

**17 OCTOBER** is the World Day for Overcoming Extreme Poverty. The International Association of Charities (AIC, see below) is closely involved, through Unesco, the Council of Europe, and elsewhere. Go to <https://en.unesco.org/events/celebration-20th-international-day-eradication-poverty>

## On the outside looking in

The older we get, the more likely it is that we will lose the sense of belonging and inclusion, perhaps through bereavement, or retirement. St Vincent shows us how to treat the ‘disease’ of loneliness

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**A**CCORDING TO Mother Teresa, the biggest disease in our day “is not leprosy, cancer or tuberculosis, but the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for and deserted by everybody”.

People today are living longer than ever before. Over the last 50 years or so, the Office for National Statistics reports that the average life span has increased by 10 years for a man and eight years for a woman in England and Wales. Hundreds of thousands of elderly people are lonely and cut off from society, especially those over the age of 75. In England, 51 per cent of all people over 75 live alone and five million older people say the television is their main form of company.

They have become socially isolated because they are weak because of their age, through disability or illness – and through the deaths of spouses and friends. Whatever the cause, it’s shockingly easy to be left feeling alone and vulnerable – and, someone who is lonely probably also finds it hard to reach out.

While working as a headteacher in a parish served by the Vincentians, I joined a lay organisation called International Association of Charities (AIC). Originally the group was formed by St Vincent in 1617 for women; today men and women who belong to it are dedicated to continuing the mission he encouraged the laity to perform. St Vincent organised the women – the oldest lay women’s group in the Catholic Church – into groups of “charities” to help the marginalised in society. The AIC continues to help support his fundamental plan in “acting together against all forms of poverty”.

AIC members work for social inclusion and community enrichment through practical projects with deaf people, blind people, homeless people, prisoners, housebound elderly people, the bereaved and people in debt. It is involved in lobbying on poverty-related issues, promotes Fair Trade Campaigns and supports a children’s project in Ukraine, the Daughters of Charity’s Kenyan Missions and UK home missions, which include The Passage, Out There, Depaul Trust and The Space.

The aim of AIC is to help those in need to be as independent as possible and to be happier as a result of their contact with us. Our aim is to help them feel valued and respected as individuals, secure in the knowledge that there is someone to whom they can turn for a helping hand or a sympathetic ear. In

### To do

**CONTINUE** the mission of St Vincent by befriending those who are isolated, lonely and in need. Reach out to them with affection and tenderness

**BE AWARE** of neighbours who are housebound, those who are in hospital or in residential care homes, refugees and people with mental health disorders

**WORK** for social inclusion and community enrichment through practical works of charity. Help people to stay in touch with family, friends and former colleagues

January of this year, the Prime Minister David Cameron recognised the work of the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) with the Big Society Award for their work in befriending some of the neediest people in England and Wales for more than 170 years. In the spirit of St Vincent, the SVP has always had a “one-to-one” approach, with 10,000 committed volunteers across England and Wales who turn concern into action.

As we celebrate the feast of St Vincent on 27 September, parishes might consider asking someone to speak about how St Vincent can inspire us to reach out with affection and tenderness to those in need. For example, people might be encouraged to befriend individuals who are new to the parish, by giving both emotional and practical support to make them feel welcome. People can be reminded to be aware of neighbours who are older or housebound, those who are in hospital or in residential care homes, refugees and people with mental health disorders, regardless of race, colour, religious belief, ideology or gender.

Try to imagine being completely alone – every single day. Around a million older people regularly go an entire month without speaking to anyone. Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion bring the Eucharist to the sick and housebound in our parishes. These are people who have been identified by their family, themselves or are known to their fellow parishioners; but it is not always easy to identify those who are lonely. People who have had fulfilling careers and family lives and then find themselves alone are sometimes the most reluctant to discuss their loneliness and certainly don’t wish to be considered “needy”. In addition, people are often reluctant to impose on others or to interfere in their lives.

Some parishes work in collaboration with

their local Good Neighbours Scheme. Together, they have a group of volunteers who give lifts to older or disabled people. This may be to a coffee morning or to a doctor’s or dentist’s appointment, or maybe to visit someone who is housebound for a friendly chat. Some volunteers are wheelchair-pushers taking wheelchair users for walks, to the library, the shops or just to get out for some fresh air. Other volunteers run coffee mornings, lunches, exercise classes and afternoon teas. When someone needs an odd job to be done such as putting up a shelf or help with filling in a form, there is a volunteer who can help.

My branch of AIC is working with our local Good Neighbours Scheme to plan an inter-generational Tea Party to celebrate the achievements of older people on national Silver Sunday on 5 October. The youth group has designed invitations and will serve refreshments on the day and the AIC has organised the catering and will arrange transport for those with mobility problems.

In June, Age UK launched a new event – the Big Chinwag, which got people talking to each other and raised money to tackle loneliness among older people. Whether it was having a cake sale at work, cocktails with friends, or a summer fete, the Big Chinwag got people together to chat and have fun, and made a real contribution to tackling loneliness. The funds raised will pay for befrienders to visit and support a lonely older person; they will support older people to get out and enjoy a warm meal at a lunch club among friends; and they will pay for a home visit to help resolve problems they are experiencing.

Professor John Cacioppo, a Professor of Psychology at the University of Chicago, is a leading expert on loneliness. He said: “We are experiencing a silver tsunami demographically. The baby boomers are reaching retirement age.” To avoid the consequences of loneliness, he says, older people can stay in touch with former co-workers, take part in family traditions and share good times with family and friends—all of which gives them a chance to connect with others about whom they care and who care about them.

**Dee Mansi** is the AIC UK president. For more information, visit <http://www.vip-gb.org/about-us/branches-of-the-vincentian-family/international-association-of-charities-aic>.