

This is a sensitive issue that bears serious thought. I have many singles in my practice who are depressed often because they are lonely and don't know where to fit. They want to be a part of the body of Christ but don't know how to find a group that will relate to and accept them as they are. Read on for more info.

Helping Hearts Heal

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Single Evangelical in Need of Advice? Books Have Plenty

By GINIA BELLAFANTE

By any standard, Michelle McKinney Hammond qualifies as a prolific writer. In less than a decade, Ms. Hammond has written 20 books, 5 of them published in the past 18 months, and nearly all are devoted to helping Christian women navigate the territories of love, dating and self-empowerment.

Close to one million copies of her books have been sold, and Ms. Hammond's talks at churches and Christian conferences draw thousands of women.

In one of her most popular titles, "Sassy, Single and Satisfied," which has sold 150,000 copies since its release last year, Ms. Hammond, who is 46 and single, asks, "Why do we feel that if we are not married, we are not free to enjoy life to the fullest?"

Ms. Hammond is perhaps the most visible face of a growing evangelical advice industry for single men and women that borrows more from the vernacular of psychotherapy than theology, and advances the discussion of romantic attachments beyond a focus on chastity.

Traditionally, Christian-themed books about dating have been intended for teenagers and college students. In recent years, recognizing that Americans of all faiths are marrying later in life, Christian presses have published books on the more-nuanced issues that adults face as they fall in and out of love.

According to the Evangelical Publishing Association, the number of Christian-themed books on single living sold in the United States over the past year has risen by 35 percent, and the number of books specifically on dating 21 percent. Two years ago, the online

bookstore Christianbook.com offered 59 titles directed at singles; it now sells more than 300.

Notably, many of the books, like "Living Whole Without a Better Half" by Wendy Widder and "Table for One" by Camerin Courtney, a columnist for Christiansinglestoday.com, seek to cast a positive light on being single, a status still stigmatized in many conservative Christian communities.

When Dr. Amy Voelker, a 33-year-old pediatrician in Kansas City, Mo., read "Table for One" two years ago, its message of living a full life even without a partner led her to adopt a child on her own, she said. "It gave me comfort to know I was not the only one who had not found Mr. Right," Dr. Voelker said.

Of the approximately 15 million evangelical Christians in America, about 3.5 million are single adults, 500,000 to 1 million of them never married, according to the Barna Group, a research group that analyzes Christian trends. But demographics alone are not responsible for literature devoted to these single men and women.

Beyond the proscription on sex outside marriage, evangelicals grapple with relationship issues many other young Americans do not, spiritual leaders and authors say. For example, many single people raised in conservative Christian denominations believe it is not necessary to actively pursue a partner. "They believe that God will deliver their mate to their doorstep," said Ben Young, an associate pastor at Second Baptist Church in Houston and author of the book "The Ten Commandments of Dating." "What I always tell these people is, 'Well, then the only person you're going to meet is the postman or a Jehovah's Witness.'" Mr. Young said.

Such passivity, some ministers and Christian counselors say, can lead to the sort of poor decisions that result in failed marriages. Consequently, many of the new books stress a near-scientific approach to analyzing compatibility. A recent book by the popular Christian writer H. Norman Wright, "101 Questions to Ask Before You Get Engaged," asks couples to reveal not only what they might ask Jesus to change in their lives, but also what they would like to say to their parents that they never did.

"There's a belief that as long as you marry a Christian and you're turned on to that person, that's enough," said Neil Clark Warren, the author of spiritually minded relationship guides like "Date ... Or Soul Mate?"

"It's an absolute scandal for Christians that the divorce rate is as high as it is," said Dr. Warren, a former dean of the graduate school of psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif. According to a survey of 7,043 Americans chosen at random by the Barna Group in 2001, 33 percent of all marriages for born-again Christians ended in divorce. "In the Christian camp, there is so much emphasis on premarital sex," Dr. Warren said, that it has led to "a push to marry young."

Dr. Warren, an evangelical Christian who holds a doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of Chicago, is the ostensible leader of what might be termed the better-selection movement. Four years ago, hoping to curb the divorce rate, Dr. Warren, 69, founded the Web site eharmony.com, which asks subscribers to fill out a 436-question survey and tries to match couples in 29 areas of compatibility. About 15 of the questions relate to spiritual practice. Although the site is nondenominational (and it will not match up same-sex couples), it is particularly popular among Christians because of Dr. Warren's prominence.

Regina Clark, 34, an evangelical Christian from Washington, D.C., who works as a hairstylist, heard an advertisement for eharmony last year on a Christian radio station. "At first I thought the word of God says my husband is supposed to find me; then I said maybe God is using this as a vehicle for my husband to find me," Ms. Clark recalled. She did not own a computer, but went out and bought one. Through eharmony, she met Daryl Clark, a firefighter, in January, and they were married in April. The time frame is not what Dr. Warren would have advised. He believes no couple should marry before the two-year mark.

Another reason for the explosion of interest in Christian single life is the belief among some unwed evangelicals, and even some ministers, that church culture has lagged behind secular society in validating the experiences of those without partners or families.

"The church has adapted the concept that there is something wrong with you if you've reached a certain age and you are not married," said Heindrich Shirley, 34, a pastor at Redemption World Outreach Center, a Pentecostal church in Greenville, S.C., with 6,500 congregants, more than half single. "We've given singles the idea that if they're single they are diseased or gay," Mr. Shirley said. He is holding a conference for singles later this month, at which Ms. Hammond, the author, will be the featured speaker.

The importance of marriage and family to church life can leave many singles feeling alienated. "Sunday mornings are my loneliest time; I go to worship and I often feel like crying," said Kristee Jackson, 30, a social worker in suburban Chicago who grew up in an evangelical household.

Though many churches have long maintained singles ministries — church services and social outings just for singles — unmarried congregants say they often feel segregated by them. At least one among the new wave of books, last year's "Single, Not Separate," calls for churches to integrate singles better. "Single people should not feel like misfits, especially at church," said Virginia McInerney, the author of the book.

Like many of the new books, "Single, Not Separate" urges women to be self-reliant. Ms. McInerney's written by women with a strong message of self-reliance. Others with a similar bent include "The Single Truth" by Lori Smith and "A Girl and Her Money: How to Have a Great Relationship without Falling in Love" by Sharon Durling, a former stockbroker in Chicago.

Ms. Courtney, the online columnist, who is 32 and single, said she was motivated to write "Table for One" to counter the attitude of some single women that " `I won't buy a house, I won't buy nice dishes — I'll just get some at Target, I won't do anything until I get married.' "

Ms. Smith, an evangelical author and speaker, included in her book a chapter titled "You May Not Get Married." Such a message of self-sufficiency ultimately proved too unconventional even for the producers of "Sex and the City," who ended their series this year with all four main characters in long-term relationships.

Ms. Smith's book, on the other hand, says that marriage is neither preordained nor is there any guarantee that a woman will find a husband if she goes seeking one. That kind of pragmatism may stem partly from the demographic reality that there are far fewer single, churchgoing Christian men than there are women. "The imbalance is real and has historical precedent," said Lauren Winner, an adjunct professor of religion at the University of Virginia. Ms. Courtney said some of the churches she has attended have had a ratio of four single women to every single man.

"I once got a letter from a reader that said, `I know that even if I were stranded on an island, God would send me a mate,' " Ms. Courtney said. "I wanted to write back and say, `If you're stranded on an island, you shouldn't be worried about a husband, you should be thinking about a boat.' "