

Talking about singleness with a church leader

Respondents were asked: **Have you ever discussed singleness with one of your Church leaders on a one to one basis?**

Yes at their instigation 8%

Yes at my request 26%

Would have liked to but didn't feel confident to ask 26%

No, have never wanted to 41%

They were then invited to make any additional comment. There were 634 comments made, all of them read and representative sample of 211 analysed in detail (every third one starting at the third).

Of 211, 11% (24) either did not address the question, making other points, or noted it was not relevant to their situation. A further 12% (26) simply said that they had done so, with no further reflection.

Many comments noted that the list of possible answers did not exhaust the possibilities and there were other options. These included that respondents:

- would discuss singleness with one of their church leaders, but just haven't done so yet (10%)
 - This has reminded me that I should talk with one of them!! (179)
- want and feel confident to do so, but are equally confident that it would not prove appropriate (if the leader is male) or helpful (anticipating the expected response), for example:
 - Heard that at a talk by wife's of leaders that we are a real head ache to leaders so won't be approaching leaders again!! I can understand why we are this to them (302)

Others qualified their Yes and No by explaining the outcome of having talked to their Church leader or of why they do not do so. Each of these is explored below.

Unhelpful, no understanding and no action

When single adult Christians had discussed singleness with someone in church leadership, there were over three times as many negative words used as positive (65 to 18). Although some described their leader or leader's wife or elder as helpful -

- My church leader is very supportive of single people and helping them with Jul 10, 2012 1:25 PM relationships. (125)
- One of my previous pastors who had been divorced and then remarried was very helpful and supportive to me when I was widowed 2 years ago and visited me regularly for support.

This was unusual - on the whole most churches don't know how to address it and at best would be helping you to cope rather than suggesting that there are any alternatives for the future. (152)

- My pastor and his wife have both encouraged me and prayed for me. I recently had my heart broken, and my pastor's wife in particular has been supportive. (379)

- the word most often described for their their experience was unhelpful, for example:

- Massively unhelpful. He told me that maybe getting married and having children wasn't going to happen for me and that I should look into adopting as a single person. I was only 30 at the time! It was the worst experience of pastoral care that I have ever experienced. (15)
- They weren't very helpful...their answers always began with "well, when i met my wife".....or "before i met my husband..." (25)

The most commonly used word thereafter was 'no understanding':

- They just don't understand, or don't want to understand that hope deferred makes the heart grow sick. We all have needs even the Apostle Paul recognised this, the leadership often simply ignore the problem and hope that it will go away. (129)
- My church leader married at 21, so while sympathetic there was little understanding of the difficulties. (213)

This was followed closely by 'no action':

- There was a talk on sex at church which I said I found quite difficult. Spoke to leader about that and he said we need to do something for singles... 6 months later he has not followed up on suggestion. (565)
- They were uncomfortable, listened, but took NO action. Pretend they want change and agree, but never do anything about it. (555)
- My vicar listened and had some wise advice but it doesn't seem to permeate to the church plans and policies. (274)

There were many stories of which the following are illustrative:

- My Church leader said that he was aware that my husband had left me, that was a year ago, he has never contacted me since, has not approached me when I have been at Church, never made eye contact. Leprosy comes to mind. (56)
- Was given the usual scripture about waiting for God's timing but little about how to wait well. (244)
- I was told my feelings of isolation were nonsense! (460)
- I occasionally mention the loneliness. My church leader looks scared and lost. (613)
- They questioned my sexuality i.e .whether I was gay and that being my reason for being single, which was not very sensitive or helpful! (246)

- Yes. I got told 'some people are mothers, some people are teachers, some people are Pastors and some people just work long hours to provide for the Church'. Guess which one he had me labelled as?! (513)
- Some of them will try to understand, but most church leaders married very early in life and don't have a clue! Some get angry (as a guy, I should be taking my responsibility more seriously and finding myself a wife - why am I "messaging about"); some are patronising, treating me like a 13 year old; most just glaze over and act like I'm not there trying to talk to them (369)
- Some of the leaders' (older men) views are that if you are single it is because you are a) inadequate b) gay, c) too picky or d) asexual (366)

Reasons for not speaking to their church leader

The reasons for wanting to speak to a church leader but not doing so included:

- Not confident in raising issue
- Not confident in that the leaders not in a position to understand or empathise or take action
- They're male and or married not appropriate to advise single women
- Not confident they would be helpful because one could anticipate the kind of response would receive

The largest number of reasons given in the comments related to expecting leaders to have no understanding or interest in their situation (33). Of these one third explicitly mentioned that leaders were male and/or married and so would not understand a single woman's situation.

- None of these answers is correct for me. I have not discussed singleness with one of the church leaders on a one to one basis, but this was not because I did not want to, nor because I didn't feel confident to ask. The real reason I have not discussed it is because I doubt they could help me very much. All the ministers I know are married, so what exactly would they know about being single? (101)
- No, there's nobody I really feel would be able to help me. (535)
- Very difficult to have a one-on-one conversation with a church leader (all of whom are male) when I am a single female (416)
- My Church leaders are fantastic but all male so as a single female would not necessarily feel comfortable discussing relationship issues with them. (578)

On the personal front, 10 said that they had no need to do so or issues to discuss. A further 8 qualifying this by explaining that they talked to their friends so saw no need to address it with leaders. 7 reported being embarrassed that they were single and felt if they were to discuss it that they would appear not to trust God.

- I think if I wanted to then I could ask and they would provide the guidance and point the way but it's never been an issue. (45)
- I would feel selfish and self-pitying to talk to a Church leader about how desperate I feel being single, how sad I am not to have children and the fear that I am running out of time. I am afraid that the Church would frown upon such self-indulgent thoughts. (479)

As a separate point that is implicit in responses to other questions, but made explicit here, one person wondered if singleness is a punishment for not being Christian when young.

- The issue of not being unequally yoked is a big issue for me. There are significantly more women in the church than men, therefore if we are not to be unequally yoked then singledom is likely to be for life. It's almost like a punishment for not being a Christian when you were young when you would have met a Christian partner. (192)