

Shalom!

A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION

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Singleness in the Church

A COMMENT MADE several years ago by a current candidate for office recently resurfaced. When the candidate talked about “childless cat ladies” back in 2021, he didn’t mean it as a compliment, but now many women without children have claimed the moniker as a strength. I thought about this as I was wondering how to introduce this edition of *Shalom!* on “Singleness in the Church.”

When I was growing up as a missionary kid, during the era of large missionary contingents in what are now Zambia and Zimbabwe, I knew a lot of single lady missionaries: Auntie Rhoda, Auntie Mary, Auntie Dorothy, Auntie Edie, Auntie Martha, Auntie Gladys, Auntie Nancy, Auntie Virginia—and the list could go on. Some may indeed have been “childless cat ladies”—there were always cats running around on the mission stations!—but that didn’t stop them from the serious work to which they were called. Dorothy went on to become academic dean at Messiah University; Edie served in leadership roles on the mission field for decades; Martha was one of the first women ordained in the Brethren in Christ Church; Virginia doctored me back to health twice after bouts with rheumatic fever. These are just a few of these women’s accomplishments.

They were strong and competent women and in many ways the backbone of the missionary endeavors. And of course they followed the model of Frances Davidson, a single woman who was in the first Brethren in Christ missions party to Africa

in 1898 and left a lasting legacy. I don’t recall as a child ever questioning why these women weren’t married.

When we think of singleness in the church, our minds tend to go to women who never married. But of course there are other categories of singles: widows and widowers, never-married men, not-yet-married men and women, divorced men and women, single parents, married people who attend church as singles, and those who have made a conscious decision to remain single.

The lead article this time is a significantly condensed version of a presentation Christina Hitchcock gave at a 2023 conference at Messiah University. Her title, “The Family Unfriendly Church,” might initially be a little head-scratching, but the point is that the Church needs to be far more inclusive and welcoming to whoever walks through the door, whether or not they are part of a “traditional” family unit—which doesn’t mean the same thing now as it did in the past. Other writers describe widowhood, singleness as a choice, singleness in service, a plea for community rather than “singleness,” and more.

The last time *Shalom!* addressed singleness was more than twenty-five years ago, in 1996. To fill in some blank space in this edition, you’ll find a couple excerpts from 1996. Their words remain just as relevant today as when they were first written.

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

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The Family Unfriendly Church

By Christina Hitchcock

RECENTLY, I DID a quick google search for “family friendly churches in Sioux Falls,” the city where I live. A huge list of churches popped up, but so did a web page called “faithstreet.com,” which apparently is a third-party app designed to help people find a faith community that is right for them. It sorts through all the faith communities’ websites and creates a short summary. Faithstreet.com’s summary of Sioux Falls churches told me that “Sioux Falls churches describe themselves with words like casual, friendly, and young families. Popular church music styles include contemporary, traditional hymns, and hillsong-style. Churches in Sioux Falls often offer adult education, youth group, children’s ministry, nursery, and com-

munity service programs.”¹

A closer analysis of this summary of how churches in Sioux Falls describe themselves reveals that a third of the words used to describe these churches are family-focused (“young families”) and of the programs highlighted in Sioux Falls churches, three-fifths or 60 percent of those are explicitly family/children oriented. Exactly zero percent of descriptors or programs are designed to attract, or even acknowledge, single people who do not have children.

This is a somewhat unscientific analysis, but even a cursory overview of the last fifty years reveals that the American church has believed that the family is under attack. We see this in all branches of the American church. Dispensationalist Gerald Flurry writes, “They know that attacking the traditional family means attacking biblical morality, and that attacking biblical morality means attacking the traditional family!”² The James Dobson Family Institute identified “7 Threats in Our Time,” and number 7 is “The Attack Upon the Biblical Family.”³ Pope John Paul II himself wrote that “the family is the object of numerous forces that seek to destroy it or in some way to deform it.”⁴

It is not my intention to argue about whether or not the traditional family is under attack. Rather, my point is this: a large proportion of the American church (dispensational, charismatic, evangelical, Roman Catholic) believes that the traditional family is under attack and in response has taken strong and very intentional steps to protect, encourage, and nurture the traditional family. This includes a variety of para-church organizations whose mission is to defend the traditional family. The most famous of these might be Focus on the Family. It also includes doctrinal and ethical statements made by churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, which declared in 1981, “Aware that the well-being of society and her own good are intimately tied to the good of the family, the Church perceives in a more urgent and compelling way her mission of proclaiming

to all people the plan of God for marriage and the family, ensuring their full vitality and human and Christian development, and thus contributing to the renewal of society and of the People of God.”⁵ And, of course, it includes an uncounted number of programs in local congregations all designed to protect and encourage the traditional family; i.e., church programs designed to help people get married, stay married, and successfully have and parent children. The way Faithstreet.com reports that Sioux Falls churches are describing themselves is evidence of the widespread nature of this kind of church programming, and anyone who has participated in local American church life is familiar with it.

Again, it is not my intention to argue against these institutions, statements, or programs. The observation I want to make is this: When the American church perceived traditional marriage to be in danger or under attack, it took clear and intentional steps that were designed to help Christians live well and faithfully in families. The Church believed it was the Church’s job to create structures and statements that made it both possible and attractive to live faithfully in marriages and in families. I think we can learn something from this. . . .

When the American church believed that the biblical idea of the family was under attack and therefore becoming harder for Christians to faithfully live out, the church took steps to make that ethical behavior more possible for Christians. How much more can we now say that the life of celibate singleness is under attack by our culture? If we think the biblical idea of family is mocked or belittled by the larger culture, how much more is that true of a lifestyle of celibate singleness? And if the church believes that Jesus’s call to faithful family life must be supported and encouraged by the church community, how much more is it true that Jesus’s call to faithful singleness must be supported and encouraged by the church community?

What would it look like for the American church to devote the same amount of time,



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EDITOR

Harriet Sider Bicksler
127 Holly Dr.
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055
EMAIL: bickhouse@aol.com

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Edie Asbury, Mechanicsburg, PA

DENOMINATIONAL LIAISON

Lynn Thrush, Tipp City, OH

EDITORIAL ADVISOR

Lois Saylor, Harrisburg, PA

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Website: bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom

energy and skill it has given to the family to making the church into a community that makes biblical singleness not just possible, but even attractive and exciting?

[I believe] that American Christians need to begin to think in terms of “family unfriendly” churches. In other words, American Christians must recognize that the gospel call to celibate singleness (which occurs in a variety of forms and for a variety of reasons), needs to be doctrinally, institutionally, and structurally supported so that those Christians who are called to celibate singleness (either for a time or for their whole lives) see that calling as not only possible, but even winsome and exciting. Just as the American church developed strategies, statements, and structures to support the family, so now the American church must develop strategies, statements, and structures to support celibate singleness. But how?

I believe the American church has at least three important resources that it can and should use in this endeavor. They are its the-

ology, its history, and its spiritual disciplines. . . . how [can they] be put to practical use in the local church that wants to encourage and uphold biblical singleness?

Notes:

¹“Churches Near Sioux Falls, SD,” faithstreet, <https://www.faithstreet.com/sioux-falls-sd>. (Emphasis mine.)

²Flurry, Gerald, “The Evidence Shows Family Is Under Attack,” *The Trumpet*, July 2017, <https://www.thetrumpet.com/15830-the-evidence-shows-family-is-under-attack>.

³Del Tackett, “7 Threats in Our Time, #7: The Attack on the Biblical Family,” Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, <https://www.drjamesdobson.org/blogs/7-threats-in-our-times-7-the-attack-upon-the-biblical-family>.

⁴Pope John Paul II, “Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio of Pope John Paul II to the Episcopate to the Clergy and to the Faithful of the Whole Catholic Church on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World,” *The Vatican*, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html (written in 1981).

⁵Pope John Paul II.

Christina Hitchcock is professor of theology at the University of Sioux Falls, a Christian liberal arts school in Sioux Falls, SD. She is the author of *The Significance of Singleness*, which was named one of the best theology books of the year in 2018 by the *Englewood Review of Books*. This article is condensed from one of two presentations she gave at the 2023 conference sponsored by the Sider Institute for Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan Studies at Messiah University. The entire article, which spells out the three resources mentioned in the last paragraph, is available in the April 2024 edition of *Brethren in Christ History and Life*. Contact the editor for more information.

Singleness, Surrender, and Significance

by Bill Donner

PROMPTS FOR THEOLOGICAL consideration

At sixty-two, I have been single now almost three years. Before this, in what feels like a life somehow completely distinct, Janet and I enjoyed a wonderful marriage more than thirty years. She passed away after a long journey with the complications of a brain tumor. I know that the long and slow—but relentless—loss of her pulled our entire family into a deep life in Christ.

For my part, as I came to know that our life together would be short, I made two radical commitments: first was to love her to the uttermost, even to the suspending of all else to carry her to the feet of Jesus. Through her illness, Janet and I saw the unique possibility of knowing Christ in the fellowship of his sufferings. The second commitment I made was that since my life would continue beyond this pearl-of-great-price, I must live it fearlessly for Jesus. My contribution to the conversation on singleness is grounded in my

pursuit of this second commitment.

Being middle-aged and single can be awkward. A friend somewhat younger than I also lost his wife. The missions organization this couple had worked with for fifteen years in Asia held a retreat that summer and, needing community, he signed up to attend. The problem was that the activities were either for marrieds (which had games and discussion based on marital issues) or singles, which related to calling, relationships, and developing financial support. He couldn't fit with the marrieds, and the issues among the singles were geared toward the life choices of twenty-somethings. Warming to his subject, he went on to say that if a church has age-based Bible studies, do not go to one for singles. When I asked why not, he continued that until the group knows you, they will decide you are some sort of “creeper” there to date younger women.

My friend related these and other stories to me soon after Janet's death, all warning me

that life as a middle-aged, single man was NOT easy. Happily, my Brethren in Christ Church community provided great fellowship and support while I was grieving. I mention all of this in acknowledgment that still today, marriage is the “normal” state for men my age.

Yet singleness is the default human condition, young or old. As modernity extends adolescence for a variety of reasons, twenty-five is the new eighteen. For young adults to succeed, most won't simply get a job at the local factory but may be faced with ten-plus years of postgraduate education and crippling student debt.¹ In later years singleness is again a reality for many adults. Even though the divorce rate has fallen since the early 2000s, it is still true that 41 percent of first marriages will end in a divorce after an average of eight years. We are also living longer than past generations, extending the years many of us live past the death of a spouse. These and other factors reveal the

most telling number: 49 percent of American adults today live as singles.²

Changes in society are forcing us to reconsider a healthy view of singleness, not just about social expectations, but relating to lifestyle and sexuality. Early this year our Leadership Council adopted the Wesleyan statement on Homosexuality³, which contained this phrase that stuck with me: “Wesleyans confess that until we reclaim a Christian account of celibacy, marriage, and the church as family—our good news for those experiencing same-sex temptation [and I add, singleness generally] will be both unbiblical and impoverished.”

I thank our theological cousins for this helpful broad view. What I take from it considering the discussion of singleness, is that healthy and biblically grounded sexual identity requires this tripod of ideas to form a stable foundation. Both celibacy (a critical aspect of Christian singleness) and marriage must be considered together and in the light of our theology of the church as family. Singleness is not a separate “track” from marriage, but an aspect of belonging to—and manifesting—the Kingdom of God through the church.

I believe that the Wesleyans have opened a door to us as Brethren in Christ to explore how church as a covenant community may be a means of ameliorating causes of sexual and gender identity issues. The church must recover from being a set of programs for an atomized society. It must be an integrated and intergenerational community that models and proclaims redemption. In my recent single years, I have really enjoyed taking some of the staff pastors to dinner and listen to how they see ministry and life unfolding. God is giving me a new comradery with others across a generational gap because we have singleness in common.

At our recent General Assembly in Sharonville, Walter Kim, the President of the National Association of Evangelicals, presented another idea that speaks to singleness. He wrote that effective evangelism today must take into consideration a new worldview among singles. It is a reality that many under thirty are unmoved when they hear that Jesus died for their sins. They may not even believe in sin or the need for forgiveness. This generation is indifferent, according

to Kim. What they seek is belonging with significance. Again, I see the central themes he presented as a call for a clear theology of the church that offers belonging and significance. We as Brethren in Christ have the means to reach and restore a generation of singles. Our conceptions of the church as a new communities rather than confessional congregations offers us an opportunity. To this I call for a renewed consideration of church membership as a call to join a covenant family. I believe that for some, “membership” has represented a non-biblical intrusion into church life for voting. But membership also might offer us a category that allows us to invite the broken into church to experience community while still maintaining a call to belong to something pure and valuable for those who come to submit to Jesus.

Prompts for the Life of Faith

I take an interest in healthy singleness as I pursue a new chapter to live entirely for Jesus. I find myself wonderfully free to travel and minister, unbound by the need to care for family. I pray a LOT. I have also been painfully confronted by gaps in my own character that I never saw because marriage hid them. In grieving as well as in new ministry as bishop the Pacific Conference, I value the rich palette of relationships with others more than ever before. Unmarried, I rely much more on others to carry the freight of my need to be connected. Singleness is both a new freedom and a new place of discipleship. I present five of the personal lessons I am learning as I have entered singleness. The experience of others will vary wildly with the calling and circumstances they face. Take these as my testimony:

Promises vs. Principles: I emphasize promises, personal promises, here concerning singleness. A critical issue seems to be what singleness is for in our lives. Our “Articles of Faith and Doctrine” state a good principle, “Human sexuality is affirmed within the chaste, single life or a lifelong marriage between a man and a woman” (italics are mine). Recent discussion on this line has been about sexuality, but I read it to say that we are all to be single or married. Great words to believe, but not sufficient for my interior faith-life. I do best when I know what God has promised me, and I consider it a

fundamental good to press in to the throne room and seek answers. This applies to singleness. Am I to be single for the rest of my life, or to plan to remarry? Theologically, either answer is fine. Existentially, I need to know; it affects how I pray and what I hope for.

Consider the analogy of Abraham. He and Sarah were promised an heir. That promise was the key to understanding their hopes and failures (like Hagar/Ishmael). Promises provide the grounds for their discipleship in faith (land, heir, blessings, etc). As singles we must hold on to our calling and seek to live fruitfully within it. Singleness is a necessary and sometimes permanent aspect of who we are. It is strategic in every life, yielding maturity and fruit, not less so for those who believe they will marry. This question has also arisen in my heart. I believe that marriage will again be a part of my story. Wrestling with that question is worth the time. Get hold of God’s unique covenant promises for you, then invest with joy in the journey. I have known several men who chose a single, celibate life and were never married. They have spoken about how God has revealed his heart in ways that marriage would have eliminated. One such man speaks about identity in Christ, the Father Heart of God, forgiveness, and silence/solitude.

Reason vs. Reasonable: It is a mistake to deify reason regarding singles. I began making lists at one point about risks and rewards of being single. Spreadsheets and personality tests clarify facts about who and where we are. Making decisions about friendship or marriage armed with accurate information is valuable. But when we rely on these tools to make decisions, we are being ruled by reason. The problem here is that the Bible is replete with stories that defy this kind of reason. When God is involved, reason is dethroned as the controlling agent. In the narrative of God’s work, the obedience of faith is always reasonable because God is considered a factor beyond the circumstance we see.

For singles who believe God offers the hope of marriage (see above) do not put all your trust in dating sites or Myers and Briggs. Make God’s loving provision your future hope and present refuge. I have been living this lesson. We live in times of anxiety in the face of countless options. A dynamic and in-

timate conversation with God over a future mate will certainly lead to the assurance that he himself will provide. He himself will be Abraham's servant who went to seek a wife for Isaac. This must be our confidence even if we invest in dating sites (I could never do that).

In Genesis 24, the wife-seeking mission had divine guidance. This story reveals our God in his faithfulness, and we must be no less certain of his loving provision for each of us. It is good to know ourselves, but we may not hide behind lists of traits; instead, we must ultimately trust that God is sovereign in this process, and then be courageous enough to choose and to entrust ourselves to him alone. Only then can we relate properly to others. This is reasonable, but it must transcend reason.

Faith vs. Fear: Where faith is present, fear is dispelled. By "faith" I do not mean my assurance of salvation, but my confidence in my identity as a son of God. As such, he knows the plans he has for me, and as he will share them. He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him. I am learning to invest my hope in what he reveals to me. He requires unhedged and full surrender. In my walk as a single, I am aware of his sufficiency in me. He calls me a royal son, and shows me images in my imagination wearing a robe and a crown. He is teaching me in the years since I have been single that I must live out of the final victory and fullness I have in Christ, not as one seeking to achieve victory. Being single has made this surrendered life critical.

Singleness for me requires that I walk in intimacy with Jesus or go crazy. Any delay in the things I pray for is a confirmation that he is working toward what is best—like a Christmas present. When I lose confidence in the ongoing narrative of his work with me, inevitably fear intrudes and accuses. Singles always face time alone, moments of longing, but I can testify that these must be taken as opportunities that drive us deeper into Christ, or else they open the door to disappointment, doubts, and needless loss.

Surrender vs. Control: One way that we as Brethren in Christ have conceived of sanctification is through total surrender to Christ. Andrew Murray was no Anabaptist, but his book, *Absolute Surrender* is still an invaluable read on this topic. I have promises

from God about a new life after the passing of my wife. He has shown it to me as if I was Israel, crossing from the plains of Moab into the promised land in front of Jericho. Singleness for me has been the entry into the land of promises. One life-long promise has been greater intimacy with Christ.

Another life-promise has been for ministry beyond what my personality and brain can conceive. I see myself cross the Jordan and I proclaim that I intend to claim and occupy the portion the Lord has given to me as an inheritance. I reckon what went before as dead to me if only I can live entirely for him henceforth! Even so, in this desire to be godly, I find my flesh is still alive. I get frustrated. I begin to harangue and try to manipulate the Father into granting me directly what he intends to give me in his time. This problem of trying to control even God himself is a problem that we become acutely aware of in trying to follow Christ. In my mind, it is amplified for singles. I am learning to wait in faith by reminding myself that any delay is essential for his highest.

Identity vs. Achievement: I want to sum up this survey of lessons I have been learning recently with the most critical foundation: identity. I am convinced that fruitfulness in my life is predicated on how I understand myself in Christ. Our place in Jesus has layers that take a lifetime to explore. Rather than survey aspects of Christian identity: servant, friend, son, bride, and such themes in the New Testament, I want to write about what I have been learning lately—that I am seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph. 1 and 2), despite still living out my life here in Diamond Bar, CA. The end of this sense of identity is resting in his finished work with the sole end of glorifying him on the earth by obedience to say and do what he says.

How does this affect singleness? It places it in the context of full redemption. Who we are transcends whether we are single or married. Our union with Christ renders peace and wholeness in either state, and when I live there I rest content.

Bill Donner is bishop of the Pacific Conference of Brethren in Christ. He previously served as a pastor in the Pacific Conference and as the chief operations officer for Mercy Ships.

Editor's Notes

2024 subscription contributions:

Because of a strong balance in the *Shalom!* account, subscription renewals have been waived for 2024. Thanks to those who have contributed/renewed anyway—your gifts are much appreciated. If you would like to contribute to help maintain that healthy balance, you can do so online at bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/ or send a check payable to Brethren in Christ U.S. to the editor. We also welcome first-time subscribers at the basic subscription price of \$20 per year. Thank you!

Fall 2024 topic:

The Fall edition will focus on the current status of the Brethren in Christ "peace position." Questions to be considered include:

1. How much theological diversity/pluralism on this topic can we handle?
2. In what specific ways are we still a peace church (beyond what we say in our "Articles of Faith and Doctrine" and core values)?
3. Why does this doctrine require a qualifying clause ("while respecting others who hold different interpretations?" Does it strengthen or weaken our position?
4. How is our commitment to peacemaking a plus in our evangelistic efforts?
5. How can we communicate and practice our commitment to peace in more public spaces (our communities, the nation, etc.)
6. What are some stories of peacemaking from individuals and congregations?

If you would like to write on this topic or have other ideas for future topics, contact the editor at bickhouse@aol.com.

Seeing God in Singleness

By Cindy Agoncillo

LIKE MANY WOMEN who grew up in the church, I assumed that I would be married with several children by the time I reached my late thirties. I would not have imagined—much less hoped for—a life story that has so far included thirty-seven years of singleness: no husband, no boyfriends, two first dates, and no second dates.

As a teenager, I read several Christian books about dating the “right” way and preparing myself for marriage. In college, I followed the guidance of these books and invested in laying a solid foundation of friendship, but when my closest male friend—who embodied every quality I had hoped for in a husband—began dating someone else instead of me, I was devastated. I wondered if I had failed to “delight in the Lord” enough to receive the “desires of [my] heart”—or perhaps God didn’t love me as much as he loved those to whom he gave spouses.

In the years since then, God has been meeting me in my singleness and correcting the lies I once believed. He brought me encouragement through Ephesians 3:20, which says, “Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.” Or as other translations say, “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.” When I thought God was refusing to give me his best, he said, “I can do immeasurably more. Have you considered the possibility that what I have for you is even better than what you thought was perfect?”

Gradually, God has been unveiling the “immeasurably more” as he opens doors and provides opportunities that my singleness has made possible. In my singleness, I have had the flexibility and permission to pursue new career options, ranging from graphic designer to young adult pastor. I have had the willingness to open my home freely to seventeen women over the course of fifteen years, providing them with a place of refuge during a wilderness season, and I had the time to invest deeply in their lives.

When God began to show me what my singleness had made possible, I was able to

lay down the sense of shame that once came with being single. I finally knew that my worth and value did not depend on having a boyfriend or a husband. I learned that I wasn’t any less of an adult or incomplete as a person because I was single.

While God has been helping me recognize the blessings of singleness, I have also been noticing the burdens of living life on my own, like not having an immediate answer to questions like: “Who will pick me up from the airport?” “Who will care for me if I get sick or need surgery?” “Who do I list as my emergency contact?” And if I reach out to someone for help, what am I interrupting? Am I asking them to prioritize me over their family in this moment? And do they even consider me important enough to drop what they’re doing to help me? At one point, I wondered if what I was looking for wasn’t a husband but a personal assistant—someone dedicated to me and willing to help me when I’m in need. But I recently realized that the actual burden I’ve been carrying wasn’t the weight and responsibility of doing life independently, but rather feeling like I’m no one’s most important person. It’s a burden of loneliness.

For single people, church can be a particularly lonely place. Ministries are often structured with couples or families in mind, and sermons about relationships are usually centered around marriage. Single people often get the sense that the church doesn’t know what to do with them—after all, churches are primarily led by married men whose seminary training likely did not emphasize ministering to single adults.

As a single woman serving as a pastor, I find myself uniquely positioned to advocate for single people from a place of leadership and out of my own experience of singleness and loneliness. While it has been encouraging to see how God is at work in and through my singleness, I still long to see his Church demonstrate their care for their single brothers and sisters. What would it look like for the Church to look after widows, orphans, and single adults who may feel like their

Informal Survey on Singleness

By Cindy Agoncillo

THE SURVEY BEGAN as a product of my own curiosity and personal experience as an unmarried Christian who found it challenging to find community in the church. I wanted to learn about the common desires and challenges of thirty-something, and as a young adult pastor lead a ministry that helps meet these needs. I shared the survey on my personal Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts with a request that others share the link with others.

Below are some highlights from the survey, focusing specifically on unmarried adults who identify as Christians.

- 113 total participants: 93 women, 19 men, one preferred not to say
- Included single adults who have never married, were currently dating, or divorced
- Participants from all over the US, and five from other countries
- Data collected via a Google Form shared publicly on social media. Survey was sent out in January 2021, so COVID was a factor in many responses re: difficulty of connecting with others.

Community

- Seventy people (62 percent) considered themselves to be “in community” with others; forty-three did not (38 percent).
- Twenty-nine people (26 percent) said they were satisfied with their current level of community; sixty said they were not satisfied (53 percent), and twenty-four were not sure (21 percent).

Connecting in the Church

- Fourteen people (12 percent) said they did not attend a local church. Another fourteen people (12 percent) said they attend church regularly but did not feel connected. The rest either attended a church

church is the only family they have?

Here are seven ideas for caring well for the single people in your congregation:

1. *Invite us to do life with you.* Whether it's family dinners at home, going out to lunch after church, running errands, or going to your kids' games and performances, invite us to join you in everyday events.
2. *Think of us around holidays.* Check if we have plans for upcoming holidays and invite us to join your family for holiday meals and other celebrations or traditions.
3. *Share how we can ask you for help.* Single people are often independent out of necessity. Especially for those far from their family of origin, it's comforting to know who we can turn to for car or house/apartment issues, rides to the airport, medical emergencies, etc.
4. *Sit with us or invite us to sit with you at church.* Church services can be very lonely times for single people. Empty chairs separating us from all the families sitting together can be harsh reminders that we are alone.
5. *Introduce us to other people.* Help us connect with people you think we'd enjoy

spending time with. This goes for new friends or blind dates—if you know we are looking to date and if we've given you permission to set us up.

6. *Show interest in our lives and celebrate us.* Remember to celebrate our birthdays, accomplishments, and important milestones other than engagements, weddings, and babies.
7. *Encourage and pray for us.* Offer words of blessing and prayers of thanksgiving for who God has created us to be and for the ways you currently see God at work in and through our lives.

I hope that we as the church can reclaim our role and identity as a family. Hebrews 2:11 says, "So now Jesus and the ones he makes holy have the same Father. That is why Jesus is not ashamed to call them his brothers and sisters." I'm hoping for more of this day-to-day, real sense of belonging to the family of God, where our experience and understanding of "family" is not exclusive to households or spouses and kids but is inclusive of us all.

Cindy Agoncillo is associate pastor of young adults and first impressions at Mechanicsburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church (McBIC).

A Call for Sensitivity

By Lona Climenhaga

A NEW WIDOWER told me that during the first two months after his wife's death several couples from the church took him out for meals or invited him to their home. Then they just kind of dropped him from their social circle—a circle he had been very much a part of while married. It was as if since he was now alone, he just didn't fit. Just because a person is single, by choice or by circumstance, communication with the opposite sex is still enjoyable and anticipated.

Returning to an empty house after being out and finding it empty—with no one there to share experiences, feelings, elation, or disappointment—is often difficult. Sundays are also difficult, as they are often family times. How nice it is to be invited out for Sunday dinner and to be part of a family or friends group.

Dealing with some of the aspects of daily living can be quite frustrating. For example, the spouse left alone who never cared for financial decisions can be at a complete loss as to how to cope. Or a single person may not know what car to buy. Or, "If only there were someone who could climb up and clean out the gutters, or fix a broken lamp, or..." Or, "My wife always told me what clothing went best together." By being sensitive to the Lord's leading and the unique needs of each person, we can all experience joy and contentment in our special roles in life.

Lona Climenhaga lives at Messiah Lifeways and attends the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church. Since she wrote this article (excerpted and adapted here) for the Spring 1996 Shalom!, her husband passed away and she is single again.

(in person or online), could not attend due to COVID, or were looking for a new church.

Challenges with Community

- Sixty-two people (55 percent) said it is generally very easy or somewhat easy for them to connect with others, but only thirty-six people (32 percent) said it was very easy or somewhat easy to get connected at church.
- Ninety-four people (83 percent) said they were very interested or somewhat interested in getting connected at church, but fifty-three people (47 percent) said it was very difficult or somewhat difficult to get connected at church.
- One hundred and seven people (95 percent) said they are generally interested in connecting with others.

When asked what type of ministry they would prefer to join, most of the participants said they would prefer a ministry that included singles and couples—only 10 percent wanted a singles-specific ministry.

I also asked about the challenges people have faced in finding community. Some common themes:

- *Exclusivity and lack of opportunities to participate*—e.g., families/couples that only interact with other families/couples, feeling left out of pre-established groups (lack of programs for post-college young adults, Bible studies that only meet during the work day, adult ministries centered on marriage/parenting, etc.).
- *Desire for meaningful, diverse connection*—e.g., small groups that are co-ed, multigenerational, and include singles and married couples (for discipleship, not to find a spouse).
- *Desire for intentionality from the church*—e.g., getting to know the single people in the congregation (not treating them like visitors), families/couples having the willingness to discuss topics other than marriage and parenting
- *Lack of understanding*—e.g., married couples not understanding the life experiences of single adults in their thirties) or recognizing that their friendship provides single people with the emotional support that others find with their spouse.

Against “Singleness”

By Zach Spidel

I USUALLY AM not someone who gets hung up on terms. Things themselves, rather than the labels we affix to them, matter most. But sometimes labels ill-fit the realities we use them to name in ways that end up confusing matters. I think that’s the case with the way we use the word “single” to describe people not in a romantic relationship.

I believe Christ calls his people to practice chastity (a marvelous word!) and that chastity involves refraining from sexual activity outside of marriage. This means, then, that the aim for Christians in their sexual lives is monogamy within marriage and celibacy outside of it. Often people describe those outside of marriage (and outside marriage-generating relationships) as “single.” Accepting this description, we Christians are apt to note that “the single life” is no less blessed than the married life. I think this statement is true as intended, but the word “single” seriously miscommunicates here.

Genuine “singleness” (existing “singly”) is not a state God wills for anyone. All people are called by God to intimate interconnection with others. We all are meant to belong within nurturing, life-giving forms of human community. God sets us all to the good labor of knowing and being known in relationships. God wants us all, I think, to walk with others, to be cared for as well as to have those trying and stretching opportunities to care for others. No one is an island, entire of itself.

Under current conditions, however, many people feel themselves, quite unhappily, to be just that—*islands cut off from the main*. This is true of those in romantic partnerships, whose little household platoons are often isolated from broader forms of social support. And if even the romantically-coupled feel isolated and cut off, such experiences are more prominent in the lives of many of those outside such romantic relationships.

In our society, one of the few forms of intimacy readily available to people is romantic/sexual. Yet this form of intimacy cannot bear the weight we have placed upon it.

Many will not marry and, if marriage is the only place where we still cultivate profound intimacy, those many people will find themselves in a state which is much less than what God intends for them, not because they aren’t married, but because they’ve been left, under current conditions, without access to intimate interconnection. Each of us needs intimacy with God and with a host of other people in various forms. Friendship, in particular, is an essential and neglected art today.

Stability is another. Middle class and wealthy people often move for work and end up far from their natural families and have no long-term ties to place and no thick web of connections between people and place. The poor are often more rooted in place, but their poverty has contributed to relational instability, very high rates of abuse, divorce, out-of-wedlock birth, etc. Thus many poor, middle-class, and rich people all end up, for different reasons, profoundly dislocated.

Celibacy is a holy state, one often actively celebrated and even sought out in the church’s past. The call to celibacy was not a call to isolation—to life lived “singly” on one’s own. It was the call to life apart from specifically sexual forms of intimacy. The renunciation of that one form of intimacy was itself for the sake of a deeper entry into other forms. The celibate life afforded deeper entry into certain kinds of friendship centered on serving the poor and worshiping God. Today, however, it is much harder to hear the call to celibacy as an invitation to intimacy (as it is meant to be by God) because we have so comprehensively shrunk opportunities for intimacy.

We have to work on this together. We have to figure out how to re-create those social conditions within which non-romantic forms of intimacy thrive. Doing this will require risk and sacrifice, of a personal, social, and economic nature. More of us in the middle class (and above) will need to opt out of career opportunities requiring lifestyles that inhibit rather than promote stable, local forms of belonging. More of us will need, likewise, to choose to live not in the largest



houses and nicest neighborhoods we can afford (with space separating us from others and mortgages that keep us locked into jobs that inhibit community engagement). More of us need to choose to live in poor neighborhoods, in tight packed houses or apartments, where we can’t help knowing our neighbors and where we work lower-paying jobs and lead lives that make us, in practical, real-life terms, dependent on neighbors.

The folk singer Greg Brown once observed that the notion of a “voluntary community” was silly (he used a different “s” word for it). He said (to paraphrase) that real community arises out of situations where we practically, even existentially, need one another. Up in the hinterlands of Alaska, where Brown has spent a lot of time, you better know your neighbors, because if you get stranded by the roadside in winter your life may well depend on them. If we lack intimacy today, it might be because we live in material conditions that both minimize and mask our genuine interdependence. To restore the intimacy that is meant to define our lives—including celibate people outside romantic relationships—we will have to re-embrace such interdependence. There is no way to do this apart from risk and self-sacrifice—working together to reorganize our personal lives, our economic goals, and our social arrangements.

In the pursuit of these lofty goals, we likely have a lot to learn from Christian communities like the Bruderhof. But far short of such full-scale social reorganization, we have ample opportunities to begin embracing an intimacy-promoting interdependence, such that no Christian need live “singly,” but each of us might live out of vital, organic, intimate, connection with God and others.

Zach Spidel is pastor of East Dayton Fellowship, Dayton, OH.

Life as a Single Holds Honor

By Madelyn Hoke

YOU WILL CHANGE your mind. God has someone special planned for you. I cannot wait until your wedding to say I told you so. You must have unlimited time. You must be sad or lonely. When you first told me, I thought that was a little weird. Singleness is such a gift, but. . . .

As a twenty-something girl, I feeling led to be unmarried, these are all phrases I encounter in conversations with followers of Christ. I smile and nod to these comments, letting them roll off my back. Yet, inwardly, I am disappointed. I am disappointed in the assumptions stemming from these words and the Church's approach to singleness.

The majority of women my age express a desire for marriage and dream about their husbands. Many experience pressure to find a man of God to partner with in ministry, which can be overwhelming. None of this is for me.

When I was in high school, I learned about vocational singleness: staying single for the sake of the Kingdom. This resonated with me; it felt as if much of my life was built so that I could pursue Jesus and his people wholeheartedly. Fast-forward to college: I began intentionally abstaining from romantic relationships to shift my heart towards Jesus. I started living my life for Jesus without romantic distractions or setbacks, pursuing complete dependence on God rather than on a relationship. Whether or not I blatantly shared this area of my life with the Church, I encountered the kind of disappointing statements shared previously.

Neither the call to marriage nor singleness should be idolized; both calls require careful prayer and discernment. Yet many within the Church assert a bias toward marriage and have created a culture in which marriage is idolized as the highest ideal. This creates an inadvertent disregard for me, who feels called to singleness, and for many others who experience singleness for a variety of other reasons, such as the death of a spouse, divorce, separation, lack of a suitable partner, etc.

One of the most prevalent ways the

Church demeans singles is when church leaders focus on relationships. In college, I regularly attended a local church on Sundays. One of their ministry foci was families, and though a number of young families did attend, the congregation was a more diverse mixture of older families and young adults from local universities. Like clockwork, twice a semester, they would dedicate an entire Sunday service to discussing relationships. Each time, singles would only be mentioned in a sentence or disregarded altogether as if families are only defined as those married with children.

These approaches are not simply contained to Sunday services at church but in other Christian contexts as well. Because I work at a Christian organization and I attended a Christian university, these messages are even more amplified in my experience. Furthermore, many podcasts, casual conversations, and worship services I have encountered in the Church have followed a similar course. On Spotify, a topical search for podcasts related to faith and singleness produces a large amount of options. Most of the time, the brief summaries of those episodes describe a married person discussing how the single "season" is a gift. Most of the podcasts I have listened to entirely focus on how to make the best of singleness before the listener gets married—no mention of the equivalent value found in a life of singleness. When discussion about relationships excludes singles or assumes everyone is on the path to marriage, an unwelcoming culture is created and a myopic and exclusive vision for relationships and the Kingdom of God is fostered.

How does the Church begin to grow regarding the culture of marriage and singleness?

One of the easiest ways to grow together is to cease the expectation of marriage and expand our collective vision for relationships and community. We need to resist making assumptions that everyone desires marriage or is not content staying single. The value of those who are single—whether it is out of one's situation or choice—is reduced when

the Church plays into these assumptions, creating a culture that does not reflect the heart of Jesus's ministry.

Additionally, the Church can begin to change this culture for the better by acknowledging singles in services and enhancing content to include applications to a variety of life situations. My home church recently had a sermon titled "Following Christ: Together at Home." While this message related particularly to habits with families at home, the pastor continually mentioned ways the habits could pertain to people without families. She made her message inclusive to singles throughout the entire sermon. This acknowledgment recognized and validated the singles.

It is not more difficult to acknowledge those who are single than those who are married. Both marriage and singleness reflect Scripture beautifully. Marriage offers many illustrations in sermons and messages to reflect a picture of Jesus and the Church, offering a unique perspective, specifically relating to the Church being the bride to Jesus. Singleness does as well. Though the Church rarely associates singleness with God's Word or Kingdom, singleness gives a glimpse of what heaven will look like—individuals focused on worshiping the Lord without distractions of the heart. Both singleness and marriage hold honor and value in the Scriptures and Christians' lives, and the culture of the Church should reflect these statuses equally.

Jesus and Paul directly speak about singleness in Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7. The Old and New Testaments also cover singleness. Paul, John the Baptist, Martha, and other biblical figures were single. The people who sat at the table with Jesus as he taught were singles, women, married couples, men, young, older, and more—his was a fully integrated ministry. Jesus himself, the only perfect human to live and minister, was single. Just as the Church aims to reflect the models of the early ministry of Jesus, the Church should be relationally integrated as well because an integrated table brings diverse per-

spectives, and diversity in all aspects reflects more accurately the Kingdom of God.

Simply because singles are unmarried does not mean they do not desire or need accountability and intimacy. Because singles lack the built-in accountability and intimate safe spaces that couples more naturally possess, they need to be more mindful about cultivating relationships with friends, family, and their Church community. Though I use the word “lack,” I do not insinuate that singles inherently lack anything married couples hold. My friendships that are filled with intentional accountability, truth, and joy are some of my most fulfilling relationships. In them, I find the safe spaces and intimate community I need, yet I must work harder than those who are married to find that.

The Church must step out of its comfort-

able segregation between couples and singles. One important step toward integration could be having mixed small groups of singles and married couples to deliberately encourage sharing life together. The majority of churches have separate groups for singles, couples, and families. Life may not always look identical for couples and singles, but there are important lessons to be learned from one another. Relationships are a significant pathway to inclusion and involvement in the Church. Church members, whether they are single or coupled, must go out of their way to close the gap between each other. Engaging in purposeful conversation with one another, making plans with one another, or introducing one another to other church members are all reasonable approaches to bridge this gap.

As humans, we do not have the ability to know the fullness of God’s plans. God may lead me to marriage, and I must not close my heart off to that possibility. However, presently, the call I am urged towards is singleness, and I desire to pursue Jesus in that calling wholeheartedly. I pray that I and others will not be pushed aside in ministry and the Church simply because of our interpersonal status.

Madelyn (Maddy) Hoke recently graduated from Asbury University with a BA in intercultural studies and a minor in photography and digital imaging. When she is not traveling, she lives in Hershey, PA and attends Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

A Place to Serve

By Winnie Thuma

WHEN I WAS asked to write on “Singleness in the Church.” I realized that my journey and experience differ because I have a somewhat limited experience of life in a local congregation. I spent about thirty-five years serving God in overseas ministry. However, three areas that most stand out in contrast, to me, are single women’s place in leadership, ministry and the sense of belonging within the Christian community (the local church).

Leadership and ministry. In my mid-twenties, I was praying, wondering and exploring what jobs were the best fit for me, with my educational background, gifts, experience and strengths. At that time, I saw few options for women (single or married) to work in the church or have leadership positions. The openings I saw that were available were secretarial, children’s ministries, teaching woman’s Bible studies, or in music ministries. I did not see anywhere that I fit into the work or ministry within the church.

When God called me to overseas work, I felt that this was where I was to serve him. My calling was initially to India or Nepal but as it turned out, God also extended my boundaries of service to other parts of Asia. I was fortunate to be encouraged to join a

well-respected, established mission with roots in both England and India. It is an international, interdenominational mission, now called Interserve, started in 1852 by women, to serve the medical and educational needs of women in the Indian sub-continent. A hundred years later, in 1952, the first man was admitted. We say that we are “people for the hard places.” There is also an emphasis on working together with other like-mind organizations, rather than establishing our own projects.

I mention the beginnings of Interserve because having women in leadership and all kinds of ministry positions is part of our DNA. In my experience overseas, I have always been encouraged to try new things and be involved in leadership roles. Single women are in many ways the backbone of overseas ministries. When working in volatile restricted access countries, they are often the first to go in and the last to leave. They are valued as equal team members and partners in making disciples of all nations. I have often wondered if the reason that there are so many single women in missions is because it was and still often is, the only place within the church where they can teach, preach, and exercise leadership gifts.

A sense of belonging in community. My experience has been when you arrive in a different country where the culture, customs and language are different, generally you begin with intense language and culture study. (I’ve done this three times in my overseas experience). Generally, the language schools are run at certain times and the new students are housed together. I have always worked in multicultural teams, so my first language school experience was the first time, but not the last time, I was involved living cross-culturally.

I can remember my first communal guest house experience. We were a group of twenty adults and lots of children, with eight different countries represented. It makes for interesting mealtimes (and that’s a British understatement). Our goals were to learn the language, how to live in our new culture, and how to live out our faith in a multicultural community. It didn’t take us long to realize that we needed each other, not just to survive, but to thrive in the new challenges we were facing. It didn’t matter if we were married or single women or men. We singles became a part of families and became surrogate aunt and uncles. I still have contact with some of my adopted nieces and nephews

(some now married, with families). We needed to be supportive and caring for each other.

When we left language school, we were strongly encouraged to join like-minded groups wherever we were working (sometimes they are called teams, clusters, or small groups). They are not based around a specific ministry, but the goal is always spiritual and emotional mutual support. I don't think that it's an accident that Jesus had a group around him, with whom he shared life.

In the years that I spent overseas, living and serving in five different countries, I have been a part of many groups. They were all different in many ways: size, composition of male and female (there were usually predominately more women), families and singles, only single women, different nationalities and denominational backgrounds. We also had great fun together; we cried, we celebrated, we disagreed, we forgave, we grew spiritually and emotionally—we shared life. However, we were all similar in having a deep sense of commitment to each other. I can't

express the richness, support, encouragement, and love I experienced through my fellow sojourners. I sometimes would not have survived if it hadn't been for those caring friends. This was something that I had not experienced in church.

To be honest, when I was on home assignments, I often thanked God that he had called me overseas because I had a ministry, was encouraged to take leadership roles, and had a rich social life that included married couples and their families.

Now that I have retired and returned to the States, I have seen some major shifts in the church. Today I see women ministering and leading in all areas of church life. Our denomination has taken positive steps to include and encourage women (married or single). I find this to be very encouraging.

When I was on one of my home assignments, I was able to join a small group from my church. This group continued, over the years, to extend their invitation to join them when I was around. They were welcoming and supportive and it meant so much to me

to have a place to really share and be accepted. In many ways they became part of my "at home" stability. These relationships were also so helpful to me as I struggled with "reverse cultural shock."

The introduction of small groups into church life is such a great way to foster the true meaning of Christian fellowship and community. It is one of the very positive things I see that includes everyone and mirrors the "sense of belonging" that I experienced overseas. In small groups we are supported, accepted and loved and in that environment, we can grow and become more like Christ.

Winnie Thuma served overseas for thirty-five years with Interserve, and international and interdenominational organization, in various roles in Nepal, China, and India. Before retirement, she served a regional director for South Asia and on the international leadership team. She attends Meetinghouse Carlisle (PA).

Addressing the "Noah's Ark" Syndrome

By Dorothy Gish

The "Noah's Ark" syndrome so pervades our world that the path to a positive perspective of the single life is faced with many pitfalls.

Confusing aloneness with loneliness. Being lonely is part of being human. If as a single you feel incomplete, unhappy, and lonely, you are not likely to be attractive to others because you have little to offer excepts your needs or desires.

Failing to establish independence. No matter how old or how competent you are, as long as you live with your parents, you are still their child. There is nothing childish about being single. The single person has the opportunity to fully develop an individual identity. In most cases, this means having living quarters of one's own.

Existing rather than living. Many people (especially women) seem hesitant to commit themselves to any long-range goals beyond that of finding a life partner. In order to feel

fulfilled, each person needs to feel that he or she is making a worthwhile commitment to life.

Failing to develop a healthy view of the opposite sex. We need to see people as persons and not as sex objects. All people, singles especially, need friends of each sex. As Christians we have an obligation to live in belonging. The celibate lifestyle does not free one from the duty of partnership and creative encounters with the opposite sex.

Being satisfied with one's singleness involves more than just developing a perspective that enables one to steer clear of the pitfalls. There must be personal acceptance of singleness—even to the point of celebrating it. Remember, the most important person in the life of Christian singles was single for thirty-three years of his earthly life!

Dorothy Gish was a woman of great achievement, serving as a missionary in Zambia, professor and de-

partment chair and finally academic dean at Messiah University, and on numerous boards and committees. At the time of her death at age 87 in 2022, she was a member of Meetinghouse Carlisle (PA). Excerpt adapted from the Spring 1996 edition of Shalom!

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riage, and to check if we are unrightly favoring some scriptures over others. Hitchcock is concerned with both doctrine and practice and asks, "What church structures are needed today to make singleness viable and attractive?" We can ask ourselves what we need to change in belief and attitude and practice. Where have we been wrong? What should we do to value singleness?

Lois Saylor is an editorial advisor for Shalom! and attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

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431 Grantham Rd., Mechanicsburg, PA 17055

BOOK REVIEW: Have Sex, Marriage, and Family Become Idols?

By Lois Saylor

CHRISTINA S. HITCHCOCK, in her book *The Significance of Singleness*, questions how the church views singleness and marriage. She critiques modern evangelicalism and the ways cultural and secular attitudes have influenced the church. While the author honors marriage, she also questions if we have turned it into an idol and in doing so have neglected the virtue and purposes in singleness. She sees the modern church as unbalanced and losing a great example of reliance on Christ when we neglect to honor the single life. Her purpose is to affirm a biblical theology of singleness and to highlight its significance for the church.

The New Testament certainly records Paul calling for those who can to remain single so they can focus on the work of the church and the calling of Christ (1 Cor. 7:7). It is a call to celibacy and to forgo marriage and children to focus on advancing the kingdom. These verses have been taught, but I am struggling to ever remember a sermon or Bible study that gave a clear call to follow them. I'm trying to imagine a youth group meeting that teaches sexual responsibility and marriage, and also teaches a theology of singleness as a life choice for God. Have we encouraged singleness as a calling, as a way

to honor God with all one has or do we simply see singleness as a stage before marriage? Do we still hope those single adults "will find someone"?

Hitchcock believes the church can and needs to learn from those in our churches who are single. She believes singleness can teach us about community, identity, and authority and looks to three historical women to explore each of these aspects.

Her first example is Macrina born in 330 AD who purposefully remained single to follow Christ and created a community of women devoted to serving, which shows how God provides intimate spiritual relationships in Christian community without marriage. Perpetua was a young Christian martyr in 202 AD. As her father pleaded with her to make a sacrifice to the Roman Emperor, she held her identity in Christ as primary over her identity as daughter or mother. The author discusses the role of baptism and visions in forming Perpetua's identity in Christ.

The third example is Lottie Moon, a single woman who pioneered many aspects of global work in China in the later 1800s and who, through many challenges, held firm to her principles that her authority came from

Christ and the Holy Spirit and not through a man—father, husband, or son.

In her detailed chapters on these women, Hitchcock demonstrates how singles then and now can be examples to the church of intimate community, primary identity in Christ, and the direct relationship and authority each of us have in Christ without a human intermediary. While I agree with her last point, I also am a bit cautious to not overdo our singular authority but would also see the faith community as a source to confer and affirm.

Hitchcock sees the call to marriage and procreation in the creation account as God-given and designed. But she calls it idolatry when we hold it above where our future is taking us. Jesus clearly stated that there is no marriage in the age to come. Our future is a new way of being which singleness can model for us, where community, identity, and authority are found outside the current family design and found in Christ and his Kingdom.

It is valuable to ask the questions she is asking and to check our theologies, to see where cultural and secular values have distorted our ideas of singleness, sex, and mar-

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