**Churches aim for sensitivity to singles**

###### Written by

##### Peter Smith

##### Gannett

LOUISVILLE, Ky. -- When he looks out over his small congregation on Sunday mornings, Steven Schafer sees a picture of modern American family life.

About half of the congregants come from what was once typical -- families headed by married couples.

The rest include "a lot of single parents, a lot of divorced parents, a lot of grandparents raising their kids," said Schafer, pastor of Ridgewood Baptist Church. "The traditional family is not the norm."

That presents a major challenge to churches, which are struggling to respond to the revolution in how Americans structure their families, households and romances.

Nearly half of American adults today are unmarried -- whether never-married, currently divorced, separated or widowed, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Married couples account for just less than half of all American households, down from 71 percent in 1970, according to the U.S. Census.

Yet still today, married people are more likely than singles to be church attendees. And churches often seem focused on the nuclear family, whether it's in the sermon topics or the posters on the walls or the graded Sunday Schools.

The Rev. Kevin Cosby, pastor of St. Stephen Church, said his congregation is trying to create a culture in which "you're not abnormal if you're single."

"One is a whole number," he said. "You're not a fraction."

Census figures show that men are marrying six years later and women seven years later on average than their counterparts 50 years ago.

Some scholars describe an extended phase of "emerging adulthood" for many twentysomethings, marked more by exploration than commitment in work, love or faith.

"As they're searching for identity, their religious identity is set aside sometimes," said Carole Goodwin, director of youth and young adult ministry for the Archdiocese of Louisville. Often, she said, young singles embrace the label "spiritual but not religious."

Meanwhile, many adults, particularly men, don't want to marry until they gain financial independence, Cosby said.

"Because of the economy, psychologically, I've found that many men stay away from marriage because they don't feel like they have the resources to fulfill the traditional roles that husbands play," Cosby said.

Churches can make potential members squirm in other ways.

Many modern families involve situations that churches have traditionally held as morally suspect at best -- such as divorce, unwed parenthood and living together outside of marriage.

In that sense, gays and lesbians -- whose role has been fiercely debated in churches -- have only borne the brunt of the far broader wrangling over how to respond to the revolutions in sexual and family life.

Greg Klass, 26, a leader of a Northeast young-adult group called DRIVEN, said its goal is to give singles a way to "do life together."

"A lot of times the people in our age group, they see the club scene, they see kind of the relationships that are popular in culture, they'll turn to that quickly," he said. "People have a need to belong. If the church forgets about them, they're going to find that in another place."

Jacob Davis of Louisville, a 28-year-old single, said churches he attended in the past didn't "seem to know what to do with single people once they graduate college." Sometimes churches would channel singles into their own Sunday school class or with younger college kids, and they seemed "a bit over-anxious about my lack of a spouse."

Davis now attends Sojourn Community Church, a growing congregation of largely young adults, about half of whom are single. The church organizes through small community groups that combine people of various ages and marital statuses -- which Davis prefers to singles-only groups.

"Singleness seems to be a bit more respected," he said.