

# When You Need a Friend

By David Albert

**I**t's time we came to grips with a very real problem in the Church of God today! Christ's Body should be "one big happy family," but the truth is that many of our members are far from happy. Many in the Church are lonely and discouraged. They feel isolated, trapped, cut off from the rest of the Body. You may well be reading this article because you have your own private struggle with loneliness and would like to know what to do about it.

## Who's lonely?

Who is lonely in God's Church? Lots of people are!

The people who feel this way most are those who are cut off from the support the natural family usually provides. This group includes those the Bible calls "the fatherless and widows" — women and children without husbands and fathers, divorced and separated persons of both sexes and the elderly.

People battling sore trials such as alcoholism, chronic illness and long-term unemployment also often feel terribly alone in their struggles.

We need to realize that many in our midst bear up under enormous physical, mental, emotional and spiritual duress with precious little support from anyone else. Through long days and even longer nights they face their problems *alone*. The feelings of isolation and loneliness they experience as a result can be an even more painful trial than the original problem itself.

Cindy DeStefano isn't in our Church, but her statements in a Los Angeles, Calif., *Times* article could speak for a lot of people who are. Cindy, 30, is confined to a wheelchair in a rest home, a victim of multiple sclerosis. She longs for companionship with persons her own age:

"I can't use my legs, but that's no big deal. I think that people who can walk should show people who are handicapped that they are wanted.

"Being here is . . . a bummer. It gets bad at night and on weekends when I have to be alone here. When I hear people say they're going to a party tonight or to a wedding reception, that's when it really hits me, and I wish the invitations, the people were there.

"So I cry. I cry a lot . . . There's hardly anybody to talk to" ("Loneliness: The Me Nobody Knows," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 8, 1978).

We have brethren in the Church of God who, like Cindy, cry a lot out of loneliness and discouragement, brethren who desperately need our help!

## Satan preys on the lonely

Being alone doesn't automatically mean being lonely. Some people prefer their solitude and manage quite well with little outside support. But why did God say of the first human being, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18)? What is not good for most people about being alone?

While we all need times of privacy, too much time alone tends to foster inward, introspective thinking and brooding that focuses the person too much on himself or herself. This is especially true if such loneliness comes in the wake of a personal trauma such as the death of a mate or the loss of one's job or health.

Then the person's thoughts are almost inevitably backward looking. They are full of blame, self-criticism, guilt and shame — the perfect climate for Satan's influence!

Satan preys on the lonely. They are perhaps his easiest victims.

Knowing the devil's devices (II Cor. 2:11), we may be sure he seeks to heap on even more negativism until he has the person so "down in the dumps" he wants to quit on everything, including life itself.

This is no doubt at least part of the reason that God intended we all have companionship. The truth is that most of us don't function all that well entirely alone, cut off from support and encouragement from others.

## The biblical antidote

There is a lot we can know and actively do in God's Church about the common human problem of loneliness. The solution lies in one big, beautiful Christian concept and practice called *fellowship*. It's unique to true Christianity. There's nothing like it available in the world around us, and it strikes to the heart of the problem of loneliness.

Acts 2:42 tells us that not only did the early New Testament Church continue in the apostles' doctrine, but also in "*fellowship*, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." That Church wasn't only bound and knit together by ideas, concepts and values, but also by a special kind of camaraderie and closeness that flowed through the Church, making it a special community of believers.

I know we have all experienced some true fellowship in God's Church over the years, and I also know that we've *lost* some of it in recent years. Jesus specifically warned that "the love of many shall wax cold" (Matt. 24:12). I can't help but wonder if we have not already seen clear trends in that direction in the Church.

## Fellowship defined

Just what is fellowship? It is more than friendship, as good as friendship

may be. Fellowship is friendship with a special spiritual component that can only come from a common calling, spirit and way of life.

It flows out of the *oneness* described in Ephesians 4:4-6: "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all and in you all." It's a common bond that comes from being members of God's one true Church.

But we can break fellowship down further and isolate specific factors that produce it.

The first and most important by far is not just human companionship! The apostle John made that clear, "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye may also have fellowship with us" (I John 1:3). John wanted the believers to have fellowship, but notice the primary stress, "and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ."

Without contact with God and Christ you may have friendship, but not true Christian fellowship. Our contact with God guarantees that our contact with each other will be profitable and edifying.

No human being or group of human beings can substitute for contact with God. Many of us would like to see our needs met by other human beings out of what one author called "the human connection." But the human connection is not enough.

Simply stated, we can't and won't be close to each other as members unless we are first close to God. As we all draw closer to God, we will inevitably be drawing closer to each other.

Conversely, times of spiritual decline and drifting away from God will just as inescapably find us forsaking each other in the Church.

That's why each of us must recognize that our first line of defense against loneliness and every other negative emotion and circumstance is our personal contact with God. Properly practiced and experienced, that is fellowship, and not a second-rate substitute! Fellowship with God is the best kind of fellowship there is!

Once we have established and are

maintaining our contact with God, what else contributes to true fellowship? Notice Malachi 3:16: "Then they that feared the Lord *spake often one to another*: and the Lord heard, and heard it." There is tremendous value in the right kind of uplifting conversation among brethren. It strengthens us in the faith while binding us together in Christ's Body.

Some time ago some longtime friends and I got together and enjoyed this very thing in the home of a fellow minister. We talked about our experiences in the Church, our trials, past feasts, lessons learned, good and bad times. It was a beautiful experience, rich and memorable for us all.

Something else that added to the occasion, and another factor we can use to enhance our fellowship, was a fine meal to which everyone contributed some part.

We do this by command on the Night to Be Much Observed and during the other festivals, but we need to employ this big ingredient of Christian fellowship throughout the year.

With a little effort and planning almost anyone in the Church can play host or cohost to such an occasion and facilitate fellowship by so doing. Remember that we are told to "use hospitality one to another" (I Pet. 4:9). Those with resources to do so have a special responsibility to contribute to the fellowship of God's Church. And to their credit, some have done a marvelous job of doing just that over the years.

Potluck suppers and buffet dinners have been favorites of many in the Church because they reduce the cost on any one person and don't require elaborate preparation. And Saturday nights have seemed to be a traditional time for such get-togethers. I fondly remember many such occasions with brethren in many different parts of the country. They were some of the best times for fellowship I have ever known.

A wide range of additional Church-related activities can also serve as vehicles for our fellowship. Church and Bible study attendance, Spokesman Club, church picnics, ball games and socials all provide good opportunities to get acquainted

with one another under a variety of circumstances.

### **A two-fold responsibility**

I have mentioned and shown how some in God's Church have a special responsibility because of their opportunity to take the lead in initiating fellowship. I hope that all of you will take that responsibility to heart.

But those of you who are lonely and in need of more contact with others have your responsibility, too. "A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly" (Prov. 18:24). All too often the lonely and isolated pull back from effective contact with others. They draw into a shell of self-pity and make it very hard for others to reach them. By *not* showing themselves friendly they fail to encourage or develop friendships that may otherwise be available to them.

Sometimes the problem is not so much attitude as the lack of good social skills. I can't broaden the scope of this article to include that here, but I feel that some profitable Bible studies or sermons might be given by our ministers on that topic to help those who lack these critically important skills.

In any case, let's all realize that fellowship is a mutual two-way responsibility. It's not something someone can simply do to someone else or for someone else whether that person wants it or not. Long-standing and profitable relationships are almost always characterized by a high degree of mutuality where each person brings something of value to that relationship.

### **True Philadelphians**

We should be inspired by the very name God has given our uniquely blessed era of His true Church. We are the Philadelphian church, the one with the open door to preach the Gospel as no other has been able to do (Rev. 3:7-8). *Philadelphia* means *brotherly love*. We have had brotherly love in our Church, and we need to continue to practice it in spite of the fact that this age and its trials tend to wear us down and make us turn inward.

Let's live the meaning of *Philadelphia* by practicing brotherly love and true Christian fellowship, seizing every opportunity to keep it alive in God's Church today. □