



Models and Ministry with Singles

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I. SOME STORIES

Story 1. “I am just a few months over 30. I thought in my teenage years that 30 was old. I also thought that by the time I was 30 I’d be married and have kids. I’m not, and even though that thought sometimes puzzles me, I’m basically very happy with who I am. I am single and always have been. The older I get, the more natural it seems. I have many friends and have been in several very intense relationships that have ended for very good reasons. When people meet me, I can almost see them sizing me up according to my age and looks, and then they ask about my marital status. I’m sure they must decide at that point that there must be something wrong that they can’t see with their eyes or I’d certainly be married. I have decided that looking at people as potential mates is only using them. I have tried to make friends and to be a friend. There are times when I wonder whether something is wrong, and unfortunately that often seems to be at church. Last Sunday our pastor was preaching about experiencing the love of God and equated that with the love of spouse, and I wondered whether the message is one that only married people can understand. It was certainly implying that knowing the love of God is like knowing love in marriage. I believe God does not love me less because I’m not married, but I’m not sure others see it that way. Sometimes it’s hard.”

Story 2. “Our divorce was final last Tuesday. It has lingered on for over two years. It is difficult to cut through the red tape of possessions and the ties of parenting, but it’s all decided, at least in the court’s eyes. He hasn’t been to church since he moved into his apartment. He thinks that because I still go there and take the kids it would be confusing and embarrassing. He’s right. It would be. Isn’t it strange that a 900-member congregation isn’t big enough for both of us? I think pastor really believes I’m the one who deserves the support. I’m so angry at Dan for leaving me, but I also feel sad because he’s left so much more. My friends don’t really know what to say. No one in my family has ever been divorced. I know that divorce is sin, and I have dealt with that to the best of my ability right now—only some of my family believe it is *the sin*, and they feel trapped in loving me and also needing to judge. I feel very confused, and then

last Sunday in church a council member gave a talk during announcements and used divorce as the example of what sin is. When we left church my daughter asked if our family could still be in the church now that we were divorced. Wasn’t that man saying we were bad? How do you explain things that hurt so much to a six year old?”

Story 3. “It happened very quickly. First the pain, then the diagnosis, writing of the will,

last words, and death. She was too young to die. Fifty-two is too young. But we had a good life. She suffered little pain with the fast-growing cancer but *oh, my pain* in being alone! I wasn't ready for it. I had planned to grow old and die with Ruth, not to be dating again like a 16 year old. When I asked around church for a place where I could talk about what was happening to me, they suggested I go to the senior citizens group. You can imagine what that did to my barely 55 year old ego. Friends called and asked me to dinner because some woman wanted to meet me. The couples' club which Ruth and I helped organize suggested I bring a date to the annual Christmas Caroling Party. I didn't realize you could only sing carols in couples. I could no longer serve on the Christian Life Council because only couples do that. They say time will help. Every time I see the word 'family' in our bulletin or newsletter I'm reminded that I have to question whether that means me. I'm not a kid, but I'm not yet a senior. Where do I belong? Where can I talk about what's going on with me?"

Story 4. "I have been a member of this congregation for eight years. My husband worships at the neighboring parish. I would like it if we could worship together, but I generally feel very good about the way in which we share the richness of both our traditions. I think the things that make it most difficult are all the family activities. I don't feel like I really belong when I come by myself with the kids. I suspect some don't talk to me because they think I'm divorced or widowed, and they won't know what to say. I have tried some conversations with some of the single women with children, but when they discover I have a husband, I know it's difficult for them. They also don't know what to say. Sometimes in the place where I most want to belong I feel like I don't fit."

Story 5. "I'm a pastor. I find continually that I am asked to be an authority on issues I have never studied in seminary or experienced in life. I went to college, met Sarah the summer before seminary, and married before internship. I have never lived alone. Only with my family or in a dorm. I love my wife. We have three great kids. My family is very important to me, and I often feel badly that I can't be with them more. Sure, we've had really hard times, but it's those times that need confronting. Relationship and commitment mean you work hard no matter what. Divorce is very difficult for me to accept. I think I'm very relieved when a single person in my congregation tells me about a planned marriage. I believe people should be married, and I'm happy for them. A part of me knows that's one more person who might not ask me to deal with a difficult issue. Now a whole bunch of the singles want to start a group, and I feel out of my league in giving the leadership that seems to be needed. And the time! Where will I find the time to do another thing? I think I have a lot of trouble just being able to figure out what all the fuss is about. Aren't we all the family of God? Why can't we all just be in the same things? Why do there have to be separate groups for everyone? *Help!*"

II. WHO ARE THE SINGLES?

The people you have just met are all fictional but their stories are comprised of actual events. The people are fictional, but the issues are real. The stories reflect the difficulty we have in understanding singleness. Singleness is a birth-to-death issue. We are born single and many of us die alone. We all pass through many stages of singleness in our lives. Even in permanent primary relationships there is aloneness that can lead to loneliness, lack of self esteem, and the lack of security that many singles experience. Indeed, in a culture that soon may be more single

that coupled, singles and marrieds may have a lot more to share in common than to separate us into two categories.

Statistics vary according to the source, but about 40 percent of the U.S. population is single according to a 1980 report by the U.S. Census Bureau. This means that there are roughly about 59 million unmarried adults over the age of 18. Fifty-nine percent are always single. Eighteen percent are divorced. Five percent are separated, and 22 percent are widowed. Twenty-five million are men, and 34 million are women. A study by the U.S. Department of Commerce in 1981 looked at single people age 15 and older and found: 39.6 percent are 65 years of age and older; 24.6 percent are 45-64; 8.7 percent are 35-44; 18.4 percent are 25-34; and 8.7 percent are 15-24. The largest group of singles by age are those over 65, most of whom are women. Many of these people are living on less than adequate income in less than adequate housing. Singleness is everybody's issue.

In the church, repeated efforts have been made to work with singles. Some have focused exclusively on the 18 to 26 year olds, i.e., those called young adults. This group has often included singles as well as young married couples without children. Seniors are the other age group of singles on which much ministry has been focused. Many congregations or coalitions of congregations have provided physical, emotional, and political resources for the concerns facing this growing population. In recent years, as the divorce rate has risen, the church has also focused attention on the needs of the divorced and divorcing. However, many groups dealing most effectively with support for these people are outside the church, e.g., Parents Without Partners, Beginning Experience, and We Care. Widows and widowers comprise another group of singles whose immediate needs at the time of death are met very well by the church community. But in most cases the message is that people who have lost a spouse by death should have dealt with that loss in a year or less. There is a growing number of single people beyond young adult age who are voicing more and more discomfort at the misunderstanding they find in the church. Another group either ignored or assumed to be well integrated are those who are married but participate in church life as "singles." The spouse may be of another faith or absent for a significant part of the marriage. Single parents can be in anyone of the groups above. Within the church community single parents are primarily women. Another group of people who can be in any of the categories above are gay men and lesbians.

There is a line from a song in the gospel musical, *It's Cool In The Furnace*, "learn to live another way." It is a song about the wanderings of the Israelites

who as a people were forced to live a life they had not expected—constant wandering, homelessness, not the kind of lifestyle they saw lived by others. Joe Bash has suggested that singles are people who often have relationships which in our society have "no real institutional base."¹ Singles are "brave, with a lived-in message of what the witness of Jesus Christ might be."² We live in a tension of what that is and what we think it should be. We live lives that are not even the proverbial gray but are rather many hues of color, lives that bring more questions than we have experience to answer, lives that bring to mind issues that need to be faced, lives that are being lived "another way."

III. LISTENING FOR THE ISSUES

The first step in ministry with single people is simply to listen. We must listen to stories that come from risk taking, from people who have been too quickly categorized, stereotyped, or overlooked. Listening is more than just hearing. In ministry it means that we listen with an intentional non-defensiveness. We listen with the knowledge that, for whatever reason, some of the things we will hear are the experiences of an alienated people who live their lives as confession without ever hearing the absolution. Non-defensive listening is difficult for those who work in the church. Too often a conversation about ministry identifies just one more task that needs doing or something else we haven't done right. Non-defensive listening means that we take ourselves out of the role of having to be answer-givers, so that we may hear what singles are really saying about their experience and feelings in being part of the church.

Secondly, those who listen must be aware of the limitations of their own experience. Many in leadership positions in the church have never really been single as mature adults. Many are married like the pastor in the opening story. Some in leadership positions who are married have difficulty with their own marriages, coloring their feelings about singles and marrieds. For these and others it is difficult to deal with issues for which there are no easy answers: sex outside of marriage, homosexuality, and our own attraction to people outside of primary relationships. We need to listen to the stories of singles, keeping in mind the ways our own stories influence our hearing.

As listening happens, we begin to hear some repeated themes. One of the recurring issues that singles voice is that of self-image. Advertising in this culture contributes to the struggle about self-image by repeating a consistent message that there is something you can buy in order to change yourself into the kind of person someone else will want to choose for a relationship. All you need to do is wear the right clothes, eat or drink something great, drive the object of your latest fantasy, and "some enchanted evening across a crowded room" you will meet "Prince or Princess Charming." The self-image issue gets focused for many singles in the context of the church by the constant emphasis on family. Raymond K. Brown states in *Reach Out to Singles*, that Jesus did not say "in order

¹Joe Bash, in an unpublished paper (1979).

²Ibid.

to follow me you must first go and get married."³ Singles say that their experience in the church makes them feel as if there is something more they must do in order to be acceptable, and that doing would be marrying.

Loneliness is another recurring theme. Articles and books have been written about the seriousness of loneliness in this culture, but at the same time we have made of it a pathology. People are not supposed to be all right by themselves. Many of us have encouraged a person to avoid spending an evening alone. Many people are frightened at the possibility of spending large amounts of time without reading material or background music. There are few Protestant models for being comfortable with solitude. So aloneness often becomes a loneliness we need to fear.

For singles the issue of sexuality is very complicated. There are few safe places to talk openly about questions and experience. We know more about how to have sex than we know about sexuality. We've not done our homework or updated our reading. Models of adult

development presume marriage and child rearing as acceptable stages of maturity. Yet we know there are not an even number of men and women to meet and mate. As Joan Timmerman says in *The Mardi Gras Syndrome*, sex has become a possession to use rather than a gift to give and receive.⁴ The church has reserved genital sexuality for the married, and marrieds have written most of the church's position papers.

Another issue is that of security. In a very insecure world with few models for living as secure individuals, singles often feel forced to be, or at least to appear to be, self reliant. Tax laws, pension, and insurance plans still favor traditional family structures. Inflation, unemployment, and the future are all issues about which singles feel threatened. Security can be an even more personal issue. We live in a world where abuse is said to happen in as many as one out of four households, and reported rape occurs every six minutes. Our pre-occupation with putting everyone in couples encourages singles to seek worth in being part of a unit that may be unhealthy. Research shows that unless there is therapeutic intervention for someone who has come from a family of origin in which there is abuse, that pattern will only be repeated in a family of choice. Yet many singles get the message that marriage is so honored that even if they settle for a relationship that is not the best, somehow that is better than being single.

Grief is another significant but sometimes elusive issue. Often singles over the age of 30 indicate by the stories they tell in the privacy of one-to-one counseling that they have awkward, complex feelings when the reality confronts them that their singleness may simply not be a stage as much as a lifestyle. A single in a congregation who asks for a singles group may be trying to articulate the loss felt at not being part of a couple. This is a grief cycle and needs to be processed. Logically, not everybody can be part of a couple. To repeat a statistic, 24 million singles are male and 35 million are female. To tell someone that he or she has just not found the right person is deceiving.

These are only a few of the issues. Each single person is a unique individual with unique perspectives and needs. Each category of singles—

³Raymond K. Brown, *Reach Out to Singles* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979).

⁴Joan Timmerman, *The Mardi Gras Syndrome* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

divorced, always single, and widowed—has its own unique perspectives and needs. All concerns must be heard. Not all singles understand their own issues. Many have not taken their singleness seriously because either they believe it is a temporary condition or it is too painful for them to do so. Many singles are healthy, happy, and waiting to be asked about their experience. In considering ministry, we need to listen and help singles listen to each other.

IV. TOWARD MODELS OF MINISTRY

Once the listening has begun there are some very practical things that can happen to continue to facilitate ministry with singles. Often the next steps take only a simple awareness on the part of the church. Language is very important. People who are single not by divorce or death are always single, not “never married” or “not yet married.” No group is worthy of being called anything like “pairs and spares.” Many congregations have an internal system of “in” language. Such language appears in bulletins and newsletters, yet means something only to those who know the language. For some singles one of those “in” words is “family.” In a culture that

defines family over and over again as being a permanent primary relationship with kids, the Family Pot Luck and Family Devotions probably mean that as well. If in a congregation “family” means the whole family of God, that must be stated clearly again and again. We can never assume inclusiveness. In teaching illustrations and sermons it is helpful to move beyond illustrations of our own families and intentionally to include images and stories about individuals who are identifiably single. Not all of us can understand the love of God in terms of love of a spouse. Equally difficult is the use of divorce as the only example of the way in which we experience alienation or sin. Awareness is the key to all of the above, and does not require a complex structure or a new organization. Changing language most often needs to be modeled first by the professional staff.

The next step in ministry on a congregational level must involve a broader spectrum of the leadership. There needs to be an awareness of the singles population and their issues. This step involves education. First, a census of the singles in a congregation ought to be taken. How many are there? What are their ages? How are they single? In metropolitan areas at least one third of most congregations are usually single. How many of the potential singles in the congregation are actually active? After identifying who the singles are, it may be important to assess their needs. This may demand a willingness to hear that there are none at this time. A needs assessment could be undertaken by telephone or mail, but it is probably most effective when small groups of singles are specially invited to tell their stories to the leadership of the church. Once the needs have been identified, the next step is to assess the resources and leadership styles available to meet these needs. Often at this point an outside consultant is helpful. If the leadership of a congregation has been effectively involved in the process to this point it becomes much easier to talk about goals and priorities. This avoids the sense that this is just one more task to add to an already full load and offers an opportunity to reassess congregational goals to include singles’ needs.

If there is support to continue to explore ministry with singles, this may be the time to consider a model. What works in congregational settings depends a lot on the size of the singles population. Is a small support group needed to integrate newly-divorced? Should the group be for all singles, or just for one part of the population? Should it be a course, a conference, a retreat, a Bible study, a social group, an activity, an opportunity for worship, recreation, or discussion of a social issue? A group could be formed to help educate the congregation in an understanding of the issues of singleness. This is the time for creativity, experimentation, and a willingness to learn from possible mistakes.

Most large groups that have any duration must meet four needs: educational, social, outreach, and spiritual. Most singles groups, like committees in the church, last for about a year and must be evaluated, reorganized, or dropped. Many people have experienced disappointment after putting a lot of energy into a group that has lasted a year. They feel that the group just wasn’t good enough because it didn’t last forever. But the healthiest thing may well be to celebrate that it happened! With a very mobile, constantly changing population a year can be a long time, and may have met a need that is no longer important. Leadership training and careful attention to structure are as important for singles as well as for any committee in the church. When singles feel good about participating in a group and know that their congregation is willing

to give time to the issues of singleness, this is an important step in higher self-esteem and acceptance. Sometimes it is advantageous to consider forming a coalition of congregations to meet a variety of needs. A coalition could be denominational or ecumenical and could link with other non-church community resources already available for singles.

Some congregations have begun simply with a group of invited singles who have participated in a needs assessment. This group has often become the first support group for singles in the congregation. The group has the potential to initiate leadership for other activities. The support and encouragement that comes from telling one's story and knowing that individuals and the whole community are concerned is ministry. For many singles nothing else needs to happen. They will feel affirmed. They may have a chance to hear stories from other singles who until then have been either invisible or "just faces" on Sunday mornings. Many singles say that just knowing one other person who is single in their congregation makes all the difference in how they feel about being a part of that community. If a congregation says a family night is open to all persons regardless of marital status, one or several singles who have been together in a support group may feel more comfortable about going together. A singles group is not intended to be a vehicle for isolation but rather a vehicle for integration. One congregation had a singles group that appeared to be having so much fun that the Couples Club asked to co-sponsor an event. The Couples Club is now the All Adult Club including *all*.

Some churches have made use of another model with a broader approach by sponsoring a large group event, retreat, or conference advertised in the community at large. This event is used as a way of proclaiming to the community that in this church it is OK to be single. Some have done this annually. One congregation has monthly Saturday spiritual retreats for the whole congregation

that attract large numbers of singles. Usually if something attracts large numbers of people there is a strong indication that there may be continuing needs. Often singles will attend such an event who haven't been in a church environment for a long time.

Another model is to have social, educational, spiritual, or support activities take place in homes. Often trust is more easily built in a home environment. Opening one's home gives many singles a chance to practice or re-learn the gift of hospitality.

Congregations which find themselves in an apartment ghetto might want to consider how people's living situation impacts ministry needs. Often apartment complexes have party/meeting rooms available at no cost. Events can happen here more conveniently for complicated singles' schedules, especially single parents.

In all events that are planned it is important to identify very practical needs which, if not met, can prohibit participation. A large number of singles are parents. Child care may be necessary. Single people care for all their own needs. Events sometimes are better attended when they are scheduled for shorter periods of time. As in all programming, cost needs to be reasonable.

The major component of ministry with single people is movement toward integration. Unlike some other situations in a congregational setting, the singles issue could be solved if and when the church and its members have become better educated about the issues and become part of the dialogue that helps all people to be a community. The integration model involves paying

particular attention to new members who are single, listening to them, and helping them find the resources they need to feel welcome. Unlike marrieds, they do not have another person to rely on during the sometimes awkward “getting to know you” stage of being a new member. Integration involves intentional singles leadership, making sure that singles are represented on the church council, committees, and planning groups in the same ratio as they are present in the total membership of the congregation. Integration means linking people by their issues. A single person may not have a support system to talk over child problems, job insecurities, aging parent issues, a recent divorce, the breaking up of a relationship, grief, and other issues. People in ministry can often introduce people with similar concerns to each other with a simple word or phone call.

V. IN CONCLUSION

In January of 1984 a group of 78 singles met at Augsburg College in Minneapolis for a singles event. During part of the weekend they drafted a document to be presented to the Commission for a New Lutheran Church. Following are two paragraphs from their document.

Singles present at this consultation wish to share with you the need they see for giving specific attention to all people who do not fit the nuclear family model: dual career married, disabled, single parents, widows, always single, divorced, separated, gay, remarried, married again/step families, empty nest, mid-life crises, grief, displaced homemakers, etc. They would like to see specific programs that go beyond the social activities that historically

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have seemed geared to mate-finding, to activities that might educate all people regardless of life-style; a needs bank that might help people share problems and solutions as a caring community; people in synodical or regional church offices who would carry portfolios relating to needs of single people; education for seminarians, pastors, and congregations around issues for singles.

Finally this group reaffirms their sense that the affirmation for Lutherans is through the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Baptized people of God may choose to live their lives in different contexts (married, single, etc.) but this is secondary to the call of Christianity. Though the issues around singleness are also secondary, they are often confusing and based on assumption rather than fact. Until these assumptions are clarified about any part of the body of Christ it is our belief that they need to be ministered to/with in a very specific way.

“I called the church today asking for a singles group. ‘Are you a member?’ _____ asked. ‘Our group is only for our members!’”

From church newsletters: “The evening is couple-oriented but singles are free to bring a friend.” “Progressive dinner—Come One, Come All... groups of eight for dinner.” “On getting the most out of church...go with someone if possible. Go alone if you must but if possible go with someone.”

From *The Lutheran*, a pastor tells members “that a church group of married and single

persons, the Pairs & Spares were going to have a square dance. He stood up and began, ‘the Pairs & Squares...’ Laughter ended the announcement.”⁵

These stories are all collected in one month. There are many more. We have a long way to go in our understanding and tolerance. We have assumed too long what is proper, and not clearly heard what is gospel. Singleness is everybody’s issue!

⁵“A little salt,” *The Lutheran* 22 (Jan. 4, 1984).