

# Not Married-with-Children

*When we segregate people according to age or marital status, we miss the true meaning of church.*

DEAN MERRILL

On the FM radio dial, the low numbers used to tend toward classical music, while the high end jumped with rock. But now you get to choose between seventies rock, light rock, heavy metal rock, alternative rock, classic rock, or even classic light rock (and don't forget the "All Elvis" stations). Welcome to Niche Time, a.k.a. the 1990s.

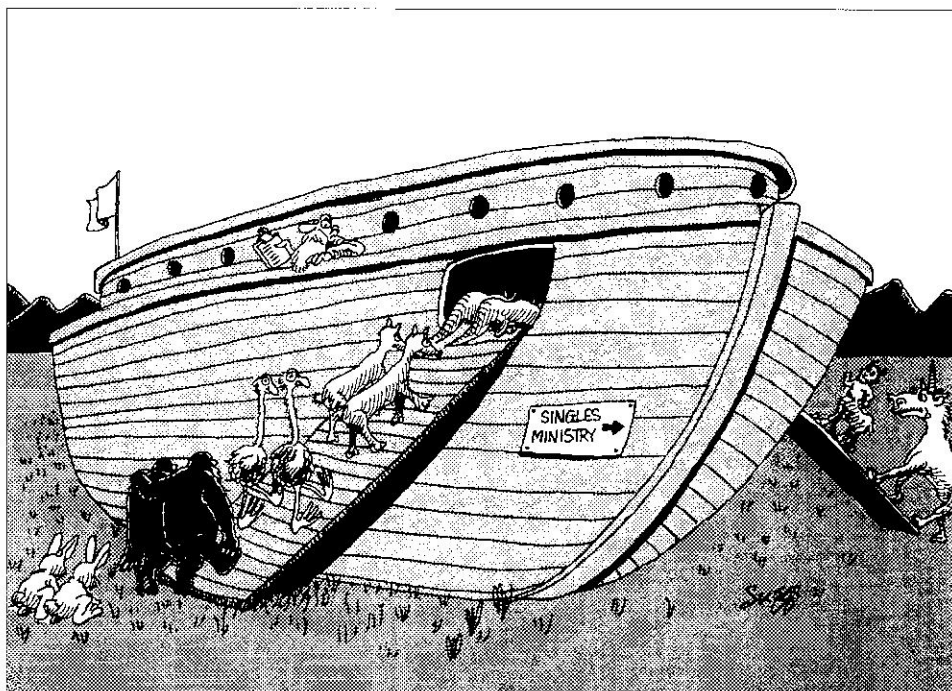
Long gone are the days when Sears Roebuck marketers claimed, in a clever phrase, that theirs was the store for "the middle 85 percent of Americans." In the nineties, nobody gets 85 percent of a market. The goal is to capture a niche, a targeted market that shares specific attributes or interests.

And therein lies a dilemma for the church. Our theology tells us that God so loved the whole world that he is not willing that any should perish. The apostle Paul insists that "all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:27-28, NIV). Just how are we to make that happen in our niche-crazy age?

We have been trying hard, to be sure. The Promise Keepers movement has been urging us to "Bring Down the Walls" (their 1996 motto), especially between races. Also, we are more sensitive than ever to the matter of gender. These walls, while not yet down by any means, are lower than they used to be.

## THE QUESTION OF THE AGES

While race and gender are at least on our radar screens, we are still largely unaware of two other major walls that keep the church from full unity and growth. One of those is age.



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Watch how we socialize at church. When did you last have a conversation more than a few seconds long with someone 20 years younger or older than yourself? We sit together in the same sanctuary, and we say hello politely in the narthex on our way out—as we head toward lunch with our "real" friends, those in our own age bracket. People of all decades are certainly welcome at our church, of course, so long as we don't have to spend much time with them.

Power naturally accrues to those age groups with the greatest numbers and donor potential. Have you ever noticed that these are the people who tend to sit in the center of the sanctuary? They also tend to get to make the big decisions.

I remember speaking at a church on a Sunday morning where the worship style was not just traditional, but stiff. I couldn't help noticing the handful of bored teenagers who slumped on the very back row of the left section, almost

under the balcony. Their faces—their whole body language—said they weren't connecting.

I got to know the youth pastor that weekend, and I asked him how the teens were relating to the church as a whole. "Not well," he replied. "I appealed to the leadership a while back to try to loosen up just a bit, to do some things in the service that kids would appreciate. Do you know what the response was? 'That's why we hired you.'"

In other words, run your own little subchurch with the youth group, and don't bother us with reaching across age lines. Just keep teenagers coming to the building until they get old enough to buy into our style—a daunting task.

On the other hand, there are just as many congregations that do appeal to younger, more progressive niches while abandoning older Christians. A frustrated gray-haired cousin of mine in a sizable West Coast church said to me

a few years ago, "If I have to listen to my pastor exhort one more time about reaching boomers and busters, I think I'll scream. What about us? Is this not my generation's church anymore?"

Population surveys and trend analyses may fascinate us, but they can also lure us away from seeing people as individuals for whom Christ died. Why must we view the various age groups as either/or? Is not Jesus appealing to all?

One church that has opted for a different philosophy is a midsized Seattle congregation called Church by the Side of the Road. "We pay as little attention to age as possible," says Dennis Sawyer, senior pastor. "If you come to our church on a Wednesday night, you'll see 60 young people, ages 2-17, all in one group! Working with them will be 30 adults—a 1:2 ratio—guiding a wide range of learning experiences.

"The other night I stopped by, and there was this wonderful Kodak moment: a cluster of four or five energetic little kids gathered around two adult workers: a lady who's in a wheelchair—she's probably in her early seventies—and a 24-year-old single guy."

Sawyer and his people have been spurred by a Youth with a Mission (YWAM) program called King's Kids. Among its foundational principles: "Children, teens, and adults can learn from one another as they work together. In their transition from childhood to adulthood, teens play a key role as a link."

Sunday school at Church by the Side of the Road takes a similar tack, with all ages choosing from a menu that includes a discovery track for those new to the faith, a Bible overview class, praise and worship (emphasis on music), evangelism (emphasis on drama), missions (emphasis on art), and leadership training. The missions class went on a work trip last year to clean and paint an orphanage in Jamaica, taking 37 people ranging in age from 3 to 64. The youngest to go without an accompanying parent was a 9-year-old girl. She got along fine, being supervised by adults she already knew well from church.

Why does this well-established congregation, founded in the 1930s, do this? "Because 'common sense' isn't so common anymore," says Sawyer. "The wisdom that used to be shared around the supper table in America, from older to younger, isn't happening. So we need to make opportunity for this in church."

Sawyer added a 19-year-old to the church's full-time ministry staff—and nobody objected. "Nobody said to me, 'Isn't he awfully young?'" They had already seen this 'kid' ministering and

knew him to be a person with valuable spiritual gifting."

Sawyer is convinced that bringing down the age wall pays big dividends at transition points. "The Bible doesn't even have a word for *teenager*," he notes. "So when visiting parents come up to me or call the office and ask, 'What programs do you have for teenagers?' I smile and say, 'We have church!'"

"If everything for teens has to be specialized . . . how do you keep their faith alive when they graduate from high school or college, and all the folderol stops? You've conditioned them for beach trips and lock-ins, and suddenly they're disappointed. We believe it's better not to set teens up in the first place."

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Perhaps the acid test of age openness in a church is who is trusted to lead. At Lake City Church in Madison, Wisconsin, a congregation of perhaps a thousand worshippers on Sunday morning, Pastor Warren Heckman says, "My goal for years has been that the board of elders have an age span. Every year in the nominating process, I purposely steer things that way—not that I neglect the biblical warnings against choosing 'novices'—but I've always believed there were young people who were worthy of consideration. Age does not automatically equal spiritual maturity."

The current elder board runs from individuals in their early thirties on up. This is all the more important, says Heckman, because he is "becoming what [church consultant] Lyle Schaller calls a 'forever pastor'"—he has been there since 1969. "I need fresh blood, people who aren't third-generation members of

this church, young Turks who will challenge me and say, 'Why do you do that?' Otherwise, I become encrusted."

#### A CHURCH BUILT FOR TWO

If we can successfully break down the niches of age, we may even someday find the fortitude to deal with another niche not currently getting much attention in the church: marital status.

Yes, we have an abundance of singles groups, even specially appointed pastors for singles on larger church staffs. There is a Christian magazine called *Single-Parent Family* and large annual conferences on singles ministries.

But acceptance into the mainstream of church life is still rare. Most church leaders, and parishioners as well, view singles the way Congress views soybean farmers—a special-interest group with a one-item agenda to push—a population to be placated by giving them a Friday-night meeting in a side room and a small provision in the annual budget. Meanwhile, those of us in the Married Majority will run things.

How else can we explain newspaper ads that blithely promote "a church for the whole family" or "a family worship center"? How else to account for fellowship schemes called "Dinner for Six" (rather than Seven, or Nine)? Of the nominees for significant church offices in your congregation last year, what percentage were single? Even in churches that view divorce as a disqualification, how many never-marrieds were deemed worthy?

No wonder that when pollster George Barna asked a nationwide sampling whether "the Christian churches in your area are relevant to the way you live today," 80 percent of marrieds said yes but only 61 percent of singles agreed—a huge gap.

Fifty percent of marrieds go to church at least three times a month. Singles? 37 percent. These are telling statistics, since singles now make up one-fourth of all American households. And their percentages are growing: over the last 25 years, the number of Americans in their early thirties who have never married jumped from 6 percent to 20 percent for women, and from 9 percent to 30 percent for men.

The apostle Paul would be feeling more at home all the time. The question is: As a single man, would he be taken seriously in our churches? For that matter, would Jesus? Or would he be waved off as just another thirty-something who needs to settle down and "establish himself"?

Roughly five years ago, West End

Assembly of God in Richmond, Virginia, surveyed its attenders and got a big surprise: Close to 50 percent were single. That led to the hiring of two new staff pastors: Rob Rhoden to work with younger singles (up to age 35), and another man for older singles.

"I made a fundamental statement in the very beginning," says Rhoden. "I determined that this would be a singles *ministry*, not a singles *group*."

What's the difference? "The first is outreach-oriented; the second is more inward, like therapy. Hence, we do mis-

sion trips one to two times a year, some of them integrated with marrieds from the larger church. In fact, when we do plan an all-singles trip, the marrieds sometimes come around to ask, 'Could I go along with you guys?' because they're interested in the particular location."

The Thursday night meeting is as mainstream as Rhoden can make it. "My premise is: 'Yes, you're single, but you're a Christian first,'" he says. "Therefore I don't do teachings on 'How to Get Along with Your Roommate.' Instead, I do series on things like 'The Life of

Christ' or 'Lessons from the Book of Job'—generic discipleship issues.

"And I find our singles thinking of themselves in this light. They don't say to their friends at work, 'Come to my singles group.' They say, 'How about coming to church with me Thursday night?' because that's in fact what it is."

On the opposite coast, Saint Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, California, has become known for its inclusion of singles; a third of its 4,600 members are single. Bill Flanagan, minister of singles for the past 16 years, has made it a personal goal to groom and encourage single people for church leadership.

"If singles don't make it eventually onto governing boards, committees, and task forces," he says, "they will drift off from a church in time."

What holds churches back from this kind of awakening? Flanagan names two factors:

"First, an inadequate theology of what the family of God really is.

"Second, the persistent myths, such as: marriage is the cure for the 'disease' of singleness; single people are less than whole—they're oversexed, they're losers, incapable; the offspring of singles are doomed to failure, juvenile delinquency. And most offensive of all: the myth that singles will prey upon your spouse if you let them get close."

In seeking to overcome the barriers created by niches, we can look to the first-century church, which faced its own niche dangers. It could have conveniently segmented itself into Jewish and Gentile factions, Aramaic-speaking and Greek-speaking congregations. But this was not God's design for his church.

It is time for us once again to hear the clarion voice of Paul in Ephesians 2 to those "excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise. . . . But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

"For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. . . . Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (vv. 12-14, 19, NIV).

Nineteen centuries later, we face the same challenge to live out this truth in our fragmented world. **CT**

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