

Wycliffe Bible Translators International
7500 West Camp Wisdom Rd.
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International Member Care

INTRODUCTION

Many of us presuppose that “married” is the normal condition for adults. The implication is that singleness is a temporary, abnormal and pitiable state. In formulating this paper, the input of many singles was sought and included. We trust it accurately reflects their concerns.

To write a paper on singles and expect it to address all issues pertaining to single missionaries would be both inaccurate and inadequate. It might even be insulting. In an effort to do justice to the single workers in our organization, I begin by acknowledging their diversity.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Approximately 20% of Wycliffe’s membership is single. That number represents a population that, while alike in unmarried status, is in other ways, immensely diverse. There are 1103 single females between the age of 18 and 90. There are 218 single males ranging from 21 to 85. (These data are from 1999.) These represent both men and women who have never married, some in response to a calling of celibacy, divorced persons, approximately 100 widows, and quite a number of widowers. Some of the divorced and widowed persons have children. Some of the never-married singles also have children by adoption. To this mixture one must add the cultural factor, since every sending country has single members, and from some countries there are more singles than married people. A first step in extending respect to this segment of our membership is to acknowledge their distinctives as a group, and their individuality as persons.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Some of Wycliffe’s earliest members were single people. They were effective and resilient. Single members throughout the years have continued to function productively in every area—administration, leadership, academia, translation, linguistics, literacy, nonprint media, communication, and all of the service and support functions of our organization. Many have worked comfortably and compatibly with married teams to complete language projects, or completed these on their own. One single female team completed three translations of the New Testament in two Latin America countries. A single woman completed two Bibles for a West Africa country. Written materials in linguistics, literacy, and translation have been augmented by the contributions of singles. Some of our best consultants are single men and women. The contributions of single persons to the Bible translation task must be acknowledged and celebrated.

It must be noted, however, that a negative result of the observed dedication and persistence of single workers has been the growth of an organizational “mythos” that says singles can “do without” more easily than married people, especially those with children. We all have like needs and wants. Singles need the same kind of individual consideration and care that married people do. In some cases, singles may need more organizational care than a couple or a family, e.g., a newly widowed person, single women in dangerous surroundings, advice in major life changes.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Opportunities for leadership, administration, advanced study—these exist for all members. However, our organization does not automatically look at ability when considering a role. The tendency is to look first at gender. Perhaps this is because of the assumption that women, single or married, are either busy with personal responsibilities, or do not have the hardiness to carry a heavy load such as leadership, board service or heading up academic institutions. Another consideration is the fact that we generally look to those we know – the “old boy” network – which is harder for women to be a part of. Concomitant with these factors is the difficulty some people have being accountable to women administrators.

Both married people and single men and women face the challenge of managing self-care while carrying a heavy load of administration. However, a single person has a stronger possibility of loneliness due to the lack of an emotionally supportive confidant.

Singles often serve in positions of great responsibility, but opportunities to advance professionally and serve in visible positions of authority may have to be more energetically sought and earned, and they may come at higher cost than that accrued to the married person.

ADVICE FROM ANOTHER SINGLE

One of our single workers offered the following advice, first to singles, and then to their married friends.

Singles to Singles

- ☼ Get on with your life. If God wants you to marry, He'll provide—in and outside of your home country.
- ☼ Develop ways of avoiding and dealing with temptation.
- ☼ Because of Christ's redemption, you are deeply loved, fully pleasing, absolutely complete in him.
- ☼ In acceptance, there is Grace.
- ☼ Worse things could happen to us than remaining single!
- ☼ Life here is so short, why waste it wondering why God had you single. Enjoy it!
- ☼ Adopt a family.
- ☼ Make a home for yourself and your friends.
- ☼ Work at avoiding selfishness.

Advantages of being Single and Childless:

- ☼ We can devote more time to ministry.
- ☼ We have more solitude, allowing us to more easily focus on our relationship with the Lord.
- ☼ We have more control of our time—to study, travel, visit.
- ☼ Our schedules are more flexible. We can move, delay, stay late, and not affect another's plans.
- ☼ Often we form a stronger bond with friends, both national colleagues and others.
- ☼ We are stretched as we do many things for ourselves.
- ☼ We can switch roommates if we don't get along!!!

Challenges Singles Face:

- ☼ Nationals may misunderstand our singleness as a flaw.
- ☼ Feeling that one has “missed out” by not having a spouse or children.
- ☼ The possible lack of close companionship with anyone.
- ☼ Sometimes we have limited roommate choices or are required to live with someone.
- ☼ At times, there’s no one to share our joys and problems with.
- ☼ Vacations alone are no fun.
- ☼ In some situations, we feel like “the different one.”
- ☼ Overseas particularly, we may have no, or limited relationships with the opposite sex.
- ☼ Loneliness.
- ☼ Fear of being self-centered and withdrawn.
- ☼ Our identity may be found in our work.

Singles to Our Married Friends

- ☼ Singleness is a gift for growth, as is marriage.
- ☼ Be sensitive to our feelings about singleness and let us talk about it. Don’t pity us – we may value our single state.
- ☼ While we may enjoy hearing about your children, we also appreciate talking about other things.
- ☼ Singleness is not necessarily a sacrifice. Our ministry to the Lord can be our *first* priority.
- ☼ Thank God for your spouse and family and never take them for granted.
- ☼ We are your brothers and sisters in Christ—complete, loved in Him, your co-workers and uniquely gifted.
- ☼ Take time to know us.
- ☼ Let us taste of family life from time to time.

Note: Feedback on singleness (in boxes) is reprinted with edits by permission from “Heart to Heart,” a periodical for missionary women

RECIPROCAL COMMUNITY CARE

Whether single or married, our basic needs are pretty much the same. The major difference seems to be that a single does not necessarily have a stable adult relationship in which daily responsibilities are shared. This is where community comes into play. Burden bearing is part of our responsibility to each other. We value each other, whether single or married, and show it by giving respect, appreciation, affection, understanding, time, opportunity, and loyalty. We all need a friend, someone who is loyal, who will listen, who will give corrective feedback, who will share freely. At times, more tangible, practical help is needed—car repairs, an advocate to intercede when administrative expectations exceed their available time, financial guidance to manage funds for retirement, care of elderly parents, help with college grants or someone to pray with over major life decisions. A lot of this is a “given” in a marriage relationship. Singles need to know that such help is available for them as well.

A single woman recently wrote, “I think the hardest thing for me as a single person is making decisions alone so much of the time. ...particularly hard is the area of significant life-changing decisions...” Singles need someone who is committed to their good who will help them sort through the factors that enter in to any decision, such as the pressure to “step out in faith” verses a need to maintain balance and emotional health.

Community care extends both directions. Singles need opportunities to give as well as receive. It is frustrating to have a single friend assume that marriage solves all problems. Just as there are aspects of singleness that escape the understanding of the married person, there are aspects of marriage that singles may never know or be able to enter into (a wayward child, a dying spouse, unspeakable loneliness within the marriage). Acknowledging the gaps in understanding and continuing to be loyal as a loving friend will go a long way toward resolving potential tension in these areas.

Discretionary/personal time is a gift a single needs to guard carefully. It can be easily seen as time available for use by other members or the branch administration. It can be the object of envy by mothers who often ache for personal time and seldom find it. Personal time is a legitimate need for both marrieds and singles and to give some of it away must be a conscious, generous gesture. A response of “No” to a request for service must be respected.

Issues of personal responsibility for all include our relationship with God on issues of justice and provision of need and care, interpersonal relationship skills and a deep commitment to make friends and be a friend, and initiative in self-care and life maintenance.

While some people really enjoy activities such as small appliance repair, computer savvy, and maintaining one's vehicle and dwelling, others don't. But even for those who don't, survival may mean a willingness to learn these skills. Successful missionary living requires a high degree of technical skill as well as relational skill. The more a single person can learn and do for him/herself, the more independent and secure he/she is going to feel. He or she will also feel more like a welcome member of the community as a contributor rather than perpetual supplicant.

Self-care may be an area of special challenge for those deprived of a partner late in life, used to a regular division of responsibilities and ill equipped to take care of the things the other partner did. They may feel like a burden to the community.

SPECIFIC ISSUES

Following is a list of issues that must be acknowledged and handled by some, if not all, single persons in mission service:

- finding and establishing a partnership or peer group for social and relational needs
- commitment to another single (how extensive should that commitment be? How long should it last?). Singles forming close friendships run the risk of being labeled, at best, co-dependent and, at worst, lesbian or gay
- leavings - saying good-by many times
- getting and maintaining support; limited finances means sharing living quarters
- feeling rootless, not belonging anywhere
- contribution (satisfaction with work load)
- trying to find a niche or role for self
- loneliness, no confidant
- unmet sexual needs
- attraction to nationals
- dealing with strong personalities
- a good partnership ends because of illness, marriage or death or change of assignment
- family of origin may not understand and care for her/him
- aware that his/her biological clock is ticking
- unmet expectations and hopes of meeting someone to marry
- feel out of step with age-mates who are now married with children
- dealing with the desire to be married
- security—who will take care of me if I get sick, when I grow old?
- Adequacy
- traveling alone
- limited options for partnership
- housing is unpredictable
- being misunderstood by host culture, always having to explain self
- issues of justice - is God really fair? Does He really supply my need?
- may find identity in work and be tempted to overwork, overachieve
- hungry for affection, tempted to inappropriate intimacy
- insecure about appropriate boundaries with opposite sex
- partnership may break up for many reasons, may bring guilt
- re-entry to home country alone, at furlough time or retirement
- many demands on furlough, only one person to meet them all
- single women expected to care for aging parents

A separate document could be prepared for widows, one for divorced persons who have children, and yet another one for singles who adopt children. There are special challenges in these roles that greatly add to the stress of cross-cultural living in a faith mission.

If singles are going to succeed in missions, they must come to terms with any of the above issues that apply to them, as often as they arise. Many do so, and have achieved a satisfying career, relationships that are nourishing and valuable, with opportunities of every sort. What has helped them to do that? Only they can tell you. My encouragement is to seek out a single person with years of mission service behind him or her and ask them about their adjustment period, their

relationship to God, their surprises and disappointments, their areas of growth, and their legacy for younger, newer members.

HEALTHY SINGLES

Spiritual health looks the same for singles and marrieds. People at peace—at peace with God and who He is and what He has given or withheld, at peace with people around them and at peace with self. A healthy person will be a growing, learning, relational person. They will display the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), the wisdom that is from above (James 3:13-18), and the blessedness of obeying the Lord (Matt. 5:3-12).

Two other papers should be considered in conjunction with this one. The first is a paper entitled “Issues Facing Women on the Field: From A Single Woman’s Perspective” written by Cindy Langermann, a single working field linguist who writes of first-hand awareness of loneliness, uncertain housing, and many of the above-mentioned issues. The second paper is, “Responsibility for One Another” by Laura Mae Gardner, 1994. An experiential testimony written by a single male is in process as well.

Note: I offer special thanks to the many singles who shared from their hearts and contributed greatly to this paper.

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