
THE HARD WORK OF DIVORCE RECOVERY GROUPS BY THE REV. CHARLES QUALLS

“I crossed that finish line and thought to myself, ‘If I can run a marathon, I can get rid of me a husband!’” So said Dominique, a 52-year-old office professional of her decision to file for divorce. The mother of two adult children, she recently had discovered that her husband had a secret second family. Running has been therapeutic for her, but the divorce support group was a bold step.

Cheryl is a 40-year-old salesperson also in the divorce recovery group. She has just separated from her husband of 20 years. Her children actually asked her to leave the house, so her isolation is magnified. Successful in her own career, she’s fine financially but her heart — and confidence — are battered.

Darcy is a 48-year-old-graduate student. Her marriage of 18 years ended recently when her husband announced he was reconciling with his first wife. In divorce recovery, she realized they never really were connected emotionally.

David is a highly successful professional who was married for 10 years. His wife struggles with substance abuse. He has been living on his own since he filed for divorce. He went through two levels of a divorce recovery program and then began to think about reconciling with his wife. Although this outcome is rare, he says he’s thankful for the program.

“It allowed me to do the reflecting I needed to. I learned a lot about myself, and about what’s been wrong with our marriage. I don’t know whether we’ll pull it back together or not. I do know that I’m on the road to being OK if we don’t. And, I know some of the patterns I don’t want to repeat if we do.”

What happened to the divorce recovery ministry?

Turn back the calendar 10 or 15 years and churches were pioneering the work of support groups for divorced and separated persons. Now, such groups are surprisingly hard to find. One pastor offers candidly, “We found out it’s hard work doing a divorce group. That, and churches

figured out that they weren’t going to gain all that many new members by offering these groups.” Indeed, divorce groups are about offering much more than they are about receiving. So, is there a case to be made that validates this ministry?

Why do divorce recovery?

There are at least three strong reasons to recommit to divorce recovery work in your congregation. When a church offers a support experience such as divorce recovery, life needs are being met. The caveat is that needs are being met only if the group is well structured and competently facilitated. Weak, manipulative or guilt-producing divorce work is not supportive. Done well, divorce recovery is in keeping with Christ’s model of upholding those who are hurting.

Also, churches can provide a trustworthy place for their own members and friends to receive help when divorce or separation occurs. Some of the ministries a church provides may attract community members only for a short time, but they are still brothers and sisters in Christ who need a safe, welcoming place to turn. Don’t we want them to believe the “church on the corner” is that place where they can seek understanding and grace?

Another consideration is the image your church projects to the larger community. A banner in the front yard promoting divorce recovery groups conveys much more to those driving by than time, date and place. It may prompt passersby to consider what kind of congregation this might be that embraces and encourages those going through this painful experience.

How to provide a healthy group

What does a church need to be ready for if it is to offer a healthy divorce support group? Here are some components of good divorce support work:

- Skilled leadership that connects with divorcing par-

ticipants. This does not have to be left exclusively to other divorcees. Ministers, counselors and empathetic church members can connect, but they need to be open to learning from their participants.

- A willingness to not attach bottom-line type growth or financial numbers to such a program in order to justify it.
- Support resources for the program, such as counselors for referral as needed or a skilled life-transition coach.
- Up-front investment in costs for training and print/electronic resources. There will also be promotional/advertising costs if offered to the community at large. Fees can be structured so that cost-recovery happens over time.
- The discipline to resist trying to “fix” participants and their marriages. Most divorce support groups actually work from the assumption that their participants’ marriages are irretrievably broken. Also, grace needs to be the predominant theme, not guilt; participants already are suffering.
- The ability to discern leadership among those who have completed the work so they can help others.

Challenges and rewards

Divorce recovery groups, and others like them that minister to suffering individuals, are not easy. They call ministers and leaders to walk alongside those in great pain who often are difficult companions. Leaders have to accept they can’t save individuals from self-destructive patterns. Nor can leaders expect participants to engage in the life of the church; most disappear back into the city again upon completion of the recovery work. Still, Christ’s call to support and to uphold is upon believers who have the resources to help.

One story reflects the growth and self-awareness that can happen in a good support group. A new group of divorce recovery participants was scheduled to start its class within the week. The leader was finishing his time with participants who were in an advanced level of the same program. One participant in that program told the leader,

“You go down there next week and tell those folks that we said they’re going to be OK.” Others nodded in agreement. The next week, that very word was passed along to the entering class members.

Nine weeks later, as they closed out their time in the program, the same leader asked them what they would tell a new group. Darcy, whose husband decided to reconcile with his first wife, responded, “You tell them we said they’re going to be OK.” Surprised, she added, “Hey, that’s what the other group told you to tell us!” And so it was.

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