

# **Singular Opportunity: Reaching Unmarried America**

By Earl Creps

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Unmarried adult Americans are the population equivalent of the 14th largest nation on earth. They comprise 40 percent of adults. If they were overseas, we would be sending missionaries (probably married) to bring them the good news about Jesus. However, because this development has taken place at home over a couple of decades, the response of the American church has been less than radical. It can be difficult for middle-aged, married pastors and their congregations to understand this demographic tidal wave.

Some want this tidal wave to go away; it will not. Others feel so overwhelmed they do not know how to respond effectively. Conventional training has done little to prepare them to speak to the issues faced by singles in today's society. For some, things seem pretty much fixed: a mainstream church of married people with a few singles hanging onto the fringes in hopes of somehow fitting in.

This passive approach will cause the church to miss one of the great missionary opportunities of the 21st century. The key is to become intentional about reaching single America. The first step is for pastors to understand what it means to be single in today's society.

## **RECOGNIZING UNMARRIED AMERICA**

A recent study by the Rutgers University National Marriage Project reports that the number of adults getting married has dropped to a 40-year low. "I do" has been replaced with, "I won't."

Coauthor David Popenoe states, "The institution of marriage is in serious trouble.... The current generation has grown up in the midst of the divorce revolution so they are extremely wary and cautious about entering into marriage." Perhaps the most concrete evidence for this conclusion is that 4.2 million unmarried couples now cohabit, a 10-fold increase since 1960.

Additional reasons for the recoil from marriage include the secularization of our values, changing expectations for marriage, and expanding affluence. Marriage is no longer necessary for economic survival. Moreover, constantly increasing demands for education and career building may temporarily be inconsistent with a married lifestyle.

On the other end of the spectrum, 50 percent of women who live alone are age 65 and older—most are widows. This group is often submerged in the torrent of

aggregate statistics. Taken together, the message is clear: a single nation has developed within our country's borders. Consider these statistics:

- 25 percent of households are made up of married couples with children.
- 25 percent of households are people now living alone.
- 51 percent of households have no children at home under 18.
- 32 percent of all family groups with children are single-parent situations. Almost 12 million white children live with one parent, nearly twice the number of African-American children, and four times the number of Hispanic children in single-parent households.

The *Single Adult Ministry Journal* has identified three major trends that will affect this growing population in the years ahead:

(1) *A rapid growth in the number of single fathers with custody.* There are currently 3.2 million households maintained by men with no wife present; about 1.7 million of these are unmarried dads.

(2) *A surge in middle-aged single adults.* Unmarrieds between age 45 and 64 will grow in numbers at a rate that far surpasses the expansion of other singles subgroups.

(3) *A growth in cohabitation.* Almost half of adults under 40 have lived with someone outside of marriage. With small percentages of younger people feeling that sex outside of marriage is wrong, the rate of cohabitation is likely to grow as the 20-somethings age.

Reaching out to unmarried people begins with recognizing their existence. The reason singles have not found their way into a church may result from the fact they have not been acknowledged. Many singles are positively disposed toward having a spiritual life; they simply have never had a chance. So how do we connect with them?

## **RELATING TO UNMARRIED AMERICA**

Once singles have been recognized, they need to be understood. Having statistical data about them is important, but not the same as being literate about their culture. The wrong assumptions can ruin even the best information.

### **Give up false assumptions about singles.**

The first of these is the idea that all singles are divorced. Many pastors keep a polite distance from the unmarried because they fear entanglement in the issues surrounding divorce. But only 18 percent of the single population are divorced. More than half (54 percent) have never married, and the remainder are widowed (22 percent) or separated (5 percent).

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These statistics reveal the second false assumption—single adults are all the same. Not only do they have several groupings, they also span several generations. For the first time in history, there are simultaneously four generations of adults in the church. There are singles in each group carrying the cultural traits of their cohort.

A third false assumption is that marital status is always the most important thing to single people. Single adults are human beings first—children of God. They have many of the issues and concerns of any other person. For many, the likelihood of marriage is not the number one issue in their lives. Some even resent being approached in this way.

Rejecting these assumptions means understanding singles as a highly diverse population that needs ministry to the whole person—spiritual, relational, and emotional. There are simply no easy, cookie-cutter answers for this group. Understanding this is the difference between starting a ministry and being a true missionary to single adults.

Single adults, however, do have certain traits that are unique. Several observers have noted that adults without partners experience their lives differently than do married people. Much of this culture has its roots in secular society, but has crept into the church as well:

- *We/they attitude toward marrieds.* A sharp sense of division from couples accompanied by a lack of "fit" into social networks can grow into a root of bitterness. The fruit of this sees married couples and the church that caters to them as enemies (Hebrews 12:15). Churches that fail to reach out to singles have fanned the flames on this issue. Forgiveness and love toward others is the answer (Matthew 5:23,24).
- *Singles go where singles are.* The vast majority of unmarried adults attend larger churches in urban areas that have singles ministries. (Approximately 2,000 Assemblies of God churches have SAMs.) Having only a few singles is perhaps the biggest barrier to reaching more. This is a significant barrier for smaller churches. Networking can be an answer (Ephesians 4:15,16).
- *Unique rules for dating and sex.* In secular culture (and sometimes in the church), the competition for mates can be intense, leading to hyperaggressive dating and permissive attitudes toward sex. Some singles believe the pool of high-quality candidates is relatively small, so extreme measures may be called for to connect with "Mr./Ms. Right" before someone else does. Unfortunately, this trait often becomes a stereotype for the whole singles population. It is no more

typical of all singles than adultery is typical of all marrieds. As with all lifestyles, contentment is the best defense (1 Corinthians 7:17–24).

- *Conflicting needs.* Like every human, singles can have a difficult time knowing what they want on a consistent basis. Researchers have noted that the desire for nurture and growth sometimes conflicts with the longing for independence. While singles often feel no more independent than married people (just try raising a child on one income in a two-income economy), they may be reluctant to give up what they do have. This can lead to weeks of absence from various functions. At other times, the isolation they may feel can motivate them to want a strong attachment to a group. Compassion and commitment are called for on all counts (Romans 12:9,10).

The single population needs to be met where they are, rather than where married people think singles should be. In truth, singles often do better with the issues cited above than their married counterparts, especially since they cope with these issues unassisted. A ministry that provides assistance will win their hearts.

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### **Give up Old Models for Ministry**

(See also: [Models of Singles Ministry](#))

There are several ideas lingering around singles ministry that need to be abandoned. They are old wineskins that will not hold what God wants to do today.

The first concept is the leper colony. Popular in the 1970s, this model assumes that singles are misfits, refugees from couples culture who have contracted the disease of being unmarried. The core emotion is not love, but pity. The church's responsibility was to quarantine these poor creatures from the mainstream population so no one else was infected. This is usually done by way of a small Sunday school class at the far end of the hall, with an occasional potluck dinner tacked on. Such isolation had the additional fringe benefit of sheltering married women from perceived competition from single females.

Another concept is the hospital model of the 1980s. Singles were seen largely as trauma victims in need of healing. Divorce and desertion were thought to be almost universal experiences. This ministry made use of all the tools of the leper colony, but added more fellowship time and support groups. Many times the core emotion was an alloy of compassion and condescension.

While many well-meaning people have done a fine job of touching the single population using elements of both models, neither adds up to the missionary enterprise that single America needs today. Both were based on a provider theory of church ministry where leadership delivers services to an audience that

cannot help itself. This thinking is both unbiblical and impractical. It robs singles of their potential in the kingdom of God by making them a permanent underclass in the church.

## **REACHING SINGLE AMERICA**

A fresh wind is blowing in the church today. The time is here for a missionary outreach to single America. New wineskins are needed. Defining them will require asking the right questions and the humility to learn from other models. Any breakthrough outreach will require thinking through questions like these:

### **How Can We Network?**

The best singles ministries of the 21st century will not operate in isolation. Their most effective tool will not be stand-alone events or classes, but relationships with other churches and groups. This is the ideal growth pathway for smaller and/or rural congregations who may not have the number of singles necessary to create critical mass. Singles leaders can contact evangelical churches in their communities, develop a database of other groups, and gather interested leaders for fellowship. If the chemistry is right, an informal network can be formed that becomes the vehicle for joint activities, concerts, community projects, and outreaches.

Many singles ministries today are built around interchurch and even citywide coalitions. These confederations can engage in missionary activity to singles that few individual churches can match. Connecting new believers with churches can be done with ease. Moreover, networking itself has a unifying effect on the body of Christ, providing a powerful witness to the community. The crucial principle here is that Christians are not meant to go it alone (John 17:21).

### **What's Going on in Cyberspace?**

The Internet and World Wide Web have created an entirely new ministry arena. The number of personal homepages is now doubling every 2 months. Web sites for singles abound for good reason—unmarried people spend significant amounts of time on the web. The chat room is the front porch of our era. The anonymity of cyberspace offers an appealing format for testing relationships without commitment, finding friends without sacrifice, and for generally exploring the world. We surf the web the way Magellan sailed the South Atlantic.

Rick Warren calls the Internet the Guttenberg press of the 21st century. Missionary activity to singles that lacks an Internet component will be hampered. It might be comparable to a church not having a telephone or photocopier. Without a presence there, a major opportunity for connecting with the unchurched single person will be missed. Many cities have companies that can assist churches in setting up and managing an Internet presence. There are dangers, but that is a constant for missionaries.

### **What About Generational Issues?**

The senior citizen living alone is totally different from the 19-year old-never-been-married. The fact neither has a spouse is hardly enough to bond them together.

The diversity of the unmarried population presents great challenges, but also great opportunities. Leaders will have to become familiar with generational issues and develop ministry that each group finds culturally relevant. Sometimes this means that single people are best reached as part of a generation, rather than as a marital status group. The emergence of young adult ministry is an excellent example of this trend. At other times, a felt need may be the perfect platform for missionary activity. Divorce recovery programs have been very effective in this regard, especially when advertised to the community and hosted at neutral locations. Another example would be lifestyle ministry such as outreach to single parents through training or support. The effective ministry of the future will be based more on empathy than publicity. It all begins with adjusting the ministry to the traits of the population (1 Corinthians 9:19–22).

Single America is a whitened harvest field (John 4:35). The only question is whether we will enter the field to reap what has been sown (Matthew 9:37,38).

There are few global solutions. The specific nature of the mission will have to be worked out in each local context. But every local leader must recognize, relate, and reach out to this unmarried nation. The single adult who gave us the Great Commission expects no less.

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