

## **A Study on Lone Parents in Church Congregations by Sally Rush**

---

So here it is a summary of Single Parents in God's Household: A Study on Lone Parents in Church Congregations. (a brief bibliography is included at the end where you can find the key people)

According to the statistics (from the Office of National Statistics) roughly 22% of families are "lone parent" families. Whilst the proportion of lone parents within our churches is lower than the one fifth you would expect if we were working on averages they are a group of people who are and will be within our congregations, in increasing numbers. Also if we are to be effective within mission we need to recognise the issues that may come with lone parenthood and be engaging in appropriate best practice within our congregations. Also it is important to understand that not all lone parents are female, but the majority of those who are main carers for their children are.

What we need to do is recognise that lone parents are not simply lone parents and that for most whilst this is part of who they are it is not the major defining feature. They will also be women, of a particular age, either disabled or able bodied, with a sexuality, with an occupation (which may include home maker), with interests and beliefs. They are individuals and so lone parent cannot be used as a "one size fits all" label. They may have become lone parents through a range of routes (widowhood, adoption, relationship breakdown (the biggest reason), and least of all through an encounter with no relationship attached). So their experiences will be different.

As individuals with this range of other biological as well as socially constructed characteristics it is important to remember that lone parents (along with everybody else) are made in the image of God and have the imago dei within them. That is not to say that lone parenthood is an ideal state, it is something which most commonly results from broken relationships and so in that sense is related to and is a consequence of the fall of man. Therefore, lone parents are simply like everybody else people made in the image of God who also require the grace of God to mend what has been broken by the fall.

The type of inclusion, which comes from naturally accepting everybody on an equal yet relational basis as people without seeking to segment them or identify them according to their social characteristics, is one which seeks to build relationship in the way God intended through creation. In this case it does not seek to compete and oppress, in the post-fall model of relationship. As Grenz (in Hancock (ed), 2003, p 99) indicates it is this approach to relationship which enables us to nurture "truly godly relationships between women and men, regardless of the

context of those relationship.”

I would argue that this type of approach is the biblical one if we look at the bible (both Old Testament and New Testament together). Within the Old Testament we can find texts which illustrate the way that God protected and provided for lone parents (most famously Genesis 21: 14 -21 and 1 Kings 17:10-24). In these texts God provides for Hagar and the Widow of Zarephath, seeing the imago dei within them and their children rather than treating them as the social outcasts the rest of society appears to. Within the New Testament Jesus also takes this relational approach with those who society would seek to deny the imago dei in.

So how does this translate into good practice within our churches? Well firstly, I think that churches should model themselves on the biblical idea of households. In addition to providing a model of inclusion on the basis of removing the oppressive aspects of a hierarchical structure (which the church by its very nature will have) it also encourages inclusion by moving beyond the modern understandings of family which lead to exclusion or invisibility. As The Working Party of the Board for Social Responsibility (1995, p 123) make clear households have the ability to “challenge many of the assumptions behind the nuclear family and can be a model for extending the intensely private kinds of families which are now so common.” This enables us to move away from a way of looking at the world which is based upon seeing “couples” as the norm and rather includes those beyond our natural family.

Another benefit of this household approach is it encourages the forming of smaller supportive groups within the overall whole. This could be translated into the house group or cell group model. The benefit of using this model is this approach does not involve segmenting lone parents, but rather is including the lone parent as a person on an equal basis, but within a formal structure. This also has the benefit of enabling the lone parent to be able to give (and minister to others) as well as receive. The small group approach also enables more understanding of the specific practical childcare needs lone parents have to be understood and catered for.

I would argue rather than setting up lone parent groups churches should facilitate a network approach, through using the household model. Within this people would be encouraged to informally network with other members of the congregation who shared a similar social characteristic. It is through this networking that friendships would be

formed and perhaps the arrangement of occasional, informal gatherings where experiences could be shared would occur. This would be facilitated by people being introduced to those who shared similar characteristics (such as being lone parents) as part of the natural welcoming and integration process within the church.

Also I believe that it is important that lone parents are given the information to allow them to tie into wider para church groups and support networks if this is appropriate to them and they wish to follow up this sort of support. This can be done in a number of ways. The details of groups such as Care for the Family or H.E.L.P., which specifically provide support for lone parents should be made available, and passed on to lone parents within church congregations. Somebody in the church could be responsible for making others aware of such organisations, again through networking. Alternatively the details of such groups could be posted on a church notice board. These types of Christian support organisations could be linked to via church websites or the church office could have a directory of them to pass onto members or those supporting them as appropriately. Alternatively the church directories passed onto members and attenders could have a brief yellow pages section in the back with details of a range of support and missionary organisations in.

Another way in which resources could be accessed is if a library of books were made available for those who wish to access them, including ones such as those by Worth and Tuffnell (2003) or Diane Louise Jordan (2003).

Another part of good practice is listening to existing lone parents and how they believe others in a similar situation could be supported. This would involve looking at the nature of support which could be useful and then on a case by case basis offering that support to all those who would benefit within the fellowship, including but not exclusively lone parents

In addition to being another way of identifying actual rather than perceived needs listening to lone parents also acts as a way of giving a voice to them and removing their invisibility. This giving a voice to lone parents could be done either through directly asking them for their opinions or as something which happens naturally as they are involved within the life of the church and contribute to discussions within it.

## **A Study on Lone Parents in Church Congregations by Sally Rush**

---

Supporting lone parents, with appropriate giftings, into leadership positions may also lead to a wider understanding of the needs they have.

A final way in which good practice can be developed is by actively dispelling the myths which the media has promoted both about lone parents and about the church. This is not only something for local congregations to address but I believe that it is something which needs to be addressed more widely within the English church. These myths are dispelled by correcting them not adding to them. As already shown I believe the view of lone parents as "not like us" which Chalke (2006, p39) and others give reinforces the impression that lone parents are likely to find themselves an excluded minority within churches. However, as we have already seen this is not necessarily the case.

To sum up the key to good practice in relation to lone parents in churches appears to be communicating with them as people. This communication should seek to help them integrate and network with others and also it should be a process where they feel listened to. They should be encouraged to join small groups which are made up of people with differing social characteristics so that they can fulfil the biblical model of contributing to community by seeking to meet the needs of others but also so their individual needs can be more readily identified and met. However, this should take place within a culture which is sensitive to the practicalities that lone parents face, in terms of child care particularly. They benefit when they are not treated as "the other" but rather welcomed on an equal basis, as people. Within that churches give best practice when they acknowledge that somebody has a mix of social characteristics and being a lone parent is just part of that mix, but not the dominant part for many lone parents. Therefore, the key is to recognise the imago dei within all.

**A summary of a dissertation by Sally Rush, part of the fellowship of:  
Herne Bay Baptist Church, Herne Bay, Kent, CT6 5LA, United Kingdom  
Tel + 44 1227 367908; Email [hbbaptistchurch@btinternet.com](mailto:hbbaptistchurch@btinternet.com)**

## **A Study on Lone Parents in Church Congregations by Sally Rush**

---

Key texts (you don't want all 4+ pages of bibliography are):

Aune, K, *Single Women: Challenge to the Church?*(2003), Paternoster Press, Carlisle

Barton, S,C, *Life Together: Family, Sexuality and Community in the New Testament and Today*, (2001) T&T Clark, Edinburgh

Beardshaw, T, Hordern, G, and Tufnell, C, *Single Parents in Focus*, (2000), Care for the Family, Cardiff

Coleman, K, *The Whitley Lecture 2006 Being Human A Black British Christian Woman's Perspective*, (2006), Whitley Publications, Oxford

Drane, J & Fleming Drane, OM, *Family Fortunes: Faith-full caring for Today's Families*, (2004), Darton, Longman and Todd, London

Hancock, M (ed), *Christian Perspectives on Gender, Sexuality and Community*, (2003), Regent College Publishing, Vancouver

Thatcher, A, *Theology and Families*, (2007), Blackwell Publishing, Oxford

Worth, J, and Tufnell, C, *All Alone? Help and Hope for Single Parents*, (2003), Spring Harvest and Authentic Lifestyle, Carlisle

Working Party of the Board for Social Responsibility, *Something to Celebrate: Valuing Families in Church and Society*, (1995), Church House Publishing, London