**Why Singles Ministry Isn’t Easy**

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Still frustrated with the singles situation at your church?

Maybe frustration is just part of doing church in North America. Especially if you’re a single believer.

We sure can learn a lot about grace, patience, and hope by not only living spouseless, but living spouseless and trying to get involved in a church!

Of course, regardless of our marital status, we Western Christians have developed high expectations for all areas of our lives. And if we’d admit it, we’re fairly spoiled, especially since many of us view church as just another service industry. Whether it’s cross-cultural missions, the music ministry, or even trying to find a spot in our church’s parking lot, we’re constantly evaluating things by asking “what’s in it for me?”

Granted, there is no such thing as a perfect church. Or a perfect pastor, or a perfect youth ministry, or a perfect worship ministry, or a perfect congregation.

Or a perfect singles ministry. And frankly, that may be partly by design. While some churches seem to have let singles-centric programming fade into the dustbin of unsuccessful ministry ventures, others have become intentional in expecting single adults to participate in the work of the church without regard to social categories by “age and stage.” Yet, still, for a variety of reasons, it can be easy for us singles to lament what we perceive to be our second-class status in many churches.

Demographically, the aloofness of church programming when it comes to singles appears counter-intuitive for churches that claim a desire for outreach into our society. After all, our cohort is growing – both by choice, as young adults delay [marriage](http://www.crosswalk.com/family/marriage/); and force, as divorce rates in churched America continue to mirror those in society at large (claims to the contrary by Focus on the [Family](http://www.crosswalk.com/family/) notwithstanding). Indeed, if you didn’t know better, you’d think churches are doing to singles what society has been doing to marriage: marginalizing their importance.

However, before we begin bashing churches and their leadership teams for failing to support us, let’s look at the bigger picture. Should we single believers be so hard on them for how we’re integrated into our local faith communities? After all, have you considered all of the factors that make ours a surprisingly diverse and elusive group of people?

Here are some of the major trends and social forces that help to shape modern churched singlehood, and how they impact singles-centric ministry:

**Urbanization**.  By now, we’re familiar with the unprecedented socioeconomic phenomenon of suburbanization and even exurbanization, as families continue moving farther away from urban cores in their elusive search for the best subdivision. Yet single adults – especially ones without kids – have begun moving in the opposite direction, back into city centers. This means that, particularly for big suburban megachurches, the trendy neighborhoods for singles are no longer those sprawling apartment complexes down the street, but gritty ‘hoods miles away, where, if there are any churches left, they’re disproportionately ethnic or mainline and liberal. During the last couple of generations, evangelicals have systematically abandoned the inner city, and singles moving back in will be among the first to have that reality slap them in the face. Meanwhile, singles who remain in suburbia are likely seeing their numbers stagnate, which means their clout at church may stagnate, too.

**Technology**. Time was, you either found work on a farm, or in a factory, or even in an office. Today, however, technology continues to unchain workers from fixed locations and allows increasing levels of on-the-job mobility. This means that it’s becoming easier for people to work where they want – and/or can afford – to live, so planning for neighborhood demographics has become more of a fruit-basket-turnover scenario instead of a neatly ordered – albeit often punitive – grocery shelving scenario. This means that single adults have even more flexibility when it comes to work schedules and work places, diluting their availability for church on weekends, but maybe opening up different days during the week. Now try finding common time for everybody to get together!

**Loosening of Family Norms.** We try to treat this particular subject delicately, but to be honest, the patterns evangelical singles have developed with divorce and childbearing outside of marriage make for profound complexities when it comes to mixing, say, career-driven never-marrieds/no-kids with single moms who’ve been abandoned by the father of their children. This means that a singles ministry that tries to be all things to all types of singles can become inefficient and ineffective quite quickly, and plenty of people can feel slighted or intimidated in the process.

**Career Requirements.** Unfortunately, our employment picture in North America has not only destabilized in recent years, it shows no signs of recovering anytime soon. This means that those of us who can get jobs – especially good jobs – feel like we need to work exceptionally hard to keep that employment. We work longer hours, take fewer vacations, and tend to give employers even more control over our schedules both on and off the clock – if we’re ever truly off the clock anymore. This isn’t just a singles-specific problem, but oftentimes, employers tend to take advantage of single employees who don’t have a family waiting at home, which means church events end up losing out to job demands.

**Social Media**. Duh – no surprise here! How many singles do you know who constantly check their smartphone and e-mail accounts – yes, plural – to see who’s doing what this evening or this weekend? How many of us hold our personal schedules in flux until we know how our social roster is shaping up? Sometimes an insignificant event can trump a major commitment if the right people will be attending the otherwise insignificant event. Indeed, waiting to gauge our best social opportunities is not only a dreadfully impolite habit, but for churches, this means that your singles programming is always competing against the next best offer via Twitter or Facebook.

It’s not that social media, your job, and even your move into a hip downtown loft are bad things, in and of themselves. In fact, as our demographics continue to shift, having more singles beginning to cluster in specific locales may provide the impetus some churches can use to more affirmingly incorporate unmarrieds into the life of their congregation.

But still, should the onus be on churches, or on us? Do churches exist for our benefit, or [are we to honor God by not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together](http://www.biblestudytools.com/kjv/hebrews/10-25.html)?

For church leadership teams that shrug their shoulders at our cohort and simply let us fend for ourselves, perhaps we singles should challenge them on the legitimacy of intentionally ignoring a significant population in their church and community.

However, for church leadership teams that seek to balance the congregation’s ministry opportunities with genuine care for everyone regardless of their marital status, shouldn’t we singles be willing to participate in ways that honor our leaders and facilitates our collective service to God, even if they don’t really understand us?

If it helps, think about the many variables that are helping to defragment our growing yet diverse demographic. And even how things like social media, technology, and urbanization can be put to good use.

For our benefit, and our Lord’s glory.

*From his smorgasboard of church experience, ranging from the Christian and Missionary Alliance to the Presbyterian Church in America,* ***Tim Laitinen*** *brings a range of observations to his perspective on how we Americans worship, fellowship, and minister among our communities of faith. As a one-time employee of a Bible church in suburban Fort Worth, Texas and a former volunteer director of the contemporary Christian music ministry at New York City's legendary Calvary Baptist, he's seen our church culture from the inside out. You can read about his unique viewpoints at [o-l-i.blogspot.com](http://www.o-l-i.blogspot.com/" \t "_blank).*