Launching a Singles Ministry

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***Note: I am not in total agreement with everything written below due to my own experience of starting, leading, teaching and working with churches for over 25 years, however, this is some great information here that should be a great help to those of you starting or restarting your ministries, blessings, Kris Swiatocho, Director, The Singles Network***

Over the years, I've helped launch a couple of singles ministries and have been in the leadership of a couple of more. I've learned several lessons from these experiences:

1) Pray and plan. The leadership team should spend much time in **prayer**, both individually and together before launching the ministry. They also should spend time planning with the pastoral staff to come up with a goal and a mission statement. Understand exactly what needs you're trying to meet. Figure out if you want the focus to be meeting spiritual needs, emotional needs, or social needs and make that the emphasis. Once the ministry gets going you'll be tempted to move in many different directions. Establishing a mission statement beforehand helps you make wise decisions and stay focused.

2) Cultivate and protect your leadership. Singles ministries chew up leaders for lunch. One of the main reasons is that the leadership has to get their needs met from the same group they're ministering to. Choose leaders according to biblical principles: leaders with good character, who fear God, are mature, and truly look at the time spent on the group as a ministry and an honor. Once you have them, keep them in the Word and protect them from getting over-extended. Always cultivate new leadership. Some groups even have a policy of limiting the number of years anyone can be in leadership to avoid burnout.

3) Watch for "sharks." One or two people can affect the entire fabric of the group either positively or negatively. I've seen one godly person turn a whole group from a little social gathering that's Christian in name only to a group that's on fire for the Lord. At the same time, you can't assume everyone who shows up is a believer or has good motives. Some people will show up solely to find a "good woman or guy," even if they're not necessarily one themselves. The leaders have to be shepherds when this happens. Enlist pastoral support for problems and needs for which you're not trained.

4) Be real. Singles are fickle and mobile. I've seen attendance drop from 30 to 6 in two weeks. People want their needs met. Figure out what the real needs are and focus on them. If I started another singles group it would focus primarily on meeting spiritual needs. Speakers on dating, relationships, and singles issues would be few and far between. The type of people you attract is dependent on the message you deliver. One of the biggest mistakes the church makes is treating singles as one homogeneous group. From a distance the singles ministry seems fun and exciting, but it's real life and the needs are sometimes messy. The first time you sit and cry with a single mother whose daughter has been killed or pray with a brother who has cancer, your perspective changes.

5) Guard your contact list (addresses and phone numbers). *Never* distribute it publicly. You'll thank me later.

I started a social group at my church called Saturdays at Seven. It's very easy. All I do is plan an event every Saturday and whoever wants to participate can come. I collected a list of e-mails from interested singles, and I send them a message about our plans on Wednesdays. We go bowling, attend hockey games, go ice skating, take dance lessons, and a lot of other fun activities. I didn't realize there was such a demand for singles to connect with one another.

I had the awesome opportunity to help revamp my church's singles ministry. This group had begun to dwindle in number. Even the facilitator became bored with the monthly meetings. Seven months later, it's a thriving ministry of faithful, loving brothers and sisters in Christ. What's the key to this success? Besides lots of prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit, two things stand out to me: commitment to service and community.

Any ministry within the church can be a place where people are served or a place where people become servants. Decide what you want your group's primary focus to be. We chose to focus on becoming servants, which lends itself to healing the brokenhearted and wounded souls.

It's also important every member knows they make up the ministry and are important to its success. So, upon meeting new members, I ask them to write down their interests, desires, and needs. We use these responses to plan activities, events, and outings. This helped the ministry to become *our* ministry. Everyone now has vested interest in the goals of the group.

Stay in contact with your group. Call your visitors to help them feel welcomed. E-mail newsletters are the most effective way of communicating with your regular attenders. Keep them informed of what's going on.

Let everyone be involved in the ministry. When people take part, they feel like they belong. Don't allow the 80/20 rule (80 percent of the work is done by 20 percent of the people), which occurs in most church ministries.

Bring in married teachers to lead Bible or book studies. They bring a healthy perspective and balance to our lives. Involve singles of all ages. Don't break out and form groups by age. This fosters division.

Keep the church staff aware of the singles ministry happenings so they're in the know and are equipped to answer inquiries about the singles ministry.

Get involved in other areas of the church and encourage other singles to do the same. This keeps everyone balanced and growing and spiritually healthy.

Don't form a singles Sunday school class. For singles to grow and belong, they must involve and enfold themselves with the whole body of believers.

Keep the ministry visible. Make sure singles events are consistently in the church's newsletter, calendar, and bulletin because 70-year-old Millie is looking for a way to get her 26-year-old grandson to church.

Find ways to serve the body or the community as a group. Outreach-oriented work is a must.

Remember special events in the members' lives, graduations, job promotions, etc. Celebrate each other!

Most importantly, remember to have fun. Don't take things too seriously. You will flounder and make mistakes, but it's the journey that matters. There are no perfect people, singles ministries, or churches. Keep everything you do and say centered in Christ.

My recommendations:

1. Pray for God to reveal his call for your ministry.

2. Look around at the people God has put in your life.

3. I was in a non-denominational Bible study and had an opportunity to visit several church singles ministries with friends. Don't be afraid to do that!

4. Invite quality people to join the team. Explain the vision. Make it OK for them to say "no." Relish those who say "yes."

5. Be sure the basic vision is written down and everyone stays on board. It's easy for people to get on a different agenda. Keep the vision alive.

6. Listen to others' advice, but weigh it against the vision God gave you.

7. Develop an "inner circle" of your primary team. Expand to a larger team. Delegate, and allow people to use their strengths. Also know their weaknesses. Don't use someone who is weak in graphic arts to do your flyers and program, that's what others will judge your organization on.

8. Always train an apprentice. God called me to step down from leadership after the first year. But the apprentice kept it going a second year.

9. You can't thank the volunteers and leadership team enough!

10. Pray, pray, pray. Look for God's answers and report them to the team.

11. Allow God to tell you when to step away from a leadership role.

Many years ago, several people in my DivorceCare class talked about having a movie night so we could hang out socially. Soon we started organizing monthly movie nights at the church, which we advertised in the church's weekly newsletter.

After three months of movie nights, a couple of the women asked me where "our" class was. The older single-again crowd didn't have a class. So in January, we started a Sunday school class with eight people and an agenda of prayer requests, a lesson/topic, and some discussion time.

Today, as we approach our first anniversary, the class has 14-20 regular attenders with well over 50 on the roster. It's grown as a community and we're getting to know each other better as we have dinners, holiday parties, and other events together.

First and foremost, pray for vision and guidance. Once God gives the vision, write it and make it plain (see Habakkuk 2:2). Do you want to minister to the needs of never-married singles, divorced singles, widowed singles, single parents, etc.? Once you've determined your target and vision, meet with your senior pastor to make sure it lines up with the church's overall vision. The church needs to be aware of what you're doing.

Find people to serve in leadership roles whose vision lines up with vision for the ministry. You need people who are willing to work. There's so much work to be done that one person trying to do it all will become frustrated and exhausted (trust me, I've been there time and time again). Delegation of duties is *vital*.

Next, determine the needs of your group. I recommend conducting a survey. How will you minister to these needs? Will you conduct Bible studies and promote building a relationship with Christ? Will you take the time to build relationships with the singles through social activities? I've noticed that singles want to know they're loved and that they matter. The leadership in our ministry is responsible for calling each member between our meetings. We also encourage them to call one another and to fellowship together outside of church.

How will you fellowship? Singles ministries are more than having Bible studies and potlucks! Solicit ideas from the group. Go bowling or skating, attend basketball games, go out to eat, take road trips, have cookouts at a park, go to the movies, have retreats, play pool, host a karaoke night. Or just gather at someone's house to play cards and eat! We have Singles Mingles, quarterly parties where we hire a DJ, dance, play games, and eat. (Free food is a good way to get people to come).

Then, think about how you're going to get the singles involved in building the kingdom. How will you display God's love to others? Will you do missions work or volunteer in your community? Work with local programs such as the Big Brothers/Big Sisters, volunteer to mentor someone less fortunate, minister to single parents in a low-income community, or reach out to the elderly in a nursing home.