

Coronavirus has raised questions of loneliness, social isolation and relationships for the whole population. This time of uncertainty, fear, collective illness, disruption is not new to humankind, but it is new to our time and culture. Our powerlessness has been forced upon us and our individual and collective unhappiness is symptomatic of our struggle to make sense of it.

Plenty has been written about ways of maintaining well-being through considering the Biblical principal of relatedness: relationship with God, with each other and with ourselves. My offering at this time, is in this tradition, inviting you into a relationship with somebody you are unlikely to have met, to explore new ways of being and relationship.



My purpose is two-fold: the first is my desire to increase your well-being through the encounter, the second is to invite you to reflect on the learning you receive from your encounter, to notice a wider circle of people who are part of our 'family' than perhaps we have realised until now, to notice what is required of ourselves in order to come into a meaningful relationship with them, how relating to that wider family brings us closer to relationship with God, into knowing ourselves, loved and enabled to love, which, I suggest, translates our calling to serve Christ through each other.

Some years ago, the sculptor, Anthony Gormley, creator of the Angel of the North, was approached by a family, seeking to place a memorial to their daughter, near the Maggie's Centre, Dundee. They raised a considerable sum to offer for one of the artist's figures. Mr Gormley responded with incredible generosity: he asked that the funds be given to the Maggie's Centre and donated the piece instead. It stands - he stands, he is a naked man - with his back to the wards of Ninewells Hospital, on a raised bank, between a large labyrinth and the helicopter pad.

My son, Louis, shown here alongside the figure, has been detained in the Learning Disability Assessment Unit at Carseview, living on the hospital campus, for almost two years, waiting for a home in community. On our walks we have come to know the figure, we call it 'The Angel of Dundee', we stop and greet him, we pray beside him. Louis once visited the Angel of the North, though I don't think he makes that connection, or rather, I cannot know what connections he does make. What I know he does understand is the familiarity of this figure, and the prayer he learned as a child, 'Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here. Ever today be at my side: to light, to guard, to rule, and to guide.' We say it together, taking turns with the phrases until the end, when Louis' face lights up as he anticipates it, saying a resounding: '**AMEN**'

Louis lacks cognitive understanding, but has a great memory for people and places. When somebody we know is in hospital, we come here and I speak a name, with simple words and phrases to explain who we're praying for. Again, Louis' '**AMEN**' rings out loudly.

Louis' communication, because it is different, has the capacity to illuminate for me the power of language itself. Sometimes, at the start of my visit to Louis in the hospital ward, we share the pleasure of being together for a few minutes, fixing our eyes on each other and saying backwards and forwards, our special word 'eeee' in a conversation formed entirely of sound, not words.

We take it in turns, copying each other, pausing, smiling, sometimes pitching 'eeee' low, sometimes starting higher and falling. All broken with peals of laughter, joy in the moment. Louis' eyes are the brown-green of waves running over sand. I look into his eyes. I see peace in them, feel peace. We connect.

'Eeeee' is a family word, one we share with friends. My younger daughter, Louis' sister, Minty, has a tiny 'Eeee' tattooed, delicately, on the inside of her wrist. 'Eeeeh' has Elizabethan spelling,

not subject to rules. It has many variants, spelled as you want to spell it. 'Eee', 'eeeeeeeee', 'eeeeeh', as many spellings as there are people who use it.



'eeee' means in its narrowest sense, 'I love you'. More broadly, and intrinsic to it, it means 'you and I love each other, our love is a two-way flow'. Wider still, and equally essential, is the sense that in the flow between us, we are part of something bigger, that we know through this moment right here, right now, where we know that we love each other, that we are part of a greater Love.

Earlier this year, the Scottish Consortium for Learning Disabilities, (SCLD), published a paper called 'Relationships Matter' with the subtitle 'Exploring people's experience of relationships, social isolation and loneliness' based on a questionnaire called *Who Cares?*¹ With support of Scottish learning disability charities, this engaged with 1232 individuals and families. Of those, 65% needed help in completing the form, one fifth did it themselves. I responded with Louis.

The research purpose was to find out from as many people with learning disabilities as possible, how they felt about their lives, to illuminate issues important to them. This would inform Scottish Government policy decisions and practice. The policy context is the historical strategy *The Same as You* that began the move from provision of care in institutions to inclusion of people with learning disabilities in community. That policy, continues to develop under the current *Keys to Life* strategy, developing nuance.

The SCLD is an intermediary organisation, for the learning disability sector, bringing together some of the most respected practitioners and thinkers in the field, along with people with learning difficulties and their families. committed to finding new and better ways to improve the lives of people with learning disabilities. SCLD expresses its vision of the integration of people with learning disabilities into wider community, for the benefit of all, in the introduction to the report:

SCLD's vision is of a fairer Scotland where people with learning disabilities live full, safe, loving and equal lives.

It struck me, reading the report, how much of the content of these documents - issues like happiness, choice, support and life satisfaction - are equally apparent in the Christian Gospels and are important subjects in religious as well as secular domains. It seems to me that here are parallel endeavours to achieve similar goals regarding relationships and well-being for individuals and communities. The gap between is perhaps lack of first-hand experience and language on both sides, a gap in translation rather than of understanding.

The focus in 'Relationships Matter' was on relationships and loneliness in the learning disabilities community. As the report says:

The importance of relationships to individual health and well-being cannot be overstated. Studies have found that the impact of poor social relationships on risk for mortality is similar to smoking and drinking alcohol, and even greater than physical inactivity and obesity.²

¹ SCLD/ Scottish Government **Relationships Matter** Exploring People's experience of social isolation and loneliness. The first in a series of reports presenting the findings from the How's Life? survey 2020 SCLD

²Holt-Lunstad, Smith & Layton (2010) Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review

Research has underlined the crucial importance of maintaining social connections and good relationships with family, friends and others, in preventing loneliness and isolation.³

Findings show a significant connection between the experience of loneliness and provision - or lack of provision - of support. 76% of respondents reported being 'occasionally, sometimes, often' feeling lonely when they also assented to the statement 'I do not get enough support' compared with 44% who reported being 'occasionally, sometimes, often' lonely when they said they did get enough support.



In the context of care for people with disabilities this shows the challenge for families, care providers, politicians, wider community and faith groups, to ensure that people do get enough support in quality relationships. This is an invitation to engage in as many ways as are possible and appropriate to local circumstance.

And all this research was done in 2019 before Covid-19 emerged, before our whole-society experience of loss of relationship and loneliness through lockdown. In studying the findings, there are many insights from the paper that can now be seen as relevant to all of society, particularly the elderly and

vulnerable shielding at home, many of those in our congregations, and to ourselves.

Yet it remains the case that those with learning disabilities, with high care needs, have suffered disproportionately more than most. As the report concludes:

If we are to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic both inclusively and fairly, we need to overhaul the structures, processes and attitudes in the social care system, and in wider society, that create barriers for people with learning disabilities having relationships and participating in society on an equal basis. To do this right will require not only significant investment, but strong leadership, and a commitment to the equality and human rights of people with learning disabilities.

This lays a prophetic challenge at the door of Scotland's faith communities, as well as politicians and care organisations. I am delighted that in appointing me to a Licensed Ministry dedicated to the support of, and being supported by, people with learning disabilities, Bishop Ian has recognised the church's calling to respond.

My lay ministry in this domain includes the development of a new house in Perthshire - Appletree Community - as a long-term home for Louis and other residents with learning disabilities and autism. My ministry includes representation to Scottish Government of Louis and others detained long-term in hospital settings, and work with NHS Tayside on the shared journey of families and professionals towards improvement in learning disability services. In all this, partnership is a key notion. Issues like trust and communication and relationship are central. My anchor in all that is the quality of relationship I enjoy with Louis, and relationship we both enjoy with God: grounded in prayer.

Theologians might recognise in our 'eee' several levels of meaning. First, they will see that we are recognising the Christ, the eternal sacred in material reality, in each other; second they will see that as we recognise the Christ in each other, we enter a sacred relationship, the I-Thou, that is the

³ Tanskanen & Anttila (2016) A Prospective Study of Social Isolation, Loneliness, and Mortality in Finland

relationship of the Holy Spirit, binding us together, affirming us as individuals in relationship with each other. And as, in the Holy Spirit, we enter this relationship of positive, mutual regard, what Martin Buber calls the 'I' and the 'Thou', in the energy of outward-flowing regard for all that is, we find ourselves swept up into the Trinity of the Eternal - the Father/ Mother - the Child - the love that



binds them together: Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.

In the reality and strength of that relationship I close with some of the questions posed at the end of the report regarding people with learning disabilities that might also speak to church communities and settings. These are questions facing Appletree Community as we start out, seeking to build partnership between residents, care staff, parents and families, wider society, faith communities as the foundation of committed, quality relationships.

- Q What can be done to ensure that everyone with Learning Disabilities (and we might add, those in our congregations who are elderly and vulnerable) is able to have, and maintain, different kinds of relationships?
- Q What can be done to realise people's preferences in relation to different kinds of relationships?
- Q What can be done to make up the deficit of access to paid support?
- Q What can be done to ensure that social relationships are maintained even when paid support is cut?

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