

Bible-Driven Ministry to Single Parents
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It is no secret that single parenting is on the rise. My parents divorced when I was in high school and I saw the extraordinary challenges my mother faced as a single woman. During my eighteen years of youth and family ministry much of my time was spent providing counseling and support for single parents and their children. I saw the church make an amazing difference in the lives of these families but I also saw situations when the church, with the best of intentions, did more harm than good.

Only a man or woman who has experienced the task of single parenting understands what it is like. The word I hear the most is, “impossible.” Earn money, take out the trash, feed the kids, drive everywhere, mow the lawn, pay the bills, help with school, fix the faucet, deal with lawyers, file taxes, handle discipline situations, go to church, and have fun! The demands are intense. The needs are intense. The response from the local church should be intense.

What can the local church do to encourage, equip, and support the single parents within the church family? To answer this question we need to turn to Scripture. God created and established the institution of the local church, and in the Bible alone He has given us all the commands and patterns we need regarding how the local church is to carry out its mission. In this article we will consider three essential practices of the Bible-driven church and how they can be a powerful blessing to single parents.

Equip the saints

One of the fundamental roles of the New Testament pastor/elder was “the equipping of the saints for the work of service” (Ephesians 4:12). What is the single parent’s most important “work of service?” It is the mission God has given them to impress the hearts of their children with a love for God. Single parents (like all parents) have been given the Great Commission calling to evangelize and disciple their children. It is the responsibility of the local church to equip them for success.

A simple first step may be to gather single parents together for 4-5 meetings of prayer and specific equipping for them on how to pray and read the Bible with their children at home. Nothing is more important for parents, single or otherwise, than to be praying and reading the Bible with their children.

The church must also be direct with single parents so that they feel no pressure to volunteer in church programming. They are drowning! Let us give the blessed and freeing message to our single parents, especially those who are in crisis, that by being a spiritual leader for their children at home they are “volunteering” in the most important ministry of all.

But a short-term prayer and equipping group is only a baby step.

Open the homes

A second biblical responsibility of the local church is to foster Christ-centered relationships. “Day by day, continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart...” (Acts 2:46). Fellowship in the New Testament church was diverse, integrated, and home-centered. We need to break out of our default ministry mindset in which our first thought is to split people up by age and stage then segregate them into different rooms in the church building.

A weekly singles gathering at church cannot ever hope to meet the intense relational needs of single parents. Single parents don’t need to be segregated, quarantined, or put in a separate category. They need to be welcomed into the lives and homes of other families in the church. In the early church, genuine Christian relationships were built and nurtured through hospitality (Romans 12:13, 1 Peter 4:9).

A few years ago a woman in our church was abandoned by her husband who chose to pursue homosexuality. She and her children moved in next door to us. For the next three years, they were a regular part of our family. The door was open. Meals were shared. Tears were shed. House projects were completed. There were many late night sessions of prayer and counseling.

This woman and her children didn’t need a class at church. They needed a family to welcome them into their lives. Her boys needed to see and experience a Christian father and husband. Her daughters needed to see and experience a loving marriage.

Rather than plan fellowship opportunities in the church building, identify and equip a dozen families in your church who will be intentional about opening their homes to single parents and their children. Perhaps your church has a small group ministry in which people meeting in homes during the week. Be sure to offer some small groups which are for entire families to participate in together. If your small groups are for adults only, it requires single parents to spend more precious time away from their children, as well as creating the difficulty and financial pressure of finding babysitters. However, a family-integrated small group can prove to be one of the biggest blessings in a single parent’s life. It is a night they don’t need to worry about preparing a meal. They experience Bible study *with* their children. Their children can build relationships with known and trusted families.

Respond to crisis

The crises of death, divorce, sin, anger, and financial distress swirl around any ministry to single parents. It is in these times of crisis, if the church does not follow the Bible carefully, we can do more harm than good. I want to give particular attention to the issue of caring for single parents during a financial crisis. In 1 Timothy 5, God provides the local church with a series of clear principles regarding how the local church should care for widows. These principles, when taken in the larger context of Scripture, form the guidelines for benevolence ministry.

So how should the local church respond when a single parent is in financial crisis? First, a careful conversation needs to take place to diagnose the cause of the financial crisis. Is the crisis due to a lack of responsibility, poor stewardship, or laziness? Or is it due to circumstances

beyond their control such as medical bills, downsizing, or financial abuse from their ex-spouse? If the pastor/elder of the church believes the need is genuine and that providing financial support would not enable ongoing irresponsibility, the first step is to reach out to family members to enlist their help. The church must not be burdened with the financial care of someone if the person has family who can help (1 Timothy 5:16). If necessary, the pastor should personally contact family members to encourage them to meet the need. If a single parent has Christian family members within the church, and those family members are *able* to help in a situation of genuine need, but are *unwilling* to do so, they should be brought under church discipline (1 Timothy 5:8).

After this process is complete, if it is found that the single parent has no family members who are able or willing to help, then the church should provide the funds necessary to meet the urgent need. In some situations, ongoing support is necessary while the family moves toward financial stability.

The best way a church can provide financial help to a single parent is to bring together a team of Christian business leaders and task them with the responsibility of developing a variety of full-time, home-based business opportunities for the single parents in the church. In this way, single parents are able to provide for their families without being separated from their children.

At all costs

Think of the single parents in your church. How would they describe their experience as a part of your church family? Have they been segregated into a class of people who are “just like them” or have they been welcomed and invited into lives and homes of other families in the church? Do they have a few godly men and women in the church who they could call at 3am if they needed help? If they have been victimized, abused, or abandoned by a spouse, have they experienced the elders of the church standing up for them, protecting them, and righteously confronting the one in sin? The needs of single parents are serious. We cannot afford to rely on our own creativity and innovations. God has given the local church its complete mission in the pages of Scripture. The pattern of the New Testament church must be our pattern as well. If we want to care for single parents, we must study the Bible and identify that pattern, and seek to practice it at all costs.

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Rob Rienow’s most important ministry is loving his wife and partnering with her to impress the hearts of their six children with a love for God. After nearly two decades in pastoral ministry, he now leads Visionary Family Ministries (www.VisionaryFam.com). Their mission is to build the Church through a global reformation of family discipleship.