

Effective Ministry to Single Parents and Their Kids

By Melanie Stone

Ministry is about serving God and serving people. Our churches have a ministry opportunity to single parents and their children because many single parents and children have needs. By helping to meet needs, we tangibly show the love of Christ, leading people into a deeper relationship with Him.

THE NEED

There is a rising need for ministry to single fathers and grandparents caring for children; however, the greatest need is still with single mothers. One of my dear friends, Jennifer Maggio, has a ministry, "The Life of a Single Mom." Jennifer is passionately diligent to bring awareness to the need for ministry to single mothers. She shares this statement and statistics for single parent homes on the ministry website:¹

"These statistics are merely a reflection of those challenging circumstances and in no way reflect our belief that single parent homes cannot overcome these hardships and rise above them."

- 78% of the current prison population was raised by single moms.
- Children of single parent homes are 5 times more likely to commit suicide.
- Children of single parent homes are 10 times more likely to drop out of high school.
- 75% of all government assistance is received by single-parent households.
- Single parent homes are 2 times more likely to have abuse occur than two parent homes.
- Only 1 percent of the country's 300,000 evangelical churches has a sustainable single-parent program.
- Two-thirds of single moms do not attend church.
- One-third of single moms live in poverty.

According to the Single Mother Guide:

- About 4 out of 10 children are born to unwed mothers.²
- Nearly two-thirds were born to mothers under the age of 30.
- Today 1 in 4 children under the age of 18- a total of about 17.2 million – are being raised without a father.

¹ www.thelifeofasinglemom.com

² www.singlemotherguide.com

GOD'S HEART

We understand that there are carrying circumstances that cause all types of family units; however, God designed the family to be according to a plan. His plan is for a man and a woman to love each other, get married in a covenant, and from that loving union, have and raise children to know Him and His ways.

NO TWO STORIES ARE ALIKE

For our ministry to be effective, we must first recognize that no two stories are alike. We can't minister to single parents as if everyone is coming from the same background. Here are some reasons why someone is a single parent:

- Some have had children outside of marriage, most likely not planned.
- Some men don't want to be fathers or feel they can't handle the responsibility.
- Teenage pregnancies are on the rise.
- Rape.
- Prison.
- Someone went through a separation, a divorce or the death of a spouse.
- Some single moms have gone through verbal, physical or sexual abuse.
- Opioid epidemic – drug use and death.
- Some have children as a result of sex trafficking.
- Sharing a child with a disability often causes stress and separation.
- Some were with a person confused about their sexuality
- Deportation of one parent.
- Some have family to help out and some do not.
- Some have great jobs and some do not.
- Some have a degree or skill and some do not.
- Some struggle with the other parent and some do not.
- Some single moms have been through abuse and some have not.

Like many of us walking through this fallen world, some of these single parents are hurting because of poverty, sickness, dysfunction, or the like. When we minister to hurting people, it can be a challenge; but God is greater than any challenge we will meet.

Throughout the Bible we see God's desire to help the widow and the orphan. Even though single moms or dads are not always widowed, they are on their own like a widow. Even though children of single parents are not orphans, they may be without a father or mother in the picture.

James 1:27 "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

EXAMPLES OF SINGLE PARENT NEEDS

Not every single parent struggles with the same needs. The following list are examples of needs some single parents face:

- Stress from carrying a load with little or no help.
- Feelings of being overwhelmed.
- Fatigued to the point of exhaustion, depleted.
- Lacking. What they do have they are giving to their children.
- Feelings of concern, worry.
- Loneliness. Many do not date or have many friends.
- Lack of a support system.
- Lack of skills or knowledge for every situation they encounter. Many attempt to learn skills out of necessity.
- Many are on government assistance for housing, food, daycare.
- Deal with guilt of not being the best parent or provider. Guilt that they aren't able to do more, be more, have more.
- Many try to overcompensate because they feel their child is at a disadvantage for not having two parents or has to be split between two families.
- Deal with shame of making a bad decision.
- Deal with fear of the future, not having enough, not being enough, not doing enough.
- Deal with fears of the influence of the other parent, especially if that parents is vengeful or spiteful about child support, custody, courts, extended family, etc.
- Deal with fears of an abusive parent or boyfriend, girlfriend of the parent—verbally, physically, sexually.
- Deal with drug abuse, addictions, some with extended issues, human trafficking.
- Many were raised by a single parent and don't know experientially what it's like to be raised in a healthy home. Nutrition, health, parenting, guidance, protection, discipline, finances, education, church, etc.
- Struggles with childcare, concerns if it's best for the child
- Getting to church takes effort, some slack. Some fear rejection or feelings of not being good enough, not fitting in.
- Lack of time
- Feeling others don't understand or know what it's like.
- Spiritual growth. THRIVE. Be strong. God has a plan.
- Faith and encouragement. God will help. Christians will help.
- Be ready. Hurting people who are in the process of growth, may look to you or others for their dysfunction and not to God. Always be pointing them up.

God cares about the single parent, whether mother or father. God wants single parents to know they are not alone. He is their helper.

Isaiah 54:5 "Your maker is your husband."

EXAMPLES OF NEEDS OF A CHILD OF A SINGLE PARENT

I passed out coloring pages to children in a preschool class several years ago. One boy picked up his chunky crayons and began to color. He was working hard to keep his coloring in the lines, but he made a mistake. His crayon marks couldn't be erased, and one of his marks had gone outside of the lines of the object he was coloring. I witnessed this young boy quickly go into a self-destructive rage as he threw his head against the table several times. I had to physically restrain the child and call for his mother. The mother was a single parent. She explained, "He often acts out in anger, blaming himself for his father leaving us. He wants to be perfect so his father will return. When he fails, he demonstrates a violent contempt for himself.

- Feelings of rejection, abandonment, betrayal, hurts
- Feelings of jealousy, insecurity between parents, other siblings from different parents
- Dealing with boyfriend or girlfriends of the parent
- Not knowing God's plan of two parents that love each other could distort their own ideas of relationships, affecting their standards and principles into adolescence
- Fears picked up from parent - finances
- Fears for their wellbeing or the parent's wellbeing
- Fears of being on their own
- Shame picked up from the parent, misconception of who they are
- Loneliness or missing a working parent
- Age appropriate responsibilities. Some kids take on more responsibility than they should have to because they are trying to fill needs a parent should be filling.
- Lack of teaching and training in their upbringing
- Comparison with kids that have a dad or mom, television shows with mom and dads, classrooms where kids have mom and dads
- Some struggle with gender issues, especially when they haven't had a healthy family modeled
- Learned disrespect if one parent is negative about the other parent
- Struggles with making meaningful relationships, trust is broken
- Developmental problems if they aren't eating right, getting exercise, getting help with academics, etc.

Genesis 21:1-21

In Genesis 21 we read about Hagar and Ishmael, a single mom and her son. God cared about them both, and He had a plan to care for them and map out their future.

God is not caught off guard by our choices or the choices that are made for us. Not many people plan on being a single parent. People don't plan on death or a rape or a divorce. Many don't plan for their children, and some choose to abort those children before they are born. In fact, there are and estimated 40-50 million abortions each year worldwide. That's about 125,000 abortions each day.³ Remember, it was while we were messed up sinners that Christ dies for us (Romans 5:8)

³ www.worldometers.info/abortions

WHY HAVE MINISTRY FOR SINGLE PARENTS AND THEIR KIDS?

Some resist the idea of a church having a ministry for single parents. Some have the mentality that we should let people suffer the consequences of their own choices. Like the phrase says, "You made your bed, now you must lie in it."

Others feel a single parent ministry promotes promiscuity, teaching people, especially young people, that the church condones sex outside of marriage.

Leaders can build a culture of condemnation or a culture of grace in their churches. The values that are shared and the words that are spoken, whether they are of judgment or grace, will produce results in the lives of the hearers. Churches who reach out to minister to the hurting, the poor, the lonely are churches with a message of grace and values of compassion.

Here are some statistics from TLSM on the results of having a consistent ministry to single parents:

- Churches with single parent support groups are twice as likely to retain single parents in their church long-term.
- Participants are 4 times more likely to connect to their local church, when active in a support group.
- Churches with a single moms' support program have seen a 58% increase in the number of single parents attending their church.

Jeremiah 49:11 "I will protect the orphans who remain among you. Your widows, too, can depend on Me for help." NLT

WHAT MINISTRY OFFERS

- Provides a place for building friendships
- The security and stability of a church family that cares for you
- A place to grow spiritually
- A place to be restored, to build trust
- A place to learn true identity and purpose
- Provides a place for sharing resources and exchanging ideas
- Provides a place for networking and exchanging ideas
- Provides information and education at workshops
- Provides ministry, prayer, teaching
- Provides care and support, take some of the load off
- Provides impartation into their children
- A safe place. If doing a ministry to single moms and one to single dads, we suggest you do them separately. Some will prey on another when they are aware of vulnerabilities.
- Biblical principles to apply to life to break any dysfunctional patterns of behavior. For example, one single mom once said that her "picker" is broken. She keeps gravitating toward men that don't commit. Others aren't Christian so the believer gets unequally yoked. Some are the people they are familiar with, compromising familiar habits like drinking or doing drugs.
- When it is appropriate, we have the opposite sex volunteering to model values of respect, love for God, self-discipline, etc.

Ten Principles for Building an Effective Ministry to Single Parents and Their Kids

I. Prayer

If we are open to receive single parents, God will send us single parents. Pray and ask. Prepare. Be diligent to continue. Get the heart of God. Vision without values lacks Jesus as the cornerstone of the ministry.

Psalm 10:14 "But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted; you consider their grief and take it in hand. The victims commit themselves to you; you are the helper of the fatherless."

II. Ministry Formation

Count the cost. Don't start this if you aren't in it for the long haul.

- A. Put together a ministry plan. Write it down.
- B. Communicate vision with the pastor geared from the pastor's perspective. Pastors and church boards are willing to support and invest in ministries where they will see results and growth. Present a plan that shows how the ministry will reach people and grow the church, not just another good program doing another good thing. Include an annual time table for events, a strategy for volunteers, a budget, and start up expenses.
- C. Form a leadership team and a volunteer pool
Work with what you have, but never do anything alone. Divide responsibilities as you are able.

Kids ministry, refreshments, event planners, designers, advertisers, marketers, volunteer director, decorators, servers, security, photographers, videographers, musicians, speakers, game coordinators, etc.

We train the teams. We tell the men not to hug the women, not knowing what they have been through.

D. Kids ministry

It's just as important as the ministry to the single parents. Work with Children's Ministry Teams who are already screened and trained to serve children.

E. Develop the ministry

1. Branding (the look and the logo)
2. Set up an email, preferably with the community in mind.
3. Set up a webpage for the church website.
4. Set up social media pages
5. Printed materials (connection card, promotional pamphlet or card, forms, letterhead, etc)
6. Get photos, hire photographer for events

- F. Have an interest meeting for any single moms in your church or within your sphere of influence.
- G. Always plan to provide two things: childcare and food. If it isn't convenient for the single parent, the single parent will not come. Their decision not to participate isn't because they don't want to, but because they can't.

III. Plan Small Groups

Once you begin to gather, you will want to have a support group in place to plug single parents into. Solid relationships do not happen overnight. To assimilate single parents into your church, have something consistent and constant available for them.

Again, always provide two things: childcare and food.

Our first small group was in a Chick-fil-a and we went through Jennifer Maggio's book for single moms called "Overwhelmed." Why Chick-fil-a? They had food. They had a play area.

Teaching truth will help someone change a mindset. Teach on relationships. Some single parents talk about their picker being broken. They always choose the wrong guy. It's what they've known and what they are attracted to. Help them understand what to look for in a man. Teach them that sex is for the commitment you have in marriage and in covenant, no condemnation. The world is giving them a different idea.

In small groups, like other small groups, they care for each other. Help as much as they can.

IV. Gather with Large Events

A large event that serves the single parent will draw single parents. We found that single moms love things geared towards them.

- A. Do at least two large events a year and do them well.
We do a Christmas party in December and a spa day for single moms around Mother's Day.
- B. Choose an event that will bless the single parent.
 - 1. Christmas party. We provided gifts for the children. Many moms needed help to make Christmas special for their kids. We gave the moms special treatment with a sit-down dinner, valet parking, ushers to escort them to their table and serve their meal, gifts for the moms, plus games and prizes and lots of fun.

Isaiah 1:17 "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; please the case of the widow."

2. Spa Day. Usually the mom is always giving out. Who pampers her? This was one of our best turn outs.
3. Mother's Day brunch.
4. Valentine's banquet
5. Mom's day out – pay for the group to see a movie, shopping

C. Do ministry for the kids.

Hosea 14:3 "...in You the fatherless find compassion."

We've seen young boys watch how men will care for their mom, honor her.

We've had a young boy ask for prayer because he was concerned for his dad, left and didn't know where he was

Kids talk about being hit.

Kids talk about not having food.

D. Offer incentives

1. Thrive Boutique- slightly used clothing
2. Food pantry
3. Gift bags for moms
4. Santa shopping
5. Photo booth
6. Professional photos
7. Glamor photos

Deuteronomy 10:18 "He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing."

V. Workshops will Inform

- A. Finances
- B. Parenting
- C. Relationships
- D. Nutrition

Psalms 146:9 "The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow.."

Ministry to single parents and children of single parents is the heart of God. You step out to do it, and God will help you. He will provide for you. He will connect you. He will empower you.

VI. Community Days to serve

You don't have to do it alone. Find other organizations and take a booth or bring together to offer more.

Jeremiah 22:16 "He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me? Declares the Lord."

- A. Free car wash
- B. Free oil change
- C. Free haircuts
- D. Back to School festival – giveaways for school supplies

VII. Church care teams

Men's ministries, women's ministries. Meet and then activate to go out and sponsor a single parent – help with home repair, auto repair, meal preparation, cleaning, etc. Never alone. It has happened with a man develops a natural instinct to care for the single woman, turning into something personal. One associate pastor took a single mom in and ended up having an affair. Never planned on it. Train teams on right and wrong behavior.

Psalms 68:6 "God sets the lonely in families..."

VIII. Community partnerships

Know what other organizations do for single moms, dads, and kids and help connect. You don't have to do everything.

Know who is hiring. Who can help with food or clothing.
Know support groups for adults and kids.

TLISM has an annual conference for single moms and their kids. Send single moms. Send your teams.

Find businesses or organizations that will help sponsor an event in exchange for advertising their product and services at the events.

IX. Mentoring Program

Mentoring single parents. Women for women, men with men.

Mentoring for kid. Sponsors at events where the child doesn't have a parent who can be involved.

Deuteronomy 14:29 "...the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands."

X. Church Ministry

Teach teachers to be mindful of children who do not have a mother or a father. Mention types of families. Some have just a mom or dad, some are with a grandparent, etc.

Be mindful some children could be dealing with rejection, abandonment, betrayal, insecurity, anger, depression, etc. One boy would bang his head against the table when he didn't color in the lines. After talking with his mom, the boy hated himself, thinking he was the reason his dad left. He felt if he could be better, his dad may come back.

Keep in mind children of single parents on Father's Day, Mother's Day.

Have ushers to help single moms get in the door and to the classrooms.
Have a special place for single moms to park.

Psalm 68:5 "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling."

I Kings 17:1-24

In I Kings 17, Elijah finds provision by going to a widow and her son. They were preparing to make their last meal and die. However, God chose not only to bless this single mother; but also to make her a blessing. We can encourage single parents to trust God to meet their needs. As we reach out to help those in need, we can have the confidence that God will meet ours as individual servants and as churches.

Our single parent ministry has been a blessing to our church. From a pastor's point of view, our church has grown, our children's ministry has multiplied, our ministry teams have increased, our outreach ministry has expanded, and we have made several quality connections with other ministries in Greater Cincinnati because of our ministry to single parents and their kids.

PRAYER

God, help us to give to YOU what Your heart wants. You are a father to the fatherless and a defender of the widow. May our church be a place where You can help the hurting. Equip us through training and resources. Empower us with your favor and anointing. May the world hear of Your love and be drawn to Your light. Amen.