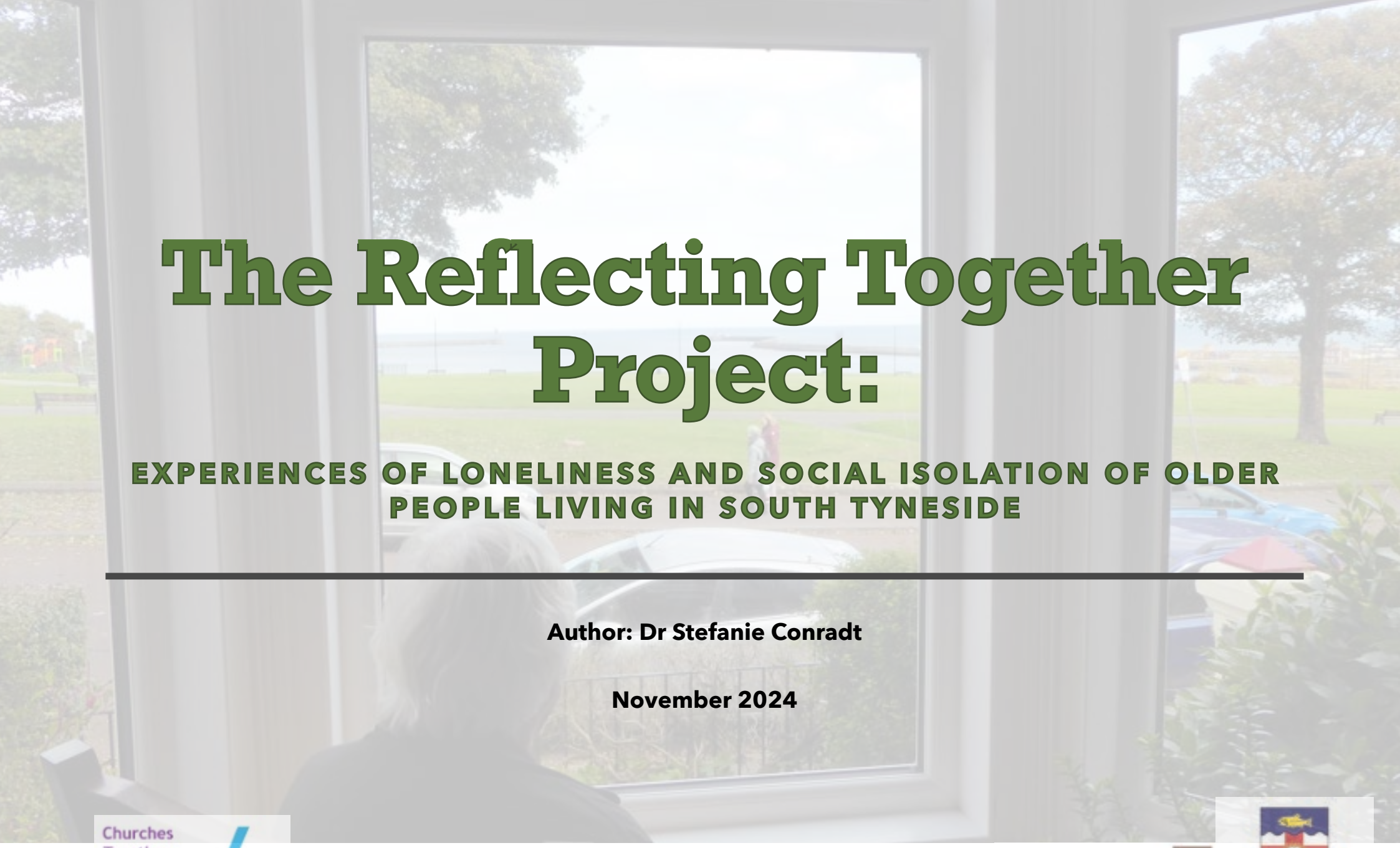


The Reflecting Together Project:

EXPERIENCES OF LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION OF OLDER PEOPLE LIVING IN SOUTH TYNESIDE

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Churches Together active in South Tyneside

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Cover Picture: Churches Together South Tyneside (2024).

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About the author

My name is Dr Stefanie Conradt and I am a Fellow of the William Leech Research Fund and a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow of the Centre for Baptist Studies, Regent's Park College, Oxford. I was awarded my doctorate in Practical Theology in 2023 by the University of St Andrews. As a practical theologian, I have a passion for theological action research. Working in a participatory way inspires me: it is a privilege to see organisations explore their practices when exercising theological reflection. More broadly, I am invested in finding ways of working at the intersection between practical theology, ecclesial praxis, and matters of social justice. I am invested to further an international discourse in congregational studies, having lived and worked in different cultural contexts. I have a background in ministry as well as in the social work sector.



Longing.

It's night-times.

Don't see neighbours.

At home by myself.

Routines.

Go out, find something.

Made good friends,

Active mind

Camaraderie.*

*Poem by Stefanie Conradt: beneficiaries' voices on loneliness.

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1. Executive Summary

The Reflecting Together Project is a participatory project, conducted in the Northeast of England. The ecumenical charity Churches Together South Tyneside (CTST) and principal investigator Dr Stefanie Conradt worked in partnership to find new ways to tackle the suffering that emerges from loneliness and social isolation experienced by older people. This Theological Action Research involved older people living in South Tyneside and those working with them. Overall, five groups both internal and external to Churches Together South Tyneside (CTST) were included in the meaning making process: CTST staff and trustees, representatives of local churches, representatives of the local council, health care and social care agencies, as well as a group of theological educators.

In a society where older people tend to be overlooked and cast aside as insignificant economic contributors, it proved as an important step to notice the lived experiences of older adults. Intending to take up a prophetic voice, The Reflecting Together Project contributes to a public theology of loneliness in two ways. First, it provides learning about how times of transitions, as inter-dependent experiences of time, loss, and place enable experiences of loneliness and social isolation. Special attention is given to the nuances of experiences of loneliness and social isolation. Second, the report conveys a new understanding that focusses on the importance of acting as a *whole* community (ubuntu) to keep older peoples' dignity intact. Only the *whole* Body of Christ can tackle suffering arising from experiences of loneliness and social isolation. Through theological reflection The Reflecting Together Project offers a response in the form of building little communities, in which older people are valued as 'prophets in

disguise', tackling individual as well as structural dimensions of loneliness and social isolation.

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

The Reflecting Together Project groups committed their time to listen and notice older persons' experiences of loneliness and social isolation. New ways of working emerged as people sought to make sense of God's story in the horizon of their every-day practices. To emphasise this process, quotations and poetry assembled from the beneficiaries' reflections, as well as from the reflections of the trustees of CTST, are included in this report. The reader is invited to step into the groups' meaning making process and take inspiration from our ideas for intervention. This report is particularly helpful for those inspired to keep the dignity of older people intact: church staff and lay leaders, theological educators involved in ministry formation, as well as volunteers and staff of social care and health care organisations.

SECTION SUMMARIES

This report consists of four parts: **The Introduction** will provide a layered understanding of South Tyneside and the people involved in The Reflecting Together Project. In this section, consideration will be given to what motivates the project members, as well as the reasons behind CTST's intention to contribute to public theological discourse on loneliness and social isolation. Contextualising South Tyneside as one of the most deprived areas in England, this section concludes by outlining the ethical commitments of this study. This gives insight into the process of participant recruitment and data handling in the context of this project.

The Meaning Making Process informs the reader on how The Reflecting Together Project members worked together. This section explains the rationale behind the two key commitments of theological action research - partnership and theological reflection (*noticing*). The report outlines how this way of working contributes to the implementation of changed practices by asking continuously how the data discloses fresh wisdom about God in everyday life.

The third part provides a brief literature review which will signify the importance of this project within a wider horizon. **Nuances of loneliness and social isolation** are explored; the beneficiaries' account reveal that experiences of loneliness and social isolation are created and amplified by times of transitions (i.e., experiences of interrelated features of time, loss and place). Using a qualitative research approach adds a much needed perspective within the context of the current debate, which overemphasises quantitative research data in policy making and academic discourse. Instead, voice is given to older people and their reflections.

The final section, **Practical Interventions**, presents the outcomes of the meaning making process. *From the pastoral to the prophetic* describes the recommendations put forward by CTST and the reflection groups. These practical responses make way to cherish the dignity of older people and value them as 'prophets in disguise'. This section identifies the significance of shaping (faith) communities as whole, reciprocal and pastoral. This section will conclude with material used in The Reflecting Together Project in order to support other (faith) communities in their pursuit to thrive from the pastoral to the prophetic.

Reciprocity.

Connective responsibility:

Getting over barriers.

The spirit of communion.

Influencer*

*Poem by Stefanie Conradt: trustees' voices reflecting on loneliness.

2. Introduction: 'Let's call it *The Reflecting Together Project.*'

The Reflecting Together Project started with a shared motivation and dedication to provide new learning into experiences of loneliness and social isolation of older people. Prior experiences in listening events and meaningful engagement with an older clientele motivated CTST to invest in finding new ways to tackle loneliness and social isolation. Their aim is to validate older peoples' place in their local community as well as in the society as a whole.

'We shared in the motivation to provide meaningful research that keeps the dignity of older people intact.' (Stefanie)

Throughout her university education and in her previous employment Stefanie has implemented a reflective and participatory way of working. Sharing in the motivation to provide meaningful research that keeps the dignity of older people intact, Dr Andrew Orton, director of the William Leech Research Fund connected both parties. As one group CTST and Stefanie embarked on a theological action research journey that would look into experiences of loneliness and social isolation as *The Reflecting Together Project*.

Contrary to the usual expectations of research, participatory research does not propose a 'research question' that leads to a specific answer in the end. It is a step of faith in itself as it trusts the reflection process to reveal questions and moments of discernment. That said, a couple of questions guided our attention in the beginning: how are loneliness and social isolation experienced by older people, and how does CTST, as

well as their local network of churches and social care and health care providers alleviate or contribute to these experiences? For this reason, representatives of local churches, health care and social care agencies, the South Tyneside Council and theological educators were included in this project.

The partnership that arose between CTST and Stefanie from the very beginning of this project, enabled a cooperative design of the 'research boundaries', summarised in the following bullet points:

- Timeline: 12-months, November 2023 – November 2024.
- Two project sites internal to CTST: *Happy at Home* and *Nurturing Dementi*a.
- Focus of data: experiences of volunteers and beneficiaries involved in CTST projects.
- Work ethics: value of networks and ecumenical partnership between agencies and churches.
- Dissemination: project report, end-of-year conference and academic open access journal article.

SOUTH TYNESIDE

South Tyneside is an ageing region with 73.2% of the population being older than 25 years old and 20.9% adults aged 65 and older.[1] South Tyneside Council estimates that the proportion of people over 65 years old will grow by another 20% by 2028.[2]

Historically, South Tyneside gained a reputation for its coal and shipbuilding industries. Heavily impacted by the miners strikes and the deindustrialisation of the 1980s, the borough suffered from vast unemployment and economic instability.[3] Today, South Tyneside still draws a lot of its 'economic strength' from manufacturing and its 'coastal location.'[4]

Economically, South Tyneside is the 27th most deprived borough nationwide, and the '3rd most deprived borough overall in the North East region.'[5] It is the 15th most deprived in health, and ONS verifies a lower life expectancy for men and women living in South Tyneside in national comparison.[6] Poor health is therefore related to issues of poverty resulting from economic struggles.[7] One of the factors leading to poor health is loneliness and social isolation, inflicted by deprivation. (This discussion will be extended in Chapter 4.)

RESEARCH SITES

CTST was founded by local church members from different denominational background to support the local communities in South Tyneside and address issues such as loneliness and poverty.[8] As an umbrella organisation it offers projects that address the needs of different clientele. Two of these projects, involved in The Reflecting Together Project, are *Happy at Home* and *Nurturing Dementia*. The staff and project leads of both projects need to be commended for their work as well as their support in spurring on this project throughout the past year.

Happy at Home is a befriending service for older people experiencing loneliness and social isolation. A home visiting service and monthly hubs invite beneficiaries to be part of a community regularly. The hubs meet in four different churches and church halls across South Tyneside: St Matthew's in Jarrow, Whitburn Methodist Church in Whitburn, St Bede's Church Hall in South Shields and Sacred Heart Catholic Church Hall in Boldon.[9] Officially, the hubs are run from 11:30am – 1:30pm; but usually the first beneficiaries arrive earlier in joyful anticipation. For older people with mobility issues, Happy at Home organises a taxi service.

The hubs include a lot of activities; the all-time favourite rounds of Bingo, singing, and quizzes, whilst enjoying the busy chatter during biscuits, tea/coffee and lunch. Sometimes mobility exercises and manicures are offered, as well. The programme varies and develops in reflection with the volunteers. The project is led by Miriam Ritson and comprises three staff members. That said, it is dependent on its volunteer-force accompanying the hubs and engaging in the befriender programme. The Reflecting Together Project film depicts the work of Happy at Home and the impact on its beneficiaries (please click on this **YouTube link** to access the video).

Happy at Home is organised in such a way that some of its members are involved as volunteers in one hub, whilst attending another hub as beneficiaries.

Happy at Home, 2024.



Happy at Home Staff (2024).

Nurturing Dementia provides a support network for people diagnosed with dementia and their carers. As the Reflecting Together Project started out, Nurturing Dementia was focused on raising awareness of dementia and creating dementia-friendly places.

As project lead, Maria Scurfield-Walton (who has long-term experience as a mental-health nurse) established a 'DEEP-' group that meets at St Gregory's Church Hall, South Shields from 1:00 – 2:30pm on a monthly basis. DEEP – an acronym for the 'Dementia Engagement and Empowerment Project' – is part of the UK Network of Dementia Voices.[10] It aims at establishing groups of people diagnosed with dementia and facilitating change by giving them a voice and the opportunity to be heard.[11] The group started with five members and has grown since. Maria also offers and organises workshops which provide learning-opportunities about dementia and how to create dementia-friendly places, such as the dementia-friendly church group in St Gregory's. As Nurturing Dementia is a younger project and at a stage of establishing its programme, the monthly committee meetings played an integral part in reflecting on its work and how best to identify new ways of working.



Nurturing Dementia Project Lead (2024).



Nurturing Dementia DEEP Group Flyer (2024).

TOWARDS A PUBLIC THEOLOGY OF LONELINESS

CTST grew dissatisfied, observing the increase of older people experiencing loneliness and social isolation. As a Christian organisation CTST is convinced that every person's value is non-negotiable and that every person is intended to live as an integral part of a (faith) community. The trustees conveyed their vocation and ministry with the following descriptions:

- Expressing God's 'with-ness', as ultimately present in Jesus Christ and
- Gathering and creating a community as the Body of Christ. Just as every part of a body bears a task and importance, so too, every member of the community has a role and is a person of reciprocal importance.

These are significant beliefs in a time where economic value and productivity determines what a human is worth.

Anna Corwin's research conducted in a Franciscan convent in the United States writes that 'The nuns demonstrated a cultural pattern of interdependence, rather than independence, of valuing each other as persons rather than as productive adults.'[12] Resonating the intent of keeping older people's dignity intact, John Swinton (practical theologian with a background in mental health) emphasises the importance of embodied faith thus: 'It is through the body of Christ that human beings find reconciliation and redemption. It is through the body that the gospel is proclaimed, prisoners are visited, the sick are consoled, lovers love . . . . . that we receive others even when our abilities to articulate that experience have faded. As we care for bodies, so we care for souls.'[13]

This has further resonance in Jesus' ministry, as narrated in the Gospel of Luke: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me . . . to proclaim the good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free' (Luke 4:18). Jesus understood his prophetic task in liberating and bringing hope to those who are overlooked by society by caring for the person's physical and mental health. Jesus outlines more distinctly what this entails in the Beatitudes (Gospel of Matthew 5): 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted' (Matthew 5:3-4).

To overlook those who experience loneliness and social isolation due to loss and bereavement, is to turn away from the Christian calling to embody the God who cares. This task is what CTST pursues through its ministry in the communities of South Tyneside. It is a prophetic witness, because through faithful actions the gospel is acted out; and the '*gospel [needs] to be seen to be believed*', according to Swinton.[14] Consequently, CTST is actively engaged in the public sector and carries its faith concerns into the public dialogue (with the local council, health care and social care agencies), beginning with noticing older people's experiences.

ETHICS

This project has received ethical approval from the University of Oxford. Concerned about the ability of participants to give informed consent, the original approach which was to record the beneficiaries' voices directly, was denied. An alternative approach was taken, field notes of conversations with beneficiaries were made and the reflective responses of the staff and volunteers were recorded and transcribed. Despite these adaptations of the research practice, the contributions of older people remain

integral to this project as the majority of recorded participants (trustees, volunteers) are similar in age to the beneficiaries.[15]

Recruitment, Data Gathering and Analysis

The project was introduced to the trustees before the official contract was signed. During this meeting the participatory research approach was introduced and possible participating organisations and persons identified. Recruitment was achieved through snowball sampling and via personal invitations extended through the trustees and staff.

Happy at Home participants were recruited through the project lead, staff and volunteers. Volunteers and staff facilitated reflective conversations with beneficiaries about their experiences. Consequently, the volunteers took the role of beneficiaries and reflection facilitators. They were trained for this task at three training sessions in March 2024 and mentored during the time that data was generated.

In the **Nurturing Dementia** project no beneficiaries were recruited. Stefanie attended the DEEP group meetings upon invitation of the group members. Reflective conversations with the project lead followed.

In both projects committee members were recruited to take part in regular reflections during their scheduled committee meetings.

All participants signed a consent form. Most participants decided to take part in an identifiable form; some opted to be pseudonymised. For reasons of data protection, all beneficiaries were anonymised.[16] Meetings were held in person and online, according to CTST's working patterns. After the meetings the conversations were transcribed by Stefanie; routinely on the same day. The transcripts

were returned to the groups, giving the opportunity for amendments. Thereafter, the documents were forwarded as reflection material to other groups. Data was recorded on encrypted electronic devices and deleted after completion of the transcript.



Audrey: 'Often an elderly person living on their own will position themselves near the window to engage with the view and all it may provide to make them feel part of the bustling life of what is around them.'

3. The Meaning Making Process

Theological Action Research is a way of doing scholarship with two concerns at heart: to do research in partnership and to practice theological reflection.

PARTNERSHIP

Partnership means that the project is conducted in a participatory way.[17] Rather than the principal investigator entering a context as an expert, the principal investigator depends (and makes herself dependent) on working together with the teams in order to 'co-create knowledge.'[18] The participatory way of working acknowledges people as experts of the context and the work they do. They are important contributors in the meaning-making process. The meaning-making takes place in cyclical reflections of the research data – in other words, in reflection of the accounts and narratives of lived experience presented by the beneficiaries, volunteers and staff. In this project, the partnership was established between Stefanie as the principal investigator and the different groups internal to CTST.

A particular close working relationship emerged between Bernadette Askins (former chair and now co-chair), Audrey Tennet (current chair), Paul Southgate (executive lead) and the project leads of Happy at Home (Miriam Ritson) and Nurturing Dementia (Maria Scurfield-Walton).

Theological Action Research is a way of learning.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Theological Reflection is a way to identify faith as an integral part in the meaning making process. The originators of this methodology suggest that research needs to be 'theological all the way through.'[19] In other words, it asks what these experiences, conversations and reflections disclose about God and the Christian faith. This happens throughout the process in form of *noticing* (theological reflection). Theology – faith-speak – is not imposed on the meaning making process but emerges through the dialogue by partners referring to the Bible, other writings (e.g., poems, devotional readings), and by recognising shared beliefs and actions.[20] Theological reflection poses an invitation to participants to 'make connections between their story and God's story.'[21] In Theological Action Research these theological reflections are held in two teams, the **internal reflector group**, who 'owns the practice,' and the **external reflector group**, who looks at the data from an outside perspective that is external to CTST.[22] The process is cyclical and runs through all groups in several cycles, thereby deepening the learning that takes place. It is a 'rippling effect' that impacts all groups involved, as David (Happy at Home staff) imaginatively described the process with this analogy.

Therefore, Theological Action Research is more than an approach – it describes a way of learning and viewing the world around you. By this way of working, new practices emerge that bring change and in the best case, the practice continues after the principal investigator leaves the research site.

Who took part and how did we work?

The Reflecting Together Project starts with the **beneficiaries**. Volunteers and staff members of

Happy at Home held conversations with the beneficiaries. Negotiating questions with the project lead and staff beforehand, they asked questions, such as: how did your parents grow old? How is that different to you today? Who do you see during your week? Who do you miss?

A recorded reflection session with **the staff and volunteers** followed. These conversation notes and transcripts were forwarded to the **internal reflector group (trustees)**, alongside the transcripts from the reflection meetings held with Maria (project lead of Nurturing Dementia) and the committee meetings of both projects.



Figure 1: Reflection Groups

A selection of transcripts were also forwarded to the external reflection groups: 1) representatives of member churches of CTST, 2) local social care and health care agencies that CTST shares clients with and 3) theological educators as a new network opportunity for CTST to influence teaching in ministry formation.[23] Due to the many participants, this project included two church reflector groups.

Trustees and staff members attended external reflection meetings, as well, carrying what was discussed back into the context of their own projects and thereby informing the next set of reflection questions with the beneficiaries. The external reflector conversations were transcribed and forwarded to the internal reflector group in anticipation of the forthcoming reflection cycle. Overall, CTST experienced four reflection cycles.

Figure 2: External Reflection Groups Outlined

External Groups:	
Churches	Two ecumenical groups: working and retired clergy, lay people, a representative of North East Churches Acting Together. Two meetings; both groups were scheduled for the same day with an opportunity to join for lunch after/ before the reflection. Place: Sacred Heart Catholic Church Hall.
Agencies	Representatives of South Shields Council, Age Concern, St Cuthbert's Care, Alzheimer's Society, and one member is employed as a health psychologist in South Shields. Two meetings were held in a conference room in South Shields Town Hall.
Theological Educators	Representatives are involved in ministry formation in the Northeast, with one exception. Two meetings: the spring meeting was held online and the September-meeting was scheduled as a reflective workshop in the afternoon in Durham.

Paul writes in reflection of these meetings:

'The research brought together academics and practitioners. We, the practitioners, were not sure what to expect but we plunged in. (. . .) Stefanie introduced a model of reflection in all our group meetings. The first reflection, I recall, was around the question 'When did you feel lonely in your life?' We all shared an experience of loneliness, which people often don't like to admit, but it built an atmosphere of trust and empathy. We understood that naming our own loneliness made us more receptive to understanding the loneliness of others. These moments of shared reflection have strengthened us as a team.'

Methods

Prior to the meetings, group members were asked to read the transcripts and accounts of beneficiaries' lived experiences'. The groups transitioned into the reflective space through three methods: quietness, devotional Bible reading, and photo-elicitation. These methods were used to inspire a creative approach in engaging with the lived experiences of older persons.

Quietness was a method that Stefanie practised throughout all groups. Keeping quietness at the beginning and sometimes in the middle of the conversations allowed for a reflective space to emerge. This differs from agenda-focussed meetings and provided the space for quiet prayer and an internal dialogue with the beneficiaries'/volunteers' accounts.

'What are you lonely from?' (Jean)

Devotional readings were used in both the theological reflections of the internal reflector group and in the conversations with the representatives of local churches. For the internal reflector groups, four readings were chosen from the New Testament, circling around the practice of 'noticing': Jesus noticing the poor widow in the temple (Luke 21:2-3), Jesus noticing Peter's ill mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14-15), and the writer Luke noticing in his narrative the prophet Anna (Luke 2:36-38a). During the last meeting the group was asked to notice Zachariah and in what way they perceived him as contributing to the community (excerpts from Luke 1:5-11).[24] The group members of the churches reflector groups reflected on the prophet Anna in both meetings.

Photo-elicitation was used as a method to enable identification with the beneficiaries' accounts. Matching with the commitment to work in partnership, photo elicitation establishes a democratising process of meaning-making.[25] This method was used in three external reflector groups: the local health care/social care agencies and Council and the local churches. During each meeting, group members were invited to choose a postcard that captured a moment, phrase or account from the transcripts that stood out to them. The visual aid deepened the participants' reflections and at times provided a helpful analogy, resulting in a string of reflections. The postcards depicted people, landscapes, items and animals to provide a broad selection for the group members.[26]



Conradt (2024).

Stefanie describes the effect that *learning by doing* had in context of the internal reflector group:

'Whilst I told the internal reflector group that we would notice together, I did not spend a lot of effort in detailing what the practice of 'noticing' entails. During our first conversation I would draw their attention back repeatedly to focus on the experiences of the beneficiaries as well as the staffs' and volunteers' reflections. It was a moment of discomfort. That said, through learning how to participate and practice theological reflection (noticing), the internal reflector group became mentors of the practice in other reflection groups.'

4.Nuances of Loneliness and Social Isolation

Looking into the current discussion on loneliness and social isolation, it becomes clear that times of transition and loss are linked to experiences of loneliness and social isolation. In this chapter this report will give a glimpse of what is generally defined as loneliness and social isolation and in what way this project offers an important contribution to the contemporary discourse.

INSIGHTS FROM CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE

When speaking about loneliness and social isolation one needs to commend Jo Cox' efforts and the Jo Cox Foundation, following her tragic murder. Jo Cox raised this issue to the attention of the public and UK government. The Jo Cox Foundation, defines loneliness as '"a subjective, unwelcoming feeling of lack or loss of companionship",' as referred to in the government report *A Connected Society*.[27]

Similar to this report, *The Campaign to End Loneliness* draws from the same working definition and highlights the subjectivity of experiences associated with loneliness.[28] Understanding is deepened, as the authors differentiate between 'chronic loneliness' and passing experiences of loneliness.[29] A prominent distinction is made in regards to 'social isolation', identified as an 'objective state', potentially leading to loneliness, but not necessarily so.[30]

The World Health Organisation (WHO) provides an important addition to this discussion; similar to the accounts mentioned so far, 'loneliness' is defined as a 'painful subjective feeling – or 'social pain' – that results from a discrepancy between desired and

actual social connections.'[31] WHO refines that it is ''the objective state of having a small network of kin and non-kin relationships and . . . few or infrequent interactions with others' that lead to a person experiencing social isolation.[32]

In summary: experiences of loneliness are highly subjective. They arise as an incident or ongoing pain of when a relationship appears to be or is lost. Social isolation refers to the relational, societal and logistical locus of a person that prevents them from engaging in social interactions meaningfully.

Times of Transitions

In *A Connected Society* scenarios of losses and times of transitions are suggested as plausible causes leading to loneliness (for example bereavement and loss by moving house). Only two years later, the research undertaken by The Campaign to End Loneliness ascertains that times of transitions do link to feelings of loneliness.[33] Christina Victor et al. identify and explain in their article 'Loneliness in Later Life' that losses are indeed an underlying theme when older people experience loneliness. The authors caution, however that more research needs to be

There is a need to understand the particularities and lived experiences behind the statistics.

developed from the older person's point of view: 'as well as trying to examine trends over time and current patterns, here is a need to examine older people's understandings of the key issue of loneliness and to develop our theoretical and conceptual understanding of these aspects of later life.'[34] Twenty years later, the need for more experience-oriented

research finds reiteration in the report *The State of Loneliness 2023*.[35] Indeed, many studies use their analyses of quantitative studies in order to tackle loneliness and social isolation: The Campaign to End Loneliness leans heavily on the ONS, as other writers refer to the UCLA Loneliness Scale.[36] This is not enough, because it lacks understanding of the particularities and lived experiences behind the statistics.

Health implications

According to the NHS loneliness as well as social isolation have long-term health implications for older adults.[37] WHO explicates that 'physical health conditions such as cardiovascular disease and stroke' as well as 'mental health conditions such as cognitive decline, dementia, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and suicide' can be caused by experiences of loneliness and social isolation.[38] Consequently, loneliness and social isolation is indeed a public health concern.

Loneliness and Social Isolation in South Tyneside

The UK government report *A Connected Society* (2018) affirmed loneliness and social isolation as a pressing concern in public health.[39] Research by Age UK, published in 2017 confirms this as a pressing concern for the Northeast of England – bearing in mind that this report offers information dated pre-COVID.[40] The Health Profile for the North East (2021) notes an increase in experiences and feelings of depression and anxiety as well as an increase of life lived in poor health, particular in national comparison, since 2016/17. Therefore, the deprivation of South Tyneside adds a burden on mental health and access to public services, which in turn affects experiences of loneliness and social isolation of older people.

Summary

This brief review indicates that both terms are in flux as research and learning matures. It is an important task to continue inquiring into experiences of loneliness and social isolation. Summarised briefly:

- Loneliness is a subjective and unique experience, suggesting that it needs to be treated as an individual problem.
- There is a connection between loneliness, social isolation and times of transitions/loss.
- Deprivation increases the likelihood of experiencing loneliness and social isolation. It is a pressing matter in the borough of South Tyneside.
- There is a need for research that prioritises lived experiences of older people. This gives this report a distinct role in the current debate.

Figure 3: Summary of Loneliness and Social Isolation

5. Voices from South Tyneside

Reflecting on older people's accounts led to the realisation of three features that impact and impose experiences of loneliness and social isolation: time, loss and place. These features are not to be understood as distinct - they are interconnected. That means they overlap and at times determine one another. This gives new insight into the nuances of loneliness and social isolation experienced by older people.

Transition.

Imposing Loss.

Talk about pain.

Being aware of people.

Community.[41]

TIME

'They [my sons] work a lot.' (Amy)

'Yes, I'm by meself. It's the night time. That's why I come to places like this. It fills me need.' (Brenda)

Hope's story, as told by her befriender: 'Her family phones every day, but don't visit daily; she never knows when they are going to call. Or when they are going to pop in. She knows her neighbours and they would message if she was stuck, but no one visits from the neighbourhood. Leaving her alone and lonely.'

These women share, how times of waiting around are associated with experiences of loneliness; one can sympathise that this experience is burdensome:

waiting for the night to end, waiting for some time to open up in a busy work schedule and waiting for people to visit, because they say they would visit, without committing to a specific time.

In the following conversation, Maeve (volunteer at Happy at Home) unpacks how her dialogue partners have 'these gaps' in their weeks where they do not see anyone. They have their respective appointments and gaps in between. And the women respond:

> Grace: That's the same for me, exactly.
>
> Maeve: There is no continuation.
>
> Grace: That's true.
>
> Maeve: [turning to Violet] And you are looking for routine.
>
> Violet: That's it!

These gaps with no interactions and uncommitted visits or phone calls produce times of waiting that convey experiences of a 'long day'. The experience of waiting is one where time is not passing by.

LOSS

Julia explains how as one grows older one's role gets reversed from caring to being cared for by the family. Anna explains how she loves to care for her family and exclaims that 'I'm the Mammie!'

'I don't miss anyone particularly. I miss the routines of going.' (Violet)

When asked, who she misses, Erica answers: 'Granddaughters.' *She explains that her grandchildren are now in their teens and twenties. They are busy and have jobs.*

Loss emerged as a prominent topic in times of transitions. These experiences of loss shrink the world of older people and often evoke patterns of waiting that facilitate experiences of loneliness and social isolation. Certain forms of loss inflict loneliness and social isolation on the carer as well as the person cared for, as only one person is singled out to carry the responsibility of caring. Miriam states that 'there's a lot of them, who want a specific person that they [have at their] beck and call, for want of another way [of saying].' The following list paraphrases what beneficiaries described as experiences of losing, missing someone or something and longing for someone or something - here categorised as 'loss of':

- closeness with grandchildren, family, friends and neighbours
- mobility,
- people, in particular spouses and friends,
- routines,
- camaraderie,
- group meetings, due to the termination of these, during the COVID pandemic,
- visits.
- a role, due to retirement and the increased need for care (a role-reversal),
- choice of food and groceries.

Figure 4: Beneficiaries' Descriptions of Loss

Implications of loss

These losses are conducive of creating space for experiences of loneliness and social isolation. For example: decreasing mobility, leads to a decline of interactions, as well as the loss of agency and choice, as the trips to the grocery store become unmanageable. This creates space for experiences of loneliness and social isolation for the older adult, as changes in routines and a person's role are imposed: the parental carer becomes the cared for, as Julia points out. When every-day patterns are dictated, what food to buy and what food to eat, it impacts the role that is tied to these actions, referred to the experience of a role-reversal.[42] With Helen's reflections (theological educator), one can sympathise that this 'being cared for' can strip a person of their agency and choice over their daily diet: 'the thing that was most poignant for me was not being able to decide what to eat. And that must just be such a moment of powerlessness.…'

PLACE



'the fact that I had moved out, [my mother] was lonely.' (Maeve)



'It keeps your mind active.' *Debbie shares how she experiences her becoming slow but that visits make a difference:* 'Your mind gets slower, but when you have a visit, you're dusting.'



'You can't say it's always geography that makes people lonely ….' (Miriam)

Place plays a vital role in experiences of loneliness and social isolation. Some beneficiaries shared how they had made the choice to move to family, leaving friends behind. Others, like Debbie expressed how anticipating a visitor keeps the mind busy and conveys new meaning to the home-space, as the

older person takes up the role of being the host. Further, transportation was a common point that beneficiaries brought up as a means to move between places, or the loss thereof. Beneficiaries described how they

- lost confidence to access public transportation, as frailty developed,
- found new ways of moving around by tapping into relational or material resources (e.g. mobility scooter, car pooling),
- lacked regular contact, especially when friends became frail, as well and were unable to meet in the middle, use public transportation or afford private means for a visit, such as Taxi and Uber.

Being house bound, lacking visitors, as well as being unable to move between places inflicts experiences of loneliness and social isolation. It is not always geography that causes people to be lonely, as Miriam - project lead of Happy at Home emphasises. Even when older people leave their context behind to move closer to family, this transition does not alleviate their loneliness and social isolation, as they leave their friends and established context behind. This tension becomes more complicated as staying at home can impose similar experiences of loneliness and social isolation, as Ann reflects:

'…the lady who refused to leave her old house. And almost isolated herself rather than maybe being able to process [that] her need to be with her family was more important. That kind of thinking. Your place in the world changes.' (Ann, trustee)

In the DEEP-group public facilities and the lack thereof, was identified as an issue that causes people to avoid public spaces, imposing experiences of loneliness and social isolation. This realisation led the project lead of Nurturing Dementia to acknowledge

that concerns of accessibility and signage are not only a matter for people diagnosed with dementia, but for all older people: 'the whole way of working has changed for me. ... I know now it needs to be anything with everybody. ... it is about connectiveness,' Maria says.

Indeed, connectiveness emerged as a key-word and main focus for the work in CTST, as the groups realised how a lack of connection in communities can foster stigma related to age and dementia, which in turn are conducive for older people to experience loneliness and social isolation. When stigma prevents a person from fully participating in a social event it amplifies the loneliness and social isolation they face.



Buissinne (2016).

6. Practical Interventions

In this chapter, the report first tackles the external reflections that emerged in response to the beneficiaries' voices and describes what action steps were discussed and implemented in these groups. Secondly, practical interventions that emerged within CTST are presented, leading into the next chapter and what this entails for a renewed public theology on loneliness.

TIME

Time emerged as a particular concern amongst the representatives of the Council and local health care and social care agencies. The group identified that these times of waiting around and not waiting *towards* something are contributing factors through which older persons relinquish their agency in planning their own schedule.

Recalling similar incidents in her work context, Hazel Cuthbertson (Service Manager at South Tyneside Council) emphasised the importance of providing the space for older people to reclaim agency: 'Because they've lost that. That accommodating anybody and everybody. So that importance of reinforcing people's natural authority…. So, there is almost like a culture creeping in of enforced passiveness. You're just

> There is almost a culture of enforced passiveness creeping in. (Hazel)

waiting for things done to you rather than being in control how they and when they happen to you.'
Hazel is committed to implementing changes within her team that value the natural authority of older people and provide the space where beneficiaries become active dialogue partners.

Moved by the impact a lack of time commitment has on the beneficiaries, Nicola Milne (Marketing Manager at St Cuthbert's Care) reflects on the transactional nature of her visits: 'It feels like everyone's much busier than they used to be and, you know, yourself flying around and trying to get everything done…. It's probably about sitting down and taking that time. Because they often have lots of conversation and now I'm like thinking, 'Oh, I gotta be out now,' you know.'

Time is a valuable asset for carers and the lack of time can lead to experiences of moral distress, as Nicola expresses. She describes how she is torn between seeing the need to give more time and the pressure of keeping up with the schedule. Nicola's experience is not unique; it is an ongoing workforce challenge, according to the Care Quality Commission (2022/2023). This brings up serious questions as to how policy-making imposes experiences of moral distress for carers that prevent relational encounters between both, carers and persons who are cared for. Nicola is dedicated to taking more time during her visits, intending to shift from a transactional visitation model to a relational visitation model.

From the perspective of a private carer, Audrey identified this challenge as a care-sandwich, 'with your children being working parents, and you supporting them through the childcare. But you're being pulled into another direction [care for older people], as well.'
It is the challenge of dividing one's resources between different demands that inflict loneliness. This reflection is meaningful for family members and volunteers as well, for example, when setting up the shopping list, organising online shopping and dropping off

groceries. It is a helpful question to consider ways to move brief meetings and interactions from the transactional to the relational model for every person, who shares in caring responsibilities and is conflicted by moments of moral distress.

LOSS AND PLACE

All participating groups were struck by the diversity of loss expressed by the beneficiaries. The groups discerned that these are often inflicted in times of transitions and require special attention. There is a particular close connection between loss and place, which explains the fusion of both topics in this section. The following example explains this reasoning:

As the loss of mobility increases, people grow dependent on their relatives and carers; physically unable to leave the house or perhaps lacking the confidence to leave their home. Unable to use public transportation (mobility reasons/ financial reasons) fosters a home-bound life, shrinking the world of an older person.

Agency Reflector Group

The culture of passiveness re-emerged as a consequence of the loss of control and loss of choice as families and friends impose (often well-meant) decisions on older people. This often results from a one-sided care dynamic and the importance for care to be perceived as a reciprocal action between carer and cared for surfaced.

Moreover, Stephanie Kerrigan (Funding and Development Manager of Acts - Age Concern) explicated the significance of building connectivity as a way to facilitate active participation of older people: 'you have to make these connections, not just for yourself…, but actually helping other people make

the connection that we've already talked about. We have a lot of volunteers that actually run our groups. So, maybe it's having the conversation with those volunteers.... That would be important for us as an organisation.' In the project, these connections were referred to as 'incidental contacts'. Stephanie highlights the meaningful impact these incidental contacts have as they create a space for reciprocal encounter and provide a role for both the volunteer as well as the older person. A smile, a nod, a chat are small actions that have great impact in countering the loss of a role and experiences of loneliness and social isolation.

Churches Reflector Group

In both churches reflector groups, connectivity arose as a matter of personal engagement, as well as a communal and collective response. According to Father Keith (priest, overseeing three local Catholic churches) this entails: 'To be able to reach out to people, to be able to fulfil that gospel. Because if that's just left to me as a priest, I ain't gonna [be] able to do it. I need the people. But it's more than just the Catholic Church.' To practice connectivity across church communities is an active response to the gospel and mirrors Jesus' prayer of unity: *I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you*. (John 17:20-21, NIV)

In reflection on the same concern, Coryn Stehouwer (Regional Officer of North East Churches Acting Together) stated: '… we have so many churches doing all the same kinds of things and we end up working in these silos….' For church-communities, connectivity entails therefore, a loss of a silo-mentality. It is important to unite the resources and act out the gospel together - as one united body, reflecting the one Body of Christ. The task to exit a pattern of insular thinking is identified.

Len (retired minister of a local Methodist Church) unpacks what connectivity entails on a personal level:''building a little community'. … the best way is to have a little community of people who drop in. And that's society of the little community where it's vibrant, it's interactive, it's productive.' Wrapped in Len's reflection is the ubuntu philosophy, which CTST introduced into the conversations. Ubuntu entails 'that it is only possible to become a person through other persons.'[43] Consequently, practising connectivity and building little communities is an active process of becoming a person; a task that does not stop in old age, but continues on an individual level, as well as on an organisational level. This intention explicates a response to a prayer Len quoted: 'Lord, help us find our way to one another.'

The representatives of the churches groups committed to the following action steps.

- Members will implement the practice of incidental contacts with other church members.
- Members will (continue to) plan a church services from point of view of an older person's mobility: to consider creative ways of enabling a person to carry out their roles when physically frail.
- Conversations started to explore the possibility of electing an overseer or overseeing group to supervise cross-church activities in the region of South Tyneside.
- Ageism was discerned as prevailing in church communities: 'stick your money on the plate, then pray for us.' (Keith) The group members committed to emphasising the value of older people and to make room for the faith stories they can share. Like the prophet Anna (Luke 2), older people have a role within the community: 'the elderly people have made a faith journey with God. … they've got a lot to offer, not just in words. … in actions still.' (Keith)

Figure 5: Action Points - Churches Reflector Groups

Theological Educators Reflection Group

The theological educators shared in the concerns, expressed by the representatives of both groups, the health care and social care agencies and local council, as well as the local churches. Their attention shifted in particular to what the beneficiaries' experiences imply for pastoral work and ministry training.

Indeed, the pastoral task to identify and discern loss became a key-concern to the theological educators. Markus stated in reflection of the beneficiaries' voices: 'I think things that were interpreted as loneliness and isolation but under that was unresolved grief … that's grave.' During the second meeting, Helen re-emphasised this point: 'And I was just thinking about Julie being made redundant as a grandmother. … she's grieving the loss of her role as an active grandmother.… How do we journey with her until she finds something that continues to make her feel useful?'

The group determined that pastoral care is meaningful when it is able to detect the loss that emerges in times of transitions, which potentially create experiences of loneliness and social isolation, such as retirement, grandchildren 'outgrowing' their grandparents, increasing frailty. Moreover, the group reflected that this work entails an ongoing process



Mirka (2019).

rather than an episodical encounter, as often happens around conducting a funeral.

Noticing the ministers' account and the need for a collective response, the members of the theological educators group identified that this, too is a collective task. Shaun explains: '… somehow you need to have as many eyes and ears as possible for those who need this care. And to think of different ways of engaging with them. … [to] find ways of helping…, if help is what they need or want.'

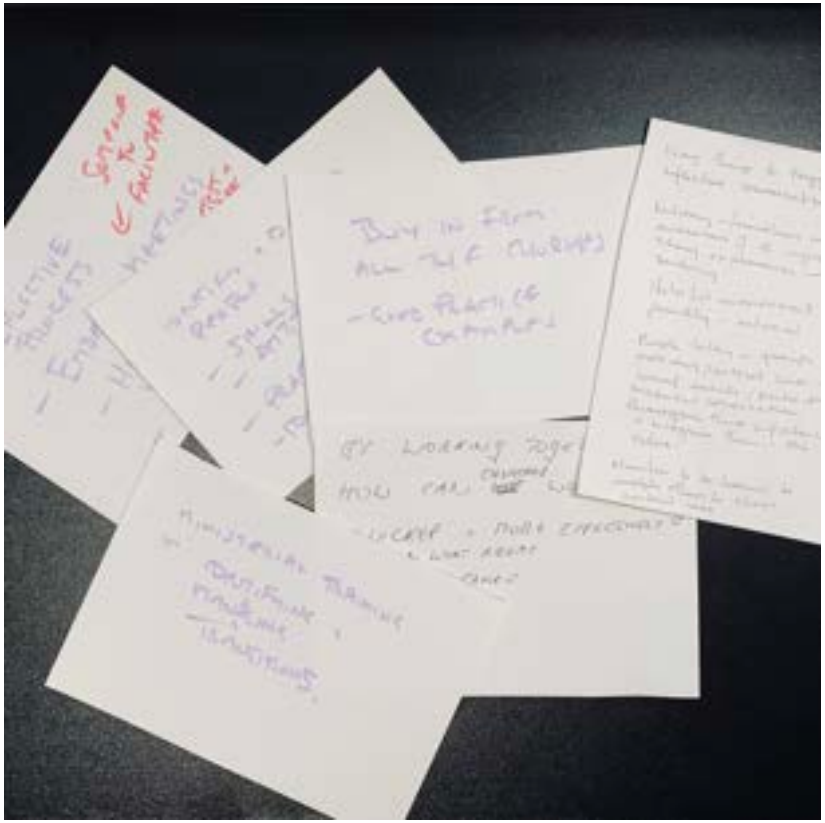
'Reimagining pastoral care' means practising pastoral care in unexpected places and incidental contacts.

Indeed, pastoral care is not just the minister's responsibility, but everyone's and practising incidental contacts and building little communities are considered pastoral actions. In Bernadette's words: '… the people who are talking together in groups, supporting each other, we should reinforce that they are providing pastoral care; … the incidental conversations people have within events, social events, these are really important….'

John Morley (lay worker alongside older people at North Shields and Whitley Bay Methodist Circuit) described this approach as a way of 're-imagining pastoral care' and adds that this entails practising pastoral care in different (unexpected) places. Reimagining pastoral care refers to unplanned moments where pastoral care meets a person content to offer it. This can happen in seemingly insignificant incidental actions.

During a workshop-session in the last meeting, the group discerned the following action steps for the training in ministry formation:

- Identifying and managing transitions,
- teaching skills to identify needs (dementia, loneliness),
- facilitating and embedding the reflective practice in meetings and using methods as ice breakers (photos),
- sensitising and raising awareness for the importance of incidental contacts,
- facilitating conversation groups as a collective method to exercise pastoral care,
- clergy receiving training in delegating pastoral care,
- leading by example and encouraging cross-church work (i.e., 'buy in from all churches').



Conradt (2024).

Churches Together South Tyneside Projects

Across all groups internal to CTST the most pressing action step emerged in implementing the practice of noticing in their committee meetings. As the groups exercised theological reflection, they identified a necessary shift to prioritise those, CTST seeks to support over agenda items.



'We have become, I suppose, very task focused in our meetings and so on.' (Harriett, trustee)



'I think our loss is our gain. We want to lose a way of working…. The amount of time we've given to instrumental things. And we've got to leave that behind.' (Jane, trustee)

Convinced of the impact of this way of working, Maria and Audrey invested time to take on this task. Both facilitated a reflection session for their respective committee meetings, aiming at implementing a practice after the end of this project. Stefanie offered mentoring and feedback during this time, which turned into another small training-session of *learning by doing*. Moreover, the trustees are exploring different methods of recording their sessions, which speaks to the intentionality of seeing this change through. A particular challenge for the trustees is to identify which action step to support and implement first, considering the volume of reflections that have emerged in a short time: 'And then there's a huge area of taking that forward about how do we improve people's lives? Knowing their story, having reflected on their story, and having heard their voice[s]. We need to move forward and it's about, you know, how do we do that?' (Audrey)

Throughout this project, Maria and Miriam have continued to establish a working relationship with each other. The reflection sessions and conversations with the older people reinforce for Miriam the importance of the work that Happy at Home offers.

She explains, how this project tackles the loneliness of their volunteers and carers next, which emerged as a new challenge in recent months: 'I think we're connecting the volunteers a lot. … We cannot forget that they're volunteers but they're also beneficiaries … and a lot of them actually need a lot of support at the minute. And they're kind of drawing on Happy at Home for that support.'

The greatest change for Maria developed as she came to re-define her role. From a sole dementia focus, she now understands her role as project lead in a proactive and broader sense: 'Because it's not just about being dementia friendly anymore, for me. Because of our reflections actually, Stefanie. That's helped me to think in my role in the socials now. For me and the Nurturing Dementia in this project it's really important that we'll get it right for the parishioners on the whole and that's older people.' Networking with facilitators of other social events in the area, Maria started to include the DEEP group at a monthly social event, held in a local church hall. Seating the group members at different tables, they experienced themselves as equal parts of the community, as other guests were ignorant of their diagnosis. This action undermined the stigmatisation of the DEEP-group members and allowed connectivity to emerge. Furthermore, it enabled Maria to network with local parishioners proactively.



Unified films (2024).

7. An Enriched Public Theology of Loneliness: from the pastoral to the prophetic

From the pastoral to the prophetic emphasises the pastoral work already underway in CTST, local churches, the local Council and social care and health care agencies. It is due to their pastoral commitment that these project members worked hard on discerning and implementing new ways of working to address experiences of loneliness and social isolation at an individual as well as structural level. With this, CTST and the project group members shift into taking up a new role – to be a prophetic voice amongst their network and across their communities.

As a Christian organisation, CTST understands Jesus' ministry and gospel as the explicit presence of *God with us*. Therein, CTST finds a purpose and an invitation for reciprocity; gifted by the Spirit, to act like Christ as part of the Body of Christ. Jesus understood his ministry as intended for the poor and those overlooked by society: the prisoners, the persecuted, the poor and the poor in spirit. (Luke 4, Matthew 5). Embodying Jesus' ministry entails therefore, identifying who 'the poor' are in this day and age.

Nowadays, poverty describes not only those lacking financial resources, it also refers to those relationally poor: those who are lonely and socially isolated. This poverty is intensified in old age, signified in the three interdependent features of time, loss and place: loss of mobility and the developing of disabilities (hearing and eyesight) shrink the world of older people as well as their access to social contacts. Financial poverty increases social isolation and loneliness and has to be considered as part of the problem. Considering further, how in society a person's value is determined by their economic productivity, emphasises how this age group, as well as their carers are continuously overlooked and disadvantaged.

Referring to policies implemented at the turn of the 21st century, James Woodward states that 'our economy relies on the care provided by family and friends. If only a small number were to give up caring … the economic impact could be disastrous. With an increasingly ageing population, it shows the urgent need for better recognition and support for carers.'[44] Since 2008 (the date of Woodward's publication) little progress has been made in improving the health and social care system and Woodward's conclusion still stands.

This project is a shift from the pastoral to the prophetic, because The Reflecting Together Project members are giving new insights as to how pastoral care needs to be reimagined to address those suffering from loneliness and social isolation in old age.

It creates a tension when ministers and local churches dedicated to the highest commandment to love God and 'your neighbour as yourself' overlook people suffering from loneliness and social isolation. If older people are treated as 'you have done your bit,' the church ignores their value as prophets in disguise: people who have a lifetime of experience and due to these experiences are able to identify Christ in unexpected places, like Anna the prophet (Luke 2). Indeed, neglecting older people contradicts a church's daily worship, as it overlooks those, Jesus dedicated his ministry to in order to bring close the God who loves and cares, as Harriet points out: 'The other part of the story that touched me was Jesus coming and seeing the need. In all the stories [transcripts] were various people seeing the need …, whether it was within the families that they spoke of or the volunteers.' (Harriet)

In many ways, ubuntu reiterates the highest commandment, because only a person willing to see themselves as a whole person through others can grasp the necessity of extending love to others.

Practising 'with-ness' through noticing is a way forward in building little communities:

A community that notices the relationally poor and implements incidental contacts as reciprocal care and prophetic action. Dedicated to *learning by doing* and breaking down stigmas by facilitating encounters.

A community that is pastorally engaged in responding collectively to the gospel. This entails changing how ministry is understood as a church-community practice. Facilitating incidental contacts are moments of pastoral care. Just as Jesus notices the old widow in the temple, incidental contacts become moments in which another person is seen, and noticed. Further, by facilitating reflection groups people noticed each other's loneliness and social isolation, as well as their own. Identifying the universality of this experience is a powerful pastoral moment, as well: as these lived experiences are disclosed, pastoral care is offered and participants build community in recognising their shared challenges.

A community of opportunity: as church is thought about from the point of view of the older person's mobility, opportunities for their skills and roles are opened up. Conveying the significance of incidental contacts and their responsibility in facilitating these, creates opportunities in which older people identify a pastoral role within a community network.

A community that honours the dignity of the older person is a whole community. Just as young people depend on peers as well as the older members of a community, older people are not whole without contact and friendships to their peers and younger people. It takes little communities to protect older persons and keep their dignity intact.

Reciprocity.

Connective responsibility:

Getting over barriers.

The spirit of communion.

Influencer.[45]



Unified films (2024).

GETTING STARTED: PRACTISING INTERVENTIONS AS A COMMUNITY

Tackling experiences of loneliness and social isolation of older people can be an overwhelming task. In this section, group-sessions, questions, and methods are outlined to help facilitate noticing experiences designed for an internal group of a church-community context.

Getting started as a team:

Outset: as a first step it is helpful to identify the need and consider the question of the motivation and reason to look into this topic. This project identifies that loneliness and social isolation are influenced by contextual factors, such as poverty and economic circumstances. What form of loneliness and social

isolation is present in your church community? Are people time-rich but cash-poor or perhaps vice-versa?

Team structure: identify a conversation facilitator. The facilitator is not primarily actively engaged in the conversations held internally in a church community. The facilitator keeps with the agreed time commitment and leads through the session, particularly important when leading into and out of quietness, as some people struggle to bear the silence. When recruiting people, identify who is in your church and who is missing. What are the reasons for people not taking part?

Duration and minutes: reflection sessions are most productive between 20 and 60 minutes. It is helpful to agree on a note-keeping method beforehand (transcription, Ai transcription; audio recording; film recording, Note-taking, Chat GPT etc.) When recording the sessions, it is helpful to rely on more than one device and to receive consent from all partners involved.

Preparation:

Welcome: consider starting with a hospitable beginning by serving coffee, tea, biscuits. This approach creates the opportunity for participants to engage in conversation and get to know each other before and after the reflection session.

Place: organise seats in a circle that allow the group to face each other. Avoid filling the space with tables if possible.

Photo Elicitation: in a separate area lay out post cards on a table for people to choose from. Alternatively, people can bring a photograph or item that they chose that reminds them of an experience of when they were lonely. (This approach takes more logistical preparation.)

Group Session Outline:

1. Quietness
   2-3 minutes, when starting out. Time can be extended after a group grew familiar with the method. Facilitator: *I am going to lead into a moment of quietness. I am inviting you to close your eyes and focus on the following reading/ question. I will break the silence and lead into conversation.*

2. Devotional Reading
   Guide: similar to the Ignatian Examen Prayer or Lectio Divina, find a reading that mirrors the need that you have identified in your community. Read a short passage twice and allow quiet time for personal engagement, before directing the attention to a question. Example:

   Reading: Matthew 14:22-23

   Method: the same part of Scripture can be used several times. 'I am using the same passage of Scripture with the churches groups. However, I am changing the focus: what does Jesus notice? Next time, why does the author notice this scene? Another time, what do the disciples notice?' (Stefanie)

   Question: What did Jesus notice that made him retreat into loneliness and social isolation?

3. Photo elicitation: Which postcard reminds you of a moment in which you experienced loneliness and social isolation? Once every person has chosen a postcard and takes their seat, people share their experiences. Allow every person to share their thoughts.

4. Conversation:
   Identify a maximum of two questions that the facilitator concentrates on for the conversation

after the photo elicitation. Possible questions:
1) If understanding experiences of loneliness and social isolation is of interest: what were you noticing that helped you understand that experience?
Or: Is something missing in the shared experiences that you would have expected to hear?
2) How well do you think are church communities preparing their congregations to notice experiences of loneliness and social isolation?

5. Quietness
   Close with thanks for people's participation and a moment of quietness that allows people to exit this reflective space they have shared.

8. Conclusion

Addressing experiences of loneliness and social isolation is a matter of keeping the dignity of older persons intact. Against the tendency to assume that older persons 'have done their bit' it is important to not write them out of community. A community without its older members is not whole. Indeed, community is not an idea, nor a dream, but what emerges when people notice each other. Older people are only then a valuable part of the community when they are noticed, heard and given a role. This happened in The Reflecting Together Project.

In this project, group members came to identify important signifiers for building wholesome communities by noticing nuances of loneliness and social isolation as layered experiences of time, loss and place. Listening to and reflecting on the accounts of older people created the opportunity to discern how loneliness and social isolation is amplified in daily life. Just 'as it takes a village to bring up a child', so it takes little communities to protect older persons and keep their dignity intact. A community that values the dignity of older people as prophets in disguise is one that notices, that is pastorally engaged and creates opportunities for stepping into a role. These communities build connectivity by committing to reciprocal scheduling patterns and reimagining pastoral work as a collective pastoral response. Practising incidental contacts is more than an episodical kindness; it is a witness to the God, who cares and who revealed himself in Jesus Christ with a dedication to notice the poor and disadvantaged in society. All that it takes is asking the question:

What are you lonely from?

Endnotes

[1] 'Population', South Tyneside Council, March 2023, https://publications.southtyneside.gov.uk/reports/our-south-tyneside-2023/#section-population.

[2] Ibid.

[3] 'King Coal Exhibition shows South Tyneside Lost Pits', BBC News, accessed 26 September 2024, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-44008103.

[4] 'Economy', South Tyneside Council, March 2023, https://publications.southtyneside.gov.uk/reports/our-south-tyneside-2023/#section-population.
'Industrial Heritage: Coal and Salt', South Tyneside Council, 2024, https://www.visitsouthtyneside.co.uk/article/12749/Industrial-heritage.
Cf. Christina Beatty and Steve Fothergill, 'The Long Shadow of Job Loss: Britain's Older Industrial Towns in the 21st Century,' in *Frontiers in Sociology*, 5. 54, (2020): 2-3.

[5] 'Our South Tyneside', South Tyneside Council, March 2023, https://publications.southtyneside.gov.uk/reports/our-south-tyneside-2023/#section-deprivation--inequality.

[6] 'Independence & Ageing', South Tyneside Council, March 2023, https://publications.southtyneside.gov.uk/reports/our-south-tyneside-2023/#section-independence--ageing.

[7] 'Key Findings', Health Profile for the North East of England 2021, accessed 1 August 2024, https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/static-reports/health-profile-for-england/regional-profile-north_east.html.

[8] 'About Us', Churches Together South Tyneside, accessed 20 September 2024, https://churchestogethersouthtyneside.co.uk/about/.

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[11] 'About DEEP', DEEP, accessed 17 August 2024, https://www.dementiavoices.org.uk/about-deep/.

[12] Anna I. Corwin, 'Care in Interaction: Ageing, Personhood, and Meaningful Decline', *Medical Anthropology*, 39. 7, (2020): 648.

[13] John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (2012), 177.

[14] John Swinton, 'What comes next? Practical theology, faithful presence, and prophetic witness', *Practical Theology* 13. 1-2, (2020): 168.

[15] The principal investigator and the line manager pursued a conversation with the ethics officer at the University of Oxford to reflect on this experience and identify a way forward for future participatory action research projects.

[16] Pseudonyms are recorded on a document, linking a person's real name to an alias. They are identifiable to the principal investigator, line manager and the project members of the same group. There are no records linking a participant to their alias, when opting to be anonymised.

[17] Cf. Mary Brydon-Miller and Patricia Maguire, 'Participatory Action Research: contributions to the development of practitioner inquiry in education', *Educational Action Research*, 17. 1, (2009): 82.

[18] Gustaaf Bos and Tineke Abma, ed., 'Co-Ownership, Dissemination, and Impact', in *Ethics in Participatory Research for Health and Social Well-Being* (2019), 104.

[19] Helen Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (2010), 51.

[20] Cf. Cameron et al., *Talking about God*, 53-55.

[21] Helen Cameron, *Poverty and Fresh Expressions: Emerging Forms of Church in Deprived Communities* (2012), 5.

[22] Cameron et al., *Talking about God*, 70.

[23] Bearing the restricted time commitment of participating agencies, clergy and university faculty in mind, the principal investigator opted to distribute a selection of transcripts to the external reflector groups. This approach ensured that project members had the time to read and reflect on the material. The content included references that were made during the conversations with the internal reflector groups and staff.

[24] These excerpts of Scripture were chosen as they mirrored the practice which developed in this project - *to take notice*. Further, they addressed topics that became significant throughout the reflections; for example, the value of being able to contribute to a community. The contemplative reading of Scripture was similar to a Lectio Divina-exercise.

[25] *See* John Marlow and Sarah Dunlop, 'Answers on a Postcard: Photo Elicitation in the Service of Local Ecclesial Strategy', *Ecclesial Practices*, 8. (2021), 171. Dunlop and Marlow offer helpful guidance on working with photo elicitation in the context of a participatory action research project; valuable insight is gained from their project tackling normative theologies of missiologies in the context of a Church of England diocese in the UK (165, 183).

[26] Conradt, 2024: picture taken of cards manufactured by *Embracing Mindfulness.*

[27] Cf. HM Government, Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, *A Connected Society: A Strategy for Tackling Loneliness* (2018), 18.
The government report presents a strategy in support of the loneliness commission, established by Jo Cox. Indeed, in 2018 the government committed to implementing recommendations offered by the Jo Cox Foundation in this report.

[28] This definition was originally proposed by D. Perlman and L. A. Peplau in the 1980s.
See A. Adams A. Goodman, The Campaign to End Loneliness, *Hidden Citizens: How can we identify the most lonely adults?* (2015); Kate Jopling, Campaign to End Loneliness, *Promising Approaches Revisited: Effective action on loneliness in later life* (2020).

[29] Jopling, *Promising Approaches Revisited*, 6.

[30] Ibid.
See Goodman, *Hidden Citizens*, 7.

[31] WHO, *Decade of Healthy Ageing: Advocacy Brief: Social isolation and loneliness among older people* (2021), 2-3.

[32] Ibid.
The discussion could be extended by Theo G. van Tilburg and Jenny de Jong Gierveld. With a background in Social Science and Sociology, the authors argue that the lack of an intimate social connection, is to be identified as emotional loneliness. Whereas social loneliness describes 'feelings of missing' a small network of non-kin relationships (i.e. a broader social network). Tilburg and Gierveld state what has been implied so far that 'social isolation' lacks a clear definition. A more substantial discussion can be found in the forthcoming open access journal article in *Practical Theology* (estimated publication in spring 2025).
See Theo G. van Tilburg and Jenny de Jong Gierveld, ed., 'The concepts and measurement of social isolation and loneliness', in *Loneliness and Isolation in Old Age* (2023), 6.

[33] Cf. HM Government (2018, 8-9.
Jopling, *Promising Approaches Revisited*, 6.

[34] *See* Christina Victor et al., 'Loneliness in Later Life: Preliminary Findings from the Growing Older Projects', *Quality in Ageing – Policy, practice and research*, 1. 1, (2002): 34-35.

[35] Campaign to End Loneliness, *The State of Loneliness 2023: ONS data in Britain: June 2023* (2023), 8.

[36] *See* Victor et al., 'Loneliness in Later Life', 35.
See 'Loneliness Scale UCLA', *Psychological Testing Online*, accessed 26 September, https://psytests.org/ipl/uclaen.html.

[37] 'Loneliness in Older People,' NHS, accessed 2 August 2024, https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/feelings-and-symptoms/loneliness-in-older-people/.

[38] WHO, *Decade of Healthy Ageing*, 5.

[39] Cf. HM Government, *A Connected Society,* 6.

[40] Age UK North of Tyne and Gateshead, *Working Together: Reducing Chronic Loneliness in the North East* (2017), 3-4.

41 Poem written by Stefanie Conradt: trustees' voices reflecting on loneliness and social isolation.

[42] The impact of this discernment is well described by David (staff member): 'That was certainly the biggest thing to me. … You know, when I said to Joy, "Well did you actually go to your mother's?" Cause really it's a role reversal, isn't it?'

[43] Jaco S. Dreyer, 'Ubuntu: A practical theological perspective', *JIPT* 19. 1, (2015), 196.
Bearing Dreyer's notion in mind that ubuntu philosophy is contested and not without criticism, the use of the quotation emphasises how ubuntu was referred to by project members; Dreyer identifies this as 'commonly associated with ubuntu'.

[44] James Woodward, *Valuing Age* (2008), 185.

[45] Poem written by Stefanie Conradt: trustees' voices reflecting on loneliness and social isolation.

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