



How does the number of men and women in our churches affect us all? asks **Annabel Clarke** and **Nathan Blackaby**.

A BETTER BALANCE

Female or male, we're all created in God's image and equal in worth and significance (Genesis 1:27). The Bible also clearly values singleness and marriage, two other key aspects of identity.

Single people are equally valuable and competent as married people. At the same time, God's desire from the start has been for marriage to reflect His covenant relationship with the church, to be foundational to society, and to be personally experienced by most people.

We are God's image bearers in all our relationships. The church can articulate a clear vision of what healthy Christian singleness, dating and marriage can involve. Christians can speak this out, live it, and model it to the next generation and the rest of society as a witness to God's grace and love.

But think of when you walk into your church – what do you see in reality? Maybe more women than men? (Have you counted?) Maybe men who could encourage each other more in their faith? Maybe children who don't have a Christian (or any) father at home? Maybe single women who'd like to get married one day?

The Engage Network is a group of leading Christian organisations, including Christian Vision for Men, British Youth for

But think of when you walk into your church – what do you see in reality?

Christ, Ridley Hall Theological College, Care for the Family, Single Friendly Church, and New Wine. Their collaborative work and vision is "to make singleness or marriage a genuine choice for all Christian women and men, through a church which has an equal number of men and women and teaches about healthy Christian singleness, dating and marriage." (For more information about the Engage Network, visit www.engage-mcmp.org.uk)

What are the problems?

There's an overall imbalance in our congregations of two men to three women. The majority of the UK church has double the number of single women to single men. This has serious consequences for us all.

1. For men

There's a key need for the church to reach

and disciple more men effectively, primarily for their own sake, but also for the health of the whole church and wider society.

2. For women

Up to two million Christian women face a choice: marry a non-Christian or remain single and childless. Many are finding that they're sacrificing their marriage and children because of their faith.

3. For children and young people

If current trends continue, only about 16 per cent of today's church's grandchildren will have two Christian parents.

4. For singleness

A third of adults in church are single; many report that they feel isolated in churches that are overly family-focused, and most want to marry another Christian.

5. For dating and relationships

There are often unhealthy psycho-social dynamics between single men and women, with a power balance in men's favour due to the significant over-supply of women in the dating market. More than half (54 per cent) of single Christian adults said that they haven't dated for at least a year, or it is many years since they last went on a date.

6. For marriage

Research by the Evangelical Alliance found that more women than men were married to a non-Christian. More than 90 per cent of Christian couples expressed happiness with their marriage, while only 66 per cent of those in a mixed marriage did so.

7. For parenting

'Spiritual fatherlessness' is increasing, both within families and within the Christian community.

What are the reasons?

We're in a spiritual battle (Ephesians 6:14)?

A church with an equal number of men and women would be spiritually stronger. Marriage between Christians can have a powerful intergenerational impact. We know the enemy will seek to destroy Christian marriages, but through the church imbalance, he is preventing them from happening in the first place, and by doing so, also preventing the birth of children to Christians.

Male ministers do not perceive the problem when it doesn't affect them?

Most church leaders are men (84 per cent in 2017) who have been able to get married and have children. Many are, therefore, less aware of how church can be experienced by non-Christian men and aren't motivated enough to address the issues causing the pain of Christian women who can't have a family.

Male ministers are worried about excluding or offending women?

The key message is probably 'balance' – women are unlikely to mind if the church further encourages men's ministry, as long as it's very clear that the women are equally encouraged.

Men's and women's brains are just hard-wired differently?

Actually, they're not – this is what psychologists call a 'neuromyth', and we need to avoid making stereotyped generalisations about men and women or giving these as reasons for the lower levels of men in our churches.

A gender balanced church would be spiritually stronger.

What reasons do people give?

One UK study showed that people also suggest the lack of men is due to romanticisation of the church and its worship, the lack of masculine role models and friendship patterns for men, and church creating a sense of passivity. Men don't always feel that they belong in church, and it's also likely that social issues affecting males more than females (such as suicide) aren't always effectively addressed by the church.

What are the solutions?

The Engage Network has produced a handbook, *7 Reasons Your Church Needs More Men: How to lead a gender balanced church supporting healthy singleness, dating, marriage and youth*. This blends research, theology and very practical solutions to address all these issues. Steve Clifford, the former general director of the Evangelical Alliance, said the handbook is "a vital subject and a key resource".

If you're male, female, single, dating, married, a parent or youth worker, it shows what you can do to flourish even more fully in your situation, and how you can support others. The vision grids at the end of the chapters have many practical suggestions for every Christian individual and leader. Here are a few:

How can we create a balanced church?

- For individual men – talk to other men and your church leaders about developing men's ministry in your context. Make use of resources to

The solutions are available, so let's each pray and take a step forward.

grow your relationship with God. Go to Christian events for men.

- For the local church – make men's ministry, evangelism and discipleship central to the church's life and mission. Gather a small strategy group. Discuss with experienced organisations like Christian Vision for Men how to create a long-term evangelistic men's ministry in your setting.

How can we create healthy singleness, dating and relationships, and marriage?

- For individuals or couples – intentionally develop how you're 'living life to the full' (John 10:10) in each area of life. See dating and relationships as two distinct stages, each with a beginning, middle and end, so that we can create a less pressurised church culture. Consider in more depth what is unique about being married to another Christian, or link with others for support/prayer if your partner is not yet a Christian.
- For parents and youth workers – explicitly disciple children and youth around healthy identity and relationships.
- For local churches – good leaders actively listen to the needs of different groups in the congregation. Make sure everyone is fully included. Provide regular teaching on singleness, dating and relationships, marriage and parenting.

At a national level, we would know things were working well when all theological colleges, denominations, leadership networks and conferences/festivals provided teaching and resourcing on all the issues addressed by Engage.

Can you imagine if the church across our country was baptising an increasing and equal number of men and women, boys and girls? Imagine a time when, with the right balance and relevant teaching, we are more of a relationally-flourishing church?

The solutions are available, so let's each pray and take a step forward in playing our part to change things, for God's glory.

Annabel Clarke is a chartered psychologist and a co-chair of the Engage Network. Nathan Blackaby is the CEO of Christian Vision for Men and a co-chair of the Engage Network.