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# ARE EVANGELICAL CHURCHES BAD FOR SINGLETONS?

by Chine Mbubaegbu

Think of a good church and you picture a loving community of believers who worship God together, break bread together and are family together.

A good church looks out for the needs of all of its members and looks outwardly to bring transformation to its towns and communities and the people who live in them.

But Church, we have a problem. Because for a significant proportion of single Christians in this country, church is not a welcoming place, but rather it is a place where they feel isolated and ignored. For them, Church is not inclusive and open-armed, but exclusive and a home for happy families.

While this may not be the intention, this is the perception among many single Christians, according to a recent survey by dating site Christian Connection.

given little teaching on relationships and singleness compared to other types of church whose members have similar expectations.

"In other words, members of evangelical churches say that they receive the expectations of behaviour on marriage and sex, but without being equipped or supported in either their singleness or dating."

## SINGLE PROFILE

One mistake that churches can often make is seeing 'singles' as young people who are yet to marry. Some singletons are much older, some are single parents raising families, some are widows and widowers,

Elton calls "excruciating" – moments in church; where the congregation might be told to get into groups to pray for each other's marriages, paying no mind to the recent divorcee. Or when the language of the family creeps into sermons and reference is made to 'your wife' or 'your husband' or 'your children' in a way which therefore renders the single person as other, or outside the norm.

"There are single Christians who find it very difficult to attend church regularly," says Jackie, who started Christian Connection 13 years ago. "They feel that this is just not about them."

"For a significant proportion of single Christians in this country, church is a place where they feel isolated and ignored."

The study of almost 3,000 people found that nearly four in 10 single Christians felt "inadequate or ignored" within their churches. And 37 per cent felt they were not treated as family members, but as outsiders – a member of the audience looking in on a scene in which only family members get the parts.

And evangelical churches are the worst culprits, the survey found. The single Christian in an evangelical church was more likely to disagree that singleness was a positive choice for them; and also felt less part of their churches than those from other denominations.

Researcher Dr David Pullinger wrote: "They are much less happy than members of all other churches in being single and enjoy the benefits of singleness less than those members of other types of church.

"Looking at the comparison suggests a reason. They feel expected to marry someone of the Christian faith, avoid sex and yet are

some are divorcees. Their needs are not the same, nor can all of their problems be solved by throwing a singles event where they can meet prospective partners.

With between 30 and 40 per cent of the UK's population identifying as single, the term encompasses a varied and significant proportion of society – one which many churches seem to be ignoring, according to the study.

David Pullinger suggests reasons why single people are not being catered well enough for in churches. "There's this feeling that you can't be an evangelical minister unless you have got four children," he jokes. "It's deep-rooted and dates back to the protestant church's split from the Roman church. The focus on the family was a reaction against the idea that you were more holy if you were a celibate monk."

The elevation of the family within church life can lead to some difficult – and what Christian Connection founder Jackie

Jackie is trying to encourage church leaders to engage in the conversation and to listen to the voices of single people. But she says it has proven difficult over the years. "When we first set up Christian Connection, we couldn't get church leaders to take it seriously even though we got national press coverage.

"A lot of the leaders I have spoken to are really focused on the family even in urban areas. Some just don't have any awareness of the number of single people they have."

## DIFFICULT PROCESS

Neither Jackie nor David feel that there is a simple solution to the problem. They recognise the complexities but feel the conversations should be happening nonetheless.

The problem is two-fold: how do churches reach out to single people in their areas and how do they cater for the specific needs of singletons within their congregations?





David says that church leaders need to think strategically about how they attract single people to their churches. "They need to go where single people go. Churches have few contact points with where single people go in general. They have more contact with families – youth groups and mums and toddlers groups, for example.

"It is a big challenge to the Church to find out all the huge variety of things that single people – many of whom don't want to be labelled 'single' – go to. But I do feel there's a sense of urgency in this. If we don't reach out to single people, the Church is going to decline."

When it comes to catering to the needs of those single people already in church, the research showed that evangelicals were more likely to hold their church leader responsible for making sure this happened. The study found evangelical single people wanted more equipping and support related to singleness – but not necessarily in sermons.

Jackie recognised however the difficulties in teaching on singleness. "There really is almost nothing about singleness as we know it, or dating, in the Bible. One could say the same about marriage. Much of what is said about any of this is derived from people's

interpretation of the Christian lifestyle and have been transformed into irrefutable truths.

"The reality is we need to dig deep into our Christian understanding to approach these matters rather than simply follow things as rules and models when they were never intended in that context.

"We have to talk about singleness a bit more than we do and this needs to be done in the context of what it means to be a genuinely inclusive church. It is too easy and too comfortable to fill the pews with families."

[christianconnection.co.uk](http://christianconnection.co.uk)