

Singles ministry tough, but vital

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RALEIGH, N.C.—Greg Belcher understands why many churches avoid keeping or starting a ministry specifically to "single adults."

It's tough.

A large part of the difficulty in singles ministry is the huge umbrella the term covers.

The Assembly of God's national Caribbean cruise for single adults drew about 175 people from 25 states. "Purposes of the cruise were for a healthy vacation, fun, travel and personal growth," said Dennis Franck, national director for single adult/young adult ministries for the Assembly of God churches.

"Singles" are not monolithic but fall across every age range and life spectrum. They are never married—like Belcher—divorced, separated and widowed. And they come in all ages, from very young adults just out of high school to senior adults who have lost a spouse after 50 years together.

Single adults have unique needs. Those under age 30 are concerned primarily with intimacy and careers. Their intimacy needs are wrapped up in whom they will marry. Over age 30, their needs are transitional, he said. Some have gone through a relationship that has ended, and some are coming to terms with the fact they may never marry.

Many singles are parents and often have needs. Many churches hesitate to

bring on a "needs-based ministry," Belcher said. And unfortunately, some churches don't quite know what to make of unmarried adults and are clumsy in their approach.

Belcher, singles pastor for the large [Hope Community Church in Raleigh, N.C.](#), committed to reach the bulging demographic of adults who are not married. Younger singles, especially, cringe at the "single" designation, but Belcher has not found a better term.

About 95 percent of people will marry, but nearly half will divorce, he said. Of those who get remarried, two-thirds will divorce. If they marry again, three-fourths will divorce.

"The church is not helping them to get whole," said Belcher, who admits many church members perceive single adults, especially never-marrieds, with an attitude that may be best defined as "mistrust."

Some never-marrieds skip their high school class reunions because they dread the incredulity and inevitable questions—"You're not married? You don't have kids?"—as well as the implication there is something wrong with them.

Still, Belcher views singles ministry as "kind of a marriage ministry." Since the vast majority of people will one day marry, he wants to help them develop a strong identity in Christ that will lower divorce rates.

"Singles ministry is, for me, an amazing opportunity, an untapped entrepreneurial opportunity to change lives like never before," Belcher said.

In Raleigh, often identified as a premier city for singles in America because of its universities and high-tech work force, few churches take advantage of what every corporate marketer knows—how to identify their product to the singles market.

Another difficulty is that many single adults are single parents. Lori Little, who has written curriculum for single moms, said if the mothers are not involved in the body of Christ, neither are their children.

Of 18 million single moms in America, she said, only about 10 percent are in church.

When single adult ministry was prominent, with publications devoted to Christian singles and national conferences held for them, Labor Day events at national conference centers like Ridgecrest drew 3,000. This year Belcher said organizers expect 300.

A major singles event in Oklahoma was cancelled for lack of registration. "The churches just aren't pushing it," he said.

"You have to work hard to make sure a single adult ministry stays Christ focused," Belcher said. "The gravitational pull of single adult ministry is to become something you don't want it to be."

Belcher, who was a senior pastor in Marietta, Ga., before joining Hope Community as its first full-time singles minister, said the number of people who have come through the church through various ministries who indicated they are "single" has increased from 800 to 2,400 in the past 12 months. About 900 circulate fairly regularly in the singles ministry.

Nationally, only 13 percent of all churches report offering single adult-specific activities.

According to researcher James Tanner, only 2.6 percent of churches that offer some form of singles activity (that is 2.6 percent of the 13 percent) are viewed to have single adult ministries that are growing and attracting new single adults to the church.

Rich Hurst, director of singles ministry resources with [David C. Cook](#)

[Publishing](#), said when he was pastor at McLean Bible Church, a group of over-30, never-married professionals told him, "We are the most ignored group in this church."

Maybe they're just too tough.