
TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

Marie Cornwall

WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT THE SINGLES PROBLEM?

One frequently hears the remark "being single in a family church is difficult." But the problem is not "being single in a family church," the problem is "being single in a married church." Single people have families. They have mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters, and many have children. The issue is not that singles have no family, but that they have no marriage partner. When one is without a marriage partner, an added element of awkwardness is introduced into every social situation within the Church. This awkwardness is in part a function of the importance of marriage as an indicator of adulthood and social status within Mormonism. But it is also due to common sense notions that every Mormon should marry, and everyone who wants to can.

New demographic trends which affect Latter-day Saints as well as the remainder of the population have created trends counter to the "adequate opportunity" assumption. The number and proportion of single Church members has increased over the past several years. Not only are people marrying later, but divorce rates are increasing. In addition, young people are much more likely to live independently from their families before marrying. This makes singleness more visible because the number of single households has increased. An increasing number of single Church members has created problems for a Church which prides itself on the importance of the family, and organizes all its functions and activities around the family as the most basic ecclesiastical unit in the Church. Despite these trends, Mormons are still more likely to marry than other religious groups, are less likely to divorce, and when divorced are more likely to remarry.

The "singles" problem will *not* go away in the near future. Recent studies of the marriage market in the U. S. suggests some women may

never marry. During the first week of June, *Newsweek* announced with utter finality a forty-year old never married woman with a college education was more likely to be killed by a terrorist than to be married. In a recent television documentary *After the Sexual Revolution*, Peter Jennings reported approximately 15% of women born in the 1950's would never marry. And a University of California study has reported, "If we tried to match each woman born in 1950 with a man three years older, we would come out with millions of women left over."

Aside from these demographic trends, we must remember life has cycles and stages and not everyone is in the same stage of life at the same time. While the perfect Mormon family has been culturally defined as a husband and wife married in the temple with children at home, at any one time this perfect Mormon family accounts for less than one in five households in the Church. A large percentage of the single population of the Church are "not yet married" members less than 30 years old. Given time, they will marry. But there will always be single members of the Church who must be integrated into the ward family. Some have not yet married, others have been married but are now divorced, and others have married but are now widowed.

I am reminded of the results of a study I read several years ago. The study reported the results of a survey of bishops and stake presidents who were asked, among other things, what they thought the solution to the "singles' problem" might be. As I recall, something like 85% responded simply, "Get them married." An obviously simple answer to a complex problem. If the marriage market among Latter-day Saints is similar to the marriage market in the U. S. in general, there are not as many marriageable men in the population as there are marriageable women. Furthermore, even if the sex ratio were equal, the men and women who

make up the single population over 30 are different from each other. The women are more likely to be professionals, while the men are more likely to be blue collar workers. Single women are more educated than single men, and the women are more likely to live in large cities while the men are more likely to live in smaller population areas. The simple solution—"get them married"—is not a simple solution at all.

So what is the solution to the single's problem? The problem is not totally a singles' problem, or the problem of singles. Rather, the problem is a married's problem, a problem of married people. The singles' problem is a married's problem because married members do not understand what it means to be single. Their understanding of single life is based on their own experiences when they were young and less mature. Having married, they attribute their sense of adulthood to marriage and family. They do not understand their peers who have not yet married also achieved adulthood. For a single person, adulthood is measured in other ways (career promotions, stability, associations with other adults). Unfortunately, whatever sense of adulthood they may feel during the week at work and at home frequently disappears on Sunday as they interact with married members.

Married's and some single people frequently assume the lack of a marriage partner is an indication something is wrong with a person. This message is frequently conveyed by the way married members approach singles. The "bold and direct" approach is generally used by married men, the "subtle and caring" approach is generally used by married women.

The "bold and direct" approach is most often articulated within the first five minutes of one's initial meeting, in which the married man simply says "How come a good looking woman like you never married?" Not only is this the \$64 million question for most never married women, it is a very painful one as well. Single women frequently brainstorm reasonable responses like "Because I never had to," or "My husband died in the war in heaven." But these replies do not totally neutralize the underlying question, "What is wrong with you that you are not married?"

The "subtle and caring" approach of married women is generally more gentle, but equally painful and carries with it the same underlying question. Subtle and caring married women avoid the "How come you never married" question, making their own guesses and providing helpful suggestions. "Why don't you get your hair cut?" "How about trying a new shade of lip stick?" "Maybe if you wore more make-up." "You

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know you really ought to go on a diet. Maybe if you lost 20 pounds." "Why don't you join the spa?"

These approaches are not helpful at all. They are not helpful because they are based on the assumption marriage is possible for all people and can be achieved by simply fixing a few things. Singles know the problem is not that simple.

The single problem is a married's problem because married members do not know what it is like to be single. They do not understand the marriage market for a single person over 30 is different from the marriage market which produced their own marriage. Because they do not understand the marriage market, they put undue pressure on singles to marry and thereby "solve the problem."

Let me give you an example of the need married people feel to pressure singles to get married. At a recent wedding reception, I was sitting with a good friend who has never married and his date for the evening. His home teacher approached to provide what he obviously thought were needed incentives for my friend to marry. The home teacher said, "What's wrong with you?" And then, pointing to my friend's date and then to me, "Here you have too lovely ladies at your side and you still aren't married." Of course my friend was speechless. His options included explaining why he had not married either of us, and thereby risk insulting one or both, or to say nothing at all. And, of course, the underlying assumption was both of us could hardly wait to get this guy to the temple.

Married people do not understand that a single man and woman can be very good friends without romantic interest. Married people must learn the questions they ask of single people are sometimes inappropriate. Just as couples who have been unable to have children appreciate the sensitivity of others who do not pressure them as to why, single members appreciate the sensitivity of those who do not pressure them about their singleness.

Another general assumption of married members is that singles face the same problems as married members in trying to live the Gospel of Christ (chastity, tithing, sacrifice, etc.), but at the same time must be treated differently (special programs, separate wards, fewer Church callings, less responsibility). One solution to the singles' problem may be the recognition that singles face different problems in trying to live the Gospel of Christ, but must be treated in much the same way as other adult members of the Church.

The lives of married and single people are different. Married's frequently perceive the sin-

gle life as simple, unencumbered, and self-satisfying to the point of selfishness. To some extent, they envy it. In fact, a single life style is not so simple. Because there is no "partner" to share in the task of daily living, the single person must do everything. Laundry, yard work, shopping, painting the living room, laying sod in the back yard, fixing the car, banking, grocery shopping, making dinner, waiting for repairmen to come, and earning a living too. The job is tripled for the divorced or never married person with children.

In addition, while married's may look forward to a quiet evening at home, a single person who lives alone must go out to meet their social needs by spending time with friends. To the married person some singles appear to spend a lot of energy seeking fun and enjoyment. What they do not understand is such activities are frequently a matter of survival for the single person who lives alone.

If the singles problem is a married's problem, then what can married's do about it? The most obvious solution is to get married people to resist the need to pressure single people to marry. For the most part single people do want to get married and do not need to be reminded getting married is something they ought to do.

Second, married people need to be less judgmental, and more accepting of the single person. This means of course, that they do not stereotype singles. It has been my experience, for example, that when a married person in my office appears tired and overworked, co-workers assume they have been working too hard or they have been up all night with a sick child. When a single person yawns in the middle of the day, it is a sure sign they were partying the night before.

Third, married people need to be more open to friendships with single people. Frequently, the tendency in the Church is to segregate singles. The assumption, of course, is that singleness is a defining characteristic of common interests. Every time I move into a new ward, the response of the members is to introduce me to the other members of the ward who are also single. They are not as concerned about introducing me to people who share the same level of education, the same kind of work, or who are approximately the same age. In fact, the opposite is true. For despite my being older each time I move into a new ward, I am introduced to younger and younger people. For the older single, the quality of their experience in the Mormon community is much more dependent upon their association with other married people with whom they can share similar interests than it is upon association with other single people. Similarity in age and educational status are much more likely to define common interests than the mere fact of being single.

Much of this discussion has been fairly negative and stereotypical of married people. Actually, some of my best friends are married, and I value these friendships. Establishing friendships with other people who share common interests, values, and commitments—whatever their marital status—is important to me. To my closest married friends, my singleness is not an issue because it does and it doesn't matter that I'm not married. It matters because they understand I want to, but haven't. But they are also sensitive to my feelings and concerns, they do not pressure, they accept me as an adult, and they feel no need to help me fix whatever needs to be fixed. I have a sense they like me the way I am.

DIFFICULTY AT THE BEGINNING

The clock stopped at one thirty is not mine.
That man, where is he going?
My body is a post

Off the highway and out of back roads
someone comes at me. What is he saying?

No camping, but walking on another road,
I make an amnion of body-heat and sun, conscious
stirring forest, blood and sap: Who-
crosses-the-side-I-am-turning-away-from

fades along the road. While he came near
me, I increased, while he goes from me,
I diminish. I offer

to return my thanks by mail.

-STEPHEN GOULD