

LEADING AS A SINGLE PERSON

BY KATE WHARTON

A while ago I wrote a book entitled *Single Minded*. I hope that it's a useful resource – for single people seeking to live life to the full, for married people seeking to better understand and support their single friends, and for leaders seeking to make their churches places of welcome for single people.

Since I wrote the book, and as I speak about singleness, people often want to discuss with me what it's like to lead as a single person. Clearly it's the only sort of leadership I've ever known. I've done a lot of thinking about it, and was delighted to write this reflection.

So what is it like to lead as a single person? If you're married, and perhaps especially if you've been married for longer than you've been a leader, you might be wondering what difference it makes – surely leading is leading, whatever your life circumstances? If you're a single leader, though, you've probably already thought of ten issues.

I'm going to explore some of the things that I think are particularly pertinent to single people in church leadership. In some cases they are, of course, also things which affect married people – but perhaps affect single people more or differently.

LONELINESS

The thing which comes immediately to mind when I think about leading as a single person is loneliness. I guess that perhaps leadership always feel a bit lonely, as it requires making many decisions, some of which may be difficult and unpopular. If you're a leader who

isn't single, then you might wonder why I've started here – you may also experience loneliness in leadership, so what's the difference?

I would say yes, sometimes leadership can be lonely whoever we are and whatever our life circumstances – but there is a difference for single people.

For me, the issue is that there isn't anyone there to talk to, or to process with, or to download to. If you're married, I realise it doesn't necessarily follow that you can discuss leadership issues with your spouse. But nevertheless, there is someone there. There's someone there in those few moments before you go off to do something big or scary, to see your anxiety and offer some comfort. There's someone there when you return from a difficult meeting or conversation, to allow you to unwind. There's someone there when life is stressful and busy, to make you a cup of tea or put the bins out or just sit and watch TV with.

I think perhaps the issue is this – leadership can be lonely, and living alone as a single person can be lonely, so if you put them together, that's a potentially difficult combination.

If you're a single leader who struggles with loneliness, I'd recommend you work out some things which will help you in those tough times – find some people to pray with regularly, find a mentor and/or spiritual director to talk to, know who the people are who you can call or text when you get in late at night and just need to tell someone about your day, find other ways to process, such as journaling, find people to have fun with.

EXPECTATIONS

Another thing which can be an issue for single leaders is other people's expectations (I know – this one's also an issue for married leaders too. But again, I think it's a bit different.)

As leaders, we all know only too well that other people can expect things of us which are simply impossible to fulfil. Sometimes it can feel as if everyone around us expects something different from us, and that Jesus himself would find it hard to meet all their expectations.

Married leaders will be familiar with the hope of some churches that their spouse will be an extra leader, so that they get 'double their money' in terms of pastoral care or ministry. Sometimes the spouse wishes to function in such a leadership role, of course, but sometimes they don't.

What you might not realise if you're not single is that there are also a number of expectations placed on single leaders. Sometimes it seems that we're expected to do the work of an entire family, to be able to work 24/7 because we have no (family) reason not to, and to be always available. People quiz us constantly about our singleness – why on earth aren't we married with children?

And of course it's very easy to put unhelpful expectations onto ourselves and to work in ways which are unhelpful – to ask too much of ourselves, to not take enough time off, to work crazy hours, to not be accountable to anyone.

Something which I've found that people often don't realise if they're not single is just how much time is taken up with cooking, cleaning, shopping, gardening and just general life admin. There's no one else to do those things so I somehow need to find the time to do all of them myself.

And then there's the time off side of things – if I'm going to see friends or family on my day off (which I really need to do if I'm going to stay sane), it might require more time and effort, planning in advance, and often having to drive some distance (which generally I do, as the one who's more flexible and able to travel).

COMMITMENT

But, enough of the negativity. There are some great things about being a single leader too. One of them I think is a flip side of what I've already mentioned. As a single leader I can totally commit myself to the congregation or group or

ministry that I'm leading. Not in a negative 'I have no life beyond' way, but in a positive 'I am able to be totally present for you' way.

I really like the fact that I can rearrange my plans at a moment's notice, should I need to. I can invite people round without needing to check with anyone else, or drop everything to go and visit someone. I can use my house and garden and car as a means of hospitality and blessing, because no one besides me needs them. I can be flexible with my time, meeting people (where reasonable) at a time that suits them.

Paul puts it like this (in the Message version of 1 Cor 7:33-34): 'Marriage involves you in all the nuts and bolts of domestic life and in wanting to please your spouse, leading to so many more demands on your attention. The time and energy that married people spend on caring for and nurturing each other, the unmarried can spend in becoming whole and holy instruments of God.'

I don't want to suggest single people are more holy than married people, obviously! But I think there is a great bonus for single people in terms of the way they can order their time and energy because they are free of some of the commitments of married people.

PERSPECTIVE

My final thought on the plus side of being a single leader is that I can bring that viewpoint and perspective to everything that I do, including to quite a few places where it might not normally be heard. Ask most single Christians and they'll tell you that church can often feel like a very couply, family-orientated place. It's obviously right and proper that churches are welcoming to families – but unfortunately this sometimes means that singles feel left out. As a single leader I can be a role model to single Christians, and remind them that they aren't odd or unusual or unwelcome. I can bring a different perspective to things and maybe challenge some assumptions or norms.

I also wonder whether being a single leader enables me to have a voice, not just for other single people, but for anyone who doesn't quite 'fit' into the normal way of things, for whatever reason. Our society and our Church still generally expect people to be in couples and so when you're not, people can treat you differently. Clearly that isn't the same as being treated differently for other reasons, but perhaps I can empathise a bit, and perhaps I can speak out and speak up for those who feel on the edge.



FOR REFLECTION

1. If you're single – what are the main challenges and opportunities that your singleness brings to your leadership?
2. If you're married – are there ways in which you could connect with/learn from/encourage single leaders around you?
3. For us all – what are we doing to ensure that our churches are genuinely places of welcome and safety for all people?