



Where Do Single People Go to Nurture Their Faith?

ELIZABETH J. HOIUM

“Take a look around your church next Sunday and note the composition of the congregation. Chances are good you will see primarily older people and families with children making up the visible community of Christ.

“Do you notice any particular group missing?

“In many congregations young single adults are severely under-represented.... The low incidence of church attendance by singles is a phenomenon that, unfortunately, feeds on itself. The church actively programs events and activities for nearly every other age group—children, high school youth, families, couples, older people.”¹

The United States has an ever-increasing number of singles as people wait longer to get married, choose not to marry, or just have not yet found the right person. Some people are not married by choice. Others have been married and suddenly find themselves single again. “Single” can mean 22 and just out of college or 82 and just lost a spouse of 60 years or many things in between.

As a single woman and newly ordained pastor, I am interested in where single people go to nurture their faith. The topic first came to my attention as a college

¹Laurel Botes, “Reaching Out to Those ‘Twentysomething,’” *The Lutheran* (October 18, 1989) 47. As will be evident, many of the citations and statistics found in this article come from my study of several years of *The Lutheran*, the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Single people can and do make great contributions in the world, and they, like married people, need places to find encouragement and support, ask God questions, and nurture their faith. Healthy and caring congregations can provide that arena, but they must plan to make that happen.

freshman, long before I had any idea I would become a pastor. Going away to college was the first time my friends and I had the opportunity to decide for ourselves whether to go to church or to sleep in on Sunday mornings. I found that there was something pulling me to go to church. It met a need, and I just did not feel right if I was not part of a church community. It centered me and anchored my week. Worshiping God made it clear there was something bigger than myself. Yet many others apparently did not feel this tug and exercised their newfound freedom by staying away from organized religion.

The term “single” is often used to mean young adults who are not yet married. “Single,” however, relates to a much broader group of people. As used in this article, “single” means not legally married if you are heterosexual (or homosexual, in states where that is legal) and not living in a committed relationship if you are homosexual (in states where marriage is not possible). Single, as used here, can mean never married, separated but not yet divorced, divorced, widowed, single parents, and people who are living together who could marry but have chosen not to.

CHURCHES GEARED TOWARD FAMILIES

Many people who grow up in the church become disenchanted, get busy with other priorities, feel hurt by the church, or do not see how the church is relevant in their lives today. As a result, they fall away after confirmation or once they have finished high school and begin their lives as independent young adults. Significant life events often bring them back: getting married, having a child baptized, or bringing their children to Sunday School or confirmation. These milestone events do not typically happen for single people.

Many single people in congregations were once married and now find themselves widowed. They may be lifelong members of a congregation and, especially if they are older, experience the death of a spouse as a painful but inevitable part of life. Some people turn to the church for solace at such times, and some congregations have experience with grief ministry. Others, however, may find that church attendance, something they did together as a couple, is now just too painful. Similarly, if a couple who were active in a congregation divorce, one or both may leave the congregation.

Who then is the visible body of Christ? The majority of people in congregations tend to be “older adults, families with children ages six to twelve, married people, widows/widowers, and college graduates.”²

The list of “not-so-regulars” is longer: high school students; young, mobile adults; families with young children; empty nesters; single people; divorced or separated people; couples living together before marriage; people of color; immigrants; gays and lesbians; disabled people; high school dropouts; and high school but not college graduates.³

²Cindy Novak, “Who’s Not Coming to Church,” *The Lutheran* (January 2001) 35.

³Ibid. (punctuation added).

The church, like any organization, tends to attract people who look like those who are already there. That is why a congregation of mostly retired people has trouble attracting young adults. They may visit but feel they do not fit and go elsewhere. A congregation of mostly young families may not appeal to empty nesters or single people without children.

DOES WORSHIP INADVERTENTLY EXCLUDE SINGLE PEOPLE?

One churchgoer observes that most preachers' stories are about "normal" families. As a result, she finds herself "stranded in familyland."⁴ In a survey of single people ages 18–35, most had never heard a sermon on singleness.⁵ In contrast, sermons about how to have a strong marriage are not uncommon.

After a year of internship, I discovered that my own preaching included many illustrations about my own childhood. Upon further reflection, I realized that this was when I was in the "right kind" of family—mom, dad, and two children (no dog though!). I do not talk much about being single in sermons. This might be because I have not felt that my experience as a single woman who has traveled, studied abroad, worked as a lawyer and airport manager, and then decided to go to seminary was material people could relate to.

The attitude of the pastor is one of the key considerations to whether single people feel comfortable in a congregation. Philip Wilson finds that young people find wider society more accepting of single people than is the case with the church.

Who is up front also has a great impact on who is in the pews. Prior to being ordained, I was a member of a vibrant growing congregation with people of all ages. In preparation for this article, I realized, however, that all six pastors were married with children at various stages of life. There are very few single pastors to be role models for people.

The attitude of the pastor is one of the key considerations to whether single people feel comfortable in a congregation. Philip Wilson reports that young people find wider society more accepting of single people than is the case with the church and that the attitude of the pastor is crucial to whether a single person stays in a congregation.⁶ One participant saw "the very presence of (mostly) married clergy as part of the reason why so many single people feel excluded from the churches."⁷ Another said that church leaders are mostly ignorant of issues affecting single people.⁸

⁴Pamela Hill Nettleton, "Stranded in Familyland," *The Lutheran* (June 1998) 29.

⁵Philip Wilson, *Being Single in the Church Today* (London: Morehouse Publishing, 2006) 155. Wilson is a Presbyterian pastor in Ireland who interviewed single people in the church from England, Ireland, and Scotland from a variety of denominations.

⁶Ibid., 63, 104, 151–152.

⁷Ibid., 153.

⁸Ibid., 154.

The language used in church communication is also important. For example, if a congregation-wide event meant to include everyone is promoted as a “family event,” single people may feel excluded and stay away. Congregations can look at the opportunities they provide for people to connect with one another and grow in faith. Are these couples groups, marriage retreats, and events for people with children? If so, are there also things geared toward single people? Or are events more broadly defined by interests—Bible studies, music, dinner groups—that could appeal to both married or single people? Then look at who actually comes. Does it just happen that everyone involved is a couple? Would a single newcomer—or any newcomer—truly feel welcome?

Some people even object to the word “single.” It defines people by their marital status and categorizes people by what they are lacking. It is akin to defining Lutheran as “not Catholic” rather than looking at the positive attributes of what people bring.

NOT A NEW ISSUE

The issue of singleness is not new. In the Bible, Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth are all widowed, and Naomi has no sons for her daughters-in-law to marry (Ruth 1:3–5). Mary is betrothed but not married when she learns she is to have a baby (Luke 1:26–38). We do not hear much about Joseph after Jesus’ birth and childhood story in Luke (2:41–51). Jesus says to the Samaritan woman at the well, “You are right in saying ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband” (John 4:17–18). Widows appear in many biblical texts, often because they are not being fed (see, for example, Acts 6:1). In biblical times, marriage and children provided the key to economic survival. Life spans were also much shorter; in today’s society, people may have seventy years of adult life, and their choices regarding marriage are much greater.

The Lutheran magazine did an entire issue on singleness in September 1990.⁹ Unfortunately, all of its articles could be written today with just a few updates to the statistics and the language used around divorce. One author says,

The “norm” is that being married is God-ordained and all other relationships (including being single) are of lesser value....It’s as if being married means a person is mentally and socially stable and being single implies a person has “problems” that need to be considered. After all, the single person failed. Either failed to get married or failed to stay married. Either way it seems to require an explanation of some kind—“He’s widowed”; “She’s been a career woman”; or “She’s been taking care of her mother for years.”...

We are fooling ourselves if we think our society is still made up primarily of what has been called the traditional family (father, mother, children). If we have any hope of rekindling the fire of the gospel, we must address the issues that exclude members of the body of Christ from full participation in the community of believers.¹⁰

⁹“Singled Out,” *The Lutheran* (September 26, 1990) 6–16.

¹⁰Gwendolyn Carr, “Zeroing in on Singles,” *The Lutheran* (September 26, 1990) 13.

The articles published by *The Lutheran* since the inception of the Evangelical Church in America (ELCA) illustrate how the mainline church is geared toward couples and families. Of 248 articles on the topic of marital status, two-thirds pertain to marriage and weddings and only one-third relate to singleness, largely to divorce.¹¹

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The idea of a two-parent family with children is deeply ingrained in American culture although it is not the “biblical family.” It is actually the product of more recent culture. The Bible has a diverse array of family relationships, many of which have no present-day advocates. Jacob, for example, had two wives, two concubines, and twelve sons (Gen 35:22–26).

DEVELOPING A THEOLOGY OF SINGLENES

Lutheran theology recognizes that we are all broken people, but we are all accepted through God’s undeserved grace, whether single or married. God sent his son to die for our sins once and for all, so all are forgiven sinners, whether single or married. The church is the body of Christ on earth. The church is not for perfect people—again, whether single or married. The church is for everyone, no matter what kind of messy or not so messy life situations we find ourselves in. Yet congregations are often places where people show only their best side, even if they are hurting. If someone does not look like the other worshipers or does not feel worthy of being there, that person may not be embraced by others or may feel different and thus cease to come.

As Christians, we are called to love our neighbors (Matt 22:37–39). We are not called to love only those neighbors who look like ourselves, although that is often easier for us. The Bible provides a rich, wide-ranging and very human look at people in all different walks of life. Single people make incredible contributions to the Christian faith, providing courage and leadership, stepping outside what was expected of them in polite society to share Jesus’ radically inclusive love. Jesus’ cousin John the Baptist comes before Jesus declaring, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” He carries out his work in the wilderness, gathering great crowds of people around him. He is the one who baptizes Jesus himself.¹²

We as readers meet Mary and Martha in their role of sisters in the Gospel of

¹¹In my survey of articles in *The Lutheran* magazine from 1988–2011, 166 articles were on marriage and weddings and 82 on singleness. The singleness articles break down as 58 on divorce, 17 on singleness generally, and 7 on young adults. Being widowed or never married were not topics in the index, although some articles in the other subcategories relate to these topics.

¹²See Matt 3:1–17, Mark 1:2–11, Luke 3:1–22, and John 1:19–34.

John as they mourn the death of their brother Lazarus. They turn to their friend Jesus for help. Each sister deals with her grief in her own way. When Jesus comes to comfort them, he responds to each of them in their respective stages of grief. Martha accuses Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21). Jesus responds to her words simply with words of his own (John 11:22–27). Mary, in contrast, weeps bitterly. Jesus is deeply moved and weeps with her, words in that instance not being necessary (John 11:31–35).

Jesus himself is single as far as we know and his marital status is not considered important enough for any of the four Gospel writers to address. Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. Being fully human, he is a whole and complete person without being married.

The Apostle Paul does more than any other person to spread the news of Christ to the people of his time. Paul uses his gifts of writing, preaching, and connecting with people to reach a wide audience in the ancient world where travel was extremely difficult. Marital status was not an issue addressed by John the Baptist or Mary and Martha. At a time when Paul and his contemporaries thought that Jesus’ return was imminent, Paul lifted up the vocation of singleness, saying that if you are single, remain single and if you are married, remain faithful (1 Cor 7:25–38). Paul’s primary message is that there is no longer Jew or Greek, male and female, slave or free (Gal 3:28). We could add there are no longer married or single. We are all one in Christ.

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As Christians we live with tension, and one of those tensions for single people is that God created woman because it is not good that man should be alone (Gen 2:18). This passage, pairing one man and one woman, has long been used to advocate for marriage. Yet the text uses the language of helper and not that of sexual partner. All people are created to be in relationship with one another. Single people, like those who are married, need close relationships in their lives and may need the community of Christ even more than those with families. Marriage and biological family are some, but not all, of the ways to meet the human needs for relationship.

¹³The question of whether Jesus was married or not fascinates people. The most recent discussion of this topic centered around a piece of papyrus from the fourth century that has been translated from Coptic Egyptian saying, “Jesus said to them my wife,” according to Harvard Divinity School Professor Karen King. A paper is scheduled to be published on the fragment in the January 2013 issue of the *Harvard Theological Review*. See B. D. Colen, “HDS Scholar Announces Existence of New Early Christian Gospel from Egypt,” at <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news-events/articles/2012/09/16/hds-scholar-announces-existence-of-new-early-christian-gospel-from-egypt> (accessed November 4, 2012).

Even as he is dying on the cross, Jesus is creating a new kind of family: “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home” (John 19:26–27). Jesus thus creates a new family—one not linked by biology but by care for one another.

A theology of singleness should celebrate how God creates each and every human being. God knew us before we were born (Ps 139:13–15) and knows every hair on our heads (Matt 10:30; Luke 12:7). All believers, regardless of marital status, make up the body of Christ. Each person created by God, whether single or married, is complete and loved by God, and we, like Jesus, should meet that person wherever they are in their lives and in their faith journey.

HOW CAN CONGREGATIONS BETTER INTEGRATE SINGLE PEOPLE INTO CONGREGATIONAL LIFE?

As with any group, it is extremely hard to minister to those who are not there. Yet it is a myth that single people are not in congregations; they just are not there in as great a number as couples and families. Congregational ministry might begin with listening closely to single people in the congregation: Who do they understand themselves to be? What are their spiritual needs? Congregations can create an atmosphere where people want to invite their friends to church. For example, Redeemer Lutheran Church in White Bear Lake, Minnesota, has a strong seniors ministry. Newly retired people became the growing segment of the congregation through word of mouth as people invited others to church.

Making space for young adults is one way to minister to single people. This might mean meeting people outside the walls of the traditional church building. The ELCA Lutheran churches in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, have created a group for young adults called Marty’s Mug. Young adults, both single and married (typically before children), meet over food or beverages in bars or coffee shops to connect with one another and talk about faith questions.¹⁴

Congregations can also provide travel and other experiences that bring people together, regardless of marital status. For instance, nine people from Bethlehem Lutheran Church in south Minneapolis recently traveled to Holden Village for their fall work week. Six were single and the other three were traveling without their spouses for work or family reasons. Of the six, three were never married, two were widowed (one a young widow and one in his 80s), and one was divorced. A single person in the group said that she likes to travel, but as a single person she has fewer opportunities and so she seeks out things like this. A young adult trip to the Holy Land and sailing trips to the Apostle Islands have been widely diverse as well.

Congregations that focus outwardly on serving the neighbor tend to be

¹⁴Kevin Stillson, “Marty’s Mug in Sioux Falls,” at <http://www.sdsynod.org/2012/03/martys-mug-in-sioux-falls/> (accessed November 4, 2012).

healthier than congregations that focus inward. In 1990, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, found itself in a changing neighborhood. Surveying that neighborhood, they discovered a large African American population and growing number of single professionals. They started a summer program to serve neighborhood children, and over half of those who attended were from single parent homes. Embracing the neighborhood has also resulted in strong growth in single worshipers. Some weeks, 25% of the people in worship are single. “‘We don’t do a special ministry for single people,’ said Holy Trinity’s pastor, Glenn Boland. ‘We deal with a person’s needs and growth in the Christian faith. Whatever facilitates that growth, that’s where we need to be.’”¹⁵

Single people can and do make contributions in the world. They need and look for ways to find encouragement and support, to ask God questions, and to look for meaning and purpose in life. Where do they go to nurture their faith? Healthy and caring congregations may be able to provide just that arena. ☩

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¹⁵Richard Haag, “Beyond Ozzie and Harriet,” *The Lutheran* (September 26, 1990) 10–11.