

Chapter Three

ABC's of Single Adult Ministry

A—

Acceptance—Single adults, like everyone else, need to know they are accepted and valued by the church community. They also need for others to accept singleness as a viable life style.

Accountability—As a single adult, it is easy for me to think the world revolves around me. After all, I'm the only adult making most decisions that effect my life. It is important to have someone who questions how I invest my time, money, and energy. Single adults with children may have some accountability. Yet the need remains for an adult who keeps me focused.

Affirmation—The Christian community appears to hold marriage as the preferred status. This may create challenges for single adults as they seek affirmation for their singleness. Many single adults are single by default; that is, they didn't decide to remain single for an extended season. They established dating standards and determined living the Christian lifestyle as a high priority.

Adult—The operative word in Single Adult Ministries is adult. Descriptors such as over-sized teenagers, irresponsible, fickle, and so on are no more applicable to single adults than to married adults. Often single adults hold positions of responsibility in the workplace, but find themselves in lesser roles in the church world.

B—

Bible Study — One of the major purposes of SAM is to bring people into a relationship with Jesus and to encourage spiritual growth and development. This happens best through Bible studies. Book studies addressing single adult issues and applications are a good option, too.

Boundaries—Some people have difficulty establishing and maintaining good boundaries. Some need to know that it is okay to decline opportunities presented by people within the church.

Budgeting—Many need assistance in planning and adhering to a budget. Budgeting is something we hear much about, but often lack the

Notes

skills to implement. Additionally, living on one income presents challenges since there are fewer discretionary dollars.

Burn-out—Some tend to see single adults as having more time than other adults. Unfortunately, the reality is that everyone has a 24-hour day. Single adults need to know it is all right to say no in order to avoid burn-out. For other single adults, burn-out may be related to their roles as parents. Therefore, an effective SAM needs to minister to single parents by providing some respite.

C—

Community— There is a sense of community that develops among single adults that is not replicated in other ministries. Perhaps it reflects the willingness to depend on others during difficult times. Many single adults see the community formed by SAM as important as family relationships.

Compassion—Single adults need to receive compassion during challenging times. As they receive compassion, they are able to give it to others in need. This means offering a listening ear, giving encouragement and support, meeting specific needs, and a multitude of possibilities.

Counseling—There will be people involved in SAM that need to use the services of professional counselors. However, many single adults benefit from having the attention of a willing listener. There are some issues that may be easily resolved by putting the situation into words.

Contentment—Paul expressed it well when he wrote, “for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (Phil. 4:11b). Contentment is a decision that is made sometimes day-by-day and moment-by-moment. Like people everywhere, some single adults are more content than others. They need to hear that contentment is a decision.

Celebrate—Single adults need people to celebrate their successes. A new job, a new car, moving into a new apartment, and many other occasions need to be celebrated. In a family structure, these happen more naturally as family members share excitement and joy. Single adults depend on friends to help celebrate. Find reasons to celebrate.

D—

Divorce recovery— Many identify divorce recovery as a life-saver while navigating the troubled waters of divorce. Also remember that children are affected by their parents’ divorce. They can benefit from a program that helps them to understand what is happening, to realize they were not responsible, and to know that others have survived.

Dating discussions—Entering the dating arena as an adult following divorce or death is scary. There are general concepts regarding dating as teens and young adults, but fewer guidelines for adult dating. General discussions are helpful as people understand their fears and concerns are shared by others.

Diversity—No other ministry in the church involves such a wide age range. Considering the unique needs of the divorced, never-married, and widowed is staggering. Yet everyone is united by singleness. Use the diversity to share commonalities, to gain new insights, and to learn how to apply concepts to different circumstances.

E—

Evangelism—One of the core values of SAM is to bring people into a relationship with Jesus and to encourage spiritual growth and development.

Encouragement—Everyone benefits from encouragement and it is an important element of every ministry. This is especially true of SAM as people adjust to a new lifestyle and learn to live life as single adults.

Education—Informing the congregation is a key element in SAM. Just when I think people understand who single adults are, I hear about a group that only identifies single adults as those who have never married. Educate the congregation to understand that all persons without a spouse are single adults, regardless if they are divorced, never-married, or widowed. Education also needs to include the unique challenges of the single adult lifestyle, especially as Christians. Help church leaders to understand terms and other aspects of church life that tend to be exclusive of single adults. For example, banquets where the cost of an individual ticket is more than half the cost of tickets for couples.

Empathy—Even though people haven't experienced a particular situation, they are capable of understanding based on similar circumstances. For example, I haven't experienced the death of a spouse; I have experienced loss and the death of relatives and friends. I can empathize with those grieving the death of a spouse, without having walked that particular path.

F—

Friendships—Single adults value their friendships. Many single adults depend as much on friends as they do family members. Some depend on friends more than family. SAM is also a good place for developing cross-gender friendships, without romantic overtones.

Forgiveness—Many single adults need to know and understand that

Notes

God's love didn't stop when they experienced death, divorce, or whatever sin they deem as unforgivable. They long to experience God's love and forgiveness.

Freedom—After receiving forgiveness, some need to discover the freedom that comes with knowing Jesus. Freedom from past sins, freedom to begin a new chapter in life as a Christian single adult, freedom to discover who they are in Christ, and freedom to use their gifts, talents, and abilities in the church are some examples.

Faith-building—Stories of how God has worked in the lives of single adults serves to encourage our faith. Telling stories of God's love, grace, and mercy at work strengthens others' faith.

G—

Growth—Single adults need to use their gifts, talents, and abilities to further God's kingdom. Growth as individuals work through the grief of their crushed hopes and broken dreams. Growth as single adults find ministry opportunities within SAM and the congregation.

Grief recovery—Ministry to the grieving individuals is a relatively new aspect of SAM. Too often, we understand grief as something experienced later in life. However, many people have experiences that cause them to grieve; some related to death and others the result of downsizing, moving, loss of friendships, and many other experiences. People need to learn to grieve the small losses in life to prepare them for grieving the significant losses.

Goal-setting—Learning to set new goals is an important part of the grieving process. Life is forever changed by death and the loss of hopes and dreams. New goals must be set; some will need encouragement and assistance as they set realistic goals.

Gateway—SAM often serves as a gateway into the Body of Christ. This may result as people accept Jesus as Savior, as they transition into other ministries, and as they discover life after traumatic experiences.

H—

Healthy people—One of the myths regarding single adults relates to their emotional health. Admittedly, individuals come to SAM in times of crisis following death, divorce, single-parent family issues, and a variety of other events. Along with these individuals are single adults who have experienced recovery from similar events as well as emotionally healthy people. Our responsibility is to treat the unhealthy and encourage the healthy.

Helping others—Ministering to others is a vital part of most recov-

*Single Adult Ministries Handbook for Leaders***Notes**

ery processes. Many people involved in helping others experience personal benefits as they reach beyond personal needs to assist others.

Healing—Many adults have experiences that require some type of healing. As people experience healing, they are able to minister to those facing similar circumstances.

Hope—Some single adults have experienced events that have left them devoid of hope. For some, the loss of hope reflects broken dreams while others find the true Source of hope in Jesus.

Holiday awareness—Much of North American culture emphasizes holidays as family time. For those without family, estranged from them, or separated geographically, the holidays present challenges. These challenges involve all adults, regardless of their marital status. However, those who are experiencing the holidays for the first time as single-again may find themselves wondering how to cope.

Also remember the “lesser” holidays such as Valentine’s Day, Easter, Mother’s Day, and Father’s Day. Some single adults find these holidays just as difficult.

I—

Instruction—There are skills needed to live as successful, healthy single adults. SAM is the best place to learn them. There are myths regarding singleness that need to be removed and replaced with truths about life as a single adult. Others need instruction on how to live as Christians. Still others need help with practical day-to-day living skills such as budgeting, financial planning, parenting as a single adult, and other issues.

Identity—Since much of the Christian world assumes that adults find identity in roles as husbands/fathers and wives/mothers, it may be difficult for single adults to determine who they are in the Christian community. Every adult needs to understand that true identity comes through a relationship with Jesus.

Intimacy—Intimacy is often used synonymously for sexual intercourse. However, there are intimate relationships that aren’t sexual. True intimacy is found as people share their stories, hopes, and dreams with others who value the shared information.

Internet—Stories abound of people, regardless of marital status, whose lives have been destroyed or radically changed through internet usage. An additional area of concern is online match-maker services and chat rooms. While there are many positive benefits of the internet, individuals need to be aware of the dangers of it, too.

Intergenerational—SAM by definition includes a wide age range as well as diversity in socio-economic, educational, and work areas. Yet, it is

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one of the few, if not only, place that people from such diverse background come together and form community. The younger people need to hear the stories of those who are farther along in life's journey. The older individuals enjoy the life and energy of those younger than they. Capitalize on the opportunity to bring the generations together to learn and share.

J—

Jesus—SAM is built on a spiritual foundation. The uniqueness of SAM is spiritual growth and development in our relationships with Jesus. Without Jesus as part of our ministry, we are no different than secular groups.

Joy—As Christians, we know our source of joy is our relationship with Jesus. Use all the events of SAM to bring people face-to-face with Jesus.

K—

Kindness—Some will come to SAM events needing to receive some kindness. Events in their life, personal and professional, may create the need for some kind words.

Kids—The children of single parents are often overlooked; or we assume their needs are being addressed through Children's Ministries. However, they may not receive help in dealing with the death of a parent or their parent's divorce. Recovery ministries that also address the needs of the children will benefit the family. Additionally, some SAM events should be designed to include children. Also, consider child-care when planning events. Perhaps SAM and NYI can work together to provide child-care.

L—

Laughter—Following many SAM events, I hear attendees comment about how they enjoyed and needed the times of laughter. While the need for a merry heart is good, life often puts people in situations that provide little opportunity for laughing. Additionally, a laugh is much better when shared.

Love—People need to know they are loved by others and God. SAM is one avenue for showing love and introducing people to the loving God.

Listening ear—According to Harold Ivan Smith, people need someone who will listen to the end of the sentence. Often no advice is needed; just someone to give undivided attention.

Single Adult Ministries Handbook for Leaders

Notes

Leadership development—SAM is a place where people discover and develop leadership abilities. As people accept responsibility for different aspects of SAM, they can learn and develop new skills.

Learning—Whether it is about life as a single adult or spiritual growth and development, learning is a key component of SAM.

M—

Marriage preparation—Dennis Franck, a colleague in SAM, states that rather than seeing singleness as a problem to be solved through marriage, we should raise the bar for people getting married. Alan Corry, another SAM colleague, posits that people who have been part of SAM should be better marriage candidates. That is, through the events and teaching of SAM, people have a sense of wholeness and skills that will enable them to better face the challenges of marriage.

N—

Never-married adults—A largely overlooked group in SAM, never-married adults seek affirmation, support, encouragement, and role models. Among baby-boomers, there is a large number of never-married adults that are blazing trails for others. These individuals have learned much about life that can be shared with others. SAM leaders must recognize the loss of hopes and dreams, help individuals through the grieving process, and encourage formation of new hopes and dreams. Never-married adults comprise the largest segment of the single adult population, and we cannot discount or overlook their needs, issues, and concerns.

New Life—Introducing people to Jesus is the foundational principle of ministry. This happens in a variety of ways as the Church ministers to people. This is particularly true of SAM as single-again individuals discover a new lifestyle. For others, new life is a renewed interest in spiritual growth and development.

O—

Opportunities for service—The nature of SAM provides countless opportunities for service as we assist people in times of crisis and transition. Additionally, single adults who are distanced from family depend on friends for assistance during routine challenges such as car repairs and transportation after medical procedures.

Openness—Several speakers state they enjoy their times with single adults most. Further questioning centered on the willingness of single adults to hear and respond to God's call. This often reflects the dependence single adults have on God. Since there is no other adult to listen,

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single adults tend to become more dependent on God.

Many single adults, after recovering from a crisis, are often willing to help others by sharing their experiences. These individuals willingly companion others through difficult times and then share good ones.

P—

Purity—A quick review of how single adults are portrayed in the media reveals little that reflects the Christian single adult lifestyle. Small groups designed to discuss these pressures and share coping skills provide encouragement and support. New Christian single adults may be learning to recapture their purity as they view life from a different perspective.

Parenting issues—Parenting is a responsibility designed for two people. Single parents, therefore, face unique challenges, such as total responsibility for day-to-day discipline, one person to transport children to diverse activities, and juggling the demands of home and school. While single parents benefit from parenting conferences and workshops, those designed for two parent families must include time for single parents to discuss how the principles apply to them.

Pain—Everyone faces pain. It's part of life. However, single adults often face life's pains without immediate support. This is an opportunity for service as others listen, share, and support during these times.

Passion—As people benefit from the ministries offered by SAM, some will become passionate about continuing the ministries. Part of the passion of SAM is to educate the congregation and community regarding the single adult lifestyle and to assist others in respecting it. Lori Smith in *The Single Truth* writes that “marriage isn't better than the single life—it's just different.”

Q—

Quiet—One of the greatest challenges of many single adults is becoming comfortable with silence. Teachings within SAM should encourage single adults to change their times of loneliness into aloneness and aloneness into solitude.

R—

Recovery—Throughout this list, recovery is a recurring theme. People experiencing death and divorce need assistance as they work and grow through the events. Transcending all groups is the loss of hopes and dreams that must be identified, named, acknowledged, and grieved. This, too, is a recovery process.

Single Adult Ministries Handbook for Leaders

Notes

Rebirth of hopes and dreams—As a result of life’s losses, new hopes and dreams must be formulated. There is little information that validates the loss of hopes and dreams and encourages new ones. Consider making this issue a discussion topic.

Respect—Conversations with single adults reveal a feeling that the single adult lifestyle is not respected. There is the sense that others continue to wait for single adults to grow up, settle down, and get married. This won’t happen for every single adult; therefore, respect for their lifestyle must be encouraged.

Role models—Even as adults, we look to others as an example.

Relationships—Everyone needs a cheerleader. We also need friends of both genders. SAM is often the place where individuals find both.

S—

Social events—Everyone needs time designed for fun and laughter. Social events provide both while presenting opportunities to form new friendships.

Step-family preparation—One of the greatest challenges facing today’s world are step-families. Preparing for life in a step-family presents unique challenges as groups of people with unshared past experiences come together. For other step-families, it is a first marriage for one spouse, thereby creating another set of circumstances.

Small groups—Many churches found great success in developing small group ministries. These groups offer a small, more connected group in which to learn and grow. While it is important for single adults to be part of mixed groups, there are single adult issues that are best addressed by small groups comprised of single adults.

T—

Truth—Single adults need to hear the truth about life as Christians. They need to know about the challenges, similarity between their lives and married persons, and the truth about a relationship with Jesus.

Tips for life—Learning from others happens as people share their stories. Encouragement, support, and helpful hints make life easier to manage.

Time management—One myth regarding single adults is that we have more time than married persons. While some single adults, those without children, may have more discretionary control of their time, everyone has a 24-hour day. Everyone needs to hear that it is OK to say no.

Touch and trust—SAM should be a safe place to learn to trust and to

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experience good touch. Everyone needs human touch and for some single adults, this may rarely happen.

Transitions—Some single adults may feel as if their lives are constantly in transition. Others will experience major transitions. Be aware that all transitions have the potential for being stressful.

U—

Unity—Whether people are divorced, never-married, or widowed, single adults are united by the commonality of singleness. Capitalize on this sense of unity while recognizing the diversity of the ministry.

Unchurched people—Some researchers say that over 50 percent of the unchurched population are single adults. No church or ministry should ignore such a large portion of the population. Remember that some of the unchurched single adults may identify themselves as Christians.

Understanding—Single adults are looking for a place where they are valued, respected, and understood. Any church or ministry that provides these will find single adults wanting to join them.

V—

Victory—Whether it's used in a spiritual sense as victory through Jesus or in a more secular sense as overcoming a problem, victory is part of life. Everyone has issues that create struggles and eventual victory. Celebrate each victory and encourage those in battle.

Visitation issues—Children in single-parent homes may face challenges as a result of divorce or a parent's death. Leaders of Children's Ministries and Youth Ministries must be aware that for children of single-parent families regular attendance may be on a regular-irregular basis. For example, court ordered visitations may mean that some children will be absent every other week or once monthly.

Another aspect of SAM and recovery programs will be to encourage single parents to stay involved with their children when their contact is limited. Another issue deals with the challenges of differing lifestyles of the parents. Be prepared to listen and support single parents as they face and cope with these challenges.

W—

Wholeness—The greatest lesson any SAM can teach is that wholeness comes from a relationship with Jesus rather than another human being. Additionally, single adults need to be reminded that whole people are best suited for marriage.

Single Adult Ministries Handbook for Leaders

Notes

Worship—Most SAM events should include times of worship. Remember the greatest offering of SAM is that individuals may know and have a relationship with Jesus.

Wide age range—SAM includes people from early 20s and upward. This diversity of ages can present challenges, yet it is one of the strongest elements as people share and learn together and from each other.

X—

Expectation—Expectations are a two-way street: expectation from single adults that SAM will address their issues, needs, and concerns and expectations from SAM that single adults will become involved in some of the opportunities it provides. The list of expectations is virtually endless, however, identifying some of them is important for an effective ministry.

Experience—People can learn from the experiences of others. Sometimes this is avoiding certain dangers and at other times, it is drawing encouragement and support.

Y—

Yearning to know God—Throughout this list, a repeated theme is relationship with Jesus and single adults seeking to know and follow God. Always remember that it is this emphasis on knowing God that separates SAM from other gatherings of single adults.

Z—

Zealous—Some single adults become zealous in the desire to share what they have learned and experienced with others. This is one way of knowing that SAM has achieved its purpose.

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