

How do single Christian women feel about not having children?

Introduction

Why?

A survey was carried out to investigate the experiences of single Christian women who don't have children. The aim was to explore how they feel about their situation, and whether there are ways in which the church can do more to support them appropriately.

How?

The survey was conducted using Survey Monkey, shared through online platforms including Engage's e-newsletter and social media channels. It is recognised that the participants were a self-selecting group. Quantitative and qualitative analysis was carried out by Annabel Clarke, Chartered Psychologist and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society.

Who?

There were 315 respondents, aged 35-69 from across the UK.

Almost all (89%) were single and had never been married/in a civil partnership. A few were separated (9%). There were none who were widowed, and 1% who were divorced/in a civil partnership which has now been dissolved. 7% said that they are currently in a mutually exclusive, romantic relationship (but not engaged).

41% said that they have a job which involves working with children or young people, 41% said they did not, while 16% said 'Not currently, but I have had in the past.'

Only 6 % said that they had intentionally chosen to be single and not have children.

Summary

There is a need for people to avoid making assumptions about why single Christian women don't have children, and about their feelings regarding their situation. Experiences and feelings vary, but are equally valid.

The church gender imbalance is leaving many Christian women childless through circumstance, not choice, causing great pain which is often unrecognised by the church. For further information about the issues and solutions, please refer to The Engage Network book *7 Reasons Your Church Needs More Men: How to lead a gender balanced church with healthy singleness, dating, marriage and youth*.

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Christian faith

96% said they have been a Christian for 10 years or more.

81% of the respondents are active, committed and engaged Christians.

The commitment of the women to their faith may be a factor contributing to their situation, because:

- A) They may be more likely to want to marry a man who shares their faith.
- B) They may be less likely to be able to find a suitable man (active/mature Christian) due to the church gender imbalance.

Which of the following do you feel best describes you?

- Christian
- An active Christian who follows Jesus
- An active Christian who follows Jesus, prays and reads or listens to the Bible at least once a week, and attends Church at least every month



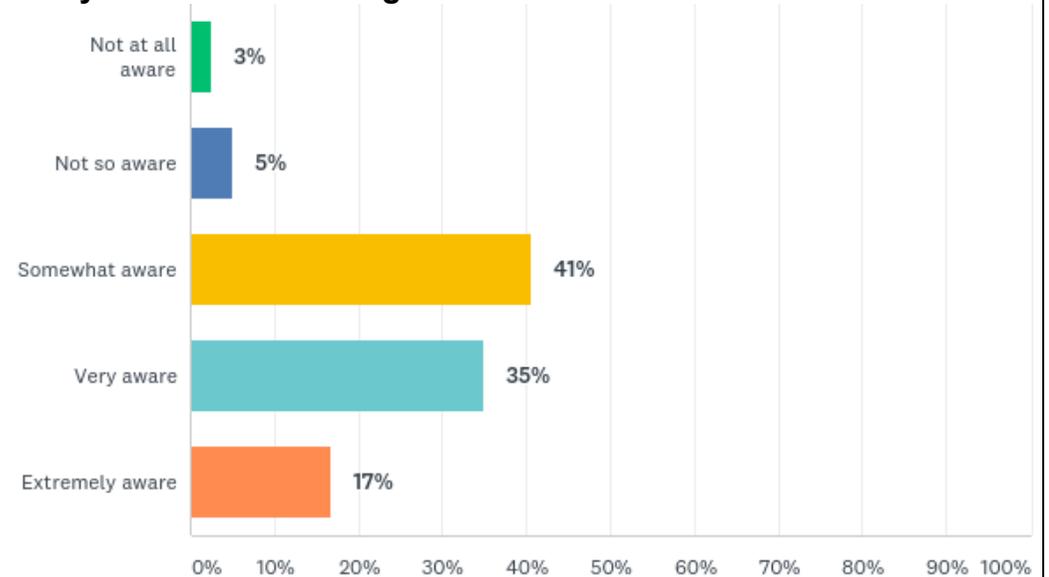
Awareness of female fertility rates

The women completing the survey were over 35. Over half (52%) of the women said they are 'Very aware' or 'Extremely aware' of female fertility rates.

41% of them said they are just 'Somewhat aware'.

As part of balanced teaching about healthy singleness, dating and relationships, marriage and parenting, there could be a case for the church teaching both men and women about both male and female fertility rates.

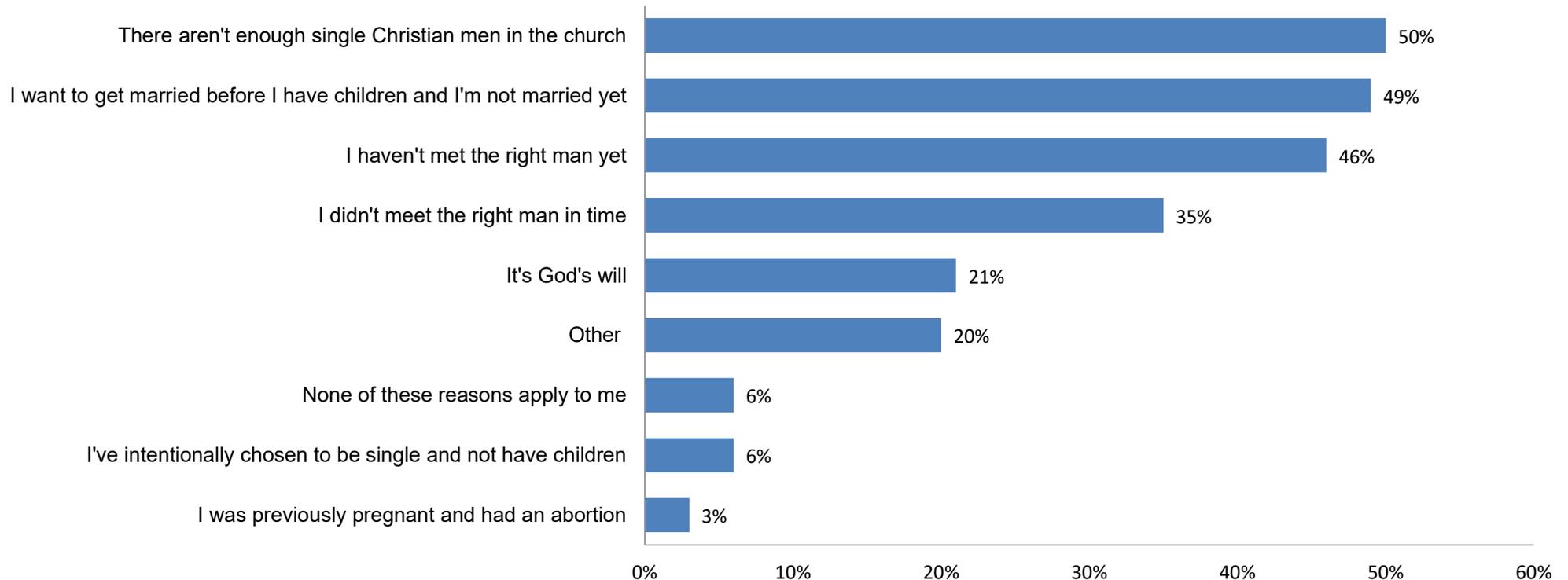
Which of the following best describes your awareness of women's fertility rates at different ages?



Reasons for not having children

The number 1 reason the women gave for them not having children was “There aren’t enough single Christian men in the church”, closely followed by related reasons – about wanting to get married before having children, and either not having met the right man yet, or not meeting the right man in time.

Which, if any, of the following reasons describe why you think you don't have children.



What are the issues?

What, if anything, are the most difficult things about being childless as a single Christian woman? Please summarise up to 10 key points as 'headlines', or leave blank if you feel this doesn't apply to your experience.

The reported themes are given in decreasing rank order of frequency, with the most common issue mentioned being 'Exclusion'.

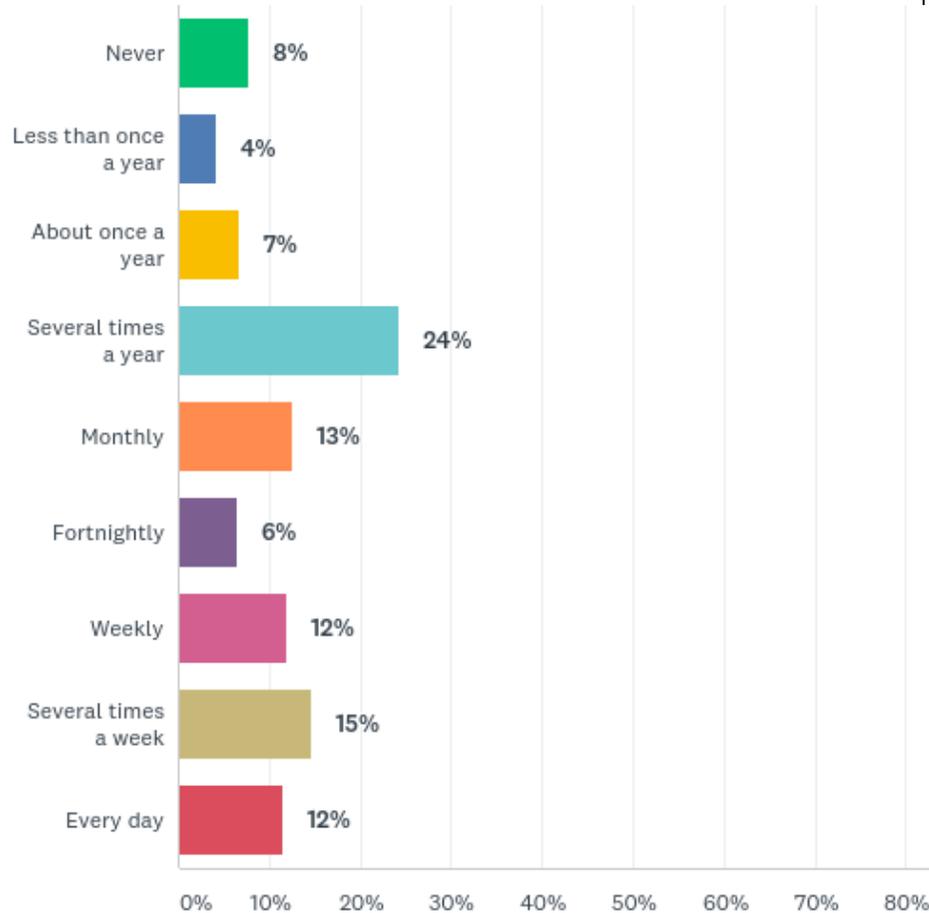
	Theme	Subtheme	Example quotes
1	Exclusion	Not belonging Isolation Insensitivity	People moving into different 'seasons' and feeling left behind. There is no 'group' for you to belong to. Not being included in social things. When everyone around you at a similar age has children. Feeling like a freak/abnormal/an outsider. Going to children's parties without a child. No peer friends in the same situation. Isolation from the church community. Being left out of conversations with mummies. Watching contemporaries boast of grandkids. Other women only talking babies/bring up the kids.
2	Being looked down on	Patronised Judged	Getting treated as a child. Other women tend to look down on you when you say you don't have children. Male leaders who ignore you because they don't talk to single women. Church behaves as if I have no value. Being treated as incomplete/unworthy/lacking value/un-Christian/unfortunate/invisible.
3	Loss/ struggle	Being a mother Biology Having a family	Dream of being a mum unfulfilled. I will not become a grandmother. No generations to bless. Hormonal struggle that is hard to express to others. Maternal instincts are still very strong. Never will know what it is like to have your own child. Lack of family. Families go through experiences together. Not being a mother of a family unit.
4	The future	Care Loneliness	Who will look after me/help me out /look out for me when I'm old? Worrying about being lonely in the future.
5	Loneliness		Loneliness. Loneliness. Loneliness.

6	Relationships	Others busy Commonalities Nobody's top priority	Limited social time with other women who are busy with family. People don't know what to say to you. Difficulty relating to mothers. My life always revolves around other people.
7	Assumptions	Assumptions Perceptions Expectations	The assumption that "there must be something wrong." People assume I want kids. People who genuinely believe it's your fault for not trying harder even though our generation was encouraged to wait for the right person. Perception that you are weird. Expectations that you must have a family.
8	Faith	God Prayer Sacrifice	Doubting God exists or cares. Your heart longs, desires for a good gift that is withheld. Dealing with unanswered prayer. It feels as if God isn't answering me. Thinking that if you weren't a Christian you'd likely have children as you'd have been more likely to meet a right man in time.
9	Church culture	Emphasis Events	The emphasis on children, family, youth within church culture. Church is built around the family experience. Church family events. Family services. Mother's Day sucks, even if it's done sensitively.
10	Practical issues	Holidays Finance	No one to go on holiday with. No immediate nuclear family to celebrate Christmas and other key holidays. Can't buy a house.

Biological clock

Nearly half (45%) of the women think about their biological clock fortnightly or more often, and for 12%, it's every day.

How often, if at all, do you think about your biological clock/your age, and the fact you don't have children?



Impact on emotional well being

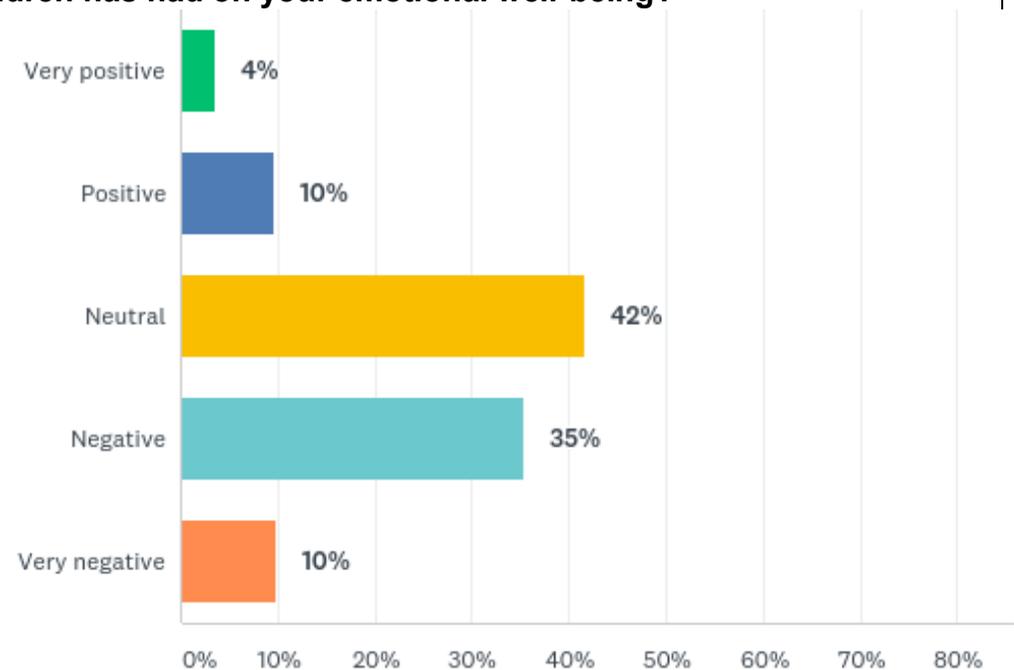
Nearly half (45%) of the women said that overall, not having children has had a 'Negative' or 'Very negative' impact on their emotional well being.

42% said the impact was 'Neutral'.

14% said the impact was 'Positive or 'Very positive'.

This highlights the need for churches to be aware of, and support the many women whose emotional well being is being adversely affected by not having children.

Overall, what sort of impact, if any, do you think that not having children has had on your emotional well-being?



Impact on social relationships

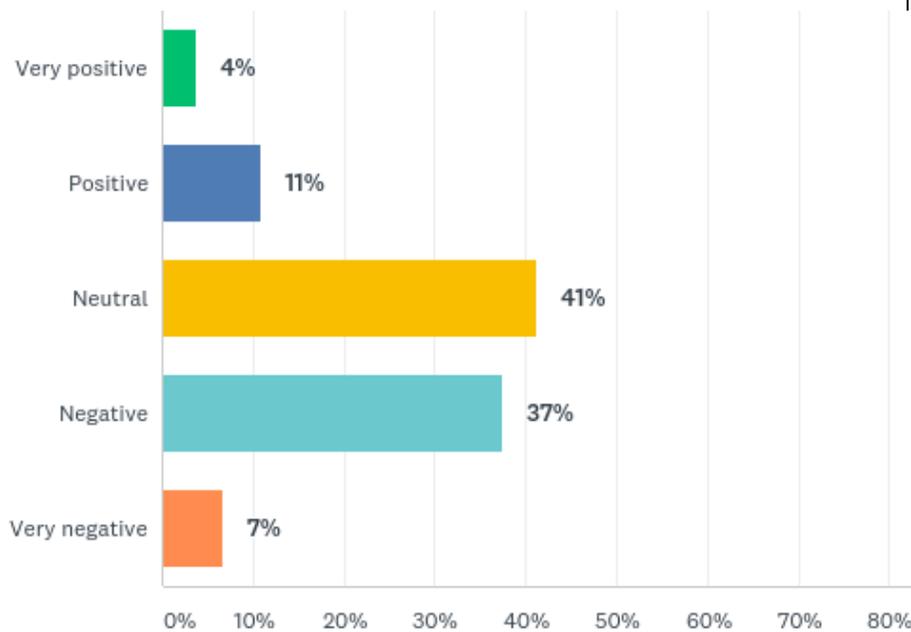
44% of the women said that overall, not having children has had a 'Negative' or 'Very negative' impact on their social relationships.

41% said the impact was 'Neutral'.

15% said it was 'Positive' or 'Very positive'.

This highlights the need for churches to be aware of, and support the many women whose social relationships are being adversely affected by not having children.

Overall, what sort of impact, if any, do you think that not having children had on your social relationships?



Impact on faith

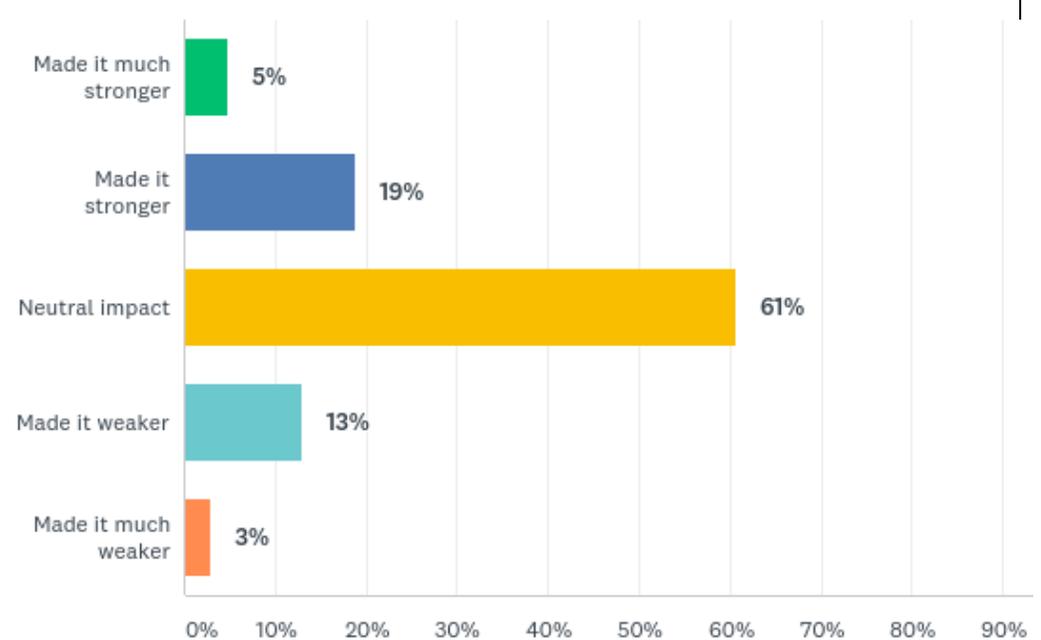
61% of the women said that overall, not having children has had a 'Neutral' impact on their faith.

24% said that it had 'Made it stronger' or 'Made it much stronger'.

16% said that it had 'Made it weaker' or 'Made it much weaker'.

This highlights the need for churches to be aware of, and support the women whose faith is being adversely affected by not having children.

Overall, what sort of impact, if any, do you think that not having children has had on your faith?

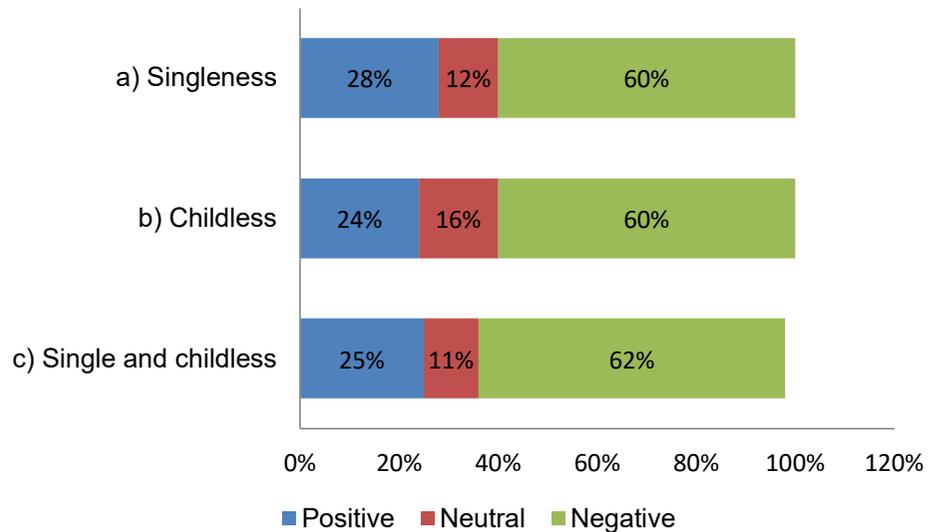


The feelings involved

Some women used different words to describe what it is like for them to be single compared to words they used to describe being childless, and different words again to describe their situation of being both single and childless.

While some women (about ¼) used positive words to describe their experience of being single, most used negative words.

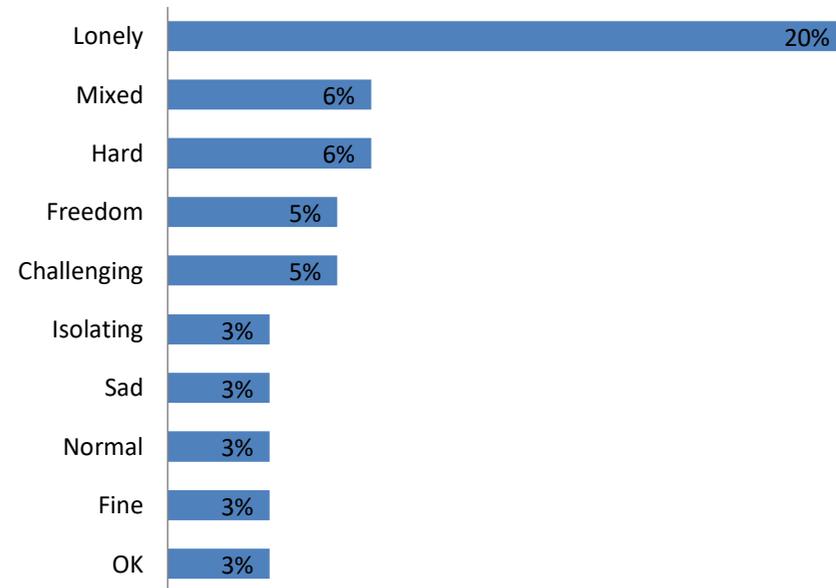
Use one word to describe what a) being single, b) being childless, and c) being single and childless is like for you. (Words were then analysed and categorised as either positive, neutral or negative words.)



Singleness

“Lonely” was the most frequently used word to describe what being single is like.

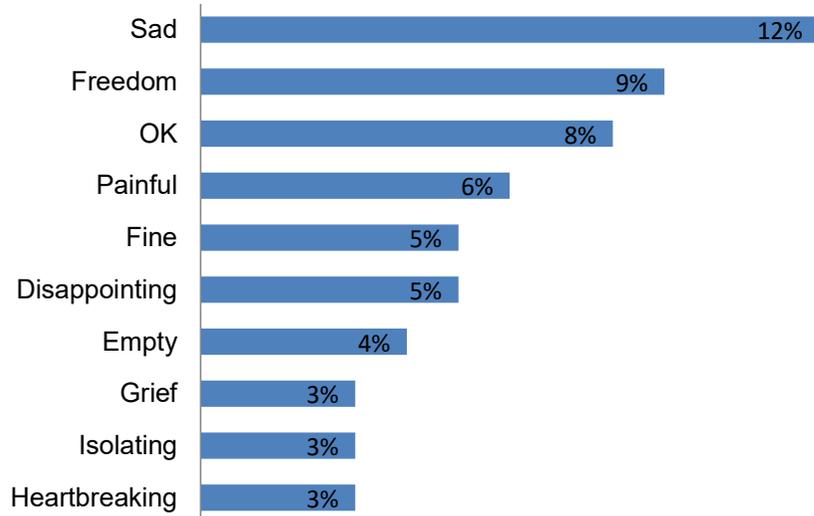
The 10 most frequently used words as a percentage of the total responses were:



Childless

“Sad” was the most frequently used word to describe what being childless is like.

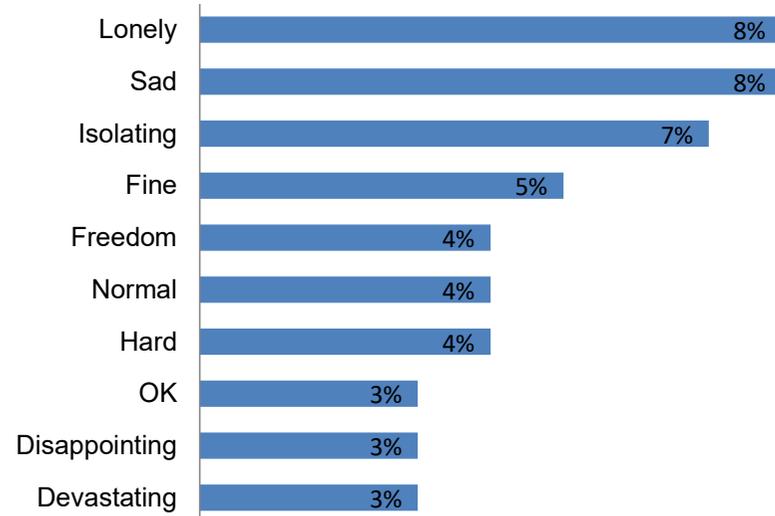
The 10 most frequently used words as a percentage of the total responses were:



Single and childless

“Lonely” and “Sad” were again the most frequently used words to describe the combined experience of being single and childless.

The 10 most frequently used words as a percentage of the total responses were:



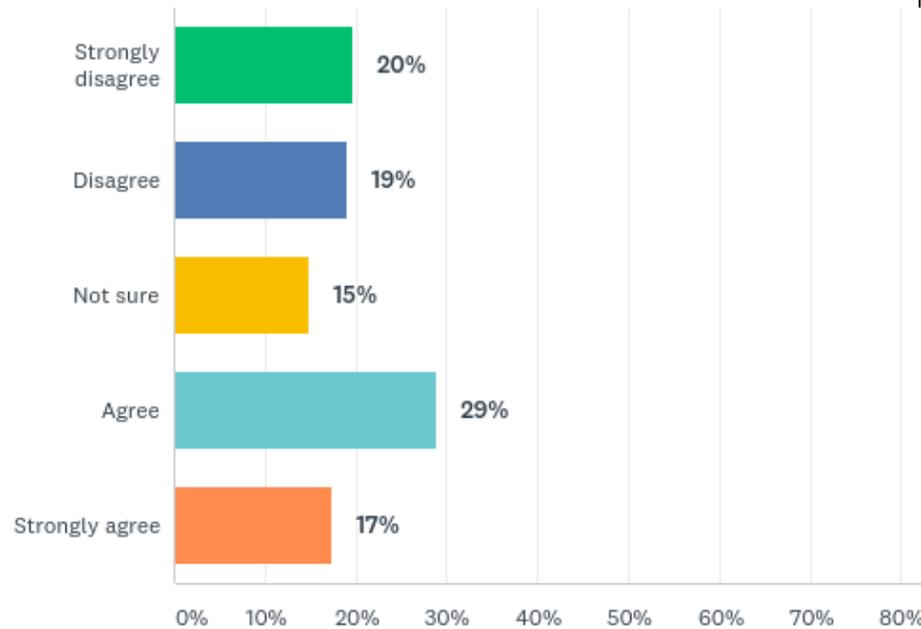
Grief and loss

46% of the women said they 'Agree' or 'Strongly agree' that they are dealing with grief and loss around not having children, while 39% said that they 'Disagree' or 'Strongly disagree'.

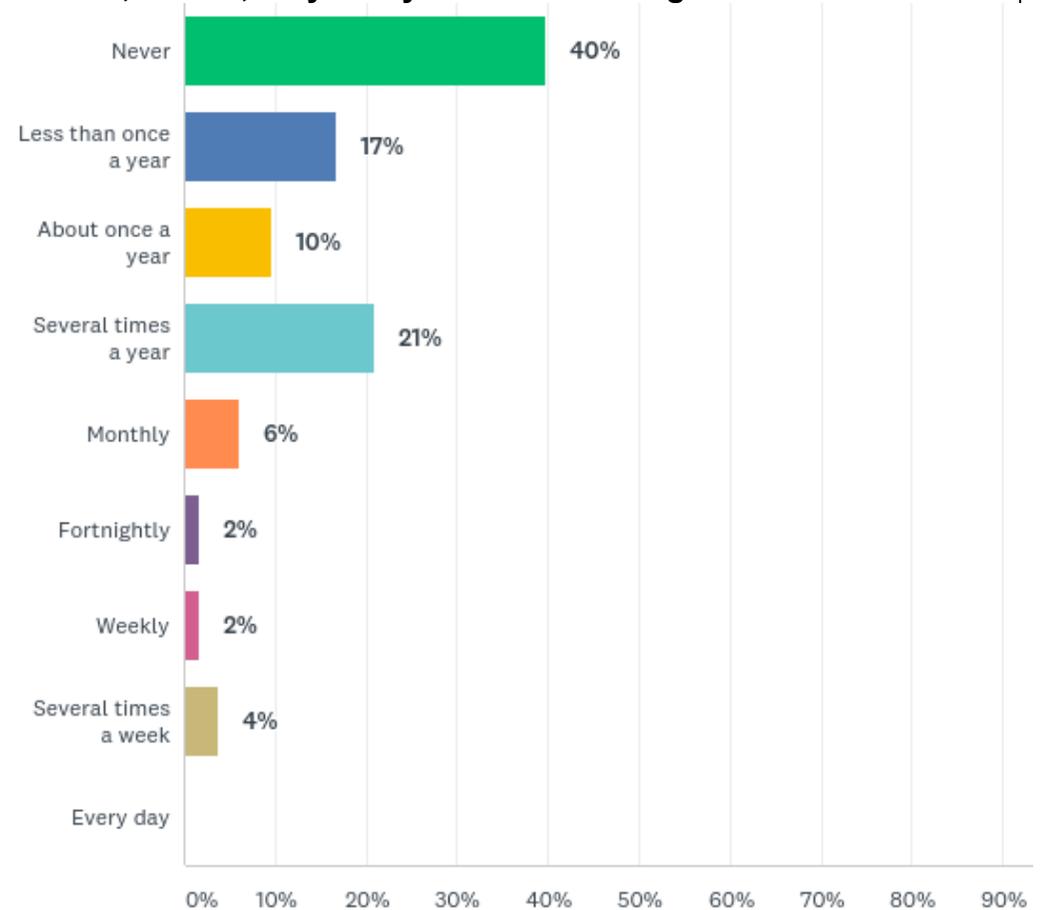
40% said that they 'Never' cry about not having children. 14% said that they cry monthly or more often.

85% also said that they had never had bad dreams or nightmares whilst asleep that are related to childlessness, but 16% said they had.

How much, if at all, would you agree with the following statement: "I am dealing with grief and loss around not having children"?



How often, if at all, do you cry about not having children?



Seeking support

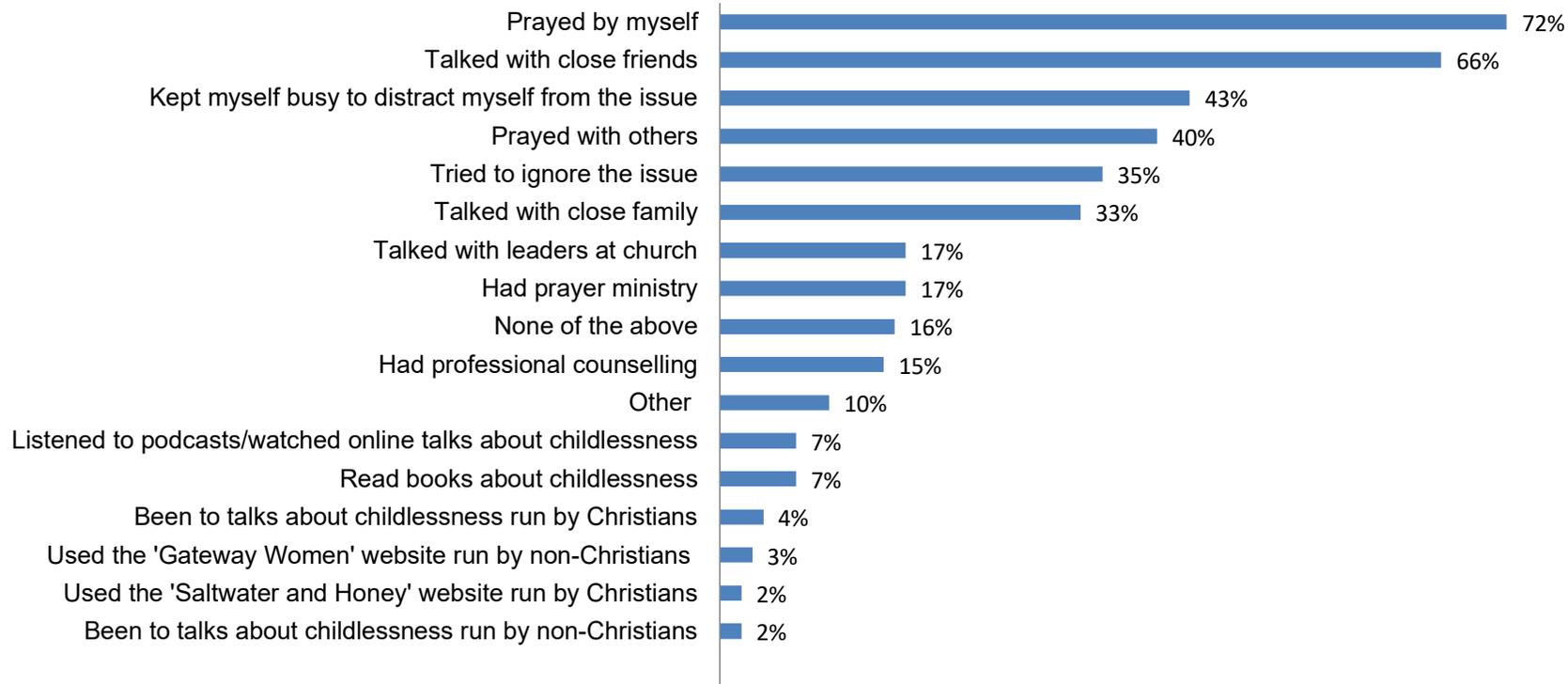
Nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the women have prayed by themselves about not having children, and $\frac{2}{3}$ have talked with close friends.

Some have used distraction (43%) or avoidance (35%) strategies to deal with not having children.

Most (83%) have not talked with leaders at church, while 17% have. Some have had prayer ministry (17%) or professional counselling (15%).

There are very few resources available to support single Christian women over the age of 35 who are involuntarily childless.

Which, if any, have you done with regards to not having children?

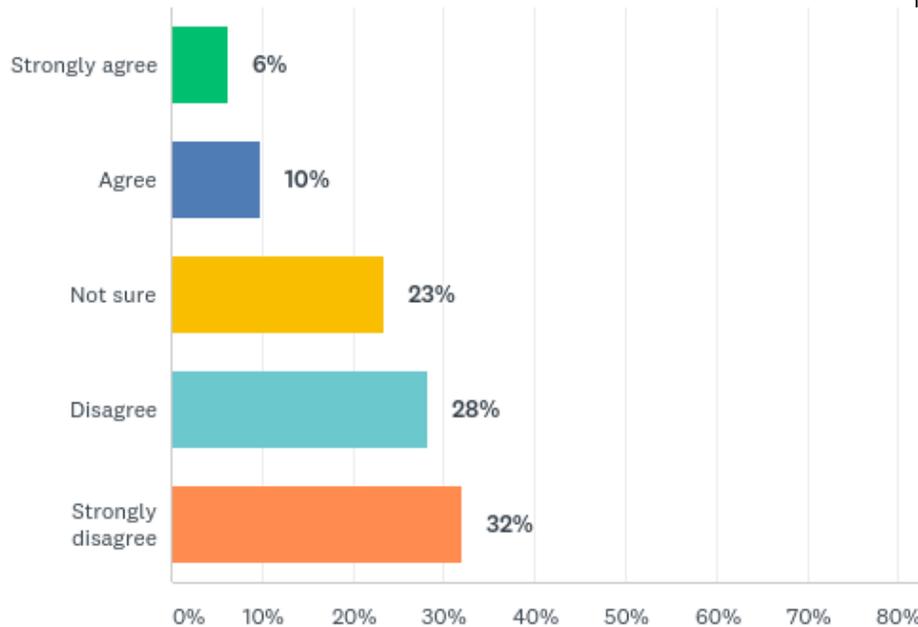


Church minister/pastor understanding

60% of the women 'Disagree' or 'Strongly disagree' that their church minister/pastor understands what it is like to be childless as a single Christian woman.

23% are 'Not sure'. 16% 'Agree' or 'Strongly agree'.

How much, if at all, would you agree with the following statement: "My church minister/pastor understands what it's like to be childless as a single Christian woman"?

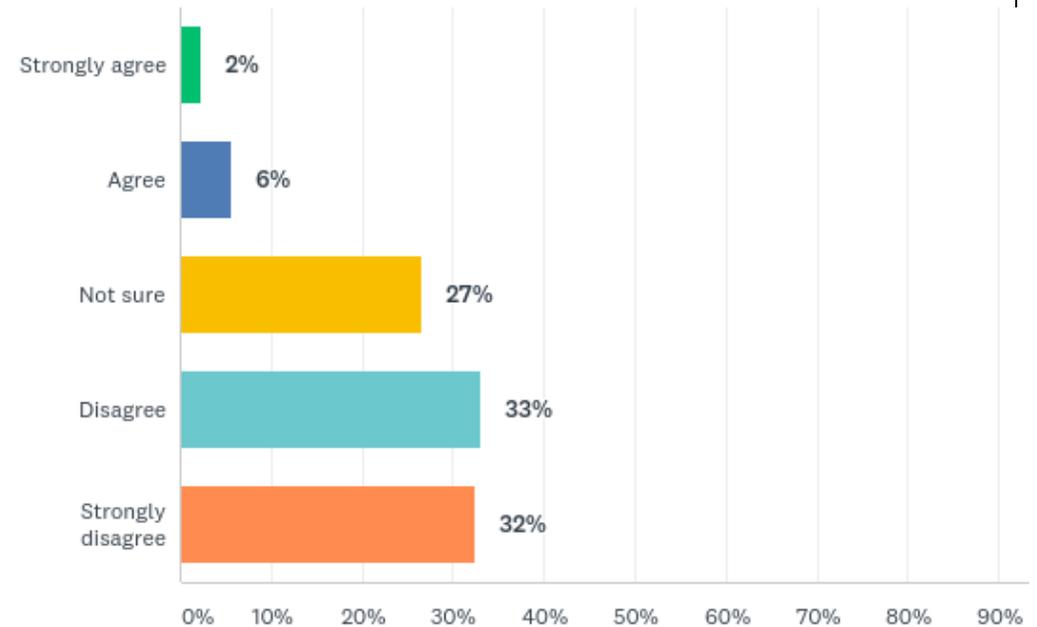


Church pastoral support

64% of the women 'Strongly disagree' or 'Disagree' that their church offers good pastoral support for single Christian women who would like a family.

27% are 'Not sure'. 8% 'Agree' or 'Strongly agree'.

How much, if at all, would you agree with the following statement: "My church offers good pastoral support for single Christian women who are childless but would like a family"?



Considering alternative options to having birth children

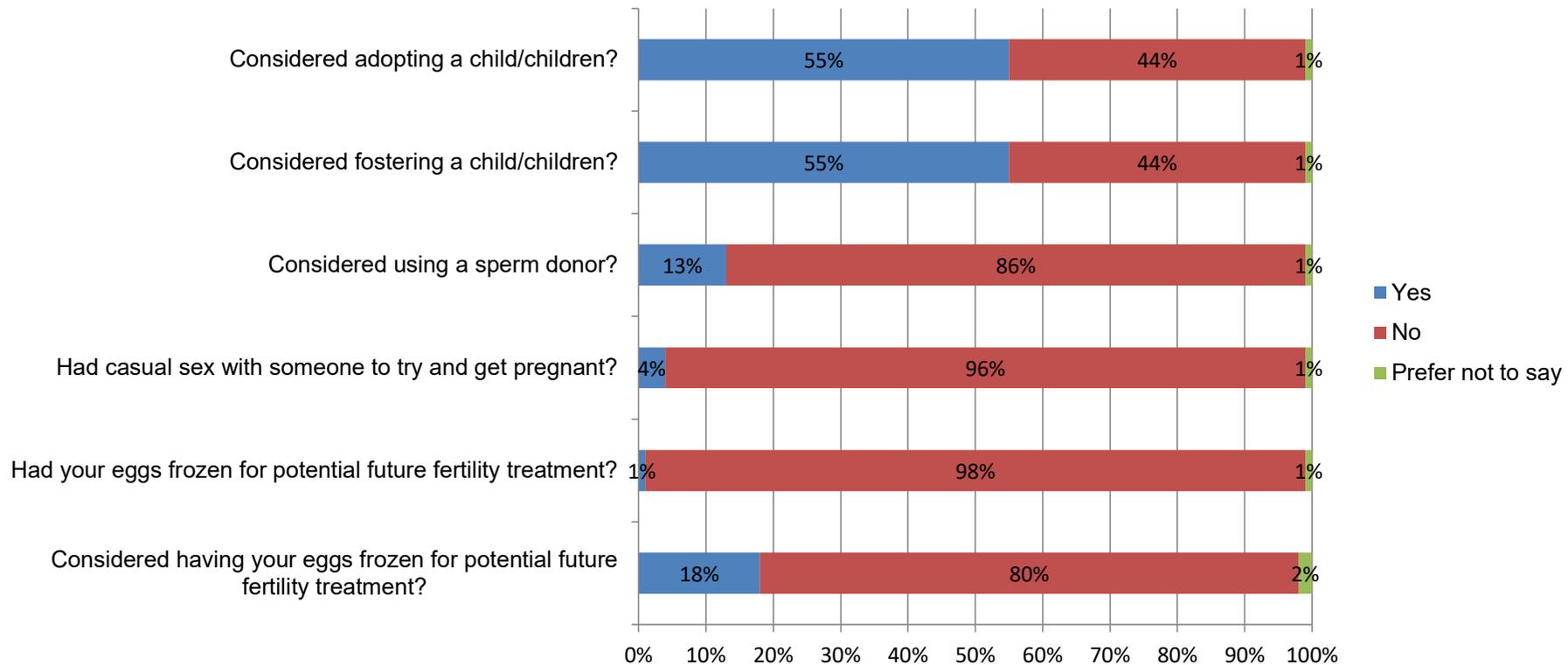
Many of the women had considered alternative options to having their own birth children.

44% had considered adopting or fostering a child/children.

18% had considered having their eggs frozen for potential future fertility treatment, and 13% had considered using a sperm donor.

In another question, 38% of the women also agreed that “It’s not the same as having your own children, but I feel I can still be a ‘spiritual mother’ to others.”

Have you ever...?



What is the least helpful thing anyone has ever said to you about being childless?

Theme	Subtheme	Example quotes
Compensation	Better off Adoption/fostering Consolation prize	You're lucky. At least you don't have to change nappies/get up early. Well, you can always just adopt (as if it's easy). At least you're an aunty/can be a spiritual mother to other children.
Assumptions	It will happen Desire It's a choice Selfishness Time-richness Career choice	God will give you the desires of your heart. Sarah was 90 when she had a child! But you'd want one if you had one! They assume I want children. Well you should have got married shouldn't you! It's selfish not to want children. You have more time to serve others. You made a choice to get on with your career instead – actually I didn't.
Advice	Hurry up Take action	Better get cracking. You're leaving it too late. You need to be less picky. You could always go and have a one night stand. Why don't you just settle for a non-Christian husband and have children? Just get a dog.
Theology	God's will Singleness Women's roles	Well, it can't be God's will for you then, can it. Some women are just not meant to have children, you must be one of them. You don't need an earthly relationship if you have God in your life. But you have to get married and have children as that is the purpose of women's lives!
Exclusion	You don't understand Dismissed Children conversations Incomplete-inadequate	You're not a mum so you wouldn't understand . Never mind. They talk about their children all the time. Why what is wrong with you? The assumption that I've failed or am incomplete.
Questions	Why? Have children? Want children? Being old Skills and interest	Why don't you have kids yet? How many children do you have? "Is that your child?" - pointing to a nearby child. Do you want children? Why don't you want children? You need children to look after you when you are old, what will you do? Why are you helping with Sunday School you don't have any kids?
Others	Their loss Mis-attributions	My parents often make passing comments about the fact that they don't have any grandchildren. When my ex-husband left me after a string of affairs, 'do you think it's because you're not feminine enough?' - from the pastor's wife. I left the church and have never been back.

What is the most helpful thing anyone has ever said to you about being childless?

Theme	Subtheme	Example quotes
Listening and empathy	Empathy with grief Accepting grief Accepting choice	This must be hard and it's OK to grieve this – how can I help? No words, but letting me cry without offering any advice. It's OK to be childless – it's your choice (in my case, it is).
Encouragement	God's sovereign love Other's love Prayer Enjoy life Good mother	That God is sovereign and he loves me and wants to use me in his plans. We love you. We'll stand with you whatever happens. We will keep on praying. Praying with me. What are the things that bring you joy that you can spend your time doing? You'd be an amazing mum.
Value	Important role with Children Inclusion in families Opportunities Significance	I know it doesn't take away the pain, but we're so grateful for the input you have with our children. We love you being part of our family. Just the action of being included. The term 'child free' gave me some hope and joy. You still matter and you're still whole.
Hope	For the future Still time Adoption/Fostering	You never know what God is going to do. It's not too late and can still happen (when this is realistic). Friends have talked through other options.
Honesty	Honest older single childless women Honest mothers	A lady, older than me, shared her emotions about being a single childless Christian women. The honesty when mothers admit children are emotionally draining.
Practical help	Support to find a husband When I'm old	Helping me to find a partner. My nephew said he'd look after me when I'm old.
Others		No one has ever said anything helpful. Everyone's experience and journey through faith is different and God loves us all no matter what.

What are the top 3 things about being childless as a single Christian woman that you think church leaders should know?

Everyone's experience is different, but most of us didn't choose this.

It's a silent grief – be aware, and sensitive.

We're not invisible, immature, less valuable or second class – we're equally complete, valid, wise, valuable and gifted as those who are married with children.

What do you think are the key things that churches can do to helpfully support single Christian women who are childless?

Provide a community where everyone is included, encouraged and celebrated. Treat us like everyone else and value our gifts equally.

Address the issue of the lack of men in our congregations!

Recognise our grief and talk to us about our experiences. Don't make assumptions.

Invite us into your family life, but recognise that that won't be helpful for everyone.

Clarke, A. (2018). *How do single Christian women feel about not having children?* The Engage Network.