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Many single people feel isolated, lonely and ignored in their churches, and some have given up on church altogether. That's the worrying conclusion of the largest ever survey of single Christians in the UK, undertaken by dating website Christian Connection.

The survey was completed by nearly 3,000 single churchgoers, and the results make for sobering reading. More than a third of respondents felt they were treated differently to people in couples. One in four said they often felt "inadequate or ignored", and 43% said their churches "didn't know what to do with them". Many said they felt more valued outside the Church than within it, and that they were excluded from leadership roles.

"One of our key findings is that while single Christians may feel accepted at church, they do not feel included," says statistician David Pullinger, who analysed the data for Christian Connection. "Singles often feel isolated and lonely in their churches. They feel invisible and they think about leaving. This is a time bomb for the Church."

With single women vastly outnumbering single men in the Church, and members taught that they should only marry other believers, single female households in particular are on the increase in the Church. Yet many people say their leaders offer no teaching that's relevant to their lives.

"Sermons often assume everyone in the congregation is married with a family," explains David. "The examples used are drawn from family life, and issues faced by single people are never touched upon. There can also be a lack of sensitivity to the pain and disappointment of people who've not had the family they longed for – for

Catherine Francis investigates the hidden pain of singles in the Church – and how to make your church a happier place for them

ingles Report

instance, in Mothering Sunday services.”

Another major issue is that church social events tend to revolve around families, with few activities and social opportunities for people without a partner, especially those over the age of 30.

“Couples and families tend to socialise together,” adds David. “Single people often aren’t invited – until they get a partner, when the invitations miraculously start coming in. Even worse, invitations can instantly dry up if someone becomes widowed or divorced. Many single women feel they’re treated as a ‘threatening presence’ to married couples. We received more than 9,500 comments in the survey, and many of the stories were heartbreaking.”

Married households are now in the minority in the UK. The continuing focus on family life could prove catastrophic for churches that have nothing to offer the singles in their congregations, or their local communities.

Founder of Christian Connection, Jackie Elton, says, “The world is changing, but churches aren’t reflecting those changes or meeting the needs of the growing numbers of single people in their congregations. In many churches, theology around singleness seems rooted somewhere in the 1950s. Singles often feel marginalised in their own churches. As the number of unmarried people grows in society, it’s more important than ever that churches find ways to make them feel welcomed and included.”

“I didn’t know where I fitted in”

“When I returned to church in my late 30s, the first thing that struck me was how it all revolved around families. It had very little to do with the life I knew as a single professional. All the ministries focused on marriage, toddlers, kids’ groups, youth clubs ... I didn’t know where I fitted in. I felt ‘less than’, which I hadn’t experienced outside the Church. Even the mentors – older, wiser women to learn from – had married young and stayed at home. Not to say they had nothing to offer, but living alone and providing for yourself is a very different experience.

“Less than 50% of people in the UK are married, but the Church hasn’t adapted to changing demographics. A lot of energy goes into attracting young people, but there’s no strategy for holding onto those over 35 and single. The most damaging thing is when people put the onus back on you to deal with the issue, which is hurtful and disheartening. Leaders need to change the culture from the top down. It’s about good practice versus bad practice. And ultimately, it’s about kindness, strengthening relationships and fostering community.”

Caroline Blyth, 43, London



“A morning of being shunned didn’t appeal”

“As a vicar’s wife, I always kept an eye out for the singles in our congregation, and we regularly invited them for meals and Christmas. But after my husband and I separated some years ago and I moved to a new area, I found not all churches are like that. I visited several and at some of them, no one even spoke to me. A morning of being shunned didn’t appeal, so I gave up. It takes courage to arrive at church on your own, and it’s hard to penetrate a community as a single person if you have to do all the work yourself. Recently, I tried another church. It was

welcoming and quite good with younger singles, but there isn’t much for middle-aged singles.

“Leaders need to tackle the issue head on, or they’ll end up with no congregations. Cultivate a culture where people invite each other round for lunch, especially new people and those on their own. Consciously look around to see who might like an invitation. Have ‘hospitality Sundays’. As a teenager, my church even coached us on how to greet new people, complete with role play – it’s worth considering.”

Gill Ashton, 53, Derbyshire



Did you know? 1-in-3 Christians is single

Source: Evangelical Alliance

"God doesn't take out the bins!"

"For me, the biggest challenge for singles lies in our invisibility. The Church generally assumes that one graduates from the 20/30s groups into marriage and families. If that doesn't happen, no one knows what to do with you. In one committee meeting recently, it was suggested the women's group should be called *Wives & Wine!* In seven years, I recall only one set of intercessions for single people, yet we regularly pray for families' concerns. Those prayers focused on loneliness, but loneliness isn't always about being alone – some of my loneliest times have been in church, surrounded by families.

"I struggle with people who think that because their husbands are non-churchgoers, they're in a similar position to singles because we're both on our own on Sundays. But living alone is hard work – nothing happens unless I make it happen, and it's tiring always having to make the first move with married friends. And don't get me started on the super-holy who think a relationship with God is enough to compensate for living solo. God doesn't take out the bins!"

Dr Sara Batts, 40, Essex



How to make your church a happier place for singles

The news isn't all bad: some church leaders are taking active steps to understand and support singles. London church Holy Trinity Brompton is developing a singleness course, to run alongside its marriage and engagement courses. The Bridge Church in Buckhurst Hill, Essex, is actively building a ministry to singles through Christian Single Mix. And the Evangelical Alliance is working to raise awareness of singleness issues to churches around the country.

So how can you make your church more singles-friendly? According to Christian Connection, the number one thing unmarried Christians would like from their churches is teaching that recognises and addresses the issues in their lives.

"People want guidance on the dilemmas they face in daily life," says David Pullinger. "Dating concerns; how to live well with the disappointment of not becoming a parent; dealing with loneliness; the ethics of assisted conception for single women; explaining your commitment to waiting for a Christian spouse to non-Christian colleagues ... These are the kinds of things people would like covered."

Next on the list come social activities that are relevant to singles (including single parents) and providing hospitality. Consider what kind of events can be enjoyed by everyone in the church, regardless of marital or family status, and actively encourage members to include single people when hosting meals or going out. "Feeling excluded was a consistent

thread," says David. "We had lots of stories along the lines of, 'As soon as I got a partner, I started getting invitations – but it was before that I needed them!'"

Being inclusive and providing role models for singles also came high on the list. "Most church activities revolve around family life, one way or another, and couples often lead," says David. "Single people sometimes feel like unpaid labour to keep the church running for the benefit of families. They'd like to be included as fully operational members of the church, and have their gifts recognised. They don't want to see a separation between married people and singles."

According to Christian Connection's research, the top 12 things singles would like their churches to do are (in order of importance):

- 1 Talk about issues affecting singles
- 2 Organise or enable social activities
- 3 Offer hospitality
- 4 Provide models of singleness
- 5 Pray for people personally or in the church
- 6 Be inclusive in all church activities
- 7 Organise or enable singles groups
- 8 Be in contact through phone, e-mail or text
- 9 Provide or facilitate practical help
- 10 Provide practical help in finding a partner
- 11 Know and recommend singles events
- 12 Seek the single person's viewpoint