**An Endangered species : Single Men and the Church**

**There are twice as many single women in the Church than men. This two-to-one ratio may seem like paradise - but as Nick Page discovers - not everything in the garden is rosy.**

It's the church equivalent of the 'Diet Pepsi' moment. You remember the advert - women office workers salivate over a hunky, building worker, drinking a can of Pepsi and taking off his shirt. Why he needed to take off his shirt I'm not sure. Nor, indeed, was, he like any building worker I've ever seen, most of whom display quite different and less attractive parts of their anatomy.

But, leaving aside the reality, you can see the same thing in churches. When a young, single, Christian man appears on the scene, a frisson of excitement runs round the building. The vicar immediately wonders if he'll do the youth work. The treasurer hopes he is the young millionaire owner of a dot.com startup. And the girls? The girls start to circle, like lionesses who have spotted a particularly succulent gazelle...

**David, 24 - Graphic Designer**

If young blokes become Christians they will seek out the church that has the largest population of females. Because they've been taught that the only pool they can go swimming in is the smallest pool possible. 'It is better for a man to marry than burn', wrote Paul, and today, in the UK, your average smouldering Christian male has a wide-choice when it comes to fire-extinguishers. The disparity between the numbers of men and women in the church is huge. To put it simply, there are more women than men in the church today. A lot more. More than twice more. In any other walk of life, this two-to-one ratio might be seen as paradise. But when I actually sat down and spoke to single male Christians, I realised that not everything in the garden is rosy. There is, it appears, trouble in paradise.

**Peter, 29 - Account Manager with a PR Company**

There is a lot of expectation. Outside church you feel like you can go out for a drink with a woman and there's no expectation. But in the church there is always that agenda. Are we going out for a drink or is this a 'relationship'? Just because we have a drink together doesn't mean I want to get married, settle down and have kids. In the church people start match-making the whole time. For many men, the expectation levels are the most difficult to handle. Coming from a society where dating is usually a relaxed affair, Churches can seem unusually intense. Rightly or wrongly, men feel that women do not see them as just friends but as potential partners.

**John, 27 - Accountant**

If you are a single bloke and you go into church and talk to females they automatically think that you are on the pull. You can't make friends that easily because you are always working within the framework of the dating agency that is the church. If you asked them out, most of them will be thinking 'is this a commitment? Does God want me to be here? While I'm thinking, 'it's just a drink.' Relationships generally take time to mature. It is difficult, not to say impossible, to develop a lasting relationship in an atmosphere of scrutiny. Yet that is exactly what happens, especially in churches with smaller congregations. The weight of expectation - of hope that this will not be 'just a drink' but will be the start of something great - is often more than the event can bear.

**Nick, 35 - Computer Consultant**

For a Christian man, the question might be 'do I want to go out with this girl? For the girl, the question is often 'is this the one?' The older the couple, the more intense this pressure is. All eyes focus on them. Indeed, that is a major contributing factor. For many of the men I spoke to, it is not only that the girl has high hopes.

**Steve, 26 - Youth worker**

Generally there is a push towards being married in the church. The church is so keen on upholding marriage and having 'good married couples' who are strong in the faith that it tends to push that as the ideal. They want to show that it works. Everyone wants to see people happy. But that doesn't mean we all have to be married and live happily ever after. One of the most frequent frustrations voiced in my conversations with single men was the pressure they felt on them to 'settle down.' It is almost as if the church doesn't know what to do with them, as if they can't be trusted as long as they remain 'unattached.' I even spoke to youth leaders who believed they had been rejected for jobs because they were not married or engaged. Even for voluntary posts in the church, being single appears to be a handicap.

**David - Graphic Designer**

There is a huge emphasis on marriage and families. If you attain that marriage and the kids then you've made it in the church. It's very hard to get anywhere in the church as a single person. You are looked upon as being stable if you are married. Throughout the church there is a sub-conscious and deep-rooted mistrust of single men. After all if they were serious about life they'd have got married, wouldn't they? Accordingly, there is a subtle - and sometimes not-so-subtle - pressure for them to conform. The church really doesn't know how to relate to young single men, so it seeks to turn them into something it can relate to: young married men. It makes them safe, defuses the ticking bomb. Young, unattached men are unsettling; we would far rather they had a wife, 2.4 children and a Ford Sierra. Then we could make them a deacon and really use them properly. Many single men see marriage in less rosy terms. Far from being the foundation of their Christian ministry, some even see it as diminishing their ability to reach others.

**Ivan, 30 - Creative Director**

It's a problem with church culture. In church, most of my mates are married, but most of my friends who aren't Christian are not married. In church there is this pressure to get married earlier. And most of my Christian friends who are married have lost their non-Christian mates. They have got caught up in the subculture and seem to be less in touch. They are now entirely different people. I don't know if that's marriage or church conditioning. So, they opt out of the 'traditional' church structures. They don't want to lead youth groups, cell groups or alpha courses. The only thing they want to lead is a normal life. In these respects, the church is very different to the world outside. Where the world puts pressure on men to behave 'badly', the church puts pressure on them to seek marriage and 'stability' - men behaving acceptably, perhaps. Just because societies view of men is wrong, doesn't make it right for the church to force them to the opposite extreme. There is one respect, however, in which the world and the church agree. They want their men to be real men.

**Charles, 25 - Shop Manager**

You have a situation where women go in there looking for the perfect person. And because it has to be 'from God', they expect the ultimate quality. Now unfortunately the ultimate quality isn't going to be there. You are going to find lower quality in the church than you find on the outside. You aren't going to find that perfect person because the church is full of broken people. I remember once listening to a speaker at a large Christian festival. (At Easter. You do the Maths.) A young woman was standing on the stage bemoaning the state of Christian manhood. "What is it about the men in church?" she lamented. "Why is it that they are all so wet?" I thought then - and I think now - that the answer is obvious. Perhaps 'wet' men like church because it is the one place they shouldn't have to worry about such value judgments. Perhaps they were attracted to church because they truly believed they had found a place where such things didn't matter. I am not for one moment denying that the church has its fair share of wimps. No one would ever claim that the High Anglican wing of the church would be able to put together much of a rugby squad. But that is not the issue. The issue is whether we have a right to expect anything different. The issue is whether we have not been sucked into the world's way of judging people, whether we have swallowed whole their definition of masculinity.

**Don, 35 - Photographer**

I haven't had many relationships with women in the church. I get the feeling they aren't that interested. I don't fit their ideal. In fact, it can be worse than that, because many women I know are looking for a relationship with a Christian man. Some of them, indeed, are desperate for a relationship. Only not with me. The message I get is, 'I may want a man, but I'm not that desperate, thanks...' In my conversations I uncovered a great deal of hurt and rejection - rejection, often not because of what the person was, but because of what he wasn't. I talked to men who are kind, funny, caring and compassionate. But none of them, so far as I know are six foot tall, blonde and with buttocks so tight they could crack walnuts. And, unfortunately for them, the buttocks are what seem to count.

**Steve - Youth worker**

The truth is that if the men are less 'desirable' for want of a better word, then we get less females in the group. We had a couple of lads go abroad recently and we've not seen some of the girls since. In that sense, to have strong, desirable men in the group is a positive asset. Women, quite rightly, point out that supermodels are not 'normal'. The 'normal' woman is not a vertical stick insect with make-up. But then, neither is the 'normal' man a six foot hunk with a six pack and a full head of hair. He comes in all shapes and sizes. He may be short or fat or wetter than an English bank holiday. Should he be made to feel inadequate for such things? Jesus, lest we forget, hung around with social misfits. It was not the gladiators who flocked to hear him, but the tax collectors - social outcasts, puny physical specimens so small they had to climb a tree in order to get a look.

**Peter - Account Manager with a PR Company**

In church if you are not married and in your thirties there is this unspoken question, 'what are you doing with your life?' You are turning thirty, not settled, what's wrong with you? All these issues stem from the same single problem: there are not enough men in the church. With more men, the pressures are less, the expectations more reasonable.

**In conclusion**

There is a great deal of theorising about why the church fails to attract men. But maybe part of the problem lies in the kind of church they are being asked to join. Accepting Jesus might be an easier proposition if it didn't mean accepting a wife, family, labrador and position on the PCC. If the moment a man sets his foot through the door he is laden with a bundle of expectations and pressures he is hardly likely to stay around for long. It has to be said that it is mostly those in their late twenties and early thirties who really feel this pressure. Younger men are more relaxed, less sensitive. But the older the single man gets, the heavier the expectation. Why? Because we have taken one choice and turned it into the only choice. We have taken one ideal - marriage - and turned it into the ideal, with the result that many single people, both men and women, feel as though they have somehow failed. In turn, this emphasis puts intolerable pressures on relationships. The older the man and woman are, the more pressure they feel to make this one count, to discover Mr. or Miss Right. And for those men who are not naturally physically attractive the sense of failure is even more keen. 'Look', we say, 'all these women to choose from you still can't get a date.'

What is needed, I think, is for the church to turn the pressure off. Instead of seeing young men as potential husbands and fathers, maybe we should start by seeing them as human beings. Instead of viewing unmarried men as problems to be solved, as irresponsible bundles of testosterone raging around the church, maybe we could start by welcoming them home as lost sons. After all, when the lost son came home, his father didn't tell him to settle down and get a job. No, he threw a party.