

Singles Ministries: Necessity or Non-Starter

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Singleness in the Seventh-day Adventist has become an increasingly topical issue in recent years as the male population in the church, seems to be dwarfed by the female membership and the number of adults who marriage appears to be eluding, continues to expand. Add to this the stigma that many singles experience in connection with their relational status and the challenges related to divorce, non-marital procreation and disenfranchisement within the church and you begin to get a sense of why there are calls for singleness to be placed on the agenda of church administrators.

Single men and women form a large portion of church populations and are often relied upon significantly to contribute to programmes and initiatives. Particularly amongst those who are ardent believers and committed to church service, there's almost an unspoken view that they can be relied upon and more readily utilised than their married counterparts because they are not accountable to a spouse and benefit from the sense of belonging and calls for service that the church provides. The Apostle Paul himself recognises the increased capacity for spiritual focus and Christian service afforded to unmarried believers, due to the absence of what some might argue is the ultimate distraction...a spouse!

However what happens when this potential distraction is precisely what an individual yearns for; when the absence of this blessing and the very unmet longings of which it is comprised becomes a distraction in itself. What does a believer do when their singleness outstays its welcome and like Hannah's barrenness, Moses' leadership assignment and Paul's thorn in the flesh, it become a source of distress. The key options are faith or fatigue and if the former is not cultivated and anchored in an unfailing source of strength, the latter threatens to sap life's essence and lead to a deluge of negativity and undesirable consequences.

In order to counter the risk of singleness being poorly represented, the reader should be reminded that Jesus' the example to whom we all aspire, was a single man. Dare it be said that his singleness and characteristic autonomy, availability and flexibility were some of the features that enabled his ministry to be so potent, selfless and extensive. The Bible says he was in all points tempted as we were, yet without sin; leading us to deduce that the beauty and appeal of a woman was not something that escaped His attention. He simply had a higher focus and a life purpose that extended far beyond His human flesh and inclinations. Praise God! Oh that it were true of more of us. Yet in addition to the spiritual benefits, there are the blessings of social relationships, educational, professional and recreational pursuits, freedoms pertaining to financial and time management that are often at the disposal of the single individual.

However, without a doubt singleness, like all gifts, opportunities and seasons needs to be managed intelligently if it is to yield fruit. Notwithstanding the bright possibilities, there

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remain potential pitfalls that can accompany the single existence; including loneliness, reduction in faith and church engagement, sexual immorality, vulnerability, exploitation, adverse emotional and mental health and competitiveness, to name but a few.

You see, in the same way that people need spiritual fuel to offer spiritual service, i.e. oil in our lamps, faith comes from hearing and hearing from the word of God; one might argue that in order to function in a manner that is holistically healthy, individuals need a varied and balanced input in their lives, providing the nutrition, stimulus, experiences and opportunities that enable us to be well-rounded individuals in every way.

So this is where the church's based singles ministry offers great potential for supporting, inspiring and safeguarding these members of the flock, by uniting them in a sense of purpose, shared experience and mutual accountability. This forges a normality and reality in which church members can find a comfortable space to occupy and a supplement that helps to maintain the relevance of their spirituality. In addition there are the opportunities to make meaningful connections with fellow believers, for the sole purpose of fellowship, or forming more strategic alliances in order to achieve mutual life goals. Then of course there remains the possibility of meeting prospective life partners, with whom individuals may pursue marital relationships.

Jesus said I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10). This text was a key influence for the initiation of Socialight Ministries, a networking collective for unattached Christians, inspiring their 'Living Life Abundantly' strap line. Socialight Ministries have a five-pronged mandate, which focuses on promoting Spiritual, Personal, Relational, Professional and Social well-being. They seek to increase knowledge in these areas, whilst providing opportunities to grow through spiritual guidance, fellowship and support. Socialight Ministries favours the use of the term 'unattached' to describe non-married individuals, finding it to be more inclusive and relevant to individuals who may be single, separated, divorced, dating, widowed or engaged and likely to benefit from the ministry's remit. Socialight Ministries does not seek to offer an alternative to marriage, but rather promotes strong marriage as a beneficial feature within church and society and is keen to increase a sense of kinship between married and single people.

Well, what of the sceptics, married or unattached who balk at the concept of singles ministries. Dismissing these efforts as futile, the preserve of the desperate and lonely, unlikely to attract male participation and a prime example of church interference in the lives of its members? The response is quite simple "Where there is no vision the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he". (Proverbs 29:18) The law of God is filled with examples of how we can both love and honour Him and show love to our fellow humans using the 'neighbour principle'. In Acts 2, subsequent to being filled with the Holy Spirit, we are told that the church 'Sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need'. There is more to this message than the willingness to sacrifice financially, rather it speaks of releasing the churches resources, capacity and compassion to support needs within the household of faith.

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This is not a call for one-sided charity as we all have needs; but instead a reminder of the importance of investing in the body of Christ. Making sure that all members, whether married or unattached are functional and knit together; '...compacted by that which every joint supplieth according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.' (Ephesians 4:16)

Singles Ministries at its best provides an innovative, insightful and inspirational opportunity to support members who despite sometimes being regarded as the uncomely or less honourably part of the body of Christ, can in fact often be seen to demonstrate abundant comeliness in their service to the household of faith (see 1 Corinthians 12:23-25). On this basis rather than being considered a non-starter, it's evident that the need for this unique and personal form of ministry should be regarded as an investment of distinct value, rendering deliberations regarding its necessity a 'no-brainer.'

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