

Being Single Being Christian

A resource for congregations

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Introduction

These discussion resources are based on the report presented by the Church of Scotland's Mission and Discipleship Council to the General Assembly of 2009 called *Being Single: in Church and Society*. Singleness has seldom been a subject for theological reflection in the Reformed Church, and the report was offered with the conviction that a study of singleness uncovers much of importance for contemporary church and society.

Being single is an aspect of every human life, and all people are single for some or all of their lives. However, contemporary patterns of relationships mean that more people today experience being single than was the case before. People marry or settle down into couples later, marriage is less common, a high percentage of marriages and long-term partnerships break up, a significant minority of people remain single throughout life. There are pressures on family life which lead in part to many people being single: society's affluence, the rise of individualism, the pressures of work. On the other hand, society and the media place a great importance on people finding fulfilment through sex, romantic love and being part of a couple. Many single people live alone, though others live with family, flatmates or friends.

There are a number of questions which arise: What are the patterns of singleness within our society and the church, and what are the influences upon that? What do single people and their lives, including their sexual lives, tell us about God? What is God's word on single people and their lives, including their sexual lives? What is it to be single in today's church and society? Are there particular emphases in Christian faith and life for single people? What does the reality and presence of single people mean for the church?

This resource offers a number of ways into thinking about being single in church and society.

- A place to start offers scriptural roots for the discussion.
- Four resource sheets offer central excerpts from the report with questions for reflection.
- A number of case-studies relate the experiences of single people within the church, to help us grasp the variety and complexity involved in being single.

Neither the report nor these discussion materials attempts to lay down how single people should be single. The aim is to offer an exploration of the experience of being single, and to suggest ways that all in the church, single or not, can flourish in the faith and grow in discipleship.

Prepared in the name of the Mission & Discipleship Council, 2009.

The Learning Process

This material can be used by individuals or in a group context. If you are going to facilitate a learning experience for a group then a programme has been included for you. Feel free to pick and mix from the elements in the programme to prepare the kind of session you feel will work in your situation. Underlying this part of the resource is this is a conversation which can help many in the local church, single or not. It is not just for the leadership of the church but for everyone. We hope that local facilitators will find ways to get Elders, youth workers, Guild members, young people, attenders and non-attenders alike to get involved in this conversation.

Copies of the full report, 'Being Single: In Church and Society' can be downloaded from www.resourcingchurches.org.uk.

Guidance for Individuals Using the Resource

It may be that you are the only person in your congregation who is interested in considering this topic or you simply want to take some time and space to do so by yourself. The resource has a number of sections which you are free to use at your own pace:

- There are quotes from the main report for you to consider.
- There are case studies that give insights into the lives of real people who live with many of the issues the report raises.

Take your time as you go through the material and take care to write down your thoughts as you go. Perhaps you might encourage others in your congregation to use the resource in a group context. Perhaps you will want to find someone else that from your church or community that you can discuss your reflections with. Whatever you do, make the most of the resource and the time you spend with it.

Guidance for facilitating a group meeting

Resources required: Food, flipchart paper and pens, copies of the worksheets and case-studies

Participants: An invited group that makes up a representative sample of people from the local church and community.

Facilitator(s): At least two.

Process

Invite a group of no more than 20 people to come to a comfortable location either in the church or local community. Allow people to relax over a simple meal or coffee together so that they can get to know who is involved in this process. Be particularly supportive of older or younger people for whom this might be a very intimidating experience. Welcome the group formally and thank them for agreeing to take part in this event. Tell them that the aim of the session is to consider some of the key ideas offered by the General Assembly report on singleness and to determine how best the issues can be taken forward in your local church.

Divide the group into either 2 or 3 smaller groups. Ensure that there is a reasonable gender and age mix in each group. Ask the group members to introduce themselves to each other and to appoint someone who will be a scribe for the group and someone who will report back on the group's behalf.

Step One

A Place to Start: give each person these pages, and give the groups time to read and discuss the biblical passages.

Step Two

Resource Sheets: give each group one of the resource sheets to consider (with a copy for each member of the group), and give the groups time to read and discuss the excerpts from the report. Encourage participants to be as open and as honest as they can be but to do so in a way that respects the opinions of others in the small groups. At the end of the allotted time, take feedback from each group so that all the participants can hear about the range of issues that have been discussed. As each group completes its feedback, ask members of the other groups to comment or ask questions.

Step Three

Case-studies: give each group one or two case-studies to consider (with a copy for each member of the group), and give the groups time to read and discuss the situations in the light of the questions on the page introducing the case-studies – copy this page for each person. Give most of the time available to this section and when it draws to a close ask for feedback from each group. Encourage those who are giving the feedback to give a précis of the case-study they have been considering and then a summary of what they have discussed together.

Step Four

Ask the group to come back together as one large group. Ask them to consider the following questions:

- How has this experience been for you?
- Has your mind changed on any of the issues discussed?
- Have you been surprised by anything you've said or someone else has said?
- How can these issues continue to be discussed positively in the life of our congregation?

Step Five

You should conclude the evening with some form of reflection or prayer. We have included an example for you at the end of the material.

A place to start: Being single in the Bible

(a) Read the following passage from Genesis 2:

Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; I shall make a partner suited to him.' So from the earth he formed all the wild animals and all the birds of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name. The man gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every wild animal; but for the man himself no suitable partner was found. The LORD God then put the man into a deep sleep and, while he slept, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the flesh over the place. The rib he had taken out of the man the LORD God built up into a woman, and he brought her to the man. The man said:

*'This one at last
is bone from my bones,
flesh from my flesh!
She shall be called woman
for from man she was taken.'*

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and attaches himself to his wife, and the two become one.
(Genesis 2:18-24, REB)

Consider the following questions.

1. Do you agree that it is not good to be alone? Why is it not good? Are there particular circumstances that make being alone better or worse?
2. Is there a partner suited to everybody? Is everybody suited to partnership?
3. Is being single the same for men and for women?
4. Does God want all people to be married?

(This passage is discussed in section 0.0 of the report.)

(b) Now read the following passages from the New Testament. The first occurs just after Jesus has told one of the rulers to sell all he has and give to the poor before following him.

Peter said, 'What about us? We left all we had to follow you.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you: there is no one who has given up home, or wife, brothers, parents, or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not be repaid many times over in this age, and in the age to come have eternal life. (Luke 18:28-30, REB)

The second is from a letter by the Apostle Paul.

About the unmarried, I have no instructions from the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is fit to be trusted. I think the best way for a man to live in a time of stress like the present is this – to remain as he is. Are you bound in marriage? Do not seek a dissolution. Has your marriage been dissolved? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you are not doing anything wrong, nor does a girl if she marries; it is only that those who marry will have hardships to endure, and my aim is to spare you...

I want you to be free from anxious care. An unmarried man is concerned with the Lord's business; his aim is to please the Lord. But a married man is concerned with worldly affairs; his aim is to please his wife, and he is pulled in two directions. The unmarried woman or girl is concerned with the Lord's business; her aim is to be dedicated him in body as in spirit. But the married woman is concerned with worldly affairs; her aim is to please her husband. (1 Corinthians 7:25-28, 32-34, REB)

Consider the following questions.

1. Do you know people who have given up family life in some way for the sake of the kingdom? How have they been repaid in this life? What are the rewards?
2. Is it significant that Jesus was single?
3. Do you agree that to be married and a follower of Jesus means being pulled in two directions? In what circumstances?
4. Does the Christian faith imply that separated, divorced and widowed people should remain single?

(These passages are discussed in section 0.0 of the report.)

A final question based on all the passages:

The Old Testament emphasises the goodness of marriage and family life. The New Testament questions the importance of family life as compared to being a Christian. How do these emphases speak to you?

Resource Sheet 1: *Patterns of Contemporary Life*

The following quotation from the report *Being Single: in church and society* describes certain features of contemporary life.

Patterns of relationship, sexual practice and living arrangements are changing rapidly in contemporary society. Being single is increasingly common, which is a significant factor in the rise in the number of people living alone, though of course the two groups are not identical: not all single people live alone, and not all people who live alone are single. Over 10% of Scottish households in the 2001 Census were single-person households, and between 1981 and 2001, the number of these households rose from 393,000 to 721,000... People are settling down later, marrying later, and it is relatively common for people to have a period of living alone between leaving home and moving in with a partner or marrying. We all know something of what it means to be single, but for some people, the period of singleness is extended through life, and may involve living alone for most of life. Furthermore, the high incidence of separation and divorce means that many people are “post-married,” and again may well live alone. It is also typical for those in later life to live alone rather than with children and further generations, and for longer given the increase in life expectancy. These various scenarios are known by Christians as much as by society at large. (Section 0.0)

Discuss this passage with reference to the following questions.

1. Do you agree that being single and/or living alone is increasingly common? How have things changed?
2. What are the particular challenges in being single and/or living alone – for people in the twenties? thirties? never married? separated or divorced? elderly? male? female?
3. Do you know of many Christian people who are single and/or live alone? Do you think there are particular features – positive and negative – of being single for Christians?

Resource Sheet 2: *Choice, faith and being single*

The following quotation from the report *Being Single: in church and society* discusses the possibility of choosing to be single.

No discussion of being single in theological perspective should overlook the ways in which being single can follow from an individual's own choices. It is not only external circumstances that lead some to marry, some to separate, some to remain single. Christians understand that human beings are, essentially, free to enter into unions or to remain single....

However, one feature of contemporary life to be noted here is what may be described as the pressure to be partnered. There is a presumption in contemporary society that the natural course of a life will involve settling down into marriage or partnership: this is learned by children from a young age from fairy-stories where the hero and heroine marry and live happily ever after, through romanticised images and portrayals of love in adolescent and grown-up fiction. The single are often assumed to be looking for love. The divorced are often assumed to be ready for a new partnership. Newspapers and the internet offer increasingly easy ways for the single to meet new potential partners.

Of course, many single people are looking for the intimacy, companionship and security that they perceive a partnership/marriage will bring them, but this is not true of all single people. Being single seems to many to be the best way of fulfilment, caring for family and friends, and contributing to society – and for the Christian, of following Christ. But there is little emphasis in contemporary conversation, media or societal ideals on the contentedly single. This may make singles increasingly insecure as to the validity of their singleness, whether largely chosen or unchosen...

It is our contention that the choice of a single life, including the commitment to celibacy, far from a turning away from Christian duty as earlier Reformed thought maintained, may be for some a fruitful and rich path of discipleship, bringing blessing to their own lives and to many others, and glory to God. (Section 0.0)

Discuss this passage with reference to the following questions.

1. Do you think that single people feel pressure to be partnered? If so, what can this lead to?
2. Make a list of single characters from TV programmes and films you've watched and/or the novels you have read. How are these single people portrayed?
3. When making choices in our lives regarding sex, love and partnership, what are the main driving forces?
4. How can being single and/or celibate be a blessing?
5. What are the difficulties in accepting singleness?

Resource Sheet 3: *Sex outwith marriage*

The following quotation from the report *Being Single: in church and society* comes from a section which explores the question of sex outside marriage first from traditionalist perspectives and then from approaches which move away from the traditional picture – these are called revisionist perspectives.

A traditionalist view begins from the view that human sexuality is part of the created order – created by God for human beings' enjoyment, intimacy, the building up of relationship and for the conception of children – but made to be enjoyed according to right order. And this order can be stated simply as: within marriage.

Drawing on the interpretation of Genesis 1-3 traditionalists understand sex as belonging properly to a man and a woman united in marriage. This complementarity and exclusivity of relationship reflects the covenantal love of God in creating humanity in his image and calling a people to be his own. God's relationship with his people is marked by faithfulness – his love is faithful, not capricious, and not turned aside by creaturely infidelity – and uniqueness or exclusivity, since he covenants himself to love his people and requires of his people that they have no other gods but him. Consequently, marriage reflects the essential nature of God's relationship with humankind, and so should echo the hallmarks of that relationship: faithful and exclusive...

Just as the traditionalist sees marriage as reflecting the faithfulness and exclusivity of God's love, so the revisionist draws on these aspects of God's character, and says that where these virtues are found in human sexual relationships, whether marriage or not, then there is a goodness to them. It is the quality of the relationship which is the criterion for the appropriateness of sexual activity. A revisionist approach does not say that anything goes sexually, since for the revisionist sexual behaviour as with all human behaviour is subject to the call of Christ to be holy in our lives as his disciples: loving, generous, compassionate, just...

A revisionist Christian ethic of sex would emphasise that sex be consensual, with adequate provision for contraception, that it involve genuine intimacy rather than a simple physical thrill, that it be generous and self-giving, and that it not involve infidelity to an already-held relationship of trust and commitment. (Section 0.0)

Discuss this passage with reference to the following questions.

1. Would you say that your own view on this issue has changed over the years?
2. Do you believe the church should re-affirm the traditionalist view of sex outwith marriage, or is it appropriate to develop a different sexual morality?
3. Can a re-statement of the traditional view have much influence on contemporary people, both young and not so young?
4. Does the development of a revisionist sexual ethic follow societal change too closely rather than challenge society with the Christian gospel?

Resource Sheet 4: *Being single in the church*

The following quotation from the report *Being Single: in church and society* outlines possible approaches the church can take with regard to single people.

Being single has always been the way of life for many in the church. Today it is experienced in some form by an increasing proportion of Christians, whose single lives have much to teach the church of Christian discipleship and flourishing. The church has a crucial role in helping single people flourish in life, faith and service. This can begin in children's and youth work, preparing each generation for the moral decisions which they face in the realm of sex, intimacy and commitment. In its teaching ministry, the church should recognise the presence of many who are single – never-married, separated, divorced, widowed, parents, childless – and help them come to understand themselves not as failures or misfits, but Christians loved by God, shaped by his Son's life-giving love, drawn into fruitful lives by the Spirit. In its mission to the world, the church ought to be aware of how the Gospel may be heard by single people. Furthermore the church could further encourage people who are single to serve according to the particular gifts they have, which may in some ways be affected by their being single. In its pastoral care, the church should be particularly aware of the difficulties which single people face, and attempt to care in the name of Christ in ways appropriate to those who are single, appropriate to the reasons for their being single. This may well involve groups for single people to gather; it may also involve opportunities for single people to live in community, itself a witness to the love of Christ in the world. (Section 0.0)

Discuss this passage with reference to the following questions.

1. How does the church (locally or more generally) relate to single people? (You might consider those never married, or divorced, or widowed.)
2. What would a church service, and worship generally, which was sensitive to the presence of single people be like?
3. What do you think are the particular issues facing those who are single and in ministry?
4. How should the church support family life without marginalising single people?
5. When we use the term 'Church family' how is that similar or different from our own families?

Case-studies

There follow ten case-studies – stories of Christians who are single in a variety of ways – never married, divorced, widowed; male and female; of different ages; of differing sexualities. Groups might look at one or two in detail. There are no specific questions for each person (except Case-study 10 – Alan), but you might consider the stories in relation to the following questions amongst others.

- What is positive in the person's experience of being single?
- What is negative in the person's experience of being single?
- To what extent has being single been an opportunity for Christian faith and discipleship?
- What has the person's experience of the church been like, as a single person?
- What role do other people play in the person's life?
- What role does sex play in the person's life?

Case-study 1: Malcolm

My experience of being a single person in a number of Christian churches over the years has been very different depending on the various congregations which I attended.

Some were very welcoming and made me feel that I was very much part of a caring community. Others, however, were generally more formal with a certain amount of 'safety distance' existing between members. And it was in these latter churches that I experienced the most difficult sermons which invariably claimed that the congregation was my 'real' family and that I had found a 'home'.

However, I was acutely aware that most (but not all) of the many persons attending these churches would always put their children, wives, husbands or parents first. In other words, that I would always come a very long way down the priority list of persons to help, value and love. Indeed, I felt that these 'pretend family' sermons did not, in any way, reflect reality. Instead they demonstrated a complete misunderstanding of the loneliness which sometimes exists in churches and what it really means to be a genuine family of God.

Moreover, because of the contrast between the official message and the reality, going to church was sometimes the most difficult experience of the week. It just served to polarise the fact I was very much alone in a community or communion which was supposed to belong to one another. I knew that I would go to church alone and come back alone while often wondering whether anybody in the congregation would actually miss me, in any way, if I happened to die during the night.

But I do know that God loves me as a child. Indeed He loves me so much that He was prepared to give everything He had. Even His son who died on a cross for me.

And I have also learned, over the years, to accept my situation of aloneness with God even though I do not always like nor understand this situation. Often I very much long for the physical and emotional closeness and affection that I see in couples and families. Being able to be part and belong to something very positive and full of love. But maybe the grass is always greener on the other side since I am aware that deep loneliness can sometimes exist inside couples or families.

Moreover, with time, I have learnt that churches are far bigger than the places which I attend on a Sunday. And even if most people in the congregation will never (nor want) to consider me as part of their 'real' family, one of the amazing things about God is that He always finds alternatives. In this regard, I have been blessed by God with some incredible Christian brothers and sisters, even though many of them are hundred or even thousands of miles away. Friends and members of my Christian family and church to which I belong. Who love and accept me unconditionally in their walk with me along the road of life and who remain with me when I fall and everything goes wrong. Furthermore, I am blessed to still have Christian parents who are as much very close friends as parents. In a way, the gift that God has given me in these persons are the greatest gifts of my life.

But I know that I am also a part of the imperfectness of imperfect churches. In other words, I know that it is also my responsibility to seek to love others with the sacrificial love of God and be a real brother towards all those around me including those in my 'Sunday' church. And I am also aware that this is not always easy.

Many churches have a very long way to go before they can be a real family united by the communion of unconditional love. But with God's help this is possible and He will help each congregation become such a family which can then be a real witness to all those seeking to belong to God.

I also know that one day, my 'single' situation will be the 'normal' one. In other words, I will be surrounded by all my real brothers and sisters assembled together in a real family in heaven.

Case-study 2: Pam

I am divorced. I have found that some people treat me in a different way from those who are widowed. While the church supports the elderly and the widowed, there has at times been an atmosphere of judgment or confusion as to what best to do with me. There can even be a feeling of condemnation. People don't mean to offend me but what they say often implies that I shouldn't have abandoned my marriage vows – even though they have no idea what happened in my marriage. Other people have hinted that I shouldn't really be an elder since I've not stayed married.

I know lots of people who have been hurt by their church because they are separated or divorced. They all have different circumstances. Some are quite happy being single. Others are devastated at a betrayal that has taken place. Others are single parents, having to deal with the complexities of bringing up their children on their own. Others are content that an abusive relationship is over.

All these people need the Church to show by its actions that it is prepared to reach out into the local community and heal the broken-hearted. So many hymns talk of binding up the broken-hearted, so many sermons go on about loving our neighbour. But there are dozens of people inside every church who are hurting and who are needing love and not getting it from their fellow-Christians.

Of course, the close friends I have in my church know the real story and they don't judge me. In fact I don't know how I would have coped if it wasn't for them. But sometimes it's been easier to stay away from events than face the looks and the whispers. I've even been warned by some women in the church to keep my hands off their husbands, as if I'm a femme fatale because I'm divorced. How come there's more nastiness inside the church than outside it? I think we've a lot to learn from the way society's become much more relaxed around divorce. After all, we need to get used to it. Half of all marriages will probably end that way. I'm not alone, and if God's a God of love, he loves me as much now that I'm divorced as when I was married.

Case-study 3: Keren

I've been single since I split up with my last boyfriend. We went out for four years. We eventually split up because I was moving more seriously towards God and he wasn't a Christian. I realized I couldn't be both fully with him and fully with God. For those four years, God had been on the back foot. I'm very thankful that changed. I'm wary of going out with anyone who's not a Christian, but I also shy away from having a Christian boyfriend in case I would become too dependent on him rather than God.

There are great things about being single. First and foremost I'm not obliged to anyone but God. There's no vying for my heart. And second, I have no exclusive relationship, so I can love everyone. I'm aware how self-engrossed my newly-married friends can be. I have more time for others.

Sometimes people at church can be a bit annoying about me being single. You hear people saying, "Oh, wouldn't it be great if she could just meet somebody." Or you hear people say, "Oh, it would be great if he went to such and such a church – he'd meet more single Christians his own age there." People have said to me, "Oh, don't you worry dear, you're still young." I hate people to pity me, to see me as incomplete. People spend too much time on this one area of existence instead of people's spiritual life. The weird thing is: my non-Christian friends don't feel the same pressure. It's in the church that people think being single is like having a disease.

I was at a Christian lecture on the meaning of life the other day and the best way the lecturer could find to prove that people are looking for and finding meaning was the meaning he found between him and his wife. Surely there must be more ways to show that people can find meaning in life than by referring to being in a couple.

Case-study 4: Liam

I'm 16 years old, in Fourth Year at High School, and I'm a Christian. I became a Christian two years ago and I go to the SU group in school and this really amazing church. I play drums in the church band every Sunday and there's rehearsals on Thursday night. We're pretty good – somebody said we should think about a CD.

God's really been amazing to me since I became a Christian. There's been so many issues to deal with like my gran dying and exams and stuff at school, and he's really been there for me. I read the Bible every day and I pray every day and some of my quiet times have been awesome.

The thing is – it's pretty tough to hold on to being a Christian, especially when everyone else at school is totally not into Christianity. Most of my friends go out at the weekend and get drunk. I've gone too but I know I shouldn't. The minister talks a lot about our bodies being the temple of the Holy Spirit, so it's wrong to get plastered. Then there's the sex thing. Half the class have probably done it, and pretty much everybody wants to – it's all people talk about on Monday – who shagged who at the weekend.

I couldn't believe it when Cheryl said she'd go out with me. She's beautiful and I don't know what she sees in me. I met her at church. I told her last week that I loved her and she said she loved me too. Sometimes it's hard not to go too far, but one of us always says, "No, we should wait, this is wrong." I just don't know if we'll be able to wait till marriage. I mean that will be years away and it wouldn't be right to get married just so's we could have sex. I can't talk to the minister about this – I know he'd just say it was wrong to do anything. And of course there's no way I could talk to my parents. But I really don't know why it would be wrong. I mean, if we love each other and we take precautions.

One night I was at a party and we were playing spin the bottle and when it landed at me I had to answer the question, "What's your favourite position?" and I'd had a few drinks so I managed to say, "I don't know because I haven't done it yet." I thought everyone would laugh but one girl just said, "That's so cool," and that was the end of it. So maybe I'll manage to stay a virgin till I get married. That would make the marriage night really special.

Case-study 5: Margaret

I'm not sure if I really am single. Andrew, my husband, died 8 years ago, and I've been on my own ever since then. So I'm a widow, and when I hear people talking about single people I don't really think of people like myself. But then I suppose our lives do have a lot in common.

When Andrew first died, I found I coped. Our two children were really good and visited most weekends, or I went to see them. The grandchildren kept me going. I made a decision not to stop doing my usual things, so I kept going to church, and the guild, and the bowling-club in the summer and all my activities. The routine really helped, and I found out what wonderful friends I've got. I also found out that one or two of my friends were hopeless around me. They couldn't cope with me being bereaved.

But after the first six months or year, reality set in. The children began to get back into the previous pattern and I didn't see them as much. Friends stopped asking how I was doing. The minister moved on to other people to visit. It was really only then I started to feel lonely. I wasn't lonely all the time – it was mainly every day from about 4 o'clock onwards when I started to think about making the tea. I'd always made the tea for Andrew and me – he was almost always home from work in time. And then if I went out to the guild or something in the evening, I hated coming back into the empty house. No-one to talk to about the funny things that happened. I also missed going to bed with Andrew: it's cold and quiet there all on my own.

Actually, I still find those times hard. You get used to being on your own, but the loneliness never goes away. My faith really helps. I say my prayers, and it feels good to think that God is listening, even if no-one else is thinking of me at that particular time. The church has been a great comfort too. It's full of widows! Half the guild have lost their husbands. Some services have their moments though – I find Christmas difficult, and especially Remembrance. Andrew did his National Service with the Royal Scots Grays. He looks so handsome in the photos.

I am a little worried about the future. Sometimes I think I'm getting more forgetful. I'm not sure if the family's noticed. But I hate to think of losing my independence. I miss Andrew, but I don't really fancy an old folks' home. Not ready for that!

Case-study 6: Martha

I've been single for most of my life, though I did try living with someone back in the days... But it didn't work out and that was that. I don't really miss it – sharing a flat, having to compromise over everything, having to be nice. I don't really miss having sex either – over-rated in my opinion. So much of the pain in the world is over sex – all these people messing up their lives and messing up other people's lives for few moments of pleasure.

In fact, the biggest problem with the church is this obsession with sex. Every time the church is in the news it seems to be about sex – gay bishops or whatever. There are so many things which are more important – like poverty or injustice or homelessness or mental illness or climate change. I mean what's the point worrying about sexuality if there's no planet to live on?

When I heard the church was doing a report on singleness I thought this was another waste of time. In fact I was angry that the church had picked out single people for attention. As if being single is a problem which needs addressed. As if there's something second-rate about being single. As if the only way to be a Christian is to be tucked up with a lawfully-wedded spouse and 2.4 kids and all of that. I get a bit of that at church but not much. People know my views by now.

It seems to me that what singles and others share is much more important than what our differences are. We're all asked by God to make a difference. We're all put in the world to use our faith. We all need company. We're all lonely sometimes. We all get fed up with day to day life. We all have people to love. So the church needs to stop going on and on about how we're different, and start letting us all integrate. After all, we're all single at some stage in life. There's no issue here. We're all individuals within the church.

There is one thing about being single that affects me though. People in the church tend to assume I've got plenty of time for church things, because there's no husband and no kids to worry about. But I still have to keep my flat going, still have to eat, still have to clean. And I'm having to spend more and more time keeping an eye on my father. I may be single but my diary can be really crammed.

Case-study 7: Douglas

I've been a minister in the Kirk for over 20 years, now in my third charge, and single.

One thing I've noticed is how the congregations have reacted differently to me as I've got older. In my first charge, everyone was wondering when I'd be married, which of their daughters or grand-daughters would want to become a minister's wife. Later, people stopped saying that, and assumed I had simply chosen the single life. More recently it's changed again. Sometimes I think people are dropping hints that they think I'm gay, and that that's fine with them. Some of the schoolchildren even ask me if I'm gay. In fact I'm not gay, but it's quite hard to be a bachelor without people jumping to conclusions. I'm not sure how easy it will be to find another charge if I want to move again.

Of course a huge part of my work is ministering to couples and families – weddings, baptisms, school chaplaincy, funerals – and all points in between. I don't feel that I can't do this work, or shouldn't do it, simply because I'm not married and don't have children. After all, I've listened to the stories of thousands of people's lives over the years, and I think I've picked something up. All the same, I sometimes think it's odd that I try and help couples prepare for marriage or for the baptism of their children when I have no personal experience of these things. I wonder if they think it's odd too.

Over the years I've got used to being on my own. I've always been comfortable with solitude, and I feel it gives me the time and space to think and to pray. I'm not alone in the manse, mind you. How could I forget Robbie, the daftest springer spaniel in the country!

But there are times when I'm really conscious of not having a partner. I hate coming home on a Sunday from leading worship to an empty house. It's so flat. Nobody to share how things have gone, who was there, the interesting visitors. And when things go wrong, I miss having someone special. After a tough meeting, I tend to dwell on things. Should I have said that? Should I have been bolder? I know my married colleagues really find support in those situations.

Funnily enough, as I get older I'm finding it easier to have friends to do things with, even to go on holiday with. Some of my friends who rarely had time for me before are now more available – their children have grown up, or they're divorced and suddenly have more time for me. I don't mind. I enjoy friendship – in fact I think I'm a good friend to many, able to give them time and energy which I don't have to give to a wife and kids. But friendship and faith don't always fill all my needs. A lack of touch and physical intimacy can be painfully acute. God's love can feel very abstract and a poor substitute for an intimate relationship with another human being.

Case-study 8: Nathalie

I'm a single mother with two children, Ryan who's 6 and Josie who's 2. They see their father a bit – it's meant to be every second weekend, but sometimes he calls to cancel. Ryan always gets upset when his father doesn't show up. He worships him. I'd love to put him straight on a few things but I try hard not to influence them too much that way. They've got to find out for themselves what he's like.

I try and get to church as often as I can, but it's not easy. It's a job getting them both ready and me as well for 10 o'clock on a Sunday, and that's when their father hasn't got them. And when they do come to church, Josie wriggles about or starts tottering about all over the church. The older people say they don't mind, but I end up getting embarrassed. Jeannie, the minister, isn't bad with the kids, but she does go on a bit. I'm on the crèche rota, and it's funny but most of the mums say the same thing – it's hard to get more involved with the church when you're on your own. Who's going to look after the kids? I know my elder takes her daughter to the Session meetings but if they ever asked me I'd have to say no. Josie would never settle.

Jeannie's a bit of an old school minister, I think. I quite like her sermons, but sometimes she goes on about the importance of family. She's been married for years and years and Colin, her husband, seems to be really supportive. Half the sermons are "Colin and I this" and "Colin and I that." "When we have difficulties, we just sit down and talk them through," and so on. I'm sitting there, thinking there's no way I could sit down and talk things through with the kids' father. Not after the way he let me down. I sometimes think that for Jeannie a family has to look a certain way. Well, this family doesn't!

But I'm not giving up on the church. I love Jesus and that's more important. And it's really helped. There's crèche and the toddlers group with Josie, and Ryan's really into the Sunday School. I feel totally accepted at toddlers especially. Half of us are in the same boat. Hardly anyone's married. It just doesn't seem important.

Case-study 9: Fraser

I would say that I am single by accident. I always thought I would get married but my relationships never seemed to lead to marriage, and so here I am looking at 50 and still on my own. Never say never, but I'm starting to accept that I'll be on my own now and won't get married or have children.

In recent years I started to notice things about the church that I never paid any attention to before. For example, the church focuses on families and the family unit. I see this in all the special services when the Sunday School leads the service, and everyone enjoys it – even the minister seems happier at family services than the other Sundays. And I hear other elders say that we need to attract more young families into the church. I'd love to be in a young family, but I'm not. Does that mean I'm not the sort of person we want in church? In fact, I've pretty much dropped out of church life. It all seems geared to families – baptisms, family services, Christmas, Easter. When I do go I feel that I stick out like a sore thumb. It doesn't speak to my life any more.

There's another issue which is never talked about in the church but affects me – sex (or the lack thereof). I would love the intimacy of a sexual relationship but I just don't know whether that's OK unless I was married. I've had relationships where we could have had sex but I thought we should wait until we were married. And then we never got married. The trouble is – now that I'm older – what if I did meet someone? Wouldn't it be a risk to leave the sex till the honeymoon – and then find it was a disaster?

I have to say it's not all bad. I can choose for myself what to do and what not to do. And I had more time for church than my married friends when I was more involved. They have their problems too, I'm sure. But I'd love to find out for myself. And I do occasionally worry that I'm going to end up a lonely old man, with no children checking to see I'm OK, no grandchildren's parties to go to, nothing new in my life. My co-workers all seem to be looking forward to retirement – I'm dreading it. Work is probably the best thing in my life.

Case-study 10: Alan

I'm a minister – married with young kids – in the Church of Scotland. I've been made to think more deeply about how the church relates to single people through something that happened recently. A few years ago we began to hold a Christmas Dinner with our 'church family' on Christmas Day. All sorts of family 'make ups' came – unmarried, widowed, single parents and their children, couples, granny and the kids, neighbours, homeless and those with such a choice of homes to spend Christmas in that "spending it with the church solves the problem!"

Having run this for a few years our family felt that perhaps we would give it a skip last year and just have a nice quiet time together. When we made this suggestion one single mother expressed her hurt and another told us that she would just spend it 'in her pyjamas'. People had clearly come to rely on our event to get them through Christmas, especially people on their own. Was this emotional blackmail, or had we missed something? When we talked about our own family and the Church family did the one word mean two different things?

In the end we decided that we would stop running something for the church, but still get together with the family on Christmas Day for dinner: and we meant the whole 'family' who had come in previous years. But instead of my wife and I organising the event, or even delegating it to others, we asked questions like: who's hosting it this year; and who's bringing the gravy? This might seem a small change in what actually happened but it was a big change in our understanding. It wasn't a case of us making room for others in our family, but rather a unique family coming together for that day.

Specific questions for Case-study 10

Can you think of an example from your church or life in which your own family's hopes seemed to clash with a larger 'family's'?

Can churches both promote family life while offering a broader family in Christ?

Closing Reflection

Eternal God

At the end of this time of talking and listening,
thinking and imagining,
we come before you in the quiet,
before returning home,
to pray.

We pray with thanksgiving for the goodness of life,
the pleasure of friends, family, sisters and brothers in Christ,
the joy of our relationship with you.
We are grateful for solitude,
for the chance it gives to be aware of you, and attentive to your world.
We thank you for the times of being single,
for enriching life, and deepening our faith.

Forgive us for the ways we have gone wrong –
as individuals, in relationships –
and as your church –
making others feel less welcome, less valued, less loved
because of whom they share their lives with and whom they don't.
Help us to reflect the life of your only Son Jesus Christ, a man without wife, in our thoughts,
words and deeds.

Bless your world and bless your people:
let relationships of love, respect, loyalty and support flourish;
help those who are lonely find companionship,
those who are bruised find healing,
those who are unsure find guidance.
Help your church be a community of hope,
where we live together, single or not,
together following your Son,
together inspired by your Spirit,
together drawn into your heavenly community.

In the name of Christ,
Amen