IN PRAISE OF SINGLE WOMEN

Posted on June 13, 2022 by Eddie

Single missionaries, the vast majority of whom are female, are proof of Paul's assertion of the value of singleness.
Category: Observations

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul makes a case for Christians remaining single and not marrying. This runs against the grain of not just our wider society but also of much evangelicalism, where finding a life partner is seen as the highest calling in life. However, after years in mission leadership, I can see exactly what Paul is getting at.

Consider a missionary family with young children living in a rural setting in Africa - like we did. One parent (probably the mother) will be involved almost full time in looking after the kids and possibly doing home school. The other parent, will also need to be involved in some aspects of schooling or child care. The upshot is that from two missionary adults, you will do well to get one full time equivalent working at whatever ministry they are involved in. Things will be different in towns and cities where more support is available, but it is still unlikely that both will work full time.

Single women missionaries (single male missionaries are an endangered species, for reasons I don't fully understand), on the other hand, are able to work full time, without the distractions that their colleagues with families face. Quite simply, single women will do more Bible translation (or whatever) than married adults with children.

A few years down the line, families with children will almost certainly return to their home country to accompany their kids through the last years of their education. Often this happens at just the point where the parents have gained enough experience to be really useful in training and mentoring others. Single woman, in contrast, are able to stick around for much longer and can contribute to the work of the mission for much longer. As a result, the demographics of mission teams is often rather skewed. You will find fewer couples (and hence, men) from their late forties onwards, whereas there will be single women through all age groups. When I was in a field leadership role, I swiftly learned that the people I could turn to for advice and counsel were almost always women a decade or more older than me.

In situations where there is instability in a country - war, coups - that sort of thing, families will often leave for a place of safety. This leaves single people - mainly women - to keep ministry ticking over. It may seem counterintuitive, but in my experience, it is single women who do most of the work in unstable situations.

Put simply, single women do more and they stay around longer than their married counterparts. I realise that I am generalising and that there are always exceptions - but that doesn't invalidate my central point.

Of course, there are advantages to families being involved in mission. Families with children have a natural entry into some parts of society that may be not available to single people. I recall a Catholic missionary priest remarking on how he was struck by the way that Protestant missionary families were able to get involved with people and to model Christian life in ways that were closed to him. Equally, being single can be a lonely business, especially when you are thousands of miles away from your friends and family. Married couples come with an inbuilt support system. Because of the demographics of the mission world, single women realise that becoming missionaries reduces their chances of finding a spouse by a significant margin.

So I'd like to salute my single colleagues, the majority of whom are female. They make a huge contribution to mission work around the world which, along with their dedication and self-sacrifice, is not always remembered. Paul knew what he was talking about when he extolled the value of singleness and you prove it. Thank you!

The picture at the top of this post is of the WEC missionary Dr. Helen Roseveare, if you've not read her books, then you should!