

Divorce Care and Recovery Ministries

“Divorce is the final and painful destination of a relationship that has broken down irretrievably,” writes Carolyn Call in, “How the Church Fails the Divorced.” (*The Christian Century*, Vol. 130, No. 15, July 24, 2013, pages 20-22). She proceeds to point out that the church community sometimes exacerbates that pain by its response – or lack thereof. Do church people think that showing compassion for those going through divorce implies support for divorce? Do they suspect that divorce might be “catching”? Do they fear that if they try to understand and accept the factors leading to divorce, the cracks in their own relationships might widen? Maybe they just don’t know what to say. One woman told me that when she was sick, people called, brought food, and asked how they could help. When she was going through divorce proceedings, however, no one reached out to give her a hug and ask “How are you doing? What do you need?” Church members can listen with empathy and offer condolences regardless of their own feelings about divorce. If church members can avoid taking sides, they may be able to continue relationships with both persons, but they should respect the wishes of divorced persons about participating in activities together.

Divorce can be a dreadfully lonely time, explains Call, and persons going through divorce may desperately need compassionate friends to offer comfort, care, and support. Some will struggle with a deep sense of failure. Some will experience an agonizing identity crisis while trying to figure out who they are and who they will be without this marriage to define them. Some may descend into bitterness, placing all the blame on the other party, when –in fact – the problem may not be in either person, but in the way they relate to each other. Learning new ways to speak, listen, and solve problems and deepening their understanding both of themselves and each other can be most helpful early in a marriage, before harmful habits and reactions become too deeply ingrained to change and before too much damage is done.

Building a lasting relationship requires couples to work intentionally to “bridge the space between” them and to heal whatever woundedness each individual brings into the relationship. In fact, once the honeymoon is over, couples often, sooner or later, slide into a state of disappointment and discontent. If they experience enough positive interaction to keep them together, most marriages improve over time, with or without intervention, as couples learn to adjust to their differences. Participation in marriage education and enrichment or in effective marriage counseling may help them achieve a happy, healthy relationship. Differentiating - understanding that they are, after all, two different persons with differing points of view - encourages them to take responsibility for their own behavior and role in the “marital dance,” rather than focusing on changing the other. Churches, through their preaching and teaching, can help people learn to apply spiritual principles - such as empathy, compassion, and forgiveness – in all their relationships. They must be careful, however, not to encourage victims of domestic violence – physical and/or emotional – to stay in situations harmful to their health and safety. (See “Shedding Light on Domestic Violence” under [Best Practices and Recommended Resources/Ministering with Those in Crisis or Transition](#) at www.marriagelovepower.net or

search by title or topic at www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries.)

However, even in churches providing effective marriage preparation, education, and enrichment, couples may find themselves in such pain that one or both of them will decide that divorce is the only solution. Sometimes, sadly, such couples disappear from church life because they fear that they will be judged. Churches that project compassion and acceptance of human frailty may more likely have opportunity to minister with couples in crisis. See "Ministering with Couples on the Brink of Divorce" under Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources/Ministering with Those in Crisis and Transition at www.marriagelovepower.net or search by title or topic at www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries.

Couples who decide to divorce may find it difficult to keep negotiations amicable, or even to minimize the emotional damage. Because some lawyers seek to protect their clients and to establish the other party as the enemy, divorce proceedings may set the couple on an adversarial path. Resentment that has built up over the years because of unaddressed disappointments, frustrations, and grievances may spill out at this time. Churches can help by sharing information about local mediators and "collaborative divorce" lawyers, who are trained to help couples negotiate a settlement before filing divorce papers, greatly reducing the hostility, anxiety, and cost of the process. Such information, along with announcements about marriage education and enrichment and crisis interventions) could be posted on bulletin boards, displayed in the church library, and mentioned in newsletters and sermons, inviting couples to reach out for support. For more information, see the *Collaborative Practice "Knowledge Kit,"* a free download from www.collaborativepractice.com; the Collaborative Professional Locator at the same website; and articles posted at www.collaborativedivorce.net.

Divorce is not a one-time event, but a life-changing step with often unforeseen ramifications and consequences. Even without children, the distribution of property may become contentious, and the financial fallout may be life-long, since divorce settlements often include division of possessions, savings, and retirement pension funds. If there are children, divorce will not get the parties out of each other's life, but may push them into an adversarial relationship which can complicate future holidays, graduations, weddings, and relationships with children and grandchildren. If custody is shared, the parents will need to cooperate to help the children adjust to and manage living in and transitioning between two different homes. Dating and/or remarriage by either or both persons may further complicate transitions between households. Basic communication and problem-solving courses, like Nonviolent Communication, would equip divorced persons to deal with each other without inflicting more pain. (See "Strengthening Stepfamilies" under Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources/Ministering with Those in Crisis and Transition at www.marriagelovepower.net or search by title or topic at www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries.)

Children of any age may be caught in the cross-fire of divorce. If they have observed their parents interacting with hostility over time, divorce may seem like a relief to them. However, if the parents have hidden their disagreements from the children and worn "happy

couple" masks, the children may be shocked and disillusioned. Many schools and community agencies offer support groups for children of divorcing parents, and some may benefit from individual counseling to help them sort out and express their feelings. Divorce will impact them not only in the present, but for the rest of their lives. Judith S. Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, in their ground-breaking *Second Chances: Men, Women, & Children a Decade After Divorce* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989) coined the phrase "sleeping effect" for the tendency of children who appear to be adjusting well at the time of the divorce to experience anxiety and stress later in life, perhaps at the time of their own marriage and child-rearing. Churches can help by making sure children of divorcing parents have ample opportunity to talk about what is happening and about their feelings - to the extent they are willing and able; by sharing information about normal reactions both in the present and future; and by alerting them to the wealth of helpful resources. Church members and friends can stand alongside these families by offering to spend time with the children and intentionally including them in intergenerational worship, study, fellowship and mission.

Churches and church people who proclaim a gospel of forgiveness, mercy, and hope will perhaps more likely provide a healing ministry for those who divorce and those who are impacted by divorce. The following Resource List includes a number of books and curriculum materials for use by individuals or in small groups. While support groups and mentor relationships with others who have faced the same situation can help immensely, divorcing and divorced persons still need to feel included in the general life of the congregation and welcomed to participate in worship, study, fellowship activities, and mission projects. As in any trial, what persons need to experience most is acceptance, validation of their feelings, and unconditional love - both in the present and for the years to come.

An updated and expanded version of this article and resource list is posted at www.marriagelovepower.net under Best Practices and Recommended Resources/ Ministering with Those in Crisis and Transition. You will also find there related articles such as "Cultivating Compassionate Connection," "Why Marriage Education and Enrichment?" "Ministering With Couples on the Brink of Divorce," "Strengthening Stepfamilies," "Shedding Light on Domestic Violence," etc. ; or you can search by topic or title at www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries.

Resources for Divorce Care and Recovery Ministries

Reading List

Support Group and Group Study Resources

Divorce Care and Recovery Reading List

(See also some of the group resources, which include reading material for individual use.)

Adult Children of Divorce: Making Your Marriage Work, by Beverly and Tom Rodgers (2002). The authors write movingly out of their own experiences, addressing issues common for

those who experience the divorce of their parents: self-esteem, ability to trust and communicate, learning to forgive and to solve problems constructively.

A Woman's Guide to Healing the Heartbreak of Divorce, by Rose Sweet (2000). The author provides guidance for dealing with the grief and residual feelings for the ex-husband and the lost life that break a woman's heart.

Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce, by Elizabeth Marquardt (Three Rivers Press, 2006). Based on a pioneering study of children of divorce, the author discusses the challenges experienced by children of divorce, even when the process is amicable. Weaving together statistics and personal stories, she shows how - if they stay involved with both parents - the children must negotiate between two different worlds, trying to reconcile differences in beliefs, values, and lifestyle.

Collaborative Practice "Knowledge Kit," free download from the International Academy of Collaborative Professions (www.CollaborativePractice.com). The kit includes a document comparing "The Collaborative Divorce vs. the Litigation Divorce," case studies illustrating the flexible, solutions-oriented process of Collaborative Divorce, and an overview of Collaborative Practice. At the same website you can use the Collaborative Professional Locator to find such professionals in or near your area. See also www.collaborativedivorce.net.

Divorce Care: Hope, Health, and Healing During and After your Divorce, by Kathy Leonard and Steve Grissom (Thomas Nelson Publishing, 2006). 365 daily readings and prayers offer encouragement and inspiration by showing how men and women have survived the darkness of separation and divorce and now walk in the bright hope of God's love and healing.

Finding God in the Seasons of Divorce, by Richard D. Crooks (Westbow Press, 2012). This first volume of daily devotions for individuals working through the emotions and difficulties of divorce, deals with "Autumn" and "Winter" - the early days of divorce. The book helps readers learn how to cope and to see that they are not alone, that God does care, and that the struggles have been faced by others as well. A topical index addresses specific needs. (Cokesbury review)

Finding the Right One After Divorce: Avoiding the 13 Common Mistakes People Make in Remarriage, by Edward Tauber and Jim Smoke (Harbor House Publishers, 2007). More than 80 percent of those who divorce and remarry will divorce again. Divorce recovery experts Edward Tauber and Jim Smoke draw on their 30 years of experience as divorce counselors and a survey of more than 600 individuals to explore why people end up divorced again and what they can do to successfully remarry. To help readers avoid making the mistakes others have made, the authors present 13 wrong reasons to remarry, including: loneliness, needing to be needed, to provide fathers or moms for their children, to prove the divorce wasn't their fault, because they think they've found their "soul mates." Tauber and Smoke provide practical guidelines based on

biblical principles to help people find partners who share values, have compatible personalities, agree on child-raising principles, and more. This book includes a helpful "Ready2Remarry" self-test. (Cokesbury review)

Grace and Divorce: God's Healing Gift to Those Whose Marriages Fall Short, by Dr. Les Carter (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2005). The author encourages both those who divorce and those who know and love them to remember that Jesus approached with compassion those who fall short of the highest standard of perfection. "My bias leans toward erring in the direction of maintaining the marriage if at all possible. At the same time, when people...tell me they've done all they can to save a marriage but to no avail, I want to be known as loving even if they divorce."

Healing from Divorce: 28 Days of Prayer, by Mary Lou Redding (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2013) Mary Lou Redding offers 28 daily meditations for guidance through a small part – perhaps the beginning -- of a healing journey, which she affirms will likely take much longer than that. Reflecting on her own experiences, she acknowledges the devastation of believing that her divorce marked her as a failure and impaired both her Christian witness and her ability to serve. She shares her joy in coming to understand God's grace "...not as something we earn by being good but as healing love that comes to us precisely because of our brokenness and inability to be the persons God created us to be." Each selection begins with a brief reading from the Bible, followed by a single verse, a story and commentary, a prayer, and a reflection suggestion. The meditations are grouped by week, with titles reflecting the progression of focus: "Broken Hearts, Broken Dreams," "The Road to Freedom – Forgiving," "The Buck Starts Here," and "A Whole New Ball Game." The content is stunningly honest and wise, as the author reveals her true feelings during this challenging time in her life and describes practices that helped her both cope and grow.

Healing the Divorced Heart, by Rose Sweet (AMG Publishing, 2003). Often those who suffer the "heart attack" of divorce fail to follow a plan to recovery. They allow the build-up of bitterness to continue to clog emotional arteries. Just as the cardiologist orders heart medication, divorce recovery needs a prescribed course of action-rest, medication, and changes in routine or daily diet. The author offers pocket-sized prescriptions for various symptoms that come as a result of divorce, inviting those who have been damaged by divorce to take their spiritual temperature and examine their emotional reactions. This book is full of practical advice, encouragement, and hope centered on daily doses of God's Word. (Cokesbury review)

Healing the Wounds of Divorce: A Spiritual Guide to Recovery, by Barbara Shlemon (Ave Maria Press, 1992). Shlemon shares her own personal experience with divorce and the healing process that followed, offering seventeen chapters dealing with such issues as children, finances,

and relatives, fear, guilt, and forgiveness. Each concludes with a prayer that enables readers to place their experience before the Lord.

It's Not Your Fault, Koko Bear: A Read-Together Book for Parents and Young Children During Divorce, by Vicki Lansky (Minnetonka, MN: Book Peddlars, 2010). This book helps parents talk with their children about divorce, reassuring them that their feelings are normal, that they are still loved, and that the divorce was not their fault. Appropriate for ages 5 through 7.

Moving Forward: A Devotional Guide for Finding Hope and Peace in the Midst of Divorce, by Jim Smoke (Hendrickson Publishing, 2000). A pioneer in the divorce recovery field for more than twenty years, the author draws from his years of counseling experience to offer devotions that explore, in a positive and compassionate way, the issues confronting those who experience divorce. With encouragement and understanding, *Moving Forward* addresses feelings of loneliness, insecurity, and anxiety while providing sound insight on forgiveness, children, remarriage, and much more. (Cokesbury review)

Spiritually Healthy Divorce: Navigating Disruption with Insight and Hope, by Carolyn Call (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2011). Call writes: "In my work with individuals going through divorce, often the most confusing and painful part of the process is coming to terms with how divorce disrupts, damages or challenges their relationship with and concepts of God. ... This is not an easy path. ... But achieving spiritual health is worth the work if you are able to grow through it into a more compassionate, humble, loving and self-accepting person." The author includes information about forming support groups, discussion guides, and group activities designed to help divorcing and divorced persons set positive goals and figure out how to get to where they want to be.

The Complete Divorce Recovery Handbook, by John P. Splinter (Grand Rapids, MI, 1992). This handbook "is designed to help persons move from initial shock and grief through the process of inner healing and return to wholeness. An update of an earlier edition titled *Second Chapter*, this book deals soundly with issues of feelings, forgiveness, ongoing relationships with an ex, dating again, and remarriage.

The Grief Recovery Handbook: The Action Program for Moving Beyond Death, Divorce, and Other Lessons (20th Anniversary Expanded Edition), by John W. James and Russell Friedman (Collins: 2009). Newly updated and expanded, this classic resource helps people complete the grieving process and move toward recovery and happiness. Incomplete recovery from grief can have a lifelong negative effect on the capacity for happiness. Drawing from their own histories as well as from others', the authors illustrate how it is possible to recover from grief and regain energy and spontaneity. New material in this edition includes: how to choose which loss you should work on first; how to deal with growing up in an alcoholic or otherwise dysfunctional home; loss of faith; loss of career; loss of health; and more.

Two Homes, Claire Masurei (Candlewick Press, 2001). A book to read with children, this presents in a positive and matter-of-fact style reassurance that the child will continue to experience love and belonging while living in two different places.

When “I Do” Becomes “I Don’t”: *Practical Steps for Healing During Separation and Divorce*, by Laura Petherbridge (David C. Cook Publishers, 2008). The author shares practical answers to the challenges of divorce, based on her own experience and her ministry of care for those grieving the loss of a marriage. “How do I find where I belong when I no longer know my identity?” “If my spouse asks for forgiveness, should I go back?” “How do I figure out a budget on my own?” “How do I reenter the workplace after years of staying home?” “How will I know when it's a good time to date again?” “Will I ever be happy again?” This book includes reflection and discussion questions after each chapter and guidelines for those who love someone who is getting a divorce.

Support Group and Group Study Resources

(Some of the books listed above also include leader’s guides.)

Celebrate Recovery (Zondervan), www.celebratediscovery.com. This Christ-Centered Recovery Ministry for your church (addressing Alcoholism, Divorce, Sexual Abuse, Codependency, Domestic Violence, Drug Addiction, Sexual Addiction, Food Addiction, Gambling Addiction and more) can help the hurting move beyond their wounds to experience the healing and forgiveness of Christ. Launched at Saddleback Church in 1991, the Celebrate Recovery programs are now offered at more than 19,000 churches, prisons, and rescue missions. Drawn from the Beatitudes, *Celebrate Recovery* helps people resolve painful problems in the context of the church as a whole. Newly updated, the kit includes: 1 20-minute DVD introductory guide for leaders, 1 leader's guide, 1 of each participant's guide (4 total), CD-ROM with 25 lessons, CD-ROM with sermon transcripts and reproducible promotional materials, and a 4-volume audio CD sermon series."

Chained No More: A Journey of Healing for Adult Children of Divorce (Leader Guide and Participant Book), by Robyn Besemann (Bloomington, IN: Westbow Press, 2011). A Biblically-based program to help those wounded by parental divorce to break free and build healthy relationships. (Cokesbury review)

Church Initiative, 250 S. Allen Rd., P.O. Box 1739, Wake Forest, NC 27588-1739, 800-395-5755 (US and Canada), 919-562-2112 (local and international), 919-562-2114 (fax) info@churchinitiative.org, www.churchinitiative.org. A nondenominational, nonprofit ministry, Church Initiative provides resources and program support to help local churches minister effectively to persons in their community. All materials are Christ-centered, biblically based, and designed for use by local churches. Among the resources currently available are *DivorceCare*, *DivorceCare for Kids*, *Single & Parenting*, *GriefShare*, *Chance to Change* (for healing gambling

addiction), *Before You Divorce*, and *Facing Forever* (issues of life, death, and eternity). Links to each program and schedules of training events are available at www.churchinitiative.org

DivorceCare for Kids (Church Initiative, P.O. Box 1739, Wake Forest, NC 27588-1739, 800-489-7778, www.dc4k.org . The DivorceCare for Kids Kit contains everything needed to lead 13 weekly group sessions for children ages 5 through 12. It is designed to be used in conjunction with the DivorceCare program, below. This website also includes parent resources, such as books to read with the children and special music CDs.

DivorceCare Starter Kit, (Church Initiative, P.O. Box 1739, Wake Forest, NC 27588-1739, 800-489-7778, info@divorcecare.org, www.divorcecare.org. This Biblically-based resource for a divorce recovery ministry includes a Leader's Guide, Participant's Workbook, and five DVDs. The DVDs present teaching segments for 13 group sessions and three leadership training sessions. The Leader's Guide provides guidance and resources for an ongoing program so that separated and divorced persons always have a place to turn.

Single & Parenting: Hard Work, Real Hope (Lake Forest, NC: Church Initiative, 2011) This "teach-out-of-the-box" curriculum kit provides a Leader's Guide, Participant's Workbook, set of DVDs, and promotional brochures and flyers. Detailed information is provided for organizing and promoting this experience (13 two-hour sessions blending Biblical teaching with practical advice), for recruiting leaders, and for using the DVD training module. The Leader's Guide suggests offering the 13 sessions three times in a given year, since participants can enter the program at any time in the cycle, providing frequent points of entry for single parents seeking support. (www.singleandparenting.org)

Divorce and Beyond, by James Greteman (ACTA Publications, 2004). This complete program for newly divorced persons focuses on the mourning period of the divorce process. The author guides participants through initial stress, anger, and guilt to forgiveness, happiness, and growth, combining the advantages of a support group with personal exercises, activities and reflections. Outlines ten sessions for group use, or serves as an excellent personal resource.

Faithlink - Divorce and Divorce Recovery - (Cokesbury, 2011) Electronic download available at www.cokesbury.com. Divorce is a painful reality that affects many people. What are some ways that people cope during a divorce? How can Christians offer support to those who are experiencing or who have gone through a divorce? (Cokesbury review)

Rebuilding Workbook: When Your Relationship Ends, by Bruce Fisher and Jere Bierhaus (Impact Publishing, 2000). Built around ten carefully designed "lesson plans," this workbook offers a self-help or group work plan for systematic progress through the most important steps in divorce recovery. Included are sessions on the nine most important "Rebuilding Blocks" of divorce recovery: Adaptation, Grief, Anger, Self-worth, Transition, Openness, Love, Relatedness, and Sexuality. Each lesson plan includes behavioral objectives, a meeting agenda

(including suggested group exercises), and “homework” for the following week’s seminar. Individual readers will enjoy the supplementary readings (poetry, articles, letters), specific exercises that may be completed alone, suggestions for affirmations, and other features of the “workbook” format. Divorce recovery groups find the *Workbook* an invaluable week-by-week guide as they share their experiences and work together to recover from the divorce crisis. The *Workbook* is widely used by therapists and other growth facilitators as a systematic plan for their seminars on divorce. (Cokesbury review)

Starting Again: A Divorce Recovery Program, by Sandra Scott (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1997). This course, designed to help persons take positive steps toward divorce recovery, is based on the premise that everyone, through Christ, has the power to make decisions that will determine how divorce affects his or her future. Three sections provide helpful suggestions: “First Grieve,” “Then Grow,” “Then What?” A Guide for Group Leaders outlines eight sessions. [Out of Print but available through online booksellers]

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