

## WHAT I WISH I'D KNOWN ABOUT SINGLES MINISTRY

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You have also probably been confronted by single adults in your own congregation who want their own particular needs met but also want to be more integrated into the total life of the church. Christian single adults are tired of being looked upon, in Joe Bayly's words, as "single, saved, and second-class." They are up to their eyeballs with being stereotyped as losers or social misfits with little to offer the Christian community.

I have tried to develop and coordinate strong, meaningful programs that meet the needs of single adults and also lead to balance and wholeness in the church. Along the way, I've learned a lot. I hope some of the following will prove helpful to those who are somewhat overwhelmed.

### UNDERSTANDING THE NUMBERS GAME

Single adults are mobile. They move from church to church, trying on for size a variety of organizations, clubs, and classes. In every single-adult program, there is incredible turnover. Most pastors who work with singles say their groups turn over 50 percent every six months.

One quickly becomes aware that a program must grow at a fantastic rate just to stay even. Singles ministries must be set up and geared to grow, or they will die from the normal attrition.

The older the age group, the more females will outnumber males. Those who work with singles need to work as hard as possible to reverse this, but at the same time they should be prepared for limited success.

Singles like large groups with lots of relational possibilities but also small groups where there is authentic intimacy. Growing, healthy singles ministries are always a combination of large events that attract significant numbers and small groups that provide close-in sharing.

### DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP

No one ever led a successful single-adult ministry alone. It always takes a team of committed leaders. And one must be continually developing new leaders. Often, I have stopped to take a breath, turned around and wondered where everybody went. There is no substitute for spending an extravagant amount of time with a few key people and additional time with others in groups who are either elected or appointed to carry out the program.

I have found that up-front male leadership is absolutely essential to a growing single adult ministry. This does not exclude women in leadership positions; in fact, the most successful officer groups are equally divided between men and women. Nonetheless, be prepared for the fact that you will have to work harder to attract males. I have discovered over the years that, programmatically, women do not draw men, but the reverse is usually true. Consequently, I spend a great deal of effort contacting, spending time, sharing a vision, and developing male leaders. When this is effective, there is no difficulty involving capable female leadership also.

### OVERCOMING STEREOTYPES

Married people in the church, particularly those in their thirties and beyond, are swimming in stereotypes. Their vision and understanding need to be gently raised. Singleness is not a disease for which the only known cure is marriage. One is a whole number. I have sought invitations to

speak to all the couples groups in our church, and this has proven to be an excellent opportunity to shatter the myths and open a fresh, new understanding of who singles are and how they feel about themselves and the church.

Some of the half-truths that plague single adults are:

- They have more money and time than couples.
- Something is wrong with them or they'd get married.
- They are almost always "swingers" with an abnormal sex drive.
- Children from single-parent families are usually undisciplined, maladjusted, and doomed to failure.

I remember greeting a married woman one Sunday who said, "Reverend Flanagan, what a wonderful thing you're doing with 'those people.'" The insensitivity that slips from the lips of well-meaning people has cut like cold steel into the hearts of many vulnerable singles.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF MINISTRY STRUCTURE**

Many churches make the mistake of developing a singles ministry on a youth ministry model, the first thing they think of is finding couples to be advisers or sponsors. Adults are not interested in being directed in ministry. They want to take responsibility for themselves. I view my relationship as being chairman of the board with the singles as the only stockholders. They must own the ministry. They're not interested in programs being done for them.

In my church, my title is not minister to singles or even minister of singles but rather minister with single adults. They have been the primary determiners of the program, the age delineations, and the written job descriptions that go with each office in our ministry cabinet.

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I have also discovered that while most church terms are a minimum of one year, six months is much more advisable with single adults (remember the turnover factor). It is also vital that these leaders be integrated into the whole life of the church. What a congregation is doing with its single adults must never turn into a satellite operation, much less a leper colony. I know churches that totally isolate their singles from the rest of the church's life, and singles should be plugged into decision making in the whole congregation.

Most singles ministries that attempt to be comprehensive need to have at least three separate groups, divided by age. I suggest twenty-one to thirty-five, thirty to fifty, and over fifty. The overlap is intentional, and obviously, no one should be checking IDs. at the door." People need to feel comfortable with folks their own age, and there can be regular interface between the different singles groups as well as the whole church.

It is never a good idea to separate people by their status of singleness, i.e., whether they are "career," divorced, or widowed. Age delineations help people discover the right group for them and also guard against older adults seeking unhealthy relationships with those far younger.

***We must learn to accept people where they are, not where we want them to be... We must struggle to find the healthy tension between God's law and his forgiving love.***

### **PASTORAL SUPPORT**

The total support and consistent encouragement of the head of staff is fundamental. Any single-adult ministry is in trouble without it. That is because a singles program on the growing edge will not be without controversy. So many times, I have been asked by the pillars of the church, "What are we going to do with all these divorced people? Remember what the Bible says about

divorce!" A few years ago, I received an angry letter from one of our prominent leaders who was having dinner in a local restaurant with his wife and heard some of our singles in the bar next door, singing loudly the praises of our church and its singles ministry. At that moment, it was good to have a senior colleague who understood that many non-Christian singles in our group did not yet grasp all the principles of church etiquette and public behavior. He was able to lend support in a situation that could have damaged our outreach.

We must learn to accept people where they are, not where we want them to be. Unmarried couples living together, the "swinging singles" scene, and how the church incorporates divorced persons raise serious moral and biblical questions. Singles ministries grow only when congregations see the larger community as their marketplace. They must have a vision to reach people who are out there and utilize creative means to do so. Clear attractive publicity works. Single adults read newspapers and are responsive to clear and creative ads. Just remember, however, that you have to fulfill your promises of an exciting, quality program.

### **A CHRISTIAN FOCUS**

Some singles are so afraid of turning non-Christians off that they compromise conviction and soon become just like the other secular organizations in the community. I have watched the demise of single-adult ministries that forgot who they were and why they were in business. Successful singles ministries always revolve around a class or group where biblical study and Christian growth is emphasized.

A singles ministry should never exist solely to meet its own needs. Single adults are a mission field, largely unreached by the institutional church, but single adults must also have a mission. I have watched so many serve beautifully as "wounded healers." I have often found the most honest, generous, sensitive group in any congregation is its singles fellowship.

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They seem to understand the beautiful balance between our lord's commands to come and to go. We come to the church to get our needs met, meet new people, participate in events that offer stimulating opportunities for personal growth; then we go into our world of work and play to be disciples and witnesses of Jesus Christ. If all the church says is "Come," it soon stagnates and dies.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF SPECIAL EVENTS**

Single people respond to seminars, workshops, and programs that meet felt needs. It takes only nominal effort to draw them to quality seminars on issues like sex, marriage, loneliness, stress reduction, self-esteem, single parenting, and divorce recovery.

Speakers and people with special skills in your church can be important resources. A concerned auto mechanic in our congregation recently put on a basic car maintenance and repair seminar for forty-five women.

In addition to this, weekend conferences, trips, and service projects are a part of the makeup of a successful singles ministry. These events require time, energy, and planning, but over the long haul they are the "grease in the gears" of a thriving Single adult ministry.

***We are called to be shepherds, not ranchers. A shepherd knows the flock by the herd. The personal touch is crucial, no matter how large or small a group may be.***

Acts 2:42 indicates that "the breaking of bread" was a key dimension in the growth of the early church, along with teaching, fellowship, and prayer. This is particularly true in a ministry with singles. We never have an activity without food. Food facilitates fellowship and the building of authentic relationships. Simply holding a cup of coffee in your hands eases nervousness and helps create a spirit of warmth.

I remember a young single named Dave who came to our group several years ago and wasn't sure whether he would return. A member of our social committee roped him into bringing mashed potatoes to the potluck the following Friday. Dave reluctantly accepted and, being a responsible person, decided the group was depending on him for mashed potatoes. It gave him a reason to show up. It also gave him an opening line as he went into a house full of strangers. Suddenly the group became "his group" because he was making a contribution to it.

Incidentally, Dave later met June. They fell in love and got married. Months later, Dave shared with me how it all started with a bowl of mashed potatoes.