

Jessica Coles

# Leading Single People *some first steps*

A few years ago, I was chatting with a Christian friend.

“If I ever get married . . .” I started. Before I could continue, my friend interjected, “You mean *when!*” Immediately (and rather ungraciously, if I’m honest) I retorted, “No, I mean *if!*”

This conversation stands out to me years later, because it highlights an assumption that’s prevalent in the Church at large: singleness is a stopover on the way to marriage. Indeed, marriage is inevitable, and the very idea that those we know, love and lead will never be married is almost postposterous.

But that simply isn’t true any more (if, indeed, it ever was).

Research funded by Single Christians and Christian Vision for Men<sup>1</sup> in 2015 suggests that, “In general, out of every 15 people attending a Christian place of worship, there are [...] 3 Never married, 1 divorced [and] 1 widowed”. Put plainly, whenever you preach, lead a Bible study, or run any kind of church event, there will be single people in the room. And probably a lot of them!

What are the implications for you as a leader?

Three things stand out.

## **Develop an understanding of the broad experience of singleness.**

Picture the average single person. Who do you see? Are they young, middle-aged, older? Do they have children? To whom are they attracted? Have they ever been married? *Do they even want to be married?*

Quite possibly, you see a fresh-faced young man or woman, probably in their early twenties; they’re on the cusp of being ready for marriage, and they’re excited to find the “right” one, and settle down. Certainly, that description may fit some of the single people in your church, but it doesn’t include them all. Not by a long shot. The reality is, our churches will have single people of all ages and stages.

Consider these:

- The woman in her mid-thirties who desires to be a wife and mother, but hasn’t found a marriage partner. She’s dated, and still dates, but nothing has worked out. She feels like she’s stuck in a waiting room, and wonders

if she'll ever marry and have children. She sometimes feels like time is running out and that she is being left behind by her peers.

- The single man in his late forties, who has dated, but hasn't found a spouse. He feels mounting pressure from the world, and maybe even the church, that sometimes leads him to believe he has failed to do something he was "meant" to do.
- The divorced man or woman who is busy juggling co-parenting with their former spouse. They wrestle with big questions like reconciliation and remarriage. How does your community support them? If they believe that remarriage isn't an option, what does life long singleness and single parenting look like for them? If they're open to remarriage, how do they navigate dating while also caring for a child?
- The same-sex attracted person, whose sexual ethic means they are committed to life-long singleness. Their life is full and satisfying but this doesn't stop them occasionally worrying about the future. What challenges will they face in old age when their parents and siblings are gone? Who will be there to love and care for them in later life?
- Then there is the widow(er). Possibly in later life, but not necessarily. Some widow(ers) are young. They built a life with a partner, but now they find themselves single again. They are faced with many challenges – grief, financial struggles perhaps, and the need to negotiate a path they had never planned for nor expected.

I could go on, but you get the picture.

The "one-size-fits-all" idea of singleness is a myth. It has always been a myth.

Leaders need to take a comprehensive view of singleness. Find out what life is like for single

people – in all their varieties. Listen and learn from single people to build a picture of the challenges they each face. Which leads me to my second point.

### **Get to know the single people in your church and ask the hard question/s.**

Several years ago, I attended some teaching sessions for single women at the church I was attending, run by a friend of mine. They were excellent. One moment stands out for me. Our lead minister turned up to speak to the group, and I still remember two things about his visit.

- His humanity. The nervous look on his face. That told me he might be the leader, but he felt a bit out of his depth.
- His humility. He admitted that he had a long way to go in understanding the life of single women, so he was coming to us to listen and learn. For me, that mattered, and I think it did for others too.

All communities differ, of course. I don't know the single people in your church – the pain points, the temptations they face, or the questions with which they wrestle. But as their leader, they appreciate it so much when you take the time to find out. It matters hugely to them.

It may be a painful process for you to discover that your preaching has, at times, hurt, not helped them. But when you approach your

single people in humility, to listen and learn, you will become a better leader. Listening leads to understanding and that can only lead to growth. It can also lead to healing.

So why not start by asking a single person about the things your church is doing well, and the areas where improvement could be made? If your church is large, and there are many voices out there, may I encourage you to meet with them all as a group? I can assure you that you – and they – will grow when you show up with ears to

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hear and a heart to love and learn.

## Point single people to the sufficiency of God, the wonder of the gospel, and their home in the church family

*"If marriage shows us the shape of the gospel, singleness shows us its sufficiency. It's a way of declaring to a world obsessed with sexual and romantic intimacy that these things are not ultimate, and that in Christ we possess what is."* Sam Allberry<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, remember that single people in your church are still just people.

Sinners, sufferers and saints.

They are people who need reminding of the grace of God, and the wonder of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Just like everyone else. In Christ, they have all they need (2 Pet 1.3). Nothing in this world will satisfy them fully, not even a spouse. So dazzle them with the vision of their Bridegroom (Rev 19.6-9) and the one to whom they truly belong (Rom 14.8).

Also, teach ALL your church members that the Body of Christ is a family (Eph 2.19). We are brothers and sisters together in community. One day, they may well be without their biological family, but their spiritual family will always be there. Consider their needs when you make

decisions, by remembering what you've learned from them. Make them welcome in your homes, in the lives of your children, and maybe even on your family holidays. Ensure they have people to celebrate with on the good days, weep with on the painful ones, and somewhere to go if their house feels empty.

Cultivate a church family where they can be known, loved, and held accountable.

Single people aren't those with "a problem to solve." They are as varied and wonderful (and challenging) as everyone else in the church. They need love, as we all do. No more, no less. They are endowed with gifts and talents, just like everyone else. And, with all believers, they await with anticipation the day when earthly marriage ceases and we *all* see our glorious Bridegroom face-to-face.



<sup>1</sup> "The numbers of Single adults practising Christian worship" (2015), Funded by Single Christians and Christian Vision for Men. Read more: [https://www.singlefriendlychurch.com/downloads/yougovscvmlow-resrpt25jan2015-\(2\).pdf](https://www.singlefriendlychurch.com/downloads/yougovscvmlow-resrpt25jan2015-(2).pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Sam Allberry, *Marriage isn't Everything: How Celibacy Points The Way To God* (Christianity Today, 2016) Read online: <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/marriage-isnt-everything-how-celibacy-points-the-way-to-god/102927.htm>

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She is a single thirty-something woman who is passionate about seeing the church thrive, to the glory of God.

I maintain that your people will always be your best source material, but there are also plenty of wise people who have taken the time to write helpful books to help you think further on the subject. Here are just a few:

- *7 Myths About Singleness* by Sam Allberry (Crossway, 2019)
- *The Plausibility Problem* by Ed Shaw (IVP, 2015)
- *The Single Issue* by Al Hsu (IVP, 2009)