



DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES
The United Methodist Church

Emotional and Mental Health as Discipleship

Addressing the Loneliness Epidemic

WRITTEN BY
The Caring Congregation





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Contents

2	Introduction
8	The Gift of Companionship
12	The Grace That Meets Us in Our Mental Health Needs
20	The Invitation to Grace and Renewal
28	The Practice of Congregational Care
34	The Commitment to Community Healing
38	The Journey of Walking One Another Home Reflections
42	“You Understand My Pain” Poem
44	Endnotes
46	Resources for Addressing the Loneliness Epidemic
50	Bibliography

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Introduction

Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?

And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'

—LUKE 15:4-6, NIV

Loneliness is a hidden burden many people carry. Even when our days are full, we can still feel unseen, unheard, or disconnected. Yet our feelings do not define our worth. Every person is created in the image of God and is deeply loved by God. Loneliness does not erase that truth, even when it feels hard to believe.

Loneliness touches people of every age, race, culture, ability, and background—rural, suburban, and urban. A teenager who doesn't feel accepted, a parent trying to hold everything together, an older adult facing health changes, or someone grieving a profound loss, all may feel alone, even when others are nearby.

Loneliness has intensified in the years following the pandemic. Many people became more isolated, and the technology meant to keep us connected often deepened our

sense of disconnection. We now recognize a true epidemic of loneliness. Recent studies show that 73% of people ages 16–24 report feeling lonely, and more than half of young people ages 13–24 say loneliness negatively affects their mental health.ⁱ National research shows that approximately one in two adults report experiencing loneliness at least some of the time, and nearly one in three adults over age 50 report feeling isolated or lonely regularly.ⁱⁱ Loneliness is a common, serious human problem. What are we to do?

Loneliness is not a new experience. In Psalm 25:16 (NRSVUE), the psalmist cries out, *“Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.”* In Gethsemane, Jesus asked his closest friends to stay with him, and they could not. He faced betrayal, denial, and abandonment as he walked the path of obedience alone. On the cross, Jesus cried out in lament, giving voice to deep human sorrow and suffering. Through rejection, isolation, and grief, Jesus stands in solidarity with all who feel alone, meeting us not with distance but with compassion and grace.

What if presence and prayer were our first line of defense?

The United Methodist Church believes that God invites all of us, not just pastors, to care for one another as we remain present and prayerful for all people. We are a connectional and caring church that knows we are stronger when we address a problem together. In our caring community, God’s grace is always at work, calling each of us to experience God’s deep and healing love.

This is why the warm welcome of our congregation matters. When someone walks through our doors, we are not only offering a friendly welcome; we are inviting

them into a place where God's healing presence is real and active. The church becomes a community where people can bring their whole selves, including mental health needs, economic struggles, disability, and life stories shaped by injustice. In the church, they encounter God's grace and discover connection, comfort, and hope. It is a place where Christ's grace gently restores us and reminds us that we do not walk alone.

Grace is God's free and steady gift of love meeting us exactly where we are. Grace is always moving toward us, wooing and drawing us into relationship, strengthening us, and shaping us into people who love as Jesus does. John Wesley taught that grace is what awakens us to God's presence and love, forgives us, helps us grow, and makes us more like Christ every day.ⁱⁱⁱ

The care of the whole person—mind, body, and spirit—is part of our Methodist understanding of grace. Wesley taught that personal holiness and social holiness belong together.^{iv} Our faith grows when we practice love, mercy, and compassion in everyday life. Scripture, interpreted through tradition, reason, and experience, guides the church in discerning how God's healing grace is revealed and lived out in the emotional and mental struggles people face. Discipleship itself is a healing path as God's grace heals the wounds of brokenness and opens us to deeper communion with God and one another.

Because God's grace invites us into relationship and healing, the work of caring belongs to all believers. This relates to the Protestant idea of the priesthood of all believers, as noted in 1 Peter 2:9. It means that every Christian—pastors and laypeople alike—shares in the ministry of showing Christ's love and care to others.

Laypeople carry Christ's compassion into workplaces, neighborhoods, small groups, hospitals, soup kitchens, and homes. Their presence and prayers are powerful gifts of God's grace.

Caring ministries of excellence are not about perfection; they are about being faithful to the grace God has already given us. Caring well means recognizing that every person has a unique story shaped by culture, language, gender, family, and life experience. When we honor these differences, our care becomes more thoughtful and real. We listen before we act. We learn before we lead.

Loneliness is more than a social issue; it is a spiritual wound. Healing begins when someone sits with us, listens to our story, and reminds us that God has not forgotten us. When we look at the ministry of Jesus, we see him healing people from all sorts of woundedness, including loneliness. Salvation means wholeness. The way of salvation, the saving work of Christ through which God brings healing and wholeness, invites us to respond in faithful living.

Recognition, expressed through faithful words and actions, can serve as a means through which God's grace is communicated. *"Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and health to the bones"* (Proverbs 16:24 NIV). When we talk about mental health in gentle and respectful ways, we help people feel seen and safe. Instead of using labels, we choose language that honors each person as a beloved child of God.

Compassionate speech can foster an environment where fear and shame are loosened, helping people ask for the support they need. When we engage in acts of mercy and compassion—listening, encouraging, praying, and showing

up—we begin to see how God’s healing grace is already at work among us.

Today, many people feel alone, overwhelmed, or disconnected. Creating a culture of care inside and outside the church is one of the most important ways we live out our discipleship. When we show up for one another with presence and prayer, we become signs of God’s grace in a world that needs hope.

The church becomes a place of safety and healing when it speaks openly and lovingly about mental and emotional health. Emotional pain is not a sign of weak faith. It is part of the human condition, and God’s grace meets us there. No one is beyond God’s love; no one is beyond God’s help, and no one should have to struggle alone.

If you are feeling alone, know this: *you are not forgotten*. God sees you, walks with you, and holds you with steadfast love. Whether you are seeking care or offering it, you belong to God and to a community shaped by grace. We go forward trusting that God is still at work—meeting us on the road, healing what is broken, and leading us home together.

Reflection Questions

1. What is your favorite story of Jesus being a healer?
How does it reflect your life story?
2. Have you experienced a church community where you could be open to grace in your life?
3. How have you felt the pain of loneliness? What helped?



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CHAPTER 1

The Gift of Companionship

“While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them.”

—LUKE 24:15, NRSVUE

Many people today walk lonely or painful roads, carrying fear, trauma, grief, mental health challenges, or questions they cannot name. Like the Emmaus travelers, people in pain do not need quick advice. They need breath. They need someone to come near, listen with love, and help them locate their story within the larger story of God. Jesus reminds us, *“Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them”* (Matthew 18:20). When we draw close to someone and show compassion, we are not simply offering human comfort; we are creating a space where Christ’s presence is made known and where God’s healing grace can be felt and experienced. The Emmaus story reveals the sacred gift of companionship. Our congregations and community need followers of Jesus who walk with people the way Jesus walked with them. This chapter explores how we become these kinds of companions.

Christ-like companionship grows through three core practices: active listening, reflective presence, and compassionate silence. These practices help us care for others with the grace, humility, and gentleness of Christ.

Active Listening as a Sacred Art

Active listening means seeing and hearing others the way God does. It helps people feel valued and understood. Jesus listened deeply to the disciples, allowing them to share their sadness and questions. Listening becomes sacred when we attend to what God may be saying in and through the situation, noticing God's quiet movements of grace as we walk beside someone.

Active listening says, *"I'm here with you. You are important."*

Tools for Active Listening

- Open-ended questions: *"Can you tell me more about that?"*
- Reflective statements: *"It sounds like this is really hard."*
- Empathy: *"I'm so sorry you are dealing with this situation."*
- Whole-body listening: Turn toward the person, maintain eye contact, silence your phone, and slow down.
- Listening without words: Notice tears, pauses, body tension, or changes in tone.

Reflective Presence: Holding a Space of Grace without Fixing

Reflective presence means sitting with someone's pain without trying to fix it. Jesus honored the disciples' grief by walking alongside them and asking questions in a respectful, measured, and open manner. He did more than listen and stay present. He placed the disciples, and he

places us within the redemptive story of God (Luke 24:27), helping us see our lives held by God's love. He let them tell their story their way.

Reflective presence says, *"I'm here. You don't have to walk through this alone."*

Tools for Reflective Presence

- Be curious: *"I wonder what that felt like for you."*
- Mirroring emotion instead of solving: *"This sounds so overwhelming"* instead of *"You should..."*
- Holding emotional space: Slow your breathing and allow yourself to feel.
- Gently naming what you notice: *"I sense some sadness here."*

Compassionate Silence: Trusting the Holy Spirit's Quiet Work

Silence is a holy gift. Jesus' quiet companionship on the road created space for the disciples to feel safe enough to share their deepest questions and concerns. *"Be still, and know that I am God"* (Psalm 46:10) reminds us that holy silence opens room for God's presence to be felt. Compassionate silence allows those in pain to breathe, think, voice, cry, and rest without pressure, trusting that God meets us in the stillness with gentleness and grace.

Compassionate silence says: *We trust God is working even when no words are spoken.*

Tools for Compassionate Silence

- Silent prayer: Invite the Holy Spirit into the sacred space surrounding you and those with you.
- Supportive quiet: Create sacred space with your open and compassionate presence.
- The ten-second pause: Silently count to ten before responding.
- Allow silence after painful words: Stay steady and present.

Companionship is one of God's simplest and strongest gifts. Walking with others while practicing active listening, reflective presence, and compassionate silence is how we pass on the love of Christ as seen on the road to Emmaus. It is how we help one another find hope and belonging again. Remember, no one walks alone.

Reflection Questions

1. Remember a time of need and the people who listened to you. Did they offer active listening, reflective presence, and/or compassionate silence?
2. Have you ever felt unsafe when you began to share a deep need? Why? What would have made it better?
3. How can you evaluate your listening skills? Who would be able to practice with you and give you honest feedback?
4. In your next conversation, practice asking questions and holding space for others without offering advice.

CHAPTER 2

The Grace That Meets Us in Our Mental Health Needs

“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; and saves the crushed in spirit.”

—PSALM 34:18

Read Psalm 34:17–18.

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus joined two disciples who were confused, grieving, and overwhelmed. They did not ask for help. They did not fully understand what they were feeling, and they didn’t know it was Jesus who was walking with them that day. Jesus listened to their pain and, through the scriptures, reframed God’s redemptive purposes. In the breaking of the bread, Jesus was made known to them. In this way, Christ met them in their weariness not only with companionship but also with truth, presence, and restorative grace. With his open questions and deep listening, Jesus created space, inviting them into a place of love and support as they experienced emotional and mental exhaustion, along with other challenges.

Many people in our congregations and communities carry similar emotional and mental burdens today. They may be

living with anxiety, depression, trauma, bipolar disorder, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), addiction, panic, deep stress, or a sense of numbness or disconnection. Their struggles are real. They affect the whole person—mind, body, and spirit. They affect relationships with friends, family, coworkers, and even themselves.

Scripture reminds us, “*The Lord is near to the brokenhearted*” (Psalm 34:18). Jesus is near because Jesus understands our pain. Jesus knew exhaustion and sorrow. He felt anguish. He withdrew to quiet places when life became too heavy.

Mental health challenges are part of our human experience. Our genetics, chemistry, experiences of trauma and stress, and life circumstances shape our mental health. One in five adults experiences a mental illness each year.^v Loneliness, anxiety, and depression increased significantly post-pandemic across all age groups. Suicide is one of the leading causes of death for people between the ages of ten and thirty-four. Because Jesus shared our humanity, he knows our weakness and meets us with prevenient and healing grace. He draws near not to condemn, but to restore, reconcile, and make us whole. Jesus meets us where we are with compassion, not judgment.

A Community That Walks Together

Jesus’ presence on the Emmaus road shows us that healing often begins with companionship. As followers of Christ, we recognize the presence and grace of God, empowering us to offer hope first through relationships. Many who struggle mentally or emotionally need someone to come

alongside them, listen with care, honor their pace, remind them of God's abiding love, and reassure them that they are not alone.

In Matthew 11:28, Jesus offers this invitation: *"Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."* In the church, we live out this invitation together, embodying Christ for one another. When one of us is weary, others help carry the weight. When someone feels ashamed or withdrawn, we draw near with gentle presence. When someone feels anxious or depressed, we extend patience and steady companionship. In this way, mental health support becomes part of our shared discipleship within our collective humanity and relationship with God.

Naming the Realities People Carry

It is common for mental health challenges to have physical symptoms, affecting concentration, sleep, and energy, in addition to affecting relationships and spiritual life. People may feel isolated, even in a room full of others. Some struggle to trust their thoughts. Others carry trauma that makes daily life feel unpredictable. Some experience panic without warning. Others feel a deep sadness that will not lift. Many people carry trauma histories of abuse, violence, systemic harm, discrimination, and suffering through natural disasters.

Loneliness does not affect everyone in the same way. Systems of racism, ableism, economic inequality, and social exclusion can intensify isolation and make it harder for some people to feel safe or welcome in community spaces. These experiences can shape how people trust, connect, and seek help. Naming these realities helps the church offer care that is more honest, attentive, and faithful to God's call to love all people.

By naming these realities, we break the silence that often keeps people suffering alone. We begin to repair harm that can happen when the church does not understand mental health or speak about it with care. Silence and shame can keep people from seeking support, including therapy, support groups, and connection with their faith community. It is not God's desire for families and individuals to suffer alone. Be mindful that in some cultures, disclosing that someone is living with a mental health condition may cause them to lose social standing in their community, and it may even affect their marriage prospects.

A caring congregation practices trauma-informed care and helps individuals know:

- Their pain is seen by God and taken seriously.
- Their stories are received within the larger story of God's redeeming love.
- They belong in the body of Christ and are not a burden to it.
- They are beloved children of God, held by grace even in this moment.

Your Story Is Honored

Mental health challenges do not define identity. Identity is rooted in God's creating and redeeming love. All people bear dignity, sacred worth, and purpose because they are claimed by God. In scripture, Jesus honors the full humanity of each person he encounters. He listens with care and responds with compassion that restores and transforms. As the body of Christ, we adopt the same posture and practices. The Holy Spirit empowers the church to create healing spaces where people can experience God's presence and participate in the healing work God is already doing among us as we listen attentively, guard trust, and respond with compassion shaped by the gospel rather than judgment. We embody God's presence with our continual invitation of welcome and love given without price. When someone shares their struggles, we do not minimize them or offer clichés. We do not default to fixing or explaining. We echo Jesus' presence on the road to Emmaus. Jesus offered companionship that said, *"I am here. I have always been here. You matter. You do not have to walk alone."* We celebrate seeking help as a sign of strength.

If you are living with mental illness, know this: you are not weak, broken, or a burden. You are created in God's image and are deeply loved. Some people experience healing in moments; others, over time. Some live faithfully with ongoing challenges. In every case, God's grace is with you, and you belong.

For those living with mental health challenges, the following steps can offer support and stability:

- **Reach out to a trusted person.**

Tell a friend, a pastor, a family member, or a care minister what you're experiencing. Speaking concerns aloud often lessens the weight. Prayer is powerful, and so are sacred spaces where people are invited to share.

- **Connect with professional help.**

Therapists, counselors, psychiatrists, and support groups offer tools and guidance that many people find essential. You do not have to wait until things feel "bad enough." The church can provide lists of trusted professionals and resources, as well as financial assistance for mental health care.

- **Talk with your primary-care doctor.**

Medical providers can help rule out physical causes, guide next steps, and connect you with mental-health specialists. They can also help you choose professionals who accept your insurance.

- **Use crisis resources when needed.**

If someone feels unsafe or overwhelmed, calling or texting 988 can provide immediate support; 988 is the national suicide and crisis lifeline. Many communities also have a helpline that can be reached by dialing 211. Web searches are also helpful. Combine your search with your local zip code.

- **Lean into spiritual practices to connect with God.**

Your pastor, care ministers, or small-group leader can recommend practices to help you feel connected to God. Simple prayers, scripture, silence, music, or breath awareness can offer grounding and comfort when emotions feel unsteady.

- **Stay connected.**

Isolation makes most mental health challenges harder. A weekly check-in with a friend, small group, or care minister can be life-giving. Start or grow a care team to foster hospitality in the church and the surrounding community, caring for one another and being present by noticing and inviting people into relationships with one another and with God.

Healing often comes in steps, moments, or seasons. Yet hope is a gift we hold with and for one another through it all. Isaiah 41:10 reminds us: *“Do not fear, for I am with you... I will strengthen you; I will help you.”* We trust this promise together. We commit to being a community where no one suffers alone and where those living with mental health challenges are met with patience, dignity, and grace.

We commit to being the body of Christ, where vulnerable people can meet, know, and find wholeness in God. Christ, who drew near to the disciples on the road, draws near to us still. As we walk beside one another as a community of hope, God’s healing love continues to unfold.

Reflection Questions

1. How can our church reflect Christ's compassion by being a safe community for those facing mental health challenges?
2. How might our church strengthen its ministries of presence and care, so our neighbors feel as supported as our congregation?
3. In light of Psalm 34:18, how is our congregation drawing near to the brokenhearted today?

CHAPTER 3

The Invitation to Grace & Renewal

“Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

—MATTHEW 11:28

Read Matthew 11:28–30.

God, our compassionate parent, is the God of all comfort. God meets us in our troubles, invites us to turn to God for help, and empowers us to offer comfort to others. This truth teaches us something important about the life of a caregiver: we must care for our own hearts if we hope to care for others with strength, love, and grace. A yearning for spiritual depth is foundational for keeping caregivers spiritually, emotionally, and physically healthy.

Caring for ourselves spiritually, emotionally, and physically is not selfish. It is part of our discipleship. When we pray, rest, reflect, and practice healthy rhythms, we become steadier, more patient, and more grounded in God’s grace. These practices fill our cup so we can offer consolation to others. Our cup overflows with what we have received from God. In caring communities, we become witnesses to God’s love, living out the words of Jesus: *“By this everyone will*

know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

This chapter explores spiritual practices that strengthen resilience: prayer, reflection, rest, mindful awareness, community, nature, and caring for the body God gave us. Tending to our bodies is one way we honor the God who created us; our physical well-being affects our emotional and spiritual well-being, helping us stay connected to God and to the people we serve. These practices help us stay anchored in God’s presence and able to walk with others through struggle, grief, and emotional pain.

Prayer as Presence: Meeting God in the Middle of Our Pain

Prayer is a gift of grace, where anxiety meets peace, fear meets faith, and where we rest in the nearness of God. In our praying, we acknowledge our own need for greater connection to God and our desire for healing and hope to be extended through us. Prayer lifts us up and out of the chaos of this world, so we can step back into it to help others. One of the key practices The Caring Congregation encourages us to follow is the phrase, “in all things, pray first.”

Ways to Pray That Bring Calm & Comfort

- **Prayer as a Mantra:**

Slow, simple phrases paired with deep breathing can help regulate the nervous system. Examples: “Jesus, hold me.” “Grant me thy peace, Sweet Jesus.”

- **Prayer as a Breath Prayer:**
 - Acknowledge what you are feeling.
 - Remember you are a child of God.
 - Breathe in deeply as you invite the Spirit to infuse you with peace, love, and light, then release any negativity you carry when you exhale.
 - Continue deep breaths and visualize yourself full of love, light, and peace.
- **Praying Through Scripture:**

The Psalms, including the Psalms of Lament, provide short verses to help us speak honestly with God.

Examples: *“Search me, O God, and know my heart”* (Psalm 139:23). *“Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?”* (Psalm 22:1).

A congregational care minister visited a woman in hospice who could no longer speak. The minister held the woman’s hand and prayed aloud, simple words of comfort. The woman’s breathing slowed, and peace filled the room. Later, the daughter said, “You prayed the prayer my mom could no longer pray.” Prayer became presence and peace beyond words.

Meditation & Mindful Awareness

Stillness creates a sacred space where we can reconnect with God and calm the mind. Gentle somatic practices help release stress and support emotional healing.

Creation reveals the heart of the Creator, a place of healing, rest, and new life. Grounding in the present moment through nature is a time-tested method for centering on

God. When we step outside, we are reminded that God holds and sustains all things, even us.

Tools for Mindful Calming: Simple Ways to Reconnect with God Through Creation

- Grounding—placing your feet on the earth or noticing the textures of nature can interrupt anxious, spiraling thoughts.
- Walking slowly outside, including prayer walks.
- Touching the ground or a tree.
- Sky-gazing or allowing your eyes to rest on the horizon. Both slow the nervous system and reconnect you with God’s calming presence.
- Breathing fresh air.
- Journaling questions, concerns, or gratitude while sitting outside.

A woman whose husband died suddenly felt overwhelmed by grief. A care minister stepped outside with her. They placed their hands on a tree and breathed slowly until she felt steady again. Touching creation helped her feel held and grounded when her emotions felt overwhelming.

Tools for Mindful Calming: Tapping (EFT)

EFT, or Emotional Freedom Techniques, is a tapping therapy that combines tapping on acupressure points, such as your temples and chest, with focusing on a specific issue to help calm the mind and body. Tapping stimulates meridian points on the body to reduce anxiety and center thoughts. It is most helpful when thoughts, such as “I’m feeling stressed,” take over. Counterbalance the anxiety-producing thought with a statement of self-acceptance or security, such as, “I love and accept myself,” or “Right

now, God is present, and I am safe,” while tapping a sequence of points on the head and body.

Light tapping over the hands, chest, or face can help settle anxiety and regulate the nervous system. Headspace (<https://www.headspace.com>) is an app that teaches you to tap.

Tools for Mindful Calming: Somatic Awareness

Somatic awareness is gently paying attention to what your body is experiencing: breath, muscle tension, posture, heartbeat, and the small sensations that signal how you’re doing. When we pause to notice these cues, we can recognize early signs of stress and respond with compassion rather than reacting out of fear or urgency.

This practice of noticing and caring for your body reflects John Wesley’s belief that grace meets our whole person—mind, body, and spirit. By listening to the body God created, we honor its wisdom, support emotional and spiritual resilience, and open ourselves to God’s calming, steadying presence in moments when we most need it.

Food as a Spiritual Practice

The Bible teaches that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). John Wesley believed that caring for the body is part of caring for the soul.^{vi} Our emotional, mental, and spiritual health is strengthened when we nourish our bodies with love, gratitude, rest, and healthy food.

Food becomes a spiritual practice when we eat mindfully with balance and joy. We leave behind perfectionism for gratitude for the life God has given us and a desire to have the strength to serve well.

To care for others well, caregivers must also care for themselves. These practices or foundation rhythms build strength for the journey:

Holistic Practices That Restore the Whole Self

- Rest as a spiritual practice
- Mindful eating, hydration, and nutrition
- Movement as embodied prayer (walking, stretching, gentle exercise)
- Balanced rhythms of work, prayer, service, sabbath, and rest

Caring for ourselves spiritually, emotionally, and physically is not selfish; it is part of our discipleship and our shared life in Christ. In the Wesleyan tradition, holiness grows in community.^{vii} We experience healing and wholeness through relationships where grace is given and received. Scripture teaches, “*Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ*” (Galatians 6:2). When we pray, rest, reflect, and practice healthy rhythms together, we stay grounded in God’s love. These shared practices remind us that God meets us not only in quiet moments but also in the care we offer one another. In this way, we invite others into a community where God’s wholeness can be felt and known.

Wesley taught that a holy life includes a holy rhythm—one shaped by grace and nurture, not pressure.^{viii} Caring for others becomes sustainable only when we first nourish our

own bodies and spirits. When we pray, rest, breathe, walk, reflect, and care for our bodies, God restores our souls. From that restored place, we can offer calm, compassion, and strength to others, sharing the comfort we receive from the God of all grace.

Reflection Questions

1. How have you noticed that caring for your body affects your emotional or spiritual health?
2. Where do you sense God inviting you to sabbath and rest? What might it look like to respond to that invitation?
3. We discussed several practices. Which one will you adopt first? Who or what will help you integrate this practice into your daily rhythms?

CHAPTER 4

The Practice of Congregational Care

“Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other. Don’t hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord! Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you’re in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. Contribute to the needs of God’s people, and welcome strangers into your home.”

—ROMANS 12:10-13 CEB

God has claimed the baptized as belonging to Christ and to one another, and every congregation is called to live out that belonging—especially with those living with emotional or mental health challenges. In Romans 12:10–13, the church is exhorted to practice a love shaped by grace: devotion to one another, mutual honor, shared care for those in need, and generous hospitality. This agape love flows from God’s prevenient and sustaining grace, which meets us before we are whole and continues to form us as disciples. As the body of Christ, marked by baptism and sustained by grace, we are called to care for one another with patience, faithfulness, and hope. Many people carry loneliness, even while sitting in church pews or joining the church online. To care as Jesus cares means creating a

congregation where all people know they are seen, valued, understood, and held in God's love. This happens when we listen deeply and speak gently, building a church where people feel safe to share their stories.

Methodists have always believed that God's healing grace works through the means of grace, especially within the life of the Christian community. Practices such as small groups, Bible studies, care groups, Sunday school, serving teams, and worship help people stay connected, grow in discipleship, and know they are not alone.^{ix} Even our sacraments shape us for the work of caring:

- Baptism – We belong to God and to a community that promises to surround us with love, forgiveness, inspiration, and support.
- Holy Communion – Christ's presence nurtures us and strengthens us to offer compassion to others along the journey of faith.

Corporate spiritual practices, alongside our personal practices, draw us closer to God and stem loneliness by building true Christian community where we are connected to one another and held by God's love. Wesley believed that Christian community is a means of grace—that God works through our relationships to heal us and help us grow in holiness.^x

Care is a sacred privilege, but it is rarely simple. Emotional and mental health needs often have many layers—grief, fear, stress, conflict, and physical challenges. If you feel the weight of carrying any of these layers, remember this: you are not alone, and you were never meant to carry it alone.

The Congregation as the Body of Christ

In the body of Christ, care is a shared calling. Jesus worked with teams: “*He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two*” (Mark 6:7), showing us that ministry is never meant to be done alone. The early church served in teams, supporting one another in prayer, mission, and daily life. Methodists described the church as a “redemptive fellowship” in the *Book of Discipline* published between 1939 and 1964. Wesley teaches that grace is experienced in relationships within a community of believers who help one another grow closer to God through love, support, honesty, and care. It is “fellowship” because we belong to one another in Christ, and it is “redemptive” because God uses our relationships to bring healing and hope.^{xi}

In a redemptive fellowship:

- People do not walk through challenging times alone.
- Grace is shared through listening, prayer, encouragement, and accountability.
- We help one another grow as disciples of Jesus.
- We carry one another’s burdens and support one another with love.

This is the priesthood of all believers, with pastors and laity working together so that no one suffers alone. One person may listen. Another may pray. Someone else may help connect the individual with professional care or community resources. Together, the congregation becomes a network of compassion shaped by the love and grace of God.

A Simple Picture: The Circle of Care

Think of care as a circle:

- God is the outer rim holding and sustaining all with steadfast love.
- Within that rim is a group of trusted people, like the spokes of a wheel—pastors, lay care ministers, medical and mental health professionals, family members, Bible study friends, support group members, community agencies, and prayer partners.
- The person in need is at the center of the circle, at the axis, surrounded by support and never alone.

By God's grace and a caring congregation, no one carries the weight alone.

Cultural Humility and Grace That Heals

Care must also be culturally and contextually sensitive. People's stories, languages, and life experiences shape how they understand pain, healing, and loneliness. To care as Jesus does, we practice cultural humility, listening before speaking, learning before leading, and honoring each person as made in God's image.

Healing comes through professional help and through the everyday gifts God gives. We work hard to eliminate the stigma of counseling, support groups, accommodations, and helpful medications.

Reflection Questions

1. How does your congregation identify and meet care needs?
2. Do you have support groups, care groups, and prayer offerings in English as well as other languages that are spoken in your community?
3. Does your care ministry and support programming reflect the needs and demographics of your community?

CHAPTER 5

The Commitment to Community Healing

“I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me... Then the king will reply to them, ‘I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.’”

—MATTHEW 25:36, 40 CEB

Read Matthew 25:31–46.

Christ’s body, the church, is called to practice radical hospitality, reaching beyond its walls in care and service. Jesus went out to meet people where they were. Jesus was a healer who cared for the whole person. His teaching in Matthew 25:36, 40 reminds us that when we care for those who are sick, hurting, or alone, we care for him. We go into the community because every person is made in the image of God, worthy of love, dignity, help, justice, and compassion.

The church has a sacred role in showing God’s healing love wherever people are struggling, whether they worship with us or not. Intentional ministries addressing mental health and loneliness are a crucial part of our discipleship because

caring is the vehicle of grace, shaping us into the likeness of Christ. In a time marked by loneliness, the church is called to be a place where no one suffers unseen or alone and where belonging becomes a form of healing.

Radical hospitality means we do not wait for people to come to us. We notice and invite people into the community. We welcome neighbors, visitors, and anyone seeking support into small groups, Bible studies, serving teams, and healing-focused care groups. Care groups for grief, anxiety, addiction, caregivers, or relationship struggles become safe spaces where people can share openly and receive encouragement and prayer. These ministries reflect Wesley's belief that discipleship forms the whole person—mind, body, and spirit.^{xii} We also reach out to people who have been harmed or excluded by churches in the past, recognizing that trust takes time and healing begins with listening.

Creating a Culture of Care in the Local Church

A caring congregation is intentional. Churches create a culture of care by:

- Training laity and leaders in mental, emotional, and spiritual health awareness.
- Integrating care ministries with worship and small groups.
- Sharing stories of hope and healing as testimonies to the congregation and community that God is at work.

These practices help break stigma, build trust, and create an environment where people feel safe seeking support. They also become channels of healing and discipleship, nurturing both soul and mind. Prayer, scripture, fellowship, and acts of service help people stem loneliness, grow in faith, and feel supported by the community.

The Means of Grace as Pathways to Mental Health

Wesley taught that the Christian community is a means of grace—a space where hearts can be opened, encouraged, and transformed. One of the most important practices is holy conferencing.^{xiii} This is the sacred work of gathering to listen for God’s direction with humility, honesty, and love. To practice holy conferencing well, churches create spaces that are:

- Emotionally safe—free from judgment, shame, or stigma when people share struggles. These environments are debate-free and fixing-free.
- Spiritually grounded—held in prayer, grace, and the presence of Christ.
- Relationally accountable—guided by love of neighbor and mutual respect.

Small groups, congregational care meetings, staff gatherings, or community conversations about mental health can all become means of grace when they are prayerful, confidential, compassionate, and focused on listening for God together.

In all these actions, the church becomes a sign of Christ's healing presence—reaching out, welcoming widely, and honoring the image of God in every person. We care for others because Jesus cared for others. We go into the community because Jesus went into the community. We invite people into a healing, grace-filled community because Jesus welcomed all people with open arms.

Reflection Questions

1. How does your church regularly evaluate the needs of your community?
2. What is the most pressing need for care in your community? Who is addressing it, and how might you and your congregation join them?
3. How have you experienced care in a small-group setting?

The Journey of Walking One Another Home

*“He guides me in proper paths for the sake of his good name.
Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger
because you are with me.”*

—PSALM 23:3b–4a CEB

Read Psalm 23.

For many years, a rural church hosted a Thursday evening meal for anyone in the community who needed care. At the beginning of the meal, a pastor or care minister was often invited to provide an opening welcome and a prayer. Always, that opening began with a simple phrase, “Welcome home,” followed by an explanation of how the church was a safe place. Many people of all ages, needs, and demographics were present, some because of food or housing insecurity; others for recovery programs, grief groups, or loneliness.

Psalm 23 reminds us that God restores our souls and walks with us through every valley. This promise connects to the heart of “Chapter 1, The Gift of Companionship,” where we reflected on the story from Luke 24:15. In that story,

the risen Christ comes alongside the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and walks with them in their sadness, confusion, and grief. They did not ask for help; they did not even recognize him. Still, Jesus drew near. His presence on their journey began their healing.

That same power of presence shapes this closing chapter. In a world marked by loneliness, fear, and emotional pain, the church is called not only to follow Jesus' example on the road but to embody a community where people encounter God's healing grace. Our care is not simply us helping one another; it is God working through us so that others may experience divine comfort, hope, and restoration. Christ walked with people in their valleys, and Christ walks with us in ours. Psalm 23:3–4 (NRSVUE) says, *"God restores my soul. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me."* The Good Shepherd is near, guiding, comforting, protecting, and providing. We lack nothing. Our cup overflows because of God's grace.

God is the healer. Christ is the companion. We are the witnesses and servants of grace. Jesus' ministry was one of power, prayer, and presence—touching the untouchable, listening to the forgotten, feeding the hungry, and restoring the unseen. When we sit with another person in their fear or sorrow, we help create space where God's presence can be felt, and where God's grace can move in ways deeper than our words or actions alone.

This is why, throughout the book, we have returned repeatedly to the gift of companionship. We do not fix problems; instead, we help people recognize and trust God's presence on the road they are walking. Through small acts of care, gentle listening, honest prayer, and our willingness to stay close, we make room for God to restore souls. In a

culture filled with disconnection, companionship becomes a holy invitation—an opening through which people encounter the God who has never left them. Loneliness grows when people believe they walk alone. Healing grows when someone helps them see that God is walking with them.

“Walking one another home” is the church’s sacred response to the loneliness epidemic. Like Jesus on the Emmaus road, we show up—not to point to ourselves, but to point to God’s presence already near. Like the Good Shepherd in Psalm 23, we companion and care, trusting that God is the one who restores. Like the early Methodist communities Wesley formed, we practice grace in daily life so that others may experience the God who meets us in community, heals us through grace, and draws us into holy love.

We offer companionship because God first offered companionship to us, and God entrusts this work to the church. In a culture of increasing isolation, God’s healing love is revealed when the church refuses to leave anyone behind. As we walk one another home—step by step, prayer by prayer, showing up again and again—we trust that the one who meets us on the road is still meeting us today, using the church to draw people closer to God and to the healing love that makes us whole.

God has always met people on the road—through presence, promise, and grace. As we walk together, we trust that loneliness does not have the final word. Love does. Grace does. God does. And through the church, that healing love continues to reach the world.

This is the church's calling in a lonely world: to notice, to stay, and to love. We do not walk ahead or turn away; we walk with one another, trusting God to do the healing work we cannot. As we practice faithful presence, the Church becomes a place where grace is lived, hope is restored, and no one has to walk alone.

Reflection Questions

1. Who has told you they "feel alone"? How will you show up for them through text, a call, or a visit? How will you introduce them to a caring group?
2. What one thing could your church do to become known in your community as the church that cares?
3. Are you feeling a call to care? Is it to help others overcome their loneliness or meet another need?

You Understand My Pain

Poem by Rev. Lisa Degrenia

I am wounded...so were you
They call me names...you heard a few
I cry at night...you cried there, too
You understand my pain

I'm unwelcome...you know the glare
I am lonely...you can compare
My choices trap...you took their snare
You understand my pain

I feel beaten...your back was scored
I have no voice...you were ignored
They pierced my heart...they pierced you more
You understand my pain

You understand my pain
You know my deepest need when life is just insane
You clear a way for me
Forever, I will claim the One who never leaves

*I need thee, O I need Thee
Every hour I need Thee
O bless me now, my Savior
I come to Thee*

Endnotes

ⁱ Jennifer Vilcarino, “Teens Are the Loneliest People in the World, a New Report Finds,” *Education Week*, August 5, 2025, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/teens-are-the-loneliest-people-in-the-world-a-new-report-finds-why/2025/08>.

ⁱⁱ The Rural Monitor, “Loneliness and Social Infrastructure in Rural America,” *Rural Health Information Hub*, June 12, 2024, <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/rural-monitor/social-infrastructure>.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation” (1765) in *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 373.

^{iv} John and Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface, viii, Duke Divinity School, https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/default/files/documents/04_Hymns_and_Sacred_Poems_%281739%29.pdf (accessed December 8, 2025).

^v National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), *Mental Health by the Numbers in the U.S.*, accessed January 30, 2026, <https://www.nami.org/resources/about-mental-illness/mental-health-numbers-us/>.

^{vi} John Wesley, “The Letters of John Wesley: 1778,” Wesley Center Online, Northwest Nazarene University, Wesley Center Online, <https://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-letters-of-john-wesley/wesleys-letters-1778/> (accessed December 8, 2025).

^{vii} John Wesley, “The Means of Grace” (1746) in *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 160–163.

^{viii} John Wesley, “The Means of Grace.”

^{ix} Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 182–184, 206–212.

^x John Wesley, “The Duty of Constant Communion” (1787) in *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 502–505.

^{xi} John Wesley, “The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law,” [1750] in *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 258–266.

^{xii} John Wesley, “The Good Steward,” [1768] in *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 421–423.

^{xiii} John Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” [1746] in *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 160–161.

Resources for Addressing the Lonliness Epidemic

- Annual Conference Websites: Check your annual conference's website for local events, training opportunities, and downloadable resources.
- Discipleship Ministries (<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org>): Look for resources and training that support discipleship and community engagement.
- ResourceUMC (<https://www.resourceumc.org>): This website is a central hub for a wide range of resources, including those on mental health and creation care.
- “Mental Health,” General Board of Church and Society, The United Methodist Church, <https://www.umcjustice.org/latest/mental-health-15>.
- “Ministries in Mental Illness” (*Book of Discipline* reference, updated and amended in 2024), <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ministries-in-mental-illness>.
- The Caring Congregation (<https://thecaringcongregation.com/>): Explore the website for training and resources about building care ministries.

- Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation 2023: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>.

Resources from the United Methodist Church

Children and Family-Focused Resources

- Children’s Ministries, Discipleship Ministries, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/equipping-leaders/children>.
- “Trauma Resources for Ministry with Children and Families,” Discipleship Ministries, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/blog/trauma-resources-for-ministry-with-children-and-families>.

A collection of tools and guidelines for responding to trauma in children and families (relevant for mental-health awareness).

- “Children’s Books to Support Mental Wellness,” United Methodist Communications, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/childrens-books-to-support-mental-wellness>.

Youth and Teen-Focused Resources

- “Hope & Healing: Understanding Teen Depression,” ResourceUMC, <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/hope-and-healing-understanding-teen-depression>.

Guidance for church leaders on spotting and supporting teens with depression.

- “New Year, New Beginnings: A Call to Health and Wellness in Body and Spirit,” Discipleship Ministries, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/new-year-new-beginnings-a-call-to-health-and-wellness-in-body-and-spirit>.

An article encouraging churches to host mental health awareness events and to include youth and teen wellness.

- “Bridging Kids into Youth Ministry,” Discipleship Ministries, <https://www.umcyoungpeople.org/lead/bridging-kids-into-youth-ministry>.

A resource about transitional times (from children to youth) that can include emotional and mental health considerations.

General Congregation & Whole-Person Care Resources

- “Trauma Informed Worship: Guidelines for Intergenerational Worship,” Discipleship Ministries, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/trauma-informed-worship-guidelines-for-intergenerational-worship>.

A trauma-informed guide for worship leaders (children, youth, and adults).

- Harper Hill Global: Empowering the Human Spirit, <https://www.harperhill.global/about-us>.

Harper Hill Global equips communities with trauma-informed health education and communication tools rooted in Wesleyan values of care and connection so people can access vital information and support.

- Isaiah Park, “Bring Back the Dining Room: Recovering the Spaces That Make Us Human,” Discipleship Ministries, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/bring-back-the-dining-room-recovering-the-spaces-that-make-us-human>.

- Holding Sacred Space: Mental Health and Faith video series, General Board of Church and Society, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLKbXvgM3JlNY4kheBG-5NazRsqjK4UmoZ>.

Resources from The Caring Congregation (TCC)

Books and Training Manuals

- *The Caring Congregation: Implementation Guide* – A resource developed by Rev. Karen Lampe and Melissa Gepford) Spanish version available
- *The Caring Congregation: Care Minister's Manual* – A resource developed by Rev. Karen Lampe and Melissa Gepford
- *Exploring a Culture of Care for a Caring Congregation, Leader's Guide* – A resource developed by Rev. Joy Dister-Dominguez
- Start-Up Kit and Forms (Congregational Care Minister Application, Confidentiality Agreement, etc., <https://thecaringcongregation.com/resources#0095f08e-06e6-4bdd-bcab-ee13190a8688>).

Helpful Apps to Calm and Center Thoughts, Including Prayer Apps

- | | |
|--------------|-----------------|
| • Pause | • Insight Timer |
| • Calm | • UCLA Mindful |
| • Lectio 365 | • Nature Space |
| • Examen | • MINDBODY |

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Reflections

*Use this space for personal reflections, insights,
questions, or next steps in ministry.*



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