

## The era of living single

*Florida Baptists struggle to be relevant to those who are not married*  
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### CONVENTION COVERAGE

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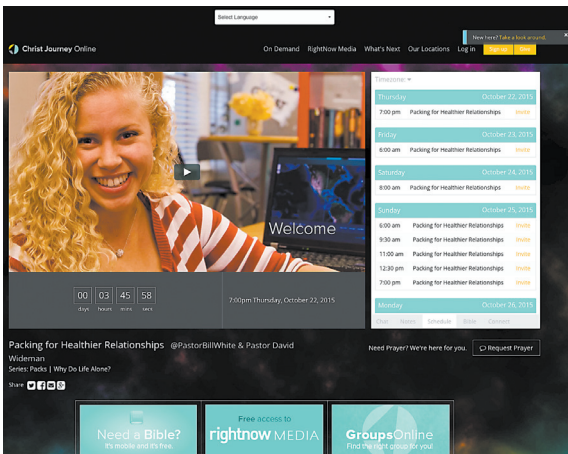
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# Florida Baptists divided on how best

BY NICOLE KALIL  
Florida Baptist Witness

At a time when there are more single adults in America than ever before, many Florida Baptist churches are among the congregations that have made the strategic decision to minimize their direct ministry to single adults. Instead, these churches are choosing to integrate singles into their broader adult ministries.

The Witness has spent the past several weeks taking a look at the implications of this trend by talking to unmarried adults and the churches that are trying to serve them. What we found is that while some singles are highly engaged in the places where they worship, fellowship and serve, others feel frustrated by the lack of connections with people in similar life circumstances.

What, exactly, is at stake for Florida Baptists?

Single adults now comprise 53.5 percent of the population in Florida, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. And the Gainesville metro area has the highest percentage of single adults in the nation—62.1 percent.

"The need has gone up, but the churches [serving singles specifically] has gone down," said Kris Swiatocho, director of The Singles Network Ministries, a nondenominational ministry devoted to helping church and lay leaders establish and grow healthy singles ministries. She said that singles ministries really took off when churches began offering support classes like DivorceCare and GriefShare.

"Men and women began to have certain needs met, and they started coming to church," Swiatocho said.

## The state of singles ministry

However, when the Great Recession struck in late 2007, many churches that had a dedicated staff person to shepherd single adults began to eliminate that position, among others. Now, even though the U.S. economy has long since recovered, Swiatocho said that many churches have moved toward putting a lay leader in charge of their singles ministry.

"Ninety percent of singles ministry is led by laypeople," she said.

Such was the case for one member of a Jacksonville-area Baptist church. The woman, who asked that her name not be used, said that since her singles pastor left, attempts by laypeople to fill the gap have been unsuccessful.

And while she attends a ladies Sunday school class, because she's never been married and has no children she can't always relate to the other women in the class who frequently talk about their children and grandchildren.

"I would like [my church] to establish a real department with a dedicated person who has a heart for [singles ministry]," she said. "It needs to be someone who understands that we're not all at the same life stage."

Another single adult, who reached out to us via Facebook, said: "Some churches do a beautiful job because they are intentional. And other churches have deeply offended people by ignoring them."

The problem goes beyond Florida Baptist churches.

Steve Grissom, founder of Church Initiative and creator of

DivorceCare, GriefShare and Single and Parenting, said there is a nationwide trend of churches moving away from singles ministry.

"It's not unique to the Baptist denomination. But we've seen, even in the SBC at the LifeWay level, a taking apart of singles ministry," he said.

Bruce Raley, director of church partnerships at LifeWay, said there's been no intentional change in how the Southern Baptist Convention approaches single adult ministry, but there has been a change in church practice.

He said that after the single adult ministry boom of the mid-'90s, churches began to see that the ministry was geared more toward middle-aged singles than any other group.

Churches also began to see that younger adults were not as interested in being labeled as "single."

"It's always been true for younger adults," Raley said. "They don't want to be labeled and categorized. They want to be mainstreamed into the adult ministry of the church itself."

That has certainly been the case for Armando Dominguez, a 25-year-old single who attends Northside Baptist Church in Hialeah.

He said that many of the singles in his church are more concerned with being a part of all the ministries of the church instead of something that is geared specifically for singles.

"I'm happy to interact with everyone," he said. "If it was just [an event for] singles, I don't think many would go."

Some Florida Baptist churches have adopted this all-inclusive philosophy and have been pleased with the results.

## Churchwide integration

Jake English, college and single adults pastor at Idlewild Baptist Church in Lutz, said that "the glory days of singles ministry" are over and, because of that, churches have had to adjust the way they relate to singles and help singles relate to the church as a whole.

"Singles used to have a vibrant culture and so much more community," English said. "We're combating the culture. We've lost the committed sense of going to church."

Like others, English has noticed that there are some single adults who don't necessarily want to identify as singles because church becomes one of the only places where they are set apart by their marital status.

"The segregated church isn't indicative of what they see in work life," he said.

Brendon Schlappi, who works with the single adults pastor as the ministry associate at Idlewild, said they have worked toward helping singles find their place within the church body.

"There's not a huge focus on the people being single," Schlappi said. "That's not the truest thing about them, and not what defines them."

Rather, Schlappi said, the church focuses on helping them understand who they are in Jesus and on building their intimacy with God.

Idlewild has a consistent group of almost 200 single adults between the ages of 25 and 65 who attend on a regular basis.



Some Florida Baptist churches are ministering to single adults through conferences like this one at Chets Creek Church.

Eric Want, lead pastor of Freedom Christian Church in Sarasota, shares a similar perspective on singles ministry.

"It's about integration and coming together," Want said.

He previously served single adults at First Baptist Church of Sarasota, but left to start Freedom Christian Church in 2012. After seeing singles done as a stand-alone ministry in a big-church context, Want has taken a different approach in connecting to singles in his new work, which is significantly smaller than his previous church.

And while Want's church occasionally does have a social event geared toward singles, his main focus is bringing everyone "into the family."

"Come in whether you're single or married, we're going to welcome you into the community of the church," he said.

Want said that labeling someone as single makes them feel as if they're a "different breed."

"They think there must be something specifically for singles or they can't belong," he said.

With 120-130 attendees on an average Sunday morning, Want finds it easier to foster the feeling of community throughout his entire congregation.

"The church is a representation of the family," he said. "In a family, you have the mom and dad who are married and the kids who are single."

To cultivate the sense of community at Freedom Christian, Want encourages his single adults to participate in all facets of the church, doing the things that "everybody else does."

"You're as important as everybody else," he said. "Be involved in committees, help out in Sunday school, be welcomers and greeters."

James Ross, lead pastor at Mosaic Church in Crestview, said that while his church doesn't have many single adults, it has tried to find a balance between giving singles opportunities to relate to each other as well as to married adults.

He said striking the right balance for singles is important. "[Young singles] should be dis-

## Baptists find ways to help singles heal following divorce

One ministry that has been successful for many Florida Baptist churches is helping single adults through the painful process of divorce, including how to help them parent effectively going forward.

Robert Lloyd, director of single adults at Olive Baptist Church in Pensacola, said that 51 percent of all households in the United States are headed by a single adult. In Pensacola, within a 20-mile radius of his church, Lloyd discovered there are 70,000 single mothers.

"It shocked me to believe there were that many single moms," he said. "It shows me the immensity of the job God has called me to do."

One person shared the following comment with us via Facebook: "If you want to see the most overlooked group in the modern church today look no farther than adult singles—particularly those who are divorced."

Steve Grissom, the founder of DivorceCare, attributes the lack of singles ministry to churches moving toward a simpler, more streamlined church model.

"That is a valid vision when dealing with singles who are single by choice and not in the middle of a crisis," he said. "But to inject a person going through a divorce in the environment of a general home group is unfair to the group and unfair to the person."

Nicole Kalil

ciplined by someone who's married, unless they feel called to singleness," Ross said. "But they also need care from people who empathize with their walk of life."

Swiatocho agreed that the goal is always to "get singles beyond singles ministry to serve in all parts of the church."

"Singles should be allowed to lead or teach Sunday school, be on pastor search committees, finance committees, etc.," she said.

Unfortunately, Swiatocho said she has seen churches that say they want their single adults to mix in with the entire congregation but then are not allowed to hold any leadership roles other than in the children's or greeters' ministry.

"When a church has failed in its singles ministry, they will always say, 'We don't want to separate our singles out,'" she said. "Neither do we want to be separated out, but we would like some ministry to us, just like youth, kids, women, men, special needs and seniors."

Through the things singles have in common, churches can reach people better and ultimately get them to Christ, Swiatocho said.

## Singles ministry can still be found

Some Florida Baptist churches still have single-adult ministries with a dedicated staff person leading them, and they are thriving.

Bob Calhoun, assistant pastor of adult singles ministries at North Jacksonville Baptist Church, believes a successful singles ministry comes in a balanced approach with a goal of helping singles build healthy relationships.

Calhoun said that he has seen a change in focus since the single adult ministry of the '90s.

"Back 20 years ago, [singles ministry] was a mile wide and an inch deep," he said. "Then it was about fellowships and retreats, but now it's about discipleship."

North Jacksonville's singles Sunday school classes are "loosely age-graded" to include

# ... to serve growing singles population



in Jacksonville. (Courtesy/Kris Swiatocho)

single adults from 18 to 70 years old. In addition to classes by age, there are classes based on interests so that people of different ages but similar affinities can develop relationships.

Helping singles in every stage of life build healthy relationships is Calhoun's main goal. From adults in their 20s waiting for a mate and starting a career to people in their 30s and 40s recovering from divorce and raising kids alone to single seniors dealing with retirement and health concerns, Calhoun wants to make sure single adults are learning relationship skills they can use in every facet of life.

And while each stage calls for a different level of support, Calhoun believes singles can best be served by serving others.

"They used to be a church within the church, and that's not what they need," he said. "They need to be integrated into the church and serve on committees and leadership boards, getting to know people of other ages and marital statuses."

Robert Lloyd, director of single adults at Olive Baptist Church in Pensacola, said that while there are some singles who want to be integrated into the whole church, that's not the norm for the typical single adult.

"There is a group of singles that wants to be integrated into the whole life ministry of the church, and it's the singles [who] have been raised in church," he said. "These are people who are comfortable in church and in who they are in singleness and in their life. They are folks who have been raised to be regular attenders."

Lloyd said that among unchurched single adults, many older single adults are looking for support as they are confronted with divorce or the death of a spouse, and the younger singles are looking for other young singles with a desire to marry.

He said it can be a hard ministry for someone who hasn't been specifically called by God to minister to single adults.

"Some are willing to do it, but are not called to do it and have no passion for it," Lloyd said. "It's

so difficult, and you deal with stuff like divorce and cohabitation on a daily basis."

Swiatocho said the difficulties inherent in serving such a diverse demographic often lead to the failure of a singles ministry.

"Singles ministry requires way more work than most ministries," she said.

Lloyd said single-adult ministry "saved his life" in 1983 when he found himself divorced with two small kids. He came to Olive specifically because it had a singles ministry. When he was asked to come on staff part time in 2005, his own experience as a single adult helped fuel his passion to reach out to singles in his church and community. In 2013, Olive brought him on full time.

### The way forward

Swiatocho said that successful churches find ways to make singles feel valued and included.

"Not every church is called to have a singles ministry, but all churches are called to minister to singles," she said.

Some singles pastors believe that the future of singles ministry could be in jeopardy if churches don't begin to recognize that changes in culture require changes to ministry approaches. With young adults postponing marriage and an ever-steady divorce rate creating new singles every day, the church needs to make sure it's ministering to singles of every age in every stage of life.

"We have to acknowledge this segment of the population, and find a way to communicate that we want them to be a part of the church and then prove it by offering things that will minister to them," Lloyd said.

Swiatocho thinks the implications of disappearing singles ministries go far beyond the singles themselves.

"Healthy and whole families come from healthy and whole singles," she said. "So why isn't our goal to get singles healthy and whole?"

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Singles at Idlewild Baptist Church in Lutz enjoy a Memorial Day barbecue. (Rachel Arocha)

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