# [Ministry to singles a challenge to churches](http://www.thestarpress.com/article/20120512/LIFESTYLE/205120346/Ministry-singles-challenge-churches)

LOUISVILLE, Ky. -- As the traditional family dynamic changes, churches face a major challenge as they struggle to respond to the revolution in how Americans structure their families, households and romances.

Nearly half of American adults today are unmarried -- whether never-married, currently divorced, separated or widowed, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Married couples account for just under half of all American households -- down from 71 percent in 1970, according to the U.S. Census.

Yet still today, married people are more likely than singles to be church attendees. And churches often seem focused on the nuclear family, whether it's in the sermon topics or the posters on the walls or the graded Sunday Schools.

The Rev. Kevin Cosby, pastor of St. Stephen Church, said his congregation is trying to create a culture in which "you're not abnormal if you're single."

"One is a whole number," he said. "You're not a fraction."

U.S. Census figures show that men are marrying six years later and women seven years later on average than their counterparts 50 years ago.

Some scholars describe an extended phase of "emerging adulthood" for many twentysomethings, marked more by exploration than commitment in work, love or faith.

"As they're searching for identity, their religious identity is set aside sometimes," said Carole Goodwin, director of youth and young adult ministry for the Catholic Archdiocese of Louisville, Ky. Often, she said, young singles embrace the label "spiritual but not religious."

Meanwhile, many adults, particularly men, don't want to marry until they gain financial independence, Cosby said.

Sociologist Bradford Wilcox of the University of Virginia said those resources are increasingly out of reach for the less-educated -- with fewer manufacturing jobs that offer living wages.

And particularly among whites, the less-educated, the under-employed and the unemployed are more likely to be disconnected from the social bonds of marriage and houses of worship, Wilcox said.

"They may also be less likely to feel comfortable or interested in regularly attending churches that continue to uphold conventional norms" of duty to family, Wilcox wrote in a study called, "No Money, No Honey, No Church."

Churches can make potential members squirm in other ways.

Many modern families involve situations that churches have traditionally held as morally suspect at best -- such as divorce, unwed parenthood and living together outside of marriage.

In that sense, gays and lesbians -- whose role has been fiercely debated in churches -- have only borne the brunt of the far broader wrangling over how to respond to the revolutions in sexual and family life.

Young adults, including religious ones, aren't delaying sex just because they're delaying marriage.

A University of Texas study found that once-religious teens are more likely to avoid church as young adults if they're cohabiting, have been more sexually active, are smoking marijuana or are drinking more.

Church leaders said that while they uphold traditional teaching that sex should be reserved for marriage between a man and a woman, they are trying to show more acceptance than judgment.

"There's no such thing as the perfect family, there's no such thing as the perfect single life," said Jon Wren, associate pastor at Northeast Christian Church.

"We are not in the business of saying when you come here let's see your ID, let's see who you're in a relationship with, let's see where you're living," he said. "... We're all in need of grace."

In some Catholic marriage-preparation classes, as many as half the couples are already living together, said Sue Brodfehrer, executive director of the Louisville Catholic archdiocese's Family Ministries Office.

"We wouldn't compromise, but we take the persons where they are and help them to see why we hold what we hold" and affirm their desire for a sacramental wedding, she said.

Churches are also rethinking how to relate with unwed parents.

Rev. T. Vaughn Walker, pastor of First Gethsemane Baptist Church, said his church decided several years ago to hold formal dedications for the infants of single as well as married parents.

"We don't pretend like they're married," Walker said. "We don't encourage living together, but we think it's important that even a single parent understands that the child is loved by the Lord, and we have a responsibility to support that mother or that father."