

SINGLES MATTER:
AN EMERGING GLOBAL DEMOGRAPHIC

By Barry N. Danylak, Ph.D.

One of my African seminary students recently shared with me his eager willingness to forgo marriage and family for the prospect of serving as a dedicated church leader and global church planter. That student is not alone! One of the most significant demographic shifts in our world today is the growing numbers of singles in society and in our churches. As leaders, shepherds and disciple-makers we need to not only recognize the changing demographics, but also be prepared to respond. Our response requires theological clarity, interpersonal compassion and strategic adjustments in how we approach evangelism, discipleship and kingdom expansion.

Though the growth in singles in society is typically associated with Western nations, it is not exclusive to the West.¹ Singles are growing in countries on all six major continents. The *Our World in Data* report on global trends in marriages and divorces indicates that while the data is sometimes sparse, available estimates in Latin America, Africa and Asia demonstrate that the decline in marriage is a global phenomenon. In the period of 1990-2010 their findings show a decline in marriage rates in the majority of countries around the world.² In some countries the decrease of marrieds relative to singles is evident from the 1970's and 1980's onward, while in others it is as recent as the decades of 2010's.

Among a number of Asian nations the growth in singleness has been dramatic. Between 1970 and 2017 marriage rates have declined 51 percent in Japan and 43 percent in South Korea.³ Singleness

¹ Since the fall of the iron curtain the following countries are generally accepted as the Western world: the United States, Canada; European Union plus UK, Norway, Iceland and Switzerland; Australia and New Zealand.

² Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser (2020) - "Marriages and Divorces". *Published online at OurWorldInData.org*. Retrieved from: '<https://ourworldindata.org/marriages-and-divorces>' [Online Resource]

³ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). *World Marriage Data 2019 (POP/DB/Marr/Rev2019)*. Copyright @ 2019 by United Nations, made available under a Creative Commons license (CC BY 3.0 IGO) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/igo>. Japanese rates declined from 10.0 in 1970 to 4.9 in 2017; Korean from 9.2 to 5.2. A 2018 Japanese news story decried the spiraling marriage rate noting that 2017 had recorded the lowest number of marriages since statistics began. A 2018 Japanese news story decried the spiraling marriage rate noting that 2017 had recorded the lowest number of marriages since statistics began.

among Japanese women aged 18 to 39 jumped from 27.4% in 1992 to 40.7% in 2015, while singleness among men jumped from 40.4 to 50.8 percent.⁴ More recent alarm bells have sounded in China where between 2013 and 2019 marriage rates fell 33 percent. Given the imbalanced ratio of three single men for every two single women resulting from the former one-child policy, as well as growing education and economic opportunities for women, many Chinese millennials are choosing foregoing marriage to pursue other options.⁵ Other nations have also followed suit. The Philippines Statistics Authority reported a 20.1 percent decrease in the number of marriages between 2005-2015 all the while the national population was increasing over the same period. A news story on the report observed that more and more people are feeling that marriage isn't quite the right thing for them, and that as they feel the need to "be themselves," getting married means losing some of their individuality.⁶ The decline and delay in marriage is seen in a wide range of other Asian nations as well, from Israel, Qatar and Kazakhstan in the west to Thailand and Indonesia in the east.⁷

Similar patterns of growing singleness are found among various Latin American and African nations. Argentina is representative of this pattern in Latin America where the marriage rate declined 63 percent from 1975 to 2016.⁸ Other Latin American countries with marriage rates at an all time low include Mexico, Uruguay, Honduras, and Bolivia.⁹ In the African nation of Diboujti the marriage rate declined 53 percent from 1962 to 1999.¹⁰ Numerous African countries show a pattern of individuals

⁴ Cyrus Ghaznavi, Haruka Sakamoto, Shuhei Nomura, Anna Kubota, Daisuke Yoneoka, Kenji Shibuya, Peter Ueda, "The Herbivore's Dilemma: Trends in and Factors Associated with Heterosexual Relationship Status and Interest in Romantic Relationships Among Young Adults in Japan - Analysis of National Surveys, 1987-2015," *PLOS ONE*: November 9, 2020, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0241571.

⁵ Nector Gan, "Chinese Millennials Aren't Getting Married, and the Government is Worried," January 29, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/29/china/china-millennials-marriage-intl-hnk/index.html>; Male/female sex ratio derived from 2020 China Statistical Yearbook, Chart 2-13. <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsjsj/2020/indexeh.htm>.

⁶ Philippines data.

⁷ UN Data

⁸ From 7.3 marriages per 1000 people in 1975 to 2.7 in 2016.

⁹ Mexico (4.3), Uruguay (3.2), Honduras (2.6), and Bolivia (2.2). The most recent marriage rate in the U.S. by comparison was 6.5.

¹⁰ From 11.6 marriages per 1000 people in 1962 to 5.4 in 1999.

delaying marriage and staying single longer,¹¹ ranging from Kenya in the east to Senegal in the west, and from Morocco and Algeria in the north to South Africa in the south.¹²

This demographic shift has been so pronounced in the West in recent decades, that most Western nations today can be aptly described as “marriage-minority cultures” reflecting not only the overall declining rates of marriage but also the fragmentation of the concept of marriage in legally recognizing various ‘marriage-like’ relationships such as civil partnerships, common-law relationships and same-sex relationships.¹³ Not only are younger generations postponing marriage, more and more are questioning the need for the institution altogether.¹⁴ Yet marriage-like relationships are not simply re-creating marriage by another name, the prevailing pattern indicates a continual increase of those never-married and relationally unattached.¹⁵ Single and unattached persons are an ever-growing proportion of society!

Is this shift a threat to the church and the furtherance of the gospel? On the one hand, the church must stand against the general fragmentation and redefinition of marriage in affirming a clearly articulated and biblically grounded vision of God’s design and purpose for marriage. We need to proclaim and model the high view of marriage and sexual relations in marriage that is given to us in the Scriptures. But at the same time, we must affirm and model an equally high view of singleness that is sexually pure and kingdom inspired. Jesus and Paul both modeled healthy singleness and invited others to do likewise. In Christ we are all equally blessed with every spiritual blessing regardless of our marital

¹¹ For example, Among Moroccan men in marriageable sweet-spot age of 25-29, 69.6 percent were married in 1971 versus only 26.9 in 2018. Married Moroccan women 25-29 also declined over the same time period from 89.5 to 65.2 percent.

¹² African UN Data.

¹³ For declining rates of marriage and increased age of first marriage, see OECD (2016), *Society at a Glance 2016: OECD Social Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264261488-en>, page 85, figures 3.11 and 3.12. For marital status breakdown among EU nations, see EUROSTAT statistical database: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_pjanmarsta/default/table?lang=en. This report uses nine categories of marital status.

¹⁴ Canadian data of 25-29 year olds. Include reference to Catron article.

¹⁵ Canadian Cardis and Eurostat data.

status. A major global relief agency estimates that 70 percent or more of global relief work is carried out by single persons. The dramatic growth of the New Testament church in the early centuries was built on the backs of many men and women who followed Jesus in remaining single for sake of the kingdom. The growing demographic of singles in the world today is not a threat to the future of the church, but rather a strategic opportunity for the church to recover the spirit of its nascent vision for sacrificial, passionate and emboldened kingdom expansion. Just as marriage models the mysterious union of Christ and his church, so too singleness models the gospel in proclaiming the sufficiency of Christ over all things in our lives.