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by Charles Qualls



The Resource Page

... creative and practical ideas

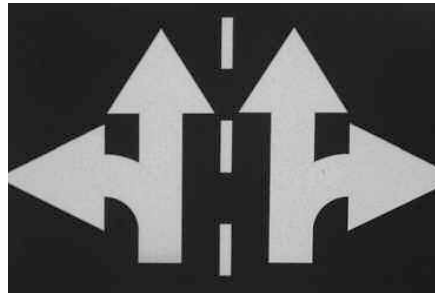
Embracing the excluded: Divorce recovery ministries

Cheryl is a 40-year-old sales person in the divorce recovery group. Her 20-year marriage has just entered into separation, and the battle with her husband is on. Successful in her own career, she'll be okay financially. It's her heart and her confidence that are a little dinged up.

Darcy is a 48-year-old graduate student. Her marriage of 18 years ended recently when her husband announced reconciliation with his first wife. In divorce recovery, she realized they had never connected emotionally to begin with.

Churches have a unique opportunity to counter the prevailing cultural assumptions when it comes to life realities such as divorce. Because the rate of first marriages ending in divorce continues to hover just below 50 percent, communities across America provide the need for divorce support. The church has a public relations problem, though. Divorcees assume the church will sit in judgment rather than respond in grace. By working to offer quality divorce recovery programs, congregations can reach out with love, safety and support in tough times.

Most participants bring some degree of exclusion from relationships as they enter divorce recovery. Many have noticed a change in the way even close friends and family members act toward them because of their divorce. Others feel isolated or focused upon even by strangers, as though "everyone" knows they have experienced a broken marriage. They say things similar to: "My friends and family all want me to be 'fixed' — in other words they want me back to normal since I'm driving



them all crazy right now." Some indicate, "There's a distance, although it's hard to describe." Plainly, some express a version of "I feel like everyone is staring at me."

So what can churches offer through divorce recovery ministries that might help? Here are some ingredients in good divorce support work:

- Skilled leadership that connects with divorcing participants (ex: divorcees, ministers, counselors, empathetic church members)
- A willingness to not attach bottom-line type growth or financial numbers to justify the program
- Support resources such as counselors for referral as needed or a skilled life-transition coach.
- Investment in costs for training, print/electronic resources, promotion/advertising costs (with participants possibly providing some funding)
- The discipline to resist trying to "fix" participants and their marriages, and focusing on grace rather than guilt
- Evaluating participants who may become future leaders of the program

At Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church, we offer a two-level program consisting of eight-week small groups. The first level focuses on the grief and emotion of the experience, while

the second level works at reconnecting with relational health and hope. Each group uses a book for the study, and the entry-level group spends a few moments watching a video based on that week's chapter before easing into discussion for the balance of the time. These entry-level groups are offered twice annually, with an advanced-level group offered once a year to all who have completed the entry level.

What happens when a church reaches out to its community by offering a support experience such as divorce recovery? First, life needs are being met if the group is structured well and offered with a degree of competence. Weak, manipulative or guilt-producing divorce work is not supportive.

Next, churches provide a trustworthy place for their members and friends to receive help when divorce or separation arises. While groups may come and go with only community members in them, there will be occasions when church or family members need a place to turn to.

An additional outcome is that the church's reputation is strengthened. A banner in the front yard advertising such a program speaks well. It entices passersby to consider what kind of congregation might offer such support, even in the eyes of those who have no need for the group.

Divorce recovery groups, and others like them, are not always easy. They cause ministers and leaders alike to walk into murky water with persons in pain. Participants are not always easy to be around. Sometimes the leaders will have to remember that they can't save everyone from self-destructive patterns. Many participants will use the church's program, only to disappear back into the city again upon completion. Still, Christ's call to support and to uphold is upon believers who have the resources to be of help. **BT**

THE RESOURCE PAGE is provided by the Congregational Life office of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in partnership with *Baptists Today* and for those dedicated lay leaders working in the educational ministries of local churches. This month's page was written by Charles Qualls, associate pastor for pastoral care at Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta. Resource Page Archives are available at <http://www.thefellowship.info/Resources/Church-Resources/Baptists-Today-resource-page>.