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Rebecca Jones/For the Chronicle

DuWayne Sipper, vice president of the Sunshine Christian Singles, bowls for a strike during a recent outing to the Sportsman Bowl in Inverness.

Singles gather to share time, company, devotion

By Nancy Kennedy
Chronicle writer

SIX YEARS AGO, Dottie Roberts found herself suddenly single after 15 years of marriage. While at the courthouse taking care of her divorce papers, she met a young woman who was crying uncontrollably. She, too, was there signing divorce papers after being married only three years.

"I tried comforting her the best I could," said Roberts from her Inverness home, "but I was going through the same thing she was. I remember thinking, 'I wish there was something I could do for her.' That's when the Lord first gave me this idea for a singles' ministry."

Five years later, Roberts launched Sunshine Christian Singles. Tonight, at 6 at the Church of the Nazarene in Hernando, the group is celebrating its first anniversary as a ministry, with a carry-in dinner. All Christian singles are welcome, regardless of age. (Dress is casual.)

"Singles need a place to go for support," Roberts explained. "Especially when they're going through a divorce or they've just been widowed. As many single people as there are, this is still a couples' world." She said when you become single after having been married, every relationship changes. After a divorce, sometimes mutual friends are forced to choose one of the divorced pair over the other. Or the newly single person becomes a threat to the married couple and the friendship cools. Or the weekly bridge foursome is forced to disband.

Not only that, Roberts said, churches generally exclude singles in their programs. Maybe not intentionally, but it happens all too regularly.

"There's a stigma attached to being a single in the church, but really, some of the best workers a church often has are the singles. We're the ones who can devote the most time and energy to ministry because we don't have anything to hold us back."

Roberts said Sunshine Christian Singles was formed as a way of getting individuals together, with all their gifts and talents, to meet one another's needs and reach out in ministry to other singles. The group's officers include a widow in her 50s, a single divorced mother in her 30s, a never-married man in his 30s, and Roberts as president, a divorced woman in her 50s. The group has 185 members on its mailing list and draws an average of 25 people at each event. The ages range from early 30s to mid-80s, men as well as women. Church affiliations include Baptist, Church of God, Methodist and Nazarene. They're sponsored by the Nazarene church but are nondenominational. Everyone is welcome.

One thing Roberts emphasized, this is a ministry, not a dating service.

"That's the first thing I say to people, and that's been the hardest part of getting people to come. They're afraid it is a dating service and many just aren't interested in meeting somebody to date. We're here to support each

other, to help each other, to meet each other's needs."

But the truth is, some singles want to meet someone. DuWayne Sipper, vice president of the group, said he'd like to meet someone, and initially, he had to work through all the wrong reasons for attending the group when it first started. He admitted he went to the first meeting to ease his boredom and find entertainment. He also had that thought, "Hmmm, maybe I'll meet someone." However, he quickly learned it was so much more than anything he could've imagined.

Being brutally honest, Sipper said being single isn't easy, especially if you

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Edythe Williams, left, and Audrey Glenn, both from Hernando, watch as members take their turn bowling. For information call Dottie Roberts 344-0486.

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go from being a sexually active adult to abstaining once you become a Christian. He said when he began studying the Bible, he discovered sex isn't a gray area like he had imagined, but a clear-cut command that it's reserved for marriage only. He said the singles group members support each other in their attempt to stay sexually pure. "Now when I start dating someone, I say up front, 'No sex before marriage.' It makes (dating) so much easier because the pressure's off. In my earlier days, sex only turned my life into a disaster. Now I can concentrate on building friendships and finding someone who shares my same vision and ministry goals."

Another challenge, he noted, is the reality every single has to deal with:

Maybe the Lord wants me to remain single. It's a topic he said makes most singles uneasy. No one likes to be alone.

"That's probably the best part of this group," he said. "When you have a group that concentrates on dating, it becomes difficult when there are break-ups and hard feelings.

"But we're more interested in being a group of Christian singles together instead of being Christians out on our own. It's one more outlet to spend time with other Christians who are all dealing with the same problems you are."

Roberts said being single gets lonely at times, but she has learned that God's enough, even in the loneliest times. "For five years after my divorce I didn't allow God to be

enough. I always thought I had to have somebody in my life. But last year, I totally gave my life to God, and since then he's made my life so exciting!"

Currently Roberts is making plans to devote her energy full time into singles' ministry, making herself available to Christian singles across the county, helping other singles in need, helping people that

through their divorces or widowhood, contacting potential new members and informing churches about their group. Her dream is to see an active, healthy singles' ministry in every church.

Although her life hasn't turned out exactly as she would have designed it, Roberts wants other singles to know that being single does have its good points. "As a sin-

gle, I have nothing but God's work to do — and what could possibly be better than that?"

Sonshine Christian Singles meet every third Saturday at the Church of the Nazarene on Florida Avenue in Hernando for a carry-in dinner.

Activities are also scheduled throughout the month. (Watch the Chronicle for their events' calendar or call Dottie Roberts at 344-0486 or

DuWayne Sipper at 341-0551 for further information or to be placed on the mailing list.)

Tonight's first year anniversary party includes a drawing for a four-day weekend retreat trip to Alabama this Labor Day weekend (\$125 value), plus a \$150 coupon book and many other gifts from area restaurants and merchants. Bring a friend.

Singles group meets with enthusiasm

■ A group for Christian singles is attractive to people who want to meet new friends.

By LISA PEEPLES
Times Correspondent

INVERNESS

For those who have never married, have gone through a divorce or are widowed and are interested in meeting other singles, a Christian singles group in Inverness would like to encourage you to participate in its organization.

Sonshine Christian Singles, started last year by Dottie Roberts, has about 60 participants and about 250 singles on its mailing list.

Roberts said the enthusiasm about the group has been astounding.

"I get calls from people who are interested all of the time. They don't want to go to the bars and other worldly places to meet other singles, so they need a place like this to go," she said.

"When singles don't get to be around other people they can experience depression and heartache. You know there are so many singles out there that just want to be with people."



Members of Sonshine Christian Singles meet recently at the Hernando Church of the Nazarene for a potluck dinner. The group — for single, divorced and widowed people — has also been on skating and bowling outings.

Photos by MICHAEL WEIMAR

DuWayne Sipper, 37, vice president of Sonshine, said his participation in the group has changed him spiritually and socially.

"I first went to the group just out of curiosity and to have something to do. Well, that first night I got voted in as vice president, and I didn't quite know what to think about it, but what I didn't realize at that time was that God was preparing me for better things," Sipper said.

"God has done a huge work within the group as far as presenting his word to us as Christian singles. Even as Paul talks about in the Bible how singles are one of the most powerful tools of God, because they don't have to serve a mate, has made a big difference," he said.

"It is not necessarily what we want, to be single, because nobody wants to be alone, but that doesn't mean necessarily that we are all supposed to be married."

Sipper said the friendships he and others have developed as a result of participating in the group have been priceless.

"For my own life the Christian singles have really been a blessing, because there were so many empty holes in my life from being single that this group has been able to fill," he said.

"Another thing God is teaching me through, this is that he is a God of relationships. My relationship with Christian singles has broadened me as a Chris-

tian . . . and it has taught me to put other people first, instead of myself.

" . . . The world has taught us to think about ourselves first, whether it is about buying a home, a car or college tuition, to put number one first. However, what Jesus tells us in the Bible is exactly the opposite, which is to put others first."

Roberts said she would also like to encourage other singles to attend one of the many events the group schedules throughout the month.

The group has special events at the Hernando Church of the Nazarene. They also go bowling and skating. For information on Sonshine, call 344-0486 or 341-0551.



Sonshine member Beverly Berlin chuckles during a recent meeting in which members shared jokes and funny stories.