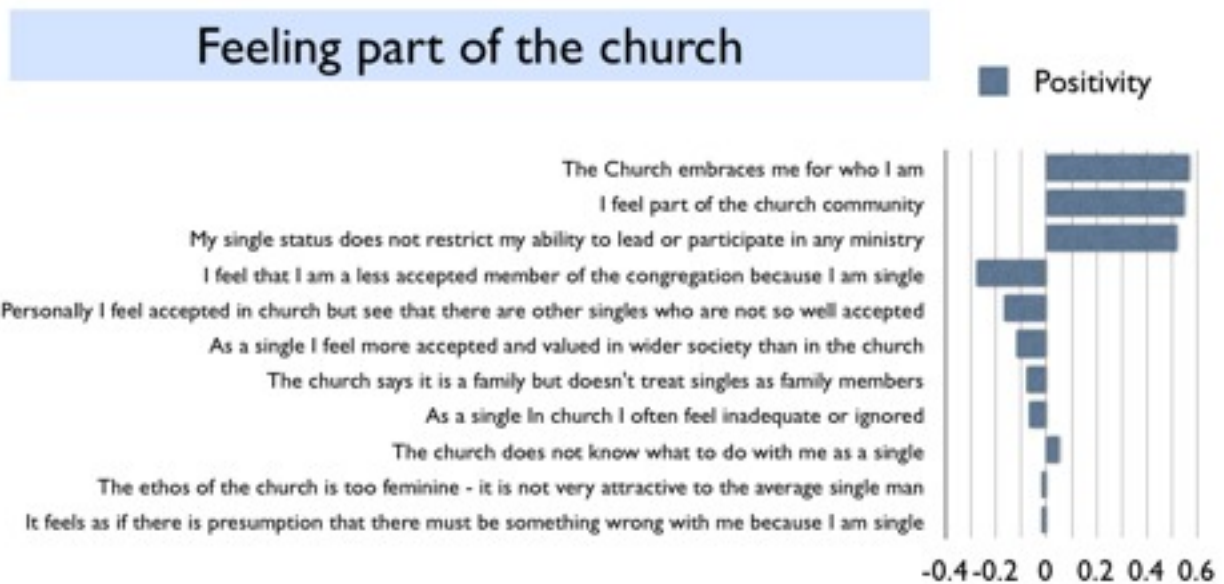


FEELING PART OF THE CHURCH

Summary: Accepted but often isolated and lonely

Christian singles responding to the survey generally felt accepted their churches. However they were split about whether churches treat them as ‘family members’ and more agree than not that churches don’t know what to do with them.



In the 712 comments, single adult Christians, while asserting that they were accepted also said that they felt isolated, alone and lonely. The main reasons given included:

- The pain of being single amongst families particularly where church has a family focus
- Their needs and issues are ignored and they feel unsupported
- Left out of the social life of the church because married people often don't invite them out socially, and many single women say that they are treated as threats to couples
- Lonely because there are few activities in church for 30 - 60 or because as single parents they cannot get to house groups
- Excluded from participating in leadership in many types of church
- There may be few other single people of the same age group to whom to relate

The combination of these gives the underlying rationale for this comment:

- *The majority of Christian singles I meet, and I meet hundreds in my job, tell me that they feel isolated in church.*

Introduction

The degree to which single Christians feel part of their churches was assessed by responses to various statements. This was made up of a set of five point scales inviting respondents to agree or disagree. An average of 2,754 people responded to the questions.

This degree is expressed in terms of positivity (the number of those agreeing minus the number disagreeing as proportion of those giving an answer). A figure of +1 would indicate that all people expressed a view and said that they agreed with it. A figure of 0 indicates that half of the people expressing a view agreed and half disagreed. For example, 1074 agreed and 1130 disagreed with the statement that 'it feels as if there is a presumption that there must be something wrong with me because I am single.'

The statements are listed in size of effect.

- + 0.57 The Church embraces me for who I am.
- + 0.55 I feel part of the church community.
- + 0.52 My single status does not restrict my ability to lead or participate in any ministry
- 0.28 I feel that I am a less accepted member of the congregation because I am single.
- 0.17 Personally I feel accepted in church but see that there are other singles who are not so well accepted.
- 0.12 As a single I feel more accepted and valued in wider society than in the church.
- 0.08 The church says it is a family but doesn't treat singles as family members.
- 0.07 As a single In church I often feel inadequate or ignored.
- + 0.05 The church does not know what to do with me as a single.
- 0.02 The ethos of the church is too feminine - it is not very attractive to the average single man.
- 0.02 It feels as if there is presumption that there must be something wrong with me because I am single.

Survey respondents generally felt embraced for who they are, part of the church community and not restricted in ability to lead.

They slightly disagreed that they were less accepted or that others were or that the church was less accepting than wider society.

However there was more ambivalence when coming to treat singles as 'family members' and more than not agreed that churches did not know what to do with them.

And people divided too on whether the church is too feminine or if there is a presumption that something is wrong with the respondent if they are single.

Analysis of the comments.

There were 712 comments which covered all aspects of these questions, many of them qualifying the answer given or giving examples of them. All 712 comments were read. As the first opportunity to write a textual comment on a question, many people commented about the survey itself, for example:

- *So glad you are doing this survey - people do not understand how hard it is being single in church (649)*
- *Thank you, this is a very relevant survey and I'm glad I got to take part and make a difference! Please help us singles. It's so hard to believe that God has someone for us. It's such a lonely existence and we feel like we don't fit into this world. Thank you. (601)*

Those initiating surveys recognise that simply asking the questions itself may prove challenging. Some of the answers reflect the struggle of strong commitment to their church 'family' and how they really feel:

- *What can I say how sad it is when I realize from these answers how I really feel however I do love my church and would not go anywhere else... it is after all my home (383)*

Also it presented the chance to write more general views on the topic, for example:

- *I have heard the nuclear family preached as God's ideal plan, whereas I think it's a modern evil, and we should promote the extended family and community which can embrace all. (543)*
- *I don't think that churches place enough emphasis on the importance of friendship, and give far too much significance to the family. The church should be a place where natural families are more dissolved into a larger community. I think that Protestantism has a poor understanding and appreciation of the callings of celibacy and singleness and overemphasises the importance of marriage. It isn't common to find single persons in Protestant church leadership, for instance. (648)*

As in all responses, there are comments for which the meaning is clear, but not directly interpretable as contributing to the implied question asked. For example:

- *I need to party more and communicate with more people to find the one (476)*

There were many that included both comments about their own church and noted that others, possibly experienced in the past, may be different, for example:

- *My particular church community is very good at demonstrating the value and contribution of single people - but that has not been my experience in the wider church to be honest. (497)*
- *I am answering for the church I currently attend however I do know in other churches my answers would be very different!!*

We should note that this is partly because questions themselves varied in using different terms: The Church, the church, the church community, in church member of congregation, in the church. It was unclear from this variety of terms what the intention was for giving an

answer. From the comments, we assume that respondents discussed the church they usually attend and, for the purposes of comparative analysis, have only taken those parts of the comments that do so.

In total 538 comments were interpretable as relating to the questions asked and are described below.

Many churches are accepting and embracing of single adults

In response to the questions, respondents wanted to assert that the individual church they attend is good in being accepting of single people and valuing them (94/538).

- *I am part of a small and accepting church - my marital status (or lack of one!!) does not affect my ministry or place within the church family (198)*
- *Personally I feel very accepted by my church. It is very family focussed but I Jun 20, 2012 1:00 AM am never left out of things. If anything they make more of an effort to invite me to things like dinner and other gatherings. (280)*
- *As a out gay man I am fully accepted (317)*
- *I have always felt very welcomed and included in my Church. (257)*
- *My church is (unusually) affirming of ALL it's members from the tinies to the oldest, whether single or married. Whole body ministry is encouraged.(127)*

Churches may accept singles, but not address their needs or issues

However half of these qualify their answers or comments by a big BUT: that while being accepted, churches don't address their needs as single people or address issues of singleness and don't understand them.

- *Some of the above answers would seem contradictory but one can feel loved at one level but isolated and uncared for at different times, and can feel those same emotions at the same time as a single person. (591)*
- *I think my church does accept single people, but it can still sometimes neglect their needs. (74)*
- *I feel I am accepted in a general, superficial way but they don't really know how to make singles feel included (207)*
- *I am accepted and valued. However, they do not understand the 'single' , divorced status (256)*
- *While I feel accepted as a single, I have to fight to get the singles point of view and lifestyle heard. (712)*

- *My church does not have a singles ministry and does not address issues in relation to single people (356)*
- *The problem is there is a general lack of understanding about the implications of being single - most people who are married in the church have never really been single so don't really understand this issues or even acknowledge that there might be any. (580)*
- *Churches do not appreciate the unique challenges faced by singles: socially, emotionally, spiritually and financially. (266)*
- *Some attitudes are changing in church to affirm singles and say it's fine to choose to be single, but those of us who are single and really don't want to be, there's not much support (487)*
- *Church does not understand singles need for social network, friendships are key to single people as are social events where we can meet each other. (633)*
- *My GP actually recommended I attend another denominational church (at the time) because of the lack of care I was experiencing. (195)*

Many churches have a family focus to them

Many commented on the family focus in church, with 32 mentioning this in general or individual aspects of it.

- *My church is so 'family friendly' that it is has no time for single people. All resources are directed at children, families and the elderly. Each Sunday I read the Church publicity to look for opportunities for me to join in and find almost none. I have started to attend a second church in order to find fellowship.*
- *There's a risk that while trying to focus on families we end up focusing on mothers and children and accidentally leave Dads out. This may give little boys the impression that Church is something they're meant to grow out of (553)*

A further 34 made specific comments in relation to the family focus of their churches which others shared. In order of frequency:

There are talks and courses for everyone except singles:

- *There are frequent meetings/ talks/ groups etc focusing on marriage and relationships, but none focusing on the difficulties of singleness. (130)*
- *I go to a church where there are courses for married and engaged couples but there are more single people than these two groups put together and nothing is being done for us!! (274)*

Celebrations in church all appear to be family-focused:

- *Think about it - we have "Father's Day", "Family services", "Youthwork", "Mother's Day", we celebrate and clap our applause for those with "wedding anniversaries", we celebrate "Valentine's Day"... All while singles, divorcees and widows/widowers look on... (165)*
- *There are a number of celebrations to do with "families", e.g. Mother's Day, weddings, but none for singles - some of these celebrations can therefore undervalue singleness. (216)*

At Christmas the blood family is particularly emphasised. The feeling of being part of a church family can disappear at Christmas:

- *When I look around the church on Christmas day, everyone seems to be with their blood family in church, at which point I no longer feel that the church is my family. (656)*

Church is oriented around the school calendar:

- *The church is based on the school calendar and everything 'shuts' down in the summer. (218)*

Single Christians are often lonely in the midst of Church acceptance

Many also noted the fact that churches being family-focused made them feel lonely in church - recognising that this may not be something the church directly causes, but something from within oneself because of being in the minority and surrounded by families.

- *I feel accepted in church. However, because I find singleness and childlessness painful, I find it even more painful in church because of the emphasis on families. (547)*
- *I don't think that others think there is something wrong with me because I'm single, but I myself struggle with such feelings, and others might pick up on my insecurity. (436)*
- *For me it isn't about not feeling accepted at all - it's about feeling lonely. You can be surrounded by people who accept you and still feel lonely. (365)*
- *People are hurting so why go to church to receive more hurt, often people stop going. (232)*
- *I found going to church one of the loneliest places in the world. That is why I no longer attend. I worship my Lord and Saviour outside the established church. (420)*
- *My church is so family focused I notice that I stand in church alone, and it hurts. In fact so much so that currently i am on a break from church. (231)*

Several commented on the use of the descriptor of 'Family', Family services and All-age worship to mean families rather than the church family.

- **Calling events 'family events' rather than parish events is off putting to many singles who feel they will not be welcome. The church seems unaware of this unintentional discrimination though (522)**

- Church family is a term often used but in practice it seems to have little value

Singles sometimes feel they are 'useful labour'

A number (17) made specific comments about feeling as if they were 'useful labour' to keep the church running for the sake of the families.

- *I often feel as if single people in church are just seen as sunday school teachers or useful labour rather than valued as individuals (130)*
- *And/or they think that I spend all my spare time at home alone twiddling my thumbs and so can be asked to turn up anytime anywhere and so I get 'volunteered' for all sorts of stuff, with little acceptance that I might not want to. This is not seen as a valid excuse, but I don't have the 'alibi' of spouse or kids which others can use if they don't feel like doing something or it is not really convenient. (368)*
- *I have looked at the generations of singles ahead of me in church and have dreaded becoming the stereotypical single who seems to be faithfully at meetings and volunteers for more than married people yet I find I all too readily slip into that role. (352)*
- *As a Single I am exploited for service because of my additional free time ...(393)*
- *It felt to me more like being treated like a household servant for a family that is just there to be used and put to work as they please, rather than a full and equal member of it. (587)*

Single people can often feel invisible, or become invisible if widowed

A family focus means that families notice other families, but single people are invisible:

- *Friends who have attended as couples and/or with their children are positively welcomed by people who haven't spoken to me ever in the years I have attended. (489)*
- *When visiting other churches as a single (even charismatic outgoing and friendly ones), I often find that whatever the service is like a lot of the people around will either treat me as invisible or back away as if I'm a threat... (620)*
- *'Invisible' taken for granted is the word, oh yeah, met a fab widow on Christian Connection with 4 kids, took them to church and suddenly got noticed. Umm nice, how old is your son they said, "What! ha ha!" Still at least we got noticed. (360)*

Sometimes though it is an act or at least the failure to act as they used too. Some widows and widowers particularly note the change when they lose their spouse.

- *When widowed, was almost ignored by church. (248)*
- *I was much more accepted when I was married. Now that I am alone I feel an odd bod. (290)*

- *I noticed the change when I was widowed and became excluded virtually over night, very strange reaction, as previously my husband and I had been in leadership but also had singles as part of our extended family (158)*

Groups of singles when younger also experience the change when they move to being in the minority:

- *When I first came to my current church, my homegrown were mainly singles/unmarried couples. I would have considered them all close friends: our lives were integrated, we prayed for each other regularly and it was an amazing time/place to be a Christian because God was changing the hearts of those that we as a group came into contact with. As various people have married over the last four years, the group has fragmented. It is true that newlyweds need to invest in their marriage, but it is also true that marriage exists for the building of the Church rather than simply to satisfy the other. None of those newly married couples have any time for me, under the banner of "I need to invest in my marriage" or even worse "Our friendship is inappropriate" (talking to each other? Friendliness? Inappropriate?!). It is immensely frustrating and I will probably leave my church as a result: I simply don't know anybody there anymore. (39)*

Practicalities often prevent Single Parents from joining in more

Some churches evidently support single parents well. Other single parents experience awkwardness in church. The majority of comments by single parents related to practicalities, particularly of attending evening meetings or small groups in people's homes.

- *I feel comfortable and happy with my single-ness but am aware that it means I am prevented from contributing as fully as others might, or being involved in activities such as cell/housegroups, as a single parent. I am resilient enough for this, but am aware other single parents I know have fallen away from church, having come seeking 'family' and left disappointed, feeling unwanted. They have also struggled to grow because it is even harder for them to receive the basic teaching they might otherwise have from small group fellowships. My church is 500 strong but only four single parents that I know of, in the two years I have been there two have left as they felt so alone. (653)*
- *Single parents struggle more within Church with commitments: lack of childcare, support to fully participate on nights out, ministry. (115)*
- *After 11 years we do finally have a single parents group but would like to make it more social & practical rather than spiritual as this is where the need lies (174)*
- *I am a single parent - churches don't know how to cater for this. Eg can't attend midweek meetings in the evening (411)*
- *There also nothing in place to make life/ministry easier for single parents, people look surprised when I can't make evening meetings as I don't have a babysitter. (691)*

Many single people feel excluded from the social life of the church

Single Christians appear to distinguish the worship of the church from the social life of the church. In particular they may feel accepted and included by 'the church', but excluded from the social life that they perceive going on among families. Over 1 in 10 (58) specifically mentioned how they were left out of married's social life of dinners invitations. The aloneness, isolation and loneliness can stem from this, rather than the formal church activities.

- *I feel that in terms of ministry singles are accepted as we are deemed to have gifts and also time to commit to leadership. However the negatives come from social church life and general ethos around church life. (299)*
- *It is certainly easier to socialise within a church community if you are part of a couple or have a family. For example, couples and families invite other couples and families for dinner, not singletons. It requires a lot more effort to make friends if you are single.*
- *I feel that my singleness makes me ignored, only those who are couples get invited round to other couple's houses for a meal, even though I have had some couples over more than once. (302)*
- *Because church is so family orientated you are not invited to dinner parties etc. I use to be when I was married! I really miss that and feel excluded. People say you shouldn't want a man but that's the way you are included. (346)*
- *I do find that people within church will gravitate towards those that are in their same circumstances e.g. married, families etc. Single people can be left out of some social situations, because they don't 'fit'. That can be a lonely place, and can be difficult.*
- *I often find myself on a Sunday going to the morning service and then 'filling up the day' with random things on my own before going to the evening service. It's a real problem and life as a single person is not easy! (349)*

The perceived threat of single women to married couples

According to single women, married couples are wary of friendship. A number, 14, made specific comments that married couples, especially the wives, appeared to perceive them as a threat:

- *I feel some married women in the church see single women as a threat to their own relationships. (279)*
- *Single women, particularly divorcees, can be perceived as a threat to couples. (199)*
- *I do find a lot of married women are suspicious of me as a single woman and sometimes sadly, other single women are competitive. (310)*
- *...single women to not make friendships with married people because they are seen as a threat to married people, especially if you have made it known that you would like to meet and marry. (233)*

- *It seems as though people are afraid to talk to single women in their 30s as if we can't be trusted because of a perceived desperation which is very sad. (529)*

One offered a possible explanation for this. Having no children made talking to non-working wives more difficult. Because a single working women's central life activity was being in a job, that made it more natural to talk to a working man. On both counts, single working women could be more likely to relate to the husband better than the non-working wife of a couple.

- *Being a professional I can relate to the Male of the couple rather than the female, as baby or family talk is limited as I have no children.(209)*

More acceptable socially when a couple

Many mentioned that they suddenly more acceptable if dating. This may be because of the removal of the 'single woman as threat' or because couples more easily relate to each other.

- *One couple asked me to dinner once they realised I had a boyfriend. How much more I needed that invite before I had the boyfriend.(695)*
- *I have noticed that it when I was in a relationship I had many more invitations to dinners/ social events as a couple with other couples than I ever did as a single. (703)*

Leadership is often denied to single Christians

There were a few comments about positive role models of single people in leadership. The practice of appointing single people and women to leadership roles varies across the different types of church. There are two aspects to this: having role models to whom to aspire, and having opportunity for ministry. The majority mentioned the exclusion for one reason or another.

- *There are lots of good single role models at my church one of whom is a great woman preacher in her forties - but I don't know if this is the same in every church. (603)*
- *Many churches, including mine, don't accept singles in ministry, and always look for couples to lead, teach, or run any groups. (617)*
- *I think that the church places a huge emphasis on marriage and family and hardly any on living a good single life and the blessing that can be to many including the single person. I think that all the role models in church are married couples, with hardly any single preachers and teachers. (699)*
- *One of the things that started me off on the track that eventually led to me drifting away from committed attendance and involvement to only very occasional attendance was when at a church meeting one member stood up and said, on the subject of appointing a youth minister, that only a married person would be acceptable, as that was the right role*

model of relationships for their children. Shocking really - I don't think this person can possibly have realised how insulting that was who were struggling to remain chaste and hopeful despite the isolation of singleness. (268)

- *As a single woman with a leadership calling on my life, and who had been involved in leadership from the early days of the church plant, there was no role for me when the church plant came to formally appoint leaders. If I was married, I would be given leadership status on account of my husband - single men had leadership status. However, as a single woman, I was automatically relegated. Obviously, various churches will have different responses to issues of female leadership, but the primary concern for me was the clear distinction made between married and unmarried women, and the willingness to respect their leadership and authority depending on whether or not they had a husband. (478)*

Over 30 years of age, there are few activities for single people

It is at the age of 30 that many feel strongly that the churches don't have anything for them. Sometimes this is due to a lack of people in their age band (15 explicitly mentioned this), the absence of men in many churches over the age of 30 (6 mentioned this), but mostly due to lack of activities in the church appropriate for single people between 30 and 60 (25 mentioning it).

- *Its hard being a young single lady in my church. there are students, young mums and a 'ladies group' but the ladies group is all older single women or married ladies whose husbands don't come to church. There are very few single graduates in their 20s and 30s. There is only one non-student single guy, and we aren't a couple, and I know he finds it very hard too. (347)*
- *Its not so much just being single but being over 30 and single! (544)*
- *The problem is my age and how most people my age are married off and have small children. Other singles my age or older (30s and 40s) are less likely to come to fellowship groups because they feel unsure as to where they fit in. (83)*
- *There are things for young singles to do - social activities are encouraged and arranged, but nothing for 30+.. and even less for 40 or 50+*
- *Our church had a "young" persons weekend away last year which included people up to the age of 40. This year, they had to restrict it to below 30 as the age range was putting people in their late teens off from coming. The result was that half the people who wanted to go this year were too old - which just goes to show how great the demand is. (255)*
- *The Church does not know what to do with single Christians between the ages of 30 and 60 - you don't fit into any category. (289)*
- *I know I have lots of contradictions here but I do feel accepted in church etc. Singleness however is still an issue. The thing I struggle with most about being a single person in church is that I don't fit in ANY category....I am not a student, I am nearly 30 years old and I don't have children.....I can't go to*

students events, I can't go to parents events, I work full time so can't go to midweek ladies bible study, except for going to church, I get lonely on the weekends because most of my friends are married with kids and want to protect their 'family time'. (349)

- *I think I'm accepted as a single Christian but there are no groups or support for me in my age range like there are for married couples, parents, students, etc etc (534)*

Churches have different views about singleness

Some churches were reported as promoting singleness as the preferred status or a gift, in which circumstances there is no support if you want to marry:

- *My Church promotes singleness in the way Paul does in the bible - the preferred status. This means that if you don't want to be single but want to find someone, there is no support for you. [No support if you do or if you don't, if they want you to marry or if they don't.]*
- *However, I am aware that they preach that singleness is a gift, yet all the clergy I know are keen to get married as soon as possible. The pain of singleness is never acknowledge or prayed about because it is preached as a gift. I therefore find the pain very isolating.(305)*

Others promote being married, in which circumstances there is no support if you want to be single and often no support if you want to marry and you are not single by choice.

- *There's little room for single-by- circumstance-not-choice Christians in much of the church.(400)*
- *I've even had prophetic words telling me how bad i am because I'm still single. (213)*
- *the church places a huge emphasis on marriage and family and hardly any on living a good single life (699)*

One person noted the disjunction between expectation of the church to be married and get together while stressing the need to stay apart in fear of sex:

- *The church seems to expect single people to 'get on with it' and get married but provides no opportunity for single men and women to interact, while at the same time stressing the importance of purity and seemingly trying to keep single men and women apart. (152)*

Singleness is not better in church or society

There is no support for the idea that people feel accepted more in society and less in the church because single. Most commenting say that they feel accepted in neither, but a few that church is supportive because it more understands the relationship lifestyle they have chosen.

- *I don't feel any more valued in society in general than I feel in church, in fact there are times when I don't FEEL accepted in either, and there is a temptation to think there must be something wrong because I've never been married (381)*
- *It isn't just Church, society sees 'single' as 'something wrong' (261)*
- *Singleness can be better understood in the church than outside where people can't work out why you aren't throwing yourself at lots of men! (548)*
- *Singleness, in the church is a double cross for many Christians to bear as they are both isolated within the church and without because of the different relational values that are practiced in normal society. (42)*
- *Worst feeling of not fitting in EITHER with promiscuous secular society or family-oriented, male dominated church scene. (501)*