

# SINGLED

Is your church welcoming to unmarried people? Are you sure...? **Catherine Francis** of Single Friendly Church considers the hidden pain of singles in the church – and why it matters



# OUT

**S**ingle people feel isolated, lonely and ignored in their churches, and many have given up on church altogether. That's the worrying conclusion of a major study by the Single Friendly Church campaign. The feedback given by over 3,000 unmarried churchgoers – the largest ever survey of single Christians in the UK – makes for sobering reading. More than a third of respondents (never-married, divorced and widowed people) felt they were treated differently to people in couples. One in four said they often felt 'inadequate or ignored'; and 43% said their churches 'didn't know what to do with them'. Many said they felt more valued outside the church than within it.

Recent decades have seen a major societal shift

towards singleness in the UK. However, many churches have failed to keep up with the changing needs of their congregations. This has led to a drift away from the church by this growing section of the population, particularly in the 25-39 age range. In this age group, 13% of married adults in society attend church at least once a month, but only 5% of single people attend church (according to a YouGov survey).

'Although the church is dominated by married couples and families, in wider society, married people make up only half of the UK adult population,' says Dr David Pullinger, the Director

## '43% of single Christians said their churches didn't know what to do with them'

of Single Friendly Church and a researcher on singleness and religion. '40% of adults are single (not cohabiting) – but they're not represented in the church, where far fewer are single.

'Why would a church choose to ignore such a large percentage of adults in its locality? Many unmarried people are crying out for community – reaching out to them helps to counter the endemic effects of social isolation in our society. Yet one of our key findings is that single Christians often feel isolated, lonely and invisible in their churches, and they think about leaving.'

However, when churches embrace their unmarried members, they can be supportive and life-giving communities. And when single people thrive, they often prove to be an energetic, imaginative and resourceful asset to the congregation.

'Single people are also vital for the future of the church,' says David. 'The church is rapidly declining in numbers. Research shows that congregations

are more likely to retain members who grow up in the church than to gain new members through outreach. The most natural way to keep numbers up is through Christians marrying and bringing their children up in the community of faith. But to do that, we need single people!'

'Many leaders say they're perplexed by the lack of singles in their congregations, despite being welcoming to them,' says David. 'However, our research shows that many churches are not as inclusive as they think! And the older people are, the less likely they are to say church is a good place for singles.'

Part of the reason single people feel invisible and undervalued is a lack of relevant preaching and teaching. 'Sermons often assume everyone in the congregation is married with a family,' explains David. 'Examples are drawn from family life, and issues faced by single people are rarely touched upon. There can also be a lack of sensitivity to the pain and disappointment of people who haven't had the family they longed for – for instance, in Mothering Sunday services.'

There are natural contact points for families – baptism, mother and toddler groups, youth groups – but rarely for single people. Singles also report wanting to be more included in hospitality within their congregations. 'Couples and families tend to socialise together,' says David. 'Single people report that they often aren't invited – until they get a partner, when the invitations miraculously start coming in. Even worse, invitations can instantly dry up if someone becomes widowed or divorced.'

The good news is that a few simple changes can make a huge difference to unmarried people's experiences of church. Of course, a single parent will have different needs to an older widow(er) or a college-leaver looking for a partner, but research reveals several key things churches can do to be more inclusive of single people.

'People want teaching and guidance on the dilemmas they face in daily life,' says David. 'Dealing with loneliness; dating concerns; how to live with the disappointment of not being a parent... these are the kinds of things people would like covered. They also appreciate thoughtful ways of presenting family celebrations and events such as Mothering Sunday that include everyone.'

Social activities and hospitality are also important. Consider what kind of church events can be enjoyed by everyone, regardless of marital or family status, and encourage members to include singles when hosting meals or going out.

'Single people want to have their gifts recognised, and to be included as fully operational members of the church,' adds David. 'It's helpful to have people in leadership who are unmarried and can model a life well lived as a single Christian.'●

**'A few changes make a huge difference'**

### Single people speak

- 'My church is so family-focused that I stand in church alone, and it hurts So much so that I'm currently on a break from church.'
- 'My church is great in that it doesn't "single me out". They make it easy for me to get involved and feel part of the family.'
- 'I noticed the change when I was widowed and became excluded virtually overnight.'
- 'The church assumes that one graduates from the 20/30s groups into marriage and families. If that doesn't happen, no one knows what to do with you.'
- 'In my church, I rarely hear talk about people's marital situation – it's more about their ministry, gifts and talents. This is a good, Godly focus.'
- 'When I returned to church in my late 30s, I was struck by how it all revolved around families. It had very little to do with my life as a single professional. I felt "less than", which I hadn't experienced outside the church.'

**i** **Catherine Francis** is writer-editor for Single Friendly Church. For more information visit [www.singlefriendlychurch.com](http://www.singlefriendlychurch.com)