

*Wycliffe Bible Translators International
International Member Care
7500 West Camp Wisdom Rd.
Dallas, TX 75236*

Introduction

Singleness presents obstacles and opportunities in missions just as being married does. Singles usually have more flexibility and availability than their married colleagues, characteristics which can be great strengths in ministry. Like any strength, however, these can also become hindrances if they are out of balance, or if unfair advantage is taken of them. The single person's interpretation of mission expectations of singles may be distorted as well. If a single perceives his/her singleness to be an obstacle, all other areas of life (work, relationships, contentment, etc.) will be affected. Whether married or single, a person's identity must be found in the person of Christ and not in any other relationship, vocation, or possession. Some key issues for single candidates to consider, in conjunction with the mission agency and home church, are how their singleness will affect travel, housing, task, relationships, social needs, finances, and decision-making.

Travel

A common assumption is that travel is much easier for a single person. Flexibility of schedule and needing only one space on any mode of transport may increase the likelihood of arriving on time, on the right day. But there are drawbacks. Traveling alone can be a formidable challenge. The single person has to handle all the details: tickets, carrying the luggage, problems with missing connections, sitting next to strangers, dealing with aggressive behavior, etc. It may be culturally inappropriate in some cultures for women to travel alone. They may be sexually harassed, receiving propositions from nationals or being inappropriately touched in crowded public transportation. They are seen as "fair game" in some countries just by the virtue of being alone, without a male companion, thus raising issues of physical and emotional security.

Housing

Assumptions and perceptions about flexibility can create problems for singles. The reality is that it is easier to move singles around than a family, but doing so without thought and clear communication with the singles involved may cause resentment and hurt feelings. Often there is limited housing available, which raises the issue of privacy—are singles given their own room or are they expected to share a room with another person? Are singles arbitrarily assigned to housing, assuming that a single can room or partner with anyone? Does a mission assume that partners want to live together when they come in from the village? Singles often have to either learn technical and practical skills like wiring or plumbing their house in the village, changing tires, repairing the car, or find someone willing to help them with these. Roles that often find natural divisions in a family (e.g. cooking or home repairs) require a different kind of negotiation between single partners.

Task

In the past, a Wycliffe policy decreed that a single person without a partner could not enter into a language project. This is still true in some places, but new strategies such as the use of macro teams have made it possible for a single person to join a project. It may be assumed that a single person could spend more time on the job because she does not have to maintain a marriage relationship. There is an advantage that a single person can spend extra time on the job, but there is a real danger also that work becomes consuming, causing an imbalance of service and personal life and possibly lead to burnout. What is the motivation for frequently working overtime? Affirmation? Acceptance? What are real expectations for time at work by the single? By her administrator? A single person is solely responsible for partnership development which may be an enjoyment or a real struggle. A single woman's responsibilities may be tempered by the expectations of her

colleagues. In multinational organizations like Wycliffe women in authority positions may create great tension. What cultural difference may come to play in regards to this issue?

Relationships

Loneliness, isolation and arbitrary relationships are real issues for singles. Loneliness will be felt by single and married alike, but it is compounded for singles by the lack of common history or shared values endemic to families and the lack of shared company when there is time for relaxation and recreation. Commitment is different in a married team than in a single team. Singles and married people experience isolation, whether physical or emotional, but for singles it is a natural consequence of their physical isolation. Singles need to build a network of friends among colleagues and nationals whom God can use to meet their needs whether they are social, technical, or practical. Relationships may be more difficult due to the fact that there are fewer options. They may be arbitrarily contrived when someone decides to put two single people together that would never have normally chosen each other's company in friendship. It is a misconception to think that a single person can get along and enjoy every other single person. Is there sensitivity by singles and couples to each other, trying to work at being the Body of Christ and appreciating each other's uniquenesses and strengths? What are single people doing to strengthen and grow in their relationships with the Lord? He must be the singles' Lord and companion. In that relationship, the single and the married person must find identity and contentment. Loneliness and isolation may render singles very vulnerable to moral struggles, critical spirits, jealousy, depression, etc.

Social Needs

Vacations and holidays can present a real problem for singles. Travel and security may be issues that keep single women from taking vacation away from work and the mission center. A part of the real joy and rest in a vacation is sharing the experience with someone who is close to the single. There are few built-in relationships with the singles like a family has. So singles have to work at finding friends who want to go on vacation and can go at the scheduled time. Holidays are often natural family oriented times whether it be Sunday dinner, Christmas or birthdays. It is wise for singles to build relationships with families so they too have a place of belonging and a family with whom they can celebrate holidays.

Finances

Singles' expenses are not just half the amount of a couple. Their costs in housing, ministry expenses, etc. may be equivalent to those of a married couple. So singles may need to develop a financial base that is almost equivalent to what a couple needs. Also the number of singles' contacts in regards to financial partners may be much smaller than a couple.

Decision-making

Decision-making may be very difficult and stressful for singles. Having friends who are wise in regard to finances, technical skills, and relational skills can be a great comfort for singles as they consult with such friends as they make decisions. Seeking advice is biblical. "Make plans by seeking advice" (Prov. 20:18) "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed" (Prov. 15:22).

The singles' perception of God's goodness and sovereignty will color their response: seeing issues as obstacles or opportunities. Is their singleness a part of God's plan for them and reflects God's goodness and sovereignty in knowing what is best for them? Is God their ultimate source of contentment not their marital status? Jeremiah 29:11 still holds true, God plans to prosper them and not harm them, and plans to give them a hope and a future.

*Copyright © 1999 by
Wycliffe Bible Translators International and Cindy Langermann, MA
Permission granted to copy for nonprofit use*