**Loneliness: social distancing, stay at home orders, isolation, doubts and death**
**By Bob Young**

Let's talk about loneliness! Loneliness is associated with increased risk of heart disease, inflammatory diseases, and immune system disfunction. Loneliness is more likely to cause death than smoking, according to research at the University of Michigan. A study by Dr. Robert Wallace found that loneliness among the elderly was a better predictor of mortality than blood pressure. Sociologist Robert Weiss, University of Massachusetts, *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation*, connected loneliness and shame.

Today, our world has been turned upside down. In an age that was already characterized by broken families, fallen Christian leaders, and gated neighborhoods, we now add social distancing, restrictions on movement with curfews and stay-at-home orders, increasing isolation, disorientation, and a constant awareness of death. The Christian church has the answer, but does not know how to respond. The world is crying out for community at the very time that many Christian communities are turning inward. We can say that there is now a church in every home, but the reality is that visitors are not welcome in most of these hundreds of new "churches."

Before I articulate a healthy and helpful response by the church, let's wrap our minds around loneliness.

What is loneliness?

Dr. William A. Sadler, Jr., sociologist at Bloomsfield College, NJ, wrote about five categories of loneliness – interpersonal, social, cultural, psychological, and cosmic. *

→Interpersonal loneliness. This loneliness is easy to understand, experienced in the **death** or a spouse or close friend, or when a close friend or family member moves away. Interpersonal loneliness is familiar to most. Basically, it is the result of **losing an intimate relationship**. Interpersonal loneliness is often the result of death, but a sense of interpersonal loneliness may come through other events that cut off intimate relationships, including the constant threat of death, such as our world is experiencing today.

→Social loneliness. This loneliness is a feeling that results from being cut off from a group one considers important. Interpersonal loneliness is personal, social loneliness is social. Especially over a longer period of time, **social distancing** contributes to social loneliness.

→Cultural loneliness. This type of loneliness occurs when one is separated or alienated from a former way of life characterized by traditional and ingrained behaviors. This is the often the loneliness of new missionaries who go to a foreign mission site. For this study, it is the loneliness that comes when our **lifestyles and usual behaviors are interrupted**, or when the culture around us is threatened, the result of restrictions, curfews, and "stay at home" orders.

→Psychological loneliness. What happens when people lose touch with themselves and their feelings? We act on our feelings. When our feelings are in turmoil, we do not know what to do and often do nothing. The problem is made worse through **isolation**. Our feelings often come from social interactions; without such interactions we do not know what to feel and what to do. The result is inaction.

→Cosmic loneliness is a sense of disconnection from an ultimate source of life and meaning. For the Christian, this is source is God. In times of doubt (Where is God?) and despair, many feel disconnected from God. In times such as we are experiencing, multitudes are seeking God, wanting to deal with their sense of cosmic loneliness. Augustine was right: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

The church has an answer to the increased loneliness around us, loneliness that is the result of the present distress. The cry of our culture and society for community can hardly be missed. Yet, despite its ability to attract large numbers of people – many of whom fail to find meaningful involvement and relationships, the institutional church model is relatively powerless to meet the need. Christians must learn how the gospel contributes to community in order to discover a way forward. This new way will result in multitudes finding Christ during these difficult days. The next articles explore how the church must respond.

*The expanded definitions, edited for application in a Christian context, are based on descriptions by Carole Ritter.