

# Antidote to Loneliness: Embracing Your Church Community

*The Cloak*, September 2023

As I noted in my latest blog, we are apparently caught in an epidemic of loneliness! In a recent review of the scientific literature on loneliness by Elenor Cummins and Andrew Zaleski (*The New York Times*, Sunday, July 16, 2023), they point out that more than one-fifth of Americans over 18 say they often or always feel lonely and socially isolated. Social isolation — especially in the elderly — has been linked to various adverse physical and psychological effects such as heart disease and dementia. The Surgeon General has said that “addressing the crisis of loneliness and isolation is one of our generation’s greatest challenges.” But Cummins and Zaleski do include some hopeful words. They emphasize the following:

*Whatever the root source of loneliness, given what we know about the brain’s capacity to rewire itself ... lonely people could take steps to pull themselves out of it. This may involve forcing themselves to connect — even when they don’t feel like it ... spending 15 minutes each day to reach out to people [they] care about, introducing themselves to their neighbors ... seeking opportunities to serve others, recognizing that helping people is one of the most powerful antidotes to loneliness.*

A follow-up letter to the editor in response to Cummins and Zaleski’s review noted that in all of their reviewed research studies, not one of them examined the effects of belonging to a religious community. In a recent issue of *The Christian Century* (August 2023), an article appeared titled “Getting Ultrareal About the Church” by Martha Tatamic, an Anglican priest in Ontario. (See photo.) In that article she bluntly asks the question: Why should the church, rocked to its core by COVID, keep trying to gather?” And she answers her question in a compelling way:

*We bother and we gather because the church bears witness to the truth of who we really are. Whether or not an individual participates in a faith community, the inescapable truth for every creature on this planet is that we are connected. I might wish I could pick and choose which parts of creation and which of God’s creatures share in that connection, but God is a pretty good door crusher when it comes to the gates of my*



*heart. As COVID made clear, we are radically infected by one another's oxygen and water vapor and germs and skin molecules, and at the same time our souls actually can't know and love God without one another. The great crises of our modern-day living are all rooted in having lost sight of that truth. The gathered church bears witness for us and for the world — to the inescapable truth of how our lives are finally and forever bound together.*

*The church ... is showered with the inconvenient blessing of the God who keeps showing up. ... I want to lift up those stories of God meeting us in the mess and binding the heartbreak and confusion and truth of just how infected with one another we really are. I want to love and serve an offering that has a chance of speaking to a whole world of hungry, broken, messed-up people — who are also already brimming with stories of God's touch and looking for language and permission to speak of holy things. (p. 62)*

Sacred community is an antidote to loneliness. I have made this point in the books I have written, citing research that has concluded that attending a church community is “brain soothing.” Feeling welcome and feeling that you belong, as well as providing opportunities to serve others; express gratitude; and enjoy the rhythm of music, chant and prayer. For many, this is the source of true grace and comfort in good times and bad.

Food for thought. And blessings on all.