

A How-To Guide to Single-parent Ministry  
An Inside Look to the Single-parent World in the Christian Community

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A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for graduation  
in the Honors Program  
Liberty University  
Fall 2015

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

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### Abstract

The status of the family dynamic in the church has changed significantly, but the cultural understanding of ministers regarding the dynamic has changed little to none. As a result, the church's ministry has become ineffective to the single-parent community because of ignorance. The goal of this thesis is to help educate Christian ministers and lay staff on the single-parent family condition and ministry opportunities to serve this demographic. This proposition includes information gained from interviews of single-parents, and ministers with experience regarding single-parents by someone with a single-parent upbringing. Overall, the single-parents interviewed stated that the Christian church is missing ministry opportunities such as mentorship and a helping hand team and is leaving single-parents to feel they do not have a place inside the body of Christ.

## A How-To Guide to Single-parent Ministry

### An Inside Look to the Single-parent World in the Christian Community

Families in the United States can be anything but homogenous. In addition, the number of single-parent families is rising to a notable amount. Although the quantity is sizable, the Christian church has not recognized this shift in population. The church and its leaders now are ineffective to single-parents because of ignorance about the change in the culture.<sup>1</sup> The scope of this argument is to inform church leaders and lay staff, so that they can thoroughly understand the single-parent family dynamic and as a result effectively minister to single-parents. In order to serve them successfully, Christian leaders first need to understand what constitutes single-parenthood and the wide spread nature of its conundrum. Then they need to understand what is happening in single-parent households and what the Bible communicates about them because ministers need to have a theological foundation before they attempt to help single-parent families. Conclusively, ministers need to develop a theological, psychological, and practical understanding of single-parent families before they attempt to minister to a single-parent household.

### **Definition**

Simply stated, single-parenthood is one parent raising his/her child or children.<sup>2</sup>

The causes of this dynamic are very situational because each family is different. Some

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1. Jennifer Maggio, *The Church and the Single Mom: Why You Should Care and What You can Do* (Stone Mountain, GA: Care Point Ministry, 2011), 13. Maggio completed a study that suggests less 1% of the churches in America have a program for single mothers. She also did a study that suggested 67% of single moms do not attend church.

2. Devin Kowalczyk, "Single Parenthood: Definition & the Effects on Children," Study.com, accessed July 12, 2015, <http://study.com/academy/lesson/single-parenthood-definition-effects-on-children-quiz.html>.

cases are traumatic in that they stem from divorce, death, or imprisonment. Other cases are less traumatic but still affect families, such as when one of the spouses are military deployed over several years of the child's life. These less traumatic cases are not true cases because their single-parenthood is temporary, and the deployed parent contributes financially and communicates minimally. The family dynamic of interest for this paper is one or more children dependent upon one biological parent. This dynamic does not necessarily mean that the parent will not have outside help such as other family members, church members, friends, and/or organizations. This specific family type means the parent is the primary care giver who has the legal custody of the child which implies the parent is biologically the parent and not someone who assumed the role. With most families in the single-parent situation, the primary caregiver is a mother.<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that a single-parent family could not be father led; it just means that the typical single-parent household is led by a mother. For the scope of this thesis, single-parenthood is one biological parent rearing his/her child or children alone.

### **Prevalence**

Today in America, the condition of the typical family has been under stark deprivation ever since divorce has been deemed as socially viable. From divorce to cohabitation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Americans in regard to raising children have gone from bad to worse. There are more children now growing up in nontraditional families than ever before. According to *Life Site News*, "The number of children in single family

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3. Jennifer Wolf, "The Single Parent – Portrait Based on Census Data," The Single Parent-Hood Statistics, accessed August 4, 2015, <http://singleparents.about.com/od/legalissues/p/portrait.htm>. In the single parent household, roughly, 82% of the custodial parents are mothers.

homes has nearly doubled from the 1960 census to the 2010 census.”<sup>4</sup> This is detailed by the fact that “*The Washington Times* analyzed the census data and found that the number of homes with children has increased 160,000 while the number of single-parent family homes has increased 1.2 million.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, there are 10 million single mothers with at least one child and about half have more than one.<sup>6</sup> According to the National Father Initiative, “there are 24 million kids and 1 out of 3 grew up without their biological father.”<sup>7</sup> With these facts explaining the family dynamic, one has to be open-minded when attempting to understand these circumstances of life because every family dynamic is situational – as defined above.

### **Biblical Foundation**

The Bible is God’s word which He inspired (1 Tim. 3:16). Because of this, God’s word is the foundation for truth. As believers in Christ, people should follow all that it commands (Jn. 14:15). As a result, the Bible is where believers turn to; to understand concepts and commands in which they live their lives accordingly. The following are some concepts and commands that one needs to take into consideration when approaching ministry to single-parent families.

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4. Kirsten Andersen, “The Number of US Children Living in Single-parent Homes Has Nearly Doubled in 50 Years: Census Data,” Life Site News, January 4, 2013, accessed November 20, 2014, <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/the-number-of-children-living-in-single-parent-homes-has-nearly-doubled-in>.

5. Ibid.

6. Jonathan Vespa, Jamie Lewis, and Rose Krieder, “America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2012,” August 1, 2013, accessed November 20, 2014, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p20-570.pdf>.

7. “Imagine for a Moment that You Could Be the Father You Never Had,” Growing Up without a Father, accessed November 20, 2014, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p20-570.pdf>.

**Special Creation**

The first issue that is helpful to understand is the value of a human. The inception of human value starts in Genesis in the creation account. God is making the whole universe and states everything is good. But in Genesis 1:26-27, God made mankind in his own image and called it very good. This means that the human race is special in God's eyes as a whole. Individually, Psalm 139:13-14 portrays why an individual is special to God because it declares that God made the person wonderfully in the inward parts of the mother's womb. Furthermore, God is intentional and knows everyone. Mankind can rejoice in this since man is made by God from His image. This articulates that every person's value is priceless to God, which signifies that humans should value each other and as a result take care of the human race. This applies to single-parent households because they are all humans made in God's image.

**Caring for the Widows and Orphans**

One has to wonder where the burden of single-parenthood is in the Bible because the traditional family has been instituted from Adam and Eve. Single-parenthood stems from the idea that God is a father to the fatherless as it states this exact phrase in Psalm 68:5. God also tells His people to honor the widows and visit the orphans in James 1:27 and 1 Timothy 5:3. These verses point to God's desires to help these people. They are of no less value and have a legitimate hardship. God through James and Paul is telling the recipients of the letters to care for these people. If it was important to the church at that time, then caring for orphans and widows should be a ministry of the church today. God, also, corrects the people in the Old Testament in Isaiah 1:17 stating, "bring justice to the fatherless and plead for the widow's cause." With these couple of verses, one can see

God's desire to assist widows and orphans. This translates to the nontraditional families of today, since widows and orphans were representatives of the broken families in the Bible.

### **The Value of Children**

God the Father and Jesus Christ both display their love and favor on children. In Psalm 127:3, the psalmist writes, "Children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward." The verse states children are blessings, a gift from God, and a continuance of one's namesake. In the New Testament, Jesus is constantly using children as examples to mankind. For instance, in Matthew 18:2-4, Jesus points out how children are in a humble state. In Mark 10:13-16, Jesus declares that one should not inhibit a child from coming to Him, and men should come to Him the way children do. Paul articulates the value of youth in 1 Timothy 4:12 asserting that youth can be an example and portray wisdom in the faith to adults. This is bolstered by the fact that Jesus used them as examples; the exact thing that Paul exhorted Timothy to be. From these passages, Children are seen as a blessing in many different aspects. Thus, people need to comprehend the favor that children have in God's eyes. This favor is also for the children who grow up in nontraditional homes. Although the Bible does not specifically isolate any part of the children demographic, this does not mean that God's favor is not upon children of the single-parent demographic.

### **Ministering to the Body**

The Bible tells believers many times that they have jobs to do on earth, and one of those jobs is loving one's neighbor in Matthew 22:39. It signifies that Christians have work to do. Love is putting others before oneself because he/she loves Jesus, and He told



mankind to do so. In Matthew 7:12, Jesus explains the golden rule – treat others the way you want to be treated. Christians should care and serve one another with these two verses as the foundation. In Ephesians 4:10-13, Paul explains that every believer has gifts, and those gifts are for the edification of the body.

What Paul says reveals itself in Galatians 6:2, believers are to bear one another's burdens. In Acts near the inception of the church, the believers fellowshiped and had everything in common. At this time there was no needy people (Acts 4:32-34). The church in the book of Acts, loved each other and bore each other's burdens to the point that they made sure everyone was taken care of. They embodied if one suffers, we all suffer (1 Cor. 12:26).

The way Jesus cared for others is an example to the church. He fed people many times. He healed people, and He taught people. Jesus even gave them their deepest need, spiritual life. He said when believers are caring for the least of society; they are caring for Him also (Matt. 25:31-46). Thus Christians should be ministering to one another and to others in the community. The community is not just Christians who have married families. The community is not inclusive to only people who do not need help. The fact of the matter is all Christians need help for all have fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). The community that should be ministering to others and one another is traditional and nontraditional families alike.

### **A Look Inside the Families**

This section is a result of interviewing single-parents in order to obtain private real life truths that was evident in single-parent families.<sup>8</sup> The interviews revealed what went on inside the lives of their day-to-day activity. In the interviewed parents were

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8. For more information on the interview process see Appendix A.

asked to share some of their struggles, desires, feelings about the church and society, and feelings about single-parenthood. These answers are not all the responses of every single-parent on earth but rather a compilation of the sample which represents single-parents as a whole. Due to the fact that this is a small sample size, there is a greater emphasis on the individualistic answers of the single-parents, so that the information collected would reflect a basic understanding of single-parenthood. In addition, when approaching a single-parent one should be open minded and meet them where they are at by first understanding their personal situation. Nonetheless, the following is a description of what happens in single-parent homes.

### **The Struggles of Single-parenthood**

The interviews revealed that single-parents have multiple areas in their lives that they struggle to manage. For this reason, they may be going through a lot more than the average parent. The main idea is that the turmoil parents deal with is often caused by collateral issues that affect each other. For instance, many of the single mothers in the interviews struggled with spending enough time with their children. They could not spend time with them because they needed money to provide for the family, which caused them to spend most of their time working and possibly working more than one job. Another issue that stems from finances is the housing parents can afford. Normally, the living space cannot accommodate the children comfortably since single-parents, as noted above, generally have more than one child. Furthermore, single mothers often experience loneliness because they spend too much time taking care of the children, working, and taking care of the home. As a result, parents have no time for social activities or proper sleep. This is a result of work overload, having so many

responsibilities that single-parents are trying to fill every role they possibly can with the amount of time they have in a week. Moreover, the parents interviewed did not cope with role overload well. They prayed and hoped for the best, but most parents did not cope. One of the single moms said that, “ I can’t cope. It isn’t an option.” Instead, single-parents endure through role overload because providing for their children is a necessity. Furthermore, parents try to take care of all the essential needs of the children so much so that they fall short on being able to raise them with values. Moreover, if they have children who are the opposite gender as they, the parents are impeded in teaching them manhood or womanhood because they are the opposite sex. Another aspect of single-parenthood that happens to traditional families as well is that they have to adapt to parenting . Being a parent is hard enough, and most people do not know what exactly to do. New parents normally rely on the experience of friends and family. If the parent does not have support systems like that, the parent is going to have a hard time adapting. On the emotional side on single-parenthood, some of the single-parents interviewed lack the intimacy with their mate because they no longer have a mate. They desire that closeness with a person, but they are too overloaded with work to even experience half that intimacy with a friend much less a romantic partner. Furthermore, the parent struggles with getting back on the “dating scene.” On the other hand, some parents struggle with finding time to just be alone. Introverts need time to themselves, and their situation does not allow for that. In all, the struggles of single-parenthood are interconnected, and the most valuable resource to single-parents is time.

### **Struggles of the Children**

The stress that burdens children is very different. The reason for this stress is that everything they have known about the world, normally, comes through their parents. If their parents are going through a divorce, then one of them leaves and disrupts everything. Many psychologists note that people develop attachment styles which help them relate to the rest of the world. Children need a secure base<sup>9</sup> that they feel safe around, and that base is normally their parents.<sup>10</sup> Thus, when a parent is taken out of a child's life that child goes through a traumatic event which disrupts their development. This could cause a child to feel as though no one wants him/her. As a result, a child wants to run back to the secure base, or the child avoids the secure base because the child feels betrayed. Apart from the attachment of young children, children from single-parent homes feel different because they do not have a "normal" childhood compared to a family with married parents. Another struggle of the children is they desire for their parents to be together. They normally do not understand why their parents cannot be together. Thus, they have a naïve perspective in that they just want one home. The children do not want to pack up and go to dad's for the weekend. Another struggle is that the children may not feel as if they have someone they can talk to who would understand what they went through. Normally, the people who try to talk to them are people with no mutual experiences. An additional problem is that a child may not voice his/her opinion on personal frustrations or ideas because the situation does not allow for the child to talk

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9. Robert Siegler, et al., *How Children Develop*, 428, 4th ed. (Worth Publishers, NY: 2014). A secure base is the idea that the presence of a trusted caregiver provides an infant or toddler with a sense of security that makes it possible for the child to explore the environment.

10. *Ibid.*, 428-433.

about what him/her went through. So the social interaction is limited to school, but children may not talk to other people about personal feelings. As a result, children withhold their true thoughts from others. A different struggle voiced by a single mom was that children can pick up bad habits from one of the parents. In this specific family, the son picked up violent behaviors from the father because the child thought that violence was a normal way of relating to women. In the end, the struggles of a child are very different because any struggle a child has can result in future attachment problems in relationships of all kinds.

### **Support System**

the support system varied for each parent interviewed, but there is one consistency – they all needed or lacked something. Some of the parents had all the help in the world from their family but no friends or church support. Others only had a couple of friends who were there. Very few of the mothers interviewed had financially lucrative jobs that allowed them to only need support from family or friends. Others had family across the world, and the family was only able to provide moral support. Unfortunately, these parents could not receive any other assistance from their families. Others parents only had support from the church or a counselor. One mother interviewed had a great support system at her job, but that was one mother. Single parents can always use some other type of support. Thus, a minister needs to keep in mind what else a parent could need because even small contributions help.

### **Desired Support**

Everyone can always use something else. In the single-parent's case, the person normally needs not just wants something else. These desires or necessities normally

mirror what the parent is struggling with. Some of the parents interviewed desired time alone, so that they could relax and decompress. Most of the parents desired child care, so that they could get other things done. Some desired to have support so they could start dating and not always be set back because of single-parenthood. Other parents desired to have a place where they could get emotional support like a support group. There they would receive encouragement and advice on a consistent basis. Along with that, one parent desired other parents with more experience being single mothers to give advice to her and be there for her, so that she could ask questions and gain wisdom in how to act in certain situations. Others did not need someone in the same situation. Parents would like to have mentors for their children because the parent cannot always be there for them. However, a very select few of the parents expressed that they did not desire any other support system. This mindset stems from a financially stable parent who has a positive outlook and a helpful church. Overall, parents want the best for their children and for themselves.

### **Their View of Single-parenthood**

The researcher asked the single-parents to explain their perspective on their situation. There were many answers, but the following are a summary of the reactions.

Some of the parents felt guilty that they put their children in the situation. They were very critical and judgemental of themselves. They called themselves hypocrites because they told themselves when they were younger that they were not going to end up in a broken home. Other moms voiced that the divorce was a choice and that they were in a “fixed home not a broken one.” They did not take pity but were very positive that this was the right thing to do. Ultimately, the parents wanted to be the best that they could

be, no matter what. They wanted to instill biblical principles in their children despite their situation and work to provide as much as he/she could for the children's sake.

### **The Church's Reaction**

The church's reaction to single-parenthood as depicted by the interviewed single-parents is dependent on a couple of things – the teaching of the church, the church's demographics, and the location of the church. The reason for this is because the teaching can be very dogmatic against nontraditional families. The demographics can display a bias against single-parenthood. Also, the location can reflect a unfriendly environment. With that being said, a lot of the single mothers felt ostracized by the church. They were at the church but were viewed as abnormal. Most received questions such as “where is your husband?” Some people did not know how to converse with them. In the church, there was not a place for single-parents. The focus of the singles group was not relative to the single-parents, while the adult group was full of married couples. They felt they were the outcast.

Another aspect is that single-parents walk into the church, as one minister interviewed put it, “with an open sin.” The parent would walk into the church with everyone seeing that he/she most likely got a divorce or has marital issues. People could see that he/she was full of potential burdens. As a result, some of the members were very pharisaical in that they would reject single-parents as needy or sinful. This was the judgement that most parents felt and received. Others received judgement because they went through a divorce at that church. People knew about their business and judged them after the divorce happened choosing sides of who was right and wrong.

Other parents felt a very different environment in the church. They were accepted as normal, and people came around them and encouraged them. These church experiences were very empathetic. The parents that felt this truly felt love and compassion. This is what people are supposed to feel when they come into the body of Christ. Unfortunately, the statement made by one minister, “The church is a body that shoots its wounded” is true most of the time.

### **The Pastor’s Perspective**

The outlook of pastoring a single-parent family is the same as pastoring a typical family. The pastor still cares for their spiritual health because he desires for the family to have eternal life which is in Jesus.<sup>11</sup> The second priority is that they understand all that Jesus has commanded.<sup>12</sup> The minister is to help them live out what the Bible teaches followers to do. With that, leaders may find themselves in situations where they give counsel to single-parent families and offer advice in tough situations. In addition, the pastor is to care about the family’s well-being. Consequently, the pastor will have to be careful not to overstep boundaries as a minister because a pastor is generally not a certified counselor. When counseling families, pastors should understand the situation of the parent in order to speak into the parent’s life. In addition, pastors should be partially knowledgeable on some basic attachment theory and other psychological principles because people relate to God in the same manner they relate to people. Although, the pastor may not have expertise in psychology, he/ she should understand how the parent relates to others in order to understand how to go about counseling the parent.

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11. The Great Commission and the first great Commandment in Matthew 22:37.

12. The Great Commission and the second commandment in Matthew 22:39.



Specifically, in single-parent households, ministers need to let their guidance over the congregation influence the body of Christ to create a community where hurting people can feel welcome. In Matthew 11:28, Jesus tells all who are weary and heavy laden to come, and He will give them rest. The body of Christ should have a natural outflow of service and love for their neighbor for as stated before when one suffers, the whole body suffers.

On the other hand, the pastor must not overemphasize ministering to single-parents. This could result in leading the sheep astray by making single-parent households the focus and not the whole community. This emphasis leads to misprioritization. Balance and order are necessary in God's church. When pastoring, the minister needs to teach the congregation from Scripture to handle and care for single-parent households. The church should have a ministry or two that specifically targets that demographic. Also the pastor should train the core leadership at the church on a deeper level about what to do with single-parent families. The congregation may understand from Scripture what to do, but the lay leaders and elders need to know the basic procedures in dealing with abuse of an ex-spouse, child depression, or any issue spawning from single-parenthood.

In all, one must remember that pastoring is multi-faceted. Single-parent ministry must be multi-faceted and balanced as well. Minister needs to keep Jesus the focus and everything else ought to be about building up the body of Christ as in Ephesians 4:10-13.

### **Psychological Aid**

In pastoral counseling or guidance, the minister normally relies primarily on the Bible to assist the family in need. The pastor addresses the problems with biblical truths. This can be effective because some psychological issues are wholly spiritual, other times

they are not. In all instances, if a pastor understands some of the basic principles of attachment theory as well as the Myer's Briggs personality type indicators, then the pastor can more effectively counsel the family's situation by understanding the reason for why the parent relates and parents in his/her specialized ways.

Attachment theory assists in understanding how and why people relate to each other.<sup>13</sup> On a parental level, one can understand how he/she relates to the child. In single-parenting, attachment displays itself best in adverse conditions. The completely secure attachment style is the easiest to counsel through because this style has little to none interpersonal conflicts.<sup>14</sup> If the single-parent has a secure attachment style,<sup>15</sup> then the minister should keep in mind the parent's specific situation and advise the parent based on his/her personality. Normally, single-parents do not have a secure attachment style and result in insecure parenting.<sup>16</sup>

Parents with an ambivalent or preoccupied attachment style tend to be highly anxious, very over bearing parents. These parent types are likely to display more emotional anxiety and have a desire to not be away from the child.<sup>17</sup> Based on the single-

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13. Siegler et al., *How Children Develop*, 428. The information is derived from Bowlby's attachment theory section.

14. *Ibid.*, 431.

15. K. Bartholomew, and Phillip R. Shaver, "Methods of Assessing Adult Attachment," in *Attachment Theory and Close Relationships*, eds. J.A. Simpson and W. S. Rholes (New York: Guilford Press, 1998), 31. According to this article, secure attachment style is a positive view of self and others along with comfortability in intimate relationships.

16. Siegler et. al., *How Children Develop*, 433, Box 11.1.

17. Emma K Adam, Megan R. Gunnar, and Akiko Tanaka, "Adult Attachment, Parent Emotion, and Observed Parenting Behavior: Mediator and Moderator Models," *Child Development* 75, no. 1 (2004): 115-119. This study founded these consistencies.

parent's time restrictions, he/she tends to have more stress because the parent cannot be there for his/her child which results in guilt. These parents generally need affirmation. When ministering to these parents, the counselor should advise the parent to spiritual affirmation in Christ. The minister should also lead the parent to understand that the child does need a mother but doesn't need someone living vicariously through him/her. The mentor should point to the process of sanctification in that it is personal process that is established from an independent personal relationship with Christ. The mentor can draw the comparison stating that life is still very similar to sanctification. The parent can teach a child the way he/she should go, but only the child will decide what one will do. Ultimately, the child has to learn in life from a personal perspective.

Dismissive parents tend to be avoidant in their relationships.<sup>18</sup> When one is trying to understand how to counsel these parents in the midst of their situation, the parent will most likely reject any help. Dismissive parents communicate that they are "fine," and they can do it on their own. These types of parents are normally very hands off in parenthood.<sup>19</sup> Speaking into this dynamic is going to be more difficult. But if the opportunity does arise, the minister should lead the parent to understand that he/she does not have to always be involved, but one needs to be active in the child's life. The pastor could show the parent Deuteronomy 6:7 where parents teach their children about God as they walk together through life, so that he/she can see that parenting as one goes through life is not a very overbearing method but still effective. Also, the pastor can lead the parent to the personal understanding that humans need Christ to get into heaven which

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18. Siegler et. al., *How Children Develop*, 433, Box11.1.

19. These parents are the exact opposite to ambivalent parents who are overbearing. They are detached.

means mankind needs help. From that, the minister can show the parent that help is advantageous.

A disorganized parent is a sensitive situation. Everytime the parent experiences difficult issues, he/she has a different reaction.<sup>20</sup> Sometimes the parent is secure. Sometimes he/she is preoccupied/ambivalent and other times dismissive/avoidant. These are normally the tough situations that ministers should seek a certified counselor to deal with the parent because a disorganized attachment style is a situation that basic knowledge in psychology will not help someone effectively.

Attachment styles can help discern what needs to be done in specific families and parental dynamics, but they only help discern what needs to happen.. Being able to analyze a personality will assist a minister in communicating the possible solutions to the family dynamic. Thus, understanding a parent's personality type will help the pastor fathom the best way to communicate to him/her in order for the parent to learn the information.

The most telling aspect of a personality in terms of the Myer's Brigg's personality indicators with regard to single-parent ministry and learning in general is whether he/she is intuitive or sensing. When someone is sensation or sensing driven, the person learns the best when things are spelled out for him/her. The parent prefers for there to be a detailed step by step process. The intuitive types are the exact opposite in that they prefer loose directives. Thus, counseling these two types are very different in that for the

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20. Siegler et. al., *How Children Develop*, 431.

sensing types the leader has to be very detailed in the process in how he/she has to do things, while intuitives can just be told what is going to happen.<sup>21</sup>

The other three sets of indicators express different details about the person that will help describe how the person thinks through life. The first aspect is extroversion or introversion. This explains where the person gets energy. If someone is extroverted, a minister may use social interaction and multiple people to help teach the parent. If the parent is introverted, the pastor may use a more intimate setting where counseling is one on one or a time that is very self-reflective to help advise the parent. Another aspect is how the parent judges. One is very logical and detached, the thinking type. The other is compassionate and empathetic, the feeling type. When a parent is a thinking type, he/she will tend to be less emotionally sensitive to issues. While, feeling types are more empathetic to how issues affect everyone. With the feeling type, a counselor has to be aware of how ideas are perceived as well as the impact of the counseling has on others in the situations for this type of parent will care more about others over the thinking type. The last aspect of a personality type is how the person lives. Is the parent a perceiving or judging? The difference is that the judging type is the planner, who does things in a methodical way. The perceiver does things in a more impulsive manner. Consequently, dealing with one or the other is quite different. When dealing with a planner, the counseling is more of a slow moving process. With the perceiver, the minister will be able to move very quickly and do things abruptly. In all, looking at one's personality will

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21. Nia Heslop, interview by author, College Park, MD, July 4, 2015. Nia Heslop is in a position at University of Maryland where she works alongside of professionals who are licensed in giving the Myers Briggs Type Indicator.

explain the way a minister communicates and the attachment style determines what the minister counsels on.

### **Ministry Opportunities**

This is the part where knowledge meets application. All of the background information about the families meets practicality in serving the needs of single-parent families. The church of today is heading in the direction of less programs and more Acts 2 church.<sup>22</sup> Though having too many programs gets in the way of the Gospel, ministers need to discern what are the correct programs to accomplish the vision of the church. For all programs have a good reason at the source for doing them, but just because the program has a good reason does not mean it is vision and mission oriented. The following are possible programs one could implement into a church in order to minister to nontraditional households according to the interview responses responses and suggestions from the 7 single-parent's in the sample.

### **Support Groups**

Support groups are a natural way to get people together to lean on each other in order to build a community. Four out of the seven parents interviewed stated that this opportunity would help them greatly because they would feel accepted. This support system can have a conglomerate of single-parents, traditional parents, ministers, and volunteers. One can see the positive effects of alcohol anonymous and narcotics anonymous are having in society. How much more can the church provide support in the form of community? The single-parents suggested a few ways this can happen, advice driven, Bible driven, or relationship driven.

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22. Acts 2 church is using the New Testament as the model for churches.

**Advice Driven.** This type of support group would be more of a peripheral support group that the soul purpose is to provide an environment which wisdom can be passed from anyone to the single-parents. These are very practically based and are very similar to self help books that are very popular today. This group could meet in the church or off the church property. This would be more of an intimate setting where there would be about 10-20 people present. The central focus would be advice and moral support.

**Bible Study.** This type of support group is very similar to an advice driven group except the central focus is biblically driven. This group would focus on teaching that may address some issues that the single-parents may struggle with like guilt or God's justice. Just because the focus has changed does not mean that advice is not facilitated. Advice and wisdom will always be present when Christians are truly loving one's neighbor. This group would also be close and a small group, but the priority is teaching God's word.

**Relationship Support.** This group's focus is on helping single-parents re-engage the relationship process with a view toward marriage. Three out of seven single mothers mentioned that this was something they struggled with. It is hard for these single-parents to have a moment to themselves and think. Imagine the difficulty in trying to cultivate relationships with the opposite sex. The parent has many new matters to consider. This group would talk about issues such as how to avoid not getting the children attached to the person or the methods to dating as a single-parent. Ultimately, this cohort would be an advice based support group that would blend with Scripture to provide an outlook on Christian dating for a single mother or father.

## **Mentorship**

Mentorship is the secular way of saying discipleship. Discipleship is the process of developing Christ-like followers in life through teaching, accountability, and edification. Simply, discipleship is learning to act like Christ. This is the means through which God wants to teach and reach the whole world in the great commission. Many of the mothers interviewed realized their need for discipleship so much so that five out of the seven parents interviewed want a mentor in some capacity. One of the mothers desired this so much, she started a mentorship ministry at her church. However, there are many ways this can flesh out. The following are some possible options.

**I Have Been There.** One approach is the “I have been there approach.” A mother specifically expressed that she desired this. Two out of three of the rest of the parents thought this was a good idea. Her suggestion is that a pastor takes someone who is further along in the journey as a single mother or father and places that person over a younger parent. This gives the younger parent an opportunity to ask the other parent, “what is the best thing to do when my child gets to this stage in life?” This relationship allows advice to be given like in the support group, but this mentorship is a deeper personal relationship. This method can also be useful in that the older parent can speak into the younger one’s life without being asked. This way the flow of love and community is natural. It is not forced or confined to meetings. It is almost, if not, closer than a familial relationship. This is where wisdom is passed down that no one else will know. Most traditional parents are not going to understand how to address the “who is my dad or mom?” talk, if they never had to explain or go through the unfortunate dynamic of the child’s family.



**Step Family.** This mentorship is similar to the previous but is different. The step family model relies on other families in the church who are later in the process of life that have not been in a nontraditional family. Basically, this would provide a single-parent with a male and a female perspective on how to raise children through all the processes of life. This gives the single-parent a close relationship that he/she can ask for advice. The step family would also assist with child care and other responsibilities that the parent needs to fulfill. This mentorships accomplishes what typical grandparents would do.

**Minister Led.** The minister led model is the most basic model of mentorship. It basically takes a minister in some capacity – elder, deacon, or church member – and places a single-parent with him/her. The minister basically lives life with them. Encouraging him/her and keeping tabs on the single-parent. The minister pours love and Scripture into the parent, so that he/she may grow in faith despite one's own hardships. It allows for the parent to go to a healthy Christian and observe how a true christian ministers in the body. This is typical discipleship with a slight focus on single-parenting.

**Role Model.** The role model method is not for the parent. This type of mentorship is for the children going through the single-parenting dynamic. This mentorship was specifically mentioned by three out of the seven single mothers. As a result, this could solve the problem of a mother raising her son, and a father raising his daughter because it places a godly role model, gender specific, in the child's life to teach him/her biblical woman or manhood. This can manifest through example, activities like sports or cooking, and teaching as well as having intimate conversation when necessary. This method provides children an opportunity to ask questions to the role model on gender specific issues. It allows the children to vent about what is going on in his/her mind because the

child often does not get to let out his/her thoughts in a healthy way. This model helps children have good examples growing up.

### **Child Care**

Single-parents are becoming more desperate for child care with single-parents experiencing heavier work overloads. For instance, over fifty percent of the interviewed single mothers directly expressed a need for child care. If people could help and watch the kids for the parent during the week, the parent would be able to do basic chores around the house like laundry and grocery shopping. An idea would be to have volunteers in the church that would watch a group of children for a couple of hours a few days a week. The volunteer would alleviate some weight off of the parents shoulders. Honestly, it does not matter; single-parents just need more time. The more child care opportunities the better.

**Parent's Night Out.** This idea was mentioned because three out of the seven mothers interviewed explicitly expressed desire to have a night out. A parent's night out would be a special time during the month where one Friday or Saturday evening the single-parent can drop the child or children off. This would allow the single-parent not just time to do things like chores and necessary activities but rather spend some time on his/herself. The parent could go on a date, hang out with some friends or just go home and relax. Child care is all about facilitating a place, time, and location to watch children for someone else's benefit.

### **Care Team**

This is a unique idea that would help single-parents and less fortunate people. one out of the seven parents interviewed did not ask for help at times because they did not

know where to look or go. Furthermore, two mothers suggested this idea in their interview. They suggested this team would provide a list of people that could do housework and specialized labor for single-parents. The care team could have subcontractors or handy men that have certain specialties like plumbing or mechanics, so that the single-parent can ask the team to fix the toilet or check up on the car. Another part of the care team could be a moving team. Another team could be a landscaping team for lawn upkeep especially in the fall, or any other need that could be met through someone's expertise. Granted, this care team would not need to be in place at a church if people are already actively helping families like the Acts church did for there was no needy people in Acts 4:34.

### **Parenting Education**

Parenting education is necessary for single-parents because some do not know the basics of discipline and the parent-child dynamic boundaries. The mentoring and support groups can handle this subject, but for more of an in-depth impact, a church can hold a seminar to provide a Q&A time for single-parents to ask any question to guarantee a full variety of answers. Also if the church is large enough, the church could hold a conference about biblical parenthood and child rearing. Nonetheless, parenting is hard especially when one does not have another parent to talk to. Thus, education is the best way to help ignorance.

### **Social Media**

Social media has been prominent in society, and there are becoming more and more uses for social media including ministry. Social media pages like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook can be created to reach out to the single-parent community

through technology. For Twitter and Instagram, these accounts can be more about sharing advice and offering encouragement. Facebook can have a page that is an open forum allowing an online community to be made where single-parents from all over can come together and encourage each other. Facebook can also post article links or video links that pertain to the edification of the single-parent community. Social media ministry can use the current culture trend to reach as many people as possible on a basic level.

## **2 Families 1 Meal**

This concept is very similar to mentorship but is more about being a community member. This is where a family invites a single-parent family over for dinner, and they commune together. This allows the single-parents to save some money, alleviate some stress about cooking dinner, and be at a house not having to worry.

### **Overview**

Though this is a list of possible ministry opportunities, these are not all of the possible outlets of ministry. There are many more depending on the church environment and demographic. Above are all of the ideas that were derived out of the interview responses as well as specifically stated suggestions by the single mothers. There are many more depending on the church environment and demographic. Pastors should keep in mind that some of the ministries above are not overtly Christian. That does not mean they are any less valuable, it just means that what they are accomplishing may not be the absolute focus of the church. Another idea for a minister to keep in mind is that these ministry outlets including the Pastor's Perspective section and the Psychological Aid section can be applied to less traumatic cases of single-parenthood and nontraditional

single-parenthood like step-parents as long as the minister recontextualizes the recipient of the service.

### **Prevention**

The following information is based out of an interview with an organization's leaders that execute ministry in preventing families from being broken. The researcher concluded from them that the church needs to be proactive not just in ministering to nontraditional families but in preventing these wounding experiences. This process starts at the primary school age and progresses on through secondary and higher education through helping the children understand the harmful effects of a hedonistic way of life. Initially, this can be done by teaching the youth of the church. This also can be achieved by going into schools and teaching students the results of hedonism and purity by comparing the two. Teaching the obedience to Christ probably would not be allowed in the school system but comparing the ways of life and the results of them in regard to sex most likely will be.

Along the same purpose but a different methodology is reaching out to teenagers or young adults who went down the wrong path and ended up in a difficult situation – early pregnancy. From this point of view, there are a lot more factors that one needs to consider which include choosing life, not forcing the child to make certain decisions, and a no condemnation zone. The child or young adult is already going through a lot with the early pregnancy, and putting judgement and guilt on the child is not going to help. It will only exacerbate the situation even more. Consequently, the church needs to be as unbiased as possible in the situation and help meet the woman where she is at. This requires a mentor in some capacity to help weigh all the options. Yes, the church wants the

expectant mother to choose life, but the church cannot force that just like the church cannot force people to follow Jesus wholeheartedly. Furthermore, there are a couple of principles the minister needs to recognize. The first is be consistent, do not be impartial in any way. This will only lead to bad mentorship and help. Secondly, ministers need to have boundaries with that woman, so that there will be love not a totalitarian mentorship. Lastly, the minister needs to speak truth in love. Tough love is necessary sometimes for people to understand perspectives or to comprehend the extent someone cares. One needs to be careful though because tough love can be mistaken for judgement and condemnation. These things are not what the body of Christ should be doing. Christians are not suppose to be the dogmatic rule keepers and enforcers. Christians are appointed the ministry of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5:18, stating that believers are to help people get better and return to the way God intended.

Although the principles are helpful in approaching the sensitive situation, they are not the end all be all principles. They have to be paired with a process to help the person through it. First, the mentor or minister needs to get to know the young couple or mother to be, so that the minister can contextualize the situation in matters of culture, religion, family, etc. Secondly, the mentor needs to walk them through the decision making process in order for mentee to actually think about the effects of every choice and not just make a quick decision. Lastly, based on the decision, prepare the family or female to live out the results of the choice whether that be single-parenthood, adoption or a terminated pregnancy.

Even though the church may seem to focus on calamity stoppage does not mean that one has to neglect the prevention of destruction. The Bible constantly juxtaposes the

way of God and the way of darkness. For instance, Galatians 5 compares the desires of the flesh and spirit. In that, the Bible teaches what is right and wrong in order that Christians may learn what not to do and stay away from the wrong path. For there is an old adage that says, “doctors will not be about healing the sick but rather preventing the sickness.” Both sides of this statement is true. Doctors and pastors are worried about the sick or the sinners but at the same time need to be worried about the prevention of sin and sickness. In the end, prevention starts in the education and is enabled through mentorship.

### **Further Research Suggestions**

With single-parenthood becoming more wide spread in today’s society, there are many new aspects that could be researched in addition to typical single-parenthood. One aspect is to research single-parent homes with adoption , because adoption is a family choosing a child. This is not typical because single-parenthood normally occurs as a result of family members being taken away. Step families is another idea to explore because the step family is similar to adoption, but is different in that another family member is added in place of the loss of another member. An additional aspect that was mentioned before, which should be investigated, is military families. These families are experiencing periods of single-parenthood without experiencing this dynamic in totality. The effects on interracial children in single-parent families is a new facet that is developing in today’s society and would be interesting to research because of the current racial events of Ferguson and Baltimore. Lastly, the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transexual) population has risen significantly. Because of this rise, Christians should research how to deal with LGBT parents as well as single parents who are LGBT. All

these ideas would enable believers and pastors to be more effective in ministry if researched further.

### **Conclusion**

In all, the single-parent household is something that all Christians need to be aware of because God values and loves all of humanity. As a result, Christians need to love the members of nontraditional families. Christian leaders need to not only love but know exactly how to speak into their lives as well as to lead a church to the forefront of single-parent ministry. Although the focus of this charge is single-parenthood, many of the concepts above can be reapplied to everyone in the body of Christ as long as one recontextualizes. Thus, to be a minister and a leader of ministers, one must be a student of culture, the Bible, basic Psychology and listen to the struggles of the hearts of mankind. In denouement, this charge provides a rudimentary level of understanding for Christians and ministers as a foundation to effective ministry and service to the single-parent community. Now, ministers should not read this and do nothing. They should use this information to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20).



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## Appendix A

### Single-Parent Interview Overview

The demographics of the single-parents interviewed are very multi-faceted. They were all women because most single-parents are single moms. Although every parent was a mother, their background were far from similar. The ethnicity of the mothers include African American, Caucasian, Hispanic, and multi-ethnic mothers as well. Some of the mothers were born and raised outside of the United States. The mothers were predominantly from Maryland and Virginia, but some of the mothers lived in multiple locations through out their life. These moms are from different political backgrounds. They ranged from extremely liberal to conservative including a few independents. The age of the mothers ranged from 20 to 65 years old. Some were single mothers in the 1970's which explains the older women. Others are currently raising children. The age of the children ranged from newborns to teenagers. Overall, this group of single-parents is diverse enough to properly describe the single-parent community especially for single mothers.

The interview questions for the single-parents were:

1. What are the 3 biggest difficulties being a single-parent? In regards to parenthood and the child (3 each).
2. What sources of support do you have? (financial, social, moral)
3. What sources of support do you wish you had?
4. In what capacity did you experience role overload as a single-parent? How did you cope?
5. Explain your perspective on your parental situation.

6. To the best of your knowledge, what did your child face in regards to personal struggles?
7. What is your perspective on the societal understand on single-parenthood?
8. How could the church best serve you?
9. How could the church best serve your family?

The survey questions for the single-parents were:

1. I have experience financial hardship in the past year.  
Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree
2. I feel like I can't satisfy all my child's needs.  
Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree
3. I have a hard time balancing all my responsibilities.  
Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree
4. I have experienced feelings of depression in the last year.  
Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree
5. I have no social support system like family or friends.  
Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree
6. My child has low self-esteem.  
Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree
7. My child is very concerned about the absent parent.  
Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree
8. I need personal time and rest.  
Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree
9. I am satisfied with the environment my child is being raised.  
Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

10. I wish I had someone who will listen/care.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

11. My child needs an older role model who will provide a listening ear.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

12. My child acts out in school.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

13. My child has lashed out in anger toward me in the past year.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

14. I feel like an outcast when I go out in public.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

15. I feel like I spend adequate amount of time with my child.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

16. I feel like the household and my neighborhood is a stable environment.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

17. I feel welcome in a church.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

*If you are religious or are a Christian answer questions 18 -22. If you are not proceed to question 23.*

18. I don't have time to go to church because of my finances.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

19. I don't have time to go to church because of work.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

20. I don't have time to go to church because of house chores.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

21. I don't have time to go to church because I need more time with my child.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

22. I don't have time to go to church because I need more time for personal rest.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

23. My family has experience 2 or more traumatic events in the past year.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

24. How invested are you in your child's education.

Not Invested      Barely Invested      Invested      Very Invested      Extremely Invested

25. My child spends a lot of time by themselves.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

26. My child is able to spend time with the noncustodial parent.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

27. I have had multiple relationships in the past year.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

Short Answer

28. What are your three biggest struggles as a single parent?

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

29. Are there any struggles that you have experienced that was not yet mentioned?

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_