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WELCOME TO SMALL VILLE

by
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Making the **most** of life in churches & towns where **singles are scarce**

I SLIPPED INTO a hard, unfriendly folding chair at the back of the conference center room. I was tired from a long week at work and what felt like an equally long drive to the facility where my church's women's retreat was held. As my gaze settled on the backs and sides of dozens of heads, I didn't see a single "single" soul.

As the evening — and entire weekend — wore on, my suspicions were confirmed. Not only was I the only non-married woman there, but all the women were married with children.

I should've known. The first time I attended Sunday School at this church, five of the 15 people in the 20-somethings class were pregnant. The church was filled with babies, small children, and activities geared toward families.

Nevertheless, because I strongly believed that God wanted me to be in this church, I've not only stayed — I've also been blessed.

If you find yourself in a similar church or small town where singles don't exactly abound, it may take a little effort and a willingness to step out of your comfort zone, but you'll find an enriching array of valuable relationships and opportunities to explore.

SURVEY YOURSELF

The first step in finding your place in a church or community with few singles is to take an inventory of your own desires. It may be to make new friends, to find a supportive shoulder for the single-parent journey, or to meet a potential spouse.

"We're finding a desperate need among singles to connect," says Kris Swiatocho, director of TheSinglesNetwork.org ministries. "A lot of people are in a hurry to connect — whether it's romantic or friendship."

Swiatocho says that while it's good to have these goals, it's crucial to recognize that above all other desires, you must seek God, and that your ultimate value, meaning, and purpose rest in Christ. Without a relationship and connection to Christ, you'll never be content, no matter what the size of your church or how many single adults live in your area.

"[Think:] I'm going to learn everything I can until God changes it — until I move to the next place," she says.

VALUE YOUR SURROUNDINGS

You may be a never-married thirtysomething attending a church where Sunday after Sunday you hear the pastor enthusiastically announce the family picnic, the young couples' Bible study, and the parenting course. Or you may be a widowed dad living in a rural community where there's no such thing as a single-parent group.

While it may be difficult to meet people you identify with, God can help you develop a meaningful appreciation for your surroundings — and make the most of them.

For example, if you don't have kids and your church focuses on families, thank God for its commitment to this vital institution, and find ways you can support them.

"I don't go to a Sunday School class because I can't find one that actually fits my stage in life," says Emily Williams, who lives in Woodland Park, Colo., population 5,500. "Instead, I teach Sunday School."

Natalee Roth, who used to live in a small Kansas community, says, "Talk to your neighbors — this could lead to a witnessing opportunity. You can easily isolate yourself in a small town and feel sorry for yourself — I did this a lot — so make friends where you can. It'll stretch you, and you'll learn from these people."

YOUNG AND OLD ALIKE

As you commit to value — rather than despise — your environment, you'll meet people of all ages who can potentially enrich your life.

"I learned from the older people I met and found a lot of joy in being with junior-high kids," Roth says. "I lived with a very active 80-year-old woman. We'd sit together outside and chat in the evenings. I enjoyed talking with the mid-30s couple who lived across the street and were nonbelievers, and the couple next door in their 70s. We laughed together a lot, and I learned from all of them."

Because you aren't part of a thriving singles' group, with separate Sunday School classes, Bible studies, and events, you have the unique opportunity to see the family of God — 75-year-old retirees and 33-year-old mothers and temper-tantrum-prone 2-year-olds — in action, and develop invaluable relationships with many of its members. Older people can offer you insight and grandmotherly hugs. Kids bring laughter and fresh perspective. An effort — even a small one — will often result in new friendships.

“If [people] don't come up to you right off the bat — which they're likely to do — don't be afraid to introduce

Perhaps you've discovered there are several unattached adults in your church, but no official singles ministry. Kris Swiatocho, who has helped develop many singles groups, recommends the following steps for initiating such a ministry in your community of believers.

1. Pray. Get a small group together — even if it's just a married couple with a heart for singles and yourself — to pray regularly for a future ministry. Keep a journal of what God is doing.

2. Research. Check your church roster to determine how many singles are part of the congregation, and find out approximately how many single adults live in your town. Also, draft some goals and a purpose for the potential ministry; calling other churches with active singles fellowships may give you some specific direction.

3. Approach church leadership. Speak with your pastor or other appropriate church leaders, explaining from your research why this ministry is important in the church and/or the community, and ask for the church's genuine support and accountability. You might be able to put an announcement in the bulletin or add a page to your church's Web site.

4. Continue to seek God's will. It's possible that you'll discover that your church can't support a full-fledged singles ministry. Instead, you may wish to have occasional social events, organize a Bible study with married and single individuals in the same age bracket, or gather together a community group. If you've discovered that the ministry is full of possibilities, ask God for further direction in choosing leadership and in touching the lives of singles in your church and town.

Great Gatherings

A group setting can be an ideal catalyst for future friendships. Below are several ideas for gatherings:

- **EAT TOGETHER** Arrange for a progressive dinner, banana split night, Saturday brunch, or holiday banquet.
- **WORSHIP** Gather around a piano, guitar, or campfire and sing praises to God, or organize a Bible study.
- **GO OUT** Plan to attend a concert, community festival, or sporting event, or spend a day at an amusement park.
- **SERVE OTHERS** Host a dinner for your church's senior citizens, schedule a free car wash for the community, or gather several people to volunteer a Saturday at a local charity.
- **PLAN A PARTY** Organize a 60s costume party, winter indoor beach bash, board game night, or dinner-and-a-movie theme evening.
- **PLAY** Get several people to join you for a day of skiing, boarding, or snowshoeing, or plan volleyball and basketball games in a community gym. In the summer, meet for baseball, hiking, biking, or a weekend camping trip.

yourself, because I don't know anyone, especially in my church, who would snub you,” says Brian White, who has lived in his Idaho hometown of 600 for most of his life. “You would most likely be welcomed, invited over for dinner by several people, asked all sorts of questions, and be offered something to do in the church before you got another sentence out.”

This is also an ideal time to glean valuable knowledge from those around you — knowledge that other singles wouldn't necessarily possess. Swiatocho suggests embarking on a mentoring relationship, either as the mentored or the mentor. Or, if you're interested in tying the knot someday, hang out with married people and observe their relational and parenting skills. White suggests planning activities that can be done as a group, rather than just as couples, to develop relationships with area families. (See “Great Gatherings” sidebar.)

HERE TO SERVE

Making a point to serve others in the church and community is certainly a way to develop connections with others who are and aren't single. And it steers you far away from pity parties. A wise preacher once said, “Don't ask what the church can do for you. Ask what you can do for the church.” The same could be said for your town.

If you love kids, consider volunteering in an after-school program or your church's youth group. Join a church-event planning-committee, or help out with a community festival or parade. White runs his church's audio and video equipment; Roth is a choir member in her family-oriented congregation. Volunteer opportunities are often advertised in church bulletins, on posters around town, and in local newspapers. You may even want to initiate a ministry or community group.



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“There are always places [at my church] I can help out, and not having a family to take up a lot of my attention allows me to help in areas others can't,” White says.

Several years ago, Swiatocho found herself in a church without a singles ministry where she believed God had placed her. The youth group had about 10 kids, and she decided to lend a hand. Although Swiatocho no longer attends there, God used her in the beginning stages of the ministry — today, it's more than 400 teens strong.

SEARCHING FOR SINGLES

While enriching your life by serving others and building relationships with people, you may still long for those with whom you can more directly identify.

Start by asking the pastor or church secretary if other single adults are part of your congregation, and then make an effort to meet them. (This conversation may also serve to make your church more aware of the needs of single adults.) If you're a single parent, ask your child's Sunday School teacher about other parents in similar situations, Swiatocho advises.

Also, look outside of your church or town for friends. Get involved in a Bible study or take a class that highlights one of your interests. See if you can join a larger church's singles group. The Internet is a solid source of information for Christian singles' events and groups of like-minded people in your area. (See “Connect Online” sidebar.)

Be prepared to take some initiative. If you find that there are several singles in your church or town but no active group,

An effort – even a small one – will often result in new friendships.

you may wish to organize an activity, such as a service project or a ski trip, to stimulate friendships.

The church or town you belong to may not currently afford you dozens of new friendships with single adults, but a God-centered perspective, a desire to build relationships with others of all ages and life stages, and a willingness to step forward to serve will enable you to thrive in your environment. As you take hold with both hands the opportunities to learn and to touch others' lives, you'll find yours changing as well. **CS**

Connect Online

Numerous Web sites offer listings of events where you can meet others, find ideas for starting a singles ministry, or receive encouragement and godly insight. Check out these sites:

- www.thesinglesnetwork.org — Ministry designed to network and provide resources and leadership development for single adults, their leaders, and pastors.
- www.4step.org/singles — Lists singles' events and church groups in various states.
- www.spfm.org — The Center for Single-Parent Family Ministry's site includes a list of churches with successful single-parent family groups, plus relevant articles.
- www.divorcecare.org — You'll find a directory of church-based DivorceCare groups and related resources.
- www.griefshare.org — Those grieving the loss of a spouse may find this site helpful; it includes a directory of church-based support groups.
- www.singlevolunteers.org — Single Volunteers, Inc.'s site lists groups of people in various areas across North America that organize volunteer projects.
- www.bsfiinternational.org — A non-denominational, international Bible study, BSF offers free classes for children and adults.
- www.communitybiblestudy.org — This interdenominational Bible study has classes in many communities across the United States.
- www.samjournal.com — An online magazine, this publication offers insights about starting a singles' ministry, plus other relevant articles and numerous links.