## What Happened to Singles Ministry?

Today the best thing for singles is not a singles-only ministry.

By Adam Stadtmiller

It was the late 1970s. John Travolta was taking the dance floor, and the church in America had a problem. How would it deal with the increasing number of single adults created by a growing divorce rate, career minded professionals placing work before settling down, and others delaying or never agreeing to the confines of marriage? It was a brave new world. Being single was in!

This zeitgeist, coupled with the attrition of the unmarried demographic from their pews, caused Christian leaders to mobilize. There was a new target for ministry professionals: singles. The race for success in reaching them was on, and by the late 1980s singles ministries had become a staple at many churches.

Almost 25 years later, much has changed. "Single" is not a term people normally choose to describe themselves. Being single, while accepted among those in their twenties, is often seen as something of a stigma after passing a certain "acceptable" age. In America that age is around 30 years old.

You almost never see a 20-something "singles ministry." Instead, 20-somethings congregate in groups with more relationally non-descript titles like New Beginnings or Careers, and the groups include both single and married.

But ministries for singles over 30 are harder to find.

The last 25 years have seen the church alter the way it relates to and reaches singles. The fervor to target singles directly is no longer front and center. On the contrary, ministry to singles is seen as a burden to many churches. What started out as a brilliant success has disintegrated into the realms of an epic fail.

Singles ministry proved to be harder than the original pioneers expected. It took too much time, too many resources, and produced too few sustainable results. We are now living in the post-singles ministry era.

Before writing this article, I contacted 16 churches about their singles ministries. Many of these churches you would know. I was looking for a thriving singles ministry.

A few of those I spoke with recounted the glory days of their ministries, days when 300-500 singles packed their facilities. While some of these churches still had a singles ministry, no longer did any have a full-time person focused on singles. Most were now only running a skeletal version of their once full-bodied singles ministries.

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Also sobering was the fact that none of these successful churches had been able to sustain a singles ministry for more than three years. I discovered a cyclical pattern of failure and restart. Groups had either been recently launched, shut down, or were in the process of regrouping for another re-launch.

In the end, singles ministry had proven to be unsustainable for all of these churches, even though there was still an often-vocal single contingent clamoring for a ministry they could call their own.

The question became: what's the appropriate amount of resources the church should devote toward singles ministry?

**A Better Model**

In 2005 I was hired by San Diego's North Coast Calvary Chapel to be the 30-somethings pastor. Not wanting to be a singles pastor, from previous exposure, I posited that we instead explore ministering to 30- and 40-something adults in an integrated construct of marrieds and singles. It would be age-appropriate for "second stage adults," but not defined by marital status. We are now finishing our sixth year of ministry in this context. It would take another article to tell the positive effects of this decision, but my conclusion is, it works.

So what went wrong with singles ministry? Was it just another fad? A seasonal thing that God was doing, or was it critically flawed from the beginning?

A study of the early singles-ministry literature during the boom years yields some common themes. The problem was not the intention, but the core concept that singles' needs are best ministered to in a segregated setting. This led to ministry models that actually disenfranchised singles from the body of Christ and isolated them in groups unable to maintain long-term structural and emotional sustainability. Here's why:

**Singles don't actually want to be part of a singles ministry.** Except for the rare individual who has the gift of celibacy, no one who attends a singles ministry wants to be there. Yes, they appreciate the group for the short haul and are glad it exists, but the end goal is never a long-term involvement. They always plan to exit the group as soon as possible. This alone is a massive structural flaw.

Even in our mixed demographic setting, 50 percent of our singles membership changes every six months. Given that dynamic, how is a singles-centric ministry supposed to create a lasting community when it's a revolving door of people?

Many singles' commitment to the group is directly based on that group's ability to meet their primary felt need, which is a Catch-22: if the group does not succeed in providing this need, the desire to find a life's partner, the person eventually leaves to look elsewhere; if the group succeeds in finding the life partner, you still lose this person as a member of the singles community. If any ministry is to succeed, it needs to have people committed beyond the limitations of their own needs.

**"Singles' needs are best addressed in a segregated setting" is a faulty premise.** Singles groups were originally segregated because of the assumption that singles have specific needs (loneliness, support, accountability and so on) that are best addressed in a segregated setting.

While I agree that singles have unique needs, I have a hard time finding any that the church cannot address in a mixed setting, provided that the church is on mission to integrate singles into the entirety of church and body life.

Mixed small groups, service teams, missions, and discipleship are just some examples where the lives of singles can interconnect with the rest of the church body, and benefit everyone.

**Singles ministries that focus primarily on the needs of singles emotionally destabilize the group.** Segregating singles into ministries designed primarily to meet singles' needs usually creates a recovery group.

Here's how it works. The ministry leader, wanting to meet the needs of singles, comes up with a list of the most important topics to single adults. The conversation and most of the teaching centers on these needs. (Loneliness, finances, dating, and being a whole person are just some of the topics that have been beaten to death in singles ministry.) This problem-centered model makes sense, but it produces a group no one wants to be in very long. The pastors have defined the wrong set of needs and strayed away from what's most important: topics directly relating to core-discipleship (faith and hope and love and service) and total church body life.

When the singles ministry becomes a recovery group, this creates an unintentional agenda of helping people recover from being single. And by mimicking the nature of a recovery group, you will primarily attract people in need of that.

**Segregated singles ministries are more susceptible to becoming emotionally toxic.**

The emotional sustainability of singles ministry has long been a problem for many churches. Groups can become places where the emotionally stable fear to go, because the emotionally unstable dominate the conversation. The pastor's main job is putting out fires.

Because of this, churched singles in general have sometimes been unfairly stereotyped as emotionally needy and the whole group flawed.

The emotional turbulence in segregated singles ministries stems in large part from the 50-percent-plus divorce rate in this country. In my group, some 30-40 percent of the singles are within three years of a serious emotional trauma.

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No matter who you are, or how stable your emotional quotient, things like custody battles and divorce court have a way of making you emotionally vulnerable for a while.

People in emotional trauma do, say, and act in ways they normally would not. This, coupled with the small percentage of singles who do have limited social skills or boundaries, often creates a tipping point for groups into "uninviting."

While the church is there as a safe haven for those in need of restoration after difficult circumstances, it needs a greater number of individuals who are emotionally steady for it to maintain emotional balance.

Healthy groups attract healthy people and dysfunctional groups attract greater dysfunction. Thus, when a well-balanced healthy single shows up to a group where more than a third of the group is recovering from a fresh emotional wound, that person tends to leave the group.

When a group burgeons with emotionally wounded people it becomes a prime target for predators. Wolves pick off those that are vulnerable. This adds to the "meet-market" vibe in many singles groups, a byproduct of segregating singles together.

Some church leaders react to this unsafe relational environment in the only way they know how: they police it. They will print out "The Rules" of the group so all can see them, constantly talking about creating a safe environment, the use of dating contracts or forbidding dating in the group all together. Ridiculous!

This kind of structure is why so many singles complain of being treated like children. Imagine the uproar if you tried to do the same thing with married people, perhaps not allowing them to speak to their friend's spouses? It would never happen.

**Where do we go from here?**

To start, we as church leaders need to renew our commitment to singles. We need to create ministries that grow with them, ministries that respect them as equal citizens, ministries they don't graduate from once finding a spouse, ministries that enfold them into the entire body of believers instead of relegating them to a stigmatic group destined to fail.

What we have done at 30:40 is just one way to reach and bless singles. The key is not so much the specific model, but the desire by church leaders to be intentional about blending singles into the whole of church life rather than segregating them.

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**5 Keys to a Healthy 30-40s Group**

**1. Build a large and diverse team.** John Wimber said, "If you want people to come to church, give them a job." When we started 30:40, I followed this advice. It works! Our "Yes Team" is all hand-selected volunteers, 14 couples and 40 single adults. We have found we need at least a 1:3 ratio of married persons to singles for this ministry paradigm to succeed. We ruthlessly pursue that balance.

We meet on Friday nights twice a month for a potluck, worship, teaching, and small group table discussion. Of the 68 individuals involved with the Yes Team, at least 50 will be on assignment that night. We have prayer teams, worship leaders, greeters, and welcome host to name a few. The key is not really what they do, but rather that they are committed to being there, and being there early. This creates is a scenario where newcomers arrive to a place packed with welcome-minded team members as opposed to an empty room where people arrive casually late.

**2. Childcare is crucial.** Unless you can provide free, quality childcare for the married and single parents wanting to come, your group will never succeed. Childcare is the most expensive line item in our budget. We offset this cost by taking an offering at each event. A more economical model would be to meet on the nights of our children's programs. Unfortunately we just don't have the room.

**3. Married couples bring stability and safety.** The fact that many of our married couples have children in the church's kids programs and local schools means that they won't be moving from church to church as freely as many singles can and do. This provides longevity of relationship, something singles desire.

Marrieds also provide safety for the group by removing the meet-market vibe found in many strictly singles groups. Nothing scares predatory individuals away better then committed spouses.

Most important, by having marrieds involved, singles have a group they don't have to leave once they get married. We currently have over a dozen couples who met in our group still actively involved now that they are married.

**4. Don't over-program.** While singles tend to want more events than marrieds, you must be careful to not become your members' total social calendar. Too many events will limit your effectiveness. You want to find a rhythm where the majority of your people can attend the events you host. Our goal is three gatherings per month. This allows our people time to be involved in other church events and personal core discipleship or small groups, while having a social life of their own.

**5. Gear the group specifically for the age you're trying to reach.** While 30:40 is geared toward that age range, we don't card at the door. We want people to be where they feel comfortable. That said, I deliberately create an environment most conducive to the people we are trying to reach. This means that everything from the events we choose to the music we play to the illustrations I use when teaching are designed for 30- and 40-something adults. To this day we have never needed to address the issue of age, a problem often faced by singles-only groups.