

# faith

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JUST A GUY  
IN THE PEW



## A DISEASE CALLED

# LONELINESS



### JOHN EDWARDS

is a husband and father of three who attends Holy Rosary Parish. His passion is mens ministry and he carries it out daily through his work at Cardinal Studios. John recently established Just a Guy in the Pew ministries which consists of a podcast, inspirational videos, and reflections for men. He is also a member of the Holy Rosary Study Group, Fishers, and Cursillo.

There is an epidemic spreading across the world today. Unlike other types of epidemics, it doesn't care what sex, race, age or blood type you are. It doesn't need a specific host to cling to. Anyone will do. What epidemic is this and why haven't I heard of it, you ask? It's a disease called loneliness, and it is not big on sharing. A recent poll from Cigna Healthcare stated that out of 20,000 Americans, more than half of them say they feel lonely. At first glance, it can be easy to cast that aside and think, "Well, I don't have to worry about that. I have plenty of friends." **That's what's so dangerous about it. It's a silent killer.** You see, we aren't talking about how many friends you have on Facebook or how many likes you have on Instagram. In fact, social media are a big part of the problem. We can build an image or present the appearance of having a wonderful life in our social media world, all the while keeping a tremendous distance between anyone who might actually want to stumble into the beautiful mess of our lives. This is why I have always found it ironic that posting is referred to as sharing. That is the furthest thing from the truth. Therein lies the problem. We live in a world that is more connected than ever before, yet people claim that they are lonelier now than at any other time in history. We don't truly share our lives with others. I, for one, know all too well the dangers of living a closed-off lonely, life.

I have been a salesman for the past 23 years of my life. I spent all day long being whatever people needed me to be. I was a chameleon among men. On the outside, I had everything. I was confident, I had money, I had a beautiful wife and family, and I had plenty of friends. On the inside though, I was a broken, disheveled mess. Surrounded by everything society tells us a man should need or want, I was painfully and utterly lonely, and no one knew it. I wouldn't LET anyone know it. The world had convinced me that loneliness is a sign of weakness and only the strong survive. Instead of reaching out to my so-called friends, I began to self medicate with alcohol and drugs.

Even those I held dearest had no idea the pain I was going through. Instead, I built a wall made of fears and tears and kept everyone and everything at a distance. Looking back now, it makes me wonder how many people really knew me, or, better yet, how many people I allowed myself to know. There was a hole in my heart.

You see, that lonely hole was put there by God, and He is the only thing that can fill it. The only way to repair it is to grow in our relationship with the Father. The best way to do that is by growing in relationship with those that He loves. Community is how we fight loneliness. Think about it. Even our bodies were made



DEACON  
CHIP JONES

# Changing **OUR** story

to come together with another. The reason we feel lonely is because we are drawn naturally to commune with others. Jesus asked Peter to establish a church through communities of people, not to set up individual worship for parties of one. That is why it is not a coincidence that Jesus sent the disciples out two by two. He knew that life is hard and that many of its challenges can only be overcome by a band of brothers. Even Jesus wished to be surrounded by the ones closest to Him as He entered into His Passion. He did not want to be alone. He invited his closest brothers to stay awake with Him while He prayed. They failed to do so. We must not fail each other in the same way. We must begin to open up to each other and stand side by side in the face of loneliness. There is just something incredible that happens when men choose to do so. It is inspiring, and it is a catalyst for change among men. I know it was for me.

There are many treatment centers in our diocese for this epidemic of loneliness. You only need to google Fishers of Men, Cursillo, Knights or Alpha – or ask about the many men's small faith sharing groups. All of these offer men a place to be a part of something more. It is in these groups that we can build authentic relationships that help us to grow in virtue and ultimately lead us closer to Christ. After all, who we associate with has a profound influence on who we become. If you are looking for a place to start, there is one venue where all of these groups and organizations come crashing together in a wonderful symphony orchestrated by the Holy Spirit. It's an event held once a year called Men's Morning of Spirituality. This year, it is at Incarnation Catholic Church on March 23 and the theme is "Most Men are Lonely ... RU 2." That theme is based on Genesis 2:18: "It is not good for man to be alone."

My life was forever changed by going to this yearly event. Last year, I was privileged to give back to it by speaking there. It's a wonderful place to start working on a cure. You'll find opportunities for worship, confession, inspirational talks guided by the Holy Spirit and men who are willing to line up next to you in the fight against loneliness. The first step in curing any epidemic is realizing that there is one in the first place. The next step is doing something about it. You take a pretty big leap in that direction by attending Men's Morning with an open mind and heart. If it's your first time, be open to the opportunities presented to you there. If you have been plenty of times before, then make this the year you go out of your way to make sure no one goes home feeling lonely. It is time to stop allowing the devil to isolate us. It is time to stop going it alone. It is time to realize you have a greater purpose and that there are those who exist that would love to help you figure it out. Now's the time to join together with other men and vaccinate yourself against the disease called loneliness. †

*By now, most of us have set aside our New Year's resolutions. It's not that we are bad, lazy or weak. It's only that we are human. Conventional wisdom (and practical experience) says that it takes 90 days of consistent performance to change a habit. So, if we had a hard time getting out of bed to go to the gym in December, and we didn't force ourselves to get up every day at the appointed time, we probably fell back into old habits.*

What makes it easier to keep those resolutions, to change those long-held habits? If we change, it's almost always due to some outside stimulus: a new relationship, a new school, a new job. Or we have an illness or injury that forces a change upon us in order to recover.

But the unfortunate fact is that our habits, in a way, make up our "story": both the person we see in the mirror and the person others see in our communities. And the longer the habits that make up our "story" have been around, the more ingrained that narrative about us becomes.

This flows over into our faith life, too. But the thing is, the stakes are much higher — they are eternal.

There is hope here, though. At our baptism and confirmation, God sent His Holy Spirit to each of us, to strengthen us for life as members of the body of Christ! And just as God spoke at Jesus' baptism to say that Jesus is His "... beloved Son; with [whom He is] well pleased," God is speaking those words to us, too.

How do we know He loves us? Because He sent Jesus "... so that we might be justified ... and become heirs in hope of eternal life." (TI 3:7) That's why Jesus came, and died. All we need do, to get help in changing our story, is to respond to the grace that's offered to us, by repenting our sin, believing in Christ and living like members of Christ's body!

How? We can start by adding a habit. Find the next Sunday's readings during the week before and study them. Commit to receiving the sacrament of reconciliation more often, to acknowledge that we want God's grace to change us. Approach the altar for Communion and pause to thank Him after receiving Him. Any of those things, and many others, can help us to change our habits, change our story, through the power of the Holy Spirit. And don't worry about keeping it up — ask the Holy Spirit for help! †

➔ You can register online for MMOS by going to [mensmorning.com](http://mensmorning.com)

# JUST A GUY IN THE PEW



*A life transformed*

BY BETH SIMKANIN  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KAREN FOCHT

*John Edwards knows what it's like to feel lost and alone in a secular world that emphasizes the importance of success, money and power.*

For years, Edwards struggled with his Catholic faith and loneliness. He claims that it took being arrested for possession of drugs and almost losing his family for him to make a vow to change his spiritual life. This ultimately led him to men's ministry. It was through men's ministry that he found his spiritual purpose: to make an impact on the lives of others and motivate men into becoming missionary disciples.

Edwards converted to Catholicism 11 years ago when he married, but he didn't practice his faith until three years ago. He remembers the exact day when his faith was affirmed. Ironically, it was when he woke up alone in a jail cell on Good Friday. He sat down on the edge of the bed in despair and felt the presence of Jesus.

"I saw the face of Jesus in a jail cell on Good Friday, and I told Him that I would become a different person," Edwards said.

Edwards says the emotional experience spurred a series of events that transformed his spiritual life.

### *Spiritual transformation*

One year after his arrest and recovery, Edwards attended Men's Morning of Spirituality, an annual diocesan faith enrichment event for Catholic men. Later that day, he talked with a friend who was full of joy after receiving the sacrament of reconciliation. His friend was confused over these feelings, and Edwards told him that the Holy Spirit was working through him. His friend asked him to explain what he meant, and the two met up the next day to discuss examples of the Holy Spirit's influence in Scripture and how they related to his friend's experience. Edwards' friend told him that no one had discussed with him the Holy Spirit before. He encouraged Edwards to start a men's group at Holy Rosary Catholic Church.

Edwards pondered his friend's words and gathered a group of 15 men together on April 12, 2017, without revealing the purpose of the meeting. He cast aside fear of rejection and told the group the story of his arrest and recovery. He said that men needed a place where they can share their struggles and talk about God. He sat down after his witness speech and thought that every man in the room wouldn't accept him. He says that he never could have imagined what happened next.

"That evening, I showed my vulnerability thinking that I would be rejected," Edwards said. "I was surprised because each man stood up and told the group their stories of fear. God made me realize that I'm not the only person who's messed up. I realized, in that moment, that I can use my experience to bring peace to other men."

Edwards says the evening marked the beginning of his involvement with men's ministry and the Holy Rosary Men's Study Group, which meets one night a week to discuss men's issues, how they relate to the Gospel and how men can apply what they've learned into their daily lives.

In addition to leading discussions during the weekly men's study group, Edwards began to attend daily Mass. He says he found a renewed sense of peace in his faith.

"It's like I was holding my breath for my entire life and then all of sudden remembering what it was like to breathe again," he said. "Things were put in the right place. Life is a gift and every moment is a blessing."

### *Men's ministry involvement*

Edwards encouraged men in the Holy Rosary Men's Study Group to read and contemplate daily Scripture readings. Several men admitted they struggled with understanding the meanings behind them. Edwards began to break down the daily readings from



the lectionary by typing his reflections in the notes application on his cell phone. He would share his notes to the group through Facebook Messenger, an instant messaging application through Facebook.

"It's a common issue for men to struggle to understand readings [from the Bible]," Edwards said. "Every man has wounds and is searching for a remedy. I realized that I could use my brokenness and my own experiences with pain to dissect the daily readings from Mass. I would type my reflections and share them in the group message. If it helped one man get through their day, then I knew that I had done my job."

He says that the response was so positive that friends encouraged him to share his reflections with others outside the group.

"I realized that something had happened to me," Edwards said. "When I would read the daily readings and pray, a phrase or a word would pop out," Edwards said. "I felt a fire and passion inside me to share it with others. It wasn't me talking, but the Holy Spirit actively working through me. That's the only way I can explain it."

He began to share his faith journey with other groups throughout the diocese,



## COVER STORY

### BETH SIMKANIN

is a freelance writer who resides in Germantown, Tenn. With more than 14 years of journalism and public relations experience, she has worked in the building materials, medical, publishing and utilities industries. She is a parishioner at The Church of the Holy Spirit.

including the Fishers of Men group, a Catholic men's group which encourages men to become active disciples of Jesus Christ, and Cursillo, which prepares lay people on how to become effective ministry leaders in the Church.

Eight months ago, he bumped into a friend at St. Paul Gift and Book Store who inspired him to spread his message of faith through a different media platform to reach more people. Edwards began to record a series of one-minute videos titled "A Minute from the Pew" in September 2018. Through his video blog, "Just a Guy in the Pew," he dissects daily Gospel readings into one-minute sessions on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. The same month, Edwards began recording a weekly, 27-minute podcast, "Just a Guy in the Pew," with

his friend Victor Adams. They discuss men's issues from a Catholic perspective. Topics are chosen at random out of hat in the Holy Rosary Men's Study Group. Examples of past discussion topics are vulnerability, distraction, stress, anger, lust and faith.

Men's ministry made an impact in Edwards' professional life as well. Five months ago, Edwards left the company where he worked for 23 years to work for Cardinal Studios, a company that produces video-based faith formation programs to Catholic churches across the nation.

### *The importance of men's ministry*

Edwards laments that today's secular society teaches men to not express their feelings with other men; therefore, they feel lost and alone.

"Men walk through life alone," he said. "We're taught not to share our problems with others or show our feelings. We isolate ourselves, which is an attack from the devil."

As a result of emotional isolation, Edwards declares that men seek to identify themselves by worldly standards. They experience an identity crisis, which, without faith, can lead them down a path of despair.

"Men grow up with a set of goals that have been laid out for them," Edwards said. "Go to school, get a job, get married and have kids. Once men have achieved these goals, they question, 'What am I supposed to do now?' All of their goals have been defined by power, success and money. Once they've checked all of the boxes, they don't know what to do next – and that's what leads them elsewhere."

*"God created us to be the spiritual leader of our families. Children are leaving, and I think that's due partially to the decline in men being the spiritual leader of their families."*

Because of this emotional and spiritual disconnection, he says that men are abandoning their roles as spiritual leaders in the Church, which is affecting Catholic families in a negative way.

"There is a void in the Church right now because men are missing," Edwards said. "God created us to be the spiritual leader of our families. Children are leaving, and I think that's due partially to the decline in men being the spiritual leader of their families. We've failed at this responsibility over the past 30 years, and it's time for us to take back our role as spiritual leaders. The devil takes his time, and he has been successful because men have been leaving their roles."

Edwards says that men's ministry makes an impact on the spirituality in men's lives because they have a place to share their vulnerabilities with other men in the presence of God without fear of rejection or judgment.

"Men have a fear of exposing themselves to others," he said. "It takes one man hearing another say, 'I'm broken,' to realize that he isn't alone anymore. It's a spiritual brotherhood, which brings peace. It's a place where they can open up and be themselves with their sins and scars and know that there is redemption."

### *A renewed sense of purpose*

Today, Edwards says his life is completely different than it was three years ago. He has a renewed sense of purpose in both his spiritual and family life.

"When I look back on my life before, I wasn't spending time with my children or going to Mass unless my wife begged me to go," he said. "Now, I rarely watch TV. I read spiritual books on faith, I spend time with my children more and make time for date nights with my wife. I realize that my first vocation is to lead my family. My wife and children are a gift from God, and I need to receive them that way."

He still leads the Holy Rosary Men's Group, which he founded almost two years ago. Edwards says the group has grown in numbers, and he has seen a spiritual transformation in the men who attend.

"We've sewn up the wounds," he said. "Now, men in the group read the Bible daily, go to Mass with their families and have become more active in the diocese. They are missionary disciples and go out and bring men into the fold."

Edwards says that it's important for men to understand that God has a specific purpose for them, and that no matter what sin they commit, they are worthy of Christ's love and grace. He says he had to learn that lesson the hard way, but it's brought him much joy and humility in his spiritual life.

"Each man is a beloved son of the Father, and God has a specific plan for him on this Earth," Edwards said. "We are here to build a treasure in heaven. At the end of my life, it isn't important what my sales goals were; it's the impact I made on others that made a difference. I realize that I am here for someone else besides myself." †

## *Men's ministry groups*

### **FISHERS OF MEN**

Every Tuesday morning at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church  
Mass at 6:15 a.m.  
Meeting in Father Gresham Hall  
6:45 a.m.-7:45 a.m.

### **HOLY ROSARY MEN'S STUDY GROUP**

Every Wednesday evening at Holy Rosary Catholic Church  
Parish Life Center Youth Room  
7 p.m.-8:15 p.m.  
Every second Wednesday: Adoration in the church from 8:15 p.m. to 9:15 p.m.

### **ST. LEO'S LUNCH**

Every Tuesday at St. Louis Catholic Church Clunan Center  
11:45 a.m.-12:45 p.m.  
\$5 for catered lunch  
Reservations required at  
[www.stleoslunch.com](http://www.stleoslunch.com)

### **MEN'S MORNING OF SPIRITUALITY**

Catholic Church of the Incarnation  
March 23, 2019  
7:30 a.m.-1 p.m.  
Free registration at [www.castyournets.org](http://www.castyournets.org)



### **FOR MORE INFORMATION ON MEN'S MINISTRY, CONTACT:**

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