

art lifting hearts

Art Lifting Hearts is a multifaceted online effort to lift up those who are relationally isolated with the love of God. Our primary tools are the artwork and storytelling of Melanie Pruitt. On these pages you will find a presentation of our purpose and strategy as well an idea sheet of how individuals and churches can join us in this important spiritual endeavor.

Why we "blend art and story to encourage the soul."

I. Because Jesus has Compassion for the Downtrodden

Luke 4:18-19 (NLT)

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come."

Matthew 9:35-36 (NLT)

Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages of that area, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

While Jesus' compassion extends to individuals in a wide variety of unfortunate circumstances, we are dedicated to focusing on one group in particular--the relationally isolated. Examples from Jesus' ministry include: a man living alone in a graveyard (Luke 8), a woman cutoff from society as perpetually unclean (Luke 8), a man who was despised for betraying his neighbors (Luke 19), a man physically unable to participate in his community (John 5), a woman who lived as an outcast due to her history (John 4).

At Art Lifting Hearts our **purpose** is to lift up those who have been **relationally isolated** by chronic illness, depression, loss and grief, aging and other life circumstances that result in a **unique kind of loneliness**.

Why This is Important to Us:

After decades of isolating chronic illness, Melanie writes, "God has prepared me to know first hand what it's like to grieve and face immense losses. He prepared me to know what it is to face pain and patiently endure trials. He taught me what it is to be immensely lonely, to feel forgotten, to feel helpless and that nothing is in my control. He taught me what it's like to feel dead inside, but still be living. And through it all, he taught me what it is like to have a faithful shepherd by your side."

II. Because Jesus' Compassion is to Flow from his Followers to Others

John 13:34-35 (NLT)

So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples."

The Challenge of Relational Isolation:

Loving others is a key pursuit for a disciple of Jesus but it is uniquely difficult to love those who withdraw or disappear altogether. Due to Melanie's many years of isolation caused by chronic illness we have a heart to help the church remember those who disappear.

At church or school or in our clubs and social gatherings we look around to see who is present. But it is extremely difficult to see who is missing, unless, we plan to do so - unless we take responsibility to pursue our friends and family and neighbors when they withdraw or disappear. We have discovered that even the most loving, mature, compassionate Christ-followers are not always good at this. We all need help being reminded and equipped to encourage those who are relationally isolated.

Our **strategy** is to use a unique combination of art and story to inspire Christ-followers to identify and lovingly reach out to relationally isolated individuals near them.

Why we use art:

Melanie first took up watercolor when illness severely limited her activity levels. After years of work as a professional artist, she came to understand in a profound way that art has a unique ability to touch the human heart. We find that Melanie's expressive style frequently produces deep emotive reactions in people.

Why we use stories:

Serving alongside her husband, a pastor, Melanie's passion was, and still is, to exhort Christ-followers to deepen their relationship with Jesus and strive to fulfill the two greatest commandments (Matt 22:37-40). Prior to illness she was published in Discipleship Journal (NavPress), Just Between Us (Jill Briscoe), and Christian Parenting Today. Now, as she seeks God for inspiration in her art, He also reveals stories from her own life that connect her art pieces to messages that she knows will speak to and encourage the relationally isolated.

III. Because Jesus' Compassion is Practical

Romans 12:10

Be devoted to one another in love.

II Corinthians 13:11

Encourage one another.

Galatians 5:13

Serve one another in love.

Ephesians 4:32

Be kind and compassionate to one another.

Colossians 3:16

Admonish one another with all wisdom.

Hebrews 10:24

Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

I Peter 4:9

Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. (NIV)

There are many more "one another" passages but these are probably sufficient to demonstrate God's expectations for us. Notice that the love we receive from Jesus, and then pass on to others has some very practical applications.

We often rightly think of these relationships being in the context of a church. However, some people are just not able to be present to participate in mutual encouragement. Loving others should motivate us to move from a mindset of "out of sight, out of mind" to a conviction that those "out of sight" should still be "on our hearts."

Art Lifting Hearts, in all its forms, (website, newsletter, podcasts, social media, etc.) is the **means** by which we inspire and encourage our readers and listeners to pass on encouragement to the isolated and lonely.

The following pages offer practical suggestions of how both individuals and churches can pursue the "one another" imperatives with the relationally isolated.

Practical Ideas for Churches, Ministry Leaders and All Christ-followers

1. Encouragement is Relational

for individuals: You are the key! An isolated person needs to be remembered and pursued by the people they already know more than to be served by a ministry team (though there may be a place for that too). You don't need to find a hundred isolated people to encourage. You need to remember and pursue that one in your life who has withdrawn.

What you choose to do for that person will depend greatly on their circumstances. One person might need a ride to church or an appointment while another person may not even be able to have visitors. You can't meet every need but the central goal of whatever you do for that individual is to let them know they are not forgotten.

Once you start, don't assume that your efforts are unappreciated or ineffective just because you don't hear back. It is hard for most of us to comprehend how much energy and how difficult it is for a chronically ill person to text or email, to talk on the phone or send a note in the mail. Don't give up. Your caring has its greatest impact when repeated over time. Even for years on end.

You can find additional ideas on the "Helping Others" page of the Art Lifting Hearts website.

for churches: Teach and promote biblical values and "one-another" responsibilities that inspire individuals to take up this call to look for and encourage the relationally isolated not just the people they spend time with each week. This personal approach is essential.

2. Recognize Loneliness

Not every relationally isolated person is physically isolated. To really "love one another" as Jesus asked, requires that we also develop an ability to recognize loneliness in a crowd. (see the story of the woman in Luke 8:43-48)

for individuals: The relationally isolated person in your life might actually be sitting next to you in church. As you think about the "one anothers" God is asking you to love, don't forget those who show up but aren't connecting due to depression, anxiety, severe shyness or other situation.

for churches: Not everyone who shows up to a worship service feels connected. Create a strategy to identify when someone pulls away from community or goes missing altogether from your church. Ask your small group leaders and ministry leaders to follow up with people who start to withdraw. This allows church staff to focus their attention on those who are even less connected with your various ministries. This proactive step will mean that less people go unnoticed and suffer loneliness for extended periods of time. This will need to be a strategy unique to your situation and resources.

3. Online Church is a Good Beginning

Not everyone who watches church online is lazy, on vacation, or dividing attention between worship and a football game. There are both good and bad reasons someone might watch online on a given Sunday. **For the home-bound, it's a spiritual lifeline.**

for individuals: There are so many reasons a relationally isolated friend might not be able to physically go with you to church. From disability, allergies, chronic migraines, depression, anxiety to immune compromising health issues, "in person" just may not be an option. Not attending in person does not equal a lack of desire to worship and learn. An online service is a great start but it's not enough. Just watching online lacks connection so ask your isolated friend to watch online while you attend the same service in person. Then connect with them by texting greetings, thoughts, or responses during that service. It says, "I am really thinking of you and you are participating in worship as much as I am."

for churches: Make special efforts to include the isolated when broadcasting a worship service. Greet your online community specifically and warmly during your service. Use a broadcast platform that includes a chat feature. Then train your online chat hosts to be highly interactive, drawing people toward connections with each other. Make provisions to distribute materials such as handouts or even communion elements by mail, or better yet, delivered by a friend. All these things communicate that your church cares. Ask your leadership teams to identify more ways of connecting with the relationally isolated in the ways they need.

A Note of Caution:

Hebrews 10:24-25

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

We have a friend whose church, like so many others, started an online worship service during the covid pandemic. As the health crisis began to subside he mentioned to us that his church was eager to shut down that online project so as to prevent people from lazily staying away from church. To be sure, getting people to return post-pandemic to experience fellowship and community once again was a challenge most churches had to tackle. But what some may not realize is that there are many people who have NOT "given up" meeting together. It has been forced upon them.

For example, it is estimated that between 10 and 15 million Americans have long covid. These people have vanished and may not be physically able to return to church for months or years, if at all. And that is just one chronic condition that isolates people. There are so many more. And who will offer connection and encouragement to these millions? Rather than shutting it down, perhaps this could become the core purpose of your online worship service!

Some churches like the idea of an online service expanding their reach, and increasing their attendance. This is not our purpose in suggesting online broadcast. If this were the goal, it would, in fact, DECREASES the possibility of people feeling "connected" when circumstances have left them relationally isolated. There can, however, be creative solutions, such as zoom groups, passwords etc. Be creative and keep the main goal in mind. You are choosing NOT to leave people out who are unable to attend and connect in a conventional way.

4. Organized Connection

for individuals: Your personal connection will always be essential however the combined resources of a church community can help you not get overwhelmed with the needs of your isolated friend. Begin a discussion with your church leaders about how you can team up to meet the challenge to encourage the relationally isolated.

for churches: Don't assume everyone watching an online service is resistant to connection. Many are starving for it. If possible, take your online ministry a step farther than just offering a worship service. Start an online community group, Bible study or prayer team specifically designed for the isolated.

As one example, a Bible Study Melanie attended for several years was in person, but they offered a zoom option for those who couldn't attend in person. The computer was set up for the opening time of greeting, worship and corporate prayer. Then, a leader assigned to the zoom group took the computer to another room for the Bible study conversation. When the study involved a video, they all watched together, streaming it on zoom, then separated for discussion and prayer.

5. The Role of Art Lifting Hearts

for individuals: When we send you a newsletter or you visit our website to read a story you are the first person we intend to encourage. Everyone needs encouragement. But then, when God leads, forward our emails and/or share the Visual Story Podcasts or website links to specific stories with someone you know needs encouragement too. As you seek to show God's love to the relationally isolated people around you our hope is that you will find our materials to be valuable tools. Melanie writes from a perspective that lonely individuals often appreciate.

for churches: We will be delighted if Art Lifting Hearts is useful in any way to your church. Let us know if there is something beyond our current efforts that you think might be helpful to you as you equip Christ-followers to encourage the relationally isolated. And pray for us as we work to fulfill God's vision (not our own) for this ministry. You can contact us through either of our websites:

artliftinghearts.com or melaniepruttart.com