

When

April 15 to August 31, 2019 (including vacation).

Focus

Using biblical, theological, historical, and pastoral perspectives, explore the potential blessings and opportunities of being alone in a Mennonite context that highly values community.

Context

Our Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition places a high value on participating in a community gathered around the centrality of Jesus Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit. This communal theology has numerous implications for the way we do church at Berkey, including the relative informality of our worship, our sharing of joys and concerns, our fellowship time and meals, our small groups, our World Cafés, our emphasis on marriage and families, and more. Like many in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, we have a reflexive predisposition for group life.

Yet in his book *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone*, sociologist Eric Klinenberg shows that Americans are increasingly living alone.

- In 1950, 22% of American adults were single. 4 million lived alone, and they accounted for 9% of all households.
- By 2012, more than 50% of American adults were single. 31 million lived alone, and they accounted for 28% of all households. Of those who lived alone, 20 million were between the ages of 18 and 64. (None of these numbers included the additional single adults in assisted living facilities, nursing homes, and prisons.)

This sociological trend shapes our missional context. Within Berkey, 22% of our households consist of single persons—lower than the national average. But whether by choice or circumstance, a number of people in our congregation live with a certain degree of aloneness. This includes singles who've never married, introverts (married or single), highly sensitive persons, people in the second half of life who for developmental reasons crave more time alone, widows and widowers, retirees, anyone who feels lonely (including some married people), or those who sense God is calling them into a more solitary way of life. The experience of aloneness can move in at least two directions: toward *loneliness* (a painful condition we try to escape) or toward *solitude* (a joyful condition we embrace).

This sabbatical project will explore some of the biblical, historical, theological, and pastoral resources for moving from loneliness to solitude in a communal context.

Activities

1. Read books on solitude. This includes biblical, theological, and historical books, as well as books by or about people who have lived in solitude for significant lengths of time.
2. Take a solitary retreat at the Cedars of Peace, which is part of the Loretto Retreat Center in Nerinx, Kentucky, May 6-31. Except for a handful of short retreats, I've lived with other people all my life. This 25-day retreat will help me to briefly experience what it's like to live alone. I hope this experience will increase my understanding of people who by choice or necessity live with the tensions of aloneness and community.