FIRST-PERSON: The singles multitude

by Diana Davis

PENSACOLA, Fla. (BP) -- A stunning fact you may not know: According to U. S. Census data, more than one-fourth of all adults have never been married (27 percent). Another 6 percent are widowed and 12 percent divorced or separated.

Most churches minister well to adults who are married. But, do we also acknowledge the great value and importance of that "invisible" multitude of unmarried adults?

In interviewing several unmarried Christian friends, I discovered 10 tips for loving and ministering to single adults who are members or guests at church.

1) See each single adult as a valued individual, ready to meet God and serve Him, with or without a boyfriend or girlfriend, fiancé, spouse or three kids in tow.

2) Train greeters at church. Comments such as "Are you here alone?" or "Is it just you?" may give the implication that he or she is incomplete.

3) Acknowledge single adults as full-fledged members, not just as sideline people. Plug them into leadership and ministry roles to fit their spiritual gifts. Encourage them to serve on important church committees, projects and men or women's ministry teams.

4) Involve singles in small groups. Many singles enjoy a small group with similar marital status and life stage. Most singles I interviewed, however, are involved in a small group of both married and unmarried. Offer choices.

5) Encourage them to make the most of their singleness. Recognize the extra gifts they may bring to the church, such as more freedom to serve and travel, and sometimes more financial freedom, etc.

6) Unless he or she personally requests it, don't set them up with your cousin or recommend online dating services. Avoid communicating, "It's God's will that you find a mate." That's not necessarily true.

In 1 Corinthians 7, the apostle Paul taught that singleness is a gift. Most singles aren't coming to church to find a mate. They're here to worship, to serve, to support.

7) Intentionally encourage single adults to participate in church events and ministries, such as Vacation Bible School and church dinners. Include them in your church traditions. For example, invite singles to light an advent candle.

8) A church may provide some quality, uniquely single events targeted to specific life circumstances. Examples: a single parents Bible study, singles mission trip, young singles retreat, single adult outreach event, mature singles' Christmas project.

9) Connect with single adults personally as a friend. Encourage them. Invite them to dinner or dessert. True fellowship often happens across the dinner table.

10) Be constantly aware of single adults all around you at work, in the grocery line, at the ball game, in your neighborhood. Invite them to your church.

As an individual member and as a church, how are you doing at reaching and including adults who are unmarried? See them. Pray for them. Love them wholeheartedly. God does.