

CHRISTIAN MONEY \$ENSE

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Ministering to Single Parents

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Did you see the May 28, 2001 issue of *Newsweek*? The cover story discusses a mission field neglected by many churches in America – single parents. The most challenging counseling sessions I encounter involve single parents. The problems they face do not simply relate to finances. They are intertwined with family and work issues, physical exhaustion, and spiritual struggles. Financial turmoil is very real for single parents, but often it is only one aspect of the unrelenting sense of pressure.

Perhaps the most difficult single parenting situation relates to divorce. Unfortunately, the church does not always help make the situation better. Many churches properly take a stance that promotes marriage and discourages divorce, but in the process, they often end up showing prejudice against single parents. Consider some common theological misconceptions:

- The book of James discusses “pure religion” as helping widows and orphans (1:21). The vast majority of single parents (95%) are in that situation because of divorce, separation, or children born out of wedlock. A literal interpretation of this verse would give license to avoid helping the majority of single parents.
- The Bible is pro-marriage (Mal. 2:16). God hates divorce because it destroys His concept of marriage and is devastating to families. However, God does not hate the divorcee. We often fail to realize that divorce is not the unpardonable sin.
- The book of Proverbs equates being poor with laziness (Prov. 10:4). Generally, single parents make less money than two-income families. We may make the assumption that single parents have poor relationship skills and could change their financial situations through harder work. This is not necessarily true.
- Jesus told His disciples, “You will always have the poor,” (John 12:8). Why try to help the poor (including single parents) when you will never be able to eliminate the problem?

When we hold any of these views, we show contempt for a group of people that God wants us to love. Christ spent more time with the needy than He did with the religious. “He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God,” (Prov. 14:31, NIV). This includes single parents and children of divorce. Statistics show that single parents head approximately twenty-five percent of families with children in America. The majority of these parents are women (80%), are over twenty-five, have two children, work, and do not receive all their court-ordered child support. They are continually

under financial stress. More startling is the statistic that ninety-five percent of single-parent families do not attend church. The church needs to change in order to reach out to this hurting group!

WHAT YOUR CHURCH CAN DO

- Financial Assistance – The key financial issues for single parents are childcare, food, transportation, clothing, and housing. Take the initiative to understand and help single parents with these areas. Establishing a church benevolence fund is a good start, but remember that the fund needs proper financial support.
- Financial Training – Divorced women are 300 percent more likely to file for bankruptcy. Intentionally help this group understand and apply biblical money management skills.
- Professional Assistance – Single parents need legal, medical, and dental help. Lawyers, doctors, and dentists in your church can consider ministering to single parents by providing services for free or at reduced rates.
- Singles Ministry - Have a layperson head up a ministry that involves two-parent families in helping single parents. This helps to provide friendship. Single parents can use mentoring by caring people who can provide a listening ear when key decisions must be made.
- Parenting Skills – Single parents attempt to fulfill both parenting roles. Everyone needs to understand biblical concepts of parenting. This is especially true of the single parent. Based on statistics, boys in single parent-homes are more likely to get involved in crime, fail in school, and get divorced as adults. Girls in single-parent homes are more likely to become pregnant and get divorced as adults. Get in the game and make a difference in the lives of these children!

I once counseled a divorced mother of two who was struggling to repay a \$400 car repair loan from another church member. Later that day, the church member she owed came in for financial counsel as well, and revealed that he had a significant amount in savings. He could have taken the initiative to minister to this divorcee by giving her a gift instead of a loan. We must love with action (1 John 3:16-18). There is a huge mission field in your church and community that needs help - single parents. What will you do to help them?

BBC Foundation has been ministering to churches and individuals regarding biblical stewardship since 1992. Send your questions on finances and stewardship to: BBC Foundation, 538 Venard Rd., Clarks Summit, PA 18411. Phone: (800) 451-8668, website: bbcfoundation.org; e-mail: info@bbcfoundation.org