

Bridging the Chasm Between Singles and Marrieds

To my surprise, I've remained single far longer than I ever expected or wanted to. As the years have progressed, I have found myself increasingly challenged by the need for answers to the tough things I was facing. Unfortunately, resources to help me and those like me have been few.

It is good for us to want others in our lives whom we love and who love us. But I have found it difficult, as a single, to sustain the level of relationship with other people I believe God wants me to have.

Various barriers inhibit this, and He wants to remove them. He wants to open the floodgates to abundantly meet the relational needs of singles today.

And there are a lot of us! According to the 2000 United States Census, 46 percent of American adults are single. Whether or not your church mirrors the national norm, it probably looks and feels like a "couples church."

We need to adjust this unintentional imbalance to better reflect who we truly are as God's people. Bridging this gap is one of the most important things we can do to make the church a family.

Admittedly, some aspects of the traditional singles ministry model can hinder singles from connecting more fully to the church and from having our relational needs better met. If we remove the elements of singles ministry that separate singles from the church generally and from couples specifically, we will take a step toward opening the doors to more diverse ways of meeting the legitimate relational needs of all singles.

Ordinarily, the social circle of singles diminishes as we age and friends marry. The gap between singles and couples distances singles from half the population, cutting the pool from which old friends are kept and new friends are made.

This gap also hinders our experience of community within the church body. If a church feels like a “couples church,” singles may feel unwelcome at church functions that are typically viewed as family-centered.

Singles who do not like attending singles functions can feel even more isolated. They don't want to be separated out with just other singles, and they may not feel that they fit in with couples.

It is going to take work on the part of both singles and couples to overcome these things. As singles, we need to be willing to push our way in, despite feeling out of place. Couples need to be willing to pull singles in and expand their own dimensions beyond family life.

God Sets the Solitary in Families

Scripture indicates that the existing divide between marrieds and singles is not on God's blueprint, but that He is the architect of a beautiful bridge. One of the most obvious passages to illustrate God's heart on this matter is in Psalm 68:6, which says, “God sets the solitary in families” (NKJV).

Among the most touching examples God has given us is the account of Jesus making provision for His mother shortly before He died on the cross. This is what we find in John 19:26-27: “When Jesus then saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ Then He said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’ From that hour the disciple took her into his own household” (NASB).

Another thing we see from Jesus' life is that even though His

mother and other relatives were still alive, He had a special “family-like” relationship with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Jesus, as a single man, was ministered to by being meaningfully included in the lives of these two sisters and their brother (see John 11:1-44).

Jesus further expanded the definition of family when He made it clear that we are related to Him through obedience to the Father: “For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother” (Matt. 12:50).

He also told us we are related to one another as family through our relationship to Him: “There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel’s sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children” (Mark 10:29-30).

The Bible speaks of the deep value in friendship, sometimes even in contrast to family ties. Proverbs 18:24 says, “There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

Proverbs 27:10 reads this way in The Amplified Bible, “Your own friend and your father’s friend, forsake them not; neither go to your brother’s house in the day of your calamity. Better is a neighbor who is near [in spirit] than a brother who is far off [in heart].”

So we can see from biblical passages that God would like singles and families to benefit from one another, especially within the broader spiritual family. But today’s cultural gap between couples and singles prevents this from happening to the extent it could.

The church corporately and we as individuals are missing out on things God desires for us—married and single. Division means less effectiveness in extending the kingdom of God.

We Are One Body

Jesus prayed, “‘That they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me'” (John 17:21, NASB). The unity we have through our relationship to Jesus is enough of a common bond to do away with things that divide us (see Gal. 3:28). Yet, currently, we don't seem like one whole family.

The church is fractured and thus weakened. Jesus said, “If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand” (Mark 3:25). According to Christian researcher George Barna and others, tragically, some “houses” (churches) have fallen, in part because of the loss of too many singles who either left or decided not to attend in the first place.

Despite this quiet exodus, I don't think Christians necessarily view the church as fractured by this issue because the division isn't intentional or malicious. However, compared to the way God wants things to be, we are fractured.

When you think about natural families, it is a bit easier to see how the church is fractured. In a family you have young, old, married, single, rich, poor. You are bound together because you are family, and that transcends the differences between you.

Unfortunately, we've probably all seen or heard what happens when family members get left out of the circle, right? Their feelings are hurt. And so it is with Christ's family.

We are a “many membered body,” each with different gifts, talents and abilities. We've been given gifts that differ so that the body will be able to care for itself (see Rom. 12:4-5).

We are part of one another. That's why it also says, “And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one

member is honored, all the members rejoice with it" (1 Cor. 12:26).

Instead, some of us who are single can't rejoice with the new bride or the new mother, or we resent being asked to pray for the infertile couple. I also see married couples who are oblivious to the suffering endured by many singles who really want to get married and have children, or who are struggling after divorce.

Many families in the church tend to network well with one another, but networking between singles and couples is not strong. As long as this gap continues, the church will not be reflecting the body of Christ in the manner God intended.

The Church Must Model Unity

In some ways, the church is less supportive of singles than social circles outside the church. This is a liability when it comes to reaching out to those who don't know the Lord, especially those who are single.

On one occasion, the pastor of my church asked me to share a bit about my vision and hope that our church would build more bridges between couples and singles. The comments later made to me spoke volumes about this issue of division.

Some who had been divorced shared their pain with me. They explained that even though many friendships stayed intact at a heart level after their divorce, they were no longer included in typical social events. Younger singles talked of the pain of being left behind as their single friends married.

There were happy reports, too. One married woman told me she was sitting with a single friend at the service when I spoke. After my talk, the two friends made a commitment to keep working at their friendship despite the challenges presented by their different lifestyles.

Many couples said to me afterward, "We've needed to hear this for a long time." The positive response was overwhelming! People's hearts are in the right place; we just need our eyes to be opened.

Over time, as God does His work in this area, I believe we will watch Him bring conviction, which will lead to repentance on the part of both couples and singles over the hurt that has come through this unfortunate division. I also believe that from that repentance, God will bring about much deep healing.

The more you understand about this issue and God's view of it, the better equipped you will be for God to use you as a change agent in His church! Extend a hand of friendship.

Start bulding bridges between couples and singles, and watch what God can do through your life! By every effort you make to bridge the gap, you please and glorify God, and the church is blessed and strengthened.

Virginia McInerney is the author of Single, Not Separate (Charisma House), from which this article is adapted.