

The Benefits and Care of Single Missionaries

April 5, 2011

tags: [singles](#), [team](#)

by MTW Europe Member Care

The Benefits and Care of Single Missionaries

Some Guidelines for Field Leadership

The many single missionaries among us have made and continue to make significant sacrifices in order to follow God's call into missions. Nearly one third of our "units" are singles, and the majority of teams in MTW have benefitted from their contributions. Yet sometimes those who are not single are a bit baffled as to how best to give them the appropriate leadership, support and care they need.

The following guidelines grew out of conversations between Ken Matlack (field leadership), Alice Hatch (counseling), and Paul and Liz Meiners (care coordinators), and arise out of appreciation for the contribution single missionaries make, and a desire to maximize that contribution through improving care for them.

We interacted with a representative sample of single missionaries with field experience from various regions of MTW, both women and men. They confirmed that they have observed or experienced the issues covered below, but also expressed an appreciation for the support of their team leaders, often experiencing growth in their working relationships as they sought solutions together.

The Environment

Recognizing that our PCA environment tends to assume that married men are the career- focused ministry leaders, we naturally turn to them when decisions are made. Denominationally there is an emphasis on trained, ordained leadership and many are uncomfortable with women having significant ministry roles (although this is more pronounced in US ministry than in the diversity of MTW teams). As a result, we may unwittingly treat singles as "worker bees" who are to help these men do their work. For various reasons, we are also inclined to think of singles as "short-termers," and therefore without a major stake in the ministry. These assumptions may affect our working relationship with single team members, especially women, and create frustration for them in their attempts to make important and welcomed contributions to the ministry. It is important for both leadership and team members to understand the important contribution that every team member makes, whether single or married, to the overall testimony and impact of their teams. Following are some specific applications.

Team Decisions

Since team leaders are male and generally married, it is easy for them to hear less from female team members, especially singles. They may assume – erroneously — that wives are represented in decisions by their husbands; nevertheless, singles don't have a spouse who may be understood as speaking for them. Team decisions can be influenced in discussions where women and singles are not present (perhaps over a beer or coffee, playing or watching sports, or other common male connections where key men on the team –and maybe only the married ones — are together). Women and singles can feel decisions are already made long before they are discussed or announced at a team meeting, leaving them with the perception, correctly or not, that they are out of the loop. Leadership should ensure that singles are asked regularly for their input, based on their experience and stake in the team. If there is an inner circle of sorts in the decision-making process (executive or steering committee, team officers, other committees or places where even informal decisions are made), it is prudent to include at least a representative of the singles in that group so their voice is heard.

Single missionaries insist it would mean a great deal to have his or her team leader say something like, "We need to make a team decision about this topic; I think you have a stake in it and would value your input. Could we meet for coffee so I can hear what you have to say before it comes to the meeting? In fact, let's think about you presenting a proposal to the team."

Professional Skills

Respect and use singles' professional skills and seek their input. Singles often bring work experience, career focus, and special skills which are not adequately recognized, perhaps because of a (narrow?) emphasis on seminary training and ordination.

Singles may be able to enter into various aspects of the culture more freely simply because they do not have family with them, a benefit they should be able to offer to the team which can enhance the team's ministry. Some leaders readily admit being good at "the big picture," but not gifted in administration; while valuing a single person with administrative ability, the team leader may not have included her/him in the planning process from the start. It is frustrating to feel that others have planned something without your involvement, yet you are still expected to administer the concept.

It is wise to show appreciation for the contribution any team member makes, and especially so for singles. Married people hopefully hear words of appreciation from their spouses, and their kids likely think they're wonderful; singles need that affirmation more from their team, as well as nationals and friends. For married team members with kids, their work is often only one part of their lives impacting their sense of value. For singles, their work is a significantly larger source of their sense of value, yet often we fail to value their contributions adequately.

Personal Honor and Integrity

We need to protect the honor of singles in all ways without shielding or controlling them unnecessarily. In many cultures a single person, especially a woman, is considered suspect, vulnerable, or may have an uncertain or even questionable standing. Ensure the culture around them knows they are part of your "family" as a team; act like family in protecting them and their honor and status. Do this in an appropriate way, taking care not to make them feel like children, and respecting their ability to make life decisions and to protect their honor and status themselves. If new to the field, they should feel you are helping them understand and fit properly into cultural expectations about appropriate dress, behavior, housing and relationships; they shouldn't feel like they have to regularly ask permission to carry on their own activities.

Personal Time

Personal time versus ministry time is an especially important distinction for singles. It can be easy to assume that because they don't have families on the field, they can work longer, more flexible hours. They may be tempted to ensure their value in the team through over-work. Leaders might even be tempted to think the extra ministry time will somehow compensate for singles not having family. Keep in mind, though, that all housekeeping responsibilities remain, although no spouse is there to share the burden. Singles need time to develop friendships in and out of the team, just like those who are married need time with their families. Spending time with friends (and keeping up with family and friends at a distance) is no more an indication of "not fitting in locally" or "not adjusting to the culture" than it is for a married team member who spends equivalent time with family. It is valuable to discuss working hours and schedules with singles teammates, and help them maintain healthy boundaries.

Family Activities

Include singles in family activities, team celebrations, and meetings with national partners; talk to them about their preferences for involvement. They may want to join into family activities since they are away from their own families; or sometimes they may want to do things with other singles, and being with a family may make them miss their own families more keenly. Help facilitate their connecting with other singles locally or farther away, and allow time for that in their schedules and holidays.

Don't assume singles are happy to babysit; however if they offer to help in that way, then make it worth their while. Single team members can be a great extension to your family and they may enjoy that role, but don't presume they desire it. Make it easy for them to choose when and how much they'll be involved. Ask about their lives, don't just talk about yours. We don't have to avoid talking about our own interests, but we do need to pay attention to theirs.

Recruiting/Team Fit

Singles can make a great contribution to your team, but "singles" is a broad category, and it is wise, before recruiting, to think about who will fit your team. If you have only one single team member, consider whether they might end up being very lonely, and how you can be prepared to help with that. Is your team best suited to a younger, less experienced short-term single, who comes in a supportive role and may see the team leader like a "father figure?" Is your team suited to a more experienced single with professional skills who sees the team as a peer group and will expect to have a voice in the work? Work through questions like these as a team and with the recruit:

- Are there special challenges to being single on your team, including loneliness, team culture and local culture?
- What do you expect of them in work; what will be their living situation and role in the team?
- What can they expect of your team and leadership? What support will you provide, and how and through whom will you provide it?

Good Leadership

When singles, especially women, encounter problems in their lives and working relationships, will they find you receptive and a good listener? Can you provide someone else on your team or location who will help you fill that role and advise you on how to provide good leadership for them?

When missionaries are unable to resolve problems within the team, we give them the right to seek input from their team leader's supervisor. Will a single woman who hasn't resolved an issue with you feel safe taking that issue to another married man over you who seems to be your friend? Supervisors will do well to establish supportive rapport with singles so they can better oversee these relationships.

Friendships/Living Arrangements

Just because two missionaries are single doesn't mean they must be friends or will want to live together. How much independence would they like or need? How much independence is appropriate to the culture and ministry? How can we facilitate the best living situation and mutual interaction that will help them fit in and have a good home life? The singles on your team are the best ones to help you answer those questions.

Discussion Checklist

Here is a discussion checklist for team leaders, teams and single team members to work through regularly, particularly at times of transition:

- How have we recently shown that we value the single person? Are we making good use of their abilities?
- Have we gotten their input on recent team decisions? How did we do that?
- Are we providing them a good balance of safety and freedom?
- Is their personal time protected and encouraged or is it threatened?
- Have we welcomed them in family life recently without presuming upon them?
- Do we recruit with mutual openness about our expectations of each other?
- How have we provided for pastoral care and suitable leadership for the singles on our team?
- As a team are we using all members' gifts well, serving, appreciating and listening to all members?
- Is there a third party or team evaluation tool we can use to check our perceptions?

February 2011, Alice Hatch, Liz Meiners and Paul Meiners