Single Parent Family Ministry: Confronting the Obstacles

Written by Eric Fruge, director of College – Church Relations, Georgetown College, and former single adult minister.

Text: Joshua 1:9; Isaiah 41:10; Zech. 7: 9-10

There is an old saying that is very pertinent to ministering to single parent families: “If it was easy everybody would be doing it.” Look at your community. How many single parent families would you estimate there are? Now look at the churches in your community. How many of them have intentional single parent family ministries? Do you know why there are so few? Because it is so hard! If it was easy everybody… well, you get the picture!

But don’t allow difficulty to stand in your way. It didn’t stand in the way of the church of the New Testament. The following three lessons will examine the blessings of single parent family ministry, but before we look at the scriptures let’s address some of the reasons why pastors and churches are often reluctant to engage in this type of outreach. Why is it difficult for churches to minister to single parent families?

We might call the first reason a problem of perceptions. Many single parents have negative perceptions of the church. More specifically, they fear the church will impart to their children negative images of their family and parents. What are some of these images? Consider the following: Single parent families are subnormal and dysfunctional; parents who are single by virtue of divorce are second-class Christians and unworthy for important church roles; church is the happy family place—families in crisis please stay out of the lime light!; church is a “couples” world where singles are marginalized. In their daily efforts to give their best to their children, many single parents simply will not take them to churches where they risk being taught that their family life and parents are substandard and inferior to everyone else. While some churches do communicate those ideas, most do not impute inferiority to single parent families and single parents should not assume they do.

Faulty perceptions work in the other direction as well. Many people in church see single parents as “too needy” and a ministry to them posing a financial burden upon the congregation. The perception that kids from single parent homes are “problem kids” and disruptive does not help, nor does the perception that single parents are desperate and therefore sexually promiscuous. And then there are the recurring questions: we don’t want to condone or encourage divorce do we? These parents (especially the attractive ones) with kids are looking for spouses—they might be interested in mine! Shouldn’t we spend that money on marriage enrichment instead? Do we want all of these grieving,
needy widows casting a pall upon our church? We need to remember that two-parent families have “problem kids,” financial difficulties, and moral issues also. Accurate perspectives can remedy faulty stereotypical perceptions.

A second reason regards confusion about the goals of single parent family ministry. Some churches measure success by how many single parents they can get married, others by how many they can help avoid marriage or keep from dating. For some the goal goes no further than childcare, for others childcare help is nowhere on the radar screen. Others get hung up on whether its best to mainstream single parents into the rest of the church or single them out and separate them into their own group. These approaches are vastly inferior to the proper goals of single parent ministry, but it is sad how often churches reach no higher than that.

A third reason for the reluctance to engage in single parent family ministry is simply the potential enormity of the task. Consider how many causes are behind the creation of single parent families: death, divorce, never married, separation, abandonment, imprisonment, military absence, cohabitation, and visa problems for internationals come first to mind. Each cause embraces unique issues requiring a different approach. Where do you begin?

Fourthly, you need to establish a biblical foundation for the ministry. Such a foundation will provide enormous strength and staying power for the leaders and workers in single parent family ministry. There are lots of good-hearted individuals who want to do something because they see that single parent families need help, but they do not take time to make a biblical case to their church for meeting the need. Before you begin, do your homework. Pray for direction by the Holy Spirit and delve into the Word. I hear what you’re asking: “You mean the Bible actually talks about single parents?” Yes! Just open and begin reading!

The biggest reason behind the failures of overwhelming numbers of single parent family ministry attempts is a lack of ministerial and lay involvement. A crucial fault is that many pastors do not give single parent family ministry affirmation from the pulpit. If the pastor will not affirm it, throw his enthusiastic support behind it, and help recruit workers then the congregation will not either. Secondly, most married lay people won’t get involved in the ministry once it has started. Too often churches will provide a room, schedule a time, and then invite single parents to do their own thing. Sometimes a staff person is charged with oversight, but the bottom line is that single parents are left to minister to single parents. It is a formula for failure. Without pastoral support and active congregational involvement the ministry is doomed to become a curious and temporary sideshow of the church.
The purpose of this lesson is to open your eyes up front to the issues so that you can prepare now to deal with them and not become discouraged after you begin. As you plan to reach out to single parent families ask yourselves the following strategic questions:

1. **Are there single parent families within the ministry orb of my church?** You would ask the same type question if you were beginning ministry to college students, singles, internationals, etc. Do a survey among your church members. Do any work with single parents, live near them, or have them in their family? Do any work with organizations that deal with single parent families? Are there single parents in your church family right now?

2. **Have you recruited your pastor’s support?** Has he agreed to give enthusiastic backing to the ministry?

3. **How many lay people in your church have a similar burden for single parent family ministry?** Think now about recruiting workers.

4. **Have you a ministry strategy?** Consider which types of single parents you will focus upon first, where your resources meet their needs, and your primary overarching ministry goal.

5. **What are your ministry resources?** Begin with prayer and the heart of God.

**Insights from the Voice of Experience:**
- Single parents will prefer to interact with couples in order to avoid being singled-out as “different.” Think about integrating them into the general Bible study structure of your church, but also having a regular time when they can get together as a mutual support group.
- Kids from single parent families, especially teenagers, do not like being separated out into special groups while their peers are meeting. They like feeling part of “normal” church and youth groups.
- Single Parents are extremely busy. Between work, playing with their kids, school, housework, grocery shopping, house and car maintenance, church activities, child events like sports and music, illnesses, and a zillion unforeseen emergencies, they get worn out! Bear this in mind as you think creatively about single parent family ministry.
- Single parent families almost universally live on shoestring budgets.
- Childcare is expensive and consumes a lot of a single parent’s income.
- Single parents are survivors who learn how to manage their families. Do not be afraid to consult and listen to their wisdom.
- Sometimes it is nice to have a little break from kids and to interact with adults.
- Single parents with no family support to lean upon are usually the most open to ministry.

---

*This worksheet prepared by the Kentucky Baptist Convention. For more helpful resources, go to: [http://www.kybaptist.org](http://www.kybaptist.org).*