberti, Biography, p.32

Loneliness is not the state of being alone, then, though it is often mistaken as such. It is a conscious, cognitive feeling of estrangement or social separation from meaningful others; an emotional lack that concerns a person's place in the world

more specifically the emergence of rational humanism, secularity [became] crucial to the modern formation of loneliness as an emotional cluster.'[46] For a person who believes in God, even when they are physically alone, they are never truly alone – God is present in human solitude. Alberti, however, explores how secularism radically changes this: 'In the absence of an all-knowing, benevolent Father and the persistent spread of a competitive individualism, a vacuum had emerged in which the self was alone, marooned and dependent on familial and social networks that were, by reason of these global changes, in a state of flux'.[47] No longer was every individual connected to God, with a meaningful place in God's cosmos. Instead, the individual stood alone and had to make their own way through life, not only physically but psychologically and spiritually.

These two factors – the rise of Darwinian beliefs and the decline of belief in God – help account for the rising problem of loneliness up to the present. In fact, Alberti acknowledges the possibility that the felt problem of loneliness may be driving people back to consider belief in God: 'It is an interesting, though underexplored, question whether the pursuit of religion in the twenty-first century is triggered by loneliness, or whether God provides a comfort to people today'.[48] (Anecdotal evidence certainly points to a rise in church attendance among young adults over the past six years. This may suggest the felt pain of loneliness in the aftermath of the pandemic and in the wake of the digital revolution is causing people to return to belief in God and the community of faith.)

Charles Taylor's Influence

Although Alberti identifies these two features as contributing factors to the rise of loneliness, for a fuller investigation of secularism the complementary work of philosopher Charles Taylor is insightful. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor seeks to answer the question: 'Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but inescapable?'[49] Taylor distinguishes between three types of secularism: (1) the emergence of an alleged neutral public sphere, (2) the decline of religious belief and practice in a population, and (3) the development of a society in which unbelief in God and belief in "exclusive humanism" becomes plausible.[50] It is secularism in this third form that concerns Taylor. He offers a definition that is true of contemporary British society: "a secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable; or better, it falls within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people"[51].

Across several hundred pages, Taylor tells the story of how this came to pass. He identifies three transitions that gave rise to secularism, and which have a bearing on the prevalence of loneliness in society.

Firstly, Taylor begins with the process of "disenchantment".[52] In former times, it was believed that

46 Alberti, Biography, p.37
47 Alebrti, Biography, p.229
48 Alberti, Biography, p.37
49 Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Harvard University Press: London, 2018), p.25
50 Taylor, Secular Age, p.3
51 Taylor, Secular Age, pp.19-20
52 Taylor, Secular Age, p.29

humans lived in a physical world that was interlocked with a spiritual realm, inhabited by other beings and forces (for example, spirits, demons, moral demands). The human social order was understood to be part of this cosmic sacred order. That is why, at different points in the annual calendar, the whole community participated in shared rites to manage their relationship with these spiritual forces. However, Taylor tracks how the belief in an enchanted cosmos has morphed into a disenchanted universe. The result is "the immanent frame" of exclusive humanism, stripped bare of divine meaning or a higher goal for life beyond individual human flourishing.[53] The individual stands alone on this lonely planet in a cold, dark, materialistic universe.

Secondly, Taylor explores the transition from a "porous" to a "buffered" understanding of the self.[54] In former times, the individual understood themselves to belong to a social and sacred order. It was not possible to answer the question: who am I, without taking into consideration their place in a wider network of relationships - in the family, tribe, nation and with God. In that sense the self was porous to society and the spiritual realm. However, the buffered self looks for identity within itself. It is resistant to unchosen demands and expectations placed upon it: 'This self can see itself as invulnerable, as master of the meanings of things for it."[55] In Henley's words: 'I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul'.[56] This encourages the individual to prioritise looking within for meaning and purpose, instead of seeking out relationship with others as the means to finding fulfilment. This inward gaze can be to the detriment of sharing life and building community with others.

Thirdly, Taylor recognises that, as these two shifts took place, they resulted in the "nova effect" - the multiplication and proliferation of different individual beliefs about the meaning of life in a disenchanted universe.[57] Given so many possibilities, especially in the contemporary globalised world and our digital exposure to different ideas and cultures, this further divides society into smaller, like-minded, self-selecting groups. Furthermore, the nova effect has fragilizing consequences, raising doubts and uncertainty for everyone, believers and sceptics alike.[58] This felt fragility and insecurity of individual beliefs may make the sharing of ideas between different groups more difficult, further dividing society and risking isolation. The less common understanding we share with one another, the greater the risk of shouting at one another across our tribal divides or simply hiding ourselves away.

These three conceptual changes in the social imaginary are helpful for understanding the conditions that give rise to loneliness in a secular society. In summary, when our medieval ancestors looked up into the night sky they called them "the heavens". They imagined that the stars were ringing and singing with "the music of the spheres". They believed that the earth was at the centre of the cosmos, which had been created and set into motion by the love of God. However, when moderns look up into the sky at night, we look up into the dark, cold void of "space". Although we are more scientifically informed, we are increasingly spiritually impoverished - we have been reduced to lonely people on a lonely planet.

53 Taylor, Secular Age, p.18
54 Taylor, Secular Age, pp.35-38
55 Taylor, Secular Age, p.38
56 William Ernest Henley, "Invictus", available at www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51642/invictus
57 Taylor, Secular Age, p.423
58 Taylor, Secular Age, p.308

Taylor, however, suggests that it does not have to be this way. The secular story is just that: a story or a take on reality. In the 21st century there is no choice about inhabiting the immanent frame, although individuals must decide whether to adopt an "open" or "closed" posture within it – whether they are open to the possibility of transcendent meanings to life or belief in a supernatural God.[59]

Taylor recognises that adopting a closed posture is not easy to maintain. He describes life from an exclusive immanent perspective as an uneasy and unsatisfying experience. He explains how the individual finds themself caught between 'cross-pressures... between the draw of the narratives of closed immanence on one side, and the sense of their inadequacy on the other, strengthened by encounter with existing milieux of religious practice, or just by some intimations of the transcendent.'[60] In others words, life in a secular world is stalked by the "malaise of immanence", the feeling of "flatness," or the sense of "missing something".[61] At the same time life in a secular world is "haunted" by the ghosts of transcendence,[62] which are experienced in the quest for meaning, encounters with beauty in the arts, and confrontations with mortality.[63] The human struggle with loneliness and longing for connection and belonging in community could be another example. The cross-pressured experience of life in the secular world is as writers like Douglas Coupland and Julian Barnes voice it: 'I don't believe in God, but I miss him;'[64] 'my secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone.'[65]

These longings for the transcendent show no signs of going away – in the words of a former proponent of secularisation theory, they can be understood as signposts or 'signals of transcendence.'[66] In the logic of C.S. Lewis, the unsatisfying experience of immanent humanism and the universal desire for the transcendent is a crucial clue about the nature of reality: 'If I find in myself a desire that no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.'[67]

In Christianity there is an answer to the problem of loneliness. In the gospel, there is a better story that makes sense of the human desire for connection and community. Humans have been made in the image of the God of love, for relationship with him and with one another. In Jesus Christ, the transcendent God has broken into the immanent frame in order to share his love with us. Through the gospel is created a better community – the church – where people can be welcomed and loved on the basis that God has first welcomed and loved us.

59 Taylor, Secular Age, pp.550-551
60 Taylor, Secular Age, p.595
61 Taylor, Secular Age, p.302
62 Taylor, Secular Age, p.593
63 Taylor, Secular Age, p.726
64 Douglas Coupland, Life After God (Washington Square Press: New York, 1994)
65 Julian Barnes, Nothing To Be Frightened Of (Vintage Books: London, 2009)
66 See Peter Berger, A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural (Anchor Books: New York, 1970), used throughout
67 C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (Harper Collins; London, 1952), pp.136-137

Chapter 3. A Theology of Loneliness: A Politics of Recognition

Rowan Williams, in *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement*, encourages the rediscovery of charity, not in the modern understanding of charitable bodies and causes, but as the ability to live with one another well. Charity, he contends, has been lost through secularisation, cultural fragmentation and the drive to competitiveness (the Darwinian implication noted above). Williams argues that social goods like friendship and fraternity are only available (and recoverable) 'by the suspension of rivalry and the equalising of honour or status'[68] – learning to talk with one another in a language that is not dominated by 'interest' or by considerations of power and advantage where there will inevitably be winners and losers – those who belong and those who are isolated and excluded. Following Charles Taylor, Williams notes that non-competitive conversation thus represents 'the breakthrough into a recognition of common goods, things that we *can only* value or enjoy together.'[69]

What is being referred to here is something far more than mere mutual recognition. Rather, Williams writes, 'it is an acknowledgement that someone else's welfare is actually *constitutive* of my own.'[70] When this is recognised, competition, negotiation and rivalry (which, as the previous chapter demonstrated, contribute to experiences of loneliness) are challenged.

Williams' thesis is that western society has drifted from charity and that the residual rituals of charity (the things traditionally done to foster community) have been severely eroded. What that means, he argues, is that,

as the institutions and rituals of charity decay, as we lose a common language affirming us where we "just are", without having to win a place, our political life fragments and corrupts. There are fewer controls on rivalry, fewer qualifications to the picture of social life as essentially or primarily conflictual. And this in turn means that the polarisation, between those who have and those who don't have the means to manage this conflict successfully, intensifies. More people are excluded from negotiating important decisions and are left with no stake in their social environment – and no language about where they unproblematically and non-negotiably belong, no system of charitable symbols.[71]

That is, without charity, people feel disenfranchised from the life of society and, as a consequence, often feel lonely.

One of the areas Williams observes this paying out most clearly is in education, with its emphasis on competition (another potential reason why young people are now amongst the loneliest in society). While he acknowledges that there are elements of education that need to be selective and competitive, he bemoans the fact that there is not a balance of activities that pull in the other direction – an emphasis of collaborative work for example, where students work together, not against each

68 Rowan Williams, Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2003), p. 58
69 Williams, Lost Icons, p. 76
70 Williams, Lost Icons, p. 77
71 Wiliams, Lost Icons, p. 71

other. The problem, as he sees it, is that 'realism has been conscripted into the service of a particular ideology – the notion that education is primarily about refining the skills necessary for an individual to succeed, and, more particularly, to succeed in an environment in which every outcome will be bitterly contested by rivals.'[72]

Williams' asserts that most, if not all, secular spaces are structured that way, with an ideology of aspiration, where success is measured by financial gain, undertaken by autonomous individuals in capitalist competition with one another for limited goods, disenchanted, buffered, and indifferent to transcendence.

What is needed for the recovery of charity is recognition – recognising the other as other and their recognition of me, and that we, in recognising one another (rather than competing as rivals), see our need for one another in constituting something shared, something like the common good. Williams, following Taylor, writes that 'recognition entails a move beyond that idea that my good, my interest, has a substantial integrity by itself: no project is just mine, wholly unique to me.'[73]

In short, recognition shows us that any understanding of the self as autonomous, self-creating and self-governing, is a fiction that will lead to competition which, as we have seen, significantly increases the likelihood of experiencing isolation and loneliness. To overcome loneliness, then, a demythologisation of the dominant picture of what a self looks like in the modern world is needed. That is, we need to put the preeminent understanding of the individual into question. Williams argues that 'where charity is eroded [where conversation becomes contest, friendship becomes competition and fraternity becomes negotiation] so is the freedom to question the self, to challenge the mythology of the atomistic system of my own desires.'[74] When charity is lost, my selfhood is no longer constituted in interaction and collaboration with others towards a common good, but by shoring up myself in competition against them.

"In terms of loneliness and belonging, in other words, institutions of charity make a difference – charity is much more difficult without them – and, as they are lost, the societal implications are significant"

'The loss of a questioning appropriation of selfhood [that is, of a self formed and shaped in recognising the other and in being so recognised] and the loss of so many of the institutions of charity go together; one is not going to be

72 Williams, Lost Icons, p. 90
73 Williams, Lost Icons, p. 93
74 Williams, Lost Icons, p. 94

restored without the other.'[75] The breakdown of societal institutions, including the church, that once provided the scaffolding and framework for lives lived together in community is a recognised reality. Museums, galleries, theatres and libraries (which, along with the church, constitute the 'institutions of charity'), have dramatically reduced in number in the aftermath of austerity, and typically against the will of local communities. Those that are left are less equipped to play the same role in society as they once did.

By way of an example the squeeze on public spending has forced local authorities to cut arts funding, leading to an 'existential crisis' for Scotland's arts sector.[76] These institutions provide community spaces for social interaction, places where people feel as though they belong. That is, they are not competitive spaces marked by negotiating relationships of power but are institutions of charity where people recognise each other and shape life together. Furthermore, and of note here, is Logos Scotland's survey data which demonstrates that 'those who attend church more often are less lonely,' churches being, arguably, the primary institutions of charity (see Appendix 1). People who attend church once a week or more report notably lower levels of loneliness than those who never attend. It is, therefore, cause of much concern that, across the UK, '3,500 churches have shut in the last decade' and that 'the Church of Scotland is reportedly planning to close as many as forty percent of its buildings.'[77]

In terms of loneliness and belonging, in other words, institutions of charity make a difference – charity is much more difficult without them – and, as they are lost, the societal implications are significant.

To summarise, recognition, in Taylor and Williams' sense of the word, concerns the fact that I need other people to reflect back to me a sense of who I am, and that I am accepted and that I belong. Despite the modern narrative that our identity is entirely self-determined, fundamental to being human is that we need others to help us become fully ourselves. The recognition that others reflect back to me initiates me into society in a meaningful way and empowers me to function effectively in the world. And I fulfil the same function for others, meaning that recognition is the key to a society in which belonging is possible.

I come to understand myself not as an isolated individual in competition with others in a context of limited social goods, but as necessarily in relationship with, and dependent upon, others, with whom social goods are shared.

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75 Williams, Lost Icons, p. 94

76 The Scottish Book Trust, "The value and impact of Scotland's public libraries", 3rd June 2025, highlights that '97 of Scotland's public libraries have closed (a total of 16%) between 2008 and 2024 – that is more than 1 in 8.' Available here: https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/our-research/the-impact-of-scotlands-libraries. The Scotsman reported that 'more than 45 attractions [museums and art galleries] are said to be under threat in the wake of cuts imposed by the Scottish Government and local authorities' (Brain Ferguson, "More than 45 of Scotland's museums and galleries 'at risk of closure' within 12 months amid funding 'crisis'", The Scotsman, 18th August, 2024, available at https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/scottish-heritage-museums-galleries-culture-4746877. Natalie Goodwin, Adam Tood and Tara Fitzpatrick state that 'a combination of government budget cuts and declining lottery revenue has left many performers int the [arts] industry struggling to survive', STV News, 27th November 2024, available at https://news.stv.tv/scotland/scotland-tonight-scotlands-arts-sector-faces-existential-crisis-as-funding-cuts-threaten-survival

77 AJ Gomez, "3,500 churches have closed over the last decade. But is this a problem or a path forward?", Premier Christianity, 30th April 2025, available at https://www.premierchristianity.com/news-analysis/3500-churches-have-closed-over-the-last-decade-but-is-this-a-problem-or-a-path-forward/19361.article

Now, if it is the case that in order for me to be fully human, I require the recognition of others, then lack of recognition does not only stunt growth, as it were, but *dehumanises* the other person. What is so crippling about loneliness, then, is not primarily a lack of company or sense of isolation. The lack of social interaction that marks loneliness means a lack of recognition which results in the dehumanisation of the person. Theologically speaking, in other words, loneliness defaces the image of God in each individual.

There is, in other words, a profoundly theological reason as to why loneliness is so problematic and painful, requiring a profoundly theological response.

If the primary issue in terms of loneliness and belonging is one of recognition, then any public policy process must begin with a politics of recognition – not merely of the issue but of the uniqueness and dignity of each individual. That is, from a Christian point of view, public policy regarding loneliness begins with the affirmation that every person is made in the image of God and that, therefore, I do not exist and establish myself against them but am one with them in creatureliness and dependence.

Significant political and societal change is required for this to happen, involving the input of public health practitioners, sociologists, community workers and so forth. The researchers exploring loneliness in Manchester are to be applauded for 'not think[ing] that any particular academic discipline or field of study holds dominium over the study of loneliness and so [they] join calls for interdisciplinary research to better understand loneliness.'[78] But no theologians were invited to join in. Rowan Williams is right to ask, ''whether a wholly secular language… can resist… trivialisation and reductions.'[79] Without a Christian voice, the understanding of the self – as Darwinian competitor, buffered within a disenchanted world – remains unchallenged. And, if we take Williams seriously (along with the insights of Alberti and Taylor), loneliness will never be overcome unless we allow the gospel to challenge such understandings and approaches and unless we open our eyes to recognise the other and to be recognised by them in return, embodying charity.

The remainder of this report features three Christian voices on themes directly related to loneliness and belonging. Before we turn to these, however, the question of a definition of loneliness returns.

As noted above, the classic definition of loneliness relates to the discrepancy between perceived and desired social connection and the negative emotions associated therewith. It is noticeable that such a definition makes loneliness subjective, distinct from the objective state of solitude 'something that is perceived and felt,'[80] distinct from the objective state of solitude. Whilst this way of thinking about loneliness has its merits, if loneliness has not always been a societal problem, following Nixon's discussion in the previous chapter and the discussion of the erosion of charity and the necessity of recognition above, then an alternative definition that takes the cultural shifts traced in this report seriously, particularly regarding the secularisation of society, is required.

This report argues that loneliness is solitude disenchanted or, put differently, solitude divorced from

78 Batsleer & Duggan, Young and Lonely, p. 1
79 Rowan Wiliams, Lost Icons, p. 7
80 Batsleer & Duggan, Young and Lonely, p. 2

its transcendent moorings, or solitude within the immanent frame wherein recognition is problematic. Belonging, correspondingly, is simply being seen.

In Genesis 16, Hagar flees from Sarai's mistreatment, finding herself in the wilderness by 'the spring that is beside the road to Shur' (16:7). In that aloneness, she encounters the angel of the Lord who promises that the descendants of her son, Ishmael, 'will be too numerous to count' (16:10). She is the recipient, in a word, of divine recognition, proclaiming '"you are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me"' (16:13). In this recognition, she finds belonging, returning to Abram's household and bearing him a son.

At a fundamental level, loneliness is a present problem because transcendence is seen as implausible and the possibility of divine recognition is viewed with scepticism. There are, of course, those who are open to transcendence and divine action who still find themselves alone and may refer to experiencing loneliness. Knowing themselves to be recognised by God, however, even if they do not experience it directly, makes positive inroads into overcoming the issue.

As such, it is the task of the Christian community to work towards making transcendence plausible again in present-day Scotland, through the embodiment of recognition in society and by faithful, charitable engagement in the public square. This report, and the voices following, are a contribution to these tasks.

Chapter 4. Loneliness and Belonging in Job and Psalm 69 – the value of lament

Introduction

Loneliness is an unavoidable part of human existence.[81] As Vanier affirms, '[e]ach one of us has a certain feeling of loneliness, regardless of age or social position.'[82] While we all have times when we willingly embrace solitude, loneliness occurs when we become aware that we have disconnected from others and the world around us, even when surrounded by family, friends and Christian fellowship.[83]

"...no longer be able to find any coherence in the world, which will consequently cease to be for [them] a habitable place."

As Thomson contends, '[t]he concept of alienation is the sense of being separated from someone, or some place that belongs to us or to which we belong.'[84] Loneliness, and the sense of detachment that comes with it, is often overlooked. However, the social, emotional, psychological and spiritual difficulties experienced because of loneliness can be catastrophic.[85] As Ticciati contends, when total isolation occurs, a person will, '... no longer be able to find any coherence in the world, which will consequently cease to be for [them] a habitable place.'[86]

To explore loneliness and the unpleasant, frequently horrifying, emotions connected with it, this paper will first present an overview of the concept within the context of the Book of Job and the lament of Psalm 69. It will then move on to discuss the information gathered from these Old Testament narratives, in light of the New Testament, to offer a biblical and practical response to the issue. It will move to conclude that reading the Book of Job and the Psalms of lament through the lens of loneliness, Christians gain a deeper understanding of how to respond to both their own loneliness and that of others, viewing the loneliness of Christ at his

81 For this study the term loneliness, should be viewed as being synonymous with alienation or isolation, irrespective of their social, emotional, psychological or spiritual context or grammatical tense.

82 Jean Vanier, "A Wound Deep in Our Hearts", Cross Currents 33:2 (1986), p. 147

83 Simon Gibbes, "A crisis of community: how an epidemic of loneliness is contributing to social disconnection in churches", Practical Theology 15:3 (2022), p. 259. Kenneth Thomson Jnr, "Out of the Whirlwind: The Sense of Alienation in the Book of Job", Interpretation 14:1 (1960), p. 51

84 Thomson, "Out of the Whirlwind", p. 51

85 In 2018, the Conservative Government, led by Prime Minister Theresa May, launched its first Loneliness Strategy claiming that 'Loneliness is one of the greatest public health challenges of our time.' Gov.UK, (2018) 'PM launches Government's First Loneliness Strategy', available at https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-launches-governments-first-loneliness-strategy

86 Susannah Ticciati, Job and the Disruption of Identity: Reading Beyond Barth (London: T&T Clark, 2005). P. 85

crucifixion as our hope and means of reconciliation to God.

Loneliness in the Book of Job

Job is depicted as 'the greatest man among all the people of the East' (Job 1:3b). He is blessed, surrounded by family, friends and wealth attributed to his 'exemplary response to God through his piety and his moral conduct.'[87] However, Job finds himself far removed from this place of familiarity and social connection when he experiences 'arbitrary suffering.'[88] Consequently he is plunged into the depths of psychological, sociological and theological isolation.[89]

We find Job sitting alone 'among the ashes' (2:7-8), most likely the 'rubbish-dump outside the city' (2:7).[90] Here Job has an altercation with his wife who berates him to 'Curse God and die!' (2:9). The meaning behind her words is debatable, as this action would be an act of rebellion against God, and result in death, thus as Habel suggests it, 'was a form of self-destruction.'[91] Job views her statement as 'foolish' (2:10), demonstrating that her words stood in contrast to his own theology, whereby actions correlate with divine blessing or punishment (1:21).[92] However, the lack of praise and gifting terminology in his rebuke may suggest he is questioning his theological beliefs. As Seow proposes, the contrast between these two verses is 'indicative of a deviation in Job's attitude or in his pious confidence.'[93] Regardless of Job's intention, this scene offers a glimpse into the disharmony within their marriage where the understanding expected from a spouse, is not forthcoming, and Job's sense of loneliness begins to develop.

The arrival of Job's friends should have been the closest means of support outside his marriage, as Janzen affirms, 'friends are the bone of one another's bone, flesh of one another's flesh.'[94] The distance travelled and the fact they did this to specifically offer 'comfort' (2:11) conveys how much they loved their friend.[95] This is further demonstrated in the tearing of 'their robes' and the 'sprinkling of dust on their heads' (2:12) often seen as acts of mourning, here represent the friends' solidarity with Job, sharing his grief. As Janzen contends, the friends use of dust, 'symbolizes their sympathetic identification with Job as fellow mourners.'[96] However, any empathic connection they may have established is short lived as they try to make sense of Job's extreme situation through the lens of

87 J. Gerald Janzen, Job (Louisville, Kentucky: WJKP, 2012), p. 35

88 Janzen, Job, p. 1

89 James L. Crenshaw, 'Job 3: Between Text and Sermon', Interpretation: A Journal of the Bible and Theology 69:1 (2014), p. 87

90 The Septuagint regarded 'the ashes' as the city dump, which implied Job was deliberately excluded from society in keeping with the Levitical leprosy laws. However, recent studies indicate this was not the case and it is more likely Job chose to make his plight public, which eventually drew the attention of his wife and friends. Norman C. Habel, The Book of Job (Philadelphia: WP, 1985), p. 96. Francis I. Andersen, Job (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1976), pp. 97, 101. Janzen, Job, p. 48

91 Habel, The Book of Job, p. 96. Scholarly debate exists in relation to whether Job's wife is portrayed as an advocate of Satan, or an ally of God and Job. For the Satan: F. I. Andersen, Augustine, Calvin and N. C. Habel. For God and Job: C. L. Seow, Pope and F. R. Magdalene. Both: D. C. Hester and J. G. Janzen. It is also worth noting that T. Longman III, suggests that Job's wife may also be heartbroken after seeing her husband suffer that she views 'Death as a relief.' Temper Longman III, Job (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), p. 98

92 Ticciati, Job and the Disruption of Identity, p. 61. It is worth noting that while Job is not a Hebrew, the basis of his inner conflict stems from his theological understanding that is similar to the 'Deuteronomic Covenant' code (Deuteronomy 27 & 28).

93 C.L. Seow, Job 1-21 Interpretation and Commentary, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans. 2013), p. 297

94 Janzen, Job, p. 57

95 The author provides no background to the friendship, how long they had been friends it is apparent the visit is not obligatory—their friendship was genuine. Andersen, Job, pp. 99-100

96 Janzen, Job, p. 59

retributive justice (4:7-8; 22:5,21; 8:3-4; 8:20; 11:14-15; 20:29), culminating in Eliphaz's indictment of Job for serious social misconduct (Job 22).[97] Therefore, as Ngwa argues, when the friends 'ignore the fact that even within the context of retributive justice, God's actions are sometimes disproportionate,' it intensifies Job's agony.[98] The friends dogmatic theological ideals limited God's Sovereignty and prevented them from reaching Job on a meaningful level, as Sobosan affirms, it can be like 'speaking a language no one comprehends or hearing one spoken that you [cannot] comprehend.'[99]

Job's emotional pain moves to resentment, and he has a real sense of doubt in relation to his theological beliefs. As Angel contends, '[Job] cannot see that his righteousness has been rewarded but rather calamities of the wicked and worse have been visited upon him.'[100]

Job's social, emotional, psychological and spiritual loneliness has become so intense his frame of theological reference is confused and his 'basic sense of safety, trust in others and trust in [his] own sense of self [has been] deeply damaged or destroyed.'[101] In short, Job has become completely isolated by the chaos of his experience. However, Job is not hopeless, he addresses God in the form of a lament, maintaining his faith, and consequently, out of his all-encompassing loneliness, comes hope, and a sense of belonging to God.[102]

Loneliness and Lament - Psalm 69

Johnston states, '[d]istress is one of the most common themes of the Psalter.'[103] This theme is intrinsically linked to loneliness, as the Psalmists, like Job, become overwhelmed by their loss of personal identity, feel at odds with their significant others, 'distant from temple and community, and often far from God himself.'[104] The Psalms of lament are prayers, cries from those suffering, as they reach out to God, seeking relief from pain, the strength to cope with their situation, while affirming their trust in him, often ending in worship, a 'vow of praise or potential praise.'[105]

An example of lament is found in Psalm 69, where the Psalmist's path is similar to Job's: he finds himself alone, cut off from his family, friends (69:8) and community, where no one accepts his innocence and seek only to judge, 'More than the hairs on my head are the people who are against me...putting an end to me, my enemies, falsely' (69:4a-d). His community want him to confess his sins, as Goldingay states, 'all the supplicant has to do is plead guilty and put things "right", then everyone

97 Elaine A. Philips, 'Speaking Truthfully Job's Friends and Job', Bulletin for Biblical Research 18:1 (2008), p. 34

98 Kenneth Numfor Ngwa, The Hermeneutics of the 'Happy' Ending in Job 42:7-17 (New York: WedG, 2006), p. 106

99 Jeffery G. Sobosan, 'Loneliness and Faith', JPT 6.2 (1978), p. 107. Janzen, Job, p. 58

100 Andrew R. Angel, Playing with Dragons: Living with Suffering and God (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), p. 58

101 Lisa M. Cataldo, 'I Know That My Redeemer Lives: Relational Perspectives on Trauma, Disassociation, and Faith', Pastoral Psychol 62 (2013): 791-2. Angel, Playing with Dragons, p. 53

102 Patricia Huff Byrne, "Give Sorrow Words": Lament—Contemporary Need for Job's Old Time Religion'. The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counselling 56:3 (2002), p. 255

103 Philip S. Johnston, 'The Psalms and Distress' in Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches, eds. Philip S. Johnston and David G. Firth, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), p. 63

104 Johnston, 'The Psalms', p. 66. For the purpose of this paper the focus will be on individual laments, but it is worth noting that there are also numerous corporate (communal) laments contained in the Psalter. Daniel J. Estes, Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), p. 165. James L. Mays, Psalms (Louisville, KY: JKP, 1994), p. 106

105 Mays, Psalms, p. 106

can "move on".'[106] This is reminiscent of the disconnect between Job and his friends, as the Psalmist refuses to confess to something he has not done. He knows God is fully aware of any wrongdoing he may have committed and will deal with it accordingly (69:5), it is not for his community to pass judgement, that lies with God.[107] However, in doing so, he has become, as Kraus argues, '[f]orsaken and ostracized by his family, [and] finds himself in utter loneliness.'[108] Yet, even when his basic needs of food and water are withheld by the community (69:21), he does not give up. Instead, he strengthens his faith in God, responding to his dire circumstances with lament, and finding hope in his all-encompassing loneliness. As Byrne states:

[l]ament is a prayer of paradox, a cry to a silent or seemingly absent God, an attempt to connect with a disenfranchising community, in an effort to define one's experience in a world where all structures have collapsed... It is the haunting howl of alienation and despair spoken from a place where hope paradoxically emerges.[109]

The Psalmist's hope is seen in the latter verses of the Psalm, where he begins to offer praise and reaffirm that God has not forgotten him (69:33-34). In his worship he gains a sense of belonging, he is part of something bigger than what can be tangibly seen or felt, irrespective of what happens to him, his faith will allow him to reside with God and be a witness to others (69:32-32; 35-36). As Mays contends:

[t]he salvation of the figure will be significant for others. He represents the affliction and the trust of a group identified as the lowly, God-seekers, the needy, the prisoners who belong to the Lord.[110]

When we consider Job's circumstances and those of the Psalmist, we are presented with a graphic depiction of loneliness, and a real sense of how it feels to be completely disconnected from a family and community to which someone belonged. For some the isolation felt, will become so horrific they may choose to give up, and commit apostasy, as Sobosan affirms, 'feeling that God has abandoned him, [the lonely person] abandons God.'[111] Others, may take the more eschatological approach of the Psalmist and believe their current suffering will one day be recompensed in eternal life.[112] Whilst others may, like Job, come confidently to God and confront him for answers, while fighting to maintain their theological integrity (Hebrews 4:16).[113] In order to consider these choices more fully, it is necessary to reflect on the responses of Job and the Psalmist in light of the New Testament.

106 John Goldingay, Psalms Volume 2: Psalms 42-89 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 341. It should be noted that there are numerous occasions when we are guilty of wrongdoing, and in these instances the correct course of action would be to confess to God and repent.

107 Goldingay, Psalms, p. 341

108 Hans-Joachim Kraus, Psalms 60-150 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 62

109 Byrne, "Give Sorrow Words", p. 255

110 Mays, Psalms, p. 231-232

111 Sobosan, "Loneliness and Faith", p. 108

112 Daniel J. Simundson, 'What Every Christian Should Know About Job', Word & World 31:4 (2011), p. 353

113 It should be noted the 3 options mentioned here, are possible responses for the purpose of this paper and should not be seen as an exhaustive list.

A Biblical and Practical Response to Loneliness

Reading the Book of Job and the Psalms of Lament from the perspective of loneliness has allowed for a deeper understanding of the emotional, psychological and spiritual anguish felt when someone feels isolated. What is apparent through both narratives is that despite their pain, frustration and anger, their honest communication pleased God.

On the vertical axis, the narratives show that confusion and doubt (even for the most mature Christian) can manifest quickly when they feel isolated from all that was once familiar.[114] They seek to make sense of a seemingly senseless situation, often trying to reconcile their plight with their understanding of divine justice.[115] As Simundson suggests, '[h]uman beings seem to have a great desire for the world to be fair. Good people should be rewarded… and evil doers punished…'[116] However, this approach can limit a person's theological frame of reference and view God as malevolent and unjust.[117] Instead Job and the Psalmist both decide to approach God rather than recant their faith. The approach gives both an outlet for their emotional turmoil while still maintaining their relationship with God. As Byrne states, 'God invites Job [and thus all sufferers] into a deeper personal relationship and honest confrontation through passionate questioning, rather than complacent submission…'[118] However, in post-modern Western Churches speaking to God in this way can be seen as inappropriate. As Grant suggests:

> *…the language of lament is considered improper—we should not address God this way [and] the darkness of laments is seen as denial of the hope that is inherent to the New Covenant faith and belief in Jesus.*[119]

Nevertheless, if we accept that the whole of Scripture is the Word of God, and a source of instruction, how can we reject the practice of lament? After all, Christ, in his last moments, in full knowledge he was going to be with the Father in eternity (Jn. 20:17), lamented in his cry '" My God, My God why have you forsaken me?"' (Mt. 27:46). If, as Boulton states, Christ's final cry refers to Psalm 22 in its entirety, it contains both 'lament and praise', demonstrating that even Christ searched for answers and was prepared to directly accuse God of abandonment.[120]

In his humanity, Christ himself embraced this method to cope with the 'overwhelming present' of the crucifixion, demonstrating that even his confident assurance of eternal life did not negate 'the need for lament.'[121] In effect, lament cries out to God from a place of hope, accepting we are human, we are weak and need him to stop our suffering or give us the strength to cope (2 Cor, 12:10). In his death and resurrection Christ has given us the means to access his 'omnipotence', as Matera confirms, '… weakness becomes the place or the occasion for Christ to manifest power, just as the weakness of the

114 Thomson, "Out of the Whirlwind", p. 51.

115 Larry J. Waters, "Elihu's Theology and his view of suffering", Bibliotheca Sacra 156 (April-June 1999), p. 151

116 Simundson, "What Every Christian Should Know", p. 353. Reap what you sow' theology has biblical support in both the Old and New Testaments e.g. Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28 and Galatians 6:7.

117 Philips, "Speaking Truthfully", p. 35. Ngwa, The Hermeneutics of the 'Happy' Ending, p. 107

118 Byrne, "Sorrow Words"': 258.

119 Jamie A. Grant, "Psalm 44 and the Christian Spirituality of Lament", (Tyndale OT Lecture, July 2007), p. 12

120 Matthew Boulton, "Forsaking God: a theological argument for Christian Lamentation", SJT 55.1 (2002), p. 60. Walter Brueggemann and William H, Bellinger Jnr., Psalms, (New York: CUP, 2014), p. 114.

121 Thomson Jnr., 'Out of the Whirlwind', p. 54. Grant, 'Psalm 44', p. 12

cross was the occasion for God to manifest power in Christ.'[122]

On the horizontal axis, the steadfast theological correctness of Job's friends and the accusatory community of Psalm 69, resulted in a stalemate between the lonely sufferers and those that could have offered comfort and companionship. The sufferer and their community have to make a choice: do they follow Job and the Psalmist and lament to connect with God even when his actions appear nonsensical, or cling to a theological belief system which is safe and familiar but is ultimately inaccurate. As Brueggemann suggests, there is a traditional practice within the Christian community to transform 'pain to guilt' particularly in light of Rom. 3:23 which teaches '[a]ll have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.'[123] Thus, from a Christological perspective, confession and repentance may appear more biblically sound than lament, as there is no confusion—admitting one's sin and seeking forgiveness—is pleasing to God.[124] Unnecessary repentance, however, constitutes lying, which 'is an abomination to the Lord' (Prov. 12:22; Col. 3:9). To combat this, both Job and the Psalmist make negative confessions whereby they state that if they have done anything wrong, God knows and will judge appropriately (Job 31; Ps 69:5). Therefore, they offer both lament and deference to God, recognising their 'knowledge of God in the here and now is imperfect' (Job 42:3; 1 Cor. 13:12).[125] In doing so the lonely sufferer and their community, recognise their humanity and come together in shared commonalities, their love of God, and all the 'frailties and vulnerabilities' that belong to humankind.[126]

The discussion above demonstrates that lament enables those experiencing loneliness to find a place of belonging in Christ, even in their darkest moments. Thus, the power gained by honest lament enables the person to cope with dignity, strength and integrity. The person partakes of Christ's victory won, for us, by his death and resurrection, and as Moo states, they can '...more than triumph over adversity, in God's good hand...' (Rom. 8:37), whilst living in the 'now' of their salvation.[127] Their families and community can offer comfort as they reach out from a place of mutual understanding, rather than focusing on their theological differences. Accepting that God is there, but his 'ways are not our ways' (Isa. 55:8-9), as Pellach points out, '...that to see God [have faith in him] and to know that you cannot know God are sufficient rewards in themselves.'[128] His Sovereignty places him in control of everything, the good or bad (Job 2:10; 42:1-6).[129] As a result, the person reconnects with their community and loneliness is reduced, as their sense of belonging increases.

122 Frank J. Matera, II Corinthians, (Louisville, Kentucky: WJKP, 2003): 286. Brueggmann, "The Friday Voice of Faith"', p. 18

123 Walter Brueggemann, 'The Friday Voice of Faith', CTJ 36 (2001): 19. Douglas J. Moo, Romans, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), p. 127

124 R. Kearsley, 'Repentance' in The New Dictionary of Theology, eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson & David F. Wright, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988), p. 580

125 Leon Morris, 1 Corinthians, (Leicester: IVP, 1990), p. 183

126 Donna M. Orange, The Suffering Stranger: Hermeneutics for Everyday Practice, (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 38.

127 Douglas J. Moo, Romans, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), p. 284

128 Peta Jones Pellach, 'The Suffering of Job He is Every Person and No-one', in Perspectives on Human Suffering, eds. Jeff Malpas & Norelle Lickis, (London: Springer, 2012), p. 109

129 Angel, Playing with Dragons, p. 1. It should be noted I am not suggesting that God causes evil, but that Job 1 demonstrates the Satan cannot do anything to Job without God's permission, and Job accepts God's Sovereignty Job 2:10 & 42:1-6.

Conclusion

Loneliness is something that everyone will experience at some point in life. Both the Book of Job and Psalm 69 demonstrate the terrible sense of emotional, psychological and spiritual pain someone feels when they become isolated from family, friends and the community to which they once belonged. The inability to connect with others in a meaningful way can leave the person feeling destitute, particularly when their theological beliefs are rejected, and blame and guilt is forced upon them. However, reading the Book of Job and the Psalms of lament from the perspective of loneliness offers the sufferer a means to communicate openly and honestly with God, while their caregivers (be they family, friends, the community or the church) find a way to reach out, putting their theological differences aside and accepting the common weaknesses of being human. Their shared inability to fully comprehend God and his ways, and accepting his Sovereignty, reunites them in the hope manifested in Christ's death and resurrection.

Chapter 5. Marriage and Family

Marriage and the resulting family unit remains the foundation of belonging in society today. The Christian tradition has always held that the family serves as the place within which husband and wife and children find belonging, but also as the means towards societal stability. To quote Lucy Denyer, writing in *The Daily Telegraph*, marriage is 'societal glue,'[130] shown, by a range of studies, to be good for both mental and physical health, while children born within wedlock are 16% less likely to receive benefits even than those born to apparently stable cohabitees.

Stable marriages have less of a financial impact on the taxpayer. Family breakdown has an estimated economic burden of £51 billion: government support for lone parents (as of 2018, 42% of lone parents received housing benefit compared to 6% of married couples), costs of care (both social services at home or for children taken into care), health and mental health services (separation and divorce have long been associated with worsening physical health and family breakdown is amongst the primary contributors to mental health problems), and costs related to crime (70% of young offenders come from broken homes).[131] 'None of this even takes into account the potential loss of productivity from employees.'[132]

Libby Purves defines it well: 'Marriage is the point where a private, intimate relationship is dragged into the light and affirmed in public. It formally entangles two families, and by tying the knot, couples strengthen the wider net of society'[133]

That is to say, marriage is not only legal ('the cultural consensus seems to be that cohabitation is just as good as marriage, and that getting married is little more than a pointless piece of outdated bureaucracy'[134]) but moral. It is a commitment to a relationship that should, at least, be stable, faithful, just, and lasting. Marriage is the best context in which to nurture children and help them mature into responsible citizens. For all these reasons and more, marriage is vital to the health of society.

Most relevant for this report is the connection between a sense of loneliness or belonging and marriage and family life. While the respondents to Logos Scotland's *Faith in Public Life* survey confirmed that loneliness is a large-scale issue in Scotland today, the findings showed that 'stronger or more stable family structures correlate with reduced loneliness, while fragmented or limited familial ties can heighten feelings of isolation. [The data] shows that currently or having been married significantly reduces loneliness by 35%' (see Appendix 1).

Biblically and theologically, human beings have material existence and spiritual existence and marriage, uniquely, caters for both these aspects. It is a 'social institution... serving both the natural

130 Lucy Denyer, "It's a tragedy that marriage has become so middle-class," The Daily Telegraph, 14th May 2019, available at https://link-gale-com.uhi.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/A585348176/STND?u=uhipswd&sid=bookmark-STND&xid=e11e299c

131 Harry Benson, "Cost of Family Breakdown", Marriage Foundation, 3rd July 2018, available at https://marriagefoundation.org.uk/cost-family-breakdown/

132 Harry Benson, "Cost of Family Breakdown"

133 Libby Purves, "Hmm. To tie the knot or not?" The Times, 4th October 2005, available at https://www.thetimes.com/life-style/sex-relationships/article/hmm-to-tie-the-knot-or-not-6m07xfrjkjj?msockid=2d0f822b49476e640c65952948af6fbd

134 Daniel Lilley, Marriage and the Stable Society: The Continued Importance of Marriage, (London: Civitas, 2024), p. 90

needs of the species as a whole [procreation] and the spiritual freedom that forms the core possibility in individual existence. Precisely that is what differentiates it from other types of friendship.'[135] (Platonic friendships as a means to belonging is discussed in the following chapter.)

The Biblical law codes in Leviticus 18-20 set forth relational orders which promote human flourishing, dealing with 'the relational order within families and the community'[136] which spring forth from a properly ordered relationship with God. These regulations centre around the relationship of husband and wife, parents to children, and families to neighbours and the wider society. The inclusion of sexual taboos in Leviticus 18 reinforces 'that sexual acts are reserved for a covenant relationship between a husband and wife.'[137] Leviticus 19 opens with the command that any children that are forthcoming within the marital context must 'respect [their] mother and father' (Lev. 19:3). Leviticus 20 continues the relational ordering within families, emphasising that dishonouring parents leads to 'the breakdown of relationships with other members of the familial chain... without respect for parents, all other family relationships are liable to collapse.'[138] Leviticus, therefore, sets forth the vision of a people, living in progressively broadening ordered relationships: husband and wife, children and parents, the wider family and the community more broadly, all grounded in the primary covenant relationship with God. 'Relational order is where wholeness of relationship exists between Yahweh and his people, from which wholeness of relationship then extends to relationships within families and between neighbours.'[139]

"It is clear, then, that marriage is built into creation from the outset and that the creational order, of which marriage is an intrinsic part, is 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). Marriage, in other words, is a creational good."

Going further back, marriage is part of the created order. This is implicitly inferred from the creation of male and female and the instruction to multiply (Genesis 1:27-28), then made explicit with the creation of Eve and the explanatory verse, 'that is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh' (Genesis 2:24). Furthermore, these verses are cited by Jesus as directly relating to marriage (see Matthew 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-9). It is clear, then, that marriage is built

135 Oliver O'Donovan, "'One Man and One Woman': The Christian Doctrine of Marriage" in in Marriage, Family and Relationships: Biblical, Doctrinal and Contemporary Perspectives, eds T.A. Noble, S.K. Whittle and P.S. Johnston, (London: Apollos, 2017), pp. 190-202, p. 195

136 Katherine Smith, "Ordered Relationships in Leviticus" in Marriage, Family and Relationships: Biblical, Doctrinal and Contemporary Perspectives, eds T.A. Noble, S.K. Whittle and P.S. Johnston, (London: Apollos, 2017), pp. 30-39, p. 38

137 Katherine Smith, "Ordered Relationships", p. 38

138 Jacob Milgrom, Leviticus 17-22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, AB 3a, (New York: Doubleday, 2000), p. 1744-1745

139 Katherine Smith, "Ordered Relationships", p. 32

into creation from the outset and that the creational order, of which marriage is an intrinsic part, is 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). Marriage, in other words, is a creational good.

Maleness and femaleness and their distinct yet interdependent nature, are included within the creational dualisms of Genesis 1. Light is separated from darkness, day from night, the waters above are separated from the waters below, the waters below are separated from the dry land, and so forth. In the same way, male is separated from female (Genesis 1:27), with God's blessing and charge to be fruitful and increase in number. Key to note, here, is the complementary nature of these dualisms.

These great asymmetric pairings aren't antagonistic dichotomies – two things fighting against each other – but pairs whose terms are interlocked yet distinct, representing the created order as one of an interplay between two elements... The goodness of marriage, as the union of an interlocked yet distinct pair, must be understood in the light of this border creational order.[140]

Male and female, created in the image of God, distinct yet interlocked in marital union, is the primary social unit of humanity. According to Augustine, 'the first natural bond of human society is man and wife,'[141] emphasising the social nature of the married couple and the family they create. The social unit of marriage 'is the germ of social formation, and the engine of social filling,'[142] which is to say, the married couple is the primary unit of social belonging and the foundational antidote to loneliness. Moreover, this is the case not just for the one man and woman – husband and wife – but for the two families that they bring together, along with the extended social relationships of the community in which they find themselves and for any children that result from their conjugal union. Marriage provides social cohesion in a way that cohabitation cannot (evidenced by the social benefits described above and by the statistics relating to the longevity of married relationships compared to cohabiting).[143]

In summary, marriage, and the family unit that it engenders, can be said to be established by God as part of the created order and is the normative means by which humanity's cultural mandate to 'fill the earth and subdue it' (Genesis 1:28) is to be undertaken. That is to say, the *telos*, of marriage, its proper end or goal, is the flourishing of humanity through its divinely given vocation to rule and fill.

From the very beginning, Scripture teaches that marriage, sex and family are creational goods. And whilst they are corrupted by the Fall and human relationships are disordered, 'scripture affirms... their ultimate redemption and reconsecration for divine service."[144] *That is to say, though 'marriage and family are disordered by the Fall... they are also [among] the means by which this disorder is overcome."*[145]

140 Onsi A. Kamel & Alastair Roberts, "Sex, Marriage, and Divorce" in Protestant Social Teaching, eds. J. Meador, J. Minich & O.A. Kamel, (Landrum, SC: Davenant Press, 2022). Pp. 103-114, p. 106

141 Augustine, On the Good of Marriage, trans. C.L. Cornish, ed. P. Schaff, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1887), 1, p. 5

142 Kamel & Roberts, "Sex", p. 106

143 Lilley, Marriage, p. 90. The comparative strengths and weaknesses of marriage and cohabitation are discussed in detail in Chapter 1 of the Civitas report (pp. 10-27)

144 Kamel & Roberts, "Sex", p. 109

145 Kamel & Roberts, "Ses", p. 114

In short, marriage is a great good, directly and explicitly for the betrothed couple and indirectly and implicitly for society as a whole.

Marriage is said to contain three goods: i) *proles*, ii) *fides*, and iii) *sacramentum*. In Augustine's own words, to whom the idea is attributed, 'these, therefore, are the goods which make marriage good – offspring, fidelity and sacrament.'[146] That is, 'the good of children, the good of faithfulness and the good of embodying meaning, a physical, moral and spiritual good all at once.'[147] These three goods together 'comprise the complex of a good marriage: the fascination with the other, the satisfaction of sexual desire, the companionship and cooperation, the courage to venture upon parenthood the reinforcement of memory in old age, and so on.'[148] Marriage alone, Christian tradition contends, has the ability to fulfil all these functions in a way that other relationships cannot do.

The good of children

The primary and, arguably, the greatest good of marriage is the generation of children – new images of God, as it were – and their care and nurture within a stable family environment. 'Marriage is ordered towards the generation and salvation of children,'[149] enabling parents to fulfil the creational mandate for rule and fill and to raise their children to do the same in due time. Children, the church holds, are a gift from God, shown by Christ to be precious (see Mark Matthew 19:13–15; Mark 10:13–16; Luke 18:15–17). Children also present parents with a great responsibility. Indeed, 'it was ordained for the continuance of the holy ordinance of family life, that children, who are the heritage of the Lord, should by duly nurtured and trained up in godliness.'[150] When marriage brings forth children and, in consequence, family life, the good of children is made manifest and is safeguarded by the commitment marriage embodies. Particularly worth noting here is that 'those who have more children are less lonely on average… The presence of… children may increase daily interaction, broaden familial support networks, and create more opportunities for meaningful relational connections' (Logos Scotland Survey, see Appendix 1).

It is worthy of note that social researchers in Manchester noted that times of loss often exacerbate loneliness in the lives of children and teenagers. Along with more normal associations concerning death, dying and bereavement, they highlighted that 'loss also occurs with the experience of parental divorce and separation.'[151] In relation to loneliness and belonging, then, ensuring a stable and committed marriage reduces the likelihood of children experiencing loneliness. After all, and as pointed to above, married couples 'are much more likely to stay together long term, and that this is greatly beneficial to their children as well as to couples' own happiness and wellbeing.'[152] For these reasons and more, children are a good of *marriage*.

146 Augustine, Good of Marriage, 32. This translation is from https://www.pathsoflove.com/texts/augustine-marrriage-outline/

147 O'Donovan, "'One Man'", p. 195

148 O'Donovan, "'One Man'", p. 196

149 Kamel & Roberts, "Sex", p. 111

150 The Committee of Public Worship and Aids to Devotion, Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland, (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 154

151 Batsleer & Duggan, Young and Lonely, p. 85

152 Lilley, Marriage, p. 90

The good of faithfulness

The second good of marriage (*fides* or faithfulness/fidelity) is often cited in theological literature as a 'remedy for sin.' Whilst it is undoubtedly so (the binding promises of marriage making unfaithfulness less likely) it is also more. Marriage, as has been argued above, makes a positive contribution to society and, for that matter, provides social cohesion. The commitment to faithfulness at the core of marriage and as one of goods that marriage fosters makes the social benefits of marriage clearer still. Inherent in the good of faithfulness is that 'carnal of youthful incontinence [lack of self-control], although it be faulty, is brought into an honest use in the begetting of children, in order that out of the evil of lust the marriage union may bring to pass some good.'[153] That is, faithfulness stabilises and holds in check our natural impulses, moving both husband and wife towards stable maturity. 'And that, we must note, is a moral contribution to the life of the human race, not merely a useful procreative service.'[154]

These first two goods of marriage – procreation and fidelity – belong to all marriages everywhere. In Augustine's own words, the good of marriage throughout all nations and all men stands in the occasion of begetting [the good of children], and faith of chastity [the good or faithfulness].'[155] The third good of marriage, in accordance with Augustine, is only applicable to Christian marriages: the good of the *sacramentum*.

The good of sacramentum

Whilst this has often proved problematic for Protestants, for whom, contrary to Roman Catholicism, marriage is not a sacrament, in Augustine's usage, in this context in any case, it was not defined in this limited sense. Augustine applied *sacramentum* 'to any ritual performance of Old or New Covenant that symbolically represented the gospel.'[156] When Christians marry, then, and undertake 'to love one another with the permanent fidelity of Christ's love for his church, [they] set forth the gospel.'[157]

The often-cited text in marriage services, of the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11), makes the same emphasis. Christ's presence and first miracle there blesses the marital union. O'Donovan notes, however, that the blessing of the married state was not akin to the simple blessing of a meal. Rather, marriage is blessed 'as the disciples were, when they were sent forth to witness to the ends of the earth, and promised Jesus' abiding presence.'[158] That is to say, marriage bears witness to Christ, 'a witness that consists in the constructive unity of opposites and not only in the cooperation of the like-minded.'[159] Such a witness to Christ benefits society significantly.

Marriage has been shown to be profitable (literally and metaphorically) to society as the principal societal unit of belonging and an antidote to loneliness. On a purely secular level, it is 'societal

153 Augustine, Good of Marriage, 3, p. 8
154 O'Donovan, "'One Man'", p. 197
155 Augustine, Good of Marriage, 32, p. 41
156 O'Donovan, "'One Man'", p. 197
157 O'Donovan, "'One Man'", p. 197
158 O'Donovan, "'One Man'", p. 199
159 O'Donovan, "'One Man'", p. 199

glue,' bringing together not just man and wife, but two families, contributing to the strengthening of society as a whole. It provides the stability for the nurture of children. Theologically, marriage and parenthood (that is, family life) are fundamental elements of the ordered relationships outlined in the Old Testament Law, whereby, grounded in right relationship with God, life in community flourishes. It is part of the good, created order, in which male and female, though distinct, complement one another and are made one flesh, with the divinely ordained cultural mandate to fill and rule, towards the end of human wellbeing. Marriage has also been shown to contain inherent goods – the good of children (the creation of a family), of faithfulness/fidelity and, for Christian marriages in particular, of witnessing to the steadfast love of Christ for his church. For all these reasons, Logos Scotland commends marriage and family life as the primary means for a stable society wherein loneliness is more likely to be alleviated through the belonging that marriage and family promote.

Post- script:

There are, of course, situations and circumstances in which divorce is permissible, in line with the teaching of the Bible. Committing adultery is the primary grounds for divorce (see Matthew 19:9), to which the Reformers added "abandonment," 'manifested either literally, as when one party refuses to live with the other, or figuratively,"[160] *in which domestic violence would be included. In line with Luther and Calvin, men and women equally hold the right to divorce.*

160 Kamel & Roberts, "Sex", p. 112

Chapter 6. Loneliness, Belongingness and Human Nature: A Theological Anthropological Approach

This chapter showcases a theological anthropology of loneliness and belongingness. It locates these concepts within the larger concepts of sorrow and joy relating to relational goods. It highlights the various types of friendship as the locus of these relational goods. It outlines a gradation of loneliness that demands a multidimensional approach. It notes upon the primacy of spiritual friendship with God as the basis of all charitable, virtuous friendships.

Introduction: A Theological Anthropology of Loneliness and Belongingness

A full understanding of loneliness and belongingness is incomplete apart from a theological account of the human person – one that touches upon our relation to God and how that effects our connection to others. Behavioural sciences, while illuminating, tend to ignore theological categories, providing only a partial vision of how these concepts are situated in the human person. Any subsequent policy built on a theologically underdetermined account of the human person risks implementing actions that exacerbate the problem of loneliness and belongingness or provide only superficial relief with more malignant consequences. This chapter provides a theological anthropological approach grounded in the work of the medieval scholastic scholar Thomas Aquinas, whose account of the passions and friendship coheres with many contemporary insights of modern scientific inquiry, while supplying what they often lack: a true description of the kinds of relational goods human beings are made for.

This chapter proceeds in four moves. First, it interprets loneliness and belongingness as species of sorrow and joy: passions or feelings arising from a perceived lack of possession of relational goods. It demonstrates that the phenomenological character of these passions can produce a disjunction between a person's judgment, their actual condition, and the kinds of goods truly proportionate to their nature. Second, it maps the effects of loneliness and belonging, highlighting the aggravating factors that can transform fleeting feelings of loneliness into a more chronic condition. Third, it outlines the kinds of relationships human beings can participate in through Aquinas' taxonomy of friendship, arguing that true fulfilment is found only in virtuous friendships animated by charity. Fourth and finally, this chapter will suggest some implied principles from this discussion to shape policy decisions related to loneliness and belongingness.

1. What are Loneliness and Belongingness?

1.1 Understanding Human Feelings: Sorrow and Joy

For Thomas Aquinas, pleasurable and painful experiences are situated among what he calls the passions of the soul.[161] These passions (which one might call feelings) are internal movements by which

161 ST I-II q.23 a.1 co.

a person is drawn towards or away from something beyond themselves.[162] That "something" is a thing simply apprehended as good or evil, which in turn causes an individual pleasure or pain.[163] This can happen with things that are readily apparent to the senses (such as the pleasure of tasting a delicious meal or the pain of being pricked by a needle), or with things that exist only within the mind (for instance, recalling a past positive friendship or imagining future rejection). When feelings are sparked in the latter way, by means of reason, the imagination, or memory, Aquinas calls the experience of pain *sorrow* and that of pleasure *joy*.[164] One might define sorrow and joy, then, as the interior movements (or feelings) that arise from the perceived privation of union with a good judged fitting to one's nature.

1.2 Loneliness and Belongingness as Types of Sorrow and Joy

Modern scientific notions of loneliness and belongingness cohere well with Aquinas' account of sorrow and joy. Both recent scholarship and Aquinas' account recognise their association with negative or positive psychological manifestations or feelings that arise when a person compares one's present participation in certain goods and one's judgment about the measure of participation one judges as fitting for themselves.[165] What is different between Aquinas' account of sorrow and joy and scientific notions of loneliness and belongingness is that the latter specify the particular goods one is perceiving and judging, often in terms of social relationships and connection,[166] whereas the former leaves open the types of goods one perceives and judges. Therefore, one can define loneliness and belongingness as types or species of sorrow and joy that specify the types of goods in view:

Loneliness: sorrow caused by the perceived lack of relational goods

Belongingness: joy caused by the perceived adherence to relational goods

1.3 The Nature of Loneliness and Belongingness

Given these definitions, it is necessary to highlight some important features of loneliness and belongingness. First, it is possible for a person to feel lonely regarding one object and belongingness in relation to another, but not simultaneously towards the same thing under the same aspect.[167] Since sorrow and joy involve movements away from or towards particular goods, a person cannot simultaneously move towards or away from the same object when they consider the same aspect of

162 ST I-II q.22 a.2 co.

163 ST I-II q.23 a.1 co.

164 ST I-II q.35 a.2 co.

165 See Louise C. Hawkley and John T. Cacioppo, 'Loneliness Matters: A Theoretical and Empirical Review of Consequences and Mechanisms', Annals of Behavioral Medicine 40, no. 2 (2010): 218;\\uc0\\u8216{}Loneliness Matters: A Theoretical and Empirical Review of Consequences and Mechanisms\\uc0\\u8217{}, {\\i{}Annals of Behavioral Medicine} 40, no. 2 (2010 Andrea Poscia et al., 'Interventions Targeting Loneliness and Social Isolation among the Older People: An Update Systematic Review', Experimental Gerontology 102 (February 2018): 133–44; Saga Pardede and Velibor Bobo Kovač, 'Distinguishing the Need to Belong and Sense of Belongingness: The Relation between Need to Belong and Personal Appraisals under Two Different Belongingness–Conditions', European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education 13, no. 2 (2023): 332.

166 See Kelly-Ann Allen et al., 'Belonging: A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Directions for Future Research', Australian Journal of Psychology 73, no. 1 (2021): 88; Alyson L. Mahar et al., 'Conceptualizing Belonging', Disability and Rehabilitation 35, no. 12 (2013): 1026.

167 ST I-II q.35 a.4 co.

that thing. However, one may have both sorrow and joy about aspects. For instance, a person may feel belongingness knowing that their friend, Bernice, knows them well and is a long-standing friend, while simultaneously feeling lonely because she lives far away.

Second, the dynamic of a person's judgment in the concepts of loneliness and belongingness creates a possibility that unwarranted feelings can arise via misjudgement. For instance, one may misjudge that a bully's manipulative words are an affirmation of respect and mutual affection when they are, in fact, insincere. A person may feel a sense of belongingness and acceptance when they are being toyed with. Alternatively, one might have unrealistic or low expectations towards the types of relational goods appropriate to their nature. One person may not expect much of their friends, so that they easily feel belongingness when their relationships with others are quite shallow, thus breeding contentment for types of relationships that are not, in fact, good for our nature. Another may have unrealistic expectations by, for instance, thinking that a friend should be available to take a phone call on my terms, and so sets up terms of friendships that go beyond what is necessary for a healthy friendship.

2. Effects of Loneliness and Belongingness

2.1 Object of Loneliness

For Aquinas, the proper object of sorrow is one's own evil. Evil is generally understood as the privation of the good that ought to be present in a subject.[168] In the case of loneliness, evil does not refer to what he calls evil of fault,[169] but instead refers to the evil of punishment. This type of evil describes the privation of goods which the will seeks.[170] While the cause of this evil is always sin, a person experiencing the evil of punishment may not be experiencing the consequences of their moral choices. Instead, a person may experience the evil of punishment on account of original sin or on account of the moral evil of others.[171] Thus, loneliness's object is one's own evil of punishment in the form of the privation of relational goods.

2.2 Four Gradations of Loneliness

Understanding the object of loneliness is important for understanding the various gradations of loneliness. For Aquinas, the proper effect of sorrow is the "flight of the appetite" from evil, which is sorrow's object.[172] It motivates withdrawal from that which is considered harmful. For loneliness, then, its proper effect is the flight of the appetite from the evil of punishment in the form of the privation of relational goods. In other words, loneliness is a motivational withdrawal away from the privation of relational goods. However, depending on whether movement is easy, delayed, or blocked, creates

168 See ST I q. 48, a. 5, a.d.1; a. 3, a.d.2.
169 See ST I q.48 a.5 co.
170 ST I q.48 a.5 co.
171 ST I-II q.87 a.7 co.
172 ST I-II q.35 a.8 co.

different types of loneliness:

Episodic Loneliness: a recognition of missing relational goods that is easily remedied. For example, a person comes home to an empty house and feels a pang of loneliness. This feeling becomes motivation to seek that missing relational good, for example, by ringing a friend or visiting a neighbour.[173]

Anxious Loneliness: a recognition of missing relational goods that is temporarily prevented from being remedied. One may want to seek those missing relational goods, but their ability to seek them may be blocked by work, travel, duty, or other circumstances. In this state, one can still see a way out of their loneliness.[174]

Perplexing Loneliness: a recognition of missing relational goods that are blocked from being remedied, with no obvious pathway to being united to those goods. The blocked pathway may be physical or psychological. For instance, a retiree who desires friendship, yet lives alone in a rural area with no close family or friends and limited transportation, is physically blocked from seeking the friendship he so desires. On the other hand, a person may be so anxious that it clouds their mental clarity, preventing them from seeing a way out of their situation.[175]

Torporial Loneliness: this occurs when the mind is weighed down to such an extent that a person's mental faculties dominate the affections so that one concludes that they will never be able to obtain the missing relational good, either by their own effort or by another's. For Aquinas, torpor, or sloth, is a sadness that casts down the spirit of a person, out of which is born despair.[176]

Aquinas also notes that sorrow can take on the form of depression, whereby the present evil hinders a person from enjoying what would ordinarily be enjoyed. Its weaker form hinders a person somewhat, but does not entirely strip a person of hope, so that some motivation to avoid that evil remains (aligning with perplexity). Its stronger form completely removes hope and can even paralyse outward action (aligning with torpor). Thus, both perplexing and torporial loneliness may be accompanied by depressing sorrow.

2.3 Impact of Belongingness

For Aquinas, joy is pleasure (or delight) that occurs when a desire, cultivated by reason, is attained.[177] Belongingness, as focused on relational goods, might be said to be pleasure or delight that occurs when a desire for relational goods, cultivated by reason, is attained. Joy, and consequently belongingness, differs from mere pleasure since it requires action on the part of the intellect, whereas pleasure can be experienced in the body apart from the intellectual faculties.[178] Thus, the effects of belongingness can be described as:

173 ST I-II q.35 a.8 co.
174 ST I-II q.35 a.8 co.
175 ST I-II q.35 a.8 co.
176 ST II-II q.20 a.4 co.
177 ST I-II q.31 a.3 co.
178 ST I-II q.31 a.3 co.

Gladness: where one's apprehension of the relational good expands by the pleasure of that thing, leading to one settling in the good one has been united with.[179]

Exaltation: an exterior sign of delight.[180]

Cheerfulness: the outward signs and effects of inner gladness (often demonstrated through a person's actions).[181]

A further effect of belongingness is that it can form habits that further increase a person's adherence to relational goods. It does this by first strengthening a person's future actions, since one who takes pleasure in an action will become more "eagerly intent on it, and carries it out with greater care".[182] And second, it increases contentment and rest in those actions that lead to belongingness.[183]

3. Relational Goods as Friendship

All of this has wide-ranging implications for how one approaches solutions to loneliness and encourages belongingness. But it also brings into focus a crucial question: what are the relational goods that human beings are meant to participate in? For Aquinas, this question cannot be answered apart from the types and kinds of relationships that human beings are created for. Nowhere is this clearer than in his account of friendship.

3.1 Conditions of Friendship

Aquinas notes that "[n]ot every love has the character of friendship". A person may say they "love" wine, but it would be odd to say that one has a "friendship" with the wine they consume. Rather, friendship is different from love by its reciprocity and shared communication of goodwill, and thus has three conditions:[184]

The willing of another's good

That the other wills your good

That you share a common life where that goodwill can be communicated

3.2 Three Ends of Friendship

Aquinas (following Aristotle) distinguishes friendships by their end – the fundamental motivation for the relationship:

Utility: persons in the relationship gain mutual benefit

179 ST I-II q.33 a.1 co.
180 ST I-II q.31 a.3 co.
181 ST I-II q.31 a.3 a.d.3; Super ad Romanos c.2 l.2 n.982; Super I ad Corinthios c.9 l.1 n.332.
182 ST I-II q.33 a.4 co.
183 ST I-II q.33 a.4 co.
184 ST II-II q.23 a.1 co.

Pleasure: persons in the relationship gain pleasure from their company

Virtue (or charity): persons in the relationship love one another for God's sake, thus founding friendship on the good of the other rather than themselves

While friendships of utility and pleasure do wish another person good in some way,[185] they remain types of friendship only incidentally,[186] "to the extent that they resemble the good".[187] Friendships of virtue are called so *essentially*, since it is the true and proper form of friendship. Friendship of virtue manifests itself in several virtuous acts, such as assistance in both spiritual and earthly duties,[188] sharing of secrets,[189] sharing of belongings,[190] the removal of offence,[191] delight in another's presence and their words and deeds,[192] as well as consolation and comfort in times of sorrow.[193] While friendships of utility and pleasure may imitate certain virtuous acts, they remain deficient, since their acts are pursued as ends in themselves for selfish benefit, rather than for the sake of the other.

3.3 Location of Friendship

Friendship also varies according to the setting or location in which it grows, since all friendship involves some common participation,[194] and thus the communication of such goodwill varies according to the various modes of association:[195]

Familial: friendship between those who share a common origin.[196] This includes spouses, parents and children, siblings, and wider kin relationships. Such relationships are bound by something that affects our very substance.[197] As such, Aquinas argues that one can love in more ways those who are closely connected to them.[198]

Companionate: friendship between those who share a common upbringing without a direct familial relation.[199]

Civic: friendship between those that share a common civic duty, such as fellow citizens, students, soldiers and the like. Often recognisable by shared tasks and public goals.[200]

185 ST I-II 1.26 a.4 a.d.3
186 Sententia Libri Ethicorum (henceforth Super Nic. ethic), Bk.8 l.3 n.1566.
187 Super Nic. ethic, Bk.8 l.4 n.1595.
188 Summa contra Gentiles (henceforth ScG) 3.134.3
189 ScG 4.21.5
190 ScG 4.21.7
191 ScG 4.21.10
192 ScG 4.22.3
193 ScG 4.22.3
194 Super Nic. ethic, Bk.8 l.12 n.1702.
195 Super Nic. ethic, Bk.8 l.9 n.1661.
196 Super Nic. ethic, Bk.8 l.12 n.1703.
197 ST II-II q.26 a.8 co.
198 ST II-II q.26 a.8 s.c; co.
199 Super Nic. ethic, Bk.8 l.12 n.1713.
200 Super Nic. ethic, Bk.8 l.12 n.1704.

Spiritual: friendship with God (also called charity). Enabled by an act of grace whereby the love of the Father and the Son is poured into us by the Holy Spirit, drawing us into communion with God.[201]

3.4 The Centrality of Spiritual Friendship

Most people can have friendships of utility or pleasure, since they depend on goods that we can identify naturally through human nature, apart from Divine aid. However, a friendship of virtue or charity can only occur when a person loves another for God's sake, where the object is the Divine good, not one's own apprehension of the good. But the Divine good cannot be identified apart from a spiritual relationship with God, since it is only a love of charity that "tends to God as to the principle of happiness, on the fellowship of which the friendship of charity is based".[202] Thus, for a person to have true friendship with either family, comrades, or their fellow citizens requires first having a spiritual relationship with God, through which they can establish friendships with others that consider the good of the person for God's sake rather than friendships established upon selfish benefit.

201 ST II-II q.24 a.2 co.

202 ST II-II q.26 a.1 co.

Chapter 6 – What This Means for Policy in Scotland today

If loneliness is, at its root, a crisis of recognition, then the task of public policy is not simply to provide services but to help create the conditions in which people are seen, known and able to belong. Loneliness cannot be solved by intervention alone – it requires the rebuilding of the social fabric through which recognition is mediated and community is formed.

This matters because loneliness is not distributed evenly across society and neither are its causes. As this report has argued, loneliness arises within a wider context of social fragmentation, weakened institutions, family instability, economic pressure, digital exclusion and the erosion of shared local life. A serious policy response must therefore do more than acknowledge loneliness as a public health concern, it must ask what kind of society makes belonging more likely.

What follows is a framework for renewal, alongside clear areas for policy action.

Strengthening Local Community Life

Loneliness is experienced locally and must be addressed locally. Scotland is a diverse country with different needs in rural and urban settings, one size does not and cannot fit all. The factors that contribute to loneliness in a remote Highland community are not always the same as those in a housing estate in Glasgow or a commuter town in the Central Belt. Central government has an important role to play, but local people and local institutions are often best placed to understand the problem and to respond with imagination and flexibility.

This is particularly important because relatively modest interventions can have a profound impact. In rural communities, for example, a very small grant to a local trust, youth organisation, café or meeting place can make the difference between isolation and connection. Local initiatives are often the places where belonging is actually built.

Youth loneliness should now be given the same level of policy focus that has rightly been given to elderly loneliness over the last decade. We have seen funding directed towards valuable initiatives for older people and some targeted interventions around loneliness in later life. That work should be commended but the evidence now points clearly to young people as one of the groups most affected by loneliness and isolation. That should shape the next phase of public policy.

Renewed investment in youth work, youth facilities and opportunities for meaningful participation in local life is therefore essential. Young people need more than services, they need places to go, responsibilities to carry, people who know them and communities in which they can imagine a future. If young people are to stay and build lives in their local communities, they must first experience that they belong there. In turn, that can help address wider issues of depopulation, ageing populations and local economic decline.

We therefore recommend that:

- The Scottish Government treats **youth loneliness as a national policy priority**, in the same way that elderly loneliness has received focused attention over the past decade
- Resources aimed at tackling loneliness and isolation are increasingly **decentralised to local government and community organisations**, with greater flexibility to respond to local need
- **Small scale community funding streams are expanded**, recognising that modest grants can have significant impact, particularly in rural areas
- Local authorities are given a **stronger voice in shaping provision**, with more freedom to vary services and support in light of local circumstances
- **Investment in youth work, youth facilities and local youth provision is increased**, with a particular focus on spaces and initiatives that foster regular participation, responsibility and connection

Rebuilding the Institutions of Charity

Throughout this report we have seen the importance of what Rowan Williams describes as the institutions of charity. These are the spaces in which people gather not to compete but to share life together. They include churches, libraries, museums, galleries, community cafés, youth groups, voluntary organisations and other local centres of common life. They are places where people are recognised, where relationships are formed and where a sense of belonging can take root.

Over the last decade many of these institutions have faced long term funding pressures, closure or decline. This has affected not only access to services but the social fabric of communities themselves. When a library closes, or a local museum loses funding, or a church building falls into disrepair, the loss is not only practical. A place of gathering, memory and encounter is weakened or removed. These buildings and institutions often function as anchors in community life.

This is particularly important in the Scottish context. In many communities, especially smaller towns and rural areas, there may be only a handful of places where people can meet across generations and backgrounds. If these spaces are weakened, loneliness becomes more likely. However, if they are supported, they can act as key sites of recognition, hospitality and connection.

Churches and places of worship should be included within this policy framework and direction. They are not only spiritual communities but often providers of practical support, social care, volunteering opportunities and regular rhythms of gathering. This report has already noted the relationship between church attendance and lower levels of loneliness. That does not mean churches alone can solve the problem, but it does mean they should be recognised as significant contributors to community life and cohesion.

Government should therefore think more seriously about community infrastructure. These institutions should not be treated as optional extras or cultural luxuries. They are part of the ecology of belonging.

We therefore recommend that:

- Government develops a **long term strategy to support community infrastructure**, including libraries, museums, community centres, youth spaces and other local social anchors
- **Targeted funding is made available for the maintenance and renewal of community buildings**, particularly where they serve as significant meeting points within a community
- Churches and places of worship are **recognised as partner organisations in tackling loneliness and strengthening community life**, with access to appropriate support where they provide clear public benefit
- Future decisions on local cultural and civic provision take account not only of financial efficiency but of the **impact on belonging, connection and community cohesion**

Supporting Family and Stable Relationships

What has come through particularly strongly in this research is the centrality of family to combatting loneliness and fostering a sense of belonging. Family life, and marriage in particular, remains one of the most significant contexts in which people are known, supported and rooted in durable relationships. It is often the first place in which belonging is learned and the place to which many return in times of crisis.

This is always a difficult area for government to address. In a pluralistic society there is often anxiety about appearing to favour one family model over another, that anxiety is understandable, but it should not prevent governments from recognising what the evidence consistently shows: stable family life is good for health, good for children, good for financial resilience, good for communities and good for society as a whole.

The point here is not that every family is healthy or that every marriage succeeds. Nor is it to ignore those situations in which relationships break down or where people experience deep pain within family life. But public policy should still be willing to say that stable, committed family relationships are a social good and that they deserve support.

Tax allowances for married couples have long formed part of the tax system and are welcomed by many. There are also examples from other countries where tax and welfare systems are designed in ways that support family stability rather than inadvertently penalise it. The broad principle is that government should at least seek to ensure that public policy does not make family life harder than it already is.

Supporting marriage and family is not about nostalgia, it is about recognising that family remains one of the most fundamental ways in which loneliness is reduced and belonging is fostered. If government is serious about wellbeing, it cannot avoid the question of family stability.

We therefore recommend that:

- Government undertakes a **review of the tax and benefits system** to assess how far it supports or undermines family stability and long term commitment
- Consideration is given to **strengthening financial recognition of marriage and family life**, drawing on examples of good practice from other countries
- Family policy is framed more explicitly around its **contribution to wellbeing, stability, child flourishing and belonging**, not only around immediate economic concerns
- Future Scottish Governments consider, with confidence and care, how policy can better **support marriage and family life as a public good**

Embedding Belonging in National Policy

Finally, this report has shown that loneliness is not only about individual emotion but about the kind of society we are building. Policy initiatives should cut across all spheres of Governments including, economic, health, education, local government and the tax and benefit system. It must shape how government thinks about wellbeing, community and social renewal more broadly.

The Scottish Government should therefore consider more carefully what it means to foster a sense of wellbeing and what wellbeing itself should include. If belonging is central to human flourishing, then it should be reflected in the way national priorities are defined and measured. Economic growth matters, but it cannot by itself tell us whether people are connected, supported or able to participate meaningfully in the life of their communities.

The Welsh Government's Wellbeing of Future Generations approach offers one possible model of how this can be done.[203] Scotland should consider whether a similar legislative or strategic framework could help clarify what wellbeing looks like in modern Scotland and what policy priorities ought to follow from it.

During the pandemic there was a rapid increase in volunteering as people looked for ways to help and contribute. Although levels have since fallen slightly, Scotland still has robust volunteering rates and there have been encouraging increases in youth volunteering. These are important signs of social health, volunteering is not only useful for service delivery. It helps draw people into shared purpose, shared responsibility and shared life. In that sense it is one of the clearest practical pathways from isolation to belonging.

With pressure on public spending, volunteering initiatives can easily slip down the list of priorities, they should not. If government wants to strengthen connection and community, support for volunteering should remain part of the picture.

203 https://futuregenerations.wales/discover/about-future-generations-commissioner/future-generations-act-2015/

We therefore recommend that:

- The Scottish Government explores the development of a **national wellbeing framework for Scotland**, with clear attention to connection, community and belonging
- Future policy decisions are assessed not only on economic grounds but also in light of their **impact on social connection, participation and community life**
- Government **maintains and strengthens support for volunteering**, recognising its role in building belonging and mutual responsibility
- Particular emphasis is given to **encouraging youth volunteering**, with renewed recruitment drives and accessible opportunities for participation in local communities

Conclusion

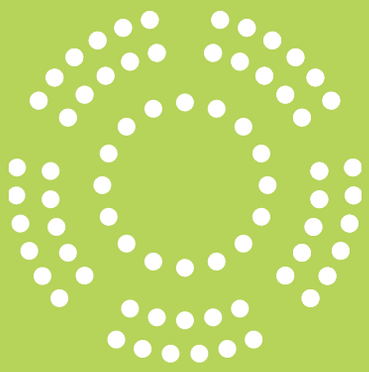
Loneliness is not simply the absence of company – it is the absence of recognition. It is the experience of not being seen, not being known and not knowing where one belongs.

A society in which people are seen and known cannot be created by policy alone, it is formed in families, sustained in communities and embodied in the institutions that hold life together. But policy has a decisive role to play in shaping the conditions in which such a society can flourish. Policy can weaken the institutions of belonging or strengthen them, it can centralise and flatten local life or equip communities to respond to their own needs. It can ignore family stability or recognise it as a public good, it can measure success narrowly or attend to the deeper conditions of human flourishing.

If Scotland is to address loneliness seriously, it must move beyond managing isolation towards rebuilding belonging. That task is not only social and economic but moral and human. It asks what kind of nation we want to be and whether we are willing to build a society in which more people can truly say that they are seen, known and part of something larger than themselves.

Key Policy Recommendations

- Prioritise youth loneliness as a national policy focus
- Decentralise funding to local communities and organisations
- Expand small scale community funding streams
- Invest in youth work and local facilities
- Support community spaces such as libraries and centres
- Recognise churches as partners in tackling loneliness
- Review tax and benefits to support family stability
- Strengthen support for marriage and family life
- Develop a national wellbeing framework for Scotland
- Maintain and expand support for volunteering



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