

the
Journey
toward
Healing

ALLYNN WALKER

*No one hears the word of grace
with as much gratitude as those whose lives
have been painfully devoid of it.*

It is the first night of the “Growing through Divorce” group. At the end of the evening, there is a closing exercise where each person is given a strip of paper and asked to write their name on it. Donna, the leader, begins talking about herself, mentioning hobbies, interests, children, work, etc. The class members are instructed to respond as soon as they hear Donna say something that is also true for them. Steve is the first person to respond. He takes his paper strip and stands next to Donna. Her paper has been stapled into a circle and Steve connects his paper to Donna’s forming another circle. Then Steve talks about his interests until another person claims a similarity. This process continues until everyone has been connected to form a paper chain. At that time, all join hands and conclude in prayer,

thanking God for this community of people who share the pain of divorce but much more, including and especially God’s love.

Our society promises us that self-sufficiency and achievement are the keys to our fulfillment. Anything that interferes with our personal autonomy and freedom is resisted in such a culture. Relationships are valued for their contribution to our self-fulfillment. Divorce is often a painful consequence of this view of life. Divorce produces broken hearts, shattered identities, and divided families. The failure of self-sufficiency and achievement are painfully evident when a marriage is torn apart.

Our church asked, “What can we offer in a place of these empty promises?” The answer was a ministry to the divorced in our congregation and the community

where we offer three promises. First, we offer the promise of sanctuary, a safe place where all are welcomed and hospitality is practiced. Healing can take place in a community of faith that draws us out of isolation and into communion. We know our true selves to be found in relationship to God and each other.

We invite participation through the church bulletin, newsletter, and advertisements in local newspapers. A version of the advertisement, business card size, is available for those who want to invite friends and co-workers in a non-threatening manner. When the class begins, all members are required to sign a covenant agreement, stipulating their commitment to honesty, confidentiality, compassionate listening, and faithful attendance. Hospitality requires creation of space where it is safe to say anything without

fear or criticism so that trust grows and community flourishes.

Secondly, we promise each person an opportunity to tell his or her story. Storytelling is cathartic and healing. Stories help us organize and make sense of our experiences. The power of interpretation is always ours so that it is possible to narrate our lives in another way. Consequently, storytelling is an act of hope and facilitates interaction with others.

It contributes to the building of authentic community by identifying common ground.

The leaders of the class play an important role. Their task is to help people reframe their lives in the light of God's love for the sake of greater freedom and responsibility. Each class session is led by four people, two men and two women, who have completed the class. They have exhibited healing in their own lives and have expressed a desire

to serve in this ministry. Some of our leaders have been persons who came to the church for the first time to attend class. In leading class discussions, they frequently share from their own stories. They testify to the faithfulness and grace of God in their journey towards wholeness. We use various video series and books that help initiate conversation. What matters most is that people have time to tell their story, so we spend the majority of each ninety-minute class session in small groups.

Finally, we promise new life in Christ. When we as Christians narrate our lives, the story of Jesus Christ provides a transforming vision for expressing and creating meaning. It is a medium for discovering how God is always at work making something new of our personal stories. Our sovereign God extends to us grace more powerful than our grief. God's son understands suffering and pain and is acquainted with grief. We offer membership in the family of God where we are allowed to be our authentic selves—vulnerable, broken, and agents of God's work in the world.

Over the eight weeks of class, participants are encouraged to begin attending the various offerings of our church, including a Singles worship service and Sunday school class. The Wednesday night Singles worship service is informal, with an interactive component. Fellowship precedes the service and afterwards all are invited to share a meal at a nearby restaurant. The Singles Council schedules social activities and service projects every other week. In addition, each divorce class is asked to undertake its own ministry project, such as buying materials for the library, collecting school supplies for needy children in the community, etc. Concrete opportunities to serve continue God's work of transformation.

During the last class, we ask participants to complete an evaluation. Most mention that first night exercise was for them. It was a powerful antidote to

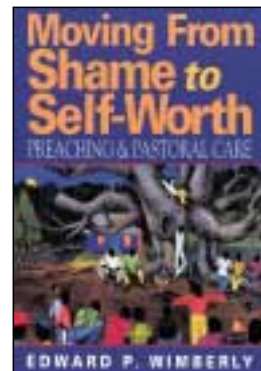
the rejection and isolation of their divorce experience. No one hears the word of grace with as much gratitude as those whose lives have been painfully devoid of it. God has richly blessed us in this ministry as we have sought to be a place that is different from the culture and community, a place where relationships are based on mutuality, compassion, forgiveness and love. We praise God for this opportunity to share the presence of the risen Christ among us, healing the sick, binding our wounds, and creating new possibilities. □

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