

Resilient Cross Cultural Living: Unique Perspectives from Single Missionaries
Mental Health and Missions 2011 Plenary Paper

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Introduction

Would everyone who is a Christian please stand?

Anyone who has suffered at some time in your life, remain standing.

Anyone who has loved at some time in your life, remain standing.

Anyone who has laughed at some time in your life, remain standing.

We are bound together even more closely through our shared experiences of suffering and joy with love as the element that binds us together.

But, we are also unique in our giftings, our choices, and our design.

Anyone who is currently single, remain standing. You, my single friends, belong to the body of Christ.

Anyone who is married, please stand with your single colleagues. You, my married friends, belong to the body of Christ.

Now, look around you. This is your family. Everyone you see standing with you is your brother or your sister. Wherever in the world you go and meet Christians, you belong to the same family.

Ephesians 4:16 says –

He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

And we belong to one another. This idea of belonging isn't just niceties, it's Biblical! *Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.* Romans 12:4-5

Belonging and Welcome

What does it do to your soul when someone says, "You belong"? What does it do to your heart when someone says "Welcome"? In Ghana, whenever we arrive back from a journey we are greeted with the word, "Akwaaba", and in Kenya the word, "Karibu" which means welcome. I've had customs officials in Ghana and in the US greet me with the words, "Welcome home." It means more in Ghana because that is my adopted home – I've been grafted in not by birth but by acceptance. When I joined Barnabas, even though I am part of a loving biological family and part of a loving MMCT team, it meant a lot to have folks in Barnabas say, "Welcome to our family."

We can all (singles and marrieds) give one another the gift of belonging – of being invited in and welcomed in to our lives, our homes, our communities.

Personal Introduction, Thanks, and Disclaimers:

When I was first given this topic of Singles and Resilience, I resisted it. In my mind, resilience is resilience and humans are humans – why differentiate between singles and marrieds? Is there really much difference? My own experience of living in a very close intentional community in West Africa is perhaps more similar to the lives of my married friends than my single friends. Many of my single missionary colleagues live alone.

I didn't see myself as the best spokesperson for single missionaries. Also, to group all singles together is, of course, akin to grouping all marrieds together – we are as different and unique as our personalities, family backgrounds, maturity, etc bring to the picture.

So, I reluctantly accepted the task and set out to do a survey of single and married missionaries to better understand their unique perspectives on resilience as it relates to marital status. I had the help of many people along the way including my teammates (Marion, Darlene, Sherri, and Patience) who patiently listened to my obsessive processing; Charlie Schaefer who did statistical analysis once the survey results came in; Bonnie Greer who took the photographs; and Nancy Crawford and Lisa Smits who helped with the survey design.

I was so surprised by the response to the survey. Over 800 people responded! As I read the comments and insights of these respondents and saw their openness and vulnerability, I repented of my resistance and embraced this topic as one of great value and honor. Many thanks to the organizers of Mental Health and Missions for giving me this very important subject.

One more disclaimer – The topic of singles is such a large issue with so many layers. I can only touch on one small part – a piece of the picture related to those serving in cross cultural settings and some thoughts about resilience.

The Survey – Resilience: Perspectives from Single and Married Missionaries

Focus – Resilience and Marital Status

Criteria – Missionaries working in passport countries not their own

Content of the Survey–

1 - Demographics - (gender, age, passport country, country of service, # of years of service, type of setting work in, type of ministry, living situation, and marital status)

2 - Rating Scale – Self statements rated from strongly disagree to strongly agree – will say more about the content of these later.

3 - Narrative Questions – Related to what impacts resilience, the best and worst aspects of their marital status, and how they go about building close personal friends in their setting.

4 - Self-care and lifestyle balance inventory – Developed by Headington Institute

Results of the survey

I hope to write up the results in several papers – there is a vast amount of rich information. But, for the sake of this presentation, I'm only going to focus on the self-ratings and a few of the narrative questions.

Description of the Respondents

Total respondents = 817

Ministry Setting:

Majority working in urban areas of developing countries with a team or workgroup

Type of Ministry:

Teaching, support, discipleship, administrative, member care, and evangelism were the highest

Marital Status:

Singles – 40% (324) and Married – 60% (493)

Single Types:

Single, never married – 93%

Divorced – 5%

Widowed – 2%

Gender for all responses: Male= 30% ; Female = 70%

Gender for singles responses: Male= 9% ; Female = 91%

Housing Situation for Singles:

Live alone – 68%

Live with others – 32%

Passport Countries: 26 passport countries represented

The range of nationalities represented:

- North America – US and Canada
- Europe – 9 countries
- Africa – 6 countries
- Oceania – 3 countries
- Central/South America – 3 countries
- Asia – 3 countries

Countries of Service: 73 countries of service represented

The range of service areas of the world included:

- Africa – 32
- Asia – 21 (Includes Central Asia, India, Middle East)
- Central/South America – 7
- Oceania – 4
- Europe - 9

Self-Ratings Results - Comparison of Singles and Marrieds

Seven of the statements given for self rating were:

1. I am content in being (married or single).
2. I have the emotional support of family.
3. I am part of a close, loving community.
4. My self-worth is directly impacted by my marital status .
5. I feel I am discriminated against because I am (married or single).
6. I have a close personal friend who speaks the truth in my life.
7. I am resilient.

Survey Respondents rated each statement from 1 to 5 with 1 being Strongly Disagree all the way up to 5 being Strongly Agree.

Survey Results for Statement Ratings

Using a t test analysis, the mean responses for singles and for marrieds were significantly different on every statement. It is possible that any of the results I'm about to present would be different if we filtered for things like gender, age, or years of cross-cultural service. More analysis to come in the future!

1. I am content in being (married or single)

Marrieds - Strongly Agree (4.79)

Singles – Agree (3.67)

The level of contentment is higher for marrieds.

2. I have the emotional support of family members

Marrieds – Agree (4.46)

Singles – Agree (3.70)

The emotional support of family members is somewhat higher for marrieds.

3. I am part of a close, loving community

Marrieds – Agree (4.12)

Singles – Agree (3.70)

Having a close loving community is somewhat more likely for marrieds.

4. My self-worth is directly impacted by my marital status

Marrieds – Neither disagree nor agree (2.61)

Singles – Disagree (2.0)

Marrieds are more likely than singles to feel that their self-worth is impacted by their marital status.

5. I feel I am discriminated against because I am (married or single)

Marrieds – Disagree (1.52)

Singles – Neither disagree nor agree (2.80)

Singles are more likely to feel discriminated against because of their marital status.

I'd like to say a few words about this result. In the narrative section, I asked singles this question – “What comments do you have about how you are viewed or treated by your married colleagues?” **Many said they have good and close relationships with their married colleagues and feel respected and valued.**

In fact, 43 percent of the single missionaries disagreed with the statement that they feel discriminated against. But, when you compare that with the fact that 90 percent of marrieds disagreed with the statement about feeling discriminated against, it's clear that it's an issue.

In response to the question about how you are viewed by your married colleagues, there were a significant number of comments that indicated that they sometimes feel treated as inferior, incomplete, less than mature, less than adult, to be pitied, or to be matched up.

Sometimes this was from their host culture and other times from their mission colleagues. One respondent was told by a pastor that she should stop wasting her life and go and find a husband. Others lamented the stigma of being second class in Christian circles.

Some singles felt that marrieds question whether they have problems with their sexuality. While some people may be single because they have problems with their sexuality or because they have problems with relationships or communication skills, we can't lump all singles into this negative bias.

I was once told by a married colleague that I wasn't a typical single because I was attractive! The implication of this remark and others like it is that if you are single, there is something wrong with you.

Theology of Singleness

Part of what seems to be behind this bias is treated in great depth and with a thoughtful comprehensive Biblical study on the theology of singleness in a book called Redeeming Singleness by Barry Danylak. In brief, he lays out how under the Old Covenant, marriage was obligatory and was a pre-requisite for receiving the blessing which came through biological children. Those who did not marry or have children were considered cursed.

This shifted with the coming of the New Covenant, meaning that while marriage and children are still a blessing and are good gifts from the Lord, it is equally valid, valuable and meaningful to remain single and to receive and pass on the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant. ***In the new covenant, one is fully blessed in union with Christ independent of marriage, family or possessions (land).***

Because of this Jesus can agree with the disciples in Matthew 19:10-12 when they say it is better not to marry. He qualifies that this is the case ***if you can accept this, if God helps you, and if it is for the sake of the Kingdom.***

It is also because of this New Covenant that Paul can say in I Corinthians 7 that he wishes everyone were single as he is and he gives the various benefits of remaining single. Danylak says, ***In the family of God, one's status is not improved through marriage.***

John Stott (a respected Biblical scholar who remained single all his life) said, ...***both the married and the single states are 'good'; neither is in itself better or worse than the other. So whether we are single or married, we need to receive our situation from God as his own special grace-gift to us.***

If we, as the body of believers, truly had this mindset, that one's status (worth, value) is not improved through marital status, then we would spare ourselves a lot of pain and judgment and comparison and would function more as a healthy body that fits together perfectly.

We are blessed to have some very inspirational singles who have served cross-culturally and been examples of courage and resilience. Some that come to mind are Gladys Aylward who led 94 orphans to safety over the mountains of China; Helen Roseveare who served as a physician in the Congo and endured war and rape; and the Biblical characters of Daniel, Nehemiah, Paul, and Jesus.

Back to the Survey Results...

6. I have a close personal friend who speaks the truth in my life.

Marrieds – Agree (3.78)

Singles – Agree (3.93)

Singles are slightly more likely to have a close friend who can speak the truth in their lives.

7. I am resilient.

Marrieds – Agree (4.11)

Singles – Agree (4.0)

Marrieds rate themselves slightly higher in resilience.

Up to this point we've been comparing the mean results of single and married missionaries. But, if we look just at the single missionaries and their means, what can we say about the majority of single missionaries? If we look at the percentage who agree or strongly agree to each statement we can make these conclusions:

The majority of single missionaries are:

- **content in being single (67%)**
- **have the emotional support of family (67%)**
- **are part of a loving community (67%)**
- **have a close friend who speaks the truth in their lives (76%)**
- **feel they are resilient (84%)**

Narrative Questions of the Survey

1. What Contributes Most to Resilience?

A close relationship with God was a predominant theme for both married and single missionaries. Responses included words like:

- walk with the Lord
- trusting in God's provision and faithfulness in difficult circumstances
- faith in God, scripture, worship, praise, prayer, retreats
- identity in Christ, spiritual disciplines
- God's character formation

Having strong loving relationships was also a dominant theme as what contributes most to resilience for both groups and included words like:

- supportive and caring community
- good friends who speak the truth in my life
- supportive family, close team
- support and companionship of spouse
- physical intimacy with spouse
- resolution of conflicts
- supportive home office

A theme that came up more often for the singles was:

A sense of God's call – or knowing I'm exactly where God wants me

For singles, a personal call or passion is what leads them to serve in mission and to persevere through difficult circumstances. This is also true for many marrieds. However, sometimes married women are in cross cultural service because of their husband's call. The wife having a call is not always a pre-requisite to cross cultural service. This varies from mission to mission.

Illustration: I did trauma counseling with one family who had experienced an armed robbery. The wife felt her call was to be a wife and mother. The husband's call was to the ministry and their geographic location. For her, the geographic location presented a threat to her call as her children were in danger. For a single who feels called to the ministry, a trauma like this will be experienced and incorporated differently.

Other themes that came up as connected to resilience were:

- Personality and character traits like flexibility, humor, self-awareness, emotional awareness and expression
- Personal disciplines like exercise, healthy diet
- Enjoyment of ministry – sense of serving in giftedness, seeing results
- Specialized supports such as debriefing and counseling

2. What is the Best Part of Being Single?

By far the most common answer to this question was **FREEDOM**.

This included explanations like:

- to use time as I feel I should
- to do whatever at moment's notice
- to not have to worry about another
- from a bad relationship
- *Being able to wholeheartedly pursue the type of life I believe God has prepared for me, both now and in the future, without being limited by a husband's career or expectations of me.*

Other frequent comments related to the best part of being single included:

- time to myself, for myself
- independence
- flexibility
- knowing this is God's best plan for me
- intimacy with Christ

- ability to serve God without distraction
- connection to local friends – looking to them for support; opportunity to bond with culture more readily
- more opportunities to rely on God for satisfaction

But, some said, *I can't see a best – I don't want to be single.*

It is interesting that what singles enjoy the most is what marrieds miss the most. A repeated theme for married missionaries was having less freedom or independence or flexibility was what was most difficult.

3. What is Most Difficult about Being Single?

I think you can guess the answer to this question. The most common word that came up was **LONELINESS.**

And many themes were connected to this response of loneliness such as:

- being alone – when travel, anticipation of retirement
- not having sense of belonging
- not having steady companionship – (someone to talk to, someone to make decisions with, someone to do things (vacations, holidays, meals) with; someone to share deeply with, someone to protect you or watch your back, someone with you on home assignment who really understands your world)
- lack of sexual intimacy
- not having children
- challenges to self- image – am I loveable, failure
- negative assumptions/judgments/pressure of others

And then there were some who said that being single is not difficult – they enjoy being single.

Again for marrieds we have the other side of the coin – what singles miss the most is what marrieds enjoy the most - having someone to share their lives with and companionship.

John Stott said, *God created us as social beings. Love is the greatest thing in the world. For God is love, and when he made us in his own image, he gave us the capacity to love and to be loved. So we need each other. Yet marriage and family are not the only antidotes to loneliness.*

Another question I asked on the survey was:

4. How would you say you go about Building Intimacy in your setting? This is not referring to sexual intimacy, but rather close, deep personal friends.

I do tremble a bit to use the word intimacy. Since it is sometimes used as a shorthand or euphemism for sexual relations, if it is used in the context of emotional intimacy, it may be

misunderstood. Since it has become full of sexual connotations, it seems to strike fear in the hearts of those who are asked how they can have it with someone other than their spouse.

Nevertheless, God wants intimacy with us and that he wants us to have intimacy with each other. John 17:22-23 *I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me.*

In using the word intimacy, I mean a deep heart to heart connection where trust, vulnerability, mutual sharing, accountability, affirmation, and loving confrontation are all cultivated and harvested. I know that this kind of intimacy is also a part of the marital relationship and can be a part of sexual relationships. But, I would submit that it is possible to be **intimate and celibate, intimate and holy, intimate and pure.**

Intimacy with Others

Check out these words written by a single male missionary to his friends, supporters, and converts:

We loved you so much that we shared with you not only God's Good News but our own lives too.
(I Thess 2:8)

God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus.
(Phil 1:8)

Danylak says, *Though Paul did not have his own wife and family, he experienced **profound familial intimacy** within the spiritual family of God in which he had **utterly invested himself.***

Jesus says in Mark 3:35, *Anyone who does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.*

Some survey responses to this question about how they are building intimacy included things like:

- sharing deeply and personally with others
- time together – shared experiences
- praying together
- intentionality, effort
- viewing it as a gift from God

My favorite building intimacy response was: *I listen more than I speak. I laugh more than I cry. I remain authentic and honest before God and others.*

But some singles said they don't have intimacy for a variety of reasons including:

- lack of trust
- hurts

- cross cultural misunderstandings
- people leaving – loss and goodbyes
- too busy
- don't know how
- too hard

A quote from one single respondent who has been a missionary for 16 years was, *Right now I'm not trying very hard. Too many friends have left recently, and I've run out of steam to maintain my place and reach out to people who will only be here for 9 months. Also, in the past few years I have been let down drastically by people whom I thought were close friends, so I'm keeping things at a more surface level. We are still friends, but the deep trust is no longer there.*

Interestingly when I looked through the marrieds' responses, I also found a number of answers like this among them – that this is hard and they don't have it or don't know how to get it.

The Best and Hardest Parts of being Single – 2 sides of a coin

If we look at the best part of being single and the most difficult part we have two sides of a coin - Freedom/Independence AND Loneliness. Sometimes valuing freedom and independence too highly or for the wrong reasons, can lead to loneliness. We all benefit from having time to ourselves and for ourselves but there's a different kind of freedom described in Romans 6 and in Galatians 5.

What kind of freedom are we called to? Galatians 5:13 says, *For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command, Love your neighbor as yourself.*

Building Meaningful Community

Both groups told us that what contributes most to resilience is RELATIONSHIP with God and RELATIONSHIP with others. So, it seems that in order to build resilience in our communities and to address the hardest part of being single (loneliness), we need to major on building meaningful community!

Some articles I have read on singles seem to chastise marrieds for not being more inclusive of singles and put the responsibility on them to reach out. That's a good thing, but it is equally good for singles to reach out to marrieds and invite them over for meals or initiate meaningful times together.

One of the three Strategic Services of MMCT is Developing Community Relationships. It is a byproduct of the inter-mission workshops and gatherings we facilitate which include a lot of opportunities for discussing heart level issues such as the kinds of crises they have had and how they have dealt with them in pairs and small groups.

MMCT Building Community - But, if we just talked about community and didn't live it, we would quickly lose our credibility and might as well pack up and go home. So, within our team, we are very intentional about growing the intimacy in our community life.

I'm definitely not trying to say that we are perfect and not holding us up as an ideal but I just want to say a bit about what we do in our context in hopes that it might bring some ideas for those of you spending time in missions settings and talking with folks who are lonely and uncertain about how to further build their own communities.

These are some attitudes, practices and written helps that we have as the Mobile Member Care Team (MMCT) - some of these things would only apply to a team, others could be applied friend to friend.

Attitudes:

- Giving preference - yielding my way or my preference for the sake of the other. This is really just living Philippians 2!
- Having concern for each other's families – call them by name, pray for them, meet them
- Generosity with time, finances, service, and affirmation
- Inclusiveness – promoting a sense of welcome and belonging
- Quote from one of my teammates – *I used to know all about speaking truth. Now that I am living in this community, I am learning about speaking the truth with **grace**.*

Practices:

- Prayer
 - Spontaneous prayer
 - Prayer and Refocus Time – every Sunday night we each answer 4 questions – What went well, What didn't go well (about the previous week). What do I want, What do I need (for the coming week). Then we pray for each other's personal concerns.
 - Prayer Retreats – Quarterly
 - Friday afternoon prayers for Africa, missionaries we serve, and ministry concerns
- Having fun – laughing and playing together
- Caring for each other when we are sick
- Touch – frequent hugs
- Service – helping each other with practical things even when it means giving up something I want to do
- Reading scripture together before a meal
- Acts of Kindness – taking coffee to someone in the morning, making meals, offering to do something that will free up another's time

- Singing “May the Peace of the Lord Christ Go with You” each time someone leaves and someone comes home
- Sometimes vacationing with each other
- Exercise together – take walks
- Practice forgiveness – no room for bitterness; this is part of the team covenant referred to below
- Inviting families and individuals over for evening meals – hosting together
- Debriefing each other when we return from trips

Written Helps:

- Team Covenant – revisit it and read it together regularly - elements of how we communicate, make decisions, express our loyalty and commitment to each other, deal with conflicts, and build trust with each other.
- Words to songs - One of the songs we often sing in our workshops is Brother Let Me Be Your Servant – The most powerful lines are *Brother Let Me Be Your Servant, Let me be as Christ to you, Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too*
- Articles - One of the articles we use in our workshops is Henri Nouwen’s *From Solitude to Community to Ministry*. Many pioneer missionaries go from solitude to ministry but the example Jesus gave us was going from solitude to community to ministry (ministering with and through his disciples)

Response at the Organizational Level

A study published in the Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission in 2000 and conducted by Lois McKinney Douglas indicated a trend of a significant decline in single missionaries. Likewise Beate Fuesser of the Member Care Network Germany has just completed research on the number of singles in the last 50 years in the two biggest German organizations. They have seen a 50 percent decline in numbers.

Mission and Sending Church Policy and Practice

The missions community needs singles! They have a unique contribution to body life, team life, and ministry. What supports are in place to nurture and support them (and the whole community for that matter)? We can encourage leaders and decision makers to take a fresh look at their policies and practices regarding housing, finances, retirement, home assignment expectations, leadership structure, decision making, etc. Is there anything that is making it harder for singles to do well on the field? Is there a subtle or not so subtle bias? Are they in any way considered second class members?

Response at the Individual Level

When doing end of term debriefs, assessments or check-ins - Ask how they are doing and what care/supports they need in these areas:

- Sense of call
- Relationship with the Lord
- Identity in Christ – the truths of who I am in scripture
- Friendships/Community of believers
- Emotional support of family
- Perceptions of discrimination or negative judgment
- Need for any practical helps
- Vacation plans
- Level of contentment

Most single missionaries are content but some are not. What if I am talking with a single missionary who is not content? What is at the root of the discontentment? Is there fear, hurt, anger? How do they feel they are viewed by God and others? What is the foundation of their sense of acceptance and worth? What is the status of their other relationships? Where can they be further supported in any areas that are battered – relationship with the Lord, identity in Christ, relationship with family, relationship with friends, sense of call and satisfaction in their ministry. Meet them where they are, hurt with them, take them back to the truth, pray with them, help them to build their resilience and strength.

Concluding Remarks

Life as a single missionary that is characterized by a deepening relationship with the Lord, ongoing investment in relationships and community, and knowing you are where the Lord called you to be is a delightful way to spend one's life. It is a good and honorable choice.

May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of the life and power that comes from God. Eph. 3:19

Resources:

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