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Singles

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"There would be posters up for families, senior citizen groups," Sister Whalen agreed. "She brought out a very good question: she felt a need for some connection. I felt this is a real viable need in any parish."

After sending out questionnaires to St. Rita's parishioners, Anne and Sister Whalen developed Singles and Single Again, which sponsors both spiritual and social events. Eleven years later, the ministry is still going strong. It's open to people who have never been married or are divorced, separated or widowed. The group does not distinguish by age or religious affiliation. This open-ended approach has been a key to its survival, Sister Whalen emphasized. "It's inclusive; everyone is welcome," she said.

Singles and Single Again is steadily expanding to other parishes in eastern Monroe County, particularly those in St. Rita's planning group: Holy Spirit, Holy Trinity and St. Paul. Anne is excited about the current interest level, noting there are more than 100 people on her mailing list and "five to 10 new faces at every meeting."

In western Monroe County, the St. Charles Singles Group has existed since 1995 and is open to people from any parish. Most members are in their 30s and 40s, said Joan Schmidt, coordinator. The group plans strictly social events and has an estimated base of 90 adults, with a typical event drawing 12 to 15 people. Dinners, especially, are a big hit with members.

"They like to go out. Basically, it's a chance to eat with someone else rather than eat alone," said Schmidt, 34, a parishioner at Greece's Our Lady of Mercy.

Elizabeth Brunner, 56, who belongs to Greece's Our Mother of Sorrows, is one of the St. Charles group's more active members. "I like dinner and movies, meeting other people and socializing. I just wanted to get out for friendship," she said.

Schmidt says she favors St. Charles over young-adult ministries in which "you're with some married people and you don't feel you have more in common."

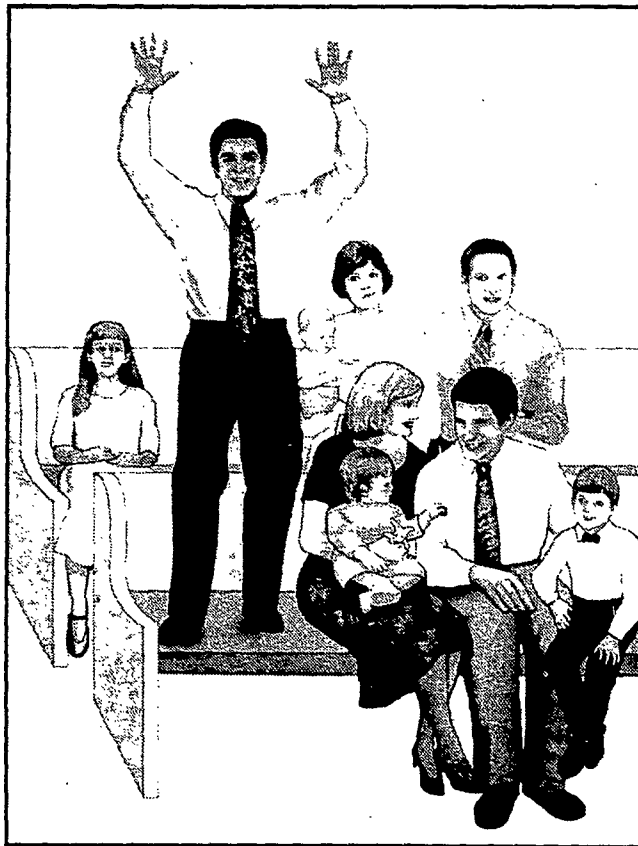
A similar effort is under way in the Southern Tier where Sean Treacy, 26, and Theresa Schamel, 33, are attempting to launch a group for 20s and 30s among all Elmira-area parishes. Treacy, a parishioner at Church of St. Mary Our Mother in Horseheads, said he began feeling the need for this kind of outlet after he and many friends were laid off from Corning Inc., thus weakening their social link. Schamel, meanwhile, hopes that such a group will increase dating opportunities for herself and others.

"I'd like to meet other people in my age group. Being single in this area is hard enough without trying to find someone who has the same faith background," said Schamel, a member of St. Mary's Parish in Elmira. "Most of the churches are family-oriented and don't have a young congregation."

Due to a slow initial response, Schamel said she plans to undertake greater promotion by advertising the group in church bulletins and local media. Her plight reflects the challenge of maintaining such a group: Schmidt said the numbers for St. Charles' group have fallen off in recent years, even though it gained some members who formerly belonged to the St. Thomas More Singles Club. That club, not associated with any parish, began in the 1950s but disbanded in 1994. Brunner, who attended the St. Thomas More group for 25 years, said it broke up due to "a lack of people who were willing to do events and work."

Joe Perham, 49, a first-year participant in Singles and Single Again, noted that singles groups often struggle to find consistent volunteer leadership.

"I think if you poll a lot of (single) people you'll find we want to do something. But to take the bull by the horns, that's tough," said Perham, a parishioner of



Blessed Sacrament in Rochester.

Schmidt further observed that would-be participants may be hesitant to join these groups: "It does depend on the person. It can be intimidating to get out with people you don't know," she said. Sister Whalen added that many singles, especially those who have previously been married, may come in with a certain level of emotional baggage.

Finding a fit

Fitting into general parish life can be intimidating for single adults as well. "Parishes don't always identify that as part of their role," Bradbury-Haehl said. "One thing I hear from single people is, 'It's so hard to meet people.'"

Perham has sensed this isolation in Catholic churches he's attended as an adult. "It's not that I didn't feel welcome. There's still kind of a detachment, if you will," he said. One way to eliminate such feelings, Schmidt suggested, is for parishes to advertise social events as being open to both singles and families.

Parishes may need to move quickly to catch this relatively mobile segment of the Catholic community, Bradbury-Haehl said. "Single people are less likely to settle in a particular parish," she observed. "Parishes should look at the programs they offer and ask, 'Is a single person going to feel comfortable?'"

By the same token, Bradbury-Haehl said single adults should take some initiative as well. She suggested that they approach parish staff members to ask about getting involved. "You don't have to be a parent to teach religious ed. So what if you're not like everyone else?" she commented.

Whereas Anne is a lector at St. Rita's, Schamel performs the same role at St. Mary's in Elmira and Brunner serves as eucharistic minister and festival worker at Our Mother of Sorrows. And Treacy said he fit right into the adult choir at St. Mary Our Mother in Horseheads, even though many of the members are much older than he and married.

"I think they were just glad to have another voice," he said.

Bradbury-Haehl said there are "a lot of wonderful things" that single people can bring to the Catholic community. "They're available in a way that married people aren't," she said.

And whereas single adults are obvious candidates for religious vocations, Sister Whalen said she regards single adulthood itself as a vocation. "There's nothing inferior about being single," she said.

"You can have a very fulfilling life. I can get up and come to Rochester any time I want," said Sheila Maschka, 38, a resident of Long Island. Maschka, who is Anne's best friend from college, said she came to the area frequently to support Anne through her divorce—something that may

not have been possible if she had had marital and parental obligations.

Maschka, who has taken part in many Singles and Single Again events, said a positive outlook is vital to a single adult's happiness. "You can sit there and be single and miserable. Even if you go to a group, you can still be miserable," she cautioned.

Treacy, for one, doesn't dwell on his singleness. "I'm one of those people that will get myself involved in anything," he said. "In fact, I have. I'm joining the Ancient Order of Hibernians' Elmira chapter; that was one way to solve my 'friends crisis.' And during the summer I'm a sailing fanatic."

Age issues

Would a diocesan, rather than parish, program help address the concerns of single adults? Perhaps. Yet

Bradbury-Haehl said it's tough to develop a comprehensive ministry because this group has such differing backgrounds.

"There are single adults who are 18 and adults who are single again in their 50s and 60s," she said. "It's so broad. To define the ministry by singleness would almost be an impossible thing to do."

Bradbury-Haehl oversees Odyssey, the diocesan young-adult program for Catholics in their 20s and 30s. Begun in 1996, this outreach of spiritual, social and service activities is open to married and single people, but is largely attended by singles. A handful of diocesan parishes such as Blessed Sacrament in Rochester also offer young-adult outreach programs.

Yet Maschka said that young-adult groups leave out an important segment of the single population. "There are a lot of things for 20s and 30s, but what do you have for 40s, 50s and 60s?" she asked.

Treacy observed that people approaching age 40 may wish to stick with singles groups in hopes of finding a mate. "At this age in my life, 26, I don't see a problem," he said. "(But) I can definitely see it if you have family and parental pressure when you get up in your late 30s." Bradbury-Haehl added that "finding a life partner is a legitimate concern in the age range I'm dealing with."

Perham, for one, is still searching for a mate and wishes there wasn't an age restriction for such groups as Odyssey. "It's my own opinion that these organizations should be more inclusive. All of a sudden you're 40 (years old) and have been doing things with a group for a couple years, and then you are no longer welcome," he said.

Anne said she would never consider putting an age limit on Singles and Single Again, saying, "I would feel so bad. I'm included in a group and then I'm kicked out? It's devastating."

Bradbury-Haehl acknowledged that she gets "at least two calls per week" from people over 40 looking for a singles group. But she maintains that a ministry to single adults, though it would include people in their 20s and 30s, is different from the goals of her office.

"Odyssey was never meant to be a permanent place for people; the idea with young-adult ministry is that people move through it. We're very clear about our mission. To expand it much beyond that age range would really change the focus of the group," she said. For example, she noted, many people may join these groups for dating purposes, but "a man in his mid 40s has a different life experience than a woman in her early or mid 20s."

Bradbury-Haehl further observed that Odyssey is currently grappling with some of these issues. Many longtime members, she said, are approaching 40 years old while the group has struggled to recruit new members in their 20s.

Singles sites gain strength

Looking to date other Catholics? You can get the ball rolling simply by spending a few minutes online.

A sampling of the Internet reveals several Catholic and Christian-based Web sites that offer to match people based on their religious beliefs as well as social interests, ages and locations. Among them are Ave Maria Single Catholic (www.singlecatholic.com) and St. Raphael Singles (www.st.raphael.net). There are also such nondenominational Christian offerings as www.ChristianCafe.com.

One of the most successful sites thus far is Catholic Singles (www.catholicingles.com) based out of Orange County, California. David Nevarez, founder, expects the site to have its 50,000th customer this summer, with an active database of 7,000-8,000.

Nevarez, a 37-year-old, single Catholic, founded the site in 1997.

He said the site has helped many people find love, including a priest who found his wife through the site.

The site is open to Catholics of all ages and backgrounds, but is primarily used by people in their 20s and 30s.

Single Catholics can find a variety of dating services, including men and women, in the Diocese of Rochester. Nevarez noted that many relationships have formed through Catholic Singles, even when church members lived hundreds of miles apart.

Although Nevarez said that some people utilize Catholic Singles simply for fellowship, the lion's share are looking to date. His staff of five people is seeing notable success, saying they get five to 10 notices per day from subscribers to discontinue the service "because they found someone special. And half of them did through the site."

Nevarez asserted that online services such as his are rapidly becoming less stigmatized. "Five years ago the Internet dating thing was still taboo. But now more people are on the Internet and they feel more comfortable," he explained. Nevarez added that Catholic Singles has had no problem with people providing false information for ulterior motives, saying that Catholic Singles' detailed application form helps minimize such possibilities.

Joan Schmidt of Greece, 34, attends St. Charles Singles Group in part because she feels marriage "is still kind of out there for me." She has been leery of dating services in general—but when told of such outlets as Catholic Singles, she said she might consider that route.

"If you see something advertised for Catholic singles it would be positive for me," Schmidt said. With more generic dating services, she added, "You don't know what's on the other end."

—Mike Latona

On the positive end, Bradbury-Haehl said that single people who no longer qualify for young-adult ministry can take steps toward solving their own dilemma. "They should think about moving on, and you see a lot of that happening now. People in that 35 to 40 range are saying, 'What's next for me?' They're talking about going out and forming groups in their parish, and they've developed their expertise from Odyssey," Bradbury-Haehl said.

"It's obviously a need out there," she added. "It's something the single Catholics are asking of their church. Just because I'm not doing it, doesn't mean it shouldn't be done in parishes and regions."