

# YOU GET THE SILVER, I GET THE CHURCH

MARYJANE PIERCE NORTON

One of the painful rituals at the time of a divorce is dividing up the mutual possessions. In a similar way, many other items of the couple's life together are divided. One part of life that may or may not be dealt with in the same way as Grandmother's silver is the church. In talking with divorced persons, you may hear the following (or similar) stories.

"We've been in this church for 20 years. Neither of us wants to leave, but we're not sure we can both remain members here either. It's awkward to see one another at church and no longer be a couple."

"This was my church before we married. I'm staying. She's going to have to go someplace else."

"Although this church has been important to both of us, neither of us feel we can stay now. All our friends were couples. We don't fit anymore in our Sunday school class. It's too hard to stay."

"I've always loved this church. Now it feels as if no one wants to talk with me. It's as if they feel divorce is catching. I really feel I need to look for another church. Besides, my ex-spouse has family here. If I leave, she can stay and I won't make her uncomfortable."

"Our children have grown up in this church. We feel it's important to them for both of us to be involved. However, we need some help working out how to

both stay active and involved when so much has changed."

Behind each of these statements is a variety of emotions. In her book, *Breaking and Mending*, Mary Lou Redding observes that every divorce represent the death of a dream. It would be safe to say that no one entering into a marriage says to themselves, "Boy, can't wait till we divorce!" Marriage represents a dream for life together, for growth, for shared love and experiences. Divorce shatters that dream. It is the death of a phase of life. This is true even when the divorce is sought by one party or another. There still is a death and people go through the same emotions they would as if a loved one has died. It is a time when people need support.

Divorcing people often drop out of

the church for a number of reasons. Some feel shame about their divorce. They live with a burden of guilt and feel they can't face the congregation. This can be true particularly in cases where they were part of a couple that might have been seen as perfect in the congregation.

Others drop out of a congregation because they feel they are now judged as damaged in some way by their own congregation. Sometimes this feeling comes in ways that those who are married might not recognize. It's the realization that they are no longer invited to certain gatherings because they are no longer part of a couple. It's the comments

(made sometimes with smiles) from friends warning them away from their spouses. It's comments like, "So, you couldn't hang in there for the long haul." These comments and opinions may happen to divorced persons in their neighborhood and in their jobs. People try to cope with those feelings in other locations. But for many, church is or has been or is hoped to be a place of love and acceptance. Comments and feelings of being unaccepted not only have an effect on the person's self esteem, they also have an effect on their spiritual well-being.

Some divorcing people drop out of a congregation because they are seeking to avoid past associations. It may be unrealistic to expect people to stay in a congregation when they divorce. Even when a



congregation seeks wholeheartedly to provide a welcome, it may simply be too painful for the individual to stay and be constantly reminded of life as a couple.

Congregations need to develop mutual strategies for doing everything possible to strengthen and honor marriage and at the same time put into place a plan for support and acceptance for every person in divorcing families. **Whether intentionally or not, many divorced or divorcing people feel they are treated as second class citizens in the church. Through the teachings of Jesus, we are charged with helping every person feel as if they are first class citizens. So, what can a congregation do?**

First of all, it is helpful to face reality. Recognize that divorces do occur. Accept this as a fact. At the point of divorce, the church can offer prayers and services of healing to families going through divorce. The United Methodist Book of Worship includes a prayer that can be used with a family. This could be part of a worship service, part of a small group meeting time with the family or part of a pastoral visit.

Offer families suggestions for ways to talk within the home about what is hap-

pening. In the book, *Capture the Moment: Building Faith Traditions for Families* by Rick and Sue Isbell there is a meditation about divorce. Parents might use this with their children, then move into talking about how each person in the family is feeling at the time of the divorce.

Second, realize that recovery from divorce can be a slow process. Just as with a death, it often takes a year or more for people come out from under the feelings of despair. The church has an opportunity to minister to those in pain. There are a number of ways to do this.

- ☞ Offer within the congregation Divorce Recovery workshops or partner with another congregation in the area to offer these workshops. One resource to use is *Starting Here: A Divorce Recovery Program* by Sandra Scott.
- ☞ Prepare a Community Resource List of divorce recovery programs available in your community. Include on the list a contact person for each program. Often someone going through a divorce may be reluctant to pick up the phone and call for information. With their permission, make the initial call for them.

- ☞ Provide support for children at the time of divorce. Often, by the time a divorce occurs, adults in a marriage have been dealing with the eventuality for awhile. Sometimes children are caught unawares. They are at a different place than their parents and parents may not be able to provide to them the support they need. As with adults, offer classes for children on dealing with divorce. *Helping Children Cope with Divorce* by Jenni Douglas Duncan provides a leader's guide with sessions to use with the children as well as with parents.
- ☞ Establish support groups beyond "dealing with divorce" groups. Many times the best support for those who are divorced can be found in others who have been divorced. They know the issues. They've developed strategies for living single after years of living as a couple. These can be classes for singles, recreation opportunities, opportunities for sharing child care, job or task brokering. For someone who in 20 years of marriage has not dealt with changing the oil in the car, it is helpful to have a ready list of who to call for advice.

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☞ Recognize the power of rituals. This year, as part of our service on the fourth Sunday of Advent, our congregation participated in communion and in a service of healing. Our pastor, in inviting those who wished to come to the altar and kneel for prayers of healing and anointing of oil, recognized that in a season of the church year when everyone is to be joyful, there are many in pain. Throughout the church year, it is important to recognize pain and feelings of brokenness. While these are not important just for those experiencing divorce, they often are seen as helpful for those dealing with divorce.

☞ Keep an eye on church activities that might buy into the myth of “keeping the table even.” The hostess idea of having an even number of men and women around a table often crops up in church activities. Ask every group planning activities for the congregation where they want to include *everyone* to ask themselves, “How welcome will those who are divorced feel when they participate in this event?” I had a long conversation recently with a divorced woman who told of going to her church-wide retreat. She had been assured that this was for all “families” in the church—not just couples with children. When she arrived, she discovered all the activities were to be done in family groups and the activities geared to couples with children. She said, “That’s the last time I’ll trust that I really am wanted at a church-wide retreat.”

Remember the image of the welcoming table when we gather for communion. We do believe this is God’s table and all are welcome at the table. For those experiencing divorce, how does your congregation work to help them know they still have a place at the table? □



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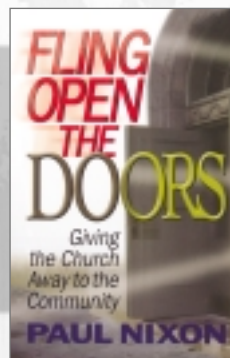
# The Latest Word



In *Standing in the Circle of Grief: Prayers and Liturgies for Death and Dying*, Blair Meeks offers new, as well as veteran, pastors a book of worship resources for occasions of grief. The book includes prayers and liturgies for particular grief-related circumstances.  
CZ3-0687051673. Paper, \$13.00

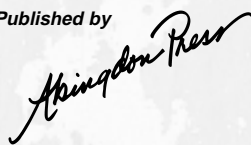


In *If It Could Happen Here*, Jeffrey H. Patton describes six “levers” for transforming a small-membership church: prayer, discerning a clear vision, indigenous worship, membership recruitment, growth groups, and lay pastoring.  
CZ3-0687030331. Paper, \$13.00



In *Fling Open the Doors: Giving the Church Away to the Community*, Paul Nixon lays out practical steps that churches can take to plant themselves firmly within the lives of the communities they serve.  
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