

Still Single

★
A GUIDE
FOR
CHRISTIAN
SINGLES

★
AND
THOSE
WHO LOVE
THEM



Still Called

DOUG HANKINS

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To my sister Jenn. I love you and am
immeasurably proud of you.

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Cheers.

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INTRODUCTION

Single in a Married World

There is nothing more socially awkward than witnessing a single person walk up to a hostess to ask for a table for *one*. I don't mean to suggest that the single person is awkward. And, the request for solo food isn't awkward.¹ What is awkward is the way that restaurant staff often respond to the perfectly normal request to dine alone.² I'm talking about the times when someone asks for a *table for one* and it sets off a scripted line of questioning aimed at dissuading the person from locating a seat in the establishment.³ The first countermeasure involves the hostess asking, "Table for one, really?"—the implication being that no sane person

1. People in Orlando do DoorDash solo meals, sip coffee alone at cafés, and grab take-out all the time.

2. This isn't necessarily true of every staff member at every restaurant. I have worked in the hospitality industry enough times to know that some places are cool with solo diners.

3. I suspect that a flowchart of countermeasures is posted next to the OSHA safety standards list on a corkboard in the employee break room somewhere in these types of eating establishments.

would intentionally dine alone. The second countermeasure involves the hostess offering an alternative arrangement: “If you would like, we can seat you immediately at the bar!” It is phrased like a suggestion, but it comes out dripping with contempt, like, “Don’t waste our time with your solo meal adventure. Why don’t you sit at the bar with the other loners?” This line of social cues, in the form of passive-aggressive restaurant banter, is designed to direct you, a single person, out of the view of the expected clientele—families, couples, and friend groups. After all, restaurants can’t have solo diners disrupting the vibe in the room.⁴

Despite current attempts to accommodate single guests, many restaurants have not adjusted to this trend of solo diners. This is because restaurants, like many types of legacy establishments, were built with families in mind. And understandably so. In the first half of the twentieth century, America witnessed a meteoric rise in the number of families while also notching an uptick in the development of the institutional structure that supported these families. And although the pendulum has swung back toward a more

4. If this happens to you, I encourage you to stand resolute. If you stay focused on your task and politely demand a single table, restaurants will have no other option but to guide you to your table (which will inevitably be set for two) and will allow you to sit down in your preferred seat so that they can do you the honor of dramatically whisking away a place setting of silverware, napkin, plates, and menu. Then, to add insult to injury, the waiter will arrive and welcome you before asking, “Are you ready to order or should we wait for the rest of your party to arrive?”

balanced population of singles and couples, our infrastructure, institutions, and presumed worldview still operate as if America is a nation of families. And because the prevailing social narrative is that “it has always been this way,” our institutions continue to be built with families in mind, ad infinitum. And while I have been writing about restaurants in this particular example, I could just as easily have been speaking about churches in America. The only thing more awkward than a single person trying to grab a table for one is a single person trying to find a seat in a church. Therein lies the problem at the heart of this book.

Churches are supposed to be places where everyone is welcome, including single adults. And yet, churches are often the most unwelcoming places for single adults. These twin realities drive me to want to act as a broker to a better relationship between the single adults who are trying to find a church community and the church communities that want to reach single adults.⁵ I want to use this book as a way to bring both parties to the table to figure out a better way forward.

5. Consider me the yenta of single church life in America, despite the fact that I am neither female nor Jewish. If you get the reference to *Fiddler on the Roof*, then there is a plausible chance that you are a church leader in America. Likewise, if you don't get that reference, then there is a plausible chance that you are a single adult in America. The fact that one of you gets the reference and one of you doesn't get the reference is why we need a yenta for church life in America. Mazel tov!!

As a broker between churches and single adults, I will provide readers with informed analysis on market trends. I'll take you through the sociological data and structural realities that highlight why singleness is on the rise. I'll also offer up some coaching insights gleaned from twenty-plus years of working with single adults, both as a pastor and as a university professor. Finally, I will introduce you to churches and church leaders who are getting it right when it comes to reaching singles in church communities. You will meet the towering grandson of a Danish communist who hates racism and who pastors one of the oldest, most diverse, and fastest-growing churches in America. You will learn from the pastor of one of the most effective church movements that you've never heard of. You will reminisce with the bookish pastor and his wife who have a thousand answers for one hundred questions—a skill that came in handy as they tried to reach the *Seinfeld* crowd. And you will celebrate with the French-speaking pastor who is reaching single adults in the most challenging mission field in North America.

Whether you're a single adult who is looking for a church or a church who wants to reach single adults, I hope you will come away from this book feeling educated and encouraged in life and in ministry.

An Honest Broker

Like Dave Grohl of the Foo Fighters, I have another confession to make. I am not single. I recognize that this

may make me an unconventional voice in the conversation about singles and the church community. However, allow me to make my case. First, my wife and I met while interns on a church staff, where our job was to help young single people find a church and navigate life. After seminary, my wife and I moved to Chicago for a PhD program, where we joined a local church and led several young adult Bible studies attended by marrieds and singles on campus. After PhD work, we moved back to Texas, where I served as a discipleship pastor and then as a teaching pastor, working all the time with communities that were comprised of married and single folks. In 2016 we moved to Orlando, Florida, to help lead a small young adult community called The Table at First Orlando (more on this in chapter 8). The Table was full of young adults who were *somewhere between college and mortgage*, and all of them were single.⁶ My wife and I also work as university professors and work regularly with an additional group of single adults studying in college and grad school. You get the point here—our ministry experience has largely been impacted by our work with single adults who are searching for churches to help them navigate life.

That being said, I am the first to admit that my wife and I have had moments when we were less than helpful in our teaching on marriage, singleness, and community. Despite

6. BTW: If you have ever wondered what we mean by the term *young adult*, it is always “someone who is between college and mortgage.” That could mean eighteen to thirty-five years of age in our current cultural moment.

our academic backgrounds and church ministry experience, we have operated from our unconscious bias toward the vision of life from 1950s Americana—where everyone gets married and has 2.5 children and moves to the suburbs, and so on. We have counseled plenty of people to trust in God’s timing for “the right one,” despite no promises in Scripture for marriage at the end of life’s rainbow. We have led singles sermon series for the sole purpose of clarifying the practices and ideals of dating and marriage. We have tried unsuccessfully to pair people up, hoping against hope that the two uninterested single people find a spark and live happily ever after. And we have witnessed the unnecessary heartbreak of rejection, fear, and loneliness that is so commonly associated with such an approach.

As an honest broker here, I want you to know that part of my curiosity on the subject of singles and the American church comes from a place of repentance. I have been wrong in much of my teaching on singleness, marriage, and community. I want to help out my single friends, and I want to help other church leaders learn from my errors. I want to give more honor to my single friends who have lovingly and patiently helped me see the error of my ways, and I want to honor my church leader friends who are doing good work in this area. I am writing some of this material on behalf of my single friends, hoping to encourage the church with the amazing opportunity we have before us. And I am writing on behalf of my church leader friends who, more than anything, want to make room at the table for everyone—married,

single, divorced, widowed, single parents, married again, and anyone else—hoping to encourage single friends not to give up on Christian community. The reality is that Jesus, the One who lived his earthly life as a single man, has an adventure for all of us through the local church. Let's go together.

TLDR: I Used AI to Summarize My Book for You

Don't be fooled by the heading title. No large language learning model would unnecessarily insert this many pop culture references into a book on singleness and the American church. Still yet, I want to provide you with a tidy summary. This book occurs in three acts. In part 1, I want to get SPECIFIC about who single adults are and, more importantly, who they are not. Chapter 1 provides clarity on what it specifically means to be single in America in 2025, as backed up by statistics and sociological definition. With this clear definition in mind, my hope is that churches will be better equipped to identify single adults and to reach them with Christian community. Chapter 2 looks at the trend of singleness in America and attempts to answer the question: "Why are there so many single people today?" I hope that both churches and single adults will appreciate my answer about the current reality of single life—which is significantly different than it was in the 1950s. Chapter 3 takes a deeper look at that the root issue facing churches and singles in America—the pervasive loneliness experienced by all people. The story of loneliness highlights a common but persistent

myth in our churches—that marriage solves loneliness. *Hint: It doesn't.* Chapter 4 delves into the complexities of modern singlehood by looking at the most honest and humorous television show about singleness in the history of America: *Gilmore Girls*. In reviewing the relationship between Lorelai, Rory, and Emily Gilmore, I show how singleness lurks behind the veneer of pop culture empowerment and social media cultivations of healthy self-esteem.

Part 2 of the book focuses on SHIFTS that church leaders and singles must make in order to better align with a healthier community life. Chapter 5 highlights the importance of prioritizing community (meaningful relationships) over matrimony (romantic relationships). As we have seen, both church and society can make romantic partnerships the industry standard for human flourishing. However, I argue that friendship, not romance, is far more essential for personal health, church health, and societal well-being. Chapter 6 observes the trend toward subscription-based business models and pleads with church leaders and singles to shift away from subscribing and toward belonging as a function of church membership. Beyond being a buzzword, *belonging* actually works as a kind of invisible capital that can be leveraged to help human beings find purpose and achieve well-being. Chapter 7 appeals directly to church leaders to please prioritize *transformation* in community and not just *information* from a pulpit or in Sunday school class. Singles already walk into most places in society feeling like second-class citizens largely because of the dominant narratives we

all peddle back and forth from within our marriage-centric echo chamber. Churches must become spaces where all people, including singles, feel welcomed and wanted. A shift toward transforming life lessons will help with this effort.

In part 3, I focus on STORIES of churches who are trying to get it right when it comes to receiving and incorporating singles into the everyday ministry and leadership of community life. In learning their stories, I want readers to find hope in the real-world possibilities of singles-integrated communities on mission. Chapter 8 introduces you to The Table, a young, single-adult community that my wife and I helped launch at First Orlando. First Orlando has the distinction of being one of the most diverse churches, the fastest-growing churches, and the oldest churches in America, making it a great case study in community effectiveness. Chapter 9 introduces you to the most effective church in America that you have never heard of and never visited. The Dallas Fort Worth Metro Family of Churches are a family of churches that are sold out to the idea of reaching college campuses, training people in real-world discipleship, and caring for adults for the long haul without reducing ministry to the arbitrary standard of marital status. *Spoiler Alert: They reach a ton of single adults.* Chapter 10 highlights Tim Keller and Redeemer Presbyterian Church. You likely don't need an introduction to Tim Keller or his church in Manhattan. But you likely do need to know just how much the church and ministry of Tim and Kathy Keller was built upon ministering to single adults in New York. Accordingly, we have much to learn from them.

Chapter 11 introduces you to La Chapelle in Montreal, which has planted a thriving church in one of the most challenging spiritual communities in North America. Montreal does not allow churches to meet in schools. Churches cannot own real estate in certain parts of the city. Furthermore, Evangelical Protestant Christianity is lambasted by the broader society. And yet, Pastor David Pothier and his ragtag group of missionaries have seen La Chapelle grow to be the largest church in Quebec and one of the fastest-growing churches in North America. The secret to reaching this community is the secret to singleness and the Christian life—consistency despite setbacks.

I hope you enjoyed that *totally not AI-generated* summary of the book. It really is going to be easy and fun to read the whole thing. Set aside a couple of hours and settle in. I hope you are ready for the journey.

SPECIFICS: a detailed and precise presentation of something . . .

In order to be the kind of church that welcomes and includes single adults into community, we must first establish who single adults are. *That is to say, we must see them for who they are and not just for who we assume they are.* We must also be clear on who single adults are not. We cannot operate from a perspective that relies on clichéd mischaracterizations, stereotypes, or outdated imaginations about what single adults used to look like in America. To gain clarity on the single friends we want to reach, we must define terms, consider the data, and get specific.

And there is no better place to begin than with statistics.
I will do my best to make it engaging.



**The Only
Thing Broken
Is How We
Treat Single
People.**



SINGLENES IS NOT A PROBLEM TO BE FIXED, EVEN THOUGH IT IS OFTEN TREATED THAT WAY. Many churches usually feel that the only way to bring a single person into the life of the church is to get them married. This expectation often leaves single Christians feeling like they don't belong, as if they're only validated by the church if they find a spouse. *Singleness is not an illness to cure or a brokenness that needs repair.*

Whether a personal decision or not, the reality is that many of these adults sense the tension of struggling to connect with the church and vice versa. Doug Hankins offers practical wisdom, theological guidance, and hopeful encouragement to both sides of this tension. Doug does not offer a path toward marriage, but instead, he points to the purpose of singleness and highlights figures in Scripture who have walked in singleness with obedience to the Lord. Though treated seriously, Hankins brings levity to the discussion with pop culture references and humorous stories. *Still Single, Still Called* sees singles for who they are: *children of God in need of a Savior, not a spouse.*



Doug Hankins (PhD., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is a pastor, professor, and friend to countless single adults who have been under his ministry for more than twenty years. He serves as senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Winter Park, Florida, and is an associate professor at the Baptist University of Florida. With the heart of a pastor, the curiosity of a storyteller, and the training of a scholar, he brings a unique blend of empathy and insight to a topic too often misunderstood.

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