

Urgent Care: Divorce



CONGREGATION & VISITORS



URGENT CARE:
Divorce

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Leader's Guide

How to use "Urgent Care: Divorce" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS.

Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: URGENT CARE. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you and your leaders minister in the some of the most sensitive circumstances.

Urgent Care handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues relevant in your situation. We hope you use their hands-on advice, theological guidance, and careful warnings in order that you may offer the best ministry possible in the toughest of situations.

These tools are specifically designed for easy and quick use by church leaders. If you have an urgent need, select the article most relevant to the demands you face, and follow the article's guidance. If time is on your side, use these handouts to launch a discussion and training for leaders in your church.

Select & Copy

This specific theme is designed to help equip pastors and leaders who need to minister when a divorce is inevitable, or has recently occurred. Simply print and photocopy the handouts and distribute them as needed. (You do not need to ask for permission provided you are making fewer than 1,000 copies, are using the material in a church or educational setting, and are not charging for it.)

The following articles cover a variety of topics. For example, to consider how the church can move forward in a culture where divorce is increasingly common, read "Fallen Marriages, Fallen World." For a look at the many needs of a man or woman experiencing divorce, see "Divorce Needs." For advice on when and how to refer a divorcing person to a professional caregiver, see "How to Make a Referral." We have also included a plan for how entire churches can minister to men and women who are divorced: "Divorce Recovery: A Task for the Church." For an overview of action steps and important concerns that need to be remembered, see "Quick Guide for Action."

Pray

Ask God to equip your church to minister sensitively and gracefully as you reach out to women and men in pain.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

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A Quick Guide For Action

Key points for caregiving ministry.

Urgent care situations require a response from church leaders. This overview outlines major steps you should take in addressing a couple's divorce. These steps are explored in greater depth and detail in the remainder of this packet.

Immediate Concerns

1. Decide whether to wait to be asked to help or to take the initiative. Waiting may make you more effective, but it can also allow a person's situation to worsen. If you suspect that your friend is being abused, initiate contact (in a discerning way).

Keep in Mind

1. Emotions are high during and after a divorce. Expect tears and anger. These emotions need to be vented in a controlled situation.
2. Two people, and usually others, too, have contributed to the divorce. Rarely are there a true villain and victim. There are normally two sides to the story, both of which are valid.
3. Resolution after a divorce is a long process.
4. Your role is to help your friend express emotion and begin to move forward, not to rebuild a marriage or point out faults.
5. Be cautious of unhealthy attractions or dependencies that can form between a person going through a divorce and a close friend of the opposite sex.
6. Professional counseling can help men or women identify the patterns in their lives that contributed to the divorce.
7. Kids have many needs when their parents divorce. Parents will need to remember to care for them, and kids will probably benefit from specialized care.

What to Say

1. Help your friend rebuild his or her spiritual, emotional, and family life with the loving care and Christian standards of the church supporting them.
2. Provide the opportunity for the controlled release of emotions, but disallow spiteful attacks.
3. Reassure your friend of your loving support.
4. Steer your friend away from irrational choices that could further complicate their life.

What Not to Say

1. Resist the urge to designate villains and victims or to take sides. Although fault may not be equal, most divorces are brought on by both partners.
2. Do not assume the responsibility to patch up the marriage or heal all of the emotions.
3. Do not condemn. People with fallen marriages know their failures and are loaded with guilt.

Plan Ahead

1. Encourage a person who has recently divorced to avoid romantic relationships for at least a year after the divorce is finalized, and probably longer. This provides time for him or her to come to terms with the patterns of behavior that contributed to the divorce.

Fallen World, Fallen Marriages

The church's role: minister to the broken, lead people to repentance, live transculturally.

1 Peter 2:11–12

by David Seamands

Church leaders are daunted by the task of ministering to broken marriages in a culture that provides an easy, and oftentimes non-biblical, way out. In this article, David Seamands brings a missionary's approach to serving, healing, and transforming the marriages of a fallen world.

The church can no longer take lightly the state of marriage in America. I have come to believe that on this issue we face nothing less than a mission-field situation. While we have never been a “Christian” country, our culture once generally accepted a Christian consensus on sexual morality, marriage, and divorce. That has changed completely.

Immoral lifestyles, lax divorce laws, and our amoral media have combined to create a society that sees marriage as provisional rather than permanent. We now have a pattern that sociologists call “serial monogamy”: an individual is married to one person at a time, but over a lifetime will have several consecutive marriage partners. This leads to situations almost as complex and difficult to resolve as those that faced missionaries to Asia or Africa when they encountered polygamy. Sometimes the destructive effects on the family—and children, in particular—are even worse.

Because the church upholds standards vastly different from those of society, because conservative Christians are increasingly countercultural in convictions about marriage and divorce, it is time to think strategically. We need the mindset of the missionary. And we must be *transcultural* as well as countercultural, lest we lose an opportunity to shape and transform the standards of our culture.

Lessons from the Field

When I was a missionary in India, the most complex problem was polygamy—what to do with a man who sought baptism but had more than one wife. I shall never forget the first time I baptized a man and his two wives. Even though Silas was the first convert from Hinduism and the one most responsible for winning almost the entire village to Christ, it was still a spiritual trauma to my biblically trained, evangelical, and—I now realize—culturally conditioned American conscience. I wrestled with how to proclaim the Christian gospel amidst a non-Christian culture while also *lifting* the patterns of the culture to Christian standards.

If the church insisted on the Christian ideal of monogamy and required Silas to “get rid of” all but one wife, the only option in that culture for the other wives would be prostitution. In addition, destroying relationships with children, in-laws, and a whole social network seemed to nullify the gospel message. The sanctified wisdom of the early missionaries in India had led almost all denominations to agree on a policy: They would take an absolutist stand against adultery, but would make a concession to existing polygamy by baptizing the husband along with his wives. This was only for *first-generation* Christians, however. Strict monogamous standards were applied to the next generation of believers. As a result, polygamy among Christians in India was almost wiped out in a relatively short time. Contrast this with Africa, where the majority of churches insisted that the man choose one wife and get rid of the rest. Many sincere believers were kept from seeking baptism, church growth was impeded, and little impact was made on the evils of polygamy. Only later did some groups change their policies.

What about the situation in America? Divorce and remarriage here also requires a missionary approach. Just as the polygamy of the Old Testament patriarchs was only reluctantly tolerated but never approved by God, we may need to think of divorce in the

same way. Jesus explained Moses' divorce and remarriage regulations in Deuteronomy as concessions to people's "hardness of heart." His own "exception" clauses regarding "marital unfaithfulness" (Matthew 5:32; 19:9), and Paul's extension of Christ's principle to include desertion by an unbelieving partner (1 Corinthians 7:15), are all concessions to the incredible and irresolvable complications that can result from the impact of sin upon marriage relationships. None of these instances lowers God's standard or his perfect ideal for marriage. Rather, they reaffirm it, while making exceptions for certain situations.

Why? Because sometimes, in this area of fallen human life, the most tragic consequence of sin is the loss of the option of ever achieving God's originally intended ideal. The concessions are to let God's mercy and grace redeem the situation as much as possible and create circumstances that will ultimately raise the culture's standards. Restoring Christian ideals of marriage and family within our present pagan American culture will require a unique combination of grace, adherence to biblical standards, and pastoral realism. The church must continue to teach, preach, model, and nurture the highest scriptural values of sexual morality, marriage, and family life. Because of the deadly and demonic effects of TV and other entertainment media, this will have to begin with the very young and continue at all age levels. We must underscore commitment to these ideals as an integral part of life in Christ. In this sense, we will create a moral and marital counterculture for the coming generation.

My wife, Helen, and I have spent decades in this kind of ministry. We have led more than 1,200 couples through various forms of Marriage Preparation weekends. I have also given hundreds of hours to counseling hurting married couples. We have an extremely high view of marriage and will do everything possible to save or rebuild marriages. But because of the cultural situation, the church must go further. We cannot be content with sitting in ivory towers or standing behind insulated pulpits propounding the meaning of Bible verses on divorce and remarriage, turning them into precise laws that shut people out of our churches. Doing so assumes a moral, legal, and cultural consensus that no longer exists and is as ineffective for American serial monogamists as the hard-line approach was for African polygamists.

It is time we recognize our mission-field situation. We must become deeply involved with those whose marriages have failed: the separated, the divorced, those contemplating remarriage, and remarried couples with struggling "blended" families. Without compromising scriptural standards, we must take the risk of asking the ultimate missionary question: How can we work with broken people and shattered marriages *in this particular setting*? How can we do it in ways that lead to repentance and forgiveness, that let people understand the sins and pathologies that destroyed their previous marriages, that help them make right choices if and when they remarry? Only then will families break the present generation's patterns of divorce, and thereby eventually cause culture to change.

—David Seamands is a former missionary and pastor, as well as professor of pastoral ministries and counselor-in-residence at Asbury Theological Seminary.

What the Bible Says About Divorce

Key texts for understanding divorce from a Christian perspective.

Hebrews 4:12–13

by H. Wayne House

People looking for biblical guidance on the subject of divorce often turn to the following nine passages. Use them to build a biblical understanding of this topic and to inform your communication about this difficult subject.

Genesis 2:24

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh.

Deuteronomy 24:1–4

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.

Malachi 2:10–16

Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?

Judah has broken faith. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god. As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the Lord cut him off from the tents of Jacob—even though he brings offerings to the Lord Almighty.

Another thing you do: You flood the Lord's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, "Why?" It is because the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.

"I hate divorce," says the Lord God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the Lord Almighty.

So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.

Matthew 5:31–32

"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

Matthew 19:3–12

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”

Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept the word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”

Mark 10:2–12

Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

“What did Moses command you?” he replied.

They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.”

“It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,” Jesus replied. “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.”

Luke 16:18

“Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

Romans 7:1–6

Do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to men who know the law—that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man.

So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

1 Corinthians 7:10–15

To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.

To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): if any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.

SCRIPTURE QUOTATIONS TAKEN FROM THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION.
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—H. Wayne House, who compiled these verses for a CHRISTIANITY TODAY article in 2000, is a professor of biblical studies and apologetics at Faith Seminary in Tacoma, Washington, and editor of Divorce and Remarriage (InterVarsity, 1990).

Divorce Needs

A look at the emotional, practical, and spiritual needs of people going through divorce.

Lamentations 3:19–23

by Connie M. Valentini

Fifty percent of marriages today will end in divorce. Because these numbers are consistent for both Christians and non-Christians, the church must learn to respond lovingly to this group of hurting people. Divorce is profoundly painful, and a better understanding of the difficulties and needs of a divorced person will provide us with the sensitivity and wisdom required to be effective ministers of God's grace and mercy. Here are a few of the main needs a person faces during a divorce:

1. Need for Understanding

Numerous problems can contribute to a couple's divorce: patterns of conflict, addiction, abuse, the trauma of an affair, stressful events that impact the marriage, neglect and/or emotional distance within the marriage. The reasons for a divorce are important as you seek to minister to a hurting divorced person.

Spouses often experience long-standing private difficulties in their marriage long before the public event of a divorce. It is important to take the time to listen and understand the reasons for the breakdown of a marriage. Only when you listen can you offer the kind of emotional and spiritual support that your friend needs. In some cases, he or she might be verbalizing the experiences for the first time, and coming to terms with many new or unfamiliar feelings. For example, a spouse who has suffered many years of physical and emotional abuse may be overwhelmed by the feelings of anger that she suppressed during the marriage. In this case, listening to the anger can be a vital step in helping this person in the recovery process.

What you can do:

- Ask your friend going through a divorce to tell you what he or she has been learning through this experience.
- Don't give advice while you are seeking to understand your friend's difficult choices. Try not to display shock or judgment if your friend discusses painful details from his or her ordeal.
- Convey a commitment to confidentiality so that your friend feels safe to share honestly about his or her experience.

2. Need for Grieving

People suffer many losses when they get divorced: the loss of a best friend and companion, financial security, a home, shared friends, daily time with children, and—perhaps most importantly—a particular vision of the future. These losses all lead to a deep sense of grief, not unlike the grief that people experience following a death. There is no way to fill the emptiness that divorce creates, but being present in the midst of your friend's sadness can be a source of comfort and strength.

While a period of grief and sadness is expected, unremitting sadness and symptoms of depression are serious. Symptoms of depression include sleeplessness, difficulty concentrating and completing daily activities, loss of appetite or weight, and thoughts of death or suicide. If you notice these symptoms, it is best to give a referral to a professional counselor.

What you can do:

- When you spend time with your friend who is going through a divorce, make mental notes of his or her physical, mental, and emotional health.

- Encourage your friend to journal his or her feelings of grief, which can be a good way to understand and move through the difficult emotions.

3. Need for Acceptance

Divorce often results in feelings of guilt, rejection, and shame. Nearly all people—Christians in particular—will struggle intensely with the decision to divorce because of the cultural and spiritual stigma of failure attached to it. Be sure to show your friend non-judgmental acceptance, which will provide a healing message that he or she is still deeply loved and valued. This love and acceptance from others—especially those within the church—can be a reassuring comfort, and a step toward experiencing God’s forgiveness.

What you can do:

- Offer to pray with your friend, particularly if you sense that shame and guilt are an encumbrance for him or her.
- Have some Scripture at hand to read with your friend to remind him or her of God’s forgiveness and grace.

4. Need for Relationship

Many divorced people experience a deep sense of alienation from others. This is particularly true for Christians. They might perceive that their divorce is such a stain of failure that others simply can’t, or no longer wish, to relate to them. By reaching out to a hurting divorced person, you can help him or her feel connected and loved.

Be sensitive, though, to the potential discomfort a recently divorced person may feel in spending time with other married couples. Sometimes this can highlight the state of his or her recently severed relationship and prompt feelings of sadness or loneliness. With this in mind, an offer of time from a same-sex friend can be especially effective.

What you can do:

- Invite your friend to do something that does not involve serious conversation, such as browsing through a bookstore or seeing a movie.
- Consider asking your friend to help you in some way, such as a project around the house or a ministry at church. Being offered an opportunity to care about others can help him or her feel worthwhile and important.

5. Need for Tangible Support

We have certain cultural traditions that we practice after a person dies: a time of visitation, a funeral, bringing food to the grieving family, and phone calls to keep in touch. But there are no recognizable rituals to acknowledge the event of divorce, nor are there prescribed responses to minister to those who have undergone a divorce. Yet divorce can include a significant time of stressful transition, disorganization, and deep grief that the loving support of others can help alleviate.

What you can do:

- Call your friend regularly while he is going through his divorce. Give him a chance to talk about the details of the events transpiring and offer your support.
- Bring meals to your friend.
- Offer to babysit if your friend has children.

- Offer to help with reorganizing or packing if your friend needs to move.

6. Need for God's Forgiveness

Christians who divorce are often quite troubled with their need for forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Most Christians clearly understand that God despises divorce (Malachi 2:16), but they are often so broken and fragile that they feel too unworthy to embrace the grace that God offers all sinners. This is where the church can communicate God's redemptive love and his capacity to restore us to wholeness. Spending time together in prayer and speaking God's truth can be a healing balm over the wounds of failure and loss.

What you can do:

- Each time you visit your friend, express your confidence in God's forgiving character and ask for a specific request you can pray for.
- Consider whether your friend would benefit from a formal time of healing prayer with a pastor or prayer minister. Experiencing compassion and forgiveness from a church leader can be a powerful representation and encounter with God's love.

7. Need for Hope

Divorce causes grief over the loss of a particular future and a fear about what the future will now hold. Your divorced friend needs a renewed sense of hope for his or her future, with trust that God will provide for his or her needs. You can communicate through prayer and conversation that God has not abandoned him or her because of divorce, but that he still desires to bless his or her life.

What you can do:

- Encourage your friend to join a church-based divorce recovery group as a way to grow and learn with others who have gone through similar difficult experiences.
- When you see your friend acting hopeless, remind him or her of his or her many strengths, and the fact God will remain faithful to him or her.

—Dr. Connie M. Valentini is a licensed clinical psychologist practicing in the Chicago suburbs.

What Friends and Relatives Can Do

Practical advice for showing love to a person in pain.

Galatians 6:2

by James Bell, Stephen Clark, and Pamela Weintraub

Your friend or loved one is hurting and that makes you hurt. Naturally you want to help. How can you? You may have never experienced divorce, so you're unsure how to empathize.

The best thing you can do is love them unconditionally, whether or not you agree or disagree with their decision to divorce. It is a decision that they will have to live with for better or for worse.

Keep an eye on them throughout the divorce process. Call them from time to time just to tell them you care and are praying for them.

Divorce can release a crazy array of opposing emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Christians must not support, encourage, or justify non-Christian behavior. However, feelings need to be expressed. Without being judgmental, allow your friend to talk out their emotions and thoughts. On the other hand, if their behavior starts getting too near the edge (for example, flirting with immoral, dangerous, or irresponsible behavior), gently and lovingly remind them of their faith. Don't preach, but if they're out of control, ignoring the advice of friends, or unconcerned about the consequences of their behavior, you may need to intervene. Get the advice of a mental health professional before you act.

Listen a lot. They will need to unload. It's a good release for them and it actually helps them get their thoughts organized. If they are taking up too much of your time, let them know gently. If they become intrusive, be firm and set boundaries. They may be offended at first but they will get over it.

If you haven't heard both sides, or you have only sketchy details, you really don't know the truth about what went wrong. What you will hear from your friend will be necessarily biased, slanted, and incomplete. In fact, only God and the divorced couple know it all. Even then, the couple's memories are clouded by emotion and miscommunication. Don't speculate, accuse, or take sides. Avoid getting caught up in bashing their former spouse even if they're doing it. You don't need to be an ally, just a friend.

It's easy to say at the end of a relationship that it should have never happened. No matter how true that may seem, it doesn't need to be said and it's not helpful. It may not even be true at all. The fact is that it did happen. The marriage was as real as the divorce is now. Don't add to your friend's sense of failure.

Challenge your own assumptions about divorce. Do you really know what the Bible says on the topic? Are you familiar with how your own denomination views divorce? Do some reading and research to learn more. Talk to your pastor to learn what he believes. Wrap all you know and learn about divorce into the entire redemptive context of the whole Bible.

Pray for your divorced friend every day. From time to time write a short blessing on their day and e-mail it to them. Drop a note of encouragement to them in the mail now and then.

Be patient with them. It may take several months or a few years for your friend to fully recover from the divorce. The devastation affects everyone a little differently. If they seem to be stuck in an emotional or spiritual funk, nudge them to see their pastor or a therapist. Let them know how much you value them and long to see them truly enjoy life.

Be cautious about setting them up with dates too soon. Let them tell you when they're ready. It's best if they wait at least a year after their divorce is finalized before they look

for a new relationship. Even then, it's probably best for them to date casually or socialize in groups.

—James Bell is editor of The Christian Family Guide series published by Alpha Books.

—Pamela Weintraub is cofounder of Divorce Central, a resource website for men and women facing divorce.

—Stephen Clark is a Christian writer and editor living in Fishers, Indiana.

Appendix F: "Suggestions for Friends and Relatives," from CHRISTIAN FAMILY GUIDE TO SURVIVING DIVORCE by Pamela Weintraub and Stephen R. Clark, edited by James S. Bell, Jr., copyright © 2003 by Penguin Group (USA) Inc. Used by permission of Alpha Books, an imprint of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

What Pastors and Church Leaders Can Do

Principles for how to care for a person undergoing divorce.

1 Thessalonians 2:11–12

by James Bell, Stephen Clark, and Pamela Weintraub

Hate divorce but not the divorced and remarried. You can avoid condemning the divorced without endorsing divorce. Most Christians will be sophisticated enough to understand and appreciate the distinction.

Speak Publicly

Talk about divorce. Not talking openly about divorce does not help people avoid it. Just the opposite. People whose marriages are in trouble will hesitate to seek help for fear of disapproval. It is not a sin to have marital problems. Make it easy and natural for hurting couples to get help in your church.

Instead of preaching dire warnings about the awful consequences of divorce, why not teach about the awesome responsibilities of family? Preach about how challenging and humbling it is for a husband and father to be responsible for being the spiritual head of his home. Explain how, together, mother and father represent God to their family. Let the children hear that when mom and dad discipline them they are behaving in a godly manner for the good of the kids. Remind your church that obedience to and respect for God begins with obedience and respect at home.

Get Personal

Avoid relying on pre-packed programs for meeting the needs of the divorced. Get personal and involve your entire church. Train couples who have had years of successful marriages to come alongside couples who are struggling. Teach your congregation to love people, not gossip about them.

Don't dance around the subject of divorce and remarriage. Let the position of your church and denomination be clearly known. This will allow those who are divorced to know up front whether or not they will be accepted or will be allowed to minister in your church.

Recognize the pain and shame that comes with divorce. Extend unconditional love and compassion to those in your church who choose divorce. Don't take sides, condemn, or assume you know what the problems are. Find creative ways to help each spouse through the transition while continuing to stay in church.

Celebrate blended families. Acknowledge openly that they exist and that they thrive.

If you won't marry people who are divorced, then maybe you should not seek them out to be members of or to serve in your church. Doing otherwise can communicate a double standard. Whatever your position is, be open and consistent.

—James Bell is editor of The Christian Family Guide series published by Alpha Books.

—Pamela Weintraub is cofounder of Divorce Central, a resource website for men and women facing divorce.

—Stephen Clark is a Christian writer and editor living in Fischers, Indiana.

How to Make a Referral

A referral to a professional counselor is, oftentimes, an act of ministry.

Proverbs 19:20

by Randy Christian

Many men and women find help and healing in specialized care once their divorce is finalized. Here is one pastor's checklist for making an effective referral:

Pastors and church leaders can easily find themselves lacking either the time or the qualifications for a given situation. When that happens, they need to make a referral. Each situation is unique, but I try to follow a few basic steps when I refer someone to a professional:

1. *Ascertain where the real need is.* When you're asked for help, your primary task is to decide what help is needed and who is the best person to meet the need. This will usually mean at least one meeting or extended conversation with the counselee. Ask enough questions to define the need.

2. *Make the referral personal.* In making a referral, I've learned to refer to a person or persons—not to an institution. Knowing the counselor to whom you are sending your counselee can help you make sure that he or she is getting the best care.

3. *Make the recommendation clear.* As you make your suggestions to the counsees, be ready to explain exactly why you believe it's best to refer them to someone else. You'll greatly increase the likelihood of a successful referral by answering directly all legitimate questions. It is good to assure the counselee that you'll continue to be involved, but in a different role.

4. *Make the first contact, if necessary.* It isn't always necessary to make the initial contact with the resource person. In some situations, it might be important for the counselee to take responsibility for making the call. But other times, especially after a significant loss, initiating the first contact can be very helpful.

5. *Insure communication with the new helper.* As a pastor, I never refer people to anyone who is unwilling to communicate with me. This doesn't mean I need to know all the details of what's going on, but I have a responsibility to the people I refer; I need to be sure they are truly being helped. A good tool to insure communication with the new counselor is a standard, release-of-information form. Most ministers don't require such a form, but virtually every community professional does.

6. *Specify to the new helper, before the referral is made, what his or her role is to be.* If you want a specific type of help to be provided, this should be made clear. When I refer people to doctors or therapists for technical counseling, I request that any questions related to moral or spiritual issues (e.g., birth control or abortion) be referred to me.

7. *Follow up on the referral.* I try to follow up within a week after a referral, and periodically thereafter. Has the counselee made contact? How is the work going? How can I best support the process?

—Randy Christian is a licensed counselor and pastor of adult education and family ministry at Beaverton Christian Church in Beaverton, Oregon.

Ministry to Children

What parents and counselors should expect from children, and how they can respond.

Matthew 9:14

by H. Norman Wright

In order to help the child or his or her parents, it is important to understand what a child of divorce experiences. Remember that the feelings experienced by a child from the divorce of his or her parents will change in time. There are fairly clear emotional stages through which the child passes as he or she struggles to understand and deal with divorce. These stages are normal. They cannot be avoided or bypassed, and they have nothing to do with the spirituality of the child. Your goal as you counsel the child or parents is to help the child pass through these stages in order to produce positive growth and minimize the negative effects.

Whether a child's home is quiet and peaceful or filled with conflict, the child rarely expects a divorce to occur. Children usually do not like conflict, and they hope it will settle down eventually. Here are some of the emotional stages a child will pass through as he or she copes with divorce:

Fear and Anxiety

These feelings occur because a child is now faced with an unknown future. A home and family with two parents is the child's source of stability. It is now about to be shattered.

Various indications of fear and anxiety may manifest themselves in restlessness, nightmares, sleeplessness, stomach problems, sweating, and aches and pains. These are normal problems. Parents at this time need to give reassurance and discuss their future plans in detail. It is important to give facts, because a child's imagination may run wild. Knowing is better than wondering. A child may tend to think up worse problems than actually exist.

Abandonment and Rejection

After fear and anxiety come feelings of abandonment and rejection. The feelings of the initial stage recede and are replaced by this struggle. The child may know at one level that he or she will not be rejected or abandoned, but the child is still concerned that it might happen. A younger child has difficulty distinguishing between the parents' leaving one another and leaving him or her behind, and unfortunately, the child may focus upon the latter. This stage may be perpetuated by unkept promises on the part of a parent who leaves.

Aloneness and Sadness

These feelings eventually replace abandonment and rejection. As the family structure changes and settles down, the reality of what has occurred begins to settle in. A child feels this stage with a pain in the stomach and a tightness in the chest. This is a time for depression, and regular activities tend to be neglected. Many children do a lot of thinking, which is usually wishful daydreaming. And the fantasies follow the same theme: parents getting back together and everything being all right. Crying spells may become more frequent at this time.

Frustration and Anger

After sadness comes frustration and anger. Children whose parents divorce or separate are angry children. This is a natural response to the frustration they feel. In addition, they have seen angry and upset parents, and this modeling of anger is emulated

by the children. Anger may continue to be the pattern for many years and may carry over into other relationships.

For some children, anger may not show itself directly. It is an inward feeling that may be suppressed or masked. It may come out through negativity and moodiness. Whether expressed or not, anger is damaging. If it is present, it is far better for it to be admitted and handled rather than buried and waiting for an eventual explosion.

A child's anger is present for several reasons:

- It serves as a protection and a warning signal, just like depression.
- It is alerting the people the child interacts with to a problem and is often a reaction to hurt, fear, or frustration.
- It is an involuntary response. Parents and counselors alike should not be threatened by the anger or attempt to deny its presence in the child.
- If it is not allowed as a direct expression, it will be expressed in a passive and indirect manner, which is far more dangerous.
- The child's anger may be expressed through a negative perspective on life, irritability, withdrawal, self-isolation, and resistance to school, chores or other activities.

The feeling of anger should never be denied. Rather, help the child learn to express and drain it. According to the child's ability, help him or her understand the reason for his or her anger and its purpose.

In order to resolve anger, a child needs time alone with his or her parents each week. This can be difficult if there are several children in the family, but it is needed. Urge the parents to be good listeners and to help their child express his or her feelings.

Additionally, be on the lookout for signs of indirect expression. Sarcasm and resistance are fairly easy to spot, but the manifestations may occur in physical complaints such as asthma, vomiting, insomnia, and stomachaches. Accept the normalcy of the child's anger. Encourage the child to talk it out but not act it out.

Rejection and Resentment

Eventually the child's anger moves into rejection and resentment. The child is not over his or her angry feelings but is now attempting to create some emotional distance between himself or herself and his or her parents. This is a protective device. Pouting can be one of the forms of rejection, as is the silent treatment. The child won't respond to suggestions or commands and often "forgets" to follow through with what he or she is supposed to do. The child becomes hypercritical. This behavior is actually a reaction formation. As a child pushes a parent away, he or she really wants to be close to the parent. The child says hateful statements and yet wants to be loved. The child is just trying to protect himself or herself from rejection, so the child rejects others first.

Reestablishment of Trust

The final stage in the process of dealing with divorce is the reestablishment of trust. It is difficult to say how long this will take, as it varies with each situation and child and ranges from months to years.

Advice for Divorced Parents

What advice can you give to the parent or parents who are concerned about the effect of their divorce upon their children? Suggest to the parents that they do the following:

- Do not be over concerned with your own feelings to the neglect of the children's feelings.
- Each day give your child some time to discuss what they are experiencing and feeling.
- Give children time to process their feelings. There are no quick solutions or cures.
- A stable environment is beneficial to the children. If possible, live in the same home and neighborhood. Keep everything the same as much as possible. The greater the change, the greater the stress and discomfort to the children.
- Give positive feedback to the children and build their sense of self-confidence.
- Reassure them that they are not the cause of the divorce or separation. Both parents need to give consistent and equal amounts of love.
- According to the children's level of understanding, help them know in advance the different types of feelings they will be experiencing. Keep the children informed at all times of any expected changes, so they can prepare in advance.

—*Dr. H. Norman Wright is a licensed marriage, family, and child therapist.*

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Divorce Recovery: A Task for the Church

Transform the tragedy of shattered marriages into compassionate ministry.

Job 4:3

by Lee Dean

“God hates divorce!” is an unambiguous expression that has the backing of Scripture (Mal. 2:16) and the buttress of common sense.

Despite the strength and sanity of this statement, divorce has become a common occurrence. Christians, including evangelical Christians, are divorcing at a rate only slightly less than the rest of society. This means that your church, wherever it is and whatever its theological stance, will contain people in pain from divorce.

Indeed, God hates divorce—but he also loves divorced people. Therefore, churches are called to provide practical and compassionate ministry to those who are struggling with this tragedy.

Theological Understanding

The subject of divorce is still a hot button, both in doctrine and policy, for many denominations and churches. The Bible carefully addresses the issue, and clearly allows divorce on two specific grounds—sexual immorality, or if a non-believing partner insists on dissolving the marriage. To this, we may add another possibility not expressly addressed in Scripture: physical abuse. It is neither pastoral nor responsible to advocate that a person remain married to someone who inflicts physical violence.

Why a Divorce Ministry?

Churches with limited resources may be driven to put all their eggs into the “marriage preparation” basket. Certainly the church should put sufficient resources into preparing people for marriage. It must also be vigilant to help rescue troubled marriages. This does not negate the fact that the church has a responsibility to people who are already divorced, by helping them recover from the trauma and prepare for a new life.

The Goals of Divorce Ministry

A strong divorce-recovery ministry will take on at least three goals:

- *Dealing with the present.* Divorce plunges people into shocking new realities. A divorce recovery ministry has the immediate task of helping people deal with the short-term effects of the divorce, which are emotional, physical, material, spiritual, and legal. They then must come to terms with being single (and sometimes alone).
- *Dealing with the past.* We need to help divorced people come to a clear self-understanding of why they married, and of the factors leading to the divorce. This may mean helping people discover patterns of behavior and relationships.
- *Looking ahead.* A large part of divorce recovery is addressing and processing the pain of the breakup. This means encouraging divorced people to forgive their ex-spouses and learn to risk trust again.

Ministry Leadership

Goals in place, a divorce recovery ministry will also need the support of church leaders:

- *Support from the top.* Leadership can support divorce recovery ministry with a sermon or adult education classes. Literature and website information can

inform divorced people and the congregation at large about the ministry. At the very least, leadership should encourage an acceptance and understanding of the needs of divorced people.

- *Selection and training.* Ideally, someone will be on staff with ministry and counseling experience, but you may also need to seek outside experts. There is another potential pool of classroom leaders and mentors within your church—divorced people who have demonstrably recovered from the experience. These mentors should be under the leadership of a pastor or other staff member, who would provide initial training and continuing oversight.

Types of Divorce Recovery Ministry

There are several options for reaching out to men and women in the aftermath of a divorce. Here are the basic structures that many churches rely on for their ministry:

- *One-time workshops or classes.* A church can offer a special weekend workshop, led by an outside expert, without further ministry programming. Special individual classes are also an option. For example, Northway Community Church in Dallas offers a course called “Getting Through the Holidays After Death or Divorce.”
- *A series of weekly classes, without a weekend workshop.* Some churches favor this approach, especially if it helps create an ongoing divorce care ministry. A person needing care can jump into the course schedule at any time and continue until all the sessions cycle back around.
- *A workshop followed by a series of classes.* A kickoff workshop takes place over a weekend, usually starting on Friday night and running all day Saturday. The follow-up classes range in number anywhere from 6 to 15.
- *One-on-one relationships.* These are individual mentoring relationships where a person going through a divorce receives care from someone who has already completed the process. The entire weight of the divorce recovery ministry should not be placed on the shoulders of the mentors. Rather, they should complement classes, workshops, and small groups.
- *Small groups.* These groups can use a combination of curriculum materials, and are ideally led by someone who has already been through divorce recovery.
- *Help for family members.* Everyone in the family suffers from a divorce, not only the dividing spouses. The needs of children in particular should be considered. Churches can also consider assisting with the day-to-day needs of a suddenly single parent, such as babysitting, grocery shopping, and transportation.

Curriculum

Some churches create their own divorce recovery curriculum, and do it well. Many other churches, whether due to small staff, limited resources, or lack of available expertise, will choose to research and purchase already-existing curriculum. Examples include:

- *DivorceCare*. This curriculum is designed to provide a church with a complete, ongoing divorce care ministry. Materials include leadership training, DVDs, and videos featuring teaching from experts, and a 13-week group course. Topics include loss, anger, depression, loneliness, finances, sexuality, childcare, forgiveness, and more. All materials are from a Christian perspective.
- *Rebuilding*. This program includes 10 sessions based on the book *Rebuilding: When Your Relationship Ends* by Bruce Fisher. Materials include participant workbooks and a facilitator's manual. This system guides people through a series of building blocks, starting from denial and working up to freedom. While *Rebuilding* is not expressly Christian, a skilled facilitator can incorporate its principles with Scripture.
- *A Time for Healing: Coming to Terms with Your Divorce* by Harold Ivan Smith (LifeWay, 2001) is a course used by a number of churches. This curriculum, which includes a facilitator book and a member guide, uses a small-group format and meets for 10 weeks.
- *DC4K*, or Divorce Recovery for Kids, is another offering of the DivorceCare ministry. This 13-week curriculum is designed for children ages 5–12. It includes video dramas, discussions, workbooks, and other activities. This program can run concurrently with the DivorceCare programs for adults.

Mistakes to Avoid

Even the best ministry can suffer from these common oversights:

- *An attitude of judgment*. The proper ministry approach is to listen with compassion and ask gentle, probing questions devoid of judgment.
- *Taking sides in the divorce*. This is especially important in the cases where both of the ex-spouses or their extended family members belong to the same church. If the divorcing parties are busy gathering allies for a fight, the divorce ministry must act as a healing, calming counterweight.
- *Not providing childcare* for classes, workshops, and meetings.
- *Believing there is something wrong or unusual about being single*. Divorce recovery should not be about matchmaking. Being single can be a revelatory time of self-discovery, deepening faith, and increasing involvement in ministry.
- *Lack of follow-through after a class or workshop*. These people will likely need some kind of ongoing relational care. It is best to avoid a system where people go to a class or workshop and are then left to their own devices.
- *Failure to integrate with other related ministries*. A divorce recovery ministry should be part of a holistic approach that includes marriage preparation, marriage enrichment, marriage rescue, and even remarriage ministry.

- *Manipulation of vulnerable people.* There are likely to be people using your divorce ministry who are not Christians. Resist the urge to use their weakened state to aggressively press for conversion. But by all means demonstrate the love of Christ and use biblical principles. Many new Christians have made their decisions as the result of a wise, loving touch in divorce recovery ministries.

—*Lee A. Dean is a freelance writer and editor based in Plainwell, Michigan.*

Further Exploration

Books and resources to help you respond to divorce.

BuildingChurchLeaders.com. Leadership training resources from Christianity Today.

- “Giving Help to the Hurting” Assessment Pack
- “Ministry for Depression” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Ministry for Remarriage” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Depression” Survival Guide
- “Recovery Ministries” Training Theme & PowerPoint

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

PreachingToday.com. A website that offers practical advice, illustrations, and sample sermons for preachers—including several resources for reaching out to people who have divorced.

DivorceCare.com. Divorce Care exists to foster healing in men and women who have experienced divorce. It draws on the resources of many well-known Christian leaders. Through their DV4K program, DivorceCare offers resources for ministering to children of divorce, too.

Christian Family Guide to Surviving Divorce *James S. Bell Jr., ed.* A Christian guide to the emotional and legal processes of divorce, including resources on parenthood after divorce. (Alpha, 2003; ISBN 978-1592570966)

Grief, Transition, and Loss: A Pastor’s Practical Guide *by Wayne E. Oates.* This book offers pastors and key ministry leaders insight into the process of loss, including one chapter specifically on the process of divorce. (Fortress Press, 1997; ISBN 978-0800628642)

How Do I Help a Hurting Friend *by Rod J.K. Wilson.* This book, by a professional counselor, provides a Christian perspective and advice for how to reach out to hurting loved ones. (Baker Books, 2006; ISBN 978-0801066092)

The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce *by Judith Wallerstein, Julia Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee.* Presents the results of a 25-year study that brings out the long-range impact of divorce on children. (Fusion, 2002; ISBN 978-1901250947)

When the Vow Breaks *by Joseph Warren Kniskern.* Offers practical advice for moving through grief and processing divorce emotionally, practically, and even theologically. (Broadman & Holman, 1993; ISBN 978-0805460841)