



Lifestyle

Single nation: Churches work to support the unmarried

Saturday, February 04, 2012 12:00 AM

For The Salisbury Post

How does the church reach the 14th largest nation in the world?

Well, as with all other nations, we sponsor missionaries, train them in cross-cultural communications, equip them to relate to the particular society, immerse them in the people group and support them with our resources. That's how we normally do it – except with this “nation.”

This nation is populated with over 101 million adults - and growing. Indeed if it were a country, it would make up the 14th largest nation in the world. That's a big country - Germany, the largest country in Europe, is ranked 17th in the world.

This nation's population is as diverse as any other nation's. Some are poor, some rich. Some are well educated, some barely literate. Some live in rural settings, some hail from the more urban centers.

In fact, their marital status may be the one thing - at times the only thing - they all have in common. Beyond personality and position, background and birthplace, they are all single adults in America. Single by chance, change (death) or choice – whether theirs or someone else's (separation and divorce).

How many missionaries are trained to focus on that group? What sort of cross-cultural “awareness” seminars are scheduled? How many people are actually aware that the population is exploding beyond any time in history? How many churches are ready and equipped to help this “nation”?

Viewing single adults as a specific target of church ministry is not a new idea. Author Rich Hurst writes: “Singles were the new kids on the block in the 1970s ... By the 1980s, every church had a singles ministry, and every church had countless resources for the singles and their leaders: conferences, retreats, Bible studies for singles, teaching videos for singles pastors, cruises, and much more.” He continues: “But what did we do? We took single adults who were looking for answers and put into fellowship groups where they studied topics like relationships, loneliness and recovery. We encouraged them to be consumers, not partners.”

Mike Regele, who wrote “Death of the Church,” said, “You can only talk about singles issues so much before you kill the singles ministry.”

One single man responding to a November 2009 article in “Christianity Today” wrote, “The (singles) group ... seemed to be making sure that everyone is liked and everyone felt good. There is not talk about ... spiritual growth.”

While singles and married adults have a need to grow and mature in many areas, there are unique challenges singles face. Some of these issues, depending on age and lifestage of the single adult, may include identity, relationships, sexuality, single parenting, divorce recovery, grief, career direction, and sometimes marriage preparation. We at First Baptist have had as many as 10 support groups for adults who are going through life transitions. Nationally recognized small group programs like DivorceCare, Spiritual Divorce, GriefShare, Single and Parenting, are ongoing support ministries, as well as Hurts, Habits and HangUps: Celebrate Recovery, our addictions group are regular offerings.

Community seminars like last year's “How Not to Date a Jerk” and our newest seminar, “Jesus: Single Like Me,” are open



to all adult singles in the community. (Note information about an upcoming event at the end of this article.)

In many circles, despite their growing numbers, some single adults feel like a fifth wheel in a group composed mainly of married couples. This leaves singles sometimes feeling left out, misunderstood, and in some cases very lonely. It's not that leaders intentionally leave singles out of their planning. For many, it's simply a lack of understanding. That is gained quickly when a pastor or church leader has a family member who goes through the death of a spouse or divorce. The emotional needs of single adults hit, quite literally, close to home.

Author and speaker Carolyn Coons reminds us that "the church needs to expand on the term 'family,' moving from a traditional definition (which only describes an ever-diminishing factor) to one that includes singles, widows, single parent families, extended families, expanded families, stepfamilies and blended families."

While Americans still cherish the ideal of marriage, many are pessimistic about finding a lasting partner. The church finds itself in the delicate position of holding a standard of marriage and parenthood. We must respond compassionately to the following realities: 40 percent of first marriages end in divorce (not including the separated); 60 percent of second marriages end in divorce; 73 percent of third marriages end in divorce. Cohabitation statuses have grown 200 percent in the last 20 years.

Many churches have responded by providing divorce recovery workshops. First Baptist also sees the need to help adults understand the dynamic of building and maintaining healthy relationships. We also offer premarital and previously married counseling using the PREPARE/ENRICH inventories, the most popular and effective relational programs. These inventories and the subsequent counseling sessions have proven to be extremely effective in identifying strength areas in relationships as well as growth areas that couples need to address.

Because many singles have been hurt by relationships, any ministry to and with singles must provide a climate of openness and acceptance. For six months before we began our Singled Out ministry, we went on outings, ate out together, had game nights and went on day trips, just to get to know each other and develop a bond. Three years later, we still do these same activities, in addition to retreats and, most importantly, mission projects.

Peachtree Presbyterian Church near Atlanta's primary method for reaching singles would be to invite their friends from work and join them on Saturdays doing a Habitat for Humanity project. Then they would invite them to join in on the Sunday morning activities. Years ago, McClean Bible Church located on the outskirts of Washington, DC shifted their singles ministry focus from social activities and study groups to servant ministry projects. In Phoenix, another church's singles group participated in a Back-to-School Day where they handed out backpacks and school clothes for hundreds.

The Singled Out ministry at First Baptist Salisbury has found this to be the most exciting phase of our ministry. In the past three years, we have been involved with numerous mission programs, from shipping shoes to earthquake victims to sending baseball caps to prisoners.

So, how do we reach this 14th largest nation in the world? While there are hints from past incarnations of singles ministry, there are new forms that are based not so much on ministry to single adults but rather mission with single adults.

We must remember that this nation is as diverse as any other: they are young and old, never married, separated, divorced, and widowed. They are childless, parents and grandparents. Some are students, professionals, employed, unemployed and underemployed. They are believers and skeptics, faithful and seekers.

They are much like the world that they are called to serve.

"Jesus: Single Like Me," a celebration event for Single Adults, will be held at First Baptist Church of Salisbury on Feb.



10 from 7-9 p. m. and Feb. 11 from 9 a. m. -Noon. The featured speaker is Kris Swiatacho, director of "The Singles Network" Ministries and co-author of Singles & Relationships. Tickets are \$15 for both days and \$10 for either day. Contact Rod or Lisa at 704-633-0431 or email [lisa@fbcsalisbury.org](mailto:lisa@fbcsalisbury.org) for registration information.

Kris Swiatacho is the President and Director of TheSinglesNetwork.org Ministries and FromHisHands.com Ministries. Kris has served in ministry in various capacities for the last 25 years. An accomplished trainer and mentor, Kris has a heart to reach and grow leaders so they will in turn reach and grow others. She is the author of 3 books: Singles and Relationships: A 31-Day Experiment, co-authored with Dick Purnell of Single Life Resources; From the Manger to the Cross: The Women in Jesus Life and most recent, Jesus, Single Like Me with Study Questions (includes a leaders guide and conference/retreat of the same name). Kris is currently working on your 4th book: FAQ's of Singles Ministry coming this fall, 2012.

TheSinglesNetwork.org Ministries helps churches, pastors and single adult leaders evaluate, develop and support their single adult ministries through high-energy speaking engagements, results-oriented consulting and training and leadership development conferences and seminars. Click [here](#) to request a FREE "How to Start a Single Adult Ministry" guide.

FromHisHands.com Ministries is Kris's speaking ministry. If you've ever heard her speak, you know that Kris is the kind of speaker who keeps the crowd captivated, shares great information and motivates people to make a difference in the lives of those around them! She speaks to all church audiences on everything from "first impression" ministry to women's topics to singles and young adults. She can speak on a Sunday morning, at a woman's retreat or for a single adults conference. Bring Kris to your church today!

