

# The Challenge of Mission in a Marriage Minority Culture

## The new reality ...

One of the most striking cultural shifts of the twenty-first century has been the sudden dramatic decline of marriage in the Western world. In the 28 EU nations, for example, from 1970 to 2010 the annual marriage rate has dropped almost 45%.<sup>1</sup> As a result, for the first time in modern history, many Western nations (including the UK, France, USA, Canada, and Australia) are now marriage minority cultures<sup>2</sup> – meaning that the majority of the adult population are single.

The situation in England serves as an illustration of the magnitude of this shift in the past century, where projections suggest that within the next twenty years almost 60% of the English adult population will be single.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, the cohabitation of unmarried adults has gained social acceptance as a valid alternative lifestyle and has been significantly on the rise in recent decades. But it is significant that the number of un-partnered single adults also continues to rise, with just the un-partnered singles projected to outnumber married adults in England and Wales in the next 20 years.<sup>4</sup> With some variation between countries, this trend is consistent across both Western and Eastern European nations.

## The internal challenge ...

What are the ramifications of this trend for the missions community of the twenty-first century? For those sending missionaries from Western countries, the implications are huge. As the proportion of singles increases in these missionary sending cultures at large, the pool from which new candidates are chosen will inevitably become increasingly single. Good stewardship of this new generation of workers will require that sending agencies be prepared to empower and leverage this valuable human resource -- fully integrating them into every aspect of ministry, team, and leadership.

## The external challenge ...

For those serving in Western countries, the new reality has huge implications for the world we are trying to reach. How can a church emphasizing strong marriages and family values avoid alienating the single culture just outside their door? Studies show that among the unreached or unchurched population, proportionately there are even more singles than in society at large. This means that if singles make up 50-55% of adult society, they typically represent 60-70% of the unreached people in that same society.<sup>5</sup> It is easy to imagine how these unchurched singles could feel excluded from churches that are well-meaning but unprepared. Having healthy and able singles fully functioning within our mission teams will be vital in bringing the gospel to the large and growing population of singles in these cultures.

It is painfully obvious that the decline of marriage in society has been accompanied by an exponential rise in other challenges. We are bringing the gospel to a different kind of world! In doing so, we must be prepared to speak effectively into the experiences of same sex attraction and marriage, transgender and gender dysphoria, alternative sexualities, sexual addictions, pornography and divorce. All of these challenges require a biblical response that is not merely reactionary to culture, but is constructive and deeply rooted in the ethos of the Scriptures.

## The biblical foundation ...

As Christians we acknowledge that the starting point for responding to cultural issues is God's Word; and we know the Bible affirms a high view of marriage, family and human sexuality. Interestingly, Christianity shares these values with other religions including Judaism, Islam, and Mormonism. But while all these faiths affirm a high view of marriage and human sexuality, Christianity is unique in also teaching a high view of singleness.

This distinction is not accidental but fundamental to the gospel message we proclaim. Under the Old Testament, God's blessing was expressed through marrying and having physical children. Barrenness and singleness were regarded as unblest states of reproach and disgrace. But in the New Testament Jesus Christ alone is the fulfillment of all spiritual blessings. Awareness of this unfolding of the whole of Scripture provides the basis for understanding why singleness is affirmed in the New Testament, both by the teachings of Jesus and through the inspired writings of Paul. But even more than this it provides the basis for understanding the reality of the new spiritual family we have in Christ and the nature of how singles and marrieds are intended to work together in producing spiritual offspring in the kingdom of God.

## Shoulder to Shoulder ...

Solid biblical theology leads to sound practical theology. How do we live the new reality of who we are in Christ as we serve on teams in mission together – thriving together in service and community? How do we effectively value and leverage singles as fully complete and equipped members of our mission teams? What are the challenges of singles and marrieds working together effectively as teams? What are the unique needs single missionaries face as they serve on the field?

Shoulder to Shoulder exists to come along-side cross-cultural workers, mission teams and organizations, and their leaders, helping them develop answers to these questions. We help them prepare for the realities and challenges of meaningful, effective cross-cultural life and ministry – encouraging ministry teams to value, integrate, benefit from, and empower every member.

Our team is available to offer training and workshops. A range of tools and resources for effectively equipping and empowering singles, marrieds, and teams is available through the web site [www.Shoulder2Shoulder.global](http://www.Shoulder2Shoulder.global). Together we can be prepared to face a world of challenges and lead the mission endeavor through the twenty-first century and beyond.

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### References:

<sup>1</sup> The combined marriage rate for 28 EU countries has dropped from 7.9/1000 persons annually in 1970 to 4.4/1000 persons annually in 2010. This represents a decline of 44.3%. Source: Eurostat ([www.ec.europa.eu/Eurostat](http://www.ec.europa.eu/Eurostat)), Marriage Indicators (demo\_nind), Crude Marriage Rate, released May 30, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Based on marriage statistics for those of legal age to marry (usually 16 years and older). Singles outnumbered marrieds for the first time in the U.S. according to a report by economist Edward Yardeni to Bloomberg on September 9, 2014 analyzing data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics. Data for a wide spectrum of European countries is available online through the U.K. Office for National Statistics bulletin, Population estimates by Marital Status and Living Arrangements: England and Wales 2002 to 2014 released July 8, 2015. See page 13 for a table by European nation.

<sup>3</sup> These projections are from the U.K. Office for National Statistics report, Population Trends 136, published in 2009 page 114.

<sup>4</sup> Based on a recent U.K. ONS report no longer available.

<sup>5</sup> See the Pew Research Study, "Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation, released October 9, 2012 ([www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/](http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/)), page 39.

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