

Mom Is Raising Them Alone

Shunned and stigmatized, single mothers are one of the fastest growing demographic groups in the church. How can we respond to their unique needs?

Tina was a 16-year-old, all-around athletic high-school student. When she wasn't cheerleading or hurdling her way through track meets, she was breaking records in volleyball and gymnastics. And like most teenagers her age, she enjoyed shopping at the local mall with her buddies and talking on the telephone.

But what really put the sparkle in Tina's eye was her new boyfriend. Her feelings for him started as a typical high-school crush, but they soon led her to sneak out of the house—not just to happily spend more time with him, but also to escape an abusive family environment. Her father had murdered her mother in a heated argument when Tina was just under 5 years old.

Tina's search for unconditional love would make her a statistic just like millions of other women before her—she soon got pregnant and had an abortion.

Two years later, in 1983, the 18-year-old found herself in the same predicament. She had met a man, gotten pregnant and had had a second abortion. One year later, Tina realized she was pregnant with a third unwanted child, but this time God intervened.

Her friend had a dream about blood flowing from someone, but she didn't know who. Tina recommended that her friend discuss the dream with her pastor. His interpretation: Tell your friend Tina not to send God any more babies.

Tina had already made an appointment for a third abortion, but the pastor's words were convicting. "I just couldn't bring

myself to have another abortion. I just couldn't do it," she says.

Tina House, who's now 38 and lives in Orlando, Florida, says she surrendered her will to God and decided to have the baby. Nine months later she gave birth to twin girls.

Her decision had broader implications than she had imagined. She not only had the responsibility of caring for two children; she had to do it on her own.

Brenda Ajamian's story has a different beginning but a similar ending. Married to a minister for 24 years, Brenda lived in Gaithersburg, Maryland, with her husband and their three children. Early in their marriage, the Ajamians had worked as missionaries in the Middle East.

The two were outwardly a doting couple held in high regard among members in their hometown church. That quickly changed in 1990, when her husband moved out of the house after it was discovered that he was having an affair with a woman from Taiwan.

"My husband was teaching English as a second language in the public school system when he became interested in a woman 15 years his junior," Brenda recalls.

Brenda was fearful at the thought of having to care for her family alone, but she was devastated to learn that her husband's mistress deliberately came to the United States to marry an American who could secure visas for her children.

Out of desperation, Brenda says she turned to her pastor and other church members for counseling and emotional support. Instead of receiving love and understanding from people, she was hurt by their cold responses.

"The pastor treated me as if I had done something wrong, like it was my fault that my husband was cheating on me," she says.

Like many other women, Brenda was facing the reality not just of being the sole provider for her family, but also of discovering that some Christians would now treat her differently.

For single moms who have been widowed, the circumstances are often different. They don't face the stigma of having had a divorce or an unwed pregnancy, and churches tend to respond to them with more compassion. Though they face many of the same financial struggles other single parents deal with, several widows say churches were quick to meet their immediate needs, including funeral costs, food and grief counseling. However, they said churches were not as committed to helping them in the years that followed.

After interviewing several single parents, Charisma discovered that they and their children are among the most needy families in the body of Christ. They all face the same difficult tasks of paying the mortgage, buying a car, pulling double shifts at work, feeding their families and maintaining an emotionally healthy life.

In addition, many of these parents worry that their children will become statistics or will not have the same advantages as children from two-parent households. They say they can't spread themselves thin enough, and many are afraid to make major decisions, such as big purchases, lest they make a mistake.

Some also feel a sense of guilt for their predicaments. They're hoping Christians across the country will take note that there's more to their story. The role of "single parent" falls on people from all racial, economic and denominational backgrounds. It plays no favorites—except perhaps in the church, where indications are single parents are made to feel they don't measure up to traditional families.

The Plight of Single Parents

The emotional sting Tina and Brenda experienced years ago has subsided, but their stories ring true in many churches today. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are 10 million single mothers and 2 million single fathers in America.

For single parents, the enormous pressure of being all things to a family is compounded by the reality of not having the physical, emotional and financial strength to carry out their duties. Some hold down two jobs to provide for their children. Others leave their younger kids with older siblings because they can't afford the skyrocketing cost of daily child care.

The lack of money is one of the main reasons many of these women are forced to choose between buying an old, used car or obtaining healthcare for their children. It's no wonder that some mothers who are rearing their children alone consider single parenting the greatest challenge they've ever faced.

Christian single parents are responsible for providing the spiritual leadership needed in their families—in addition to attending school functions, preparing meals, paying all the bills and helping with homework. In a two-parent home, these responsibilities are typically shared between a husband and wife.

Today, Brenda Ajamian is an aide to David Simmons, a state representative from Longwood, Florida. A politically savvy 60-year-old, Ajamian has worked with politicians such as Florida Gov. Jeb Bush. But she's not too busy to encourage churches to make an assertive effort at helping women who are struggling.

"Many times these mothers just want someone to listen to their concerns, like I did. And ministry leaders have a mandate from God to do so," says Ajamian, who is an ordained minister.

It was a decade ago that then-Vice President Dan Quayle openly criticized the TV character Murphy Brown for having a child out of wedlock. Many advocates of welfare reform say the only thing that has changed in the 10 years since then are the

alarming statistics and obvious consequences of fatherlessness in America.

According to The American Prospect, a biweekly political publication, children who grow up with only one of their biological parents “are disadvantaged across a broad array of outcomes.” The Census Bureau notes that children from single-parent homes are twice as likely to drop out of high school before they turn 18 than children from two-parent homes, and 2.5 times as likely to have children out of wedlock.

For Tina House, the statistics held true.

“My twins were 15 years old when they told me they were pregnant,” says House who considered but declined to make both of her daughters have abortions. “I thought back to my own abortions and remembered that the Lord told me not to send Him anymore babies.”

That’s when the Houses’ pastor, Jonathan L. McKnight, of Sanctuary of Praise Church, stepped in. He refused to allow church members to criticize or shun the teens. Instead, he saw to it that House’s grandsons had enough food and diapers to last them a year.

Some say the pastor’s actions are a far cry from the way churches used to deal with single mothers. According to one church member, who requested not to be identified in this report, one reason churches did not help women in the past was because they considered out-of-wedlock pregnancy a woman’s problem or her fault—while the man involved was never chastised.

There was a time in many Pentecostal and Holiness churches when these women were told they had to stand before the church, confess their behavior to the congregation and then ask for forgiveness. If the woman was a single mother due to divorce, she was not permitted to serve in ministry and was told to remain silent in the church.

“There were some congregants who openly struggled with vices such as drugs and alcohol or stealing, but they were never made to come before the church and repent,” the member explained.

According to a 1997 Census study on single parents and how they fare, children who live with a divorced single parent have an advantage over children who live with a parent who has never married, and an even greater edge if the parent is the father.

The data revealed that the level of education and financial stability greatly contribute to the overall success of a child. Researchers say that in many cases, low test scores, truancy and promiscuous behavior all stem from growing up in a home with one parent.

Because of the grim outlook on one-parent homes, some women say the church must reposition itself to help families. When Charlotte Decker learned that she would have to rear her teenage grandson alone, she was certain that a few men in her church would serve as a surrogate father to him. She was wrong. She says the more trouble Tyson found himself in, the more her church in Kailua Kona, Hawaii, seemed to avoid him.

“When certain brothers learned that my 17-year-old grandson was returning home from jail, they turned a deaf ear to my request for them to reach out to him,” says Decker, who has been a missionary with Youth With a Mission since 1985. Many people like Decker insist that the church has a responsibility to uphold Psalm 68:5, “A father of the fatherless, a defender of the widows, is God in His holy habitation” (NKJV).

Meeting Single Parents’ Needs

Not all churches forego the opportunity to serve one-parent families. Today, many of them, especially urban ministries, are finding ways to help lighten the load of those in need.

From Mom's Day Out programs, free child care and food giveaways to free car repairs, support groups and job-placement services, some congregations are intentionally reaching a generation of single-parent families. People who minister to this particular group say in order to be effective, congregants will have to go beyond the church if they want to win souls to Christ.

Bent Tree Bible Fellowship, a nondenominational church in Carrollton, Texas, focuses on meeting the spiritual and emotional needs of members through its Single Parent Family Ministry. The church offers programs such as Lifeline, Zipline, Chalkline and Outline.

Held at different times of the month, the programs focus on small-group Bible study, entertaining fellowship opportunities and tutorial lessons for children of single-parent families. The church also offers support groups for children and teens of divorce.

Many churches around the country offer their entire congregations free or inexpensive dinners on the evenings Bible study is held. Others offer three- and four-day camping trips or retreats that are designed specifically for single-parent families.

Megachurches such as West Angeles Church of God in Christ (COGIC) in Los Angeles, are not too big to meet one-parent families at their greatest point of need. "In our workshops, we help single parents realize that they are not alone," explains Brenda Brown James, who leads the church's Children ministry.

James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, says in his book Complete Marriage and Family Home Reference Guide that the church must extend a hand to those who struggle to care for their families.

Mary Ann Archible, who heads the single parent ministry at

Upper Room COGIC in Raleigh, North Carolina, shares Dobson's sentiments. She says her church addresses the practical issues confronting both single mothers and fathers. The program she oversees pairs professional, educated single mothers with young unwed mothers for mentoring.

"We help them work through their immediate problems and [pastor Patrick Wooten] addresses their spiritual needs," says Archible, who is a single mother of three.

Dallas-based Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship, pastored by Tony Evans, has a single-parent ministry that provides minor car repairs for parents who attend their program. Certified mechanics check the oil, fix flat tires, replace spark plugs and provide other services. As a result, the parents get instruction in basic car care.

"Our goal is to equip, support and disciple our single parents back to wholeness," says James Womack, who oversees the program.

With a database of 400 parents, Womack says the ministry focuses on 12 keys to successful single parenting that include communication, housing, education and career, budgeting, parenting tips and more.

"We do a lot of encouraging and praying for our participants," he adds.

Katrina Spigner, a chaplain for the Center for Child and Family Studies at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, says when a single parent is looking for a church to join, the person should consider a ministry that is committed to transforming the lives of its members with the Word of God and that is aware of the special needs of these families. Spigner travels to churches in her city and in surrounding areas conducting workshops and seminars on topics such as loss and grief in the family.

“Single parents deal with many losses. There is the loss of fellowship, the loss of personal relationships, financial losses and others that the church must address,” Spigner says.

A church that fosters an atmosphere of love and acceptance among its families, whether those families are headed by two parents or one, is the kind of church that most single mothers told Charisma they are attracted to. They say they are not looking for handouts, just a place that is biblically sound and will help relieve them of some of the pressures they face as parents.

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