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Confronting the Myths of Singles in the Church

Eleanor Daniel

Most churches like to describe themselves as “family churches.” This means, most of the time, that they see themselves as composed of traditional families, the Ward and June Cleaver variety—Mom, Dad, and a couple of kids. But what of the social changes that have altered adult demographics? Is the church aware and responsive? As a single adult, I sometimes have to wonder.

Some pernicious myths about single adults seem to permeate churches. Let’s examine the most prevalent ones—and possible responses we can make to them.

Myths about Single Adults

Myth 1: We don’t have many single adults in our church.

We may not have many single adults in our churches. But if so, we must ask ourselves why. It isn’t true in the United States as a whole. For example, using 1998 demographic figures from government agencies, I learned that 44.7% of all adults age 18 and older in the United States are single or live apart from their spouses. That is nearly one of every two adults age 18 and older in your community, if it meets national demographics—over 87 million people nationwide. Of course, the majority is in the 18–24 category—86.7% in that age range are single (over 21 million of them). But in the 25–44 age

range, 40.5% are single (nearly 34 million), while 30.3% of all adults in the 45–64 range are single (almost 17 million people). The percentage rises to 45.6% in the 65+ range (of which most are widowed). See the table on the following page for further data.

Granted, we may not have a college nearby, and most of our college young people may leave home to go to school—good reasons to have few singles in the 18–24 range. But it is hard to believe that our communities don’t have single adults—and many of them—whether or not our congregations do. I recently analyzed the list of people in the congregation I attend. It is a comfortable place for me and a good many other single adults. Yet I found that only 17% of the people on the total list of names were single. That may be skewed a bit—I didn’t include the names of college students who attend regularly but aren’t from the community. Even then, I estimate that no more than 20% of the list would be single. Though I suspect that our percentage is higher than that of many congregations, I still have to ask why it is as low as it is.

Myth 2: Singles are all similar.

The main similarity of singles is their marital status. Other than that, they probably have no more—nor fewer—similarities than married adults. Singles

A Demographic Description of Adults in the United States
(Numbers in thousands)

Age Range	Total Adults in the Age Category	Never Married	Separated	Widowed	Divorced
18-24	25,201	20,809 82.6%	461 1.8%	17 .1%	370 1.4%
25-34	39,354	13,569 34.5%	1,638 4.2%	120 .3%	2,660 6.7%
35-44	44,462	6,841 15.4%	2,211 5.0%	398 .9%	5,832 13.1%
45-64	56,312	3,854 6.8%	2,238 4.0%	2,648 4.7%	8,394 14.9%
65-74	17,874	753 4.2%	423 2.4%	3,862 21.6%	1,508 8.5%
75+	14,210	636 4.5%	333 2.5%	6,550 46%	635 4.5%
Total	197,413	46,462 23.5%	7,304 3.7%	13,595 6.9%	19,399 9.8%

Source: United States Census Bureau

are single for a variety of reasons. You can readily identify at least four categories of singles: (1) never married, (2) separated from a spouse, (3) widowed, and (4) divorced. Demographics from the year 1998 show that 23.5% of all adults have never married. The largest segment of never-married people is, quite predictably, those 18–24—82.6% fit into that category. But 23.9% of those age 25–44 have never married, nor have 6.8% of those age 45–64 and 4.3% of those age 65 and over.

The same demographic source indicates that 4% of all adults are separated from their spouses. That is most common in the 25–64 age categories. Separation may be for a variety of reasons—military service, jobs, institutionalization (one person living in a nursing home or in prison, for example), or pending divorce. The same source reveals that 9.8% of all adults are living as divorced singles. (Of course, many more have been divorced but are now married again.) That is most common in the 25–64 age range. Just under 7% of all adults are widowed. Predictably, most of those are older adults.

Clearly, singles are single for a variety of reasons—and the reasons undoubtedly shape their char-

acteristics and needs. One program does not fit all. Young singles age 18–24 look for something quite different than older singles age 65 and over.

Single adults differ significantly in their attitudes toward singleness and their needs. Most single adults younger than age 35 regard adult singleness as a transitory status—they fully expect to marry one day. Some never-married singles beyond age 35 may be content with their status, while others may be bitter because of their circumstances. Some singles may carry deep hurt and confusion as a result of divorce; others may need to deal with the grief of being widowed. Older singles must often deal with the grief of the loss of a spouse and then move on to putting life back together again.

Myth 3: Singles are incomplete, immature, undeveloped, or sinful.

The belief still permeates many churches that singles are unmarried because something is wrong with them. It is seldom stated openly, but it is often an underlying assumption felt strongly by single adults. It may have been most bluntly expressed by a friend of mine. We had become acquainted when

she was newly divorced. But it was clear that she had no intention to remain single—and she didn't. She married again. Sometime later, when I had moved to another city, she came to visit me. One evening, I had several single friends come to my house for dinner and fellowship. Another day, she met a single faculty colleague. She met several single friends at church. Still another day, I took her to a place where several single friends worked. All told, I suppose she met more than a dozen single friends of mine—all productive, happy Christian adults. On the way to the airport, she mused, "Isn't it strange—so many singles." "What's strange?" I asked. "That they are all happy," she replied.

Of course, some single adults are immature, undeveloped, and sinful. But then, so are some married adults. Some single adults are quite mature and are developing well in their walk with Christ, as are their married friends. Before you put too much credence in this myth, think seriously about Jesus and Paul—hardly immature, incomplete, sinful people just because they were single. But even if the myth were completely factual, the church is called to minister to everyone—complete or incomplete, developed or undeveloped, saint or sinner, single or married, child or adult.

Myth 4: Singles ministry should be designed to help people get married.

I once had quite a debate with a man who was in a seminar I was leading on single adult ministry. He insisted that churches should conduct single adult ministries but that the purpose should be to help people get married so they could do real ministry. I have often wondered how his single adult ministry has developed!

However a congregation goes about incorporating singles and ministering to their needs, the driving purpose is *not* to run a matchmaking service. It is to welcome single adults to begin to develop a life-long walk with the Lord. It is a ministry of discipleship, helping people to deepen in their faith and to share in ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. Until we have that commitment, we have no business thinking of singles ministry. If the myths are no more than myths, how do we minister to single adults?

What Do Single Adults Need from the Church?

1. Single adults need to be accepted in the church as they are.

This may or may not mean a ministry designated as "singles ministry." It may or may not mean a staff member assigned specifically to minister to singles. But it does mean church leaders, and the body as a whole, who see no need to remake singles any more than they see a need to remake any married person. Every person needs to change more and more into the image of Christ—but he or she need not be married to do it.

This means that for many congregations a thorough evaluation of attitudes about singleness in general and divorce in particular is needed. Are single adults welcome in the congregation? Or are they reminded at every turn of their singleness? Can single adults fit into the social structure of existing adult classes and groups without feeling uncomfortable because every activity is geared to couples? Do divorced individuals always feel that they must give explanations about their divorce? Are people ready to rally to the needs of single adults?

I have an elderly friend who was divorced probably fifty years ago. She had three young children when her husband abandoned her. It was a real challenge for her to rear those three children without a father who was involved in their lives. She had major financial challenges, but eventually she was able to get a good civil service job that met most of their needs, though not all their wants. Her three children have turned out to be capable adults. But she once told me, "I would never have been able to do this without this church [naming the congregation of which she is a part]." She told me how the church people had come and painted her house when she couldn't afford to have it done. She told how men in the congregation had met the need of her boys for a man's influence, how she had found meaning in teaching children in the congregation, how she had never had to spend time feeling she must defend her divorce or being a single mom. That is acceptance—and what singles need.

Churches serious about ministering to singles must spend some time wrestling with their theology of marriage and singleness and their understanding of divorce.

Living in community means that we are valued for ourselves. It means that our gifts and abilities are recognized. It means that we are heard.

I'm not suggesting that churches should adopt an "anything goes" attitude. Not even most singles would appreciate that. But on the other hand, singles must know that they are accepted in the congregation and that they can find meaningful expressions of ministry, even if they have never married or have experienced the pain of a divorce.

Churches need to reexamine how they name things. Consider the following names of adult classes and groups I have known: Mr. and Mrs. Class, Win-A-Kuple, Homebuilders, Pairs and Spares. All these names and others imply that couples are the norm and singles are the aberration. They generally fail to appeal to single adults who may draw conclusions on the basis of a name alone.

Congregational leaders need to rethink how issues such as marriage and family are handled in preaching and worship. Once I was a part of a congregation in which the minister preached a series of sermons on Christian marriage. There is nothing new or wrong with such a preaching series. But what a number of us found problematic was the last Sunday of the series. On that day, at the end of the sermon, the minister asked all couples to stand and repeat their wedding vows. Nothing wrong with that—but it would have been better done, in my opinion, in a service other than Sunday morning and with a prior announcement. Less than half the congregation stood. Many were single for a variety of reasons. One older person had buried his wife only a month or two before. A married friend of mine couldn't stand—her husband was out of town. Other married friends couldn't either, as much as they wanted to, because their spouses were elsewhere in the building leading children's services. You have to wonder how many couples felt compelled to stand despite the

difficulties they were confronting—or else have the whole church body wonder what was wrong. Occasions such as this, as well intentioned as they are, may be as painful for some couples as it is for some single adults.

A former student of mine, divorced several years before the event she described, recounted to me the pain she felt one Valentine's Day in her congregation. The minister made much of the fact that it was Valentine's Day—a day of love—and then asked each member to find his or her spouse to embrace. She said, "I just sat there and cried. I didn't want to be married to him again. But it was having what had been, and no longer was, symbolized before my very eyes." I'm sure the minister did all of this in good faith, but he was insensitive to the needs of the singles.

2. Singles need community.

Every person is made to live in community. Many community, or intimacy, needs are realized in marriage; others, within other human relationships. Indeed, the church is community—a people first in community with God but also in community with each other. Without a mate, many single adults are left to find their sense of community in relationships with friends and the church body.

Living in community means that we are valued for ourselves. It means that our gifts and abilities are recognized. It means that we are heard. It requires that we have the opportunity to share in the life of the community without undue reservation or suspicion. A divorced friend of mine, a graduate of a Bible college with a degree in Bible and Christian education, experience as a professional Christian educator, and professional credentials and experience as a social worker, told me once about the congregation of which she was a part. She could teach a class of adult women only if an elder was present to be sure she didn't encourage divorce and that she was accurate in her Bible teaching. Needless to say, she didn't sense much community—and she didn't stay long.

Contrast that with an experience I had in a congregation. I was the professional Christian educator. The minister became enamored with much of the anti-institutional church rhetoric of the era. After he verbally slapped the congregation around for some

months, he finally resigned and took a splinter group from the congregation. It was a difficult time for me. I was in doctoral work. Yet I was the one person in the congregation who could go to each of the splinter groups and try to seek reconciliation. I was called upon in my professional role to work redemptively with the people who remained in the congregation. It was one of the hardest moments of ministry for me.

I remember well one day when two women came to me to invite me to be a part of a small group. They and their husbands and two other couples were forming a small group that would work together to heal their own hurts and to grow together. They wanted me to be a part too, not to lead, but to be ministered to. For better than a year I was in that group—and never once was there a sense that I was different from them. I was single—but I was a part of the community. You can imagine that thirty years later, those folks are among some of my treasured friends.

Holidays are often difficult times for single adults, especially those distant from family. It is true that they can, on their own, initiate activity that would ameliorate the loneliness of the season—and many do. But if the church is a true biblical community, holidays can be times when families of every description share with each other, making certain that no single person is alone on a special day. It is a part of caring for each other's needs.

3. Single adults need the opportunity for ministry in the name of Christ.

The contemporary church is often reluctant to turn significant ministry over to single adults. The reasons are many—they are seen as incomplete, they are divorced, they need ministry to themselves, for example. They do need ministry—but they need also to minister. It is easy for singles to become self-absorbed—that is easy for anyone in this culture. The

corrective is to challenge people to find their fulfillment in serving others in the name of Christ.

Have we forgotten Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 7? "Now I say to those who aren't married and to widows—it's better to stay unmarried, just as I am" (1 Cor 7:8 NLT). He insists later (1 Cor 7:29–38) that the single person has opportunities for ministry that are not available for those who are married.

Paul is by no means stating that everyone should remain single. But he does insist that singles have a freedom to minister without other obligations, a freedom that simply does not exist for those with responsibilities for a spouse and children. This challenge needs to be presented to singles and understood by married adults, as well. Singles need to be recruited, and then set free, to minister—not discouraged. Their ministry needs to be celebrated.

Conclusion

Singles in the church is a timely topic for a church that should no longer assume that being a "family" means ministering only to the traditional family. Churches and church leaders must come to grips with the reality of the changing face of families. They need to accept the presence of singles of all varieties, the challenge of ministering to those of every marital status, and the mandate to equip them for ministry—among themselves, to the larger body, and to the world. The barriers must go. Community must be sought. Perhaps if Paul were writing today, he would say, "All who have been united with Christ in baptism have been made like him. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, *married or single*. For you are all Christians—you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:27–28 NLT).

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