

RESEARCH ON
MARITAL STATUS AND FAITH

SINGULAR INSIGHT 1

THE NUMBERS AND
ISSUES OF SINGLE
PEOPLE IN CHURCHES

by
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**THE EYES
OF THE
PERCEIVER**

A Christian Research Ltd survey conducted July
2014. Research funded by Network Christians
and further analysis by Single Christians.

January 2015

The Eyes of the Perceiver: the numbers and issues of single people in church © David Pullinger 2015

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Foreword

There has been little research on the marital status of those attending a Christian church. Regular censuses and reports for national bodies have focused on numbers and ages attending, rather than marital status. However 2012 saw the start of a series of surveys that start to shed light on marital status and Christian worship.

In 2012, Christian Connection, an online dating organisation, realised that many of their members were commenting adversely on their experience of church because of their marital status. They initiated a survey that gave 3,000 single adults a voice to talk about a range of issues. This was published in August 2014 on www.singlechristians.co.uk. What was then missing was actual numbers of single people and the proportions of men to women.

In 2013, Network Christians commissioned David Pullinger to do a small pilot survey of church leaders and also for single christians to identify the major issues they were facing.

That work led In 2014 to an opportunity to bring these strands together through the Christian Research Ltd Omnibus survey of their Resonate Panel. Network Christians funded the survey, whose cost was also reduced by Christian Research Ltd as their contribution.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Network Christians and especially their Director Susan Ashman for support in funding the research, Christian Research Ltd for recognising its importance and putting questions into their annual Resonate survey, and to Single Christians Ltd for funding the further analysis as part of their broader strategy to look at marital status and Christian faith.

David Pullinger, 7 January 2015

About the survey

ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS

Christian Research Ltd have a database of self-selected people with whom they conduct research from time to time, called the Resonate Panel. The research was conducted in July 2014 and 1,401 respondents completed the questionnaire.

The Panel has more men (53.3%) than the average more than once per month (45.8%, YouGov 2014). This probably reflects the fact that many of the Panel are church leaders which remains skewed towards men.

The age distribution of those responding come from a slightly older age group with the median (half being younger and half being older) at 57.1 years old.

THE SURVEY QUESTIONS

The survey asked questions addressing three areas:

- The proportion of single men and women in their churches.
- In response to the comments in the Christian Connection 2012 survey, how the respondents might make talks and sermons more relevant to single people.
- What they believed were the main issues facing single people.

1,401 panellists responded, with 400 being church leaders. This gave the opportunity to compare some responses between those in leadership and those not

ANALYSIS

Christian Research Ltd made an initial analysis of the results and further analysis was supported by Single Christians Ltd.

Summary

- People appear to see those of the same or similar marital status to themselves. Only single people themselves identified the actual percentage of single people in the church as measured in a later YouGov survey.
- Church leaders have a better overview of who is 'single', but slightly less readily think of the never married among the 30+ age group, which is a group that report feeling particularly overlooked in a previous Christian Connection survey.
- There appears to be a scale for the degree of singleness based on who is spontaneously identified as single: Never Married, Previously Married, Separated, and those with elements of singleness in their day to day living arrangements and experience.
- The Roman Catholic church was reported to have fewer single people than the other main denominations.
- There is general consensus on the major issues facing single people, with loneliness at the top.

Who is 'single'?

Single is not a great term. It is disliked by many to whom it refers. Many who are unpartnered or unmarried don't think of themselves as single. For example the younger who have never married think their state is one for dating. They may start to feel 'single' only when their friends are marrying at the average age of first marriage around 30 years old. The widowed sometimes describe themselves as 'married but my spouse passed on.' So we were interested in what church attendees immediately brought to mind when describing someone as single.

There can be elements of singleness when legally married, particularly in living arrangements and managing everyday life. For example those who are separated for a time before divorce are likely to live apart on their own. Other situations containing a degree of singleness include those whose partner is physically distant through illness or work, and when one of the partners is so ill that they don't recognise the other.

The responses show that there is a scale of 'singleness' that emerges:

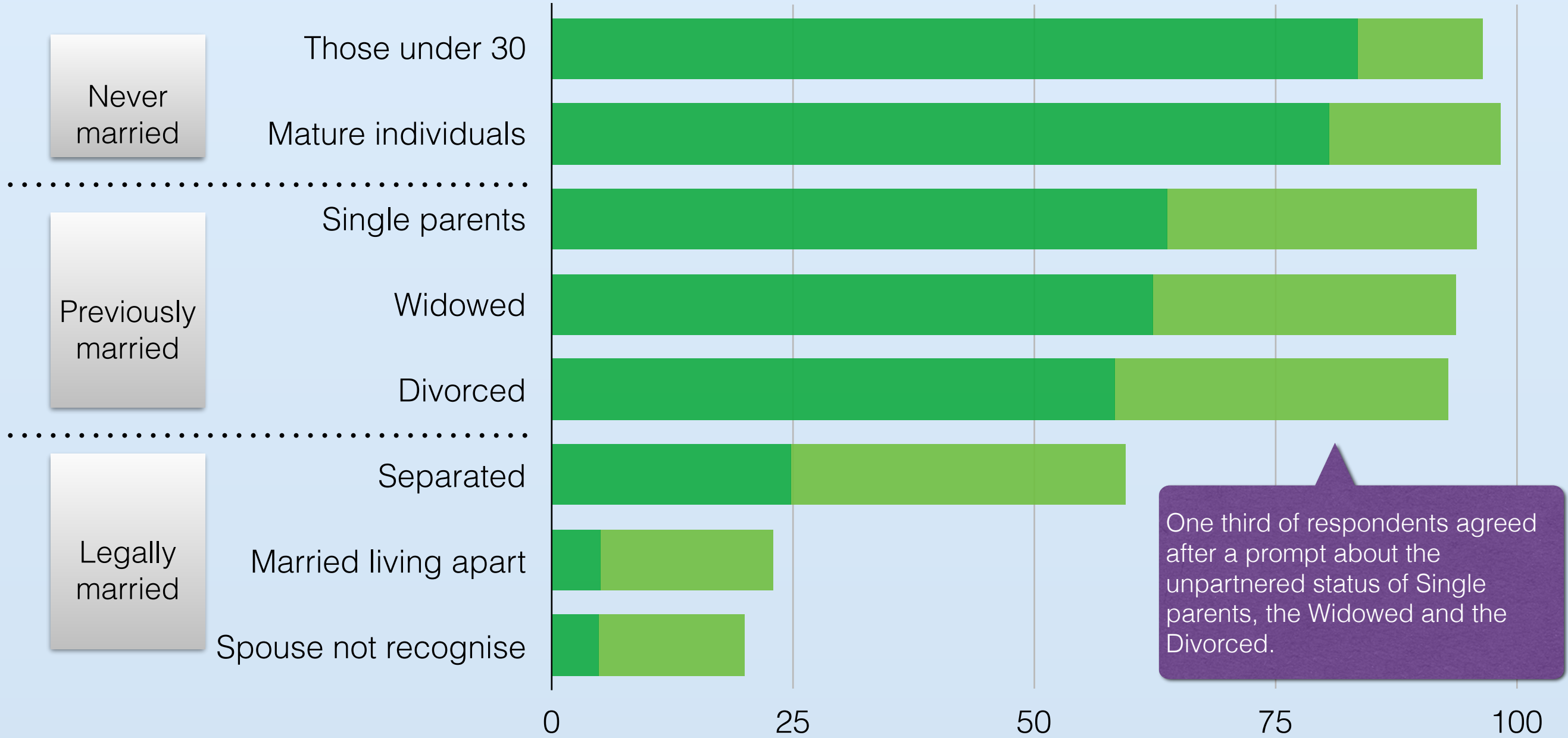
1. Never Married
2. Previously Married
3. Separated
4. Those experiencing singleness within marriage

The Never Married occur most spontaneously to mind, followed by those that have been previously married less so, the Single Parents, Divorced (no dependent children) and Widowed. And then roughly a 50/50 split on the question of whether those Separated should be counted as single or not, which was then followed by those legally married but living separate lives.

When prompted, most recognised the elements of singleness among those who had previously been married, but many did so too for the separated and those still married. Some prompting may be required to bring the living situation of some marital statuses to awareness.

WHO IS MOST READILY IDENTIFIED AS 'SINGLE'?

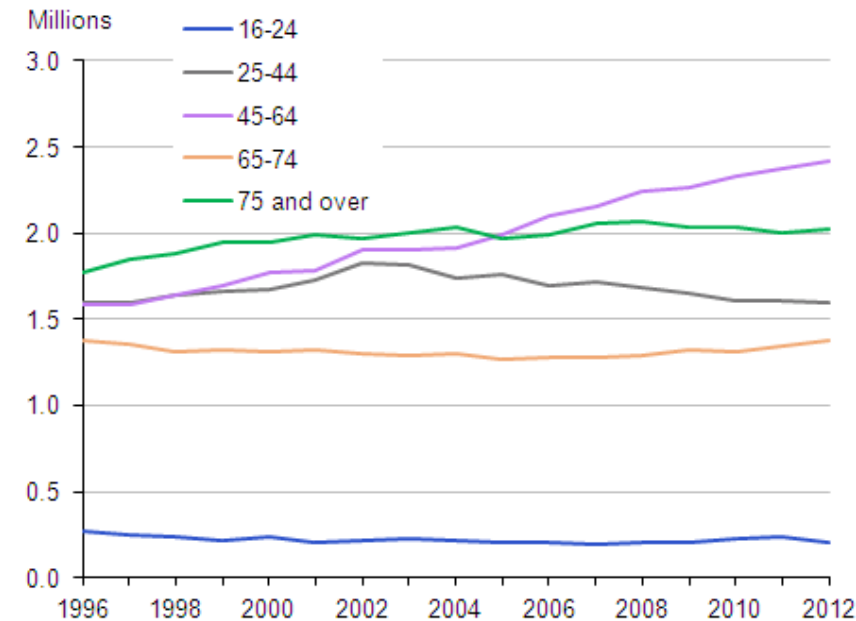
■ Spontaneously ■ When mentioned



Church leaders have a better overview, but less aware of the mature Never Married

Church leaders more readily think of the entire spectrum of situations in which people find themselves single. While doing so they appear slightly less aware of one group, mature individuals who have never married. In this sense, these appear more invisible to them than one would expect. This is exactly what was reported in the Christian Connection 2012 survey. Single adults aged 30 and above felt less visible within the church family and less part of it (www.singlechristians.co.uk). The under 30 year age group felt most part of the church. Once over 45 more agreed than disagreed with the statement that ‘the church says it is family but doesn’t treat singles as family members.’ One reason for the importance of this is that the biggest rise among those living on their own is in the age group 45-64.

Figure 7: People living alone in the UK: by age group, 1996 to 2012



Source: Labour Force Survey - Office for National Statistics

There isn't good enough data on the Never Married versus the other Unpartnered statuses within the official data sets. One thing that does happen through this age group is that men's attendance at places of worship declines, but women's starts to increase again, most of these being divorced (YouGov 2014). For example in the 45-60 age group, three quarters of single women in the church are divorced. It is still true, however, there are more unpartnered 30-60 year olds in society and in the church than the younger age group.

Unpartnered by Age group	Percentages attending places of worship at least every quarter	Numbers in GB
under 30	9.3% of makeup of church	653,790
30-60	11.6% of makeup of church	815,317
60-79	7.9% of makeup of church	555,370

The most likely reason why the younger come to mind more readily is that they are more regular in their attendance and more homogeneous in their characteristics.

GENERAL AGREEMENT BETWEEN LEADERS AND NON-LEADERS, BUT LEADERS ARE SLIGHTLY PRONE TO OVERLOOK THE MATURE WHO HAVE NEVER MARRIED

Percentage of those spontaneously thought of as single	TOTAL	CHURCH LEADER	NON- LEADER
Those under 30 who have not yet formed a relationship	86.1%	86.1	82.6
Mature individual who have never married	80.5%	80.2	80.6
Single parents with dependent children	63.7%	67.3	62.2
Widows and widowers	62.3%	67.3	60.1
Divorced and not remarried	58.4%	61.6	57.1
Separated/ undergoing marital breakdown	24.8%	29.8	22.7
Married with spouse living apart due to ill health etc.	5.1%	4.4	5.4
Married with spouse suffering severe dementia/Alzheimers	4.8%	5.9	4.3

Leaders appear to have a better overview of who is single. The only major grouping they identify less readily than non-leaders are those mature individuals who have never married.

Under UK laws these last three groups are legally married, but individuals might live as if single.

Who is like me, who is unlike me?

The estimate for the percentage of single people in the churches was different depending on who was making the response. In order to make the assessment people appeared to asking the question: Who is like me, who is unlike me? This natural human behaviour of seeing others in a similar position and estimating the remainder demonstrated our perception depends on our own marital status.

It is natural that each person tends to be alert to the cues around them to what their focus is. Most have had the experience of spending some time selecting a new car, or a new camera or some such, only to see them everywhere afterwards. Perception has been changed by one's interest. This what appears to be happening here.

If this were true, then the most reliable of the measures for the percentage of single people would be single people themselves. This turns out to be true. A later balanced socio-demographic survey on church attendance found a very closely similar percentage (YouGov 2014) to the one they gave for their numbers.

It also emphasises the need not to trust one's own judgement but to get reliable data on who is present at worship.

Differences in perception were discovered in:

- Partnered/unpartnered
Partnered people estimated far fewer single people than the unpartnered.
- Male/Female
Females estimated for more unpartnered people than men.
- Leaders/ Non-leaders
Leaders, as we have seen, have a better overview of the different types of single people, but estimated them as lower than the Unpartnered probably because of the number of them that are married.
- Age group
The estimate of the percentage of single people in church largely follows the age profile of the church (Tear Fund 2007). Age groups appear to be looking at others of like age.
- Denomination
At present the only data on denominational difference. The Roman Catholic church, which many assume would have a greater percentage of single people because more leaders are unmarried celibates, are estimated to have one of the lowest percentages of single people.

PEOPLE APPEAR TO SEE THEIR OWN KIND OF MARITAL STATUS

What is the proportion of single people in church?

Partnered vs Unpartnered

Partnered
27.2%

Unpartnered
32.4%

This is very close to the actual figure (from YouGov 2014) 32.0%

Female vs Male

Female
30.4%

Male
27.5%

There are higher numbers of unpartnered females in church

Church leader vs non-leader

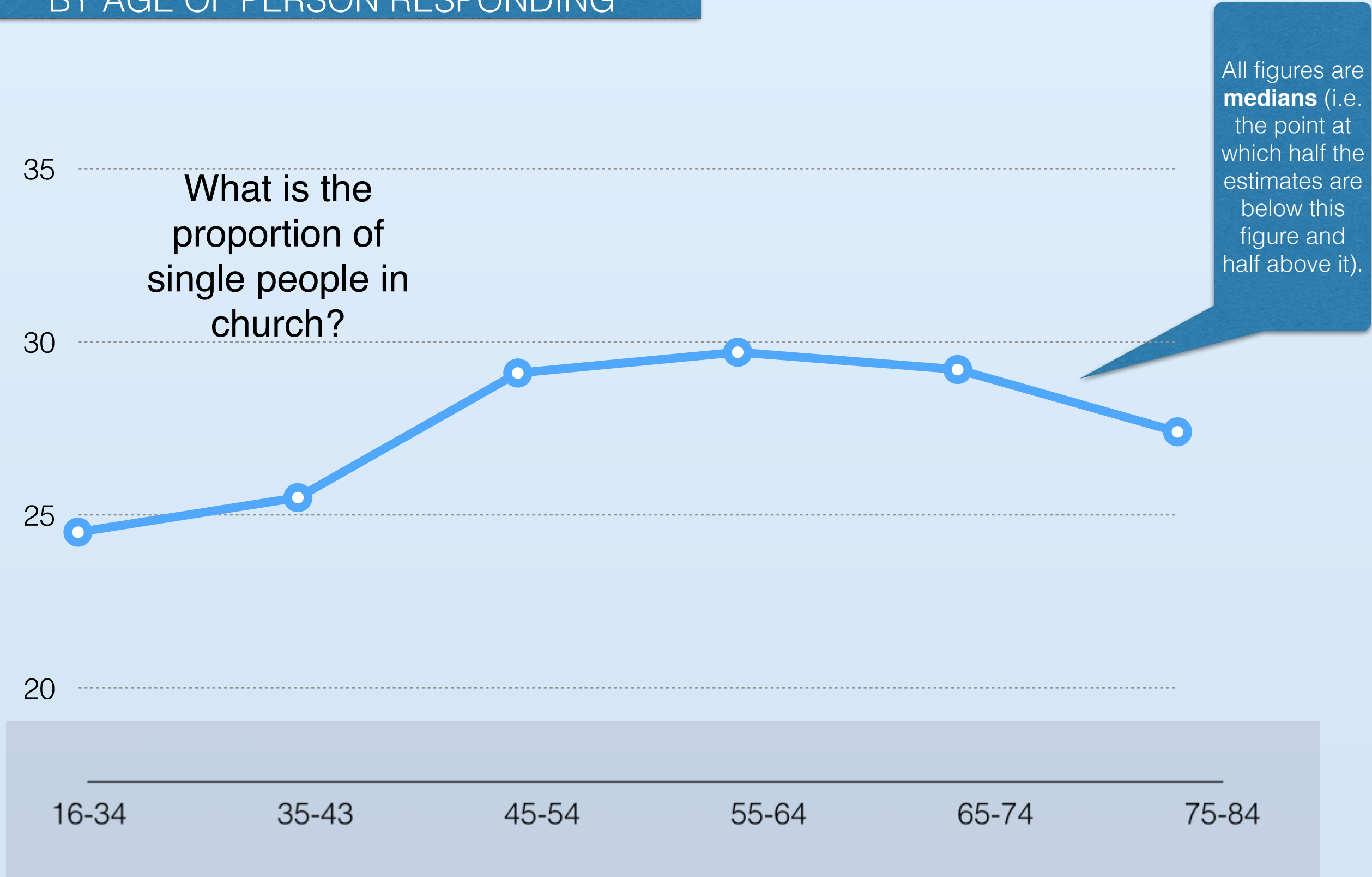
Church leader
30.3%

Non-leader
27.0%

Church leaders have a good overview, compared with non-leaders, but slightly lower than the actual figure probably because many are married

All figures are **medians** (i.e. the point at which half the estimates are below this figure and half above it).

NUMBERS OF SINGLE PEOPLE IN CHURCH BY AGE OF PERSON RESPONDING



CHURCH DENOMINATION AND THE PROPORTION OF SINGLES

What is the proportion of single people in church?

Denomination	Estimated median proportion of single people in church
Congregational/URC	34.8
Methodist	29.8
Anglican/CoE	29.8
New	28.4
Catholic	26.9
Independent	26.0
Black Majority Churches/ Pentecostal/Apostolic	24.5

All figures are **medians** (i.e. the point at which half the estimates are below this figure and half above it).

Talks and sermons relevant to single people

THE LACK OF RELEVANCE FOR SINGLE PEOPLE

One of the main complaints among single adult Christians in the Christian Connection 2012 survey was the prevalence of sermon illustrations made about, and applications to, marital relationships and family life. They felt excluded by this habit.

Moreover, the top reason that leaders were inspirational for them as single Christians was the giving of talks and sermons that were relevant. How could this be done? We asked a question about what would make talks and sermons relevant.

AVOID USING ILLUSTRATIONS ONLY FROM FAMILY LIFE

The majority response was never having heard such a talk or sermon particularly relevant to single people and so had nothing to contribute. The second most common response was to advocate avoiding using illustrations and applications that were only targeted at families and to be aware of the make-up of the congregation or audience being addressed. People divided on whether to avoid entirely the use of illustrations based on marital status, or if one is used relating to the family then another should relate to single people (bearing in mind the many different situations of singleness).

Thereafter there were many interesting suggestions that are written up in a separate summary in Singular Insight 2.

ISSUES FACING SINGLE PEOPLE

In most families, the interpersonal dynamics are one of the most important aspects of living. This is not true for single people in the same way. What issues face them?

This question was asked through a multiple choice ranking, with the results on the following page. Some caution should be applied to these as the survey methodology did not present them in a random order.

We also compared the leaders' responses with those of the non-leaders. The only difference in the order was that leaders placed 'higher stress levels' and 'lower mental well-being' above 'fewer social opportunities'. These are highly related, according to social psychologists, and one might consider the level of mental well-being an effect from the degree of social interaction. The leaders may be seeing the results of lower social connections and the non-leaders looking for greater social opportunities.

RESPONDENTS ON THE MAJOR ISSUES THEY THINK FACE SINGLE PEOPLE TODAY

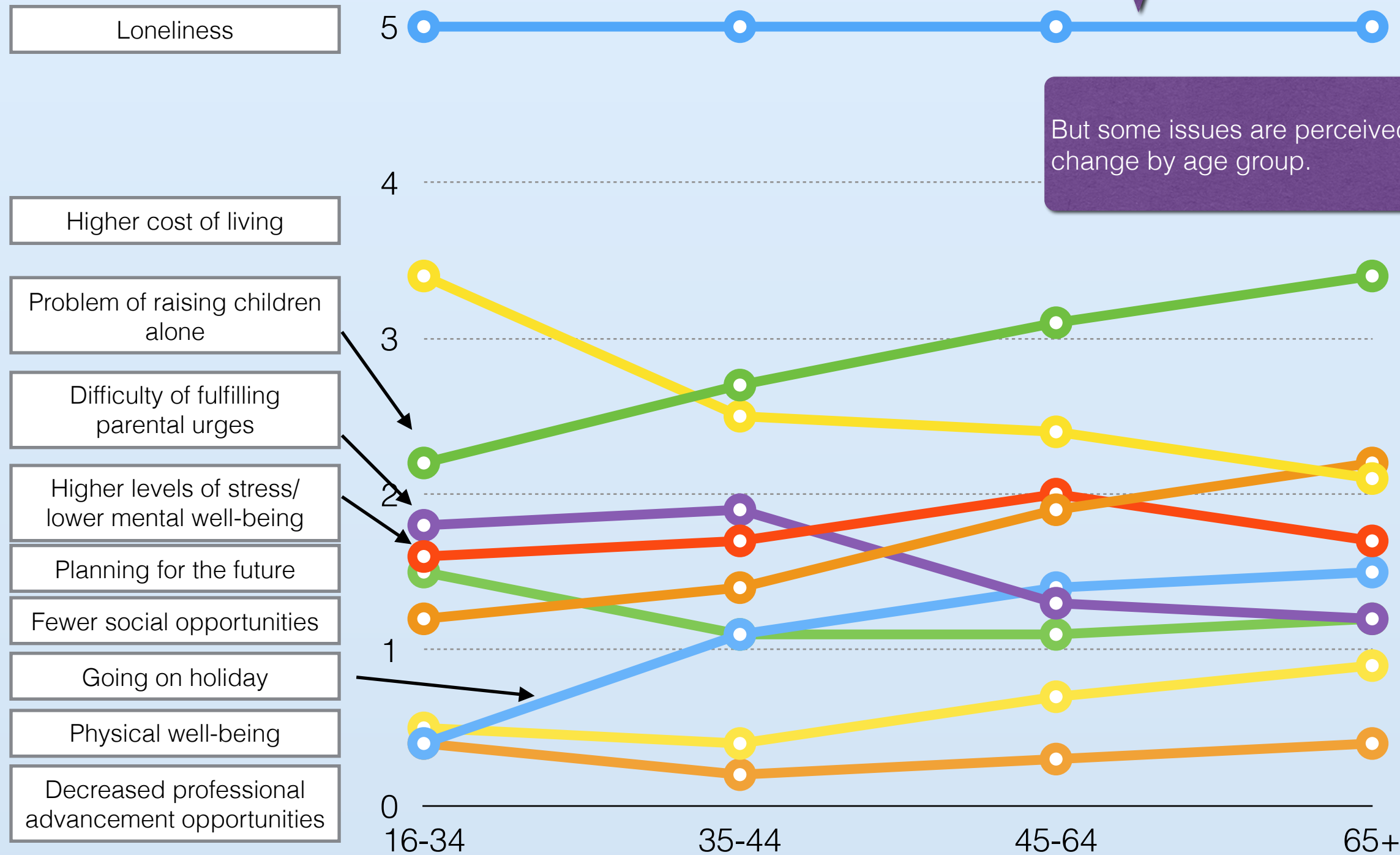


Figures are **weighted rankings**. All chose importance on a scale of 1-5 and then the final order is the average of all respondents.

AGE GROUPS IDENTIFY DIFFERENT ISSUES FOR SINGLE PEOPLE - EXCEPT FOR LONELINESS

Loneliness is identified as the top issue for single people by every age group.

But some issues are perceived to change by age group.



Weighted ranking of all respondents by age of respondent

KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED FOR SINGLE PEOPLE AT DIFFERENT AGES

Some issues peak or valley at certain age groups

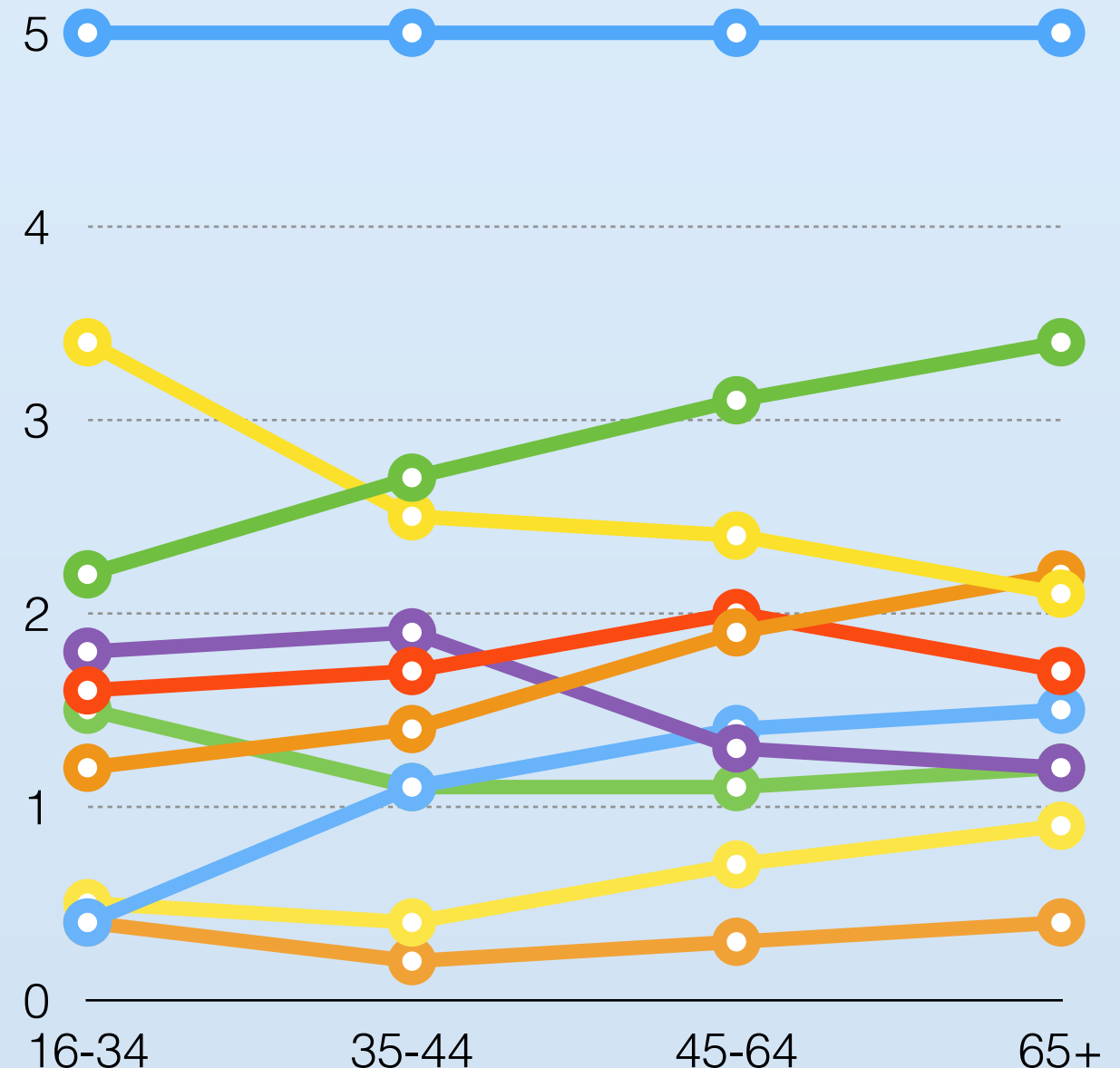
- Higher cost of living particularly affects 16-34 age group
- Difficulty of fulfilling parental urges particularly affects the 35-44 age group, but physical well-being is less an issue for them.
- Higher levels of stress particularly affects the 45-64 age group

One issue decreases by age

- Higher cost of living

Some issues increase by age

- Difficulty of raising children alone
- Few social opportunities
- Going on holiday
- Physical well-being



Reflection and further research

NEW DATA AND INSIGHT

This survey has helped our understanding of marital status and faith considerably. There is data here that has not before been studied or reported, as far we have been able to find out.

PERCEPTIONS OF SINGLENESS

The spontaneous identification of who is single and the perceived percentages is new and interesting data. Just under 1 in 3 in the GB churches across all denominations are single (YouGov 2014). That is not most people's perception, nor that of the leaders though they get near it.

Data like this brings home the need for new eyes to check that no-one is being overlooked. It is possible that in these 1,401 churches the numbers just happen to be smaller. However there is still need to check one's perception is an accurate reflection of the situation. Single people over the age of 30 years old feel overlooked and the evidence unfortunately appears to support that experience.

DENOMINATIONAL DIFFERENCES

There has not been a previous study looking at marital status across denominations. The results proved surprising in some aspects and further research with larger numbers is needed to check these. The national church bodies can then reliably consider what to do about the differences and single people identify churches where they are more likely to be supported.

ADDRESSING THE LIFE SITUATIONS OF SINGLE PEOPLE

One of the main ways to help single people feel included in the worship is through reference to their life situations in sermons and talks. To this end, we asked what the major issues that face them are. This needs some refinement through discussion and articulation.

Associated with the issues faced by those living on their own is the need for advice to speakers on how to tackle 21st century Western democracy issues that do not easily emerge from the pages of a lectionary or passages from the Bible. Awareness of such issues is the first step and we pray that they are a useful start.

About the funders

Network Christians (NC) Established for over 25 years, Network Christians is a 'Not for Profit' Community Interest Company, run by Christians for Christians. Website: www.networkchristians.com

Single Christians Ltd (SC) is a not-for-profit company set up to facilitate a better understanding of the needs and aspirations of single people of Christian faith, primarily through research and provision of resources. Website: www.singlechristians.co.uk

About the survey company

Christian Research Ltd (CRL) is a registered Charity part of the Bible Society that operates as an independent market research agency and aims to turn research into credible, insightful and actionable results. Website: www.christian-research.org

Surveys referenced

Christian Connection/Single Christians 2012
Published on www.singlechristians.co.uk 2014

Christian Research Ltd/Network Christians 2014
Published in *The Eyes of the Perceiver: the numbers and issues of single people in church* Singular Insights 1
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2014

About the author

Dr David Pullinger FRSA is a popular speaker on faith and singleness, basing his talks on surveys and research. Author of *A Desire to Belong: thinking about single people in church* a book for congregations to think about those who are unpartnered in their midst and analyst of the Christian Connection 2012 survey.

He was formerly a Director of the Church of Scotland's Society Religion and Technology Project, afterwards holding senior policy and strategy roles in industry and government and being instrumental in establishing international digital publishing and the UK government's website strategy.

The Eyes of the Perceiver: the numbers and issues of single people in church

The results of a Christian Research Ltd survey funded by Network Christians

Who we see in church depends on who we are. We see those like us more clearly. Our perception distorts the actual numbers. This means it is easy to underestimate the numbers of minority groups - including single people. In particular, the mature singles tend to be overlooked.

There is an intrinsic sliding scale of singleness. The survey found that people readily identify some as single, particularly those who have never married, and then slightly less readily those who had been previously married, followed by those who are separated. There is recognition too of elements of singleness in the midst of married life.

Preaching to all in the congregation. Many single adults feel excluded by sermons and talks in church. There was very clear advice to avoid using only illustrations and applications based on family life.

Loneliness, the pain of solitariness. Across all ages, loneliness is identified as the major issue facing those who do not have partners. Awareness of this should be included not only into talks and sermons but into every part of the life of the church community.

