



5 Alone Again,
Naturally

8 Alone,
but at Home

6 Being Alone
Shouldn't be Lonely

15 Why Our Loneliness
Points to Truth

Publisher | [Bishop Geoffrey Woodcroft](#)
 Editor | [Kyla Neufeld](#)
 Accounting | [Bernice Funk](#)
 Advertising | [Angela Rush](#)
 Layout & design | [cityfolkcreative.ca](#)

Editorial offices:
 Anglican Lutheran Centre
 935 Nesbitt Bay
 Winnipeg Manitoba, R3T 1W6

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Where are all the Lonely People?

Photo: Ryoji Iwata

I'm extremely introverted. Being in situations where I don't know many people and have to make small talk are absolutely exhausting to me. Because of that, I really value my alone time.

I've been working from home for two years. I started out of necessity so I could take care of my daughter, and, for the most part, it's worked out pretty well. I like being able to work independently, and I wouldn't give up my ability to make my own schedule for anything. But, after about a year of working alone, I realized something: I missed having coworkers. I missed working around other people.

In the early days, when my daughter was just a few months old, I would often go several days without talking to another adult (besides my husband). For someone who loves their alone time, I had never felt so lonely. Now that my daughter is in daycare, I try to work out of a café a few times each month; it also helps that I've joined a kickboxing club. I still spend a lot of my time alone, but I don't feel so starved for human contact anymore.

In the U.K., family doctors can prescribe art classes, gardening groups, and knitting clubs to patients dealing with mental health issues. The practice, called social prescribing, works under the recognition that pills don't always address everything that comes with mental health issues. "Within the [National Health Service], we have general practitioners who are all recognizing that people are coming back to see them over and over and over again and what they're prescribing isn't working," Marie Polley, founder of the Social Prescribing Network, told Anna Maria Tremonti on [The Current](#).

In June 2018, Ontario launched a pilot program to see how social prescribing would work

there. The Ontario program targets people who aren't well-served by the mainstream health community, like those with employment barriers, LGBTQ2 folks, and Indigenous people. According to [The Star](#), Kate Mulligan – director of policy and communications for the Alliance for Healthier Communities, which is leading the one-year pilot program – says one of the most common patient complaints is loneliness. Iris Gorfinkel, a general practitioner in Toronto, adds: "I'm a huge proponent of this idea.... As family doctor I see so much loneliness and so much problems that arise directly from loneliness."

I decided to do an issue on Alone-ness after I received a letter from a parishioner here in Rupert's Land. In it, she described the loneliness she has faced ever since her husband died, and how she is often treated like an after-thought by her old friends. I know she's not the only one who feels like that.

What is the social prescription for the Church? How do we address the loneliness that permeates our communities? In this issue, we'll hear from Michelle Owens, who writes about the general implications of being alone versus being lonely, and Donald McKenzie, who shares his thoughts on being single in the Church. And, in via media, Kirsten Pinto Gfroerer finishes her exploration of spiritual texts with a piece about monastic alone-ness.

Would all the lonely people please stand up?



Kyla Neufeld is the editor of *Rupert's Land News*.

Alone Together

GEOFFREY WOODCROFT



Have you ever had one of those encounters where a crowd has thinned-out, and someone says “Finally! We’re alone.” It is a funny phrase, one which causes me to think about our singular-ness and individuality, but also our interdependence with God in all of Creation. As living parts of this beautiful creation, can we ever be truly alone?

Jesus, it is reported by Mark and Luke, heals, casts out demons, and gathers those for whom discipleship is their new path. He goes to deserted places, and there he prays, alone.

Some Christian Testament commentaries suggest that Jesus’ foray to deserted places is about him knowing personal limits and having the self-discipline to take time needed to heal and prepare for ministry. The Church has understood these parts of Jesus’ narrative as an example of personal devotional and centring practices that build spiritual health in a disciple. Since spiritual wellness does indeed require regular and thorough attending, this is good practice.

I do, however, question commentary that does not take into account the broader context of Christ’s narrative. Jesus preforms miracles of healing, exorcism, and freedom from oppression, and all the while his disciples observe. Towns folk are excited, but also frightened, and, in many cases, angry to the point of wanting to kill Jesus – and news of him spreads, even though he asks for that not to happen.

I think Jesus goes to a deserted place to be found by disciples. I think Jesus drags his disciples to a deserted place not for rest and recuperation, but for deep, disturbing, and



"Study for Christ in the Wilderness" by Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoi, 1837–1887. See more on page 14.

empowering prayer that shakes them to their very core so they may be prepared for the responsibility of loving in the world. Following the Mark 1:35 and Luke 5:16 desert moments, Jesus gathers yet another disciple, Levi, and then drags his disciples into a long ugly quarrel with religious authority.

What if Jesus was teaching the Church how to be the Church? What if Jesus was teaching the disciples to see God’s power and gifts for the wellness of all creation? What

if Jesus was showing the first disciples how to be *alone together* so they could focus and utilize all that God had given them for ministry?

In today’s Church climate, I see the need for Christian communities to be led to desert places where we can enter deep, disturbing, and empowering prayer. We need to be shaken from our complacency, our notion of living in a culture of scarcity, and our insular views of the Church being about and for us. We need to be ready to leave the desert knowing this Church, this Body of Christ, is not about us, but about those whom God calls us to serve. We need to be prepared to challenge and reshape unjust structures that hurt the world. And we must be ready to be called back into the desert to sit at the feet of Christ again, alone together.



**Geoffrey Woodcroft,
Bishop of Rupert’s Land**

Alone Again, Naturally



Though this letter is published with permission, the author has requested to remain anonymous.

One Sunday, my priest gave a sermon on Job. He focused on being lonely and being alone, and kept referring to words from an old song by that title. I tried to find the message, but he continued on, telling tales of people suffering loss. I was gripped with an overwhelming sense that I had been grappling with my loss and aloneness by putting a new face on a new life in an old place. I don't want to stay here anymore. It hurts. I can't run fast enough to get out of the way of this kind of loneliness, the kind that occurs when you feel surrounded by people and they are not feeling what you are feeling.

When I started to cry in the pew, a person sitting behind me that I hardly know started to rub my shoulder to comfort me. In that moment, I realized I could not even turn around and thank her, but what she did opened the floodgates of emotion... and I realized that I had lost the one forever who loved and comforted me. I really miss him and the life we shared together. I had to leave. I hoped someone would notice. No one did. And I don't mean God. I have been holding on as tight as I can to God to give me the strength to see the path ahead... to know it will have meaning and purpose.

I have a box of condolence cards next to my husband's cane and ashes. There are many cards in it. They all express some words of comfort, sent by well-meaning people who know us. Most came to the funeral. "So there, task done," they must think. He died believing that the friends who came by to see him in hospital would look after me. Since his death, I have had very few social invitations to join anyone to do anything. Not even for a cup of coffee. It is hard to ask. I guess it wasn't friendship for me, it was for us as a couple, or maybe just him.

One friend used to call every day: "How's the old boy doing? Can we pick you up and go

somewhere for supper?" Not only did I lose my husband, I lost that as well. The first dinner at the Senior Centre came along. We always had a seat at a particular table. Not one of those who sent a card thought to invite me to join them at their table. I could always join the widows' table that a friend arranged, bless her heart. I didn't just lose my husband, I lost my seat at the table. I could be squeezed in, I was told. Then I started to reflect... not just my husband, but my partner, handyman, my travelling companion, my cheerleader, my driver.

Last week I overheard part of a conversation between a man who had lost his wife of 50 years and a long-time acquaintance. He spoke in a frustrated tone: "Why do people ask me how I am? They already know how I am. Why don't they just talk to me?" I wonder if people think we need time, or space, to grieve. There are plenty of hours in a day (and night) for that.

A friend phoned one day and said she and her husband were coming for coffee (and bringing her famously delicious scones). Wonderful! While they were here, they noticed a new blind laying on the counter, still needing to be installed. They put it up for me. They saw that I had a need, and they filled it.

Being alone is my new normal. Sometimes, when I'm in a community full of fine people, it feels like I'm standing at a bus stop and watching the bus go by full of people getting on with their lives. And I am standing alone again, naturally.

In the time that has passed, I spoke with a friend with terminal cancer, who said, "Your experience is the same as mine... serious health issues leave others not knowing what to say or do, so they do nothing. If it is important for you to have contact with people, then it is up to you to step up and go after that. The circumstances in their lives never changed. Yours did."

With that advice, I have, and I'm getting better each day.

Being Alone Shouldn't be Lonely: the Church and Singles

DONALD MCKENZIE



There's an old cartoon that shows a minister walking into the church office. He is on crutches with bandages, bruises, and braces all over his body. In the foreground the parish administrator is asking him: "So how did the singles group take your suggestion that they start calling themselves The Leftovers?"

Leftovers. That's a pretty accurate way to describe what it's like living as a single. When I say leftovers, I'm not talking leftovers in the wonderful, tasty, beef-stew-reheated-from-the-day-before sense of the word. I mean the odd sock, assorted mismatched screws, and not-sure-where-it-came-from computer cord sense of the word.

Essentially, as singles, particularly as we get older, we find that the world and the Church just don't know what to do with us. This is especially true in the Church where we like to create affinity groups. We have a real tendency to divide everything up by age or common interest. We have youth groups, young adult, young married, men's groups, and women's groups. You name

it. If we can create a group out of it, we will.


This is what happens to singles. We're turned into a group. One group. Because all singles are the same. Our dominant trait is our singleness. Apparently, I at 53 have more in common with a single who is 22, than a couple who are both 22 will have in common with a single who is 22.

Developing and being in relationships (whether romantic or not) takes time and effort. Yet, single people both inside and outside the Church are often treated as having more time to devote to their workplace or Church because they are single, based on Paul's 1 Corinthians 7 exhortations that people should maintain their single status so that they will be better able to serve God and God's people. One would almost think, at times, that the best reason for being in a relationship is to avoid having to do the work of the Church.

We do allow for the possibility that some people may have been especially called to remain single (and sexless), and the Church has long created orders that allow singles to minister (nuns and monks). But these orders keep them from other singles, particularly of the opposite sex (while pretending that same-sex attraction doesn't exist).

There's also the notion that being part of a couple is the desire of every single person. Invitations to join families often turn out to be opportunities for the single person to get to know one of their friends, who – surprise, surprise – just happens to be single.



The Church reflects the greater society's need to see everyone paired off. That's why shows such as *The Bachelor* or *Love Island* continue to flourish. They feed this misconception that there is someone out there for everyone. We simply have to keep looking until we find that one special person.



What If I Got Hit By A Bus?

(or not able to communicate with my family?)

Presented by Margaret Meush
and sponsored by the
Diocese of Rupert's Land
and Richard Rosin

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On top of these specific reasons for remaining single, we don't allow for the possibility that maybe some people are just better off living on their own. Relationships require intimacy in all forms. I know for myself as I grow older, it becomes harder to achieve such intimacy. Even living with a roommate is more difficult because, unless you have commonality, the only thing likely holding that relationship together may be the need to save money.

The Church has also fetishized the nuclear family. Our programs and outreach are still aimed at getting families into our communities. Yet, according to [“Census 2016: More Canadians than ever are living alone, and other take-aways”](#) in *The Globe and Mail*, people living on their own have gone from being about seven percent of the Canadian population in the early 1950s to being almost four times that amount in 2016. In fact, single-adult households are now the most common family unit, just edging out families with two adults with children and families of two adults, with no children.

Where do we start to change this? First and foremost, we need to keep reminding ourselves that we are a body. Not a body in the sense of a collection of individuals, but parts of a living, breathing, body. When Paul speaks of the body in 1 Corinthians 12, he speaks of a human body, where all parts are connected with each other. A hand that is cut off from the body ceases to function as a hand, and the body is forced to compensate, putting more pressure on other parts of the body.

Like most analogies, this falls down because, when the physical body loses a part, it can't be replaced. However, when a part of the body is injured, the act of compensation may make it easier for the injured part to heal and become even stronger than it was before, in the end making the whole body stronger.

One thing that we could do as a Church to invite singles in more is to remember that we follow the lead of Jesus and not Emily Post. Given that there are so many more single females than males, more dinner parties that involve couples could round out their numbers

with two single women rather than finding a man and a woman.

The Church should also be inviting singles into greater leadership. I'm grateful that the Anglican Church of Canada doesn't view my singleness as something that disqualifies me from being a priest. However, senior parish leadership too often places emphasis on leaders who are married with families. This is one reason we can't break out of this notion that we should always be targeting families. A good question for a newcomer ministry in a parish could be: Does this ministry make an effort to help singles integrate with couples and families in this parish?

Earlier I mentioned the need for some measure of commonality. This is something we often forget. We as the Church have a commonality, and that is we are all called to live out the love of Christ to the world around us.

Our baptismal covenant calls us to such a life. The first part of that covenant is the Apostle's Creed, and the second part begins with the question:

“Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?”

There is nothing in this question that suggests that it only relates to our intimate circle, but rather that it is something in which we all participate, no matter what our relationship status. Single, married, with children, without, we are all meant to be in relationship.



Donald McKenzie is the incumbent at St. Philip's Anglican Church. You can find his thoughts on food at his blog, [Dining with Donald](#).

Alone, but at Home

MICHELLE OWENS



When I moved to Winnipeg in the summer of 2017, my furniture took quite a few days to catch up with me. A friend had accompanied me on the road trip here from southern Ontario, but she flew back before the moving truck arrived. Since I didn't start working at the Centre for Christian Studies for another week or two (thank goodness, as all my work clothes were on the road somewhere!), I was left in an empty apartment in a new city. Alone.

This is the first time I have ever lived by myself. After moving from my parents' house in the small town where I grew up, I lived with roommates, and then with my daughter and eventually my (now ex) husband and a second child. I have lived with parents and partners and kids and friends and cats and dogs and goldfish and even a turtle. But the move to the prairies coincided with moving into the empty nest stage of my life. Even my dog and houseplants stayed in Ontario!

Some of the adjustments to living alone are immediate, concrete, and practical: grocery shopping is different now that my 20-year-old son is no longer in my household! Other aspects of alone-ness sneak in like fog – it took me a while to notice how often I could spend a weekend without talking to another person. I've learned to be a bit braver with offering invitations, and also go by myself to concerts or other events.

The circumstances of alone-ness shape our experience of it. Alone-ness can feel like a restorative retreat, a heartbreaking loss, spacious freedom, or numbing loneliness. The circumstances that transition us into alone-ness can be sudden or gradual, freely chosen or devastatingly foisted upon us.

Our experiences of being alone shape the ways we offer, receive, and participate in ministry, from who is invited into leadership roles

to which secular holidays we celebrate in worship, to how we navigate coffee time. Our sense of being alone – of who is alone and whether alone-ness correlates with being single or partnered, how alone-ness and loneliness are connected – shapes our decisions.

Some of us appreciate the quiet and space of being alone more than others. Some of us associate being alone with being lonely. Others have experienced loneliness most acutely in broken relationships or at the edges of community.

I find stretches of time alone with myself restorative, and I have to more actively work at not letting myself become isolated – especially as following my call to ministry has included many moves into new communities. I suspect many introverted clergy struggle to reserve enough energy to forge and maintain social connections; it is easy to feel "peopled out" by Sunday afternoon!

And yet there are times when being alone feels haunted by grief, when Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13 feel less like an exhortation and more like a lament:

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."

What kind of love do we need to “have” in order to avoid being a noisy nothing? Are love and alone-ness discrete from one another? Does alone-ness itself generate needs?

A widely held belief in the Church seems to be that **Being Alone + Being a Certain Age = Needing a Visit**. Preferably from the minister. And the practice of pastoral visitation is one which generates feelings of inadequacy amongst clergy – visiting is easy to let slide down the priority list. Pastoral visitation often falls by the wayside when parishes can no longer afford full-time clergy. Part time (or unpaid) ministry often only covers Sunday worship and pastoral emergencies. Lay people may not feel well equipped to become pastoral visitors. The differences between social and pastoral visiting are not always clear, especially for “regular” visitation (rather than visitation during crisis or loss).

In my experiences of visiting older parishioners who lived alone, the state of alone-ness did not create a common visitation situation. Some people were isolated and mourning the absence of loved ones and the loss of social connection. Others were fiercely independent and had busier schedules than I! Some visits were with wise elders who deftly oriented me to the community through storytelling, others

filled with long pauses as a deeply buried spiritual concern started to surface. Prayers and stories and tears and wisdom were shared – but I am not convinced that their alone-ness provided anything other than the opportunity to make time to visit. I wonder how many visits were missed because people weren’t identified as being alone? I wonder who might be better served by a strengthening of their community ties rather than a visit from the minister.

The gravest danger of assigning pastoral visitation to clergy is that it risks displacing the pastoral ministry of the community. Congregations are strengthened when the laity is empowered and equipped for the ministry of visitation – taking fellowship and community with us beyond the sanctuary doors. Time spent together can alleviate moments of loneliness, but, more importantly, knits us together in community.

Being alone can mean many things, and will be experienced differently by each of us at different moments in our lives. We give a gift of honesty when we acknowledge the deep pain of loneliness and the reality that loneliness is not a state limited to people easily identified as alone. We give a great gift of presence when we visit with one another in a spirit of grace and kindness, by not being in a hurry. Sometimes we give ourselves the gift of alone-ness – a stretch of time to be at peace with ourselves, to listen to our own concerns and joys.

At its best, alone-ness grants us the understanding that we are never alone at all. That the One who loves us – Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer – is always at our side and in our hearts. Already waiting in the quiet empty apartment in the new city. Always ready to welcome us home.



Michelle Owens is a diaconal minister and the Principal of the Centre for Christian Studies, a national theological school in Winnipeg with connections to the Anglican Church of Canada and The United Church of Canada.

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Parish News Round Up

Evensong

The Evensong schedule for March is:

- **March 3:** All the King's Men (St. John's College), 7:00 p.m.
- **March 10:** St. Luke's Anglican, 4:00 p.m.
- **March 17:** St. George's, Crescentwood, 4:00 p.m.
- **March 24:** All Saints' Anglican, 4:00 p.m.

St. Saviour's Anglican

Threads of Hope will be happening again on March 16, where the project will be Dog toys, crate blankets, and belly bands for Hull's Haven Border Collie Rescue. Drop in between 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., and stay for however long you can. There's lots to do, even if you can't sew. Please bring your own sewing supplies, as well as a lunch if you plan on staying for the day. Material donations are also appreciated: cottons and poly cottons, flannelette, fleece, and heavy material for dog beds. They will also be repurposing gently used clothing and pillows.

For more information, contact Cindy Bell: 204-668-7166, or cindyjbell@shaw.ca.

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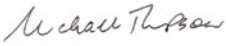


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With every blessing,



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MAR-JUN 2019



This page of the Parish News Round Up is sponsored by Richard Rosin. For more information, see his ad on page 6.

Truth and Reconciliation: Westworth 2019 Interfaith Dialogue

March 11 to April 1

This dialogue series will explore the following questions:

- What type of healing do we each need?
- What faith-based skills & techniques will help us address truth and reconciliation?
- How does our faith teach us to be treaty people?
- How can our faith community respond to the TRC Calls to Action?

Monday, March 11:

Congregation Etz Chayim (123 Matheson Avenue E), 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Speakers: Shahina Siddiqui, Executive Director of Islamic Social Services Association, and Theodore Fontaine, Sagkeeng Elder, survivor of Fort Alexander & Assiniboia Residential Schools.

Monday, March 18:

Manitoba Buddhist Temple (39 Tecumseh Street), 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Speakers: Steve Heinrichs, Director of Indigenous-Settler Relations at Mennonite Church Canada, and Stan McKay, Cree Elder and former Moderator of the United Church of Canada.

PWRDF Rupert’s Land and Canadian Foodgrains Bank

Chris and Leianne Lea, who started the Anglican Grow Hope project last year, headed to Ethiopia with Canadian Foodgrains Bank on an educational trip in February. Below you can see some of their photos with captions about how farms operate in Ethiopia.

For more info, contact
Rev. Loraine MacKenzie Shepherd
Westworth United Church
(204) 489-6974, ext. 22;
westworthminister@gmail.com.

Monday, March 25:

Manitoba Buddhist Temple (39 Tecumseh Street), 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Speakers: Steve Heinrichs, Director of Indigenous-Settler Relations at Mennonite Church Canada, and Stan McKay, Cree Elder and former Moderator of the United Church of Canada.

Monday, April 1:

Westworth United Church (1750 Grosvenor Avenue), 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Speakers: Ruth Ashrafi, Judaic Studies Advisor at Gray Academy of Jewish Education and Instructor of Hebrew Bible at the University of Winnipeg, and Chickadee Richard, Anishinaabe Elder and Co-Founder of the Bear Clan.

See photos on the following page...



Clockwise from top-left:

Met these amazing farmers today. The average size farm here is 1.7 hectares. The Canadian Foodgrains Bank has helped them practice conservation farming practices, which include reduced tillage, better water retention on the soil, and growing legumes for nitrogen fertility.

Typically, grain storage losses are quite high due to rodent and insect damage. Anglican Grow Hope/Canada Foodgrains Bank will distribute 10 of these 600-kg storage bins on a trial basis to help the farmers have a constant supply of wheat throughout the season.

These are some of the volunteers that work with the Canadian Foodgrains orphanage program. They tutor orphan children during the evenings and weekends to ensure that they achieve a quality education.

Final stage of harvest, after the cattle have tramped seed out of the heads and straw is removed. The farmer separates the chaff by throwing seeds in the air to let the wind blow the chaff away; the grain is then bagged.

Creation Matters Working Group

As spring approaches, the Creation Matters Working Group, a National Church group, invites your parish to prepare to celebrate Earth Sunday, either on Easter Day, April 21, or the following week, April 28.

As part of the service, plan to sing “All Things Bright and Beautiful,” one of the most famous children’s hymns. Cecil Frances Alexander was inspired by the countryside, but now the areas that were *bright and beautiful* are shrinking because of resource extraction, uncaring multinational companies, and an apathy for preservation.

Creatures both great and small are disappearing in the sea and on land due to over-fishing, pollution, and destruction of habitats. Last year, an orca whale held her dead calf out of the water for 17 days; shipping and the lack of salmon have made her pod vulnerable. And for small creatures, the plight of the monarch butterfly seems to have motivated so many people to plant milkweeds. It is not too late to save these and other creatures that are finding it hard to survive.

Others verses in “All Things Bright and Beautiful” mention *radiant flowers*, but non-native species are increasingly crowding out indigenous plants.

Vibrant birds are still singing, and most of us have heard the *loon’s wild haunting call*, but their numbers are also decreasing.

We still have *cold winds in the winter*, but in the Canadian Arctic, warmer winds have been blowing. In her book *The Right to be Cold*, Sheila Watt-Cloutier, an Inuit activist, documents the dangers a warming Arctic is having on Inuit peoples. Sea ice is disappearing, and it is harder and more dangerous to hunt; polar bears can’t find enough food; and melting permafrost is causing homes to sink.

The hymn mentions the *Rocky Mountain splendour*. But in the Appalachian Mountains in the U.S., coal mining companies are using explosives to blow off the tops of mountains

to expose the coal. Burning coal is one of the worst climate emitters. The destruction of the mountains leads to soil erosion – causing mud flows, which pollute the rivers below.

In Canada, those forests in the fall have become paper or they are destroyed for bitumen extraction. Insects are killing many varieties of trees, making them more susceptible to forest fires. In other parts of the world, Rain Forests are disappearing at an alarming rate to provide land for farmers or to grow palm oil.

The final verse of the hymn says, “God gave us eyes to see them / and lips that we might tell.” So what do we need to do about the devastation of creation? As Anglicans and stewards of creation, we must first acknowledge earth’s losses. We must use our eyes to see and our lips to tell, our fingers to write to all levels of government, our hands to plant trees and gardens, our feet to walk and march, and our hearts and minds to pray. *How great is the Creator, who has made all things well*. It is up to us to ensure that it recovers and remains well.

Please celebrate Earth Sunday and take some small action every day to combat climate change and extinction.

Creation Matters Working Group is a working group of the Public Witness for Social and Ecological Justice coordinating committee of the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada.

Upcoming Issues

In **April**, we’ll find out all the ways Rupert’s Land is encouraging parishes to step outside the box in this issue on **Creative Disruptions**.

In **May’s** issue, we’ll meet **God in the Garden**.



"Christ in the Wilderness" by Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoi, 1837–1887.

"I'm too alone in the world, yet not alone enough
to make each hour holy.
I'm too small in the world, yet not small enough
to be simply in your presence, like a thing –
just as it is.

I want to know my own will
and to move with it.
And I want, in the hushed moments
when the nameless draws near,
to be among the wise ones –
or alone."

– From Rainer Maria Rilke,
"The Book of a Monastic Life,"
Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God.

Why Our Loneliness Points to Truth: How Alone-ness can Show Us Our True Home

KIRSTEN PINTO GFROERER



This piece concludes Kirsten Pinto Gfroerer’s explorations of the monastic traditions. Her first piece, [“Reading the Great Spiritual Writers of the Past,”](#) appeared in January 2019’s issue, and her second, [“Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience: Re-learning How to Give,”](#) appeared in February 2019.

No matter what the conditions of our life, all of us feel lonely. There are moments in most days where we feel an abyss open between us and the person sitting across the table. Be it a stranger, parent, spouse, friend, child, or colleague, something happens and we cannot reach each other anymore. Being lonely is not cured by marriage, by friendships, or by meaningful work; it is not cured by riches or poverty. We all find ourselves, in the silence of these moments very, very alone.

This lonely silence can make us afraid. And so, we look to fill our lives with things, screens, activities, ideas, and people. This can sometimes make it worse because, when we do attempt again to speak our truth, when we are intimate with another person, we find we cannot communicate. Our minds are scattered or frantic, everything comes out all wrong, and the rifts get bigger. We can be stifled by the distractions we created to cover our fear.

Sometimes we try other ways to cure our

discomfort with loneliness. We hold on too tightly to those we love, fusing our self to another, frantically over communicating or manipulating people to stay close to make us feel better about ourselves. But it doesn’t work. As much as community is important, as much as the gift of intimacy comes into our life, we cannot depend on these to take away loneliness. It is part of what it is to be human.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, said in *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections*:

“Loneliness makes us confront the mysteriousness, the elusiveness of our own reality, makes us recognize that it is never exhausted in our relations and our words and our acts. The truth of our selves, the foundation of our selves, is something baffling, toughly resistant to all our efforts to bring it out into the open or other people’s sight.”

Loneliness points to the mystery of our personhood and the truth of our self, which is inimitable. If each one of us is created as distinctive and particular, then our differences make for alone-ness. This is the truth of self, given by God to each one of us; it is our life which is, as St. Paul said, “hidden with Christ in God.” It’s the hiddenness that makes us feel alone when we try to communicate it. Our truth is always slightly beyond our reach. But, in the silence of the alone, when we are prone to be afraid and frantic, we are extremely close to the truth of who we are in God.



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We all run from our alone-ness, and thus we all run from our lives. The only one in all of history who did not succumb to the temptations to run from his alone-ness is Jesus Christ. He did not attempt to evade it, but rather went into the Garden of Gethsemane alone to pray. He went into Pilate's court in a silence without self-defence. And he confronted Pilate's question – "what is truth?" – with his own death, the death of the Son of God in love. Jesus Christ, the God Man, knew who he was and what the truth was, and he knew that he was incomprehensible, incommunicable to fallen humanity. Thus, he took the hard truth of our loneliness to the cross and filled the space of our isolation with love and the abysses of our ultimate inability to understand one another with the fullness of his presence.

Now in the depths of our loneliness we can meet God. Jesus Christ allowed himself to be misunderstood and mistreated – he became the one most alone and forsaken – because he was communicating the truth of God, which is love. This love, which went to death and is risen from the dead, has made a place, a home, for humanity where we are most alone, a home where we can be safe. This home has the shape of a cross, and thus it remains filled with pain. But, because it is a true place of love, it is a place of life.

In these last few articles, I have been pointing to ways in which ancient spiritual writers and the monastic tradition of the Church can serve as a resource for us as we seek to live faithfully in this world. To teach us the hardest work of faith, staying in the loneliness of our hiddenness, we must turn to one of the most severe disciplines in the tradition of the Church for help: the medieval anchorite. When a person became an anchorite, a funeral service was held for her, and she entered into a tomb-like space attached to a church, which was called the Anchorhold, to live alone confined. The room had three windows: one that opened onto the church sanctuary, one that opened onto the road, and a third that opened onto a room where an assistant resided. There was no door in the Anchorhold. The anchorite withdrew from the world in

order to lose her life to find it, and to be with God alone. Few of us can imagine choosing this life, but the witness of the anchorite is that an enclosed place, though it feels like a tomb, can be a place of abundant life.

Anchorites in their alone-ness became a focal point, a centre for their community. They were honoured and beloved. People came to their window off the street to ask questions about their own lives, to ask for prayer or wisdom. The Anchorhold represented for the people a place of hope and rebirth. In facing the truth of their alone-ness and the truth of God's present love the anchorite became a pillar from whom truth, wisdom, and love could flourish for a community.

Julian of Norwich was an anchorite, and, in her small cell, she wrote *The Revelations of Divine Love*, the first book in England to be authored by a woman. This text speaks to the depths of God's love in words that have challenged, comforted, and strengthened the communion of saints for 645 years.

She spent her life looking at Jesus Christ on the cross, and what she discovered was this:

"He wants us to have true knowledge that he himself is being and he wants our understanding to be founded in this knowledge with all our might and all our purpose and all our intuition; and upon this foundation he wants us to take our place and make our home."

This anchorite reminds us that in our most lonely places we have a home; only there can we learn and become the person we are uniquely called to be. Few of us are called to the life of an anchorite, but all of us are called to face the silence of our alone-ness in order that we might find our truth hidden in God in Christ.



Kirsten Pinto Gfroerer is a counsellor and writer currently learning from the medieval theologian and mystic, Julian of Norwich. She is part of St. Margaret's Anglican Parish where she served for a long time as a pastor. To learn more about her work visit [the Anchorhold](#).