

CALLED TO CONNECT:



CREATING A WELCOMING PARISH IN A LONELY WORLD



Catholic



BY TERRY POPLAVA

CONNECTED

BUT LONELY

The condition of loneliness and isolation has become pervasive in the United States. You likely have seen many of the communications alerting us to the challenges children and young adults face. It's a condition many adults experience as well. In his advisory on the healing effects of social connection and the community, the U.S. Surgeon General highlights the startling impact of social isolation and reminds us of the benefits of community and social connection.

HERE ARE JUST A FEW WAYS A LACK OF CONNECTION CAN IMPACT A PERSON'S PHYSICAL HEALTH¹:

- Lacking social connection is as dangerous as **smoking 15 cigarettes a day**
- Poor social relationships increase the risk of heart disease **by 29% and stroke by 32%**
- Loneliness and isolation in older adults can increase the risk of developing dementia by **50%**
- Social isolation and loneliness increase the risk of depression and anxiety in children and adolescents

Statistics were pointing to the epidemic even prior to COVID-19. In one study focused on youth aged 13-25, they found that one in three young people feel completely alone much of the time, and almost 40% of them feel left out and have no one to talk to.²

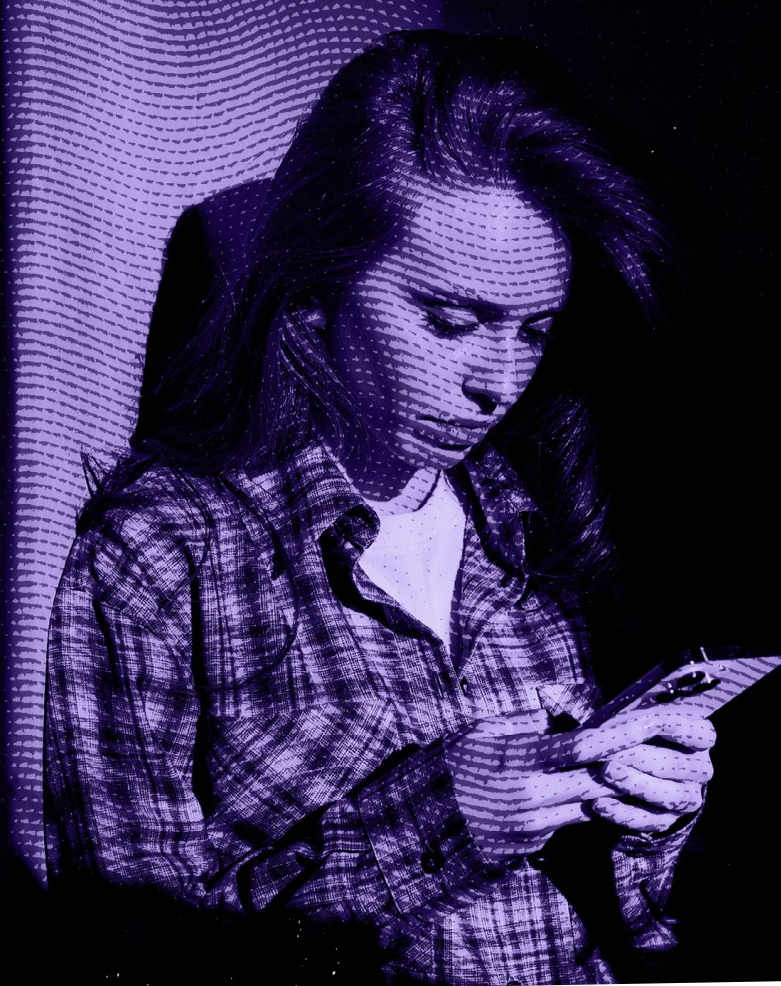
ON THE FLIP SIDE, POSITIVE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS CAN HAVE A VERY POSITIVE IMPACT³:

- Social connection increases the odds of survival by 50%
- Family support has been shown to improve the health of those with type 1 and type 2 diabetes
- Adults with strong social relationships are more likely to engage in positive health behaviors, including preventative care

¹ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

² <https://www.springtideresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/springtide-guide-for-serving-young-people.pdf>

³ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>



PEOPLE ARE MORE ALONE NOW THAN BEFORE.

Between 2003 and 2020, time spent alone increased by 24 hours per month. Over the same time period, household engagement decreased by 5 hours per month, and social engagement with friends decreased by 20 hours per month.⁴

What's leading to our lack of connection? There could be many reasons: our society's focus on independence and empowerment, increases in the use of technology, more geographic mobility, and a move toward more one-sided experiences. These are but a few factors that may create what we can call "crowded loneliness." We're surrounded by "connections," but we lack real relationships.

These findings and the trend are alarming. Is this the unraveling of our social fabric? The answer should be a resounding NO. The solution, obvious to those of us who enjoy the support of our parish communities, is the Church. Our parishes can be the antidote. What is our parish response to people who are searching, lonely, and need help? While we are not typically equipped to address medical or mental issues, our parishes can play a vital role in helping to reduce loneliness.

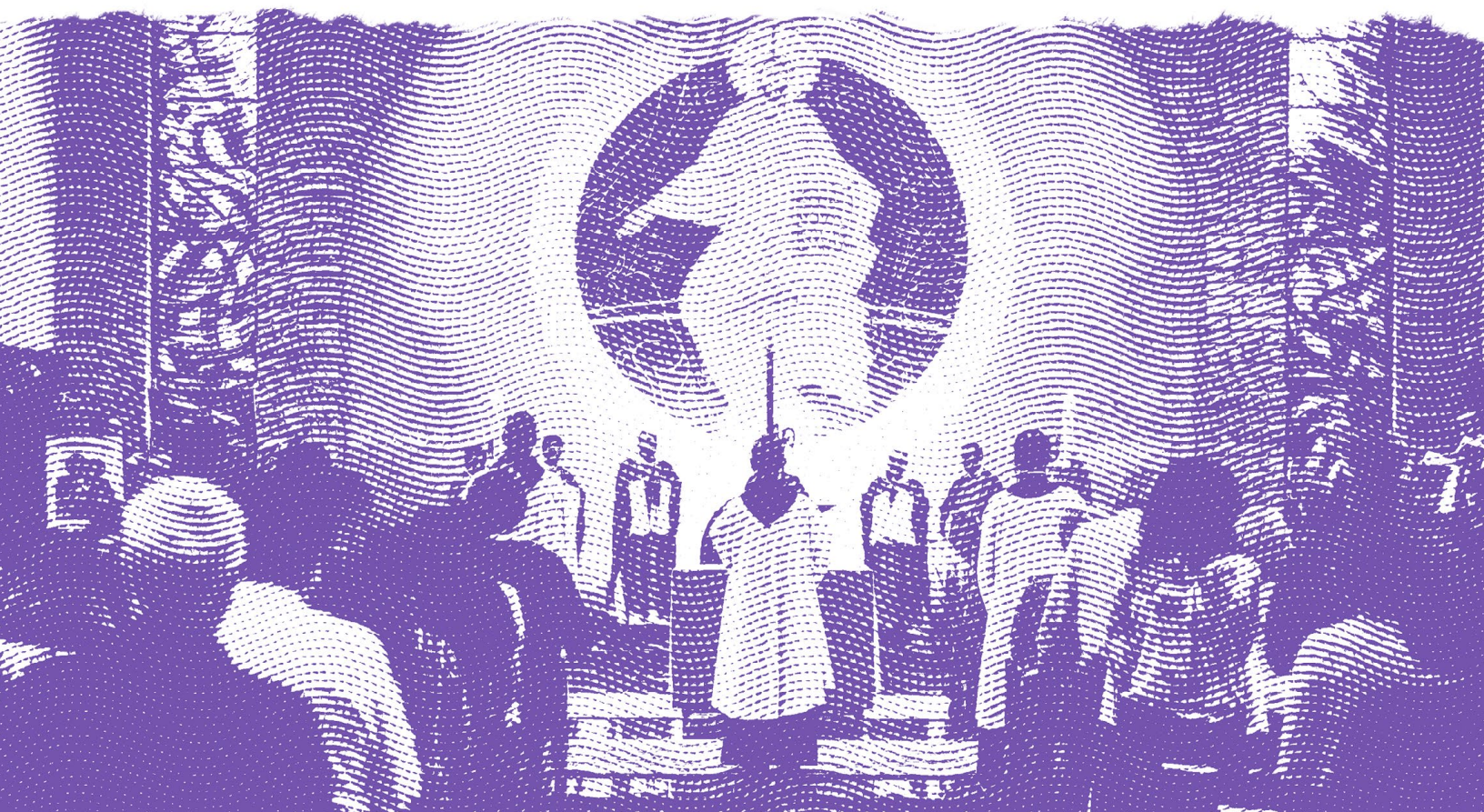
⁴<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

WE WERE MEANT FOR COMMUNITY

One of the most beautiful teachings of the Catholic Church is that we were meant for each other and meant to live in community with other people. *“The human person needs to live in society. Society is not for him an extraneous addition but a requirement of his nature. Through the exchange with others, mutual service and dialog with his brethren, man develops his potential; he thus responds to his vocation. (CCC 1879)”*

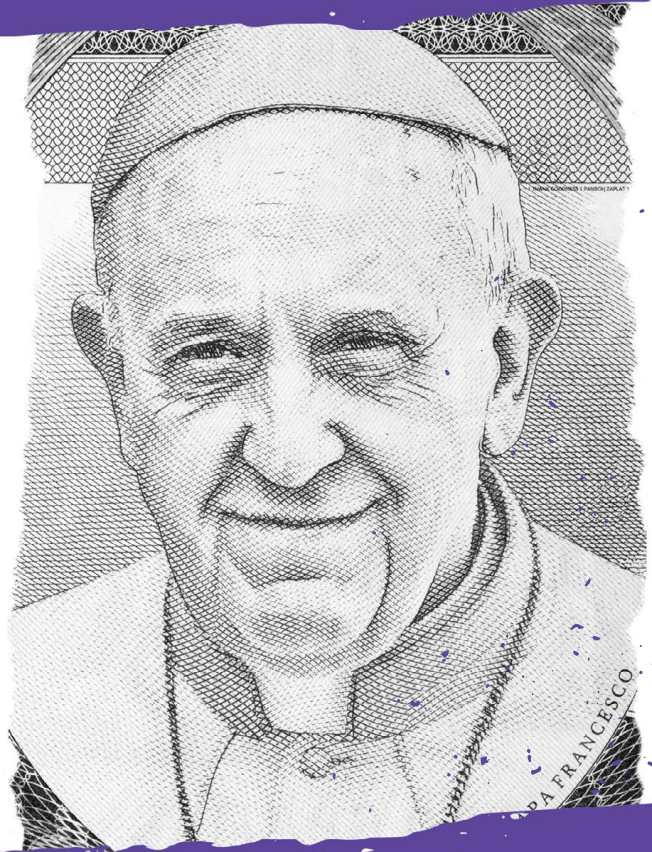
So, for us as Catholics, community is not just a vague concept but a very real part of our ability to realize our potential as human beings. It is this reality that makes the loneliness and isolation among some of our members even more heartbreaking. And that is why we, as Catholics—whether clergy, religious, or laity—must respond.

The neighborhood church was historically a key touchpoint for people. The bonds formed through the parish created a sense of connectedness and belonging. But that is not the case today. The American Beliefs Study found that two-thirds of Americans are not involved in any faith community, believing religious people are too judgmental, distrusting organized religion or religious leaders, or not finding any relevance to their daily lives.



In his message on the World Day of the Sick in 2024, Pope Francis gave us the basic outline for reaching out to the lonely in our midst:

“Brothers and sisters, the first form of care needed in any illness is compassionate and loving closeness. To care for the sick thus means above all to care for their relationships, all of them: with God, with others – family members, friends, healthcare workers – , with creation and with themselves. Can this be done? Yes, it can be done and all of us are called to ensure that it happens. Let us look to the icon of the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10:25-37), to his ability to slow down and draw near to another person, to the tender love with which he cares for the wounds of a suffering brother.”



Adopting what Pope Francis suggests—the mindset of the Good Samaritan—can become a kind of grassroots effort that can begin in our parishes as we reach out in love to the lonely and isolated. In Luke’s parable, the Good Samaritan was a social outcast. The priest and the Levite who passed by the traveler were adhering to the letter of the law by not touching the man who might be dead. The Samaritan didn’t have such restrictions. His pity moved him to not just stop to see—but to take action, to bind the man’s wounds, to carry him to shelter, and to pay for his care.

But the story isn’t just about taking care of the traveler’s physical needs; it’s also about bringing him back into community. He was found alone and separated, and the Samaritan brought him into connection.

This parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us that connection and compassion are at the heart of our call as Christians. Parishes are uniquely equipped to offer refuge from an often inhospitable world and a place where the lonely can be known, loved, and valued. In fact, parishes are naturally designed to foster healing relationships.

PARISHES INHERENTLY

PROVIDE CONNECTION

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that the word “church” applies to all the People of God throughout the world, as well as local communities—that is, our parishes.

“The Church is, accordingly, a sheepfold, the sole and necessary gateway to which is Christ. It is also the flock of which God himself foretold that he would be the shepherd, and whose sheep, even though governed by human shepherds, are unfailingly nourished and led by Christ himself...(CCC 754).”

In *Communities of Salt and Light: Reflections on the Social Mission of the Parish*, we read, “The parish is where the Church lives. Parishes are communities of faith, of action, and of hope. They are where the Gospel is proclaimed and celebrated, where believers are formed and sent to renew the earth. Parishes are the home of the Christian community; they are the heart of our Church. Parishes are the place where God’s people meet Jesus in word and sacrament and come in touch with the source of the Church’s life.”

By its nature, the parish fosters personal connection. The mission of the Church, and therefore of the parish, is to proclaim the Good News, build community, and strive for unity.

This type of lively, loving, and faithful community is the model for all parishes. Many vibrant Catholic parishes across the U.S. exemplify this ideal. Unfortunately, despite much prayer and effort, many other parishes see their communities disrupted by the many factors that can drive loneliness. Declining Mass attendance, as well as other shifts in behaviors, are impacting the connection that used to be a natural part of being Catholic. In the past, families were linked to the parish through the sacramental life. From marriage to baptism, first communion to confirmation, the parish was the central hub of the spiritual life of the family. This is becoming less and less the case. The sizes and shapes of families themselves have also changed over time. Blended families, single-parent homes, multi-generational living situations—all these situations have an impact on the life of the parish and the feeling of connection—or lack thereof.

Meanwhile, those who have left the Church are excluded—particularly if the parish does not maintain contact, express concern, or invite them back. Those who have no experience of the Church are also excluded because they have not experienced or benefitted from the powerful community that is a Catholic parish and are seemingly outside the reach of the parish.

These very challenges are opportunities for our local parishes to become a source of community.

CULTIVATING A PRO-CONNECTION CULTURE

Parish hospitality has been a priority for many church leaders, particularly in the wake of the pandemic. Once parishes were reopened, it became clear that simply keeping a greeter at the door, having friendly ushers, or Father greeting people after Mass was not enough. In addition to welcoming back committed Mass-goers after COVID, parish leaders were asking themselves, “What about those who haven’t come back yet? Or who may not come back at all?”

One of the key questions posed in a recent American Beliefs Study was, “What do you look for when searching for a new parish?” The top response from Catholics was, unsurprisingly, “Celebration of the sacraments.” Equally important, however, was a tie for second place between “Quality sermons/homilies” and “Warm and friendly encounters.”

While the emphasis on the sacraments and homilies aligns with our spiritual and liturgical tradition, the high value placed on “warm and friendly encounters” reveals the crucial role of hospitality in parish life. For parish leaders, this presents an opportunity to enhance ministry by focusing on the relational aspect of faith, which is as vital as the spiritual and catechetical dimensions.

But many parishes are stuck. Where do you start? To begin establishing a culture of connection, parish leaders should prioritize foundational practices that support meaningful relationships. One essential tool for this is a well-managed database.



DATA

This may seem “too basic,” but a well-managed database is, in fact, core to being able to see, know, and serve your parish community.

Do you have contact information for all your parishioners? Do you have a process in place to gather contact information from visitors? Is your parish data frequently updated? Are there methods for noting parishioner activities and needs? Are sacraments tracked in your system?

This isn't the most exciting part of creating and maintaining a pro-connection culture, but it is one of the most vital (and perhaps the most taken for granted).

PARISHIONERS

Parishioners are the key to cultivating and maintaining a culture of hospitality. Guided by leadership, they play an absolutely crucial role in making the parish welcoming for everyone, not just visitors. They should understand that it isn't “the job” of the clergy or staff but that it's the responsibility of every parishioner to participate in hospitality, welcome, and community.

Leadership can encourage parishioners to ask themselves some challenging questions. How am I doing my part to create a culture of connection at my parish? Would I invite someone to a parish event? Am I excited about what's happening here? How would I be greeted if I were a visitor? Would I feel seen and heard? Would I want to come back?

Equally important is to make it clear that welcome, hospitality and community are the roles of every parishioner. Inviting visitors, welcoming them back, checking on people who have stopped attending, offering to serve in ministries, participating in events, and reaching out to new families are all up to each of us, so the entire parish lives as a community that cares for one another.

With a strong foundation in place, there are actions that leaders or a core team can take to strengthen the faith and discipleship of those within the parish walls, instilling in them the crucial call to bring in the lost and lonely.

PARISH

LEADERSHIP

Building a truly welcoming and supportive parish begins with clergy and staff. In addressing the epidemic of loneliness (or any other parish-wide need), it is tempting to begin by searching for a ready-made solution or program. However, a more effective solution lies in returning to the basics. By focusing on the fundamentals—such as gathering data on parishioners and their needs, actively engaging with the community, and re-emphasizing outreach—parishes can build a strong foundation for combating loneliness.

Begin by defining how you identify engaged parishioners. Consider how important “community” is within your parish. Is community limited to the people participating in the parish, or does it extend further? Does the parish have a particular way to do outreach?

Does your parish warmly welcome visitors? Do you have a follow-up process to know who visited and to invite them back? Are there ways to track participation so you can reach out if someone stops attending? Are there intentional efforts to check in with members?

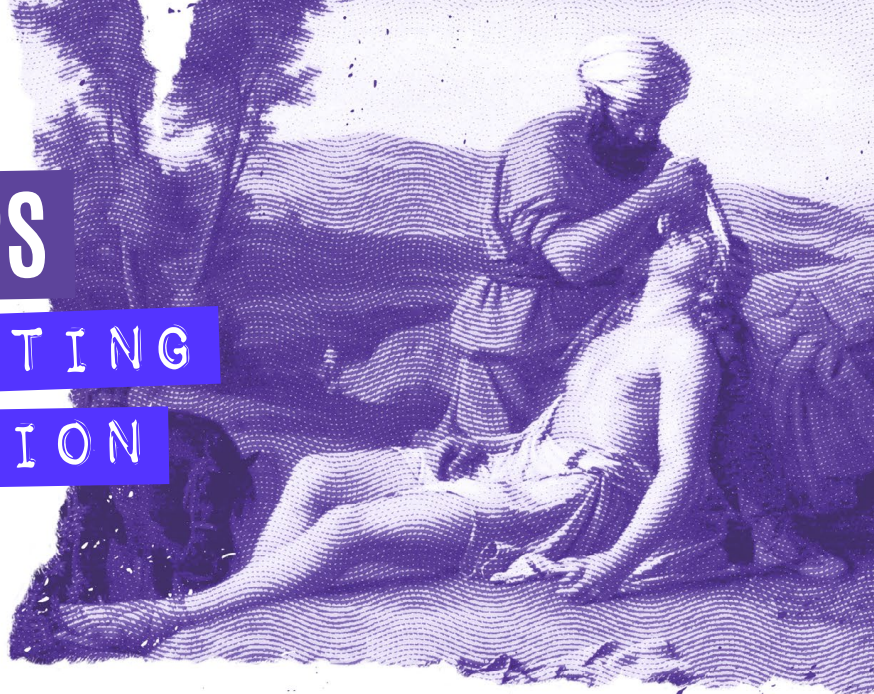
In establishing a pro-connection culture, clergy and parishioners alike can foster a community that genuinely cares for one another, embodying the true mission of the parish.



PRACTICAL STEPS

FOR CULTIVATING CONNECTION

Building a pro-connection culture in the parish requires that we start with those foundational changes in mindset and practice. With those in place, the parish can define intentional steps and actions to continue to build community. Here is an example of using the Good Samaritan as a theme with suggested actions:



WALKING IN THE STEPS

OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Parish presence in the broader community: Inspire parishioners and the community with the mission of the parish and its service to others.. Increase visibility at community events, host non-liturgical gatherings, and increase outreach, particularly participation in serving the vulnerable and marginalized.

Personal witness at Mass: Ask a parish volunteer to give a short testimonial about how important the parish has been in their life or the lives of their children, emphasizing the strong connections and relationships that have been built. Alternatively, a returning parishioner can share their reasons for coming back.

Community impact awareness: Another pulpit idea is to have a staff member give a brief monthly or quarterly report on the ways the parish is involved in the life of the community, focusing on specific outreach initiatives and inviting parishioners to join in supporting these efforts.

Stay connected with everyone: Identify changes in giving or attendance. Record life events and schedule follow-up from sacrament celebrations. Regularly monitor giving trends and group attendance, and if something changes for a period of time, send a note offering prayer and inviting conversation. Stay in communication after life events and sacraments in support of the person or family. Too often, people feel that they just “aren’t missed” or that their presence doesn’t matter. Emphasize that their presence truly does matter and that we are all connected and not alone. This one simple step could make a difference.



ACTION PLANS

FOR CONNECTION

Develop a grassroots action plan: With the help of your most engaged parishioners and staff, develop a plan to address the connection culture at the parish. This could take the form of several weekly meetings, in which you could look at the parish culture through the lens of “strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.” A strength, for example, could be that you have many young families who have returned to Mass post-pandemic. A weakness could be that you don’t have a system in place to capture contact information from visitors or past parishioners. Once you have your SWOT in place, you and your parish culture team can create an action plan.

From the Pulpit: Kick off a parish-wide initiative, such as “Mercy in Motion,” with a homily or talk that addresses the epidemic of loneliness and how it impacts people both outside and inside the parish. Share specific actions parishioners can take to foster relationships, reiterating that it is the role and responsibility of every parishioner to be part of welcoming and accompanying each other and the wider community.

For the Bulletin: Publish the text of your pulpit talk in the bulletin, along with contact information or a QR code for people to scan to sign up to help with the initiative. Then, throughout the year, publish suggested steps people can take on their own to create a more pro-connection culture in the parish. In addition, publish impact stories, sharing with the parish how the “Mercy in Motion” initiative has made a difference in the lives of the community, both in and outside the parish walls.

THE PARISH

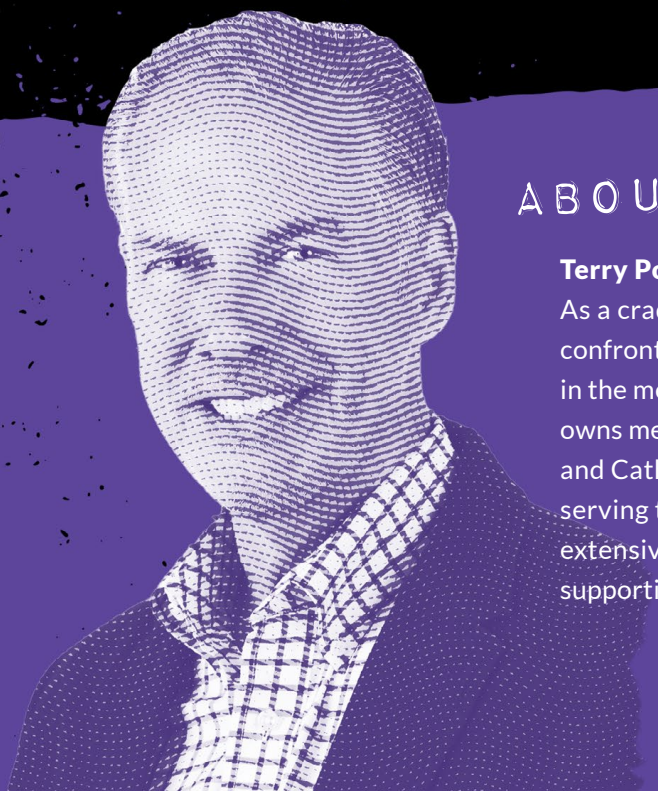
IS THE GOOD SAMARITAN

The parish is, by definition, the center of our Catholic community. We come together as our local assembly of the “body of Christ” to care for each other and to grow in our faith.

The epidemic of loneliness calls for urgent proactive steps from all of us. This is truly a time for missionary discipleship, where our faith-filled parishioners—brimming with the Good News—recognize the shared and sacred mission of welcoming others into our parish communities. Like the Good Samaritan, we are called to draw near to those who feel isolated and lonely, wherever they are, and offer the warmth and care of a true neighbor. The nurturing, relational foundation of our parishes is essential. Our bonds are built on personal relationships.

To be an antidote to loneliness, we must name it and consider how our parish charisms equip us to respond. This calls for a renewed focus on forming, inspiring, and evangelizing our parishioners so that everyone is excited to talk with others about their faith. Engaging people in the mission of the parish and encouraging participation, in addition to Mass attendance, are key steps. Reassessing ministries to reach the wider community will also help extend our message outward—while keeping our hearts centered on the mystical celebration that is the source and summit of our faith.

Equally important. Remember to notice each other and greet each other with a smile. Invite someone to attend an event or Mass, and make sure to invite them back!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry Poplava serves as General Manager, ACST Catholic. As a cradle Catholic, his faith was lukewarm until he was confronted by the intense challenge and commitment he heard in the message about Stewardship. “What do I own and what owns me?” which led him to executive roles at *Our Sunday Visitor* and Catholic Leadership Institute before his current focus on serving the Catholic Church at ACS Technologies. Terry has extensive experience working with churches across the U.S., supporting their planning, stewardship, and engagement efforts.

Choosing the right ministry partner matters.

The know-how you need from experts you trust.

ACS Technologies is the original pioneer of Church Management Software (ChMS). But we know and care about more than technology and software; we know how to help you put it to best use to keep parishioners engaged, feeling welcome, and tending to their pastoral needs. We are evolving and changing to meet the changing needs of the Church. We're with you every step of the way.

Tools and support to strengthen churches.

We build great software, but we don't stop there. We have a "service-first" approach that truly sets us apart. With hundreds of dedicated support and consulting personnel, your staff can reach our team 24/7. We're in your corner to help you with the challenges you and your staff face every week.

Ideas and solutions powered by integrity.

Integrity is fundamental for us. It means consistently being faithful stewards by doing the right thing for church success. For over 40 years, we have earned the trust of parish and diocese staff, our employees, and our colleagues.

A plan to meet your needs and move your ministry.

Your satisfaction is the starting point. We see ourselves as your real ministry partner and will work with you to make disciples who are formed and confident in sharing their faith with others. We're excited to talk about your goals, create a plan together, and set you up with the software, service, and resources you need.

Let's Talk

We know the challenges of switching or implementing new technology—it can feel overwhelming. But we also know the unbelievable changes that have happened within parishes and dioceses that have partnered with us. Let's connect and see how we can assist you in the greatest thing you do - proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.

About ACST Catholic

ACST Catholic, a business of ACS Technologies, is devoted to serving and equipping Catholic parishes and dioceses with the tools to engage, inspire, and accompany their communities and form missionary disciples. By harnessing technology as a tool for connection and growth, we amplify ministry impact and foster more meaningful experiences that can lead to intentional discipleship.

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