

Why Are So Many Churchgoers Lonely?

There is more than one kind of poverty. Many believers are hungry for the sense of belonging that genuine fellowship provides.

Sometimes God uses the awareness of our own poverty to make others rich. I recently discovered this during a move to a new town. My husband, Leif, and I were new to the area; something biblical writers like to call “aliens.” Before we moved, we had asked three different pastors from three different denominations which church they would recommend. They all gave the same answer. We went to that church—committed to discover what God had for us.

We made a conscious decision not to get involved in the church for the first six months. We needed time to get settled—we were busy buying our first home, and Leif was starting a new job as well as going back to school to finish a degree in business management.

We attended church faithfully each week. But there was one problem: No one talked to us. OK, a few people here and there said hello, but despite our efforts to reach out, we received little response.

After four months, I was frustrated and discouraged. While Leif stayed behind after a service in another attempt to build relationships, I headed to the car in tears, wondering: *Why is it so hard for us to make friends here? Why won't anyone talk to us? What is it, God?*

Big, wet, hot tears rolled down my cheeks. Finally, I looked up from the steering wheel and noticed several others leaving the church. I watched as they each got into their vehicles and drove away in different directions. I knew in that moment that

I wasn't the only one who felt this way.

Feeding the Hungry

When our personal six-month moratorium ended, we knew we had to do something—anything—for others who felt as disconnected as we did. After church we began inviting people to our home. We served lunch and led a spiritual discussion video series known as Nooma (Zondervan).

More than a dozen people joined, and the comment that we heard again and again was the same, "We needed this—why didn't we start this sooner?" Out of that little group, relationships have sprouted, prayers have been answered and a heart cry for community has been met. All have been enriched.

Though many of the biblical laws and instructions regarding those in need talk about money and material goods, they also point to something deeper: Poverty comes in many forms. In the ancient world, the orphans, widows and aliens lived in a cultural context where they were more likely to be financially needy, but they were also more likely to be relationally needy as well.

Orphans, widows and aliens, by their very nature, have all experienced relational loss. They have been separated from those they love. God tells us not only to give them food and financial support, but also to come alongside them and build relationships.

He instructs us to invite them onto our land to glean and invite them into our feasts to eat. These are not people to be marginalized and set aside, but to be acknowledged, included and appreciated.

Time and time again God revisits this issue of caring for the poor—an echo that repeats itself from Genesis to Revelation. The Bible acknowledges that the poor will always be part of society, but God takes on their cause. He promises that He will care for them personally (see Ps. 132:15).

The Mosaic Law is filled with regulations to prevent and eliminate poverty. The poor were given the right to glean—taking produce from the unharvested edges of the fields (see Lev. 19:9-10); a portion of the tithes (see Deut. 14:28-29) and a daily wage (see Lev. 19:13).

The law prevented permanent slavery by releasing Jewish bondsmen and bondswomen on the sabbatical and Jubilee years (see Deut. 15:12-15; Lev. 25:39-42) and forbid charging interest on loans (see Ex. 22:25). And in one of His most tender acts, God makes sure that the poor—the aliens, widows and orphans—are all invited to the feasts (see Deut. 16:11-15).

God designed His laws and instructions to preserve and protect those in need. He is very clear that the poor are not to be abused or ignored. First John 3:17 goes as far as to ask the question, “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” (NIV).

Ouch. The question pierces my own soul, but at the same time, it raises a few questions: Who is poor in an abundant society? How do I respond to the spiritual poverty that can sometimes accompany material excess? What does the life God is calling me to live look like in relation to the poor?

I do not know. But I am beginning to discover just how crucial care for those in need is to our faith. James wrote, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27).

Faith Works

In the process of looking after those in need, something transformational happens. We begin to open our eyes to the world around us rather than just focusing on ourselves. We begin to recognize those in need in our neighborhoods and

community and decide to cross that invisible threshold and actually get involved.

At times that means writing big checks and handing over wads of cash to those in need, but it also means delivering bags of groceries, shoveling snowy walkways, mowing out-of-control lawns, volunteering to baby-sit and serving in the countless small ways that make a big difference. Sometimes I think the best gift that can be given to someone in need is a long afternoon together on a shady porch with a pitcher of iced tea.

The God whisper I have been hearing in my heart is simply this: The poor are all around you. They cannot always be identified by their material lack. In our society, poverty has become more than just a zip code.

Revelation 3:17 describes a people who have acquired wealth to the level that they do not need a single thing. Yet God exposes the poverty of the über-rich. "You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." Indeed, the poor are all around us.

Just recently I heard of a young couple looking for a church where they could build relationships. I smiled. I look forward to being on the front end of welcoming them into our community.

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