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NewsDigest

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Rooftop experience: Members of the Christian Life Center singles group in Fort Lauderdale, including Pastor Gloria Young (third from left), build a Habitat house.

Single-minded devotion: Unmarried ranks offer ministry opportunities

► As never before, singles in America are putting their mark on society in everything from dining habits to car designs. The 2000 U.S. Census revealed that for the first time there were more single-member households than traditional families. More than 27 million Americans, or about 10 percent of the overall population, are single. This accounts for one in four households, more than

those headed by married couples with children (under 25 million) according to Census data.

Most single adults live with someone else, such as a roommate or relative such as child or parent. When counting all single adults in the United States — those who have never married, or are divorced, separated or widowed — the total mushrooms to 82 million. This includes 6 million cohabit-

ing couples.

Only three decades ago, 70 percent of American households contained a married couple. That has declined to 52 percent.

“Society in the past has been geared for families,” says Tom Coleman, 53, head of the new Glendale, Calif., secular advocacy group American Association for Single People. “People weren’t seen as individuals, but as part of an extended

family. We want singles to be respected for who they are.”

Madison Avenue certainly has taken notice of the largest unmarried adult population in U.S. history. But Christian single adult ministry experts say denominations have been slower to respond to the needs of single adults.

“Singles are the most dominant factor in American society today,” says Colorado Springs pastoral consultant Rich Hurst, 49, co-author of *Deepening Your Walk: A Spirituality for Single Adults* and *Giving the Ministry Away: Empowering Single Adults for Effective Leadership*.

“Singles by and large aren’t in church. If the church wants to [thrive] this century, it’s going to have to get serious about reaching single adults.”

The Assemblies of God saw the need and organized a national Single Adult Ministries office based in Springfield, Mo.

“If the church is to be effective in reaching, nurturing, discipling and training adults, we can’t avoid singles,” says Dennis Franck, 50, director of the agency.

“Demographics in this

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country are demanding that we do something," he says.

Single Adult Ministries will conduct seven regional conferences this year. The three-day conferences are designed both to train volunteer and paid leaders and to provide spiritual growth teaching to nonleaders.

In the Assemblies of God, 2,100 local congregations have some type of ministry geared to singles. The concept makes perfect sense to Franck. "Why do we have women's ministry or ministry to seniors?" he asks. "We do so because they have specific needs and interests. It's the same with singles."

Franck, who has worked in single adult ministries for 23 years, says the spiritual needs of singles, such as prayer and worship, are the same as for married adults. But the personal needs are much different on topics such as sexuality, relationships, career choices and church identity.

"If singles don't get teaching and perspective from church, they will get it from non-Christian friends or the bar scene," he says.

Franck says while there is nothing wrong with the Fellowship's longtime family-oriented emphasis, congregations shouldn't inadvertently exclude singles.

"We need to discuss the issues they are facing and give them biblical teaching," Franck says. "They want friendships, and if they don't find them in church they will go somewhere else to meet people."

Ideally, Franck says,

churches that are large enough should target three age-specific singles' groups.

Christian Life Center in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., has a weekly attendance of 2,500, with 700 of those being single adults. The ministry at the A/G church started in 2000, yet there already are three age-distinction groups for twentysomethings, those 30 to 55 and senior adults. In addition, there are specific ministries to single-agains (the widowed and divorced) as well as to single parents.

"The biggest challenge I face is trying to convince



Church activity: Single adult ministry covers a broad range of ages and interests. Above, singles attend an indoor seniors picnic hosted by Christian Life Center in Fort Lauderdale.

singles that they are complete, even though they aren't married," says singles pastor Gloria Young, 47. She says singles are capable of greater devotion to ministry because they have fewer family obligations than married members do.

While social events and retreats are popular, Young says ministry activities are, too. For example, in December, single church members helped to build a Habitat for Humanity home.

Likewise, Christian Outreach Center in West

Columbia, S.C., divides its 130 singles into three age groups. Singles pastor Carolyn Heuer, 47, notes that the needs of the recently graduated college student, divorced middle-aged dad and widowed retiree are vastly different.

Every six months, Heuer conducts research to find out more about who exactly is attending events. Such surveys led to the formation of a group just for senior singles in 2000.

Heuer says most of the singles visiting the A/G church have no religious

background and thus they need discipleship. They also may have struggled with addictions and been through multiple divorces.

"It's not enough to simply say there is a class on Sunday morning," Heuer says. "Singles need Christian fellowship." Twice a month, the church sponsors a Christian coffee-house. Annually up to 20 singles participate in an overseas missions trip.

Harold Ivan Smith, author of *Young Adult Ministry: The NeXt Generation* and

Reluctantly Single, agrees that conventional programs may not appeal to unchurched singles.

"There is a growing subculture that certainly doesn't see the traditional church as important to them," says Smith, 54, of Kansas City, Mo.

However, Smith says the uncertainty after last year's terrorist attacks presents a great opportunity for the church to reach the growing ranks of singles.

"For many, September 11 heightened their awareness of their singleness," Smith says. "There is a real sense of aloneness. A lot are asking where they can find meaning in life. Working long hours to get ahead in their career is no longer a priority for many."

Ultimately, Franck says, single adults come to understand they can be effective and complete people without being married. Rather than maintain that distinction of being an individual, single adult ministries are designed to integrate singles into mainstream activities of the church, such as greeting at the door, singing in the choir and helping in the nursery.

The A/G's seven regional singles and training leadership conferences this year are as follows: March 15-17, Waxahachie, Texas; April 25-27, Wesley Chapel, Fla.; Sept. 12-14, Fort Wayne, Ind.; Sept. 19-21, Elk Grove, Calif.; Oct. 24-26, Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Nov. 8-10, Portland, Ore.; and Nov. 15-17, Wyckoff, N.J. See the Single Adults Ministries Web site at singles.ag.org for more information.

— John W. Kennedy