THE LONELY EUROPEAN?

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Richard Dowden has an interesting article about Africans and loneliness in The Times today. Or rather, about Africans and not being lonely. While I tend to be suspicious about anything that makes universal claims for a continent as large and diverse as Africa, I feel that he has a point. Here are a few excerpts:

> *... But silent companionship is just fine in Africa. Just being with someone is perfectly normal. In Britain we shut ourselves off from other people and leave the lonely to themselves, especially at Christmas. Loneliness and depression are serious afflictions, created by the way we live.*
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> *Maybe we should learn from Africa. There, whenever I find myself alone, people join me, not necessarily to talk, or out of politeness to a stranger, but to have human company. What is awkward is to leave someone alone. To be alone is abnormal. When I have said I want to be alone people ask if I am ill.*
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> *... It is hard to be alone in Africa. Everyone has family. A person without relations is nothing. And family in Africa extends far beyond the truncated nuclear family of the Western world. Cousins several times removed are called brother or sister; distant in-laws are aunt or uncle.*
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> *While Westerners tend to shed family members, Africans greedily gather and hoard them. This extends horizontally but also vertically. The only time people are left alone is when they are left to die, but that is not universal. In some societies the family gathers round to shout their name repeatedly to retrieve them from death. And when people do die they must be given a proper send-off.*
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> *... Africaâ€™s traditional communalism has a lot to teach a world that suffers from loneliness and depression. Africa still possesses the sort of community that we talk about but rarely experience. And best of all, a society that does not leave its members to grow old and die neglected and alone.*

It seems somewhat ironic that this article should appear in the same edition of the newspaper where we read that the British Government is suggesting that parents should encourage older children to move out of the family home (see here).

There is an important principle here. In Genesis 2:18 God says that it is not good for the man to be alone. I don't believe that this is simply talking about the marriage relationship, as some take it. Rather, I see this verse as highlighting the social nature of humanity. We are created in the image of a triune, social God and we need community.

The fragmentation of British society is all too obvious when you live here and the contrast with Africa is particularly telling. To me this raises a huge question about how the church can live as community

in an increasingly broken society. Tim Chester has been looking at this question on and off for a while now, and I'd encourage you to take a look at what he has to say (this is a good place to start).