

A mission in our midst

by David Pullinger



‘The times they are a-changin’,’ sang Bob Dylan. The question is, how? One particular change flew under the radar of many: the rising number of single people in society. It hit the headlines after the 2011 Census, primarily because it was a surprise – experts hadn’t expected it. It’s still a surprise, and when I recently ran a survey with YouGov, we discovered that 40% of adults are currently single (and that excludes those who are cohabiting). Only 47% of the British adult population is married.

In our churches, however, the majority of people are married. Society is changing, but the church in general isn't reflecting those changes. It's missing out on large numbers of people who have much to offer, and can bring a vibrant and different energy to congregations. Moreover, at a time when loneliness and social isolation are increasing, it would be great to think of faith communities as somewhere that people could experience companionship, friendship and Christian love. But single churchgoers often report finding more of those qualities outside the church than inside it, and say that the church doesn't know what to do with them.

However, small changes can make a huge difference to single people's sense of being included, embraced and celebrated as part of the church. In particular, what's said from the pulpit influences whether they feel included or excluded, and choose to stay or go. It sets the tone for how well the community embraces those who aren't married.

WHO ARE ALL THESE SINGLE PEOPLE?

Society's singles include all ages, genders and ethnic origins. We naturally expect younger adults to be 'never married' (the average age of first marriage is around 30), and to find singleness among older age groups (as partners pass on). However, numbers are increasing in the middle age bracket.

We tend to think in terms of the traditional stages of life – moving from singleness in early adulthood to marriage, children, and finally widowhood. But whether we like it or not, the shape of modern families is changing. Divorce is much more common now than a generation or two ago. Many people marry two or more times within their lifetime, with children born in sequential marriages, leading to step-families and 'blended'

families. Children are commonly born to cohabiting couples and single parents, and same-sex couples are recognised in civil partnership and marriage. The number of people living in 'non-traditional' relationships and families is increasing.

When I speak of single people, I am referring to those who have never married, as well as those who have divorced or been widowed (not people who are cohabiting) – broadly, those who are unpartnered. However, there are also people who are married but living as if single – they may be separated; have a spouse who is away for long periods; or have a spouse in long-term care, who may not even recognise them. Feeling single can be more extensive than we might imagine.



IT WOULD BE GREAT TO THINK OF FAITH COMMUNITIES AS SOMEWHERE THAT PEOPLE COULD EXPERIENCE COMPANIONSHIP, FRIENDSHIP AND CHRISTIAN LOVE.



THE SINGLE PERSON IN CHURCH

There are far fewer single people in church than in broader society, and they appear to drift away from the church at around the age of 25. In the 25-39 age range, 13% of married adults in Britain attend church at least once a month, but only 5% of single people do the same. That means, for example, that if a single person wants to marry someone who shares their faith, they look around and see relatively few others like them. They will need prayer and support in moving beyond existing church and social circles.

Although under-represented, single people still make up almost one in three church members, and the majority of these are in the middle

age group. Yet although churches may cater for singles in their 20s and 30s (who make up just 9% of church attenders) and older people (8% of the church), singles in the middle age band of 30-60 (who make up 12% of the church) report that there's little for them. One respondent in our survey said: 'There are things for young singles to do – social activities are encouraged and arranged. But there's nothing for 30+, and even less for 40+ or 50+.'

WHY ARE PEOPLE SINGLE?

The common assumption is that single people just haven't found the 'right' person with whom to spend their lives, but there are many reasons for people being single.

Choice: Some people choose to remain single, either reporting no physical attraction for others, or prioritising their careers and independence. A few respond to Jesus' words in Matthew 19, choosing to be single for the sake of the gospel. They ask to have their singleness respected, rather than assuming they want to find a partner.

Circumstance: There are twice as many ABC1 (educated and professional) women as men in church, and many women will remain single rather than marry a non-Christian. Others become single through widowhood or unwelcome separation or divorce.

Personality and lack of skills: Some people are naturally shy and introverted and find it hard to interact. Within our digital society, there are also reports of relationship skills being lost. We often focus on the need for married people to develop good communication skills, but these are just as important for those seeking a partner, or needing more social inclusion.

Teaching: Respondents to our surveys say that some church teaching has led to them remaining single, when they wanted to marry. Often, there's

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OF UK ADULTS ARE SINGLE

such a narrow view of ‘Christian’ that it drastically reduces the number of potential spouses. And, in light of the gender imbalance in church, if women are told they should only marry a man of faith, then many are, in effect, being told to remain single (usually without any psychological or spiritual support). The most unhappy single people are in church traditions where dating is discouraged but marriage is expected.

WHAT SINGLE PEOPLE SAY ABOUT CHURCH

Over half of single people say they love their churches, appreciate their faith community, and thrive within it. But, we discovered, a significant number describe themselves as not being included: ‘I’m accepted in a general, superficial way, but they [the church] don’t really know how to make singles feel included.’

Those who feel positive about church report having other single friends there, and a small group supporting them, although they may still struggle with family celebrations such as

Mothering Sunday and Christmas. Others, however, feel isolated especially when they see others go home to companionship or family: ‘I find 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.’

In general, people say: ‘Churches do not appreciate the unique challenges faced by singles in our society: socially, emotionally, spiritually and financially.’

There are some clear age differences in how people experience church:

Under 30: People in their teens and 20s tend to consider themselves ‘not yet partnered’, rather than single. Nevertheless, they feel it deeply when their peers have partners and they don’t. The cost of living and finding housing are particular issues.

30-45 year olds: This group worries most about being single. They start to doubt that God has a plan for their lives, since the promise of a partner hasn’t been fulfilled. As a

result, some say they start to doubt God’s love for them and their faith.

46-60 year olds: Single women recognise that they’re now unlikely to have a family, and tend to get on with life. Many say that, through their difficulties, they experience deeper faith. However, men do not, possibly thinking they may still meet a partner and have a family. This group reports the highest levels of stress.

Over-60s: They appear to come to terms with their situation, worrying less about the future and being more secure in their faith. However, they feel most strongly that the church is not a good place for singles.

The most cited reason for a single person not attending church is that they have no one to go with. You might want to consider pickup schemes, or ‘buddying’ up, or simply asking other members to knock on doors as they pass. It’s also a note for mission: people are unlikely to walk into a church without an initial point of contact, which many singles don’t have (unlike, for example, mothers with children in church toddler groups).

PREACHING TO ALL MARITAL STATUSES

Singles report that the other most important small change a church leader can make is to include them when they preach and talk. Too often, sermon illustrations and applications are only geared to family life, using examples of interactions with spouses and children. Unless these are balanced with examples relevant for singles, people feel excluded.

Our research has found that there are several approaches for including everyone when preaching: building lives of faith; useful Bible passages; and issues faced by single people, which are also beneficial for the whole congregation.

LIVES OF FAITH

We found two main areas of faith development which can be promoted through preaching and good leadership.

The first is helping individuals along in their personal faith journeys. Having relevant sermon and talk illustrations is the most important of these. Probably the best way to do this is by asking and listening. We heard of one vicar, married and aware he didn't have knowledge of such experience, who emailed a few single members of his congregation asking for examples from their lives. What sustains many single Christians is seeing a leader with a 'well-lived single life in action'. Ensuring that leadership teams include such a person is greatly encouraging for singles in the congregation – and of course they can also contribute to sermon illustrations. Single people also leave church because no one is speaking into their lives over big decisions such as career choices; moving for work; where to live; and if, when and how to date. These 'big' life questions are important and singles want guidance.

The second is through building a community of faith. Communities are built not only through formal worship, but also through being together socially. One of the gifts in the New Testament is to practice hospitality, yet many people in our surveys reported never being invited to family homes – but hearing of other families who were: '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.' Others write about how they were suddenly 'dropped' when they were widowed: 'Because church is so family orientated, you are not invited to dinner parties etc. I used to be invited 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.' Hospitality as a regular practise, especially at Christmas and Easter, was something I learned from my parents, and it led to lifelong friendships. As children we resented having to wait to open our Christmas presents until after our single visitors had left, usually early evening, but through it we learned the real meaning of Christmas.

Leaders were described as 'good' if they organised social events, either for singles or for all adults (married and single) and kept contact, for example through texts or email. Sermons available online are invaluable too. There is also the need to provide practical support. This might include: babysitting or childminding to enable a single parent to attend Bible studies (one church group organised a rota to help a single mother); accompanying people home after church events so they don't have to travel alone at night; being visited when ill (nothing seems to hurt single people more than seeing lavish care offered to the spouses of those who fall ill, while nothing is offered to singles); graciously dealing with divorced partners (one woman greatly appreciated the welcome and acceptance given to her non-Christian, ex-husband in church, because he was father to the children attending – this kindness was transformational for her relationship with him).



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THERE ARE FAR FEWER SINGLE PEOPLE IN CHURCH THAN IN BROADER SOCIETY, AND THEY APPEAR TO DRIFT AWAY FROM THE CHURCH AT AROUND THE AGE OF 25. IN THE 25-39 AGE RANGE, 13% OF MARRIED ADULTS IN BRITAIN ATTEND CHURCH AT LEAST ONCE A MONTH, BUT ONLY 5% OF SINGLE PEOPLE DO THE SAME.

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OF SINGLE PEOPLE (25-39) GO TO CHURCH AT LEAST ONCE A MONTH

A functioning community of faith is itself a witness to society. Single people flourishing within it is a sign that the church isn't just another social organisation based on biological offspring, but one that points to something different – the Kingdom of God with spiritual heirs. Jesus introduced a new kind of community, which contrasted sharply with the extended family businesses that comprised the society of the day.

BIBLE TEACHING

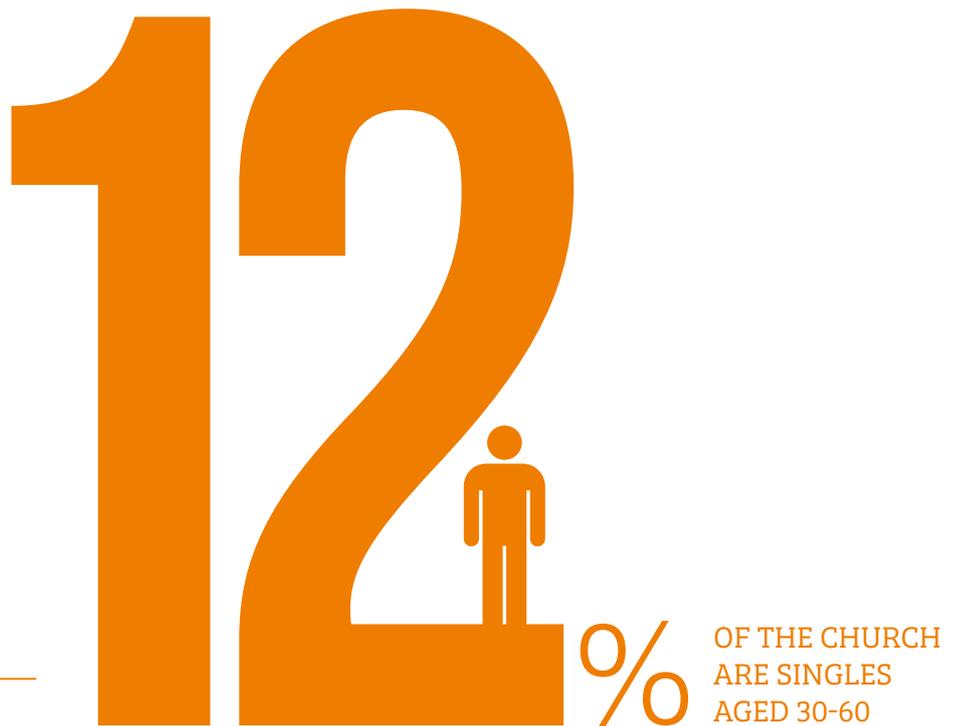
We asked leaders which Bible passages and stories they turn to when addressing singleness. The top three were:

- 1 Jesus and St Paul as single persons.
- 2 The creation of the new family of God, based on spiritual heirs rather than biological ones.
- 3 Psalms to comfort and encourage, particularly those of David.

Passages including these feature so regularly in church lectionaries or preaching series that one might mention relevant issues about singleness directly or in passing. Both help singles to feel included.

ISSUES FACING SINGLE PEOPLE

Addressing the issues that face single people will also help the whole church. The issues brought up by single people include: loneliness; the higher cost of living; problems of raising children alone; the unfulfilled desire to be a parent; higher levels of stress and lower mental wellbeing; planning for the future; reduced social opportunities; reluctance to go on holiday alone; and the decline of physical wellbeing.



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Many of these can also apply to others in the congregation, regardless of their marital status. One could, for example, be lonely in one's faith if a partner does not share it, or feel socially isolated while bringing up children. Struggling with money, while often a problem for single people, is one that others will also share. There are particular issues in raising children alone, including the loneliness of decision-making and lack of time for personal relationships, but even these find echoes in families if decision-making is not prayerfully approached together. And handling the disappointments of life with their long-terming aching, for

example in not having children, is shared by many. Far from being irrelevant to families, addressing the issues that face single people can prove helpful for everyone.

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