

GO AND MAKE DISCIPLES: HOW DISCIPLESHIP IN THE FORM OF SMALL GROUPS  
REACHES AND CARES FOR SINGLE ADULTS IN THEIR TWENTIES AND THIRTIES

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## ABSTRACT

According to the 2020 U.S. census, nearly 50 percent of the population is single or never-married. Statistics show an increase in the single population, but has that resulted in increased single adults in Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) church pews? Or have young, single people avoided the idea of church to find community, purpose, identity, and accountability elsewhere? Unfortunately, there is a disconnect between the growing number of young single people worldwide and the decreasing number of young single people in the pews. As the number of single people in society increases, a WELS church will want to ask this question, “What strategies can pastors implement to create and foster a church community which cares for and reaches out to single people in their twenties and thirties?” This thesis paper seeks to answer this question by examining the possibility of creating that community through small groups. Throughout this paper, the reader will hear from WELS pastors, WELS members, and published authors who have rigorously studied singles ministry and small group ministry.

## INTRODUCTION

Cody<sup>1</sup> is a twenty-seven-year-old, single individual who just accepted a promotion that required him to move away from his hometown to a new city. His family helped him move all his belongings into his new one-bedroom apartment on the lower Eastside of Milwaukee and hugged him goodbye. For the first time in Cody's life, he was all on his own.

After getting comfortable at his new job as a marketing consultant for Milwaukee Tool, he received an email from a WELS church saying, "Welcome to the area! We want to personally invite you to our church! Our services are at nine am on Sunday mornings. Please come worship with us!" At first, he ignored it, thinking, "Maybe later; I'm just too busy right now."

A few days later, he thought, "Maybe I should try that church." As Sunday morning dawned, he put on his church clothes, headed out the door, and entered the church doors. As he walked in, he saw a group of people who looked very different from himself. He saw people with gray hair, married couples, and married couples with children. He noticed something was off. One group of people was missing. "Where are all the young, single people like me?" he asked himself. He began to wonder, "Do I fit in?"

Despite this, he went with the flow. Cody sat down in the pew, sang some hymns, and listened to a sermon on Rom 12. After proclaiming the law and gospel, the pastor guided the congregation in responding to the gospel, "Husbands and wives, be a living sacrifice to God by

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1. Cody is not a real person. He serves as a character for the illustration.

loving one another. Children, be a living sacrifice to God by serving your parents. Single people, be a living sacrifice by saying no to sexual temptation.” Cody wondered, “Is that all I am called to do? Just say no to sex? Isn’t there more to my singlehood than that?”

After worship, the pastor made some announcements about different events coming up on the calendar. “Coming up next week, we will have a marriage enrichment seminar. We will start ‘Mornings with Mommy in the next couple of weeks.’ After worship concludes, we will continue with *Family Bible Hour*.” As the pastor concluded his announcements, Cody began to wonder, “Is there anything for young, single people here?”

In the fellowship area, a few people greeted him. They asked Cody, “So, are you married?” He said, “No, I’m focusing on my career right now, but maybe in the future.” To that, they said, “Wow. I’m surprised a nice man like you isn’t married yet.” Cody smiled politely but thought, “Is there something wrong with being single?” On Cody’s drive home, he could not shake the thought that maybe that church was not for him.

The picture painted is one of a family-oriented church. A family-oriented church is undoubtedly admirable. Christians want to follow God’s plan for families, and churches want to offer as many opportunities for families as possible for spiritual growth. Unfortunately, at times the family-oriented nature of WELS churches tends to leave young, single people like Cody wondering, “Where do I fit in? How does this apply to me? What’s my purpose at this church?”

The 2020 U.S. Census reports that over 50 percent of the population is unmarried.<sup>2</sup> Yet, often, WELS churches do not see a majority of single people in their pews. Why is this? One deficiency in WELS churches may be the lack of intentionality in making young, single people

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2. “Families and Living Arrangements,” U.S. Census Bureau, <https://data.census.gov/profile?q=United+States&g=0100000US>.

feel at home. WELS churches are built on the family unit. WELS has consistently grown through Lutheran early childhood centers, pre-schools, and grade schools. However, as the number of single people in our country rises, WELS churches need to broaden their mission mindset to effectively reach the growing demographic of young, single people in their twenties and thirties.

Jesus gave his church the Great Commission, “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19).<sup>3</sup> “All nations” means all people, young and old, married or unmarried, with children or without children. WELS has understood how to reach and care for families for years, but has it adapted to do the same for single people in their twenties and thirties? What strategies could churches implement to create and foster a community that cares for and reaches the single individual in their twenties or thirties?

One strategy a church can implement is discipleship in the form of small groups. Small groups have much to offer the single person in their twenties and thirties. As the single person faces the challenge of loneliness, a small group offers an authentic community. As the single person faces the challenge of finding purpose, a small group offers a purpose in opportunities to serve their neighbor. Therefore, discipleship in the form of small groups can create and foster a church community that reaches and cares for the single individual in their twenties or thirties.

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3. All Bible quotations are NIV11 unless otherwise indicated.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Extensive research has been done on the United States and WELS demographics. The U.S. Census Bureau reveals many different statistics about marital status and adults in their twenties and thirties. Many of those statistics are not tracked in WELS churches. The Pew Research Center has extensively researched these demographics and trends in churches and society. Aside from statistics, evangelical authors have written several books on singleness. They present the needs of singles and ways churches can minister to single adults. The Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary library and essay file also have abundant resources on this topic. Those resources present the theology of singleness and how churches can minister to them. Those resources are written by pastors and other leaders in the WELS. This paper will discuss findings from those resources and interviews done by the author in the following pages.



## CHAPTER I: WHY ARE THERE SO MANY SINGLES THESE DAYS?

Before examining how a church can reach and care for single individuals in their twenties and thirties, a question needs to be asked. Who are the people in their twenties and thirties? What characteristics do they have? What are their views on the family? What are their thoughts on religion? In order to provide care for a people group, one must first examine the people group.

Two distinct generations make up the twenties and thirties age group. Generation Y and Generation Z comprise those in their twenties and thirties. Generation Y has been nicknamed the “Millennials,” and Generation Z has been nicknamed “iGen.” This paper will use those nicknames to refer to each generation from here on out. Both Millennials and iGen’ers have unique characteristics.

People in Generation Y are called Millennials because of the turn of the millennium in 2000. Millennials are those born between 1981 and 1996.<sup>4</sup> The ages of the people in this generation span from twenty-six to forty-one. Concerning Millennials, this thesis paper will focus primarily on those between the ages of twenty-six and thirty-nine.

Generation Z is known as iGen due to its familiarity with contemporary technology. Researcher Jean M. Twenge, who has extensively studied this generation, includes anyone born after 1995 in her definition of iGen.<sup>5</sup> Twenge admits, “It’s anyone’s guess when iGen will end;

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4. “Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” The Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>.

5. Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us*, (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 5.

I'd put my money on fourteen to seventeen years after 1995. That would mean the last iGen'ers were born somewhere between 2009 and 2015, with 2012 right at the middle of that range. That makes the birth year span of iGen 1995–2012.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, one can conclude that the youngest people in this age group are currently ten years old, and the oldest are twenty-seven years old. Due to the subject material, this paper will focus on adult (eighteen to twenty-seven-years-old) iGen'ers.

### **The Great Number of Singles in Two Generations**

The 2020 U.S. Census reported that a stunning 52 percent of the adult population is single.<sup>7</sup> This is broken down into various categories such as widowed, divorced, separated, and never-married. Of the 52 percent of unmarried adults, 34.2 percent were never-married.<sup>8</sup> That is over one-third of the adult population.

A year before the U.S. Census, the Pew Research Center did an in-depth study of never-married single adults. In October 2019, the Pew Research Center surveyed 4,860 American adults concerning their marital status. That survey reported that 31 percent were single. The other 69 percent were either married or in a relationship.<sup>9</sup> Of those who were single, 41 percent were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine, and 23 percent were between the ages of thirty

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6. Twenge, *iGen*, 10.

7. “Unmarried and Single Americans Week: September 18-24, 2022,” U.S. Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/stories/unmarried-single-americans-week.html>.

8. “Families and Living Arrangements,” U.S. Census Bureau, <https://data.census.gov/profile?q=United+States&g=0100000US>.

9. “A Profile of Single Americans,” The Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/08/20/a-profile-of-single-americans/>.

and forty-nine.<sup>10</sup> Anna Brown, the writer of this particular study, notes, “The youngest and oldest Americans are the most likely to be single – 41% of those ages 18 to 29 and 36% of those 65 and older say they are single, compared with 23% of those 30 to 49 and 28% of those 50 to 64.”<sup>11</sup>

By looking at this data, one can gather that most singles fall between eighteen and twenty-nine. However, there are still a handful of singles between the ages of thirty and thirty-nine. The primary truth that these statistics reflect is that many singles exist in the United States. A lot of them are young people in their twenties and thirties. So that begs the question. Why are there so many singles in their twenties and thirties?

One main factor is that young people choose to marry later in life. Over the years, the median age of marriage for young adults has moved. In 2000, the median age for men to first marry was twenty-six, and for women, it was twenty-five. In 2022, the median marriage age for men was thirty, and for women, it was twenty-eight.<sup>12</sup> Why has the needle moved from the mid-twenties in the early 2000s to the early thirties and late twenties in 2022? It is helpful to examine the generational views of marriage for Millennials and iGen’ers. First, this paper will examine the Millennials’ view.

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10. “A Profile of Single Americans,” The Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/08/20/a-profile-of-single-americans/>.

11. “A Profile of Single Americans,” The Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/08/20/a-profile-of-single-americans/>.

12. U.S. Census Bureau, “Decennial Censuses, 1890 to 1940, and Current Population Survey, March and Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 1947 to 2022,” (Suitland, MD: U.S. Bureau, 2022), <http://www2.census.gov>.

## The Millennial View of Marriage

Amanda Barrosso, Kim Parker, and Jesse Bennett reported that most Millennials are not currently married. This statistic marked a significant change from past generations as only 44 percent of Millennials were married in 2019 compared to 53 percent of Gen X'ers, 61 percent of Boomers, and 81 percent of Silents at a comparable age.<sup>13</sup> Why is this the case? Part of the reason may be due to their view of marriage. People in the millennial generation saw the destruction that divorce brought to households. Their parents, the “Baby Boomer” generation (those born between 1946 and 1964), saw a stunning rise in divorce rates. The Pew Research Center reported that the divorce rate roughly doubled among U.S. adults ages fifty and older since the 1990s.<sup>14</sup> Seeing marriage fail during childhood dramatically affects the decision to get married. As a result, millennials often view cohabitation as a way to dodge marriage altogether.

An increasing number of young adults are living together before marriage. This trend is especially true of Millennials and iGen'ers. Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Nikki Graf, and Gretchen Livingston report:

The share of U.S. adults who are currently married has declined modestly in recent decades, from 58% in 1995 to 53% today. Over the same period, the share of adults who are living with an unmarried partner has risen from 3% to 7%. While the share who are currently cohabiting remains far smaller than the share who are married, the share of adults ages 18 to 44 who have ever lived with an unmarried partner (59%) has surpassed the share who has ever been married (50%), according to a Pew Research Center analysis of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG).<sup>15</sup>

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13. “As Millennials Near 40, They’re Approaching Family Life Differently Than Previous Generations,” The Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/27/as-millennials-near-40-theyre-approaching-family-life-differently-than-previous-generations/>.

14. “Led By Baby Boomers, Divorce Rates Climb For America’s 50’s Population,” The Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/03/09/led-by-baby-boomers-divorce-rates-climb-for-americas-50-population/>.

15. “Marriage and Cohabitation in the U.S.,” The Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/11/06/marriage-and-cohabitation-in-the-u-s/>.

Cohabitation is a pivotal contributor to the rising rate of unmarried adults in the United States. Why are many young adults choosing to live together before or instead of getting married? A couple of contributing factors are their high or low view of marriage. In his master's thesis concerning cohabitation, Pastor Lucas Proeber considers how the high view of marriage may be why some choose to live together rather than get married. He writes, "One such problem shows itself when people realize they have become cripplingly frightened at the prospect of marriage. In their minds, if there is so much pain connected to divorce, it is better to stay unmarried."<sup>16</sup> Some are afraid that marriage means an eventual divorce, so their solution is to test it out first. On the flip side, some cohabit due to their low view of marriage. Proeber writes concerning this view as well:

Not all who cohabit have a high view of marriage, though. A more likely view many cohabiters hold is what Stanton calls a low view of marriage. This is the general secular thought which defines marriage as a man-made legal contract or piece of paper. People profess that what really matters is the love they have for each other. The church or government do not have the right to tell them otherwise. This, too, comes from the generation of experimentation and family upheaval mentioned earlier.<sup>17</sup>

"Love is love." Many people throw that phrase around these days. It carries much weight. Implicit in that phrase is this question, "Who has the right to tell me if I'm in love or not? I certainly don't need a piece of paper from the government to tell me if I am or not!" The low view of marriage pictures marriage as a simple piece of paper that the government issues.

The previous generation's high divorce rate directly influences the next generation's view of marriage. The high divorce rate may be why Millennials are warier about getting married at a young age. They have seen the wreckage that divorce has caused their families emotionally and

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16. Lucas Proeber, "God Knows What He is Talking About: Using Secular Data to Show That Cohabitation is a Detriment to Individuals and Society (master's thesis, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 2018), 14.

17. Proeber, "God Knows," 15.

financially. When they hear of marriage, they think of divorce. Millennials do not want to cause that same wreckage in their own lives and their potential future family. They also do not feel the need to get a piece of paper that tells them whether or not they are in a loving relationship. The high and low views of marriage drive young Millennials to hesitate to get married.

### **iGen's View of Marriage**

Where do marriage and raising a family fall on the priority list of an iGen'er? A survey done from 1976 to 2016 among twelfth graders and entering college students revealed that marriage has fallen on the iGen'ers' list of priorities. From 2002 to 2007, marriage and raising a family were ranked as the highest priority each year. However, by 2015, it fell to third place behind "being very well off financially" and "helping others in difficulty."<sup>18</sup>

Why is this the case? IGen'ers are concerned about their ability to provide for a potential family. Twenge shares the insights of Miles, a twenty-two-year-old iGen'er whom she interviewed in her research, "I think the biggest problem in having children is [wondering whether] I'll be able to provide a secure and comfortable lifestyle for them... I don't want to have a child when I'm not sure if I'm going to have a job tomorrow."<sup>19</sup> It is true that iGen'ers are facing some economic adversity. The Pew Research Center reports that as the share of never-married adults has climbed, their economic circumstances have also changed. For men ages twenty-five to thirty-four, the median hourly wage has declined by 20 percent since 1980. As never-married women place a high value on finding a spouse with a steady income, changes in

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18. Twenge, *iGen*, 264.

19. Twenge, *iGen*, 264.

the labor market have affected the number of young men with steady jobs.<sup>20</sup> Wendy Wang and Kim Parker report,

Among never-married adults ages 25 to 34, the number of employed men per 100 women dropped from 139 in 1960 to 91 in 2012, despite the fact that men in this age group outnumber young women in absolute numbers. In other words, if all never-married young women in 2012 wanted to find a young employed man who had also never been married, 9% of them would fail, simply because there are not enough men in the target group. Five decades ago, never-married young women had a much larger pool of potential spouses from which to choose.<sup>21</sup>

iGen'ers want to make sure that they can provide for their family when expected to do so. This safety focus and concern for the future plays a role in their decision to hold off on marriage for the time being and possibly altogether.

However, finances and future planning are not the only factors. Like Millennials, the previous generation's view of marriage directly influences the current generation's view. According to Twenge, 36 percent of iGen babies were born to single mothers, compared to 25 percent of Millennials.<sup>22</sup> That is an 11 percent increase in just one generation. From one generation to another, the needle moved from having a poor view of marriage to having relatively no view of marriage. When there is no one in the home to teach the younger generation what a marriage looks like, it is unlikely that iGen'ers would jump into the marriage pool head first. Unfortunately, with more and more iGen'ers raised in single-parent households, marriage might be avoided altogether.

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20. "Record Share of Americans Have Never-Married," Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2014/09/24/record-share-of-americans-have-never-married/>

21. "Record Share of Americans Have Never-Married," Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2014/09/24/record-share-of-americans-have-never-married/>

22. Twenge, *iGen*, 264.

However, even on top of the cohabitation phenomenon, Twenge shares another interesting trend. Twenge says:

Okay, so maybe more people are living together—after all, high school students are now much more likely to say that’s a good idea. Sure enough, more young couples now live together while unmarried than in previous generations. But in the last decade, something interesting has happened: the percentage of unmarried young adults living with a partner has stayed about the same, while the percentage who are married has plummeted. That means that more young people are truly single—not married and not living with anyone.<sup>23</sup>

A survey done by Gallup in 2015 gives validity to Twenge’s claim. Lydia Saad writes in her article, *Fewer Young People Say I Do—to Any Relationship*,

Along with the decline in marriages among 18- to 29-year-olds in the U.S. in recent years, Gallup trends on Americans' living arrangements reveal that the percentage of young adults "living together" has hardly budged. This means that not only are fewer young adults married, but also that fewer are in committed relationships. As a result, the percentage of young adults who report being single and not living with someone has risen dramatically in the past decade, from 52% in 2004 to 64% in 2014.<sup>24</sup>

To what should one attribute this additional phenomenon? Twenge suggests that their increasing disconnect from human relationships plays a crucial role in their hesitancy to even get into a serious relationship.<sup>25</sup> Generation Z has been nicknamed “iGen” for a reason. The dawn of technology has significantly affected how people interact with one another. As Twenge puts it, “Teens are Instagramming, Snapchatting, and texting with their friends more, and seeing them in person less. For iGen’ers, online friendship has replaced offline friendship.”<sup>26</sup> This lack of in-person, face-to-face interaction is another factor that directly affects the rise of singleness among generation Z.

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23. Twenge, *iGen*, 266–277.

24. “Fewer Young People Say I Do—to Any Relationship,” Gallup, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/183515/fewer-young-people-say-relationship.aspx>

25. Twenge, *iGen*, 267.

26. Twenge, *iGen*, 93.



## CHAPTER II: WHY AREN'T YOUNG SINGLES ATTENDING CHURCH?

Unfortunately, tracking the exact number of young, single people in WELS churches is hard because marital status data is not tracked in yearly synod statistical reports. Survey data does track, however, that there is a lack of single adults in their twenties and thirties in the WELS. Forty-two people responded to a survey conducted by the author of this paper in November of 2022 among WELS and ELS singles. Of those forty-two, thirty-six were WELS members. The survey posed this statement, “There are a lot of single people in their 20s and 30s at my church.” 72 percent of the WELS respondents answered that they disagreed with that statement.<sup>27</sup> Another survey done by the author asked several WELS pastors what percentage of twenties and thirties singles attend their churches. Responses were as high as 35 percent and as low as 1 percent.<sup>28</sup> Singles in their twenties and thirties tend to be the minority in most WELS churches.

The 2020 WELS Statistical Summary recorded age demographics synod-wide. The summary records a decrease in people ages eighteen to thirty-four from 2016 to 2020. In 2016, the number of eighteen to twenty-four-year-olds sat at about 29,000, and this decreased to about 25,000 in 2020. Similarly, the number of twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds sat at about 41,000 in 2016 and decreased to about 36,000 in 2020. The number of people between the ages of thirty-five and forty-four increased slightly from about 40,000 in 2016 to about 41,000 in 2020.<sup>29</sup> Why

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27. See Appendix D

28. See Appendix E

29. Jonathan Hein, “WELS Statistical Summary,” (Waukesha, WI: WELS, 2020), 7.

is it important to consider the age demographics? As noted earlier, people in their twenties and thirties are getting married at later stages. Since the number of people getting married in their twenties and thirties has decreased and the number of single people in that age bracket is rising, it stands to reason, based on the WELS Statistical Summary, that the number of young singles in WELS churches is decreasing.

This problem spreads across Christianity in America today. Dennis Franck writes, “Only 15 percent of all single adults of any age attend any church in the U.S. This enormous group of individuals, many without time-consuming family responsibilities, lies grossly untargeted, unchallenged, unused, undeveloped, and unsaved!”<sup>30</sup> Franck includes singles of all ages in that statistic. However, it causes one to wonder, “If the percentage of single adults of any age attending a church is only 15 percent, how small is the percentage of twenties and thirties singles attending a church? Moreover, why are so few attending?” In the following pages, this paper will discover what could contribute to it by examining the generational characteristics that cause young people to flee from churches and the different stereotypes churches have of young single adults. These stereotypes may cause single people to be wary of walking through the church doors.

### **Millennial and Generation Z Views on Religion**

A quick Google search on why young people are not going to church reveals a number of headlines. One from the Washington Post reads, “Why Millennials are Skipping Church and Not

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30. Dennis Franck, *Reaching Single Adults* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 44.

Going Back.”<sup>31</sup> Another from Christianity Today reads, “The Top Reasons Young People Drop Out of Church.”<sup>32</sup> In October 2019, a survey was done by Monthly Labor Review which examined the time-use of Millennials and non-Millennials. That study found that 6.2 percent of Millennials ages twenty-one to thirty-six spend time engaged in religious and spiritual activities. In comparison, 11.3 percent of non-Millennials spend time doing that very thing.<sup>33</sup> As noted earlier, many of the people in the two youngest generations are unmarried. If the number of young people in the church, in general, is decreasing, it is safe to assume that the number of young, single people in churches is decreasing as well, but why? What characteristics of these generations are causing them to flee from the sanctuary?

According to Daniel Cox and Amelia Thomson-Deveaux, “Millennials are almost as likely to say that they have no religion at all as they are to identify as Christian.”<sup>34</sup> They also note that four in ten Millennials say they are religiously unaffiliated.<sup>35</sup> It seems like they won’t be returning anytime soon. A survey from the American Enterprise Institute found a few different

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31. “Why Millennials Are Skipping Church and Not Going Back,” Washington Post, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-millennials-are-skipping-church-and-not-going-back/2019/10/27/0d35b972-f777-11e9-8cf0-4cc99f74d127\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-millennials-are-skipping-church-and-not-going-back/2019/10/27/0d35b972-f777-11e9-8cf0-4cc99f74d127_story.html).

32. “The Top Reasons Young People Drop Out of Church,” Christianity Today, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/january/church-drop-out-college-young-adults-hiatus-lifeway-survey.html>.

33. “Time Use of Millennials and Nonmillennials,” Monthly Labor Review, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2019/article/time-use-of-millennials-and-nonmillennials.htm>.

34. “Millennials Are Leaving Religion And Not Coming Back,” FiveThirtyEight, [https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/millennials-are-leaving-religion-and-not-coming-back/?utm\\_source=pocket-newtab](https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/millennials-are-leaving-religion-and-not-coming-back/?utm_source=pocket-newtab).

35. “Millennials Are Leaving Religion And Not Coming Back,” FiveThirtyEight, [https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/millennials-are-leaving-religion-and-not-coming-back/?utm\\_source=pocket-newtab](https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/millennials-are-leaving-religion-and-not-coming-back/?utm_source=pocket-newtab).

reasons for this.<sup>36</sup> These are reasons that Cox and Thomson-Deveaux point to as well.<sup>37</sup> In the first place, many Millennials did not grow up with strong ties to religion. Secondly, Millennials are more likely to marry a non-religious spouse, making it easier to join the secular world and more challenging to return to church. Thirdly, the changing views on the relationship between morality and religious institutions have caused Millennials to wonder if a church is even necessary for their lives.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, iGen is generally irreligious. Twenge points out a stunning stat concerning iGen's view on religion. She says:

Affiliating with a religion was once a near-universal experience for young people: In the early 1980s, more than 90% of high school seniors identified as part of one religious group or another, meaning that only one out of ten chose “none” for his or her religious affiliation. As late as 2003, 87% of 10th graders affiliated with a religion. Then that changed. Beginning in the 1990s and accelerating in the 2000s, fewer and fewer young people affiliated with a religion. The shift was largest for young adults, with the religiously affiliated dipping to 66% by 2016. Thus, a full third of young adults do not affiliate with any organized religion.<sup>39</sup>

Many iGen'ers do not identify with any religion whatsoever. What contributes to this? Twenge suggests that a few different factors play into this. One factor is their upbringing. An increasing number of iGen'ers are being raised in non-religious households.<sup>40</sup> Twenge writes, “In the 2016 college student survey, 17% of students' parents did not belong to a religion, up from only 5% in

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36. “The Decline of Religion in American Family Life,” AEI, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-decline-of-religion-in-american-family-life/>.

37. “Why Millennials Are Skipping Church and Not Going Back,” Washington Post, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-millennials-are-skipping-church-and-not-going-back/2019/10/27/0d35b972-f777-11e9-8cf0-4cc99f74d127\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-millennials-are-skipping-church-and-not-going-back/2019/10/27/0d35b972-f777-11e9-8cf0-4cc99f74d127_story.html).

38. “Millennials Are Leaving Religion And Not Coming Back,” FiveThirtyEight, [https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/millennials-are-leaving-religion-and-not-coming-back/?utm\\_source=pocket-newtab](https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/millennials-are-leaving-religion-and-not-coming-back/?utm_source=pocket-newtab).

39. Twenge, *iGen*, 145.

40. Twenge, *iGen*, 146.

the late 1970s.”<sup>41</sup> With more and more iGen’ers being raised in non-religious households, it is no surprise that a third of them do not identify with a religion at all.

Many of the characteristics between Millennials and iGen’ers are similar concerning religion. One characteristic stands out—the lack of discipleship. Millennials and iGen’ers were raised in homes where religion was not a primary emphasis. This lack of discipleship significantly impacts their likelihood of attending a church in the future.

### **A Few Stereotypical Views of Young Christian Singles**

Why is it hard for a single person, in particular, to come to church? Many singles feel churches will view them differently from married people. This assumption contributes to the low number of young, single people in the church today. Why might singles in their twenties and thirties feel out of place in the church? Tim Keller, the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, New York, shares some insight into this thought in his book, *The Meaning of Marriage*. He writes, “Some Christian singles in my church were raised in parts of the United States that are very traditional culturally, and there they got the ‘You aren’t a whole person until you are married’ mentality.”<sup>42</sup>

Have WELS churches given in to this mentality? The survey among WELS and ELS singles mentioned earlier posed this statement, “The WELS has a ‘You aren’t a whole person until you are married’ mentality.” Forty-two single WELS and ELS members responded. 50

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41. Twenge, *iGen*, 146.

42. Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Penguin Group, 2011), 231.

percent of the respondents said they either agreed or strongly agreed.<sup>43</sup> While this may not be a significant enough sample size to say that this idea floats around the WELS, it reflects one truth. The WELS has given that impression to some. If some people are getting this impression, that is too many.

### The “Immature” Single

In what ways are some singles in the church perceived as being incomplete? One way is maturity. Pastor Andrew Stuebs of Living Word Lutheran Church in Johnson City, Tennessee, pointed out a perception of immaturity among young, single people:

I think there's a tendency for pastors and lay people to categorize those single people who are just beyond college almost as teenagers. ‘Okay, you're not married. You haven't taken that maturity step just yet. And you're not forty, so maybe you're not mature enough to hold a meaningful leadership role in our church or to really commit to anything.’ I think it's sad that we do that but I think there's a stereotype of general immaturity. Unfairly so.<sup>44</sup>

The single Christian in his or her twenties and thirties is in an interesting stage of life. Age certainly plays a role in maturity. As the Christian ages, he faces more and more challenges from which he can gain experience and wisdom. Also, marriage does bring an element of maturity. After a Christian marries, both husband and wife experience the challenge of self-sacrificial love in the greatest sense. As Paul says in Eph 5, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.... Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.... Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:21–22, 25). A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. That means being willing to sacrifice

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43. See Appendix D

44. Andrew Stuebs, interview by author, Zoom conference, November 1, 2022.

oneself for the good of the other. A wife is to set aside her desires to lead and submit to the leadership of her husband. Again, that means being willing to sacrifice oneself for the good of the other.

However, just because age and marriage bring forth an element of maturity, does that mean that Christian singles in their twenties and thirties are incapable of being mature? Does it mean they cannot hold meaningful leadership roles in the church? Pastor Kent Reeder of Illume in Seattle, Washington, comments concerning this:

I think we have a tendency to be somewhat disrespectful to the realities of what a twenty or thirty-year-old single person's life-needs are. We are maybe pedantic toward them. We smile at them and say "That's cute." And we're like, "Yeah, you'll really get it when you have kids." And, in doing so, I think we rob ourselves with some phenomenal leaders and some people who could and want to and have time to contribute to their community.<sup>45</sup>

Pastor Reeder touches on a critical point. Singles in their twenties and thirties want to and have time to contribute to their community. The church needs people who both want to serve and have time to serve. However, oftentimes, people in the church and the church itself are tempted to view singles in their twenties and thirties as immature. It is subtle but damaging. By looking at them as immature, they start to believe it themselves. In so doing, the church robs itself of some potentially phenomenal gifts.

### The "Out of Place" Single

Many singles feel out of place in the church. Much of this is due to the family-oriented nature of the WELS. There is plenty for children to be involved in the WELS, from Lutheran early childhood to elementary school. Teens have many ways to get involved, from youth group

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45. Kent Reeder, interview by author, Zoom conference, November 7, 2022.

outings to youth rallies. There are plenty of campus ministries for college-aged adults with which they can be involved. The WELS also has Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran College to foster the faith of people in that age group. However, after that, there is not much for young, single people post college until they get married and have a family. The next logical stage of life is marriage and the family. Pastor Jon Bilitz of Wisconsin Lutheran Chapel in Madison, Wisconsin, elaborates on this thought:

Think of our systems. We have training for people from preschool through twelfth grade if you want to take advantage of it. And then we even have colleges... We obviously have Martin Luther College. We have Wisconsin Lutheran College... And then for some reason, between twenty-two and the time somebody gets married, there is not really any programming or anything that's specifically set up in our system. It's almost like you go to college, but there's this expectation that in order to stay on the team, then you're going to get married and start having a family. So, I think there's definitely this feeling among our singles that they're not on the team yet because we don't have anything for them.<sup>46</sup>

What Pastor Bilitz reflects is an unfortunate truth. The WELS does not have systems set in place for young, single people. However, many systems are set in place to help married people and families. However, this is not just a synod problem. This is also a problem on a small church basis. Hannah Schermerhorn, the author of *A Single Life to Live*, reflects on her experience as a single person in a WELS church. She says,

I remember after breaking up [with my fiancé], going to church and there's all these couples showing public displays of affection in front of you. Then the sermon is on marriage and you're like, "I don't belong here. What's going on?" The church I was at the time had small groups, and they asked my brother if I wanted to be in the first small group, which was for married people with children. That was the first-level group you could be in. Then beyond that, you had to be further [on in life] than that. And they were like, "Well, Hannah doesn't really belong in this group, but, should we put her in anyways?" It was just so weird. There's really not a lot to serve single people. And that's where some of my frustration came in. For example, like in sermons, in small groups, and how they're set up sometimes.<sup>47</sup>

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46. Jon Bilitz, interview by author, Zoom conference, November 3, 2022.

47. Hannah Schermerhorn, interview by author, Zoom conference, November 28, 2022.



Hannah reflects the feelings of many singles in the church. Many feel like they need a place to serve or a place to be served. Dennis Franck points out the importance of giving singles a place in the church, “It is my contention that many unmarried adults need specialized ministry opportunities to reach, retain, and disciple them before they will be integrated into and involved in the total life of the church, which is the ultimate goal of ministry to single adults.”<sup>48</sup> In order to retain single adults in the church, it is imperative that they have a place to serve and be served by their church. Singles often feel out of place and out of the loop.

### The “Problem” Single

Singles in the church are sometimes viewed as problems. By “problems” it is meant that there is something wrong or incomplete about them. The author asked Hannah Schermerhorn if the idea that a person is not complete unless married goes around in WELS circles. She said, “Yeah, I think that's totally legitimate. I think it's weird to me because in the church that's so much more apparent.”<sup>49</sup> Hannah continued, “I found a lot of pressure in church, especially after I broke off my engagement. I think so many people were just kind of like, ‘Oh, don't worry, you'll find someone soon or I can set you up with this person or that and it's like, that's not what I need. Right now, I need understanding. I need time.’”<sup>50</sup> Hannah reflects on the feelings of many singles in the church. There is a subtle pressure to get married. It is not entirely bad for pastors, church leaders, and church members to encourage marriage. However, oftentimes it comes off as

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48. Franck, *Reaching Single Adults*, 44.

49. Hannah Schermerhorn, interview by author, Zoom conference, November 28, 2022.

50. Hannah Schermerhorn, interview by author, Zoom conference, November 28, 2022.

pressure for the single person. The single person left wondering, “Is there something wrong with me?”

### CHAPTER III: WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT SINGLENESS?

So far, this paper has discussed the stats concerning young single people and the likely reasons for those stats. It has also discussed possible stereotypes surrounding singles. The question remains, “Is it wrong to be single?” or “Is it wrong to wait to get married?” Some in American Christianity think so. In *Getting Serious about Getting Married*, Debbie Maken writes:

Being a single person for too long has more capacity to produce negative characteristics in terms of sanctification than it does to produce healthy members of the body of Christ. And yet we persist in our churches to praise the single status, placing it on an equal level with marriage. We delude ourselves and the singles in our congregations into believing that participation in a few service activities will somehow redeem or offset all of the negative practical—and sometimes spiritual—consequences of remaining single despite God’s clear call to marriage.<sup>51</sup>

Some of the pressure written about earlier in this paper stems from this rhetoric. Are these assessments fair? More importantly, are they Biblical? First, this paper will examine the institution of marriage by God in Gen 2.

#### **Genesis 2:18-25: The Institution of Marriage**

On the sixth day of creation, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen 1:31). As Moses zooms back to the sixth day of creation in Gen 2, the Bible reader notices something in particular. God saw that something was not good. “The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Gen 2:18). The man was alone, and this

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51. Debbie Maken, *Getting Serious about Getting Married: Rethinking the Gift of Singleness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 17.

was not good. So, God made a helper suitable for Adam. He formed Eve out of the rib of Adam. The question is, “Is God saying it is not good to be single?”

Here the word, טוב, means “good, appropriate” or “becoming.”<sup>52</sup> God noticed a situation that called for still more creating work to be done. He saw a circumstance that was the opposite of good. That circumstance was man’s loneliness. Yes, Adam had every creature with him. He was not alone in the sense that he had no other living beings around him, but he was alone in the sense that there was no one with him who had human characteristics. Two truths are evident here. First, Adam was not a mere animal like the rest of God’s creation. Second, it was not good for him to live in solitary confinement.

A key point to note here is that God saw a problem with the situation, not the person. Adam was perfect at this point. Neither he nor Eve had eaten from the tree yet. As Carl Lawrenz and John Jeske note, “God’s assertion was not addressed to the man. It serves the purpose of revealing God’s thoughts to us concerning the matter at hand. It informs us what prompted God to create woman and to institute marriage.”<sup>53</sup> The circumstance was “not good.”

Because Adam was perfect at this point and because the problem was one of circumstance, not the individual, one can rightly assert that God was not saying it is a sin to be single. However, sometimes Gen 2:18 is misinterpreted by some in our churches. Pastor James Hein of St. Marcus Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin correctly observes that, “a lot of people interpret Genesis 2 which says, ‘It’s not good for the man to be alone,’ as ‘It’s not good

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52. Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, Wilhelm Gesenius and James Strong, *The Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 374.

53. Carl J. Lawrenz and John C. Jeske, *A Commentary on Genesis 1–11* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2004), 115.

for man to be unmarried.’ and that's not what it says.”<sup>54</sup> God is not saying it is wrong to be of a single status. Rather, he is saying the status of being alone is not good for man in general. For some, marriage is a blessing that God gives to them. For others, that blessing may come further down the road. For others, like the apostle Paul, it may not be in the plan. However, as was the case with Paul, this is for God’s greater purpose. Over and above all, one would be wrong to assume that Gen 2 is saying that it is not suitable for a person to stay unmarried. God, through the apostle Paul, makes that very clear in the New Testament.

### **1 Corinthians 7:1-9, 25-40: Paul’s Theology of Singlehood**

The Corinthian congregation had many problems, from misuse of the Lord’s Supper to sexual immorality. In addition to addressing these problems, Paul also answered some of their questions regarding marriage and single life.<sup>55</sup> In 1 Cor 7, Paul addresses some of those concerns, and they are essential to address the topic of singleness in the church today.

Another proof that Gen 2:18 is not calling singleness a sin is 1 Cor 7:1. There, the apostle Paul says, “Now for the matters you wrote about: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” (1 Cor 7:1). First, the word, καλὸν, translated as “good” here means “morally good,” and “pleasing to God.”<sup>56</sup> Secondly, καλὸν is front shifted to the beginning of the clause for emphasis. This front shift emphasizes the goodness of singlehood.<sup>57</sup> Here, Paul says it

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54. James Hein, interview by author. Personal interview, November 9, 2022.

55. E. Allen Sorum, “Exposition and Application of Paul’s Theology of Singlehood in 1 Corinthians 7:1–9, 25–40” (Paper presented at Joint Meeting of the Metro North and South Pastoral Conference, 1991), 1.

56. W. Arndt, F.W. Danker, W. Bauer, & F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian literature*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 505.

57. E. Allen Sorum, “Exposition and Application,” 1.

is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. In the context of singleness, this is one way that he or she can serve God. By keeping his or her body as a holy temple, the single person gives God glory. Marriage is an honorable estate before God. Singleness is an honorable estate before God as well.

Paul again points to the goodness of singleness in 1 Cor 7:8. The apostle writes, “Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.” (1 Cor 7:8–9). First of all, Paul again front shifts the noun *καλὸν* in the Greek, emphasizing the goodness of singleness. Paul also concedes that this may not be the preferable lifestyle for everyone. He says that if a single person cannot control their sexual passions, it is better for him or her to marry. When sexual passions take over the single person's life, the goodness of singlehood and the undivided attention to Christ fly out the window. At that point, it would be better to marry. However, Professor Sorum makes a key distinction here. He writes:

Paul's point is not that burning, uncontrollable passion is a God-pleasing motivation for marriage. His point is that the God-pleasing purposes of singlehood are not accomplished if one's energy and attention are consumed by lust. Paul's concern was for the consciences of his brothers and sisters in Corinth. If they wanted to marry, they should marry, let passion consume their spiritual life or lust set them up for a devastating fall. Married life is honorable. Single life is honorable. Each has its place in the family of God and for the service of God.<sup>58</sup>

Sorum's key distinction is that singleness itself is not a sin. It is honorable before God. The sin is giving in to the possible sexual temptations that may come with single life. Single life has the blessing of undivided attention toward God. As Paul says, "An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife— and his interests are divided" (1 Cor 7:32–

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58. E. Allen Sorum, “Exposition and Application,” 2–3.

34). However, that blessing is null and void when the undivided attention becomes divided toward sexual promiscuity. At the heart of Paul's theology of singlehood is this question, "How can you serve God in the best way? If it is single, great! If it is being married, great!" Both estates are honorable in God's eyes as long as God is at the heart and core of it all.

So, what does that mean for the thirty-one-year-old woman to whom the blessing of marriage has not come? What does that mean for the twenty-eight-year-old man who has not found a suitable helper? What does that mean for the thirty-eight-year-old woman who has never wanted to get married and never will? It means they have an excellent opportunity to serve God in their singleness! A single person can give their full attention to the service of God's kingdom. God smiles at that. He loves that as he sees his children serve their Father in reverence to him.

## CHAPTER IV: WHAT NEEDS DO TWENTIES AND THIRTIES SINGLES HAVE?

What does a single person need? How do their needs differ from a married person with kids? Britton Wood wrote an article entitled, *Single Adults Want to Be the Church*. In it, she listed eight specific needs for singles in particular. Of those listed were acceptance, self-worth, loneliness, companionship, money, children, sex, direction, and meaning in life.<sup>59</sup> These needs could be appropriately put into four categories: Christian community, Christian guidance in purpose, Christian guidance in identity, and Christian guidance in sexuality.

### **Christian Community**

On the top of the list of struggles for Christian singles is loneliness. An article written in 1989 by Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service entitled *Christian Singles: Tuning In and Tuning Up*, listed some of the top challenges and needs that Christian singles deal with daily. The first one they listed was loneliness. They write, “Loneliness was listed by singles as their number one concern. Some singles may truly have trouble finding suitable friends and companions. Others may be surrounded by people and still feel lonely. For these people, what's missing is often a feeling of being ‘on the top of someone’s list.’”<sup>60</sup> Even though many singles are surrounded by people in their daily lives, they still may feel as though they do not have any real community.

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59. Britton Wood, “Singles Want to Be the Church,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 17 (1975): 37–47.

60. Wisconsin Child and Family Services, “Christian Singles: Tuning In and Tuning Up” (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, 1989), 3.



What is community in the greatest sense? It is knowing those around you and being known by those around you. It is hearing those around you and being heard by those around you. It is having someone or multiple people with whom to do life. Pastor Hein says it well, “Everybody needs to be heard. If you're a single person and if somebody's listening to your stuff, you feel heard. It validates your existence.”<sup>61</sup> Hein continues by using Wilson from the movie *Castaway* as an illustration of a single person's need for community. Hein says:

All the research says that suffering is terrible, but suffering alone is the worst. As an example, about 20 years ago, there was a movie called *Castaway* with Tom Hanks. One of the things that I explain to people about isolation is this: So, people think about, Wilson, a volleyball that [Tom Hanks] drew a face on. If you talk to people, they think that looks exactly crazy. But the reality is, he's talking to volleyball in order to not go crazy. Solitary confinement is the harshest thing that we allow to happen in the incarceration system because human beings will go insane if they don't talk to someone after a while. And so just the way that we're wired by a Triune God, who makes us relationally, if we don't have somebody else to put our attention into and that we are the attention of, we go insane. So, I think it's experiencing life with somebody else. It's not good for us to be alone. Again, that doesn't mean it's not good for them to not be married, it just means they can't be alone.<sup>62</sup>

For singles, this is the struggle. There is possibly no one other than their immediate family with whom to do life. As Pastor Hein noted, the single Christian needs to do life with someone else by their side. As a Christian single goes through different struggles in life, he or she needs someone to be a sounding board for them. A single Christian needs what every person needs—a community of people who loves them, listens to their needs, and celebrates their victories.

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61. James Hein, interview by author, Personal interview, November 9, 2022.

62. James Hein, interview by author, Personal interview, November 9, 2022.

### Christian Guidance in Purpose

Wood says, “Many single adults are floundering and searching. They are persons who are ‘hungering and thirsting for righteousness’ but do not realize where or how to ‘be filled.’”<sup>63</sup> Why might this be the case for a single person? For the married person, there is an obvious vocation. He or she is called to serve their spouse in love. The single person may wonder, “I don’t have a significant other. I don’t have kids. What is my calling?”

Dr. Michael Berg speaks about vocation in his book *Vocation: The Setting for Human Flourishing*. He writes:

This is ultimately what vocation is about: God serves our neighbors through us as we carry out our vocations. As I alluded to above, *vocation* means ‘calling.’ Everybody has a station in life—multiple stations, in fact. A woman may be a mother, lawyer, aunt, citizen, wife, volunteer at a local school and so on. This is where she stands. These are her stations. Notice that these are all God-approved... Proper stations take on new meaning for the Christian. The Christian is called by God to perform acts of love in those stations. They are more than stations; they are vocations or callings.<sup>64</sup>

Vocation is a calling. It is a calling to serve God in one’s respective station in life. As Berg points out, God has given a calling to each person. The struggle for the single person is seeing that calling in their singleness. The difficulty comes from the circumstance that there is no one in the house to serve directly. However, vocation is not limited under the roof of a household. God’s calling to serve others goes outside the walls of a household and into the world. Therefore, in general, a single person’s vocation is not very much different from a married person’s. Their calling is to serve those around them at their church, workplace, school, community group, and other venues. All of this is done out of love for Christ and his sacrifice.

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63. Wood, “Single Adults,” 40.

64. Michael Berg, *Vocation: The Setting For Human Flourishing*, (Irvine: 1517 Publishing, 2020), 5–6.

Specifically, for the single person, however, some blessings allow them to carry out their vocation in a different way from married people. The apostle Paul says:

An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord’s affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit (1 Cor 7:32-34).

For unmarried people, the reality is that they can give undivided attention and concern to the affairs of the Lord. A married person’s first concern is their first calling. Their first calling is to their spouse and kids. A married person is concerned about their spouse’s needs and desires. A married person has different responsibilities toward their kids as well: taking them to school, helping them with homework, and taking them to soccer practice. A single person does not have those responsibilities, so he or she can give all their time and focus to the service of the Lord directly. Both serve God, but in different ways.

Harold Ivan Smith, the author of *Positively Single*, sums up the calling of a single person in this way:

Jesus says, “My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matt. 11:30). Jesus’ call is not to be fragile or to live less than a dynamic, fulfilled singleness. If anything, it is a call to be more courageous, more disciplined. It is a call to become fully all that God dreams for you to become. To be free to explore the ministry gifts He has given you. To take your place in that long line of single adults, like Bonhoeffer, who chose to be kingdom-seekers—and who made a difference!<sup>65</sup>

Smith mentions one single person who is a notable figure in Christianity. That person is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer never married. Nevertheless, that did not take away from his purpose or his calling. At the time of Hitler, Bonhoeffer organized a seminary to train future pastors. The Gestapo eventually arrested him. Nevertheless, that did not stop him from doing

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65. Harold Ivan Smith, *Positively Single* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 152.

ministry. Prison became a place for him to do active ministry. God placed him in that place to comfort his fellow prisoners.<sup>66</sup> Bonhoeffer is an example of a man who saw his purpose not in his relationship status but in his vocation as a servant of the Lord. Smith says, “He could have cursed his singleness; fought for marriage...; but he did not. Ironically, this world will never be the same because of that German single adult. He has not vanished ‘without a trace.’ Four decades after his death, he is better known than when he lived.”<sup>67</sup>

What is a single person’s purpose? It is the same as a married person—to serve the Lord with their time, talents, and gifts. To carry out the calling God has given them. The challenge for single people is seeing that purpose as it may not be as obvious. The joy for pastors, church leaders, and church members is being able to help guide and direct single people to see their purpose and their unique gifts for carrying it out.

### **Christian Guidance in Identity**

“Who am I?” is the question that young people across the world ask themselves as they grow up. Finding identity is one of the primary goals of people in their twenties and thirties. Furthermore, it is another need that singles in their twenties and thirties face.

Relationships are a huge part of a person’s identity. As Hannah Schermerhorn said in a presentation given to the students at Wisconsin Lutheran Chapel, “A lot of times being in a relationship is a huge part of our identity.”<sup>68</sup> In the presentation, she shared four things in which

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66. Smith, *Positively Single*, 151–152.

67. Smith, *Positively Single*, 152.

68. Hannah Schermerhorn, “Wednesday Worship – October 5, 2022,” Vimeo, October 5, 2022, <https://vimeo.com/756151186>.

she found her identity previously. For her, those four things were her relationship, her abilities, her family, and her intelligence.<sup>69</sup>

In the presentation, Hannah shared how over time, each of those things was wiped off her identity list. Her relationship did not work out as she had hoped. After a health problem distorted her vision, she felt she was not in control of her abilities. Her mom was diagnosed with cancer, and her grandpa passed away about the same time. Because of these events, her school grades were struggling.<sup>70</sup> Hannah shared how these challenges wiped away each of the items from her identity list.

Most people would agree with Hannah. It is easy to find identity in relationships. Unfortunately, this often leads to losing one's identity or at least part of it. Secular author, John Kim, writes, "Then, we get into relationships. We feel a sense of worth and importance. We feel desirable. And because we finally feel seen, we believe we have found ourselves. But what actually has happened is that we have begun losing ourselves in someone else."<sup>71</sup> Why is there a tendency for humans to find their identity in being loved by someone else? Every person wants to feel worthy enough to be loved by someone else.

Unfortunately, when humans try to find that in human love, they will always be left feeling not as loved as they want to be. This reality is due to sin. Since Eve and Adam ate from the tree, perfect love fell by the wayside. Take Adam, for example. When God confronted him about eating from the tree, Adam did not take the blame for his wife. Instead, he blamed her and

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69. Hannah Schermerhorn, "Wednesday Worship – October 5, 2022," Vimeo, October 5, 2022, <https://vimeo.com/756151186>.

70. Hannah Schermerhorn, "Wednesday Worship – October 5, 2022," Vimeo, October 5, 2022, <https://vimeo.com/756151186>.

71. John Kim, *Single. On Purpose.*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2021), 24–25.

God by saying, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it” (Gen 3:12). God himself is the only one that will ever love perfectly in the way that humans want to be loved. God does not love based on the merit of the person he loves. He loves unconditionally despite the flaws and errors of humans. The apostle Paul makes this clear. He writes, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). God does not love his creation because they earned it or showed themselves worthy of love. God loves his creation simply because he is love. He demonstrated it by sending Jesus to live, die, and rise for his people.

So then, where does a single person in their twenties or thirties find their identity? They find it in Christ alone. Hannah shares how her single experience helped her find her identity in Christ. She says, “I’ve been at my rock bottom... And the reason was that I was placing my identity in the wrong thing. There is only one thing that I should put my identity in and that is that I was loved by God.”<sup>72</sup> Anything other than the love of God will lead to rock bottom. Relationships come and go. Intelligence fades as the brain ages. Family is not always there to help. Gifts and abilities can be taken away in an instant. There is one who is constant, and that is God. God will always love. He is love.

The challenge for the single adult is seeing that fact. Often the culture of the Western world pushes for finding identity in one's abilities, the amount of money in one's bank account, a good health record, and healthy relationships. It can be easy to give into that view. However, it is a lie. A Christian’s identity is rooted in Christ, whether married or unmarried. The Church’s goal is to help a single person see that and live in that.

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72. Hannah Schermerhorn, “Wednesday Worship – October 5, 2022,” Vimeo, October 5, 2022, <https://vimeo.com/756151186>.

## Christian Sexual Guidance

When discussing the topic of singlehood, sex is the elephant in the room. However, it is not discussed often because of the topic's taboo nature. This is a mistake. If the church does not talk about sexuality, who will guide singles in their sexual living? Kim gives some guidance to singles on sexual living in singlehood, and it is far from Biblical. He says, "Exploring your sexuality is in fact part of working on yourself. Our sexual need is a basic need. We are sexual beings."<sup>73</sup> Kim continues, "If you're at a party or bar or even at the grocery store and you strike up a conversation with someone and feel a spark, explore it. Feed that desire. It's okay."<sup>74</sup> Kim wrote this book to guide singles on how to live fulfilling lives in their singlehood. This guidance is what singles are getting from the world. They need Biblical guidance from the church.

Sexual sin is damaging. It pervades America's culture, and it is readily available. In the internet age, a person does not have to go to a bar or a club to stumble into sexual sin. A person does not have to go through the shame of buying a pornographic magazine at the gas station anymore. Nowadays, it is readily available on the phones in everyone's pockets.

A nationally representative survey of U.S. teens found that 84.4 percent of fourteen to eighteen-year-old males and 57 percent of fourteen to eighteen-year-old females have viewed pornography.<sup>75</sup> This is a frightening statistic. First, it is scary because of the many people who have viewed pornography. Second, it is scary because of the age they are viewing it. When it

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73. Kim, *Single. On Purpose.*, 149.

74. Kim, *Single. On Purpose.*, 149.

75. Paul J. Wright, Bryant Paul, & Debbie Herbenick "Preliminary Insights from a U.S. Probability Sample on Adolescents' Pornography Exposure, Media Psychology, and Sexual Aggression," *Journal of Health Communication* (2021): 39-46.

comes to ministering to twenties and thirties singles, they are highly likely to have already viewed pornography in their life.

Pornography is damaging. The studies prove that viewing pornography harms relationships in general.<sup>76</sup> For the single person, this can negatively impact their future marriage. Furthermore, pornography has a damaging impact on one's faith. Pastor Mike Novotny shares with his readers how porn affects faith in his book, *From Dirty to Dancing*. Pastor Novotny shares the doubts that pornography brings. As Satan accuses, the Christian asks, “Am I really a Christian? Christians are repentant; they are sorry for their sins. Am I sorry? Sorry enough? I say I'm sorry, but why did I go back to porn? Why did I do that again? Why don't I just stop if I say I love God so much?”<sup>77</sup> The devil is the ultimate accuser. With sexual sin especially, he accuses and asks, “Are you sure you're really a Christian?”

There is no doubt that the single life introduces all sorts of sexual temptations for many. Many singles need Christian guidance in how to approach these matters. However, frequently the answer to sexual temptation that most singles receive from churches is “get married.” As Pastor Reeder, who is the chairman of *Conquerors Through Christ*, remarks:

When we talk about sex, we almost always say, “Well, just get married.” right? Like, once you're married, it'll be fine. We don't talk about the idea that like, well, maybe while you're a human being who's not married, you can find ways to be a satisfied person who is whole and happy and contented. No, we just assume that the only solution to sexual temptation is to get married. And there's some biblical backing for the idea that if you don't have the gift of singleness, you ought to have it in your mind that it's wise to find the person that you can be with and have a sexual connection with. So, I'm not trying to say Paul was wrong.<sup>78</sup>

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76. “How Porn Can Negatively Impact Love and Intimacy,” Fight the New Drug, <https://fightthenewdrug.org/how-porn-can-negatively-impact-love-and-intimacy/>.

77. Mike Novotny, *From Dirty to Dancing: God's Grace for Those Struggling With Pornography*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2018), Kindle edition, ch. 1.

78. Kent Reeder, interview by author. Zoom conference, November 7, 2022.



The apostle Paul suggests marriage as an option for those who burn sexually. In other words, marriage is an option for those who face sexual temptation and cannot overcome it. As Pastor Reeder said, those people should be seeking marriage.

However, marriage is not immediate. One needs to find a person he or she loves and to whom they are attracted. That takes time. Then the dating phase happens. In the dating phase, the couple gets to know one another on more than an acquaintance level. That stage takes months. From there comes an engagement in which the couple plans their dream wedding. That takes about a year or two. Finally, when the newly-wedded couple comes home from their dream wedding and reception, they can enjoy God's gift of sex. It is a beautiful thing. However, it takes time.

So, the question is, "How does a single person navigate the different sexual temptations and pressures they face in the world while they remain in their single stage of life?" In order to navigate these temptations, they need guidance from God's Word. Often, this topic is not addressed. If one does address it, it is often framed in this way, "Don't!" In order to navigate these temptations, they need guidance from God's Word.

Indeed, God tells his people not to give in to sexual temptation, but that is not all he says. Luther's explanation of the sixth commandment frames it in a positive sense. Luther says, "We should fear and love God that we lead a pure and decent life in words and actions, and that husband and wife love and honor each other."<sup>79</sup> Luther's explanation of the sixth commandment only speaks about it in a positive sense. Young Christian singles need this type of guidance. They need to know that their sexual purity is positively carried out in love for Christ. As they carry out

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79. Martin Luther, *Luther's Catechism: The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017), 2.

their sexual purity in love for Christ, they need Christian brothers and sisters with whom they can share their struggles. They need a Christian community that will not stone them for their sexual failings but gives them words of absolution when they fall into sexual sin. Christian singles need brothers and sisters in Christ who will help, guide, and direct them to God's Word. If the Christian church does not talk about sex in the light of God's Word, who will?

## CHAPTER V: HOW CAN THE CHURCH DISCIPLE SINGLES IN THEIR TWENTIES AND THIRTIES?

What is known about singles in their twenties and thirties? For one, there are many of them, as was covered earlier in this paper. We also know they have unique needs that differ from those of a married person with kids. The next question is, “How can WELS churches meet those needs and create a community that cares for and reaches singles in their twenties and thirties?” Based on qualitative research, discipleship in the form of small groups can meet those needs and create that community. The following pages will examine that possibility.

### **What is discipleship?**

As the risen Christ was about to ascend into heaven, he gave his disciples the Great Commission. Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:18–20). Jesus had done his work. He had gone through all of Galilee preaching the good news about himself. Having lived a perfect life in the place of all people, he went to the cross and paid the price for the world’s sins. Then on the third day after his death, he rose to confirm his saving work. Now, after rising, he was about to ascend into heaven. It was time for Jesus to “pass the baton.” It was time for his disciples to go and

make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching people everything Jesus had commanded them. That gets to the question, “What is discipleship?”

Each person interviewed for this paper gave a slightly different answer to that question that shared an essential similarity. Matthew Werner is a staff minister at The CORE in Appleton, Wisconsin. He defines it as “using the means of grace to grow faith.”<sup>80</sup> Pastor Bilitz says, “The heart of the word is training. So that idea of discipleship is training for service, training for living as a part of the kingdom of God.”<sup>81</sup> Pastor Reeder defines it as, “the endeavor toward becoming one body where a diverse set of people learn what it means to be one thing together.”<sup>82</sup> Pastor Stuebs says, “Discipleship is growth. It's growing in the Word. It's maturity in our faith. It is growing closer in our relationship to our Lord and our ongoing walk of faith.”<sup>83</sup> Stuebs continues, “And we always do that intention of going with the Word whether that's in our church, our relationships with our brothers and sisters, or in our communities. They always go hand in hand. Discipleship causes me to look outside of myself.”<sup>84</sup>

At the heart of each of these definitions is God's Word. As Jesus gave his disciples the Great Commission, he told them to go with the Word and sacraments and make disciples with those divine tools. As the interviewees pointed out, going with God's Word produces wondrous things. His Word produces growth in faith in Jesus and equips the individual for kingdom work. The Word produces unity between brothers and sisters in Christ who may be completely

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80. Matthew Werner, interview by author. Zoom conference, October 18, 2022.

81. Jon Bilitz, interview by author. Zoom conference, November 3, 2022.

82. Kent Reeder, interview by author. Zoom conference, November 7, 2022.

83. Andrew Stuebs, interview by author. Zoom conference, November 1, 2022.

84. Andrew Stuebs, interview by author. Zoom conference, November 1, 2022.

different from one another in every worldly way. It also produces maturity in faith and the ability to take trials and struggles in stride. Discipleship under the truth of God's Word finally bears the fruit of yearning to go out and share the gospel's good news with all people.

### **How is discipleship carried out?**

Discipleship is growing in faith in Jesus Christ through God's Word and the sacraments. How is it carried out in God's church? First, it is proper to take a look at the original discipler. How did Christ himself carry out discipleship?

#### Christ the Discipler

It was just another day at the office for Peter and Andrew, although their office was a boat on the Sea of Galilee, and their computers were their fishing nets. Then, just as they were casting their nets out to catch the next round of fish, they heard a voice on shore. "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt 4:19 NIV84). Peter and Andrew immediately dropped everything to follow Jesus.

First, Jesus does not just say, "Follow!" He attaches an object to their following. That object was Christ, the Word, himself. The same is true for all of Christ's disciples today. As Christians read the Word and carry it out in their lives, they are following Jesus.

Second, Jesus immediately gives them a mission. He says, "I will make you fishers of men" (Matt 4:19 NIV84). Peter and Andrew may not have known what Jesus meant at the time, but there, at that moment, Jesus was calling them to service in the kingdom. As Martin

Franzmann notes, “He was confiscating man for Himself.”<sup>85</sup> The disciples would not just receive the Word, but they would also go with the Word. The same is true for all of Jesus’ disciples today. As God’s Word touches the hearts of his people, they are motivated to go with the Word and be fishers of men.

Jesus did not stop by calling the disciples to follow him; he also taught them. Franzmann notes, “When Jesus ‘opened His mouth and taught’ His disciples, He was not, in Matthew’s eyes, a master teacher enunciating a higher system of ethics. He was the Messianic Master molding the wills of those whom he had claimed by His call.”<sup>86</sup> Throughout Jesus’ ministry, he was molding his disciples for service in the kingdom. Through parables, he taught them about the kingdom (Matt 13). As Jesus fed the five thousand and walked on water, he taught them that he was the Son of God himself (Matt 14:13–35). Jesus used teaching moments like that of the rich young man to teach his disciples that salvation is impossible with man but possible with God (Matt 19:16–26). At the last supper, he taught his disciples to remember him by continuing to practice communion (Matt 26:26–29). Even as the soldiers arrested him in the Garden of Gethsemane, he taught his disciples to love their enemies. He told Peter to put away his sword (Matt 26:52). Throughout his ministry, Jesus was teaching his disciples that the kingdom of God was of utmost importance rather than the kingdom of this world. Finally, in Matt 28, Jesus sets his disciples on the gospel mission to now go and make disciples of Christ through the ministry of the Word.

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85. Martin H. Franzmann, *Follow Me: Discipleship According to St. Matthew* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 33.

86. Franzmann, *Follow Me*, 34.

### The Discipler Pastor

Jesus led as an example for his church as the original discipler. Jesus called his disciples, gave them a mission, and instructed them to carry it out. How does this look in the church? First, it starts with the pastor. How does the pastor carry out discipleship? The pastor follows the example of Christ. In doing so, he reaches out with the gospel to anyone and everyone. Many pastors go door to door, inviting people to church. Some pastors lead committees that have the goal of outreach. Pastors also encourage members to reach out to their friends, relatives, acquaintances, and neighbors.

The pastor then instructs those to whom he has been entrusted in the Word of truth. One of the main ways a pastor does this is through preaching sermons. Joel Gerlach and Richard Balge write, “The Savior’s parting instruction was directed to all of his disciples and is in force for all time. The ministry of heralding the good news belongs to the whole church. But the commission has special significance and force for those who are called into the public ministry.”<sup>87</sup> When a pastor preaches a sermon, it is not centered on himself, but on Christ. Its goal is to create and grow disciples of Christ. As the pastor preaches, he prepares Christ’s disciples for different temptations and challenges they will face in the upcoming week and in life. His goal is to apply God’s Word to his hearers lives without changing it so that they may go out and follow Jesus in their lives.

The pastor also disciplines those to whom he has been entrusted by teaching them in Bible study. Bible study is designed to go deeper into God’s Word. The pastor is responsible for

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87. Joel Gerlach and Richard Balge, *Preach the Gospel* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1978), xi.

sharing God's Word with his people and teaching them what it means. As he teaches them, they become more prepared to go with the Word into the world.

Finally, a pastor carries out discipleship by administering the sacraments to God's people. A pastor administers the sacrament of initiation as he baptizes a little child or an adult. He also administers the sacrament of confirmation as he presides over the Lord's Supper and distributes it to those at the communion rail and those who are homebound. As the Holy Spirit works through these sacraments to affect faith, the Lord strengthens the faith of those receiving it. As they grow in faith, they grow in their discipleship to Christ.

#### The Discipler Parishioner

As Jesus gave his Great Commission to the disciples, he was not just giving that trust to his disciples but to all Christians of all time. This is the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Luther says, "Consequently, every baptized Christian is a priest already, not by appointment or ordination from the pope or any other man but because Christ himself has begotten him as a priest and has given birth to him in baptism."<sup>88</sup> All Christians are called to go and make disciples with the Word of God. It looks different from the pastor's work, but it is no less significant.

A Christian is a priest to their neighbor when they serve their neighbor in love. This priesthood can take on many different forms. It could be acts of service like helping the elderly with their groceries or giving chicken soup to a friend who is sick. Also, it could take on the form of praying for someone who is going through a particularly rough season of their life.

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88. Ewald M. Plass, ed., *Prayers to Zeal*, vol. 3 of *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 1139.



Being a priest to one's neighbor takes its ultimate form in sharing the Word and encouraging one another with the Word.

As members of God's church take on the role of being priests to one another, they are, in effect, discipling one another. They are creating and strengthening disciples of Christ through the Word. By sharing the Word with one another in different settings, God grows their faith, prepares them for service in his kingdom, and creates unity among them. This unity cannot be broken because it is firmly rooted in the love of Christ.

## CHAPTER VI: WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF DISCIPLESHIP IN THE FORM OF SMALL GROUPS?

Where does this leave us when it comes to ministering to singles in their twenties and thirties? It has been shown that there are many young singles today. It has also been shown that there may not be many in the pews of WELS churches. This paper has covered the various needs of single people in their twenties and thirties. It has also mapped out what discipleship is and how it is carried out. Now, the question is, “How does discipleship meet the needs of a single person in their twenties and thirties?” The needs of single people in their twenties and thirties and discipleship meet at the intersection of small groups. Small groups meet the needs that many Christian singles face. They provide community in the face of loneliness, opportunities for service in the face of purposelessness, Christ-centered identity in the face of self-centered identity, and guidance and accountability in the face of a culture that bleeds with sexual temptation.

### **What are small groups?**

Small groups are nothing new. Their use can be traced back to the late 1600s. Unfortunately, the impetus for early small groups in church history is connected with the Pietism movement led by Philipp Spener. David Kuske writes, “Spener promoted them as a vehicle by which pious laypeople could be a leaven for good in reforming the ‘dead orthodoxy’ of a congregation and its

pastor.”<sup>89</sup> The initial motivation for small groups has been a cause for concern for some. While the initial motivation for small groups was misplaced, it does not mean they cannot be utilized for gospel ministry today with the proper motivation.

More contemporarily, the growing movement of small groups began in the 1940s. Before the emergence of small groups, a group of psychologists such as Jacob Moreno and Kurt Lewin began doing studies in the area of how people relate to each other.<sup>90</sup> William Clemmons and Harvey Hester write, “They discovered that social pressure not only caused people to conform, and thus distorted God-given potential, but at the same time could become the means by which potential could be tapped.”<sup>91</sup> So, the emergence of small groups began. Managers of businesses use small groups to help their employees reach their full potential. Schools started to use groups more as well. And finally, by the 1950s small groups found their way into churches.<sup>92</sup>

What exactly are small groups? In a small group, five to ten people get together regularly at the church, in a member’s home, or at a neutral location. The congregation’s pastor serves as an overseer and provides bible study materials for the group. Lay members of the congregation who are mature in their faith typically lead small groups. Members of the group enjoy fellowship, grow in God’s Word, and pray together when they get together. The goal of small groups is to grow vertically in relationship to God and horizontally in fellowship with one another.

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89. David P. Kuske, “Home Bible Study Groups in the 1990s,” (Paper presented at Pastors Institute at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1993), 1.

90. William Clemmons and Harvey Hester, *Growth Through Groups* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974), 40.

91. Clemmons and Hester, *Growth Through Groups*, 40.

92. Clemmons and Hester, *Growth Through Groups*, 40.

### **What are the fruits of small groups?**

Why is it essential to have small groups in WELS churches? Why can't WELS churches get along without a small group ministry? This paper is not proposing that a church without a small group ministry is failing or is incomplete. However, small groups bear fruits that any church would be hesitant to miss. Small groups provide avenues for authentic spiritual growth, authentic relationships, and authentic service.

#### Authentic Spiritual Growth

St. Paul encouraged the church in Rome with these words, "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ" (Rom 10:17). Faith, which holds onto the message about Christ, grows as the Word of God touches the ears and hearts of his people. A small group would not be a small group without God's Word at its center. The group gathers to hear it and exists to live in it.

Christin and Faith Belt, members of Living Word Lutheran Church in Johnson City, Tennessee, share how God's Word shared in a small group differs from a typical Sunday.

When do you actually slow down and think about God? I think it's important to slow down a little bit and small groups are a good way to do that... it's taking the Word of God outside of a single Sunday every week where you go to church... You take it with you during the week, and talk it through with other people. For me, it makes it more real and applicable.<sup>93</sup>

Faith and Christin reflect one of the greatest strengths of small groups. All Christians are priests who share God's Word with one another. As small groups gather, they get to talk about a section of Scripture and dive deep into it. They apply it to their lives and take it with them throughout

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93. Faith Belt and Christin Belt, interview by author. Zoom conference, November 9, 2022.

the week. This sharing of the Word happens after a sermon on Sunday, but as Faith and Christin point out, it is different in a group. In a small group, the Christian gets the chance to ask questions in an informal way and among trusted brothers and sisters in Christ. Small groups allow for further growth in faith outside of the typical Sunday service and Bible study.

### Authentic Relationship Growth

As believers in Jesus gather around God's Word in their homes in small groups, the fruit of an authentic Christian community grows from it. A person who is in an authentic Christian community knows those around him and is known, loves and is loved, serves and is served, admonishes and is admonished, celebrates and is celebrated.<sup>94</sup> It is one that genuinely cares for the needs of every individual in that group. An authentic community grows in the love that only Christ himself could give. Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson break it down as a community that provides strength, wisdom, accountability, and acceptance.<sup>95</sup>

Small groups provide strength for the Christian because as they face different sufferings, they have a solid community to fall back on. This community will help with physical and spiritual needs as they point that person to the love of Christ. There is strength in numbers. The same is true for small groups but not in large numbers. There is strength in the small number of people in each group. This small number allows for better trust between each member of the group. It is vital to have a trusting relationship with one another. As Pastor Reeder points out:

I don't think it is that important to me when it comes particularly to discipleship that you have, a light acquaintance with three-hundred other people as much as it is important that

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94. Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building A Church Of Small Groups: A Place where Nobody Stands Alone* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 59–71.

95. Donahue and Robinson, *Building A Church Of Small Groups*, 40–43.

you can name the ten people from your church that you would trust with your child, if something went down, you could drop your kid off while you're on your way to the hospital. That's what Christian community should look like.<sup>96</sup>

Pastor Reeder shared that he's experienced these types of relationships forming in their small groups at Illume.

Those same relationships in small groups provide wisdom for the Christian as he has a group of brothers and sisters to ask for counsel during life's hardest decisions.<sup>97</sup> This is something everyone needs. Pastor James Hein talked about how he advises the people he pastors to ask their Christian brothers and sisters for Christian life advice. Pastor Hein says:

In the same way that if somebody was hungry, or in need of clothes or shelter, and they prayed to God for help, you wouldn't expect the guy to drop packages out of the sky. You would expect that people would come that confess Christian creeds and would step up... that is God providing for them. God provides through tangible means. And the same thing is true with life advice. Many people I have counseled are young adults who say, "I don't know what I'm supposed to do with my life. I don't know if I should marry this person or which school I should go to." And I say to them, "Well, what are your wisest and most humble, most mature Christian friends saying to you? You know, like the people who objectively look at you regularly. That is, in a sense God speaking to you because those are the people that he indwells by his Spirit. That's his body. That's him communicating to you. It's not the same thing as the inspired Word of God. But it's definitely something more than just advice."<sup>98</sup>

Pastor Hein essentially reflects the doctrine of vocation. He points out the importance of having Christian friends who know you, understand you, and want to help you by giving counsel for life's many decisions. The vocation of friendship is one way that Christians serve one another. As people in small groups learn and understand one another, as they grow in the Word together, they are equipped to give advice to one another and seek advice from one another.

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96. Kent Reeder, interview by author, Zoom conference, November 7, 2022.

97. Donahue and Robinson, *Building A Church Of Small Groups*, 40.

98. James Hein, interview by author, Personal interview, November 9, 2022.

The community that comes from small groups also provides accountability for Christian living as small group members share their spiritual struggles. Pastor Joseph Lindloff of Hope Lutheran Church in Irmo, South Carolina, shares the importance of Christian friendships and their relation to accountability. He says:

I think it's important to normalize and standardize opportunities for people to get together and build lasting relationships, because those relationships are spiritual as much as they are physical, as much as they are emotional. If you get those people relationally connected, now they're checking in on each other, now they're seeing how each other's doing, maybe even grabbing coffee.<sup>99</sup>

Small groups provide an avenue for building authentic relationships with one another. As they grow around the Word, their relationship with one another grows. Those authentic relationships provide an avenue for accountability with God and one another.

Accepting relationships is just another one of the many fruits that grow from small groups because all the people are there for the same purpose—to be built up in Christ. Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson point out the importance of acceptance. They write, “The Bible presents yet another piece of sociological evidence for community. It says that we need friends to hold us accountable and offer acceptance while we change.”<sup>100</sup> Donahue and Robinson point out a vital blessing that small groups provide—the offer of acceptance while one changes. The life of sanctification for a Christian is an ongoing journey. Christians understand that. Christians understand that all people are born sinful and sin every day. Christians understand that they are saved by a perfect and loving Savior. Small groups are an avenue for accepting and supporting relationships for lives of sanctification.

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99. Joseph Lindloff, interview by author, Phone call, November 23, 2022.

100. Donahue and Robinson, *Building A Church Of Small Groups*, 41.

## Authentic Service

St. Paul writes to the Corinthians:

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many (1 Cor 12:12–14).

Paul wrote this to encourage the Corinthians to do two things. First, to recognize that each one of them has gifts and they, with their gifts, help make up the body of the Christian church. Each person in the Christian church has gifts for service in ministry. It is important that they are encouraged to use their gifts out of love for God.

Small groups are a great avenue to recognize the gifts that God has blessed his people with and to use those gifts for service in his kingdom. As believers gather around the Word and get to know one another and themselves, their gifts for service naturally shine. Matthew Werner shares one of the highlights of his experience with small group ministry as he saw gifts for leadership shine through groups. He says,

This is probably one of the biggest highlights for me... So, coming out of COVID, we had to continue to have some of those groups online. And it's something that's still a pretty attractive option for parents, for different people that maybe can't make it to a place in person. And so to see some of our facilitators' expertise that they developed in doing that is just phenomenal.<sup>101</sup>

Werner shares just one example of the types of gifts for service that can shine in a small group. Many small groups have a service project in mind as they gather. Small groups are an excellent avenue for young and older adults to use their gifts to serve God's kingdom.

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101. Matthew Werner, interview by author. Zoom conference, October 18, 2022.



## CHAPTER VII: HOW DOES DISCIPLESHIP IN THE FORM OF SMALL GROUPS REACH AND CARE FOR TWENTIES AND THIRTIES SINGLES?

Earlier, this paper examined the characteristics of people in their twenties and thirties. Their various reasons for holding off on marriage and avoiding church were discussed as well. This paper has also discussed the various needs that single people have. Now, the question remains, “Can discipleship in the form of small groups create and foster a church community that reaches and cares for singles in their twenties and thirties?” The answer is yes, and the following pages will prove why that is the case.

### **Small groups provide an opportunity to reach the lost**

First, how do small groups reach singles in their twenties and thirties? Millennials and iGen’ers alike did not grow up going to church. As discussed earlier, many grew up in homes where spiritual growth was not a high priority. Where will they get it if they are not getting spiritual encouragement from their families? They will get it from their Christian friends. A significant characteristic of small groups is that they provide an informal invitation opportunity for small group members to reach out. It may be intimidating for someone to come to a typical church service, but it may be less intimidating to come to a small group. A small group typically takes place in a home. It is far less intimidating for the non-churchgoer to come to their friend’s home and hang out with mutual friends from church. Small groups provide that opportunity for members to invite their unchurched friends. Matthew Werner shares some insight on one group

at his church that is specifically designed to invite people who may be new to Christianity. He says:

We have people [in our church] that are pretty intentional about saying, “This group is meant for those that know very little about church.” Some of the results that our church has seen out of that are pretty amazing. One of our pastors, Mike Novotny, has regularly done that where we’ll get eight to twelve people that have had little to no contact with the Word and I’m going to invite my friends too. We have other members that do that too. And some of the things that we see from that are adult baptisms, weddings, things like that come from that... The results have been pretty amazing to see what the Holy Spirit does through that connection.<sup>102</sup>

Small groups provide an informal way to invite unchurched friends to hear the Word of God and get to know God’s people. This informal invite creates a church community that reaches single individuals in their twenties and thirties.

### **Small groups provide an opportunity to care for the found**

Single people in their twenties and thirties need Christian community, guidance in purpose, guidance in identity, and sexual guidance. Can small groups provide that for single people? They can. The following paragraphs will discuss why.

Small groups provide an authentic community. As members of a small group get to know one another, they begin to appreciate and love each other selflessly. As Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson say, “In all these ways we not only remember our people, but we help them remember the work of the ever-present Christ in the new community. Combine this kind of loving with a knowing that connects small group members in deep relationships, and you have the beginnings of authentic community.”<sup>103</sup> Single people, especially, need this type of community. They need a

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102. Matthew Werner, interview by author, Zoom conference, October 18, 2022.

103. Donahue and Robinson, *Building A Church Of Small Groups*, 64.

functional family. Many singles' families live far away or are not in their lives as often as is ideal. Mike Westendorf, one of the leaders of “Awake and Alive,” a conference for young adults, explains the importance of a functional family in this way:

I talk about that idea of the family church, because there's two kinds of families. There's the biological family, which is what I'm talking about. You're part of a biological family. But there's the other reality about families and that's the functional family... I don't do stuff with my brothers and my sister hardly at all. But I'm in a number of groups here at St. Paul's and I have a number of friends whom I've actually spent time doing stuff with. I have closer relationships with my functional brother or my functional sister, my functional mom and dad, in some ways... For single people, in particular, I think that idea of the functional family is really important.<sup>104</sup>

Westendorf continues by sharing how the small service groups in his church serve as a functional family:

We have a devotion every Sunday because we know that the "Bridge" volunteers will be busy operating different things, but we make sure that as a functional family, we gather together, remember why we're here and the importance of the work that we do. We gather to reflect for an eight-minute devotion and pray together. That's functional family, and that's where I think I've seen the biggest place for single people to feel welcomed.<sup>105</sup>

Small groups provide an avenue for functional families. Single people need that. As was discussed earlier, “it is not good for man to be alone” (Gen 2:18). This passage does not mean that it is not suitable for humans to be unmarried, but rather that it is not suitable for humans to isolate themselves. They need brothers and sisters in Christ who will know them, love them, care for them, and see them as the person they are. Small groups provide the Christian community that single people need.

As Christians gather together in homes to hear God’s Word and talk about it, they inevitably realize their purpose to serve God and their community. Most small groups have

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104. Mike Westendorf, interview by author, Zoom conference, November 16, 2022.

105. Mike Westendorf, interview by author, Zoom conference, November 16, 2022.

service opportunities. From personal experience at Resurrection Lutheran Church in Verona, Wisconsin, my small group and I put together a celebration Sunday after our church's week-long soccer camp. One member, Lisa, used her organization gifts to estimate the right amount of food to get. Another member, Steve, used his gifts in hospitality to grill about one-hundred burgers and hot dogs. The rest of the group used their gifts of communication by talking with the guests who came to our soccer camp celebration. This event resulted from God's Word working in the hearts of his people. As single people come to a small group, God works in their hearts to show them that their purpose is to serve God and their community.

In small groups, single people are affirmed in their identity as Christians. As they gather around the Word and spend time with one another, they will find their whole identity in Christ because the groups are not based on life stage, relationship status, or occupation. Instead, they center around their identity, that is, Christ. Hannah Schermerhorn shares her experience:

And one thing really changed it for me. The church I was at said, "We won't put people into groups based off of category because some people like the category that they're in and some people don't." So, our groups were just anyone. So, my groups are like people who are my parent's age and there's people who are younger than me. They're single, or they're married. And there's about 12 people in a group and it's just a group of people coming together who all have different backgrounds. They all different places in life, and they're building each other up... It was a place where people just wanted to meet and talk about Jesus.<sup>106</sup>

Hannah reflects the identity at the heart and core of small groups. That identity is Christ. In a small group, people of many different backgrounds and life stages get together and do one thing—talk about their identity, Jesus Christ.

Finally, small groups allow Christians to open up with their deepest struggles. They are a place where people can open up without fearing being judged. A small group has this

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106. Hannah Schermerhorn, interview by author, Zoom conference, November 28, 2022.

understanding: “What happens and what is said in the small group stays in the small group.” As a single person shares the temptations he or she faces, they gain for themselves an accountability group. A Christian who attends a small group has a band of brothers and sisters who are willing to be there to give absolution when one fails and encouragement when one wins the battle over sin.

### **Discipleship in the form of small groups reaches and cares for twenties and thirties singles**

Discipleship in the form of small groups can certainly create and foster a church community that reaches and cares for singles in their twenties and thirties. They provide an informal invitation to come and hear the good news about Christ. They also provide care for the single person who may be struggling to find community, purpose, identity, and accountability. Does a church absolutely need to have a small group to reach and care for the twenties and thirties singles in their church? No. It would be legalistic to say yes. Aside from that, it is not a “silver bullet”<sup>107</sup> as one anonymous survey respondent said. Each ministry context will be a little bit different.

However, small groups do have much to offer in terms of caring for and reaching singles adults in their twenties and thirties. A church would be wise to at least consider the possibility. The overarching purpose of this paper is to bring an awareness to the need for improving ministry to the single people in the WELS’ midst and offer one possible solution to do so. I believe that small groups are an acceptable application of discipling twenties and thirties singles. It is a solution that can bear many fruits as God’s Word works in the hearts of his people.

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107. See Appendix E

## CONCLUSION

After a few months of working at Milwaukee Tool, one of Cody's co-workers who happened to go to the church he had tried months ago approached him and said, "Hey, a few of my friends from church are going to get together on Friday night. We just started a new thing at our church called small groups. We usually hang out, eat food, have drinks, and read the Bible together. Want to come?" Cody thought to himself, "Wow, that was so thoughtful!" He replied, "Sure, I'll give it a try!"

As Friday night rolled around, he went to his co-worker's house and was met by some of the nicest people he had ever met. These people seemed to genuinely care about each other and, by their first impression, they already cared about him. Cody thought, "Wow, I already fit in with these people!"

As Cody went through Rom 12 with the small group, they discussed how Christians want to be living sacrifices because Christ was a sacrifice for all people. He and the small group discussed real-life applications of Rom 12. "Wow, I have a real purpose here!" Cody thought to himself.

As the small group's evening gathering comes to a close, they ask Cody, "Is there anything we can pray about for you? What's on your heart?" He shared with them that he had been struggling to find friends and community in this new city. With accepting eyes, and caring concern, the group leader said, "Thanks for sharing that. Let's take it to the Lord in prayer." After he said, "Amen." Cody thought, "Wow, these people care. This place is where I want to be week after week. I want to try their church again."

The picture painted was one of a small group that gathers, enjoys each other's company, grows in God's Word, and cares for each other's needs and concerns. At the heart of it, small groups provide growth for individuals. They provide growth in faith and fellowship. These two things are immensely important for singles in their twenties and thirties. How does a church built on discipleship through small groups look? It looks like a community that welcomes anyone regardless of age or relationship status. It looks like a place of caring concern and love for one another. It looks like the kingdom of God at full strength. It looks like God working through his people to go and makes disciples of all ages, life stages, ethnicities, and relationship statuses.

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## APPENDIX A. INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research. This project is in partial fulfillment of my MDiv degree. You have been invited to participate in this research because I believe that you can provide valuable information on the topic. I will be asking you questions about how discipleship/small groups/age-related groups relate to the church's overall community and ministry to Christian singles in their 20s and 30s. The interview will last approximately 40 minutes.

Your involvement in this research will be shared in the following ways:

- I may quote you in my thesis paper.
- I may use ideas that you suggest in my thesis paper.
  - o Any time I use a quote or idea from you, I will be sure to cite it as your idea and thought.

If you agree to the audio recording of the interview, the recording will be deleted after the research project is completed.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you may choose not to answer any or all questions. You may fully withdraw from the interview at any time and information that you provided will not be reported in the research.

“By signing this consent form, I acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information, and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study under the conditions described.”

Name : \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

“I furthermore agree to the audio recording of this interview, and understand that the recording will be deleted upon completion of the research project.” \_\_\_\_\_ (initials)

## APPENDIX B. INTERVIEWEE QUESTIONNAIRE 1

1. How have you served in ministry in the past? How are you serving in ministry right now?
2. In your ministry experience past and present, were there a lot of never-married single people in their 20s and 30s in the WELS churches you've served?
3. In your opinion and from your experience, does this idea float around WELS culture today?  

*"You aren't a whole person unless you are married."*
4. In your opinion and from your experience, how have we fallen short in caring for and reaching out to single people in their 20s and 30s? What have we done well?
5. What spiritual needs have you noticed among young, never-married, single people in general?
6. In your ministry experience, what have you found difficult about reaching single people in their 20s and 30s?
7. In your ministry experience, what have you found difficult about retaining single people in their 20s and 30s?
8. What needs of the church are single people in their 20s and 30s uniquely suited to fulfill?
9. In your own words, what is discipleship?
8. What kinds of things were/are done at the places you've served and are currently serving to encourage discipleship?
9. How does discipleship affect the church community as a whole?
10. How does discipleship provide care for single people in their 20s and 30s?
11. How does discipleship reach out to single people in their 20s and 30s who aren't already Christians?

12. In your ministry, what strategies have you implemented to create and foster a church community that cares for and reaches singles in their 20s and 30s? What strategies would you like to see implemented?

## APPENDIX C. INTERVIEWEE QUESTIONNAIRE 2.

1. What are some of the unique challenges that single people face?
2. What are some of the unique abilities/gifts that single people can offer to the church?
3. In your opinion and from your experience, does this idea float around WELS culture today?  

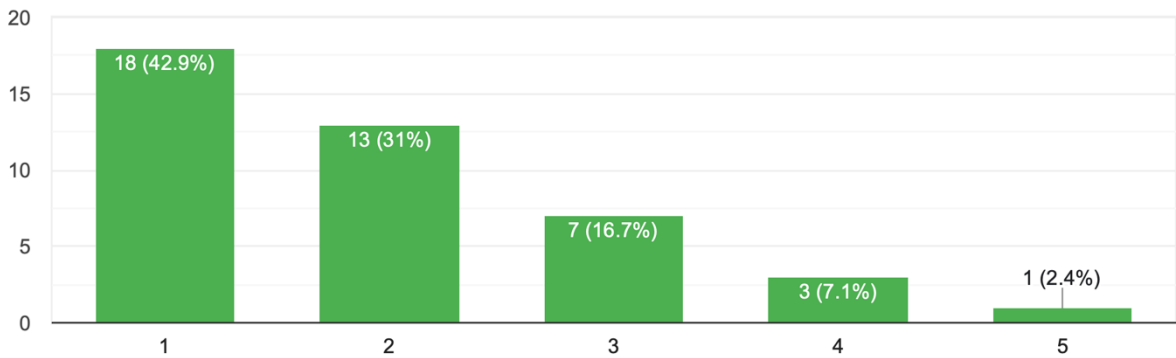
*“You aren’t a whole person unless you are married.”*
4. In your opinion and from your experience, how have we fallen short in caring for and reaching out to single people? What have we done well?
5. What can churches do to create and foster a church community that cares for and reaches singles in their 20s and 30s?
6. Is there anything that wasn’t covered in this interview that you feel needs to be addressed in a paper on ministry to singles?

## APPENDIX D. SURVEY RESULTS AMONG WELS/ELS SINGLE ADULTS

Hello! My name is Dan Spaude. I'm a senior at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and I'm working on writing my senior thesis on ministering to Christian singles in their 20s and 30s. This survey will help me with my research. Please fill it out as honestly and openly as you can. Thank you for participating in this survey and for helping me with my research! (1 = Totally disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree)

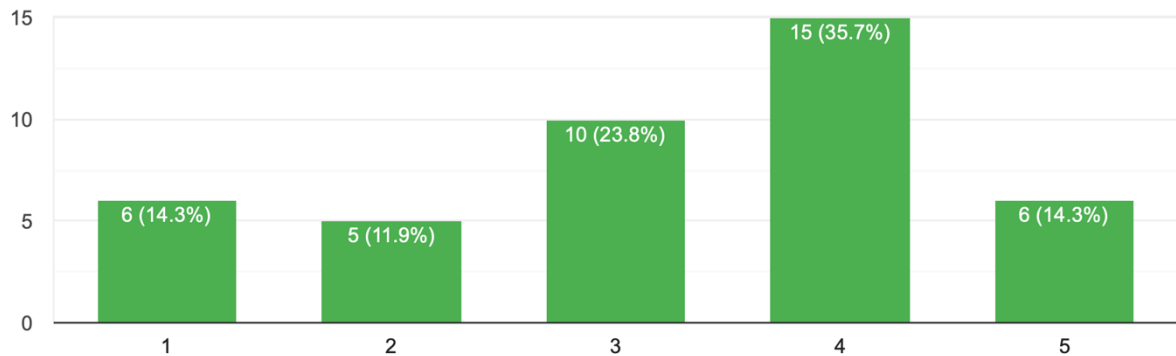
There are a lot of single people in there 20s and 30s at my church.

42 responses



The WELS has a "You aren't a whole person until you are married" mentality.

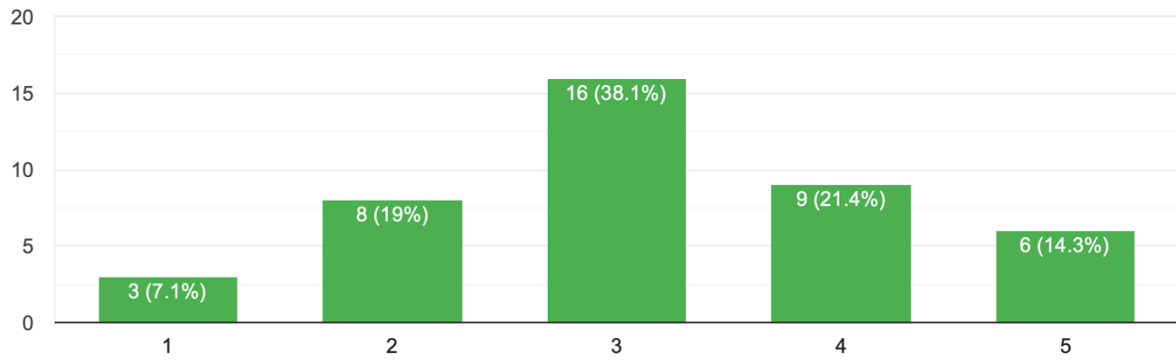
42 responses





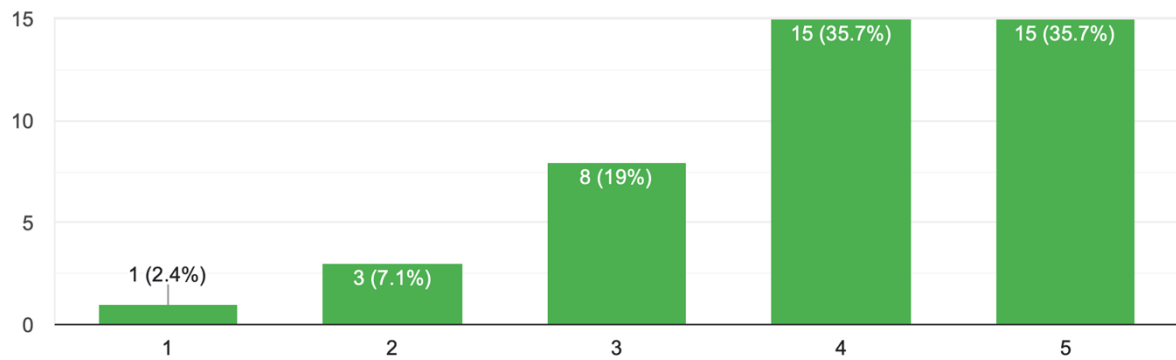
My church is a welcoming place for single individuals in their 20s and 30s.

42 responses



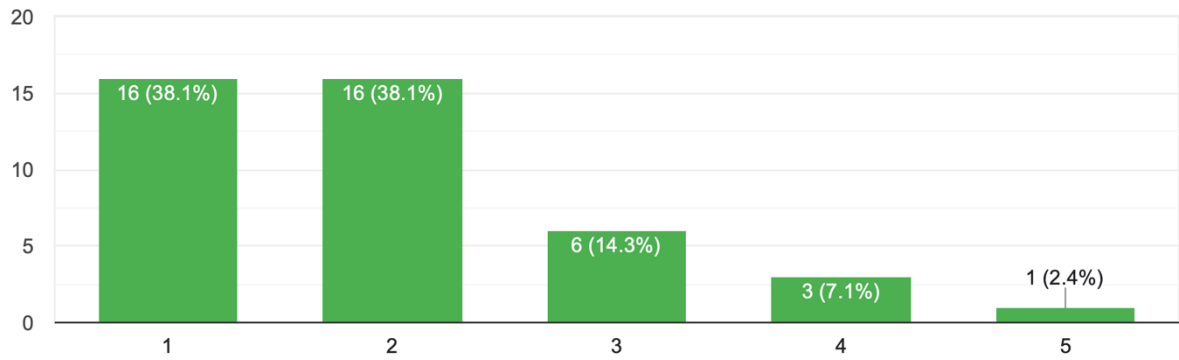
I think discipleship in the form of small groups can reach out to single individuals in their 20s and 30s.

42 responses



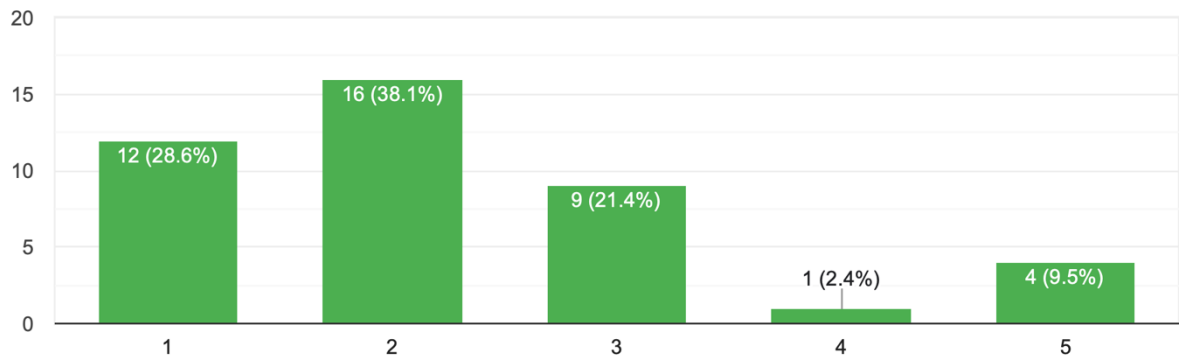
The WELS/ELS is good at caring for the unique needs of single people in their 20s and 30s.

42 responses



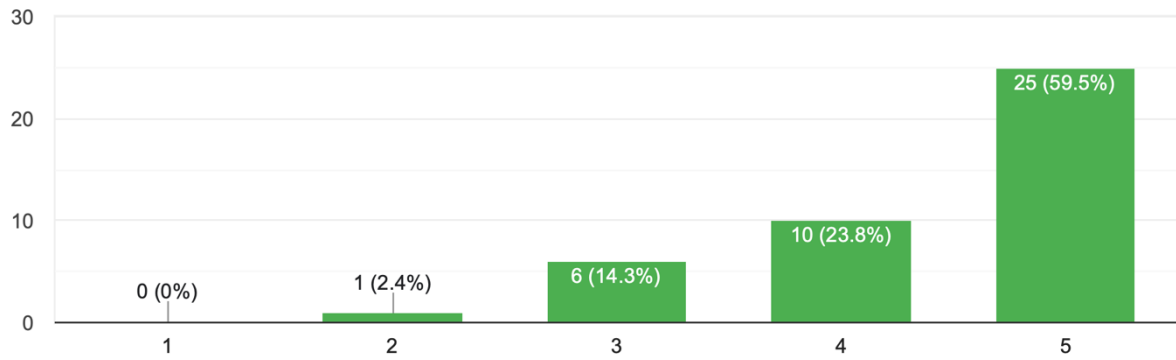
The WELS/ELS is good at reaching out to single people in their 20s and 30s.

42 responses



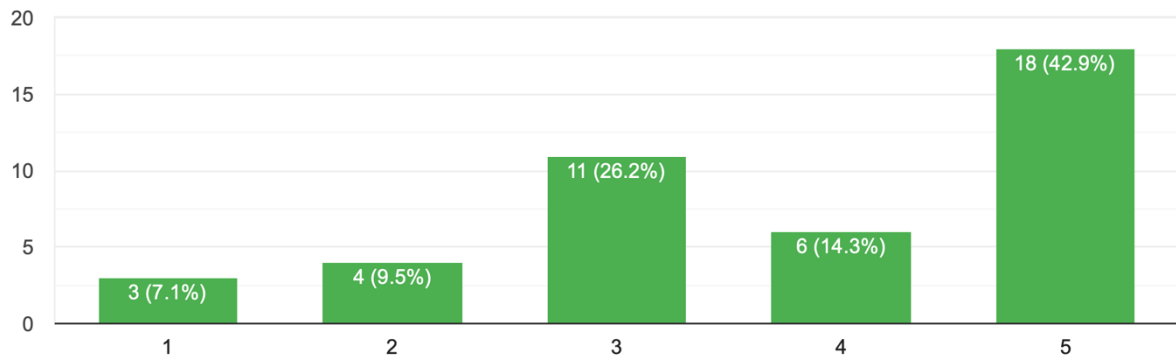
I think my church should have groups that involve single people and married people alike.

42 responses



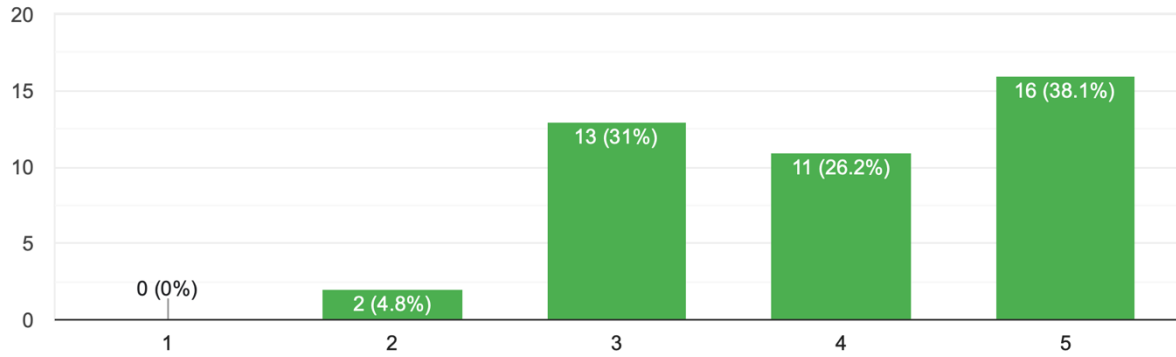
My church offers just as many opportunities for single people to serve as married people.

42 responses



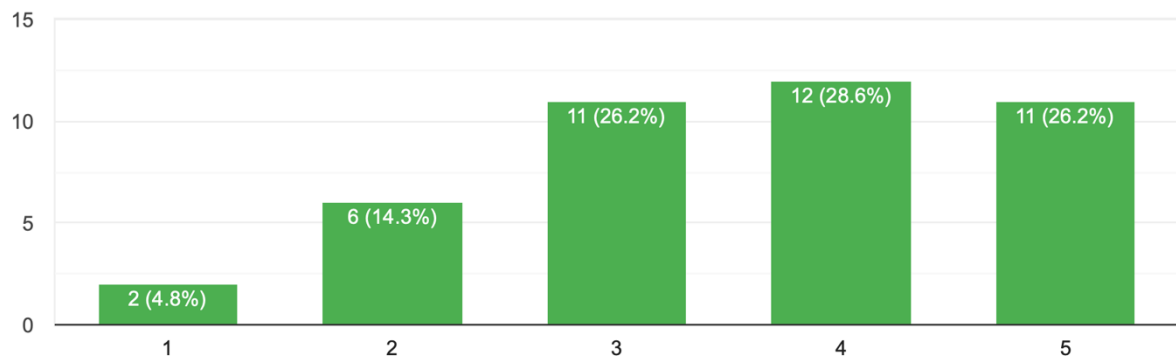
I think discipleship in the form of small groups can provide care for single people in their 20s and 30s.

42 responses



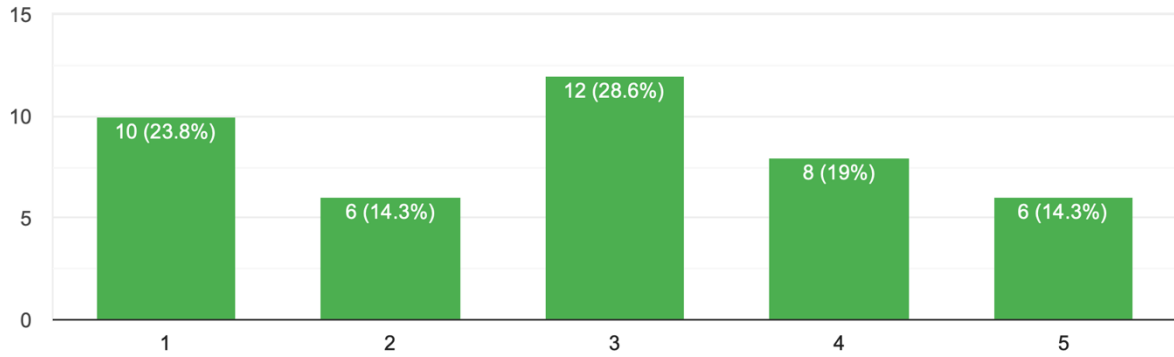
I think my church should have small groups just for singles.

42 responses



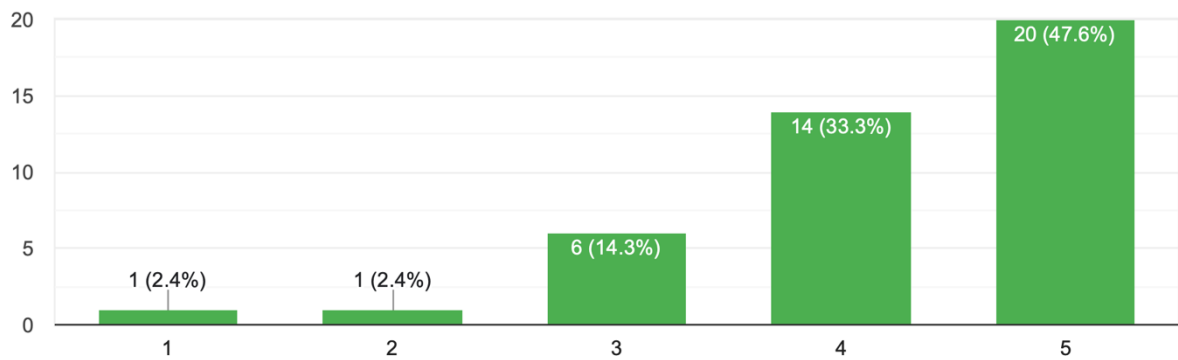
My church offers many opportunities for single and married people alike to gather and make connections.

42 responses



Christian mentorship for single individuals would be helpful.

42 responses



## APPENDIX E. SURVEY RESULTS AMONG WELS PASTORS

1. The approximate percentage of young single people (20s and 30s) at my church is...

Answer 1: "About 1%"

Answer 2: "About 10%"

Answer 3: "2%"

Answer 4: "20%"

Answer 5: "10%"

Answer 6: "35%"

2. In your experience, has it been more difficult to reach and retain young single people than family units?

Yes: 5

No: 1

3. If you answered "Yes," why has it been more difficult to reach and retain young single people?

Answer 1: "At that age, members seem less likely to come forward in need of pastoral attention, so it requires a highly motivated parishioner to stay engaged in congregational life. In my experience, we also need to do better at identifying the gifts of the young and using them for service in Christ's kingdom."

Answer 2: "We don't have enough critical mass of this age group to provide necessary social and spiritual programs/events that would enable them to further connect to each other and the congregation as a whole. That being said, the ones we do have are engaged and comfortable participating with the other demographics of our congregation, just not a in affinity group of their age and/or interests."

Answer 3: “They are a much smaller percentage than families. As a result, it's difficult to reach a critical mass of a group that knows one another and feels like they have an identity within the congregation.”

Answer 4: “Most of the gathering in our congregation focus on the family or elderly. We don't have anything that really engages the 20-30's that are single.”

Answer 5: “With family units you have the school & children's activities, Christmas service, Pioneers, etc. There is nothing ‘pulling’ the single people in unless they have a strong desire to be involved in something like choir or ushering and have the gumption to follow through. Also, if you don't already have a momentum started in which young people are deliberately encouraged to get involved or already enjoy gathering together, it is very hard to get them assimilated. Millennials & those who follow are reluctant to commit to things and seem turned off by organization.”

4. If you answered “No,” what has worked for you to reach and retain young, single people?

Answer 1: “The combination of relevant preaching of the lectionary and prioritizing pastoral care and attention—the pastor building a relationship with each individual—has worked for us.”

Answer 2: “One thing that has worked is to give the names of our single people to the board chairmen and have them contact the 20s & 30s to recruit them for a board. We also have a 20s & 30s group, some married and some not married, who enjoy fellowship once or twice a month and do fun activities. I often give names to the leaders for them to contact & invite. If they have a talent like singing or play an instrument we are on task to utilize them in our worship. Also, we pastors need to stop giving the impression that marriage is a form of salvation or the ultimate goal in life and that singles are somehow second-class citizens or deserving of our pity. Once in heaven, marriage will have served its purpose and will exist no more. We will experience the fullness of what it means to be the bride of Christ. So, in our preaching & teaching & prayers we can express the unique joys & opportunities that singleness offers for service to Christ just like the Apostle Paul did. It's not a piece of cake, but its not a curse either.”

5. In your opinion, do small groups help reach and retain young single people?

Answer 1: “Sometimes. It depends on how open the small group is, and how self-motivated many of our single people are.”

Answer 2: “Yes.”

Answer 3: “Yes, I think that's the key.”

Answer 4: “‘Retain’ is a tough word, because young single people tend to be highly mobile and I don't think it's a failure to retain them if they relocate. That being said, I do think that it's important for them to forge relationships at church with people other than

the pastor. Small groups might be an avenue to do so, but they can also be a turn-off to young single people who (at least in my experience) perceive them as churchly attempts at social engineering. We've found that more natural venues for forging relationships, such as singing in a choir or working together on a community service project, etc., provides venues where young single people get to know each other and often results in new friendships forming. I'm always glad to see young people getting together on their own, apart from any churchly function.”

Answer 5: “They can if someone reaches out to them and gets their attention. Sometimes single people's biggest struggle is giving up their free time to do something else. Single people like to be invited but if they aren't they just do what that they want.”

Answer 6: “Sure, but there is no silver bullet. It just takes dogged work, like anything.”