



## **Move Your Career 4word: How to Overcome Loneliness and Pursue Community**

By Marion Medina

*To learn more about how to end the epidemic of loneliness, be sure to listen to this month's Work, Love, Pray episodes featuring Liz Forkin Bohannon (Episode One), and 4word's new Executive Director, Melissa Harrison (Episode Two).*

### **God created us for community.**

Before the beginning of time, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit existed in community. God's love is so vast that it must be shared, so God created people and stamped the Imago Dei – the very image of God – into the souls of every person. Community and connection are not just nice ideas, they are part of our design and as essential as breathing. We were created for community, and without community we fail to thrive.

We are facing an unprecedented crisis in our lifetimes, and it is not a virus. The crisis is loneliness. Several recent research projects shed light on this growing crisis and set off alarm bells that call for drastic change in the cultural trajectory. A 2023 study published by the National Institutes of Health defines loneliness this way: "...a subjective psychological state caused by the failure of interpersonal relationships to reach expected levels, often accompanied by boredom, helplessness, depression, and other negative psychological experiences" (National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health).

For decades we have been involved in a social experiment creating a culture designed for isolation. The rise in individualism, suburban design, self-fulfillment, and the introduction of the smart phone are some of the variables in this experiment and the subsequent results have us headed down a lonely and dangerous path as a society.

Another variable contributing to the rise of loneliness is the explosively divisive political climate of the last decade. The rise of political vitriol and partisan-ism coupled with the forced isolation brought on by the Covid 19 virus helped fuel a drastic decline in connectedness and community in this country. At present, around half of the adults living in the U.S. report that they are lonely, and among young adults the percentage is even higher.

The political tone in our country and the moral failures of many prominent religious figures have contributed to a growing lack of trust among Americans. Trust is a necessity for friendships because healthy relationships are rooted in vulnerability. Without trust people hide behind ideologies and fictional lifestyles and strive to keep their weaknesses and challenges secret. But true community requires vulnerability. People need to trust that when they lower their masks, they will be met with empathy and compassion rather than judgment and argument.

One of the main sources for community in the U.S. used to be the church, but the results of a recent Gallup poll highlight the erosion of trust even in the church. Only around a third of respondents said that they trust pastors. And the survey also showed that fewer than half of Americans regularly participate in church services.



### **We are in the middle of an epidemic.**

Divisive politics, moral failures, lack of trust, and the ever-prevalent temptation to hide behind a glowing screen – all of these factors have contributed to the crisis of isolation that we are currently experiencing. Loneliness in the United States has reached epidemic proportions.

Last year, in an 82-page report on the “epidemic of loneliness and isolation,” the U.S. Surgeon General outlined several negative outcomes of loneliness:

- “Loneliness and social isolation increase the risk for premature death by 26% and 29% respectively.”
- Loneliness and isolation can “can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.”
- “Poor or insufficient social connection is associated with increased risk of disease, including a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke.”
- Lack of social connection is “associated with increased risk for anxiety, depression and dementia.”
- Loneliness “may increase susceptibility to viruses and respiratory illness.”

The Surgeon General sums up these outcomes this way: “Social connection is a fundamental human need, as essential to survival as food, water, and shelter. Throughout history, our ability to rely on one another has been crucial to survival.” The social experiment is not working.

So, what can we do as individuals and a society to course-correct? The subtitle of the Surgeon General’s report provides a clue: “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: **The Surgeon General’s Report on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community.**” The remedy to our isolation is the establishment of and participation in community.

### **How to Build and Engage in Community**

Below are some practical steps we can all take to end the epidemic of loneliness:

#### **Go First.**

In Jesus, we have a perfect example of genuine community. Jesus did not live a solitary life on earth; he formed a community and called them collectively into his mission and work. Every Jesus follower is part of that extended community, and it is through us that God intends to bring restoration to the world.

Whether you are an Introvert or an extrovert, Jesus calls you to do as he did and go first. Be the one to initiate and maintain friendships. Of course, there is risk involved in going first, but the rewards of connection and community far outweigh the risks.

#### **Be Purposeful.**

You can always find multiple excuses for not showing up when an opportunity for connection and community presents itself, but community takes effort. So, get up early, stay up a little later - just go ahead and register to get involved in a 4word community. If your current circumstances simply don’t allow for an in-person experience, get on Zoom and participate in a virtual community. 4word has 35 Community Groups across the country and several virtual groups as well. You will be welcomed in a 4word Community



Group whoever you are, because 4word women come from across the political and denominational spectrum and gather in respect to support each other.

The 4word Mentor Program is another place to develop deep, authentic relationships. Wherever you are in your career journey, from the very beginning to the top levels of leadership, 4word has a mentor who is the perfect match for the goals and challenges in front of you.

And if you're ready to take a larger step, consider applying for the 4word Emerging Leaders year-long, cohort-based program. Or if you're already in the highest levels of leadership and influence, attend the Executive Women 4Christ Forum and get involved in an EW4C cohort or group.

### **Start Small.**

If the thought of finding and maintaining community feels overwhelming, look again to the example of Jesus. Jesus' 1<sup>st</sup> Century community had several layers. There were three disciples with whom Jesus spent the most time, then seventy-two women and men with whom he traveled and did life, and then the crowds who gathered everywhere he went.

Begin by finding one friend who is trustworthy and open to meeting with you. Then continue adding at least two more friends to the mix. It may take a few tries before you find your tribe, but considering the negative effects of loneliness, it will be worth the effort.

### **Shift Your Perspective.**

Feelings of loneliness may drive you to seek out relationships, but sustainable, healthy relationships occur when each person is genuinely interested and concerned about the other. Enter into friendships with a goal of establishing mutual care and concern and consider what you can give to others rather than focusing on what they can do for you.

The Apostle Paul put it like this: "Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had." – Philippians 2:3-5

### **Persist and give grace.**

Let's face it, relationships can be messy. We are all broken people with blind spots and unpacked baggage, so we need to enter into community with open eyes and open hearts. With our eyes wide open we recognize that even our closest friends will sometimes disappoint us, and with our hearts wide open we are ready to forgive – just as we have been, and will be, forgiven.

Again, we hear from the Apostle Paul: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." – Ephesians 4:31-32

### **The way forward.**

The key to healthy sustainable community is love, and we can only have the kind of love necessary for a thriving community when we lean into the love of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus issued this commandment, “Love one another as I have loved you,” he knew that we would not be able to do this without him. The Good News is that he is with us every step of the way.

Let’s end with these words from the U.S. Surgeon General encouraging us to reshape our culture so healthy community can become the norm:

“Each of us can start now, in our own lives, by strengthening our connections and relationships. Our individual relationships are an untapped resource—a source of healing hiding in plain sight. They can help us live healthier, more productive, and more fulfilled lives. Answer that phone call from a friend. Make time to share a meal. Listen without the distraction of your phone. Perform an act of service. Express yourself authentically. The keys to human connection are simple, but extraordinarily powerful.”

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Think of a time when you experienced feelings of loneliness. How did that experience affect you?
2. How do you react to the Surgeon General’s list of the negative outcomes of loneliness and isolation?
3. Which of the practical steps to end loneliness stands out to you most? Why?
4. Which of the steps seems the most doable to you? Which seems the most challenging?
5. What specific actions might God be inviting you into to help end the epidemic of loneliness? How do you plan to get started?



Liz Forkin Bohannon is the founder of Sseko Designs and the author of the book *Beginner’s Pluck: Build your life of purpose, passion and impact now.*

Sseko Designs is an ethical fashion brand that works to educate and empower women. By providing employment and educational opportunities, Sseko enables women to continue their education and become leaders in their country.

Liz graduated from the University of Missouri with a master’s degree in journalism. In 2008, she moved to Uganda where she met an incredible group of talented young women who were struggling to finance their higher education.

After traveling the country by motorcycle to find raw materials and learn how to produce footwear by hand, Liz hired three young women and started Sseko Designs. Since then, Sseko Designs has grown from three women making sandals together

under a mango tree, to an international fashion brand that provides employment, educational opportunities and entrepreneurial training to hundreds of women in East Africa and across the globe. Using her unlikely story of a journalist-gone-shoe-maker, Liz shares her passion for social enterprise, conscious consumerism, social justice, creative leadership and gender-equality.

Liz and the Sseko story has been featured in dozens of publications including: Vogue Magazine, Redbook Magazine, O Magazine, Inc, Fortune and others. Sseko has appeared on national broadcasts including ABC’s Shark Tank and Good Morning America.

Among other notable honors, Liz was recently named a top three Transformation Leader by John Maxwell



and Bloomberg Businessweek named Sseko as a top social enterprise. Forbes named Liz one of the top 20 public speakers in the U.S. Liz's powerful, disarmingly authentic and witty voice captivates and inspires her audience.

She now splits her time between Uganda and Portland, Oregon, where she and her husband Ben run Sseko Designs and raise their two young sons.



Marion is the Director of Programs for 4word.

Marion served in pastoral ministry for 17 years at three local churches including, most recently, Willow Creek Community Church. During her church ministry, she incorporated her organizational development skills with her practical knowledge of effective discipleship to create growth strategies that focused on the equipping and mobilization of congregations on the mission of Jesus. She holds degrees from Trinity International University and Wheaton College in Organizational Leadership and Missional Church Movement.



***4word** is a global community of Christian women in the workplace. Our mission is to help women in the workplace reach their God-given potential with confidence.*

### **Why 4word?**

At 4word, we know you want to reach your God-given potential so you can have a Kingdom impact on your workplace and the world. To do that, you need resources for professional and spiritual growth - and a community of like-minded women to cheer you on!

The problem is your time is limited and meaningful connections are hard to find. This can leave you feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, and isolated on your life's journey.

**We believe you shouldn't have to navigate work, life and faith on your own because God designed you for community. You are worthy to be surrounded by loving and supportive women who "get you."**

**We understand you face unique challenges as a Christian woman in the workplace, which is** why we create easy-access opportunities for leadership development, spiritual growth, and connections to influential women around the globe.

### **Our Simple Empowerment Plan:**

- Connect to a community – We offer virtual and in-person Community Groups specifically designed for working women – and we also have special groups for executive women.
- Access relevant content – 4word's podcast, blog, and our Community Group Discussion Guides are specifically geared to women in the workplace to help thrive on your journey.
- Get matched with a mentor – From our pool of over 220 amazing mentors we connect you with the right fit for a transformational mentoring experience through 4word's Mentor Program.

**Join the Journey** to empower 10 million Christian women in the workplace to change the world by 2030. Click the picture below to learn more.





## Upcoming

**4word Gala 2024 – [February 24 An Evening with Stephanie Chung & MORE!](#)**

**March Discussion-** Find Your Personal Confidence