

# Christian Singles: Tuning In and Tuning Up

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“I don’t fit in at church. It seems that everyone else is part of a family.”

“I go to church on Sundays, but don’t attend many other church functions because I don’t feel comfortable walking in alone.”

“Because I’m single, my church seems to expect that I should be able to give more money and more time than people who are married. They don’t realize that when you’re alone you don’t have anyone to share in the expenses or the chores.”

“I often sense that people at church either feel sorry for me because I’m not married, think I’m single because I’m selfish or irresponsible, or think I’m some kind of freak.”

These are a few comments made by unmarried WELS members—both by those who have always been single and those now resingled (widowed or divorced).

This perceived lack of understanding seems a bit surprising since all of us are single for at least part of our lives, and since such a large percentage of the population is single.

The National Center for Health Statistics reported that 37% of the adult population was single in 1985. They predicted that the percentage would rise to 50.1% by 1990.

Official statistics on the number of singles in WELS churches are not available. In compiling data for self-study, several Milwaukee area WELS churches found that 20-25% of their members age 18 and over are single. Assuming that these figures are fairly accurate, we are led to wonder about the discrepancy between more than 1/3 of the national population being single and 1/4 or less of our church membership being single.

Are there things we can do to meet the needs of singles in our churches? To help singles feel more comfortable and more involved? To reach more unchurched singles?

The purpose of this paper is twofold: to help pastors increase their awareness of major issues for singles; and, to share some ideas on how singles can be encouraged to become a more vital part of the church’s ministry team.

Although always single, divorced, and widowed singles face some problems which are specific to their circumstances and their individual personalities, let us first take a look at issues which are common to all three sub groups. These include societal attitudes, loneliness, solo decision-making, intimacy, generativity, sexuality, productivity, and spiritual issues.

Obviously, many married Christians deal with some of the same issues. Likewise, some single people do not find the above issues to be problematic. Few singles would list all or none of these items as problematic. An individual’s background, circumstances and attitude will determine to what extent they view these issues as problems.

A national questionnaire given to both marrieds and singles indicated that marrieds perceived that the number one problem for singles was sexual frustration. Singles ranked sexual frustration fifth. The biggest frustration was feeling left out, and the second was finances. Finding rewarding friendships ranked third, with single parenting concerns in fourth place (Fagerstrom, p. 28).

Let’s take a look at these issues as they may surface in counseling situations or in other areas of your ministry:

## **1. Societal Attitudes, Personal Decisions**

Whether societal attitudes are real or perceived, many Christian singles feel that others view them as being either “incomplete” or somewhat set apart from the mainstream.

One of the attitudes mentioned most often is that there is something wrong with being single. Terms like “old maid,” “spinster,” and “swinging single” reinforce that idea.

Both single and married Christians may need reminders that Jesus was single, as were many of his faithful followers who played an important part in his ministry. Paul, as pro-family as he was, preferred singleness for himself and for others who wished to devote themselves more fully to God’s work. (1 Corinthians 7:32-34)

Some singles are single by choice. Some would like to be married and are troubled by their single status. Still others feel that being single is “no big deal” and don’t understand why marital status should be an issue at all.

People are single for many different reasons. Some may be single for selfish reasons—enjoyment of personal freedom, unwillingness to make commitments, or lax sexual standards. But many believe that it is God’s will for them to be single, at least for this time in their lives either because they have not found a suitable partner or because they have lost a partner to death or divorce.

A number of factors may contribute to difficulty finding a suitable partner. There are currently 6.3 million more women than men in the U.S. (Fagerstrom, p. 49). Since World War II, we have seen an increase in the number of women who are educated and have jobs or careers. Therefore fewer women are dependent on men for financial security. Whether always single or resingled, these women may feel less pressure to marry. They may then choose not to marry, may set higher standards and have higher expectations of men they would consider to be suitable partners, or they may postpone marriage until they are established in a career and then find that the field of potential partners has become more limited. Still others may find the field limited because they live in a rural or sparsely populated area.

Some may remain single because of family obligations—either to parents, children, or siblings. These obligations may make it difficult to find a partner, or the individual may decide that they could not, or prefer not to, divide their attentions between a spouse and other family members. St. Paul warns us that those who marry can expect more problems, and some may feel that they already have all they can handle.

Some may be single because of shyness or limited social skills. Some have seen or felt the pain of broken relationships and fear rejection and loss too much to take risks.

Some may realize that they have either very low sexual urges or even homosexual urges and feel that it would be best for them to remain unmarried.

Sometimes well-meaning friends and family members may say things that convey an attitude of disapproval, pity, or even guilt. “I can’t believe no one has snatched you up yet. Would you like to meet my niece?” “When are you going to settle down?” “My friends all have grandchildren. I wish my son/daughter would find a wife/husband and start a family,” or, “Don’t worry, dear, I’m sure the right one will come along soon.” Some of these comments may be appropriate if the speaker understands the individual’s reasons for being single.

Sometimes singles may start to “buy into” the attitudes of others. They may begin to suffer from low self-esteem or feel that they aren’t quite “whole” as a single person.

Obviously, the measure of “wholeness” for anyone needs to be found in one’s relationship to God. A discussion of and understanding of the reasons why one is single can help pastors and others guide singles in moving toward a closer relationship with the Lord.

## 2. Loneliness, Lack of Companionship, Feeling Left Out

Loneliness was listed by singles as their number one concern. Some singles may truly have trouble finding suitable friends and companions. Others may be surrounded by people and still feel lonely. For these people, what’s missing is often a feeling of being “on the top of someone’s list”. Resingled people may be especially aware of the absence of a life-partner. Friends and relatives may care about one’s physical and emotional health, but it isn’t the same as having a spouse who not only cares, but is directly affected by your physical and emotional health. One woman who was recently widowed stated, “I can call my friends or children

and they will be happy to share fragments of my life. But I miss having one person who shares my whole life". Singles often feel a lack of significance. They miss feeling that they are the most significant person to at least one other human being.

The most helpful response to this issue is one of empathy. Listening and caring may be more helpful than any words of comfort and advice. At some point, reassurance of the significance each of us has to our Savior will be comforting. A re-focusing onto looking for ways we can minister to others can also be helpful. At this point, some singles, especially those who have always been singles, may over-simplify and think that if they were married they would never feel alone. Contact and friendships with married individuals and couples can help to add a touch of reality.

Some couples may see unattached singles as a threat to their marriage. Singles need to be prepared to offer reassurance that they, too, feel strongly about the sanctity of marriage. All parties involved need to make a commitment to being open and honest and conducting themselves in an appropriate manner. Church activities which involve marrieds and singles working together can be a good place to form Christian friendships.

Resingled people, especially, sometimes feel like a "fifth wheel" when they associate with married friends. The association may be painful if it reminds them of times spent together when they, too, were part of a couple. In a divorce situation, it may be difficult for friends to remain neutral. The divorced single may wonder where loyalties lie.

Singles may say, "I'm lonely because all my friends are married." They hesitate to call married friends, thinking they'll be too busy with their families and the call or invitation may be an imposition. Married people need friends too. Encourage singles to call, but be prepared to accept an "I'm busy" as an honest excuse, rather than as rejection. If it continues repeatedly, without an attempt by the married friend to reciprocate an invitation, then it may be time to look elsewhere for friends.

Although singles need married friends, they also need other singles who share the same problems and concerns. It may be easier to find single Christian friends in an area where congregations are large and close together, sometimes even with organized singles groups and activities. But for singles in smaller more isolated congregations, this type of companionship may be difficult to find. They may need to meet their needs for close Christian friendships with married people or singles of different ages or circumstances. Some may need to look outside the congregation for companionship with singles whose needs and interests match their own. Our Lord said, "My prayer is not that you take them out of this world, but that you protect them from the evil one". Through contacts outside the church, singles can provide a powerful witness to those who do not know Jesus as their Savior.

They may need encouragement to pursue these friendships, along with guidance on appropriate witness and caution on dating people who do not share their faith. Encouragement to attend synod-wide singles activities can also be helpful.

### **3. Decision-Making, Finances, Tasks Related to Daily Living**

Many singles find making it on their own to be a struggle financially. They may need to make decisions about where they can afford to live. They may even find that they cannot afford to live alone and face tough choices about finding a roommate or other suitable living arrangements.

Some marrieds may think that without a family to support, singles have more job options. This may or may not be true. Some singles find the thought of re-locating to be too frightening when they consider starting over—alone in a new city far from family and friends.

Singles may have more flexibility than a married person who is the sole bread-winner, but less flexibility than partners in a marriage with two incomes. Resigning from an unsatisfactory job may not be possible. Although the costs are less than for a family, rent, insurance, medical bills, etc., still have to be paid. Singles may sometimes be envious of friends who have a spouse's income to fall back on when considering a job that pays less or has fewer benefits.

Resingled people may feel frightened and unprepared to deal with tasks that were previously handled by a spouse. For example, single women may be overwhelmed by the thought of finding an auto mechanic or home repairman they can trust. Single men may be frustrated by disasters in the kitchen or at the laundromat. Both men and women who are resingled are often unprepared for the extra time and energy it takes to cope with tasks that were previously handled by a spouse. This is especially critical if the spouse handled the finances with little involvement from the other partner.

#### **4. Intimacy/Sexuality**

Some singles may be frustrated by a lack of emotional and physical closeness.

After losing a spouse, it is common for divorced or widowed people to alternate between intense physical and emotional sexual urges and a total lack of interest in sex. This may be frightening and confusing. Some resingled people fear that they are either “going crazy” or becoming impotent. During this time, they can be extremely vulnerable to physical relationships with the opposite sex. Reassurance that both the intensity and the high and low swings are somewhat normal can help them through this time.

One of the reasons why Christian singles groups are so important is that many singles are exposed to the looser sexual standards of society in general. It becomes easy for them to rationalize. They may convince themselves that “it’s OK if I limit my sexual activity to one steady partner” or “necking and petting are OK as long as I don’t go all the way.” Sometimes, people convince themselves rationally that it’s OK, but carry an enormous amount of guilt deep inside that gnaws away at them without ever rising to the surface. That guilt may come between them and their Lord, affecting church attendance and participation. Some may be well aware of the guilt but feel helpless to break off a sexual relationship once it has begun.

A discussion of law and gospel is imperative in these situations. Counselors may need to give a reminder that God expects us to keep all of his commandments, not just the “easy” ones. Singles also need to be reminded that God gave us those commandments out of love, not because He wants to test us or doesn’t want us to have any fun, but because He wants to protect us and knows that sexual activity outside of marriage is hurtful to us. They may need reminders that God forgives any sin, but also expects us to flee temptation and to rely on Him and believe He will help us deal with our needs for physical and emotional intimacy.

Some Christian singles may be reluctant to admit to the presence of sexual urges, even to themselves, let alone to their pastor. It may be helpful to remind them of the fact that God created us as sexual beings. Repressed sexual urges are like a beach ball that is pushed below the surface of the water and exerts upward pressure. Once it is allowed to float to the top, it can be seen and gently guided in the direction we wish it to go. Sexual feelings are to be controlled by us, not control us.

It is important to realize that sexuality is more than physical. God created each of us male or female. We can take joy in and express our maleness or femaleness in ways other than sexual contact. We can express our God-given sexuality in the way we dress, in our attitudes and in the way we relate emotionally and intellectually to others. Sexuality is emotional and intellectual as well as physical.

Often, sexual urges are more emotional than physical. One may think he or she is experiencing a physical need, when the actual need is for emotional closeness or intimacy. When singles are troubled by strong sexual urges, it helps to ask, “What is the need right now? Is it really physical or is it a need for comfort, understanding, to be touched?” Those needs can be met in non-sexual ways. Singles need to know that they can experience emotional closeness without a sexual relationship. In fact, in many relationships, sexual contact increases the distance emotionally.

In his article, “Sexuality and Spirituality,” Richard Foster notes three ways in which a single person’s sexuality is expressed: 1) in his or here capacity to love or be loved; 2) in the need to experience emotional fulfillment, and, 3) in learning to accept and control his/her sexual feelings. (Foster)

Friendships with members of the opposite sex are important. God created men and women differently to balance each other out. These friendships can be emotionally intimate and fulfilling. They will include sexuality because that is a unique part of the way each of us relates to others. It may or may not include sexual feelings. If

sexual feelings are present in the relationship they must be accepted and controlled. That acceptance and control is much easier if both people are committed to their Lord and to preserving their own and the other person's relationship with Him.

Dating and sexuality are important components in Christian education programs for singles. Many do not understand how the emotional and physical aspects of sexuality work together until the relationship has gone too far to be reversed and can only be ended with a great deal of pain. With a more mature understanding of sexuality comes a recognition of potential problems of being "yoked together with unbelievers," (1 Corinthians 6:14).

## **5. Generativity/Children**

Single parenting was listed as one of the top concerns for resingled Christians. Children feel, and often act out, the pain their parents are experiencing in a divorce or death. This may be extremely difficult for a parent at a time when he/she is already in so much pain.

Sometimes the single parent becomes so focused on surviving the onslaught of their children's grief that their own grieving process gets pushed to the background. This only prolongs the healing process since what can most help the children feel secure is for the parent to reach a point of stability.

In divorce situations, it may be necessary for family counseling with both parents present to facilitate the transition and work out specific issues. The divorced parent may feel alone, but every effort should be made to continue the parenting partnership despite the breakup of the marriage partnership.

Close friendships with other mature Christians are especially crucial for a widowed single parent. It is especially helpful to have friends of the opposite sex, whether single or married, who can give support and advice to both parent and children.

Secular groups for single parents abound, but need to be checked out in advance. Some Christian single parents have attended groups in hopes of finding emotional support for parenting and come away feeling exploited by members of the opposite sex looking for dating partners. This can be especially difficult during that vulnerable time immediately following the loss of a spouse.

Those who are always single may also deal with issues related to generativity. Much has been written about "the ticking of a biological clock." Around the age of 30, some singles feel pressure to decide whether they wish to marry and have children. Some feel panic that if they wait too long they will not have children. Some may even marry the wrong person too quickly because they are anxious to have children before it's too late.

Still others may be faced with accepting the fact that they may never bear children. Different people react differently to this realization. Some may truly love children and experience great pain at the idea of not having any of their own. It may be helpful for churches to link singles with families who would appreciate some physical and emotional support with parenting responsibilities.

Perhaps the individual is already linked with nieces and nephews or the children of close friends. Contact with other people's children does not replace the experience of having one's own children, but one can find some fulfillment in alternative nurturing opportunities.

For others, distress is not caused so much by love of children as a need to feel that something of themselves will live on after they leave this earth. This can be a wonderful opportunity for spiritual growth and fulfillment, as the individual searches for new, more meaningful ways to do the Lord's work.

## **6. Productivity**

Some singles may have jobs and hobbies through which they meet their needs for productivity. Others may find themselves with extra time and energy on their hands. By taking some extra time and effort to become acquainted with the individual, his needs and interests, pastors may be able to help match the single person with activities that will both help him meet his needs for productivity and be of great benefit to the church's ministry.

## 7. Spiritual Issues

Some singles may have difficulty recognizing singleness as God's gift to them. Some may be angry with God. Encourage them to let the anger rise to the surface and to pray about it. Help them to discover the things they like about being single. Most important, help them to explore the ways in which they are closer to God because of their singleness. Many resingled Christians have found that they become much closer to God after the loss of their marriage because they now must depend on Him for many of the things they once shared with a spouse.

In addition to the issues already discussed, always single, divorced and widowed singles each have some specific needs and issues. Let's take a look at each of these subgroups

### A. Always Single

A comedienne in a New York comedy club once did a routine on the frustrations of being single. One of her most popular lines was, "I think my mother wishes I would get married and divorced just so she could say 'somebody loved her once'". From the audience response, it was obvious that many singles could relate to her feelings. Many singles suffer from low self-esteem and sometimes fear that there is something wrong with them because they have not been "chosen" as someone's beloved. It is important to deal with these fears because often if people feel unlovable they will begin to act that way. A negative attitude, withdrawal, and lack of pride in appearance can be a clue that someone is suffering from low self-esteem. It may be possible to enlist the help of others in the congregation in treating the individual in a way that will help them see themselves as more loveable. Giving them specific tasks at which they are apt to succeed may help. With some, a direct approach may be more effective in helping them see that their behavior is keeping others away. In all cases, those with low self-esteem need help in recognizing their worth as children of God, and they are to "Love one's neighbor as oneself".

Sometimes those who have always been single find themselves putting their lives "on hold" until they find a mate. This may add to their unhappiness and feelings of being unfulfilled. They may feel cheated and angry with God, when in actuality, they are cheating themselves. Many singles find that once they buy a house, take a trip, go back to school or do whatever they've been postponing until they get married, the bitterness begins to lessen and they start to lead more enjoyable, productive lives.

### B. Divorced Singles

Divorced singles are in a unique situation that may result in guilt issues and a need to receive or give forgiveness and acceptance, complicated grieving and self-esteem/identity issues.

Divorced Christians often feel stigmatized in the church. One divorced woman stated feeling as though there was a big "D" on her forehead that everyone could see. Regardless of who is at fault in the divorce, guilt and blame are normal parts of the grieving process that goes along with divorce. Ideally, as Christians, our primary concern should be for our brothers and sisters' relationship to Christ. We should be there to give each other support and encouragement in closing the gap that feelings of guilt and blame cause between us and our Savior. Instead, many divorced Christians report that they felt alone in reconciling with their Lord, but that that issue was much easier than feeling accepted by fellow Christians.

Sometimes we may avoid the newly divorced, not because we are judgmental, but because we don't know what to say or how to help. How the pastor responds to someone may go a long way in setting an example for other members of a congregation. Especially in a situation where the marriage appeared to have been really bad for a long time, others may not understand the divorced persons' need to grieve. Divorce is a loss and with any loss there is a grieving process. This process may last much longer than others realize.

Divorce adjustment is especially complicated because of multiple losses—the person, the marriage, companionship, goals and dreams, changed identity and title. Oftentimes, self-esteem, the home, children, friends and life style are also lost.

Even people who have always appeared to be capable and confident may be shaken by feelings of failure and loss. People who have always seemed sure of “who” they are and “why” they are may find their sense of identity shaken by divorce. Indeed, the process of questioning and reexamining oneself during and following a divorce may result in marked changes, both in personality and in how the person sees him/herself. Involvement with other Christians can help to channel those changes in a positive, productive direction.

For some, church may be a painful reminder of the past, regardless of whether or not the former spouse is still there. Some may even feel that they need to transfer to another congregation. Contact with other members is important in helping them feel wanted and accepted and in promoting a sense of belonging.

### **C. Widowed Singles**

As with divorced singles, widowed singles go through a grieving process. Many find that friends and family are available and supportive in the weeks and months following the death, but may not realize or understand that the process may take several years.

Some may have a tendency toward extremes—either to make drastic changes like selling a home or giving away anything that reminds them of the former spouse or of changing nothing and avoiding moving on. Moderation needs to be the goal.

Others may become frustrated with widows or widowers who seem to be going over the details of the death again and again. Getting them to focus on their feelings instead of the details can help them get “unstuck.” Most important, the widow(er) may experience painful feelings of being “left out” and not fitting in with couples who had been their friends. Helping them connect with other singles can help. They may need special invitations or encouragement by other singles to join them in attending functions they once had participated in as a couple.

Aging and health concerns may also complicate ministering to widowed singles. One’s own death seems closer and more real after the loss of a spouse. Where some may simply dislike being alone, other widow(er)s may fear that they will become sick, injured or die with no one to help them. Fellow Christians who are willing to call every day can be a big help in easing both the loneliness and fear.

### **Involving Singles in the Ministry Team**

Single adults are not just one part of the church to whom one needs to minister. They make up an important part of the ministry team (Fagerstrom, 243).

Because pastors may be so busy with the needs of so many, they may not think much about giving extra effort to involving more singles in the on-going work of the church. Because of the time and energy limitations, it’s easy to involve the people who come to us and who seem most available. Very often, there are people who have children and are at school and church a lot because of youth activities.

Singles, however, may be less apt to get involved without encouragement, especially if they’re new to the congregation. Encouragement may be as simple as asking them to serve on a committee or suggesting that they call another member to see if they’d like to come along to a potluck dinner. It may be as simple as changing the title of events like “Family Fun Night,” or at least adding a statement that singles are welcome.

Some larger congregations may have singles “groups,” but participants in recent synod-wide singles events have seemed to be in agreement that they don’t need pastors to plan something especially for singles, as much as they need encouragement to be more involved and feel more a part of what is already going on.

Here are some suggestions:

1. Promote a positive attitude about singles in the church.

2. Introduce singles to other singles or to married who you know may have common interests.
3. Extend a personal verbal invitation to participate in activities, committees, etc., or suggest that others invite singles who have not previously been involved.
4. Encourage fellowship with other singles in the church—either via a formalized group and/or teaming up to perform functions that may have traditionally been done by couples—greeters, hosting fellowship times, etc.
5. Facilitate networking of services—accounting or legal advice, child care, home and auto repair, etc. if you know singles who are in need of these services.
6. Inform and encourage participation in area and synod-wide singles groups and activities.
7. Encourage singles to witness to friends outside the congregation and bring them along to church activities.
8. Don't limit your sermon or Bible class illustrations to marriage/family-based issues.

Whether or not you are dealing with singles in a counseling situation, increased awareness and understanding of concerns and issues faced by singles can help in several ways. As singles begin to feel an increased sensitivity to their needs and situations, they may become more motivated to get involved in church activities. From involvement comes belonging, and an enhancement both of the single person's spiritual life and the church's ministry.

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