

Bringing Singles and Family Ministry Together

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If a church begins the journey of developing a family ministry, one of the first questions that will arise is, "What about those in our church who are single? We don't want to send the message to them that they are not welcome, or that they are less important to our church family." If a church says that they are, "Family Friendly," does that mean that they are "Single Unfriendly?" Here are some concepts that may help your church move toward unity of heart, mind, and mission on this critical issue.

1. The Bible doesn't pit singleness against marriage

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul confronts the Corinthians on the fact that they were arguing about whether being single was better than being married. Some of the people in the church were saying, "it is good for a man not to marry" (1 Cor. 7:1). Paul draws them away from this unbiblical line of thinking. The Scriptures do not put being in single in conflict with being married. Rather, the calling to marriage is celebrated and honored, and the calling to singleness is celebrated and honored. In my judgment, the church needs to increase the volume on both these points. Any time we find ourselves in discussions about "which state is better," we have turned aside from biblical thinking on this issue.

2. Family ministry should seek to nurture all family relationships

Family ministry does not simply mean, "ministry to parents and their kids." There are many different kinds of family relationships, and they all matter to God. Family ministry should be committed to helping siblings reconcile their differences. Family ministry should seek to help adults honor and care for their aging parents. Everyone has family relationships of one kind or another (nuclear, adoptive, foster, step, extended, etc.) Comprehensive family ministry should seek to encourage and foster healthy family life up, down, and on the sides of the family tree. So one question might be, "How can family ministries come along side those who are single to encourage and equip them to develop a healthier relationship with their aging parents?"

3. Family ministry can help provide a deep level of authentic community for singles

If you pick up any book on "singles ministry" it will tell you that the greatest need of singles today is "connection" or "community." Many of our singles feel lonely and socially fragmented. How can the faith community respond in a meaningful way to this need? Starting a singles group is a fair response, but it should not end there. If singles are craving connection and community, then we owe them more than creating a new homogenous program of the church "just for them." A singles group may be a great way to start a singles ministry, and it may serve as a good first step for a single who wants to visit your church, but how can we truly integrate singles into the diverse and multigenerational life of the church? Where do our single adults have the opportunity to spend time with kids and teens? Where do our single adults have the opportunity to develop meaningful connections with seniors who may be able to play an important role of mentoring and nurture in their lives? What opportunities do we have in our regular programming where kids, married adults, and single adults can develop relationships with one another? One possible programmatic solution to this is to encourage the formation of Community Groups that are multi-generational. What if you had small groups at your church that were made up of singles, seniors, parents, kids, and teens? Community Groups that bring the generations together may serve to provide your church family an authentic model for "doing life together" and seeing discipleship happen in the context of relationships. If you are interested in hearing more about how to encourage successful Community Groups feel free to email me at rob@visionaryparenting.com

Life stage ministries are appropriate, as long as they don't compete – start a singles ministry, no one says, hey we don't want to offend those who are married!

4. Pay attention to all life stages in your teaching, writing, and publicity

Work hard as a ministry team to keep your language inclusive rather exclusive. For those of you that preach or teach, be sure to give applications and illustrations that directly speak to various life stages. It helps to create a welcoming culture when pastors say from the pulpit, "Let me talk with those of you who are kids or teenagers about how this passage might apply to your life right now." "Perhaps you are here and you are a grandparent, what might this mean for you today?" The more we speak directly to all ages and family situations, the more people will feel included. For this reason, here at Wheaton Bible Church, we don't call our generational Community Groups, "Family Small Groups." That title makes it sound like this is a group for parents and kids. That feels exclusive. We call them Generational Community Groups, or some churches just call them Community Groups, because everyone is included, from the youngest to the oldest.

5. Have those who serve in family ministries and singles ministries spend time together and collaborate on shared events

Many churches talk about the importance of ministries working together, but frequently the only thing that actually happens is occasional discussion meetings. What could the different segment ministries of your church actually do together? What ministry could you put shared work and energy into? Those in singles ministry can move toward this partnership model by asking the questions, "How can we help the singles that we minister to develop better relationships with their parents, siblings, and extended family?" "How can we help them engage with the multigenerational life of the church?"

6. Be strategic in helping singles prepare for healthy marriage and parenting

According to the US Census Bureau, 95% of adults get married before the age of 55. Many of the people who are currently single in our churches, will one day be married and may also be parents. It is the essential task of family ministries and singles ministries to partner together to help equip those singles who God will lead into marriage and parenting. Some of our best efforts in regards to marriage ministry and parenting ministry should be given to giving our teens and adult singles a biblical vision for family life, and preparing them to develop their character, dating life, and spiritual life in such a way as to best prepare them for lifelong marriage and godly parenting.

7. Work diligently to help staff, elders, and lay leaders in the church think biblically about the gift of celibacy.

I have a great concern that the church is sending a damaging and confusing message to some of our singles. The message is this, "If you are single, you must have the 'gift of singleness/celibacy, therefore embrace your singleness." The problem with this message is that it equates the state of being single, with having the gift of celibacy. As a result many of our singles are crying out in pain saying, "If singleness is a gift from God, why am I sad and lonely?" The problem comes when we are not clear biblically and theologically about the relationship between being single and the gift of singleness. Reformation theologians, particularly Luther¹, gave solid voice and understanding to the biblical gift of celibacy. As a result the historical understanding of this gift is that if a person has the gift of celibacy they do not have a desire for marriage, children, and can live without the temptation toward lust. And the Scriptures are clear that this gift of celibacy is a good gift, and is given so that a person can be completely focused on their calling in ministry and advancing the Kingdom of Christ. If a person has the gift of celibacy, it should be embraced and celebrated! However, if a single person has the desire to be married, has the desire for children, and has a desire for sex, then this is an indication that they do not have the gift of celibacy. In that situation, the Christian community should do everything it can to encourage that single person to be preparing for marriage and parenting, and to assist them in any way possible in finding a godly spouse. And while it is appropriate to counsel a single person who desires to be married, to trust

¹ http://theologica.blogspot.com/2005/01/martin-luthers-reform-of-marriage-part_31.html

God with the fact that He has not brought a spouse into their life at that time, and to encourage them to be content with the present life that God has given them, we should actively encourage them to respond to the sense of calling and desire that they have for marriage by helping them prepare their character for marriage, make godly decisions with dating, and pray for them that God would grant them their heart's desire for a family. For a thought provoking expansion of this, consider reading Albert Mohler's work on understanding marriage in the church and culture.²

8. Encourage singles to follow Jesus' example by nurturing faith in the lives of children.

I believe that one of the best ways to get a clear picture of how singles can make a difference in the church is by looking at the ultimate example of a "singles minister;" Jesus Himself. What example did Jesus set, as a single man, for making a difference in His community? There are many answers to this question, but one answer is that Jesus placed a high priority on nurturing faith in children and sharing His time with them. In Mark 10:14, we see that Jesus became angry when His disciples tried to keep children away from Him. He strongly rebuked His disciples and intentionally shared his time and heart with kids. He wasn't a parent. He wasn't married. Yet he went against the cultural norms and even the religious norms, to invest Himself in the hearts of the next generation. How might you encourage the singles in your church to follow in the example of Jesus? What influence might it have on your high school students, particularly the guys, if they were encouraged and trained to spend time in the church nursery holding babies? How might singles in your church develop a vision for their role in nurturing faith for the next generation through a big buddies ministry, or serving as god-parents to assist young people in their spiritual journeys? Do you have singles serving in your Children's and Youth Ministries? Go out of your way to praise them and encourage them. Tell them plainly that they are following in the example of the greatest "single minister" of all time. I believe that Jesus loved children more than anyone ever has, and so I believe that the more we become like Christ, the more we will love children and seek to make a difference in their lives for God.

Final Thoughts

Society seeks to pit different groups against each other. Races are set in conflict. Rich and poor are set in conflict. All these conflicts are contrary to Scripture, and they are a poison to the local church. What will it take for your church to break out of the battle that society has set up between those who are single and those who are married? Unity begins with Scripture, then moves to our relationships, and finally to our programs and church structures. I pray that God will give your church increasing unity of heart, mind, and practice on these important questions.

² <http://www.crosswalk.com/1280013/>