

Singled Out by Michelle Connor

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Recently I attended my first singles retreat. Not only was I surprised to hear that a local church was actually offering a singles retreat to the area churches, but I was encouraged at what it might bring. “Finally,” I thought, “some young, single Christian believers!”

I'm a 20's-something, a lifelong member of the non-married club. Since college graduation I have felt the gap left by the missing generation X and Y in our churches. It is challenging to find folks my age in a church, let alone those that are single.

As a first-timer to these sorts of singles gatherings, I wasn't sure what to expect. I had hoped to meet other fellow Christian-believing 20's- and 30's-somethings, and, to be honest, maybe even an eligible bachelor. (Hey, a girl can hope, right?!) But most of the single people in attendance were not of my generation nor did their singleness stem from similar life circumstances.

But God worked through this event in several ways. First, it helped me realize that singles come in all ages with varied life experiences. Never before had I put divorcees and widowers in the same “singles” category as my never-been-married self. Secondly, it also showed me that one blanket “singles” ministry cannot be successful. Talking about divorce, or watching grieving videos, made me feel even more isolated. God showed me that not only does singleness come in many different situations, but that it needs to be handled uniquely for each case. How can we address this in today's church?

As the body of Christ, we cannot ignore one of the largest populations in America. According to George Barna, the United States has more single adults than any other nation except China and India. ‘Single’ can be classified into three main groups—never been married, divorced, and widowed. Since there are obvious differences among these groups, outreach cannot be approached in just one way.

When considering outreach to singles, these action steps might be helpful. First, identify your single adult audience using the aforementioned groupings. Then find your core team, people as passionate about reaching out to singles as you are. Then start praying and planning, asking God to lead you. You may also want to do some research. George Barna's book *Single Focus* (see www.barna.org, Barna update for March 11, 2002; book available at Amazon.com) captures great ways to reach all groups of singles. Some examples:

Never-Been-Married: Age specific groups can be highly successful for these singles. They do not necessarily want to be segregated from married people, so incorporating married couples and singles within the same age group would be beneficial.

Divorced: Divorce is a reality in our world today. Most divorced people are seeking healing and forgiveness. A Divorce Care group is a great way to reach these singles and show Christ's love. See www.divorcecare.com for more information.

Widowed: Most widows and widowers are older and are concerned with needs such as health-care and housing situations. Consider starting a group to help in these areas or allow opportunities for these people to mentor younger people.

From the singles retreat experience, and failed attempts to find an existing network of singles in

our churches, we found God leading us to change the way we reach out to singles. We formed a small group, "Revolution So Cal" (Southern California). With the Lord's guidance, we are reaching out to connect disconnected young professionals in their mid 20's and 30's to Christ and to other believers. We facilitate discussion groups that challenge people to think about their spiritual lives, and we network and fellowship through social gatherings. It is a start. Our prayer is that we not only reach unbelievers, but we also ignite a desire in Southern California congregations to reach out to singles.

Congregations not only need to reach out to singles, but they need to be single friendly congregations. Too often singles say they feel Sunday is the most segregated day of the week. So many churches focus on families (mother, father, and children); singles don't know where they fit into that picture. Simply by not over-emphasizing traditional families and couples as the norm, our congregations could become more inviting places for singles. It can be as easy as valuing each person as they are, regardless of their marital status.

Jesus, a single man himself, calls us to love each other just as He loved us and gave His life for us. He never favored married people over single people. When reaching out to singles, we need to ask ourselves: *Are we ready to receive them?* Singles are looking for a place to truly belong. If your congregation provides this, singles will find it to be home. ■

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