

The Isolated Worker

by Liz Paxton



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Travelling trainers, salespeople and those who work away from home, often in virtual teams, face special spiritual problems due to isolation and severance from community. How can we minister and witness to them?

"It is not good for man to be alone"
Genesis 2:18

Working as I do as a self-employed Management Trainer and Facilitator, frequently working away from home, and working in isolation both at home and away, I depend very heavily on my faith to support me on a daily basis. Given that my faith is such a support to me, I was interested in how other people, both Christians and non-Christians who are isolated, resourced themselves in their particular (isolated) work patterns. I also wanted to explore how a ministry could be developed to reach remote and virtual workers who work outside a corporate community.

With support from the Director of MaST (Management and Skills Training International), I surveyed a number of facilitators and trainers who work with

various corporate clients across the UK. Initially, I asked 30 people to respond, but within three weeks over 55 completed surveys were e-mailed to me, many from people I did not know. People showed an unanticipated interest in the subject, and had copied the survey on to their own network of colleagues. To get a 183% response rate from a survey seems to indicate a high degree of interest in the subject of spirituality by this community, and I have received many requests for copies of the e-mail findings.

The type of job I do is similar to all customer-facing roles in business, particularly sales and marketing, where travel is a significant aspect of the role. Client- and customer-facing roles call for highly developed interpersonal skills, whenever you are 'in front of' the customer, and long periods without interaction whilst travelling or in hotels.

Self-employed Management Trainer and Facilitators expect to travel to where clients require their workshops and seminars to be run. This often means extensive travel in the UK and abroad, and frequent overnight stays. I have often woken up in my hotel room and thought "OK, I know this is a Holiday Inn from the décor, but which one?" Night after night of staying in comfortable but characterless rooms, homogeneous facilities, and nothing to identify your whereabouts except that it definitely isn't "home". Coping strategies to deal with this disruption to family and local community life need to be developed, as attendance at supportive mid-week home groups or Christian community activities is erratic or impossible. Christian beliefs can help with this disruption to local family and friends, and I wanted to explore whether people professing no

faith or spirituality feel that developing this aspect would be helpful to their mental wellbeing. I already have a 'virtual' network of people working as management trainers and facilitators. They were my initial target community for the survey.

A survey was developed to examine the degree of spirituality, faith and dependence and expression of that faith in the workplace. The terms 'spirituality' and 'faith' were deliberately not defined, so that people could adopt their own interpretation of these terms.

"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no-one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep



■ *Two are better than one...* ■

warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not easily broken."

Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12

Findings

There is a clear interest in spiritual support expressed by almost half the group of remote

and virtual workers. The evidence of the encouraging response rate highlights the willingness of this group to share information and interests with each other, people who already have social networks established in the virtual world. Just under half the respondents would welcome spiritual support in their work lives. They were centred on the groups who already have a faith, and those who regard themselves as spiritual but have no formal faith. These are two major areas for ministry, and Christians need to develop methods and material to overcome the practical difficulties of reaching these groups.

Practical considerations

By the nature of their roles, these people are travelling to client sites where they will interact with

delegates for a day or two and never meet these people again. Even where there is more of an extended relationship in the case of executive coaching, the relationship established is not one likely to feed the coach, but rather the coached. The nature of the job is to feel drained of energy at

the end of the day, no matter how much enjoyment people take in the job itself. Another factor is that this work often takes place in a hotel or training centre, run by staff with whom you will not build up a relationship, and often staying in a variety of hotels and bed and breakfasts. Many courses extend into the evening,

where there are hopes of teambuilding, but even when the facilitator is invited to participate, it is usually still in the facilitation role, prompting games and activities designed to engender the very thing that the facilitator most lacks; a sense of community.

On the other hand, remote and virtual workers have often established for themselves a virtual community of colleagues. This may be people they met on training courses, or in the course of business, and some organisations run periodic get-togethers of their extended network, including people associated with their company but not on the payroll.

This is a potential community to whom to minister.

Working life in the 21st Century

There has been a major increase in recent years to remote and virtual working, facilitated by broadband communications for internet, and an explosion in telephony facilities, not only mobile phones, but tele- and video conferencing, the use of skype and messaging facilities on portable devices including palm computers and blackberry devices. As ever, the use of the new technology is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, the sense of isolation could be reduced, as close contact is maintained both with the office and with loved ones, but similarly, any sense of quietness and reflection can be interrupted with the 'always on' attitude to work. In my previous role in IT, being several time zones away from the

office was not considered relevant when colleagues needed to call.

A recent study by Roffey Park, a charitable trust specializing in innovation in learning approaches for business and management, found that:

“A survey of 371 managers found that 46% of managers currently work in virtual teams. 80% claim that virtual management arrangements have increased in their organisation over the past five years. The main reasons for this are the cost and time savings which accrue when project teams of experts work together remotely across a split-site organisation. In other cases, virtual management has become an issue after organisations have introduced remote working - including telecommuting and home working - to enhance the work-life balance of individuals.”¹

The study goes on to stress the need for highly developed interpersonal skills, and strong capability in self and time management. It recognises the dangers of working alone for extended periods, and the threat both to the sense of community and to potential corporate and team loyalty that remote working could engender.

“The community building aspects of social interaction should not be underestimated”²

There are no suggestions about how this social interaction could be developed, merely a warning of the risks of overlooking it. Work alone is insufficient to bring meaning to a life. We need to heed the words of Herzberg: “The primary functions of any

organisation, whether religious, political or industrial, should be to implement the needs of man to enjoy a meaningful existence”³

Isolation and the Christian Response

Jesus said: ‘I will be with you always, even until the end of the age.’

Matthew 28:20

There are examples from the Old Testament where people have used isolation to become closer to God. Ruth managed to live in a foreign land, Moses had his ‘rock’⁴ where God appeared to him; Elijah went to the desert when his life was in danger at court, and found God in “a gentle whisper”.⁵

Isolation was not only an escape, but often a welcome respite from difficult circumstances. Nevertheless, when people experience a difficult time they often need the comfort of others. Even Jesus in Gethsemane needed his disciples to support him and reproached them when they slept.⁶

Following the example of Christ who went into the wilderness to pray to his Father, over the centuries many Christians have sought isolation to be closer to God. Early desert fathers known as stylites put themselves on pillars to worship God, fast and pray. St Anthony of Egypt was one of the most ascetic of the desert fathers and he spent 33

years in extreme conditions in the western Desert, finally emerging by popular demand to help establish Christian community living in the form of monasteries.

St Ignatius Loyola, when wounded in battle, spent his months of convalescence considering God. This was a life transformation and he later valued the benefits of internal reflection which gave him ‘interior things, like humility, charity,

patience and discretion’.⁷

Following isolation for him too, came community, as St Ignatius went on to found the Jesuits, and developed Spiritual exercises to support a reflective journey into self, in order to find God.



■ St. Ignatius statue, Gesù Church, Rome ■

Many Christian writers have understood the mental states that extended isolation can bring, both positive and negative. In *The Dark Night of the Soul* St John of the Cross described how God can work through sorrow and darkness, and encouraged others toward inward reflection. He established the Carmelite order, where monks lived solitary lives of work, study and prayer, so that they were freed from the distractions of social interaction. St John sums up his philosophy in the following quote:

*What more do you want, o soul!
And what else do you search for
outside, when within yourself
you possess your riches, delights,*

*satisfaction and kingdom — your beloved whom you desire and seek? Desire him there, adore him there. Do not go in pursuit of him outside yourself. You will only become distracted and you won't find him, or enjoy him more than by seeking him within you.*⁸

These Christians have developed tools and techniques which could be helpful to remote and Christian workers, so that isolation itself is seen rather as a potential benefit for communion with God, rather than a barrier. Below is the summary of the Jesuit position regarding isolation which I have personally found useful.

Support for Christians who are working disconnected from colleagues

For many years, Christians or those seeking support have been able to use private time to study the bible and pray. Thanks to the Gideon Society, there was a Bible



■ Gideon Bible in Hotel room ■

in every hotel bedroom, which included guidance on how to use the Bible according to your needs. There were references for failure, inadequacy, being lost, intimidated,

and many other negative states of mind. These days most hotel chains have withdrawn the Bible in every room for 'fear of offending' other religions. Christians may well take their own Bibles or bible notes with them, but there is now no provision for people seeking spiritual comfort in a lonely hotel room. The risk is that comfort can more readily be found in the bar or simply killing time in the restaurant, having food or drink that you neither want nor need. Boredom and your relative anonymity is the main challenge, so why not strike up a conversation with an attractive member of the opposite sex (who is just as bored as you)?

It becomes easier to consider those things which you would never contemplate in your own community or home. The Bible has been replaced by the access to adult channels on the TV in every room, and of course, the internet where it is difficult to keep to the advice of Paul to the Philippians.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things.

Philippians 4:8

Practical suggestions for support:

- Encourage and teach Christians who have this lifestyle to adopt the discipline of personal time with God. Use the material created by St Ignatius Loyola and other reclusives and adapt it to the modern world, with training and encouragement of spiritual leaders.

- Create virtual 'home-groups' where Christians can study the same Bible passage or study material over the week, and discuss on a blog. There are already social network sites like face book, my space and bebo that could host such a community.

- Encourage other Christians to attend the available supportive networks, and to set up their own across the country.

- Ask a Christian friend to keep you accountable while you are away. Phone them or get them to phone you in your hotel room.

Support for non-Christian seekers who work in isolation

Using language that is generic and accessible to this group, offer support and friendship via e-mail, blogs and telephone. This group I have surveyed has indicated that they are open to this; they allude to difficult work situations where they would particularly welcome support.

There are a number of secular topics which would interest this group in an online forum. Psychological techniques for handling stress, work-life balance, and personal development could all be moderated from a Christian perspective. References to Christian and secular thought leaders in personal and self development could ultimately encourage people to follow an 'Open to Question' course which could be handled online.

Conclusion

The results of the survey have shown me that there is an opportunity to minister to both Christians and people who claim some sort of spirituality, as both groups indicate a desire for spiritual support in the workplace. There is an opportunity for mature Christians to embrace the enforced isolation of their work and spend time in meditation, reflection, following bible readings



Isolation can be embraced as a way of getting closer to God

and spiritual exercises, but this may need to be encouraged and supported by 'virtual' pastoring. In the footsteps of the desert fathers, isolation can be embraced as a way of getting closer to God. Our aim is that our Christian witness will inform the work we do so that we may all represent and further the work of the Kingdom of God.

There is an opportunity for organisations which already reach Christians in the workplace to find new and innovative ways of reaching those who are home-based or travelling.

There is an opportunity to reach non-Christian seekers interested in the spiritual aspects of personal development either for their own self-development or that of their clients.

The challenge for the Church is to engage with these groups in a way which works for them, despite the difficulties of mobility and isolation. The feelings of boredom of the business traveller comprise a God-given opportunity to befriend appropriately, to witness, and to lead these people who are spiritually seeking and hungry to the living water that sustains us.

Whenever I experience feelings of isolation and loneliness I remember that this will pass. I recall the promise that Jesus made

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you may also be where I am.

John 14:1-3 ■

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Notes

¹ Roffey Park study on virtual working: http://www.roffeypark.com/press/onerelease.php?record_id=37

² Roffey Park, virtual working press release.

³ D.S. Pugh (Ed.), *Writers on Organisations*, Penguin Modern Management Texts, Middx 1978, p123

⁴ Exodus 33:21

⁵ 1 Kings 18 :12

⁶ Mark 14:37

⁷ Taken from <http://www.wf-f.org/StIgnatiusLoyola.html> accessed 28th March 08

⁸ http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=65

Jesuit Spiritual Exercises
Twelfth Annotation:

the more our soul finds itself alone and isolated, the more apt it makes itself to approach and reach its creator and Lord, and the more it approaches Him, the more it disposes itself to receive graces and gifts from His Divine and Sovereign Goodness.