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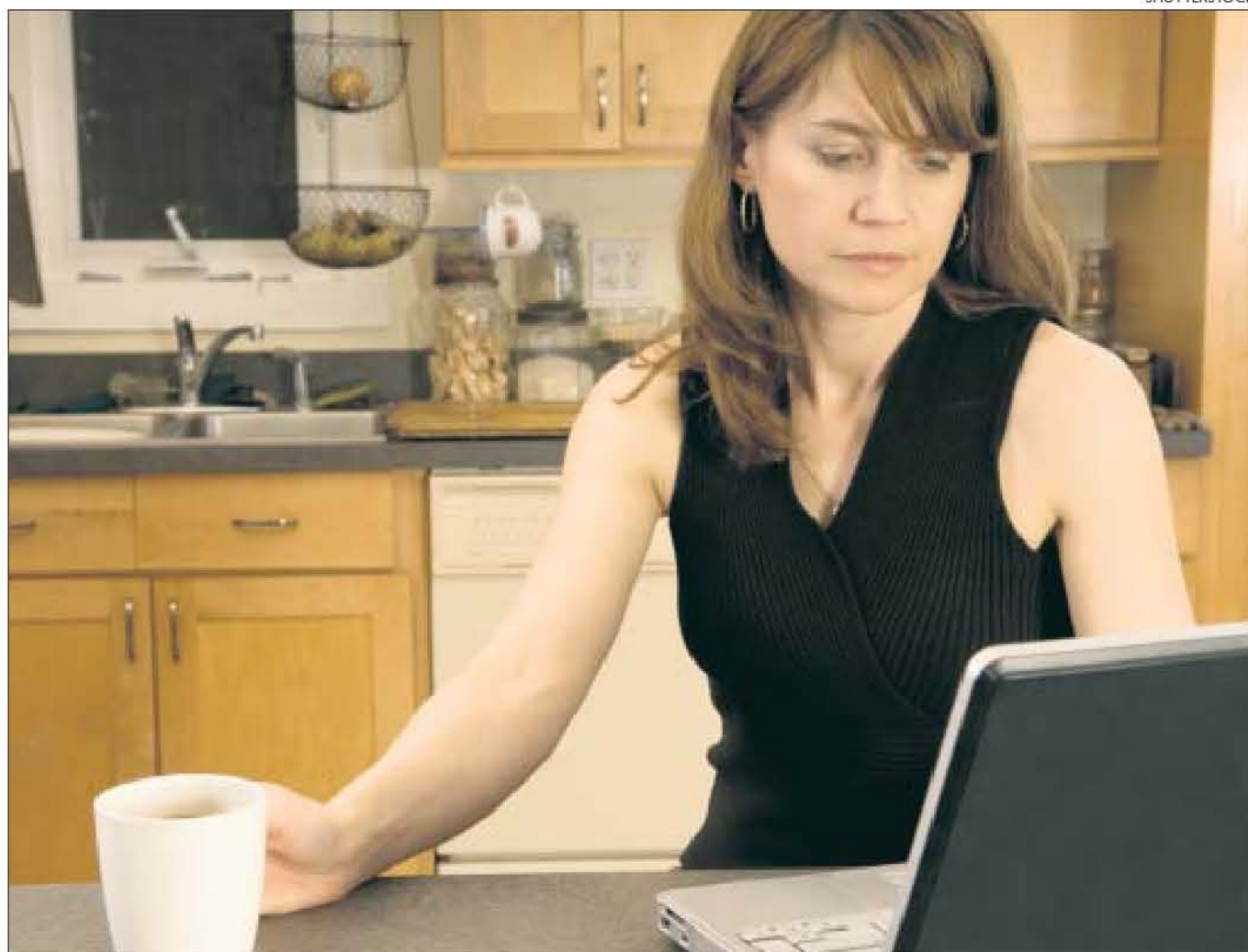
the quest goes online

useful and acceptable?

charity Christmas gifts

PLUS: review of Advent books

Looking for a soulmate



SHUTTERSTOCK

Searching online: single Christians are turning increasingly to dating websites like Christian Connection

Where do single Christians turn when they want to find love? They go online, discovers Rebecca Paveley

rose from nine per cent in 1973 to 17 per cent in 2004. Those most affected by this rise in singleness are in the 25-to-44 age-group — predominantly women who have good jobs and live in metropolitan areas.

Yet the Church, in many places, has not responded to the challenge. Although it can be good at catering for young mothers and toddlers, and at counselling couples through marriage courses, "singles ministry" is rarely found in the UK. In the United States, however, it is more prevalent.

MS ELTON believes that this is due to a very British awkwardness. "There's

a certain amount of embarrassment in church circles, as they don't want to advertise themselves as dating organisations, which I can understand. But singles don't just want to go speed dating, they want to be included and recognised in church.

"A lot of single people would like to have some organised Sunday lunches. Sunday lunches are a time when people come together."

The Revd Stephanie Couvela, the chaplain at Scargill House, a retreat centre, echoes this. She has written a book on the single life. "Single people in the church are seen as a resource, but they don't feel that singleness is valued," she says. "We are made to feel we fall short of the ideal."

"There is an idea out there that the idealised Christian way of life is to be married with children, and that exerts pressure on people to conform. People spend a lot of time wanting to be something else — married — and it becomes a kind of identity-in-waiting. The Church, and married couples, just don't know what to do with us."

She felt at her happiest in church when invited by families to share in their family life, for example to pop round for Sunday lunch or to watch a film. "It's intimacy I miss, rather than sex," she says.

Ms Couvela will be one of the leaders of a Positively Single week, to be held in January next year, at Scargill House. It will celebrate the single life but will "own up to some of the things that are a bit rubbish, too".

THE Revd Joanna Jepson, chaplain to the London College of Fashion, has become involved in the issue of singles in the Church after being approached by a group of students who attend Holy Trinity, Brompton (HTB). She believes that Evangelical churches, in particular, have to take

responsibility over the issue if they are going to preach that Christians should marry only other Christians.

"Churches aren't addressing the huge crisis that is having two women

to every man in our churches," she says. "If churches insist that single Christian women should marry only Christian men, where does that leave half the women?"

"Last Valentine's Day, HTB took questions. One of those that wasn't answered on the night was: 'If I can't find a Christian man, can I have IVF to start a family?' These are pretty serious and explosive questions, which just aren't being addressed — often because the leadership in these churches is predominantly married."

She set up a meeting between HTB and some students, and, since then, the church had made a real effort to change, she says. "It is not about being single in your 20s. It's about being single in your 30s and 40s. That is a whole different ball game — how you live your life without touch, without financial support, without children."

"Churches can't ignore difficult questions about singleness because they fear it will get them on to theologically tricky ground. The painful questions need to come out."

Being single in church can be even more challenging when the single person is the vicar — particularly in small rural parishes. "With single clergy in rural parishes, some people will always think they are gay," she says.

SOME parishioners are concerned about their vicar's single status; others are just wary, or slightly bemused. Many clerics use Christian Connection, but they may not make it obvious on their profile that they are ordained.

One of them explains why: "I don't major on being a vicar in my profile because there are women who will go for the job, the status, and sometimes the big house, rather than the man. And it also tends to attract women who are needy — I can be a magnet in an iron-filings factory of needy women."

As the incumbent in a rural parish, he finds life as a single vicar very tough, and isolating. "I work at

Continued overleaf

ON AN average Sunday morning in an average church, the vicar will survey his or her congregation and will see the children, the young families, the newly retired, and the elderly. He or she might notice that there are more women than men, but is less likely to notice that at least a quarter — and more than a third in some churches — of this congregation have come alone, and will leave alone. Some may be widowed, some divorced, but most are just single people looking for a partner.

Single people in church have become almost the last taboo subject, Jackie Elton believes. She set up the Christian online-dating agency Christian Connection ten years ago this month.

"The biggest problem for single people in church is invisibility. Churches just don't realise that there are single people out there," she says. "Church leaders won't believe that, in their own congregations, there might be 30 to 40 people living on their own. And yet the statistics are going up all the time, and it is not just elderly people who have been widowed, though a lot of them are still looking, too."

The National Census suggests that the number of people living alone



Singles' advocate: Jackie Elton

'Singles want to be included and recognised in church'

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'Unless we did something like this, it was never going to happen'

PETER ROGERSON met his wife within a few months of signing up with Christian Connection. "I hadn't been on the site very long before Jill and I started emailing," he remembers. And, less than a year later, they were engaged, after he proposed to her on the second floor of the Eiffel Tower.

Both Mr Rogerson, aged 56, and Jill, had waited years to meet someone through work or church. "I think we both realised that unless we did something like this, it was never going to happen. I looked at various dating websites, but Christian Connection had

integrity, and the fact that it was a Christian site was very important to me.

"It asked questions about what was important, too, in the profile — not just eye colour and height, but church involvement and commitments."

Mr Rogerson, a deputy head-teacher, had a number of married friends but did not meet single people his own age. "I didn't go out clubbing, and I didn't meet people through work; so Christian Connection offered me a chance to meet different people."

They discovered that his wife-to-be had lived just two miles away, in Romford, for the previous 18 years. The couple have now been married for three years.

social life, I have to drive a long way to the nearest city to go out, and I can't do that on a Saturday night if I have a service the next morning. Most people just don't realise how difficult it is. In my ten years in parish ministry, only once has a single woman under the age of 45 come into my church."

And then there are the rumours, and the gossip in the parish, that being single can generate. "If a single vicar is above a certain age, it is probably assumed he is homosexual. And at some stage — I'm not quite sure when it happens — a man ceases to be just 'single', and becomes a bachelor."

CHRISTIAN CONNECTION has become a lifeline for many single Christians. It provides a "safer" option than other online-dating sites because it is seen as more "caring". It has experienced startling results — several hundred weddings, and plenty of babies, have followed on during the past decade.

A poll on the site suggests that 70 per cent of the single Christians who responded would marry only another Christian. And 26 per cent would marry only within their own Christian tradition. Given the huge imbalance in the number of single Christian women to men — 70 per cent to 30 — singleness equals childlessness, Ms Elton says.

The site allows singles to meet others without the risk that comes with meeting a partner in your own church, which can mean that if it doesn't work out, relationships at church are spoilt.

Ms Elton is pleased at the success of the site (she says it is the busiest Christian website in the UK). But despite the fact that it is making a profit from the failure of many churches to respond to a real need,

'Being single in your 30s and 40s is a whole different ball game'

JUSSI RATILAINEN



Two women to every man: face the questions, Joanna Jepson says

she is angry that single people are being let down.

"There is a real need for people to feel integrated and accepted into churches. Single people feel unaffirmed and unable to serve more in church."

Running the website — and its counterpart, eventsforChristians.co.uk — has "a strong element of calling," she says.

After ten years, there are about 30,000 people active on the site each month. On average, 66 people join the site each day. They are asked the standard questions about eye- and hair-colour, but are also asked about their churchgoing, their denomination, and their involvement in their church. It has become apparent that many users do not go to church any more because of the discrimination they have felt as single people in their church community.

Lesbian and gay Christians can also sign up, but few do: "There are far better sites for them elsewhere on the internet," she says.

Happy conclusion: James and Judy Cornthwaite met through Christian Connection, were married in 2007 and now have two children

FOR all its talk of serving and empowering single people, there is the obvious paradox that the website underlines the preconception that most single Christians complain of — that to be a good Christian you ought to be married with children.

Ms Elton is very aware of the tension. "We're not suggesting that everybody needs to go and get married, but people like to feel that they have a choice," she says. "One poll we

'People have come to accept internet dating as very ordinary'

BEN, a charity worker, has been a member of Christian Connection ever since it was launched at the Greenbelt Festival ten years ago. He has had several relationships through the site, but he is, as yet, unmarried.

"It's been incredibly heartening how sane everyone I've met has been. It has been really good to feel I can still go to my local church and contribute there — even though there are no other single people — because of Christian Connection."

"Without it, I'd have to travel to a huge church miles away, where I could meet loads of younger, single people. I don't have to worry when the next single person is going to walk into my church any more."

"I had no qualms at all about signing up. I think people have come to accept internet dating as very ordinary. And I feel that Christian Connection is managed very well; they try to keep a pastoral eye on people on the site."

did said that a third of single people wanted to be married; another third said they would be happy married or single; and one quarter liked being single. So the assumption that everyone who is single desperately wants to be married is not right."

Some churches disapprove of the website. "Often, in more Evangelical circles, you get the 'If God wants you to find somebody, then it will happen.' But if you want a job, you apply for a job, you don't wait for God to find one for you, so why should finding a partner be any different?"

Some people join and make friends, and stay for years, while others meet someone after three months and never return. Many of those who do meet someone embark on whirlwind romances, and get married only months after meeting, as "success story" testimonials on the website's home page illustrate.

One such personal story comes from "Sarah": "Little did we know that an email from James would be the start of a whirlwind distance romance, culminating in an engagement in April. If it hadn't been for [Christian Connection], we would never have met our soulmate. James and I, coincidentally, also discovered we have mutual friends."

"The blessings God has showered on us have been incredible. Both our families are delighted, and we are getting married in December." www.christianconnection.co.uk www.scargillmovement.org

Continued from previous page

home, and, if I'm not careful, I can spend long periods of time not speaking to people," he says.

"To start work on a Monday morning, I have to have made breakfast,

cleared up, done the ironing and washing — and all without speaking to anyone. If I'm not careful I could implode."

He has yet to hear a bishop address the particular stresses facing single clerics, he says. "If I want a

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