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### “Developing an Effective Divorce Recovery Ministry”

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To the congregations with whom I have been in ministry, the children with which God has blessed me, my courageous wife René, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the faithful friends who were there to speak life on His behalf.

## CONTENTS

TABLES .....	ix
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	x
COPYRIGHT ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	xi
ABSTRACT .....	xii
CHAPTER ONE .....	1
INTRODUCTION .....	1
THE PROBLEM: WHY DEVELOP A DIVORCE RECOVERY MINISTRY?.....	3
THE PURPOSE: WHAT DID THE PROJECT HOPE TO ACHIEVE? .....	5
THE PROCESS: HOW WAS THE PROJECT CARRIED OUT? .....	6
THE PARAMETERS: WHAT ASSUMPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS GUIDED THE PROJECT?.....	7
THE PROSPECTUS: WHAT LIES AHEAD? .....	8
CHAPTER TWO .....	11
THE PROJECT IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE .....	11
THE ISSUES OF MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, AND REMARRIAGE IN SCRIPTURE ....	12
The Permanence of Marriage.....	12
The Permissibility of Divorce.....	16
The Possibility of Remarriage .....	23
The Preeminence of Reconciliation.....	25
CHAPTER THREE .....	31
THE PROJECT IN MISSIONAL PERSPECTIVE.....	31
THE <i>MISSIO DEI</i> AND MINISTRY TO THE DIVORCED .....	32

Mission as Incarnation .....	33
Mission as Restoration.....	34
Mission as Transformation .....	35
Mission as Conversation.....	38
Mission as Community.....	40
Mission as Confession .....	44
Mission as Communication .....	45
Mission as Reconciliation.....	49
CHAPTER FOUR.....	52
THE PROJECT IN THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE.....	52
THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: HOW DID DIVORCE RECOVERY DEVELOP? .....	52
Divorce Adjustment Groups .....	53
Single Adult Ministries.....	54
Fresh Start Seminars .....	55
Video Based Curricula.....	57
Two Recent Trends.....	61
THE LITERATURE REVIEW: WHAT MAKES DIVORCE RECOVERY EFFECTIVE? .....	62
Social Support.....	65
Emotional Expression.....	66
Insight and Intervention.....	67
Freedom in Forgiveness.....	69
Holistic Hope .....	70
CHAPTER FIVE .....	73

THE PROJECT DEVELOPED .....	73
THE PROJECT DESIGN: HOW WAS A DIVORCE RECOVERY MINISTRY INITIATED?.....	73
Leadership Recruitment.....	73
Curriculum Determination.....	76
Logistics Planning .....	77
Advertising Campaigns .....	78
Facilitator Training .....	81
RESEARCH TOOLS AND METHODOLOGY: HOW WAS EFFECTIVENESS EVALUATED? .....	82
The Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale.....	82
The Focus Group Interview .....	84
PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION: HOW WAS THE RESEARCH CARRIED OUT?.....	85
The First Session .....	85
The Following Sessions.....	87
Mid-Course Adjustments.....	89
The Final Sessions .....	90
CHAPTER SIX.....	93
THE PROJECT EVALUATED .....	93
QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS: WHAT DID THE FDAS INDICATE? .....	93
Adjustment Improvement.....	93
Comparison Scores .....	95
An Anomalous Score.....	98
QUALITATIVE FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS: WHAT DID THE FOCUS GROUP	

INDICATE?.....	99
Social Support.....	99
Helpful Information.....	101
Grief Facilitation.....	101
Hope Restoration .....	103
Forgiveness Extension.....	103
Self-Esteem Renewal.....	104
Gospel Proclamation.....	105
Relationship Guidance.....	107
OBSERVATIONS REGARDING PARTICIPATION: WHAT MADE THE GROUP VIABLE? .....	108
Effective Marketing .....	108
Effective Scheduling.....	109
PROJECT VALIDITY AND LIMITATIONS: WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE?.....	109
PROJECT STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES: TO WHAT EXTENT DID WE SUCCEED? .....	111
CHAPTER SEVEN .....	114
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS .....	114
MINISTRY CONTRIBUTIONS: HOW DID THE PROJECT AFFECT THE CONGREGATION? .....	115
RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS: WHAT DID THE PROJECT ADD TO THE FIELD? .....	117
PERSONAL CONTRIBUTIONS: HOW DID THE PROJECT PROMOTE GROWTH?.....	118
FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? .....	121
APPENDIX ONE.....	124



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF VIDEO CURRICULA AND SUGGESTED ADAPTATIONS: <i>LIFE AFTER DIVORCE OR DIVORCECARE?</i> .....	124
FAITH AND EMOTIONAL HEALING .....	125
FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION .....	130
DATING RELATIONSHIPS AND REMARRIAGE .....	133
SUGGESTED <i>DIVORCECARE</i> CURRICULAR ADAPTATION .....	137
APPENDIX TWO.....	140
ADVERTISING LETTER TO LOCAL CHURCHES.....	140
ADVERTISING LETTER TO LOCAL SCHOOLS.....	141
APPENDIX THREE.....	142
DIVORCE RECOVERY GROUP GUIDELINES.....	142
APPENDIX FOUR.....	143
DIVORCE RECOVERY GROUP SESSION OUTLINES.....	143
APPENDIX FIVE.....	156
FOCUS GROUP CONSENT FORM .....	156
APPENDIX SIX .....	157
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS.....	157
APPENDIX SEVEN.....	158
FOCUS GROUP TRANSCRIPT .....	158
APPENDIX EIGHT.....	176
FISHER DIVORCE ADJUSTMENT SCALE RESULTS.....	176
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	178

## TABLES

Table	Page
Table 1. Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale Differences.....	94

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## ABSTRACT

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A divorce recovery ministry was initiated in a church setting using the video-based *DivorceCare* curriculum. Over the course of thirteen weeks, participant scores on the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale increased an average of 53.6 points, and a final focus group interview elicited positive evaluations from all the participants. The steps taken to initiate the group and the results are discussed in detail, including eight factors cited by participants as contributing to the effectiveness of the ministry. Issues involved in divorce recovery are also considered from Biblical, missional, and theoretical perspectives, with a brief history documenting the origins of divorce recovery ministry.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

As she sits alone in a pew, listening to the sermon, the young woman can barely contain her compulsion to weep. At only twenty-four years old, she is a college graduate and successful professional. Yet her heart is devastated, her soul violated, and she can't help but feel that her future is bleak. She had been married less than two years when she discovered that her handsome, charming husband was cheating on her. She had learned of his addictions to alcohol and pornography shortly after they were married, but he had seemed repentant, professing his love for her and promising that he would change in order to make her happy. She had given him the benefit of the doubt, but his behavior had only gotten worse after he lost his job. While she worked to support them, he stayed home drinking, surfing the web, watching porn, and doing who knew what else. Then one night while he was sleeping off yet another binge, she found the messages on his phone from another woman. A few days later, encouraged by family, a few friends, and even a church member she had confided in, she left him and filed for divorce. He had alternately begged, shamed, and threatened her in attempts to change her mind, but his lack of remorse had made it clear that he had no intention of changing his heart to save their marriage. Now the divorce is final, but she still feels attached to her ex-husband, broken hearted over his betrayal, guilty before God, stigmatized by former friends, overwhelmed by everyday life, and in despair of ever being happy again, let alone happily married.

Nearby, a thirty-eight-year-old single mother is struggling to keep her three children engaged in the worship service. They are sitting with her parents, long term members of the

congregation who insisted that the family go to church together. Her parents don't understand why she stopped attending worship just before her divorce. She hasn't told them how she had gone to the previous pastor in terror of her increasingly narcissistic husband, who had not touched her in bed for eight years but whose emotional abuse of their children had recently become physical. When the young pastor insisted that she submit to her husband and repent of whatever sin was causing his behavior, she had decided that the church had neither the wisdom nor the compassion to help her. She had gone through long and terrible legal battles, first for the divorce, and then to get any kind of child support. She had helped her children work through their grief, unable to explain that she had divorced their father for their protection and unable to completely work through her own grief. She still feels stigmatized, particularly at church, where the emphasis is on faithfulness in marriage and no one knows the reasons for her decision to divorce a wealthy and popular figure in the community. Yet she also still longs for the sense of community, comfort, and strength she once found in the Christian faith. She feels sorry that her children are not being nurtured in their spiritual development as she was at their ages.

Up in the pulpit, the forty-six-year-old pastor is preaching passionately on God's will for marriage, though it still pains him to do so. He is new to the congregation, having recently accepted its call to serve as pastor after two years of recovery from his own divorce. He had never thought it would happen to him: he and his wife had been married for nearly twenty years when she had decided to end their marriage. Forced to resign his call to a congregation he loved, he had deeply grieved the loss of his soulmate, family life with his children, and relationships with many friends, church members and in-laws, as well as his reputation, dreams, and purpose in life. Thank God that a handful of compassionate friends, who had survived their own difficult divorces, had reached out to help him cope in healthy ways, start a new life as a single parent,

and recover somewhat from the emotional and spiritual trauma. As he began serving a new congregation, he found himself determined to pay forward the help he had received and do what he could to help others recover from the catastrophic consequences of divorce.

### **The Problem: Why Develop a Divorce Recovery Ministry?**

I have experienced the trauma of divorce not only in the lives of friends, neighbors, and the people I serve as pastor, but in my own life: the first two stories above are composite descriptions of representative divorcees, but the third is my own story. I know from experience that divorce can be emotionally devastating, socially alienating, and spiritually destructive, a deeply wounding and profoundly life-changing event. Many who have experienced divorce consider the pain and grief involved to be comparable to the death of a spouse, but intensified by betrayal, shame, guilt, stigma, and the lack of support or sympathy usually given to widows and widowers. As one woman commented, “Unlike the experience of losing my first husband, I didn’t receive one casserole or condolence card after the divorce.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, part of the pain in divorce comes from its tendency to isolate its victims. Those who have not experienced divorce may have no idea how to respond and are likely to fault one or both parties. Friends of the couple may feel compelled to pull away in order to avoid taking sides, or perhaps because they *have* taken sides with one spouse or the other. The individuals involved often exhibit the stages of grief through anti-social behaviors: anger, bitterness, mood swings, impulsivity, irritability, irrationality, reclusiveness, depression, addiction, etc.<sup>2</sup> In fact, research has shown that divorced people are considerably more likely to be treated for mental

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Burns, *Through the Whirlwind* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Bobbie Reed, *Life After Divorce* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1993), 27–29.



illnesses, increasing the stigma and social isolation.<sup>3</sup>

Of particular concern to pastors, divorce is also spiritually alienating. According to a recent survey by Lifeway Research, twenty percent of those who divorce stop participating in their church,<sup>4</sup> and research shows that even after remarriage divorced people are significantly less likely than those never divorced to participate in religious activities,<sup>5</sup> as are their children, even as adults.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the possibility of social stigma at church, divorcees may struggle with shame and guilt over ways in which they contributed to or compensated for the break-up of their marriage. They may also feel bitterness and unforgiveness toward their ex-spouse, a sense of abandonment by God, and disillusionment with the inability of their faith or their church to prevent or respond to the divorce.

The devastation of divorce is tragically widespread in the United States, and particularly in my community. In 2014, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that some 13.1% of Americans described themselves as separated or divorced singles, but among the 42,036 people in my urban, western zip code the percentage was 19.5%, approximately 8,197 people who were separated or divorced, not counting those who had remarried.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> David Samuel Friedman, "Divorce Recovery: Effects of a Divorce Recovery Group," (University of Arizona, 1987), 5. Friedman cites research by Redick and Johnson (1975) calculating that divorced men were 18 times more and divorced women 7 times more likely than those married to be admitted for inpatient mental health treatment.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Brown, "Twenty percent of church-goers no longer attend church after a divorce, research says," *Deseret News*, October 31, 2015, accessed August 16, 2016, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865640436/20-percent-of-churchgoers-no-longer-attend-church-after-a-divorce-2-and-the-loss-among-children-is.html?pg=all>.

<sup>5</sup> Kimiko Tanaka, "The Effect of Divorce Experience on Religious Involvement: Implications for Later Health Lifestyle," *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* 51, no. 1 (2010), 10.

<sup>6</sup> Jason Koebler, "Study: Religious Parents' Divorce May Cause Children to Leave the Church," *U.S. News and World Report* (March 5, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> "United States Census Bureau 5 Year Estimates," *2014 American Community Survey*, accessed July 15, 2016, [http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS\\_14\\_5YR\\_S1201&prodType=table](http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_14_5YR_S1201&prodType=table).

It seems obvious that Christian congregations could offer unique resources to help people heal from the pain of divorce through a clear understanding of God's Law, the restorative power of the Gospel, and the development of positive, compassionate relationships. Yet at the time that this project began fewer than one in three people in my city identified themselves as Christian,<sup>8</sup> far fewer were members of any church, and in our metropolitan area of nearly a million people, only four churches advertised divorce recovery ministries to those outside their membership.<sup>9</sup> None of the groups were near the neighborhood of my church or represented a Lutheran faith perspective. Therefore, as my congregation looked for opportunities to reach out in love and building meaningful relationships with our neighbors, we felt led to develop a recovery ministry for those struggling to recover from marital separation and divorce.

### **The Purpose: What Did the Project Hope to Achieve?**

The purpose of this project was to develop a divorce recovery ministry at Pilgrim Lutheran Church in Spokane, Washington, that participants would find effective in helping to heal the emotional, social, and spiritual devastation of divorce. In doing so, it was hoped to also initiate meaningful, mutual relationships with community members, create opportunities to share the good news of Jesus Christ with those who need to hear it, provide a ministry to and for divorced members of the congregation, and increase perceptions in the community of the congregation as a valuable resource for not only our members, but our neighbors.

The research component of the project specifically proposed, first, to describe the process of launching a divorce recovery group. Second, it was intended to determine whether such a group could make a quantifiable difference in the divorce adjustment of participants. Third, the

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<sup>8</sup> U.S. Census Data, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.bestplaces.net/religion/city/washington/spokane>.

<sup>9</sup> Google search of Divorce Recovery groups in or near Spokane, Washington on December 31, 2015.

research was designed to qualitatively examine how helpful various aspects of the divorce recovery group were found to be by participants.

Expected outcomes included the development of a recovery program consistent with Lutheran theology that could be demonstrated to increase feelings of hope and healing within participants. Also expected were the initiation of compassionate, mutual relationships between the facilitators and participants undergoing marital separation and divorce. Through those relationships and the topics included in the curriculum, opportunities to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ were expected. In addition, the discovery of group techniques that would encourage ongoing, supportive relationships among participants was expected.

### **The Process: How Was the Project Carried Out?**

The effort to develop a divorce recovery group began with an independent study of divorce recovery literature, including a comparative analysis of two leading video based curricula recently developed for use by churches in divorce recovery ministry. Based on the analysis, the *DivorceCare* curriculum was chosen and advertised on the internet, at churches, and at community centers throughout the Spokane area, focusing particularly on the neighborhood of our congregation. A husband and wife team of facilitators studied the leadership training video provided with the curriculum and prepared for the first session. The course was then convened over a 13-week period during the spring of 2016 with the researcher, as one of the facilitators, recording significant interactions and impressions of each session. Participants included one active member of the congregation, one former member, and nine members of the community.

The effectiveness of the course was measured through voluntary completion of the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale at the beginning and at the end of the course. The FDAS is a confidential, self-reporting inventory widely accepted and used to gauge changes in adjustment to

separation and divorce. A voluntary focus group interview at the end of the course was also conducted to record the perceptions of participants regarding the relevance and helpfulness of various aspects of the divorce recovery course.

### **The Parameters: What Assumptions and Limitations Guided the Project?**

Several underlying beliefs were assumed and not investigated by the research or conduct of this project. It was assumed that the facilitators' personal experiences of divorce, backgrounds in education, social services, and pastoral ministry, and the leadership training included in the curriculum would provide adequate preparation for effective facilitation of the group. It was assumed that the physical location of the group at a church facility would not preclude the participation of most people in the target group. It was assumed that participants would recognize that affiliation of the recovery group with a Christian ministry, the location of the group at a Lutheran Church, and facilitation of the group by a Lutheran Pastor would make explicit that a Lutheran Christian perspective would be represented by the facilitator on any theological issues. It was assumed that the widely-used Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale is a valid measure of divorce recovery. It was assumed that a small group would provide an adequate sample size to give some indication of the effectiveness of the course. It was also assumed that the relationships formed through the divorce recovery ministry would allow for honest and open evaluation of the experience.

Several limitations also put constraints on the scope of the project. The study measured the perceived effectiveness of only the *DivorceCare* curriculum facilitated for the first time at a single church, so comparison made to other curricular approaches convened by other facilitators in other settings would be limited. The group studied was not a random sample of the divorced population, but a self-selected group of congregation and community members who were open to

meeting in a church and who volunteered to participate out of a desire to aid in their own recovery. Advertising of the group was limited by a budget of \$350 and a time frame of less than a month between approval of the project and initiation of the first session. The group was therefore small in size: out of eleven individuals who participated in the group at some point only seven completed the course, took the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale, and participated in the focus group. No follow up was done to measure the perceived helpfulness of the course to those who dropped out, though one person who left wrote a supportive thank you letter and another phoned to explain that her absence was due to a schedule change. The husband and wife team of facilitators had no prior experience leading a group through the DivorceCare curriculum or in facilitating a focus group dealing with divorce. Finally, the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale was administered on paper and scored by hand, so that recording and reporting errors were possible.

### **The Prospectus: What Lies Ahead?**

In Chapter Two, I will examine the Biblical references and variety of theological interpretations which have led historically to differing points of view within the Christian church regarding the permanence of marriage, the permissibility of divorce, the possibility of remarriage, and the priority of reconciliation. Since all of these issues invariably arise in divorce recovery ministry, an effort will be made to explain the how these topics are currently understood by most Protestant, and particularly, Lutheran Christians.

In Chapter Three I will discuss the theological rationale for ministry to divorced people as an appropriate and opportune extension of the ongoing, saving mission of God into which He calls His Church. First I will summarize how the Church's understanding of what it means to be in mission has changed over time, then I will explain how divorce recovery ministry fits into eight current models of missional outreach.

In Chapter Four the development of divorce recovery groups will be described as a relatively recent response to changing cultural conditions. Since the curricula of divorce recovery ministries arose not only out of theological convictions but from the research of social scientists, I will survey the professional literature describing the findings of those who have experienced and empirically studied divorce recovery groups regarding what makes them effective.

In Chapter Five I will turn to describing in detail how the project was developed, beginning with the process of evaluating and choosing a divorce recovery curriculum. I will explain the means used to advertise and recruit members for the study group, explaining which methods seemed most appropriate for our situation and the reasons why. I will describe how the facilitators were prepared to lead the group and the methods chosen to evaluate the effectiveness of the group, specifically the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale and the focus group interview. I will then explain how the project was actually implemented, including adjustments that were made to both the format of the group meetings and to the evaluative methods, in response to unforeseen circumstances.

In Chapter Six I will evaluate the project both quantitatively and qualitatively. I will discuss whether data from the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale supported individual and corporate adjustment during the course of the group meetings. I will then review the perceptions of both the facilitators and the participants regarding the value of the project and the factors which they felt contributed toward the efficacy of the experience.

Finally, in Chapter Seven I will explain how the project contributed to the ministry of my congregation, Pilgrim Lutheran Church, and how it promoted my own personal and professional growth. I will conclude by describing some questions remaining at the completion of the study, the future direction of the divorce recovery ministry initiated through the project, and

recommendations for further study regarding divorce recovery groups.

Appendices will include a comparative analysis of the *DivorceCare* and *Life After Divorce* curricula, examples of advertising materials used in promoting the divorce recovery group, guidelines for participation, session outlines, the consent form, questions, the transcript of the focus group interview, and tables presenting data from the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale pre- and post-tests. A bibliography will include references consulted in the project and resources for further study in the development of divorce recovery ministry.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THE PROJECT IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE**

When I first proposed to my congregation the development of a divorce recovery ministry, I was surprised by the reluctance and confusion I encountered regarding a Christian response to the painful predicaments in which divorcees find themselves. Many seemed to think it a novel idea that we would invest time and energy in serving those whose marriages are broken. They saw divorcees as unrepentant sinners, rightly stigmatized by the emphasis Christian churches place on encouraging strong marriages and faithful families. The implication in many conversations seemed to be that, since virtually all divorced people are guilty of violating God's will by contributing to the severing of their marriage, we would be better off expending our energy in encouraging the winners—intact families—rather than trying to heal the losers, who probably wouldn't be repentant anyway. Other conversations seemed to suggest that by acknowledging the needs of those suffering from divorce might grant legitimacy to the idea of divorce and so erode the sanctity of marriage.

While some seemed to question the propriety of developing a divorce ministry, others seemed more puzzled by the variety of views they had encountered regarding what the Bible actually teaches regarding divorce, remarriage, and the reconciliation of marriages. Therefore, in this chapter I will discuss how Biblical guidance regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage can be understood in a way that affirms God's intent for marriage while providing healing and hope for those suffering from separation and divorce.



## **The Issues of Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in Scripture**

Divorce can be devastating for anyone, but is often especially painful for devout Christian believers. Most churches teach their members that marriage is a divine institution which ought never to be severed except, perhaps, for marital unfaithfulness. This high view of marriage may exacerbate the shame and guilt felt by those whose marriages have failed, causing them to be particularly resistant to outreach efforts if they are not church members, or to leave their church in the wake of a divorce if they are members.<sup>1</sup> A general prohibition of divorce is consistent throughout Scripture and particularly clear in Jesus' teachings, with an exception for unfaithfulness found only in Matthew's Gospel and a concession to those deserted by unbelieving spouses found only in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Consequently, interpreters have debated the permissibility of marital dissolution and reconstitution for centuries, often opposing one another regarding what might constitute legitimate grounds for divorce and whether remarriage may ever be permissible. The result has been that Christian churches have often seemed to offer nothing but confusion and condemnation for those already suffering through separation and divorce. Yet a closer reading and clearer understanding of Scripture can affirm not only God's original intention for marriage, but His compassionate provision for restoration when marriages are broken.

### **The Permanence of Marriage**

The origin and intent of marriage is first described the creation accounts of Adam and Eve in Genesis:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.... Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."... So the LORD God caused a

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, "Twenty percent of church-goers no longer attend."

deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (Gen. 1:27, 2:18, 21–25)

When asked about permissible grounds for divorce, Jesus famously affirmed these passages as the basis for understanding God's intention that spouses be intimate and inseparable, adding a controversial caveat:

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." (Matt. 19:3–9)

In the early Christian church, therefore, marriage was described as a divine bond broken only by death. Though Jesus' words were understood to permit divorce in the case of adultery, remarriage was usually forbidden, in the hope of reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> Augustine elaborated on these teachings, heavily influencing development of the Roman Catholic doctrine that marriage constitutes an indissoluble, sacramental bond between believers. Even under that doctrine, however, divorce and remarriage were permissible and even advisable when one spouse was an unbeliever, since 'spiritual adultery' was considered to have occurred. In addition, some marriages were "annulled" and remarriage permitted in de facto divorces.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David L. Snuth, "Divorce and Remarriage from The Early Church to John Wesley," *Trinity Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 131–32.

<sup>3</sup> Snuth, "Divorce and Remarriage," 133.

Enlightenment humanists, including Erasmus and Thomas More, challenged the Catholic doctrine, reasoning that sexual unfaithfulness by either spouse breaks the marriage bond, as does cruelty or hatred, and those in such broken marriages ought to divorce and remarry.<sup>4</sup> While the Protestant Reformers held a high view of marriage as a divine institution, they also opposed the Roman Catholic doctrine, considering marriage to be neither a sacrament nor indissoluble. They understood Jesus' words to be characteristic but not comprehensive, and so considered several reasons for divorce defensible, with remarriage permissible in many cases.<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther, for example, in "The Estate of Marriage" (1522) argued that marriage was instituted not only in the creation of humanity, as cited by Jesus, but in God's command to be fruitful and multiply; therefore deceit or deficiency regarding copulative capability could be legitimate grounds for divorce and permit remarriage, as could unfaithfulness in the form of adultery, refusal to live with one's spouse, or intentional denial of one's conjugal duty. In addition, Luther wrote that if a couple is dangerously conflicted for some other reason, they may be allowed to divorce as a protection against harm, but not to remarry, since Christians are to endure evil.<sup>6</sup>

The views of Calvin and many of the English reformers were similar to Luther, but radical reformed groups such as the Mennonites reverted to a much stricter prohibition of divorce and remarriage,<sup>7</sup> while Puritan poet John Milton represented those who advocated greater permissiveness in both divorce and remarriage. He argued that since God created marriage for human happiness and Jesus' denunciation of divorce was directed at Pharisaic legalism, a

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<sup>4</sup> Snuth, "Divorce and Remarriage," 134.

<sup>5</sup> Snuth, "Divorce and Remarriage," 136.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," trans. Walther I. Brandt, University of Oregon, accessed July 31, 2014. <http://pages.uoregon.edu/dluebke/Reformations441/LutherMarriage.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Allen Verhey, "Divorce and the New Testament (1)," *The Reformed Journal* 26, no.5 (May–June 1976): 19.

marriage devoid of happiness "is not of God's institution, and therefore no marriage."<sup>8</sup>

To this day, as a result, disagreement is common between and even within Protestant churches regarding the permissible options available to Christian believers in broken marriages. In *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, for example, four evangelical professors each take a different position: J. Carl Laney insists that divorce is never permissible and remarriage is never an option; William Heth holds that divorce is permissible for adultery but remarriage is still not an option; Thomas R. Edgar argues that Scripture allows both divorce and remarriage in cases of either adultery or desertion; and Lawrence O. Richards contends that Jesus' abrogation of the Law means that divorce and remarriage, while never God's intention, are Biblically permissible for a variety of causes including mental or physical abuse, adulteries, and physical or spiritual abandonment.<sup>9</sup> Dwight Small goes even further in his popular book *The Right to Remarry*, arguing that Jesus' limitations of divorce and remarriage do not apply to the interim period prior to the complete fulfillment of the kingdom of God and suggesting that, though marriage ought to be honored, divorce and remarriage for nearly any reason might, in practice, be sanctioned by the church as it strives to demonstrate the grace of God.<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, the witness of the church regarding marriage is unclear, and many believers are left with perplexing questions regarding divorce and remarriage. Did Jesus intend to denounce all divorce as a sinful sundering of what God has joined, or can it be a righteous decision when confronted with an unfaithful spouse? In which case, what qualifies as unfaithfulness? Moreover, could some remarriages—or perhaps all of them—be celebrated

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<sup>8</sup> Snuth, "Divorce and Remarriage," 140.

<sup>9</sup> H. Wayne House, ed., *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> Dwight H. Small, *The Right to Remarry* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1977): 12.

rather than condemned as adulterous?

### The Permissibility of Divorce

Even the most sympathetic scholars acknowledge that Jesus' original teaching was a strongly worded defense of marriage and denunciation of divorce, represented by the parallel passages in Mark 10:2–12 and Luke 16:18 condemning divorce, without exception, as adultery. Yet the exception for sexual immorality found in Matthew is consistent both with Jesus' interpretation of the Torah and with the interpretive techniques of the Israelite community demonstrated in Ezra 9 and 10, where Shecaniah and Ezra advise those who have married foreign women contrary to God's Law to send away such wives and their children.<sup>11</sup> In Ezra's case God's requirement of religious purity in Israel (love for God) was seen as superseding His original intention that those married not be separated (love for others), while in Jesus' case honoring God's intention that marriage be life-long (love for God) was cited as superseding divorce for any cause (love for self).

The context into which Jesus spoke is well known. Although the Torah does not directly record Moses' allowance for divorce, Deut. 24:1–4 prohibits an Israelite man who has given his wife a certificate of divorce and sent her away, because she found no favor in his eyes as a result of his finding something indecent in her, from later remarrying the same woman after she had been married to another man. The particular wording of the first verse in the passage, which describes the reason for the divorce as an “indecent matter” עֲרֻת דָּבָר (*erwath dabar*) created a debate among the rabbis preserved in the Mishnah Gittin (IX. 10) regarding what constituted acceptable grounds for divorce. Rabbi Hillel and his followers emphasized the unnecessary

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<sup>11</sup> Don Polaski and Sandra Hack Polaski, “Listening to a Conversation: Divorce, the Torah, and Earliest Christianity,” *Review and Expositor* 106 (Fall 2009): 591–602.

inclusion of the word “matter” and argued that a man could divorce his wife for any matter he found indecent, even a burned meal or the wrinkles that come with aging. The more conservative Rabbi Shammai emphasized the word “indecency” and argued that only unlawful sexual conduct such as adultery could justify divorce, a reading which gave more protection to wives. Rabbi Akiba, though happily married, focused on the phrase “finds no favor in his eyes” and concluded even more permissively than Hillel that divorce was permitted if the man simply finds another woman more attractive.<sup>12</sup>

The question was a matter of legal conduct for men, but life and death for women. Gerald Borchert argues that in Mal. 2:14–16 God does not express hatred of divorce, as it is generally translated, but of *שָׁלַח*, (*shalach*) the “casting out” or “sending away” by Israelite men of their wives without the protection of an official divorce certificate. Such a certificate would allow the women to remarry without being considered adulterous and perhaps even to sue for return of their dowry. By contrast, in Jer. 3:8 after Israel has prostituted herself by worshiping false gods, the LORD Himself does the right thing by sending her away with a certificate of divorce *כְּרִיתְהוּתָהּ*. (*keriythuwth*) even while calling on her to acknowledge her guilt and return to Him.<sup>13</sup>

David Instone-Brewer’s studies of ancient Jewish marriage and divorce certificates make clear that in addition to Deut. 24:1–4, rabbinic divorce law was shaped by Exod. 21:10–11, which gives a slave woman taken as a wife the right to her freedom if she does not continue to receive food, clothing, and conjugal rights in the event that her husband takes a second wife. On the basis of this passage, even the more conservative followers of Shammai allowed women to

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<sup>12</sup> Verhey, “Divorce and the New Testament (1)”, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Gerald L. Borchert, “1 Corinthians 7:15 and the Church’s Historic Misunderstanding of Divorce and Remarriage,” *Review and Expositor* 96 (1999): 128.

seek a divorce, not only in the case of adultery, but also for neglect if their husbands failed to provide these three basic needs. Instone-Brewer notes that “There is no extant record of any part of Jewish society which did not accept these other three grounds. Jesus was silent on Exod. 21:10–11, perhaps because he was not asked about it or, more probably, because he agreed with the standard teaching which was followed by all branches of Judaism.”<sup>14</sup>

The question which was, in fact, put before Jesus, was εἰ ἔξεστιν ἀνθρώπῳ ἀπολῦσαι τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ κατὰ πᾶσαν αἰτίαν “Is it lawful for a man to send away his wife for any reason?” (Matt. 19:3) Instone-Brewer argues that the influence of Hillel’s interpretation of Deuteronomy 24 was such that in Jesus’ day men in Israel could legally divorce their wives for any and every cause, so the Pharisees were asking Jesus whether His interpretation of the Law supported such ‘any cause’ divorces, which had become the common practice.

Further, Matthew tell us that the Pharisees were πειράζοντες, “testing”, Jesus with the question. Since those who advocated for Shammai’s more restrictive position are thought to have been a small minority at the time,<sup>15</sup> it would be expected that among the multitudes Matthew describes as the audience in 19:2 many, perhaps even some among the disciples, had used this prerogative to divorce their spouses. Thus, the question may have been a test in the sense of asking Jesus to align Himself with Hillel or Shammai, but it could also be understood more seriously as tempting Jesus to either the hypocrisy of backing away from the strict interpretation of the Law He had taught in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) or the alienation of multitudes who had come to hear Him by making what was sure to be an unpopular pronouncement. Jesus clearly risked the latter consequence:

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<sup>14</sup> David Instone-Brewer, “1 Corinthians 7 in the Light of the Jewish, Greek, and Aramaic Marriage and Divorce Papyri,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 55, no.2 (2001): 236.

<sup>15</sup> David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 114.

“So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” (Matt. 19:6–9)

Jesus unequivocally sided with the followers of Shammai in denying the legitimacy of ‘any cause’ divorces, and His line of reasoning is revealing. Jesus begins by implying that a reading of the Torah ought to have made clear God’s original intention, expressed in the creation account, that marriage be the lifelong union of a man and a woman. The Pharisees’ objection is also revealing, since they sidestep the issue of God’s original intention and refer to Moses’ command that for her protection, a woman be given a certificate of divorce, suggesting that the provision implies approval of divorce. Jesus counters that the provision was an accommodation rather than an act of approval, noting that Moses ἐπέτρεψεν, “allowed” divorce because of σκληροκαρδίαν,, “hard heartedness.” The stubborn persistence of sin in the hearts of God’s people caused Moses to make an allowance for divorce, but it was not what God intended from the beginning. Consistent with His hermeneutic in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere, Jesus describes as sinful any departure from the original intention of God, regardless of the cause. It follows then, that Jesus describes as the sin of adultery any sexual union apart from one’s original spouse, even in the case of a second marriage: “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matt. 5:31).

The specific exception, found only in Matthew, is for πορνεία| -- sexual immorality. Much debate regarding the acceptability of divorce and remarriage has revolved around what exactly Jesus meant by using the word πορνεία rather than the specific word for adultery, μοιχᾶται|.



Some argue that in the context of Matthew’s Gospel, widely understood as being addressed to a Jewish audience, the term refers specifically to the discovery of unchastity during the Jewish betrothal period prior to consummation of a marriage. In such a case the marital union had not yet been consummated, so divorce was considered the righteous response to a broken covenant rather than a breaking of the marital union.<sup>16</sup> Proponents of this view point out that only Matthew records Joseph’s intention, after discovering his wife Mary pregnant during their betrothal, to send her away secretly (Matt. 1:19), and they suggest that the assumed betrothal unfaithfulness of Jesus’ parents was the slander implied by the Pharisees’ use of πορνεία in their attack on Jesus in John 8:41.<sup>17</sup> However, many others argue that so limiting the meaning of the word is not justified by either the immediate context of the question or the normal usage of πορνεία, which Paul employs in 1 Cor. 7:2 to describe extramarital sexual activity, and John quotes in Rev. 2:21 to describe the unfaithfulness of the Jezebel tolerated by believers in Thyatira. In the immediate context of Jesus’ support for marriage as God’s joining of a man and a woman it seems more reasonable to understand Jesus’ use of πορνεία as meaning any sexual unfaithfulness which breaks a marital covenant through the introduction of another person.<sup>18</sup>

Possible support for this understanding of πορνεία is the use of καὶ with the relative clause γαμήσῃ ἄλλην before μοιχᾶται to form “and marries another commits adultery.” Jeff Gibbs points out that “this may express result or purpose, especially when the verb that follows is a future indicative,” such that an alternate translation could be “whoever sends away his wife except for sexual immorality, and so marries/in order to marry another, commits adultery.” Gibbs

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<sup>16</sup> David W. Jones, “The Betrothal View of Divorce and Remarriage,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165 (January-March 2006): 68–85.

<sup>17</sup> Jones, “Betrothal View of Divorce and Remarriage,” 81–82.

<sup>18</sup> “Divorce and Remarriage: An Exegetical Study,” The Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (November 1987): 25.

notes that “In Jesus’ time, the thought of obtaining a divorce with the intention of remaining unmarried would have been rare; far more common would have been cases involving a man who intended to divorce his wife in order to marry *another* woman.” Unless the man’s first wife had already broken the marital bond by introducing another person, the man’s “marriage to another woman” would break the union and thus be adultery.<sup>19</sup>

Was Jesus then denying the possibility of divorce for any cause other than sexual immorality, including abuse or neglect of food, clothing, or conjugal rights? Not necessarily; Jesus was affirming that the “indecent matter” of Deuteronomy 24:1 referred only to sexual unfaithfulness by which the marital bond had been broken. He was not dismissing the Rabbinical interpretation of Exod. 21:10–11 because He was not being asked about it. Rather, He was insisting, as He had in Matt. 5:32, that any third party breaking of the marital union is a departure from God’s intention for marriage and is equivalent to adultery; even the marriage of a single man to a divorced woman where the marriage was not already so broken.

Jesus’ strong insistence on God’s intention as the measure of righteousness and His refusal to sanction the sundering of any marriage not already broken was as shocking to the disciples as it is to modern readers:

The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it." (Matt. 19:10)

In response to the disciple’s astonishment, Jesus affirms voluntary celibacy, a stance which would have surprised His generation no less than ours. However, the force of this follow up

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<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 2010): 945–46.

conversation is to further reinforce His approach to righteousness: whatever serves the kingdom of heaven takes precedence over human self-interest. For some, righteousness entails faithfulness within the lifelong union of marriage; for others the kingdom of heaven will best be served by a single life of celibacy. Only submission to God's intention constitutes righteousness.

If consideration of God's original intention is the hermeneutic by which Christ interpreted the Torah and Rabbinic laws regarding divorce and remarriage, then the Christian church must also consider God's original intention when it comes to its teachings on the permissibility of divorce and remarriage. "Is it lawful for a man to send away his wife for any reason?"

Absolutely not: God's original intention was that a man and woman who marry should leave their families, cleave to one another, and remain faithfully married. If one of the marriage partners breaks the union through sexual immorality, that individual has broken the marriage covenant and committed adultery. If the break is irreparable because of the hardness of one or both hearts involved (the offending partner is unrepentant or the innocent partner is unable to forgive) Jesus acknowledged that divorce is allowed as a legal recourse, but not for any cause, and the preferred course is repentance and forgiveness in accord with God's will.<sup>20</sup>

What of the marriage in which a spouse is abusive or neglectful, abandoning or failing to provide for the material or physical needs of his or her partner? While Jesus neither explicitly permitted, nor precluded divorce in such a case, His silence on the issue seems to be tacit support for the Rabbinic allowance for divorce based on Exod. 21:10–11. In such a case the Christian church recognizes that God's original will for marriage was not that one or the other partner be physically or materially deprived, but that husbands and wives love and provide for one another. (Eph. 5:21–28). As in the case of sexual immorality, God's will is best served by restoration of

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<sup>20</sup> Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34*, 946.

the marriage through repentance and forgiveness, but where hard heartedness makes such healing impossible, divorce, though still regrettable, may be allowable.

What of the marriage in which one spouse belongs to God while the other spouse does not? In the case of Ezra, the vulnerability of the Israelites to idolatry and God's will that they be pure in order to represent Him to all nations led to the sending away of foreign spouses who would not convert to Judaism. On the other hand, in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul encourages those whose unbelieving spouses are willing to remain married to preserve God's intention for marriage by remaining married, releases those whose unbelieving spouses have abandoned them so they can live in peace, and encourages those able to remain celibate to do so for the sake of God's kingdom. Though Jesus does not specifically address the situation, His hermeneutic is applied in each case through discernment of what best reflects God's original will.

### The Possibility of Remarriage

Contrary to historic interpretations that marriage is an indissoluble bond broken only by death, Jesus asserts that what God has joined, man can, in fact, separate. The right to divorce was a facet of both Jewish and Greco-Roman law and in both the right to remarry was explicitly granted by the divorce certificate.<sup>21</sup> Though Jesus asserted that "whoever sends away his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery," He was not necessarily ruling out remarriage, but rather condemning divorce for the sake of remarriage where the marriage had not already been broken by adultery. His purpose was to reprimand those with calloused or cavalier attitudes toward the dissolution of a divine institution, but not to preclude the possibility of repentance and the rebuilding of one's life, possibly through remarriage. The

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<sup>21</sup> Instone-Brewer, "1 Corinthians 7," 111.

Lutheran Confessions interpret Jesus' assertion this way, as Melancthon writes in the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, "the traditions concerning spiritual relationship are unjust, as is the tradition that prohibits remarriage of an innocent party after divorce."<sup>22</sup>

Such an understanding of Jesus' intention is essential, because many people faced with issues of divorce and remarriage today hear the words of Jesus as crushing condemnation and so despair of redemption within the Christian community, or ignore the words of Jesus as irrelevant to their situation. Instead, Jesus calls His people, in particular, to carefully consider God's will for their lives in order to discern responses to their situations which best reflect His selfless love and endless faithfulness. While dismissing Small's exegetical method as misguided, Bill Flanagan notes the importance to the church's mission of dealing graciously with divorced people:

The point he makes about grace is nonetheless important. He correctly identifies the tragic stigma divorced people carry in the church today when they are viewed as those who have committed "the unpardonable sin" with no restoration possible to full status in the Christian community. He is justifiably concerned that the church may be responsible for turning people away from the body of Christ to secular options, or to other churches that do not hold to the integrity and authority of scripture.<sup>23</sup>

Paul Peckman expresses a similar concern. Pointing to Christ Himself as the model for pastoral care of all divorced and disgraced people, he points out that "If there were a motto that Jesus seemed to live by and model His ministry around, it would be the words of Isaiah 42:3: 'A bruised reed [the Lord] will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.'"<sup>24</sup> Peckman

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<sup>22</sup> *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, 78 in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000): 342–43.

<sup>23</sup> William L. Flanagan, "Developing a Ministry to Separated and Divorced Persons," (D. Min. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1986), 27.

<sup>24</sup> Paul H. Peckman, "Internal and External Factors that Hinder or Help Effective Ministry to Divorced Lutherans: Why They Stay Away/What We Can Do to Bring Them In," (D. Min. MAP, Concordia Seminary, 1994), 32.

describes Jesus' gentle, genuine, unwavering compassion for those suffering from sin and its consequences, asserting that "As the church approaches those whose lives have been disrupted by divorce, even if fully convinced that they are the ones primarily at fault, it should look beyond their failure to the future God would have for them."<sup>25</sup>

The Bible abounds with anecdotes of God's redemptive intent for His repentant people, beginning with His confrontation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, where He not only pronounces the consequences of their sin, but provides cover for their shame and predicts the crushing victory over evil by Eve's Offspring. Matthew begins his Gospel by pointing out that it was through the line of King David and Bathsheba that the Messiah came, despite their adultery and the murder of Bathsheba's faithful husband, Uriah. Jesus, the Messiah, Himself famously spared a woman caught in the act of adultery and condemned to death by God's Law, instructing her to "Go and from now on sin no more." (John 8:11) He also transformed the life of a Samaritan woman who had failed in marriage five times, gently confronting her ignorance, inviting her to seek God, and introducing Himself as Messiah. It was Jesus' conversation with and conversion of this woman that served as the context for the admonition to His followers, "Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest." (John 4:35) One implication of His words, taken in context, would seem to be that for those with eyes to see, people disgraced and devastated by failed marriages may be a particularly ripe mission field.

### The Preeminence of Reconciliation

Not only the words of Jesus, but His works guided His followers in understanding their role in upholding God's intent for marriage while reaching out in mission. Again, the Apostle Paul

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<sup>25</sup> Peckman, "Internal and External Factors," 38.

demonstrates that such is the case in his opinions regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage in 1 Corinthians 7. Asked whether the current crisis being experienced by believers in Corinth (verse 26) might constitute reason for believers to break up their marital union, Paul reiterates what Jesus declared regarding God's intent that believing spouses not separate, "To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife" (1 Cor. 7:10–11).

Yet confronted with questions which Jesus did not directly address, such as whether those married to unbelievers ought to break up their union, Paul offers his opinion "as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy" (verse 25) and who has "the Spirit of God" (verse 40). First, Paul affirms that even if a believer is married to an unbeliever, divorce is not God's will.

To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. (1 Cor. 7:12–14)

Paul's purpose for affirming the union in this case is both a matter of upholding God's intent for marriage and His missional intent for believers. As long as an unbeliever is willing to continue the marital union with a believer, he or she is ἡγίασται, "sanctified," set aside for God's purpose and exposed to His goodness, so that the unbeliever might come to believe through the witness of the believing spouse. That may have been what happened in the cases of Lydia and the Jailer in Philippi (Acts 16:14–15, 33), both of whom were God's instruments for the conversion of their entire households. What's more, their children are ἅγιά, "holy," or capable of being brought into God's presence, through the faith of the believing parent. That was the case with Timothy, Paul's protégé, whose father was a Greek but who came to faith through the

witness of his mother and grandmother (Acts 16:1, 2 Tim. 1:5).

However, Paul also understands the mission of God to allow for acceptance of separation, divorce, and probably remarriage when the believer is deserted by the unbeliever:

But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Cor. 7:15–16)

The sad reality is that the transformation of character which occurs in genuine Christian conversion may be unacceptable to the unbeliever, who may abandon the marriage. In that case, the believer is not δεδούλωται, “bound,” obligated or enslaved to the other person, even by the bonds of marriage. Paul asserts that believers cannot forcibly convert their spouses and are called to εἰρήνη, “peace,” well-being, and perhaps cessation of the conflict caused by their differences. The implications of Paul’s allowance for the separation and unbinding of a believer from an unbeliever seem to be not only that Paul understood Jesus’ words affirming the permanence of marriage to allow for an additional exception, but that Jesus’ ongoing work of redemption can only be accomplished through adoption of His peaceful character and acceptance of the practical limitations found in all human relationships.

That is not to say that the Church should in any way compromise its calling to be a counter-cultural community, maintaining God’s intention for not only permanence, but the purpose of marriage. Gifford Grobien writes compellingly that the church has largely lost the biblical understanding of marriage as “the ‘permanent and exclusive’ relationship of a man and a woman expressed in conjugal acts, which also presume the conception of children under a barrage of cultural influences that have promoted a ‘revisionist’ view that ‘marriage is for romantic enjoyment and self-fulfillment.’”<sup>26</sup> He points to the biblical assumption that marriage is not a

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<sup>26</sup> Gifford A. Grobien, “Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage: The Triumph of Culture?” *Concordia*



choice, as presumed by our culture, but a natural and normal condition, as reflected in Luther's discussion of the Sixth Commandment:

[Marriage] is not just an honorable walk of life but also a necessary one; it is solemnly commanded by God that in general both men and women of all walks of life, who have been created for it, shall be found in this walk of life. To be sure, there are some (albeit rare) exceptions whom God has especially exempted, in that some are unsuited for married life, or others God has released by a high, supernatural gift so that they can maintain chastity outside of marriage. Where nature functions as God implanted it, however, it is not possible to remain chaste outside of marriage; for flesh and blood remain flesh and blood, and natural inclinations and stimulations proceed unrestrained and unimpeded, as everyone observes and experience. Therefore, to make it easier for people to avoid unchastity in some measure, God has established marriage, so that all may have their allotted portion and be satisfied with it—although here, too, God's grace is still required to keep the heart pure.<sup>27</sup>

Leaders and laypeople alike are called to hold each other accountable for understanding and maintaining this gift of God. "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." (Heb. 13:4) As Peckman writes, "There are many instances faced by the Church, including situations where church members choose divorce as the solution to their marital problems, where biblical judgment must be rendered and compassionate, biblical discipline exercised."<sup>28</sup> F. Dale Bruner notes that Matt. 7:1, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged," has "often been used as a cover for moral laxity, for indifference to evil, and for toleration of falsehood."<sup>29</sup> He argues that

"Don't judge" certainly does not mean "do not have discernment" or "do not think," for [Matthew 7:6 which follows] will immediately ask us to discern "dogs" and "pigs" from whom to keep the Word, and the Warnings at the end of the chapter will tell us that we can and must discern false from true prophets by their fruit. All discernment involves the formation of judgments...[However,] the judgment we are asked to surrender is the judgment of condemnation...we are not to make final

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*Theological Quarterly* 79 (2015): 325.

<sup>27</sup> The Large Catechism I: 211–212 in Kolb and Wengert, 414–15.

<sup>28</sup> Peckman, "Internal and External Factors," 39.

<sup>29</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: A Historical/Theological Commentary: Matthew 1–12* (Waco: Word, 1987), 274.

judgments on anyone, to speak assuredly of people's real character, to pretend that we know God's verdict on other people's lives at the final judgment.<sup>30</sup>

Peckman contends that Paul understood God's absolute righteousness to be tempered by His abounding grace, beginning with Paul's own case: "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief" (1Tim. 1:13). Paul described himself as chief among sinners, and:

Many of our members who have gone through divorce, no doubt, would admit the same thing, even though it may take a protracted interval of time before they reach such a conclusion and perspective. They, too, may have acted in ignorance and unbelief and a whole lot more: confusion, pain, desperation, anger, etc. All of these together cannot nullify the restorative power of God and the reconciling goal of the Gospel.<sup>31</sup>

Jim Smoke, a pioneer in divorce recovery ministry, describes the balance of God's Law and Gospel required of those who would be Christ's ambassadors, imploring those in the throes of divorce to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:17–21):

When I started divorce recovery workshops in the early 70s, my own family questioned whether I was on the right track. I was trying to help the healing process, but they thought I was giving a vote for divorce.... Accepting a divorced person doesn't mean you accept divorce. Jesus hates sin, but He loves people and sinners. Divorced people need to be accepted and loved.<sup>32</sup>

Just as Jesus and His apostles set people free from the burden of the Law without diminishing the blessings of obedience, those who engage in recovery ministries do not give up good discipline within the church, but rather refrain from judgmentalism and attempts to discipline those outside the church, who are not yet disciples. For many, such patient, loving, and practical engagement of sinners seems to be a new and challenging idea because the church's

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<sup>30</sup> Bruner, *Christbook*, 272.

<sup>31</sup> Peckman, "Internal and External Factors," 41.

<sup>32</sup> Rick Knoth, "Helping the Divorced Find Hope and Healing: Interview with Jim Smoke," *Enrichment Journal* (Summer 2000) accessed August 16, 2016 [http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200003/054\\_helping\\_divorced.cfm](http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200003/054_helping_divorced.cfm).

understanding of its mission has changed over the centuries since Jesus and Paul. However, by entering into the critical life events of outsiders to bring them comfort, engage them in deep, meaningful conversations about their faith, and invite them to experience the love and acceptance of God and His people, Christians are in fact returning to the mission and methods of Christ and the earliest Christian church.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE PROJECT IN MISSIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

As this project was being developed, some in my congregation had questions regarding not only the purpose of the effort, but its relationship to the mission of the church. They asked questions that surprised me, such as, “Will it be just for our members or will outsiders be invited to participate?” “Won’t this take a lot of time away from the church’s mission and ministry?” Even more startling were the objections of colleagues: “Should you really consider this an outreach if it is not explicitly focused on sharing the Christian gospel?” “Shouldn’t you call it a community service instead?” “Won’t you be taking advantage of emotionally vulnerable divorced people from the community if you do include an evangelistic presentation when you’ve promised to help them recover from their divorces?” The implication seemed to be that our witness to the Christian gospel is one thing, the appropriate mission of the church. Having mercy on those who are suffering from the consequences of sin is something else, a program any social service agency can offer without regard for Christ’s mission.

Confusion and concern regarding the relationship between ministry to the divorced and the mission of the church may have been inevitable, since the Christian church throughout its history has held changing and conflicting ideas regarding both. In this chapter I will discuss how recent changes in thinking about God’s ongoing mission suggest that ministry to the separated and divorced people in our communities is not only an appropriate avenue of outreach, but a particularly opportune one.

## **The *Missio Dei* and Ministry to the Divorced**

In *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* the late missiologist David Bosch describes how several shifts in paradigms, or ways of thinking about God's mission, have occurred since the New Testament was written. As early Christianity became institutionalized and contextualized in the Greco-Roman world, mission became church-centered: instead of being seen as an instrument of God's mission, church communities came to be the aim of mission. In medieval Europe, as the Christian church became increasingly associated with the Holy Roman Empire, the "mission" became an institutional outpost sanctioned by the state and staffed by clergy, authorized representatives of the church. In Protestant churches at the time of the Reformation the church was disassociated from the state and its mission became the work of pastors to rightly preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments so that God could draw His chosen people from every nation to Himself, without human effort or planning. Through the influence of the Enlightenment, in the modern period the mission work of the church came to be seen as a science in which educated "missionaries" brought western civilization to uncivilized lands, creating the right conditions for individuals to make a rational decision to believe in God.<sup>1</sup>

Challenges to such Enlightenment optimism regarding human capabilities in the twentieth century, however, prompted an emerging "post-modern" paradigm, in which the mission of the Church was understood to proceed from the mission of God in the world. As the Father sent the Son into human flesh to serve and save the world, and as the Father and Son sent the Spirit to empower the Church for the spread of that salvation, the Son and Holy Spirit have sent the

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991) 181–345.

Church into the world in order to not only proclaim, but incarnate the message of salvation through service and sacrifice.<sup>2</sup> This is often described as the *Missio Dei*, the “mission or sending of God,” a term thought to have been coined by German theologian Karl Hartenstein in 1934<sup>3</sup> and developed by Lutheran missiologist Georg Vicedom in his 1958 book *Missio Dei*.<sup>4</sup> Vicedom argued that as the province of the sending God, the mission of the church requires not only words, but deeds that reveal His mercy.<sup>5</sup>

### Mission as Incarnation

In describing the new paradigm (which he calls “ecumenical” due to its implicit requirement of cooperation among all Christians), David Bosch argues that the church must increasingly be seen as the unique, pilgrim people of God, both proclaiming and beginning to embody His Kingdom by serving and sharing in the problems of the world. Salvation must be understood as not only a future, spiritual, and individual event, but as calling people into present, physical, and communal embodiments of Christ’s presence, made visible through responsible participation in human society. Bosch describes evangelism as contextualized words and deeds that offer deliverance from the world’s powers through Christ and an invitation to become members of His Church involved in His mission of salvation. He urges that Christians not be afraid to develop deep, caring relationships with those whose views are quite different from our

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<sup>2</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 349–93.

<sup>3</sup> “Missio Dei,” *Wikipedia*, accessed July 28, 2016. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missio\\_Dei](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missio_Dei). For more on Hartenstein’s thinking, see Gerold Schwarz, “The Legacy of Karl Hartenstein,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (July 1984) accessed July 28, 2016 <http://www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/g-h/hartenstein-karl-1894-1952/>.

<sup>4</sup> Georg F. Vicedom, *Missio Dei: Einführung in eine Theologie der Mission* (München: C. Kaiser, 1958), republished in English as *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Mattson, “What It Means to Be a Missionary Pastor” (a presentation to DM-947 “Leadership and the Missio Dei” July 16, 2016 at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis).

own, since when we engage in dialogue with those of other faiths or no faith at all “we are not moving into a void . . . we go expecting to meet the God who has preceded us and has been preparing people within the context of their own cultures and convictions.”<sup>6</sup> Writing at the end of the twentieth century on behalf of the Faith and Culture Network, Darrell Guder agrees:

We have come to see that mission is not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation. ‘Mission’ means ‘sending’ and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God’s action in human history. . . . We have begun to learn that the biblical message is more radical, more inclusive, more transforming than we have allowed it to be. In particular, we have begun to see that the church of Jesus Christ is not the purpose or goal of the gospel, but rather its instrument and witness. . . . God’s mission is calling and sending us, the church of Jesus Christ, to be a missionary church in our own societies, in the cultures in which we find ourselves.<sup>7</sup>

Christopher Wright, in *The Mission of God*, argues that this view is not at all new, but a return to the way that God’s mission is revealed throughout all of Scripture. He contends that:

All mission or missions which we initiate, or into which we invest our own vocation, gifts and energies, flow from the prior and larger reality of the mission of God. God is on mission, and we, in that wonderful phrase of Paul, are ‘co-workers with God’ (1 Cor. 3:9) . . . . We ask, ‘Where does God fit into the story of my life?’ when the real question is where does my little life fit into this great story of God’s mission.<sup>8</sup>

#### Mission as Restoration

Henry Rowold agrees with Wright that God’s mission is rooted in His creation and restoration of all things. If so, he notes that an element of that mission must be the restoration of the relationships not only between God and mankind, but between men and women.<sup>9</sup> Jesus seems to affirm as much when he responds to the Pharisees’ question, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce

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<sup>6</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 484.

<sup>7</sup> Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 4–5.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 532–34.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Rowold, “Biblical Foundations for Mission” (a presentation to DM-947 “Leadership and the Missio Dei” July 13, 2016 at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis).

his wife for any and every reason?” by referring to the intention of creation:

Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." (Matt. 19:4–6)

Recalling God’s recognition that it was not good for man to be alone, Robert Kolb asserts that community and conversation seem to be part of being made the image of God. Yet that aspect of God’s image is shattered in the dissolution of marriage. Like Adam and Eve, who chose autonomy over community with God, every divorced couple includes at least one person who has been deceived into some form of idolatry, elevating what has been created and demeaning the Creator who ought to be worshiped. Yet because all idols are fatal deceptions, failing to provide the blessings of the true God, the attitude of God’s people is not triumphant warfare, but compassionate service to restore those fatally deceived.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, Scott Moreau has identified restoration as one of six important ways in which evangelical missionaries contextualize the Christian faith so that it can be transmitted across cultures: “The restorer comes as a healer to bring peace or deliver people from some type of bondage, whether social, psychological, environmental, systemic, or spiritual. This initiator brings people to a state of health in which they can begin living as Jesus calls us to live.”<sup>11</sup>

### Mission as Transformation

In many ways, divorced people are a unique culture, or at least sub-culture, of American communities, made up of those desperately in need of restoration. Robert Kolb defines a culture as “the organic (mutually related elements) whole of human activities and relationships which

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Kolb, “Toward a Theology of Culture” (a presentation to DM-947 “Leadership and the Missio Dei” July 14, 2016 at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis).

<sup>11</sup> A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012), 196.



define the meaning and significance of life for a specific group of people linked by these elements in a common identity and in common endeavors. It presumes shared assumptions, values, and allegiances, involving systems, institutions, and individuals.”<sup>12</sup> By that definition, divorced people form a distinct culture within the larger society, engaging in distinct activities (legal mediation, reorganization of households, renegotiation of family and friend relationships, parenting plans, child support, adult dating, etc.) and relationships (ex-spouses, former in-laws, step-children, etc.) which at least temporarily define their identity and involve them in common endeavors. What’s more, divorce often exposes immediate issues of shame, guilt, meaning, and trust that are more effective bridges for communication of the Gospel than are traditional issues of ultimate destiny. As Kolb says, “Most people think heaven can wait; they want to know how belief makes life better today.”<sup>13</sup>

That is not to say that questions of ultimate destiny are not at the essential center of Christian mission. As Kolb himself has written, “there are solutions which will serve for today. But there is no permanent solution to the persistent re-invasion of evil into daily life—apart from the resurrection of Jesus Christ and its eschatological completion.”<sup>14</sup> Christopher Little argues persuasively that the indispensable purpose of the Christian church is not its temporal acts of mercy in and of themselves, but to make known to the world the eternal salvation purchased by the sacrifice of God’s Son, Jesus, to which they point, for “only the church is entrusted with the apostolic role of gospel proclamation whereby people are brought to the foot of the cross.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Kolb, “Law and Gospel as Tools for the *Missio Dei*” (a presentation to DM-947 “Leadership and the *Missio Dei*” July 15, 2016 at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis).

<sup>13</sup> Kolb, “Law and Gospel as Tools.”

<sup>14</sup> Robert Kolb, “Niebuhr’s ‘Christ and Culture in Paradox’ Revisited: The Christian Life, Simultaneous in Both Dimensions” in *Christ and Culture in Dialog: Constructive Themes and Practical Application*, ed. Angus Menuge (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999), 111.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher R. Little, “In Response to ‘The Future of Evangelicals in Mission’” in *Missionshift: Global*

However, as Jeffrey Kloha argues in *Inviting Communities*, the church makes known the reign of Christ by providing, seeking, gathering, and suffering for others so that “the Spirit might lead them to make the same confession of Jesus as Lord and also bring them into his kingdom.”<sup>16</sup> Providing a recovery group which seeks out and gathers those who are suffering from the consequences of a particular sin in order to share in and alleviate their suffering is not an endorsement of the sin involved, but an opportunity for even non-believers to gain exposure to the grace of Jesus Christ, both explicitly expressed and incarnated in Christian community.

In fact, missiologist and anthropologist Paul Hiebart contends that sustaining the ongoing mission of the church depends on not only communicating the Gospel, nor even on making converts to it, but on changing the worldview of believers so that they are thoroughly shaped by the Gospel. He proposes that such worldview transformation comes about through careful examination of old views, exposure to the new perspectives of others, and participation in communities with “living rituals” which affirm the new beliefs<sup>17</sup>—a concise description of the process of an effective recovery group. In order for Christian churches to be effective instruments of God’s ongoing mission, Hiebart maintains that they must continually be “in the world,” dealing with the consequences of sin and evil as active participants in secular society, but “not of the world,” creating relevant, inviting communities with the alternative message and manner of Christ:

We are not called to fight the world or to flee from it. We are like salt and yeast, bringing about transformation in the world. One danger is to withdraw and form Christian communities that have no impact on the world. Another is to become so captive to our culture that we lose the gospel. We are to live as a countercultural

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*Missions in the Third Millennium*, eds. David J. Hesselgrave and Ed Stetzer (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 216.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Kloha, “Making Christ’s Reign Known: Church in the New Testament” in *Inviting Community*, ed. Theodore Hopkins and Robert Kolb (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2013), 50.

<sup>17</sup> Paul G. Hiebart, *Transforming Worldviews*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 324.

community and as individuals in the world, exemplifying Christlikeness in our lives as individuals and as communities of Christ's disciples.<sup>18</sup>

### Mission as Conversation

The Christlikeness of churches in their efforts on behalf of God's mission in many cases must be re-examined, as passive acceptance of increasingly ineffective mission strategies has led many congregations to become impotent in their missional involvement. Todd Jones contends that many congregational assumptions regarding domestic missions no longer hold true. For example, the assumption that education events lead to action is proving to be increasingly false, as many well-instructed members never become directly involved in the mission of the church, and many seeking God at church events never make the jump to participate in a congregation. Instead of relying on programmatic education and entertainment offerings, congregations must teach members to incarnate the mission and introduce others to Christ through relationships built on the basis of relevant needs and interests. Rather than focusing solely on the quality of the program, congregations would do well to focus on the critical life event being addressed and the way in which that need leads to curiosity about the Christian faith. In place of measuring success by the number of people attending an event, the critical metric ought to be the number of people engaged in faith conversations.<sup>19</sup>

Scripture clearly depicts Jesus Himself as inviting people into a relationship with His Father not only through the creation of an alternative community, but through incursion into human need and initiation of faith conversations. For example, in the fourth chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus publicly and personally engages a Samaritan woman drawing water at mid-day,

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<sup>18</sup> Hiebart, *Transforming Worldviews*, 333.

<sup>19</sup> Todd Jones, "The Congregation as Mission Outpost" (a presentation to DM-947 "Leadership and the Missio Dei" July 15, 2016 at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis).

someone other Jewish rabbis would consider an outcast. He does not ignore, but directly addresses the disgrace of her marital failures in order to redirect her to the living water of His Spirit which could quench the thirsts of her heart. Yet He does not engage in a condescending or condemning lecture, but a respectful conversation in which she is encouraged to exchange views and ask questions, quickly creating a relationship of trust.

The development of mutually respectful relationships in which such conversations can occur remains an essential element of effectiveness in mission, as Robert Kolb points out: “Conversations about evangelism really don’t begin until we’ve earned people’s trust.”<sup>20</sup> In the context of divorce recovery groups, that means that Christians leading such groups act as peers, facilitators, and encouragers rather than as authorities, teachers, or preachers, at all times demonstrating love and respect for participants. Bill Flanagan, an experienced facilitator of Christian divorce recovery groups, describes the importance of establishing and maintaining the trust of divorcees in order to avoid exploiting and alienating such a vulnerable group:

I'm a bit nervous about those who see the divorce recovery workshop as nothing more than an evangelistic ploy or just an opportunity to get divorced people into a place where they can witness to them for Christ. I feel very strongly that our ministry must not exploit the vulnerability of anyone. And the divorced person can be one of the most vulnerable of all people. People walk through our doors who haven't darkened the door of a church in years. They are scared to death and they are hurting. When divorce recovery ministries lose their perspective and see this only as a golden evangelistic opportunity, they will also lose their opportunities to reach out to pain-filled people looking for someone they can trust. That is our first mission: to gain their trust. I've seen some workshops where people have left confused. They have gone away saying, "These people don't really care about helping me get over my divorce; all they want to do is get me into their church." We lose our integrity and their confidence when this happens.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Kolb, “Law and Gospel as Tools.”

<sup>21</sup> Bill Flanagan, *Developing a Divorce Recovery Ministry: A How-To-Manual* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2002), 17.

Kolb concurs, emphasizing the responsibility of Christians to be loving and respectful of all people, including those who do not share their beliefs, not only for the sake of their witness but as recognition of God's ongoing work in the world outside of the church:

Christians begin their thinking about mission with the confession that Jesus is Lord, Lord of all. They come to those outside the church in order to serve as instruments which bring God's rule to those who do not trust in Him as Lord and Savior. They recognize, at the same time that the fallen, the unbelievers, remain under His lordship even when they do not recognize it. That means not only that God has a claim on them which He is exercising as believers witness to their faith in order to bring people into God's family. It also means that those living outside the faith are still living with the gifts of God, bestowed within their culture and in the form of the various elements of their culture. Therefore Christians will be respectful of these gifts of God with which they are not familiar.<sup>22</sup>

#### Mission as Community

Far from being coercive or taking advantage of our vulnerable neighbors, a congregational divorce recovery ministry offers members and non-members alike the opportunity to participate in a caring community during a critical life event which often alienates people from groups in which they previously participated. Describing the work of M. Scott Peck on community in groups, Richard Marris notes that:

“Peck emphasized that true communities must be inclusive, consensus seeking, and committed to one another.... A second feature of community, according to Peck, is its realism. When the ‘soft’ individualism of community replaces the ‘rugged’ individualism, people become more humble and more appreciative of others’ gifts, and better, more realistic community decisions will be made. Furthermore, a community is self-contemplative...A community also seeks to be a safe place where participants can express their vulnerabilities and discard their defenses. In community people can learn to experience others’ wounds and experiment with lowering the barriers of distrust, resentment, and fear. The last Peckian characteristic worth noting is that a community is a group that can fight gracefully and learn to celebrate differences, listening carefully to one another and committing to struggle ‘together rather than against each other.’<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Kolb, “Niebuhr’s ‘Christ and Culture in Paradox’ Revisited,” 118.

<sup>23</sup> Rick Marris, “Inviting Community: First Article Perspectives,” in Hopkins and Kolb, 30–31.

Such sharing in each other's struggles not only relieves the intense loneliness generally felt by those who have been betrayed or deserted by their partners, it reflects the compassion of Christ Jesus, who humbled Himself and became one of us in order to reconcile us, and who invites us to join together as His body. Bruce Hartung paraphrases the Apostle Paul's description of the care and empathy expected of the Church, in spite of—and perhaps because of—the stigma that surrounds those whose lives have been devastated by divorce and other public consequences of sin:

Even those that appear to be inherently weaker are necessary (1 Cor. 12:22). On those parts of the body that we perceive to be insignificant we bestow more honor (1 Cor. 12:24). Each part of the body is such so that the members care for and are concerned about each other (1 Cor. 12:26). And, as a behavioral and experiential capstone of it all, if one part suffers, all the members suffer the same thing—i.e., they suffer with each other, Likewise, if one part rejoices, all the members rejoice in the same way—i.e., they all rejoice with each other (1 Cor. 12:26). These are all characteristics of empathy, not born of human-to-human interaction, but born in the reality of God's action in Christ as the Spirit moves persons to faith and places them in community so that we are now Christ's body and individually parts of it (1 Cor. 12:27).<sup>24</sup>

Bill Flanagan affirms that it is the character of the Christian community into which they are invited that softens the hearts and opens the minds of participants to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the motive and method behind Christian divorce recovery ministry. He writes:

In my lectures it is clear that Jesus Christ is at the very core of what I teach and believe. A biblical foundation is apparent; the gospel of love is pervasive. But I am not there to exploit or manipulate. I've watched many of our people come to Christ. But it has not been because of some heavy-handed witness. Rather, it has been because they have found us to be a loving, caring community and they want to know why.... In actual practice, this sharing of Christ's love takes place not so much from the platform during the lectures, but rather in a relational way in the small groups and the longer term relationships that grow out of them. Our leaders are expected to be able to share the reason for the hope that is within them. No evangelistic literature is offered; no public opportunities for commitment are given. And yet participants have

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<sup>24</sup> Bruce M. Hartung, "Empathy & Community: Inviting Community in the Midst of Cultural Diversity" in Hopkins and Kolb, 56.

often wanted to investigate further why we are extending ourselves so vigorously and authentically, and many are drawn to the Lord because of this.<sup>25</sup>

The approach to evangelism taken by churches offering divorce recovery groups can be described as “missional,” a word which began to be used at the turn of the twenty-first century to describe established congregations and small, home based groups intent on participating in God’s ongoing mission in the world, particularly by striving to offer the compassionate community found in the Body of Christ to people who are not yet believers and who may never be official church members. As Victor Raj writes,

It is obvious in the holy Scripture that from the beginning the Creator never intended human beings to [be] alone leading lonely lives totally detached from everyone else. People are by design meant to live in communities, of families, neighborhoods and nations. These entities [are] avenues for people to belong which brings in their lives a sense of security, meaning and purpose.... Communities built on the foundation of Jesus Christ are avenues that put into effect how people of God live with the mind of Christ and the heart of Christ (Phil. 4:7)...<sup>26</sup>

Instead of following the “attractional” model of mission, in which congregations attempt to draw people into their programs and facilities by advertising their activities, congregations which have a missional paradigm focus on going out into their communities to build relationships and bring the compassion of Christ to bear on people’s felt needs. Writing on behalf of the Gospel in Our Culture Network, Lois Barrett explains that “a missional church is a church that is shaped by participating in God’s mission, which is to set things right in a broken, sinful world, to redeem it, and to restore it to what God has always intended for the world.”<sup>27</sup> She and an ecumenical team of six researchers set out to identify patterns common to congregations that by their definition

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<sup>25</sup> Flanagan, *Developing a Divorce Recovery Ministry*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Victor Raj, “Missional Communities” (unpublished editorial distributed June 17, 2016 to DM-947 “Leadership and the Missio Dei” at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis).

<sup>27</sup> Lois Y. Barrett, ed., *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns of Missional Faithfulness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), x.

would be considered to be missional, and among those common characteristics was discernment of a congregational calling to incarnate Christ in its local community in a way specific enough to be used as a measure of faithfulness and success. The calling was not usually an easy, popular, or traditional form of ministry, but was based on the needs of people from the neighborhood of the congregation. Barrett explains that “to be called to a particular vocation does not mean that God sends us to do what we feel we are good at, what we are gifted for, or what we would enjoy doing. Biblical accounts of callings illustrate that the more normal pattern is that callings tend to involve the same forms of suffering and sacrifice that Jesus’ callings did.”<sup>28</sup>

In fact, another characteristic common to the missional congregations was that their outreach involved taking risks for the Gospel in the sense of nonconformity to surrounding cultural norms: choosing generosity rather than materialism, community over individualism, and the sufferings of Christ by comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. Barrett writes, “These congregations seem to be living by a set of rules different from that of the dominant culture. Their priorities are different. They act against the ‘common sense.’ They are trying to conform to Jesus Christ rather than to the surrounding culture.”<sup>29</sup>

Another pattern found by the researchers in their examination of missional churches was that the congregations emphasized mutual care, reconciliation, loving accountability, and hospitality—key characteristics of support groups—as demonstrations of God’s intent for the world. As Dale Ziemer writes,

This biblical image of the reign of God offers a vision for human life and community that contrasts sharply with the pattern of individualism that is so common in the dominant North American culture...through the practice of active helpfulness, churches are learning how to engage and overcome these barriers. Active helpfulness means individuals will come to know enough about one another to become

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<sup>28</sup> Barrett, *Treasure in Clay Jars*, 57.

<sup>29</sup> Barrett, *Treasure in Clay Jars*, 75.



significantly involved in each other's lives. It means becoming open and honest with one another; sometimes it means confronting, sometimes consoling.<sup>30</sup>

### Mission as Confession

Such an intentionally outward focused and relational view of the Church's role in God's mission, while not particularly associated with the paradigm that emerged from the Protestant Reformation, is well in keeping with a Lutheran theological view. As Robert Kolb puts it, "Luther's world-changing shift was that he went back to the Biblical narrative of God coming to us, rather than us having to come to Him, instead of the Roman emphasis on rituals as *ex opera operato* good works. Thus, Luther taught that God is not an abstraction, but a person who wants to have a relationship with us."<sup>31</sup> Kolb writes regarding Luther's exposition of justification, "*The Freedom of the Christian* treated not only the freedom bestowed at the heart of life, in the vertical realm, before God—freedom from all that separates sinners from God. It also treated the freedom which flows from this vertical freedom in the daily life of the horizontal realm, the freedom to serve the neighbor without thought for anyone or anything else but the neighbor."<sup>32</sup>

Understanding the relationship between the vertical realm, in which God reaches out to set us free, and the horizontal realm, in which God sets us free to reach out, is crucial to our participation in His ongoing mission. As those who have been redeemed by the incarnation, sacrifice, and resurrection of Christ, believers are set free from any obligation to perform acts of service for their own benefit. Instead, Christians are compelled to respond to the unconditional love they have received from God by unconditionally loving others on His behalf. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they imitate the incarnation, sacrifice, and resurrection of Christ by entering

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<sup>30</sup> Dale A. Ziemer, "Practices the Demonstrate God's Intent for the World" in Barrett, 89.

<sup>31</sup> Kolb, "Law and Gospel as Tools."

<sup>32</sup> Kolb, "Niebuhr's 'Christ and Culture in Paradox' Revisited," 111.

into the experiences of others, giving away their lives in order to alleviate shame, guilt, or suffering, and persevering through the powerful hope of new life to which they are called.

Such an understanding enables us to be explicit in our faith without being exploitive, since we cannot avoid sharing the convictions which are at the center of our identity. Yet our acts of love and service are offered unconditionally, without expectation of return, and with sensitivity toward those who do not share our faith and may have reason to reject it. As Flanagan puts it,

I realize this is a tough issue for some. There is always the question of how Christian we need to be when we are speaking to so many non-Christians. What can we do to not turn people off but at the same time not compromise who we are? Over the years I have come to this opinion: Since a divorce recovery ministry is such a powerful way to reach non-Christians in the community, I will bend over backwards not to offend them or lose their trust. I intend to keep them coming long enough to earn the right to be heard. That means walking a tightrope between not exploiting their vulnerability at a very critical time in their lives and yet not losing the opportunity to share the love of Jesus Christ with them.<sup>33</sup>

#### Mission as Communication

Presenting the Gospel effectively to those struggling with separation and divorce actually necessitates being sensitive to their needs and vulnerabilities by addressing the particular manifestations of sin which they are experiencing, their felt needs, in terms of the appropriate remedies for their spiritual pain. That is so because, in effect, every support group is a gathering of public failures, people seeking remedy from the consequences of sin who have been humiliated and left hopeless by their brokenness and are desperately seeking help.

Sin is often described in worship services and Sunday Schools as disobedience deserving God's wrath, but many people going through divorce are more likely to experience the pain of sin as affliction, estrangement, emptiness, or defectiveness.<sup>34</sup> Those who feel afflicted, perhaps

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<sup>33</sup> Flanagan, *Developing a Divorce Recovery Ministry*, 17.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Kolb, "Understanding Sinners in Their Cultural Context" (a presentation to DM-947 "Leadership and the Missio Dei" July 16, 2016 at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis).

because they are being divorced against their will or threatened by hostile legal proceedings, may most easily understand the condemnation of God's Law through legal metaphors, and embrace the comfort of the Gospel in terms of God's presence, protection, and provision of justice for victims (Ps. 10:14). After coming to know that they have a defender, they will be more ready to recognize that they are complicit in the failure of their marriage and responsible to God for ongoing obedience. Those who are estranged from family and friends through the turmoil of divorce may be particularly in need of God's promise to never forsake those who trust in Him (Deut. 31:6) and its facilitation through the substitutionary abandonment of Jesus, after which they will be more able to understand and repent of ways in which they have themselves turned from God. Those who feel empty because of their lost hopes and dreams may desperately need to be assured of God's desire to fill them with good things through the power of Christ's resurrection (Ps. 16:9–11) in order to give them the assurance needed to acknowledge their emptiness as partly due to some form of idolatry. And those who have been shamed by the condemnation of their ex-spouse and the stigma of divorce will likely need to be assured that they are valuable to God and the intended recipients of His reclamation (Isa. 43:1) before they will have the confidence to confess their spiritual defectiveness and find healing in Christ's redemption.

Jack Preus notes that Scripture itself provides a variety of metaphors for the Gospel, and these metaphors are particularly powerful for people when applied to the particular form of affliction sin and evil have taken in their lives. For example, Preus describes the Biblical metaphor of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18–19) as a potent, universal means of communicating the Gospel, but it is especially relevant for those who have been separated or divorced by a spouse against their will:

Between people, reconciliation is a two-way street. But it is not so with God's reconciliation of the world. God is the subject; we are always the objects. He reconciles us. We are passive. In fact, according to our natural inclinations, we are hostile and enemies of God (Romans 5:9–10). God does all the work of reconciling.<sup>35</sup>

The initiation of reconciliation by God speaks deeply to the alienation felt by those who have been through a separation or divorce—alienation not only from their former spouse, but from their former in-laws, friends who took sides or distanced themselves in dismay, religious people who felt that they were somehow supporting marriage by stigmatizing divorce, and God Himself, since most divorced people feel a profound sense of failure in the dissolution of such an intimate, important, and public bond. Into such alienation, Scripture tells us that

God has opened the way for rapprochement. He has taught us the proper spelling and pronunciation of that beautiful theological word at-one-ment. God is at one with us on account of Christ. Our alienation has been removed.<sup>36</sup>

A related Gospel metaphor is peace, which Preus describes as “the cessation of conflict that occurs at the same time . . . the solution to the friction between and within people.”<sup>37</sup> Though separated and divorced people often experience distress and despair due to the ongoing, unresolvable conflict resulting from the dissolution of their marriage and family, “the peace that Christ is and brings is much more than our feeling or experience of tranquility. Jesus brings about the objective state of peace that transcends our experiences and is real despite our feelings to the contrary.”<sup>38</sup>

Essential to divorce recovery is the issue of forgiveness, which Preus points to in Scripture as “a commercial metaphor, denoting the cancellation of a debt” as well as “a personal

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<sup>35</sup> Jacob A. O. Preus, *Just Words: Understanding the Fullness of the Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2000), 139.

<sup>36</sup> Preus, *Just Words*, 141.

<sup>37</sup> Preus, *Just Words*, 146.

<sup>38</sup> Preus, *Just Words*, 148–49.

metaphor...when separation between people is resolved, when the occasion or cause of the division is eliminated or removed.”<sup>39</sup> Though Preus argues that we can forgive and forget because God has forgiven and forgotten our much greater sins against him, divorced people may need a more careful explanation of what Isa. 43:25 and 65:17 mean when they describe God as “remembering sins no more.” Though God’s omniscience does not allow for a gap in his memory, as a result of Christ’s sacrifice in our place God promises to no longer bring up or insist on further punishment for our sins. In the same way, those who have experienced the dissolution of their marriages are empowered by God’s Spirit to stop rehearsing their grievances and refrain from exacting punishment for the wrongs inflicted on them by their former partners, not because they are capable of forgetting such deep hurts, but because they no longer need repayment for their losses in the aftermath of God’s all forgiving grace.

Equally relevant and powerful for some separated or divorced people is Scripture’s use of marriage metaphors to describe God’s restoration of his people. Preus writes,

The imagery is framed in different ways—bridegroom and bride, wedding and wedding banquet, husband and wife—but the basic idea is that what happens as a result of the work of Christ is a new relationship with God that is similar to marriage. Because of Christ, God, our enemy because of sin, becomes our husband. He woos us as a bridegroom does his bride. He marries us and makes us His beloved. He throws a great wedding banquet, a celebration of joy and union and faithfulness. He makes us His own, His bride.<sup>40</sup>

Such use of marriage as a metaphor for the restoration God intends in Christ may be of great comfort to those whose human marriages, the most intimate relationships they have known, ended in failure and dissolution. Though they may despair of ever attaining the marriage of their hopes and dreams, in Christ they have been offered an even more intimate and infinitely more

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<sup>39</sup> Preus, *Just Words*, 152.

<sup>40</sup> Preus, *Just Words*, 158.

permanent relationship with God, to which even the best of human marriages only point. What is more, those whose hearts have been devastated by the infidelity of their spouse can take comfort that God knows the intensity of their pain, describing through the prophets the unfaithfulness of the people he loves in terms of marital infidelity. Yet God remains faithful and willing to forgive, instructing Hosea to “show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites...” (Hosea 3:1) Not everyone will be able to restore their marriage after an infidelity, but those who have known the pain of their spouse’s infidelity or the shame of their own can take comfort in the restoration which God is able to bring about in their relationship with Him.

#### Mission as Reconciliation

Among the many powerful metaphors used in Scripture to communicate the message of God’s intervention in human history to restore our relationship with Him, these four— marriage, forgiveness, peace, and reconciliation—are particularly relevant to the discussion topics of divorce recovery groups. As safe places where empathy, sensitivity, care and respect are encouraged in order to promote healing and growth, such groups can easily introduce those unchurched and even unbelievers to the loving community that comprises Christ’s body on earth and can generate relationships of mutual trust leading to deep conversations which are explicit about the Christian faith without being exploitive. To pursue the mission of God in a selfless, patient, and practical way is to follow the example of Jesus in reaching out to outcasts, and to live in the freedom of the Christian who, having been reconciled to God solely by His gracious initiative, responds by reaching out to serve and help restore others for whom Christ died.

Thus, churches which are seeking to participate in God’s ongoing mission as agents of restoration through the creation of communities in which the Gospel can be explained and

experienced do well to consider the creation of a ministry to divorced and separated people, whose spiritual and emotional pain can make them particularly receptive to the compassion and hope conveyed in the Christian Gospel. Such a ministry certainly serves those within the church whose faith may be shaken by the crisis of divorce, but it ought also to be understood as a powerful incarnation of the Christian faith to those outside the church. In rare cases, the reflection and repentance which occur in divorce recovery groups may lead toward the restoration of marriages. In most cases, however, the ministry will work for reconciliation in the form of forgiveness, peace between former spouses, and redemption of the tragic dissolution through a new life, reconciled to God through Christ Jesus.

Far from signaling an approval of divorce, recovery ministry takes seriously the devastating consequences of sin in the world, much as building a hospital takes seriously the destructive consequences of illness and injury. It is a service to the community, to be sure, but also an outreach of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, an opportunity to share explicitly but without exploitation the message of God's forgiveness and reconciliation as the only means to permanent peace and the establishment of a new, redeemed identity. The message of God's redemption is made clear not only in the curriculum's presentation of the Gospel but in the community's incarnation of Christ, refusing to condemn each other even while encouraging each other to "go and sin no more." Those who engage in such ministry do so not for their own benefit, but because Christ's love compels them to seek and to save those who are lost. Other agencies can help those in the throes of separation and divorce to grieve and move on, but only the Church has the means by which those who have failed in their human relationships can be made new and invited into an intimate, permanent marriage to Christ, who loves them unconditionally and desires to wash away all their sins. As Paul put it,

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:17–21)



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE PROJECT IN THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Divorce recovery groups are a relatively recent development, not only in the church but in the culture. Consequently, there are few references to their origins in either social science or theological literature. However, the growing volume of research literature can be traced back to a few pioneers in the social sciences whose studies and advocacy of divorce recovery groups influenced both the culture and the church. In addition, some of those who pioneered divorce recovery ministries are still available and were graciously willing to be interviewed. The first part of this chapter will therefore attempt to describe the origins of divorce recovery groups as both a psycho-social methodology and as a Christian ministry. Then some research will be reviewed regarding how such groups work. This background is necessary to understand how effectiveness in divorce recovery is determined and encouraged by social scientists as well as ministry professionals.

#### **The Historical Context: How Did Divorce Recovery Develop?**

*Cultural Sociology of Divorce: An Encyclopedia* notes that support groups intended to address emotional, social, and psychological issues began to emerge in the mid-twentieth century after Alcoholics Anonymous demonstrated that social support was essential in member recovery from addiction.<sup>1</sup> David White describes the first major research paper published in the field of divorce adjustment as a 1949 article by W. J. Goode entitled “Problems in Post-divorce

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<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Emery, ed. *Cultural Sociology of Divorce: An Encyclopedia* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2013), 1169.

Adjustment.” This was followed by Goode’s 1956 book *After Divorce*, a study of 425 women undergoing separation or divorce, which was a pioneering work in the field.<sup>2</sup>

### Divorce Adjustment Groups

The growing presence of women in the workforce following World War II, an increase in cohabitation during the 1960s, and the advent of “no fault” divorce laws in most states by 1970 are all factors generally considered to have led to a doubling of the U. S. divorce rate over a fifteen-year period.<sup>3</sup> In 1972 Sheila Kessler, a divorced professor at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas, became one of the first researchers to study support groups for divorcees. In 1976, she reported her findings in the article, “Divorce Adjustment Groups,” in which she advocated for such groups. She described their goals, format, and dynamics, but did not attempt to test the effectiveness of support group methods.<sup>4</sup>

By 1974 Bruce Fisher, an educator in Colorado, had developed his own ten-week divorce adjustment seminar, which later became known as the “Rebuilding” model. Fisher tested the effectiveness of Rebuilding as part of his 1976 doctoral dissertation using an inventory that became known as the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale.<sup>5</sup> A participant in one of Fisher’s leadership seminars, Barbara Brown, later noted that until the seventies research in the mental health field had emphasized avoiding divorce or coping until remarriage. A spate of social research in the 1970s determined that divorcees could adjust and find fulfillment as singles, but

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<sup>2</sup> David H. White, “Development of the Participant’s Manual for a Divorce Recovery Seminar,” D. Min. project, Andrews University, 1986.

<sup>3</sup> “Why Have Divorce Rates Increased Over Time,” accessed August 22, 2016. <http://www.attorneys.com/divorce/why-have-divorce-rates-increased-over-time>.

<sup>4</sup> Sheila Kessler, “Divorce Adjustment Groups,” *Personnel and Guidance Journal* (January 1976): 250–55.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Fisher, “Identifying and Meeting the Needs of Formerly Married People through a Divorce Adjustment Seminar,” Ed. D. diss., University of Northern Colorado – Greeley, 1976.

up until Fisher, it was mostly descriptive.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, churches had been developing their own responses to the growing number of divorced adults.

### Single Adult Ministries

In the early seventies Jim Smoke, Singles Pastor at the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, CA, had developed a faith-based “Positive Christian Singles Divorce Recovery Workshop.” In 1976 Smoke published the first Christian book on divorce recovery, a best seller called *Growing through Divorce*,<sup>7</sup> which became highly influential among those ministering to divorcees. That same year Jim Talley, Minister to Singles at First Baptist Church in Modesto, CA, began to notice that a growing number of the singles he served were coming out of the married group at his church. Drawing on his backgrounds in sociology and ministry, Talley created a course on divorce recovery and reconciliation which later became the basis for many workbooks and books, including *Too Close Too Soon* with Bobbie Reed (1982),<sup>8</sup> and both *Reconcilable Differences* (1985)<sup>9</sup> and *Life After Divorce: A Single Mother’s Guide* (1991)<sup>10</sup> with Les Stobbe.<sup>11</sup> Reed was herself a single mother who drew on her divorce experience to become a prolific author, speaker, social psychologist, and consultant on singles ministries in California. She claims to have based her approach in part on the work of Dr. Zev Wanderer, founder of

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<sup>6</sup> Barbara Fowles Brown, “Divorce Adjustment and Social Support: A Study of Their Relationship through a Divorce Adjustment Group Approach Designed to Facilitate the Building of Social Support,” Ph. D. diss., The Fielding Institute, 1981.

<sup>7</sup> Jim Smoke, *Growing Through Divorce*, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1976).

<sup>8</sup> Jim Talley and Bobbie Reed, *Too Close Too Soon*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> Jim Talley and Leslie H. Stobbe, *Reconcilable Differences*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> Jim Talley and Leslie H. Stobbe, *Life After Divorce: A Single Mother’s Guide*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Jim Talley, phone interview by Kirk Hille, August 21, 2016.

Center for Behavioral Therapy in Beverly Hills.<sup>12</sup> After attending a workshop led by Jim Smoke at the Crystal Cathedral in 1977, singles minister Bill Flanagan returned to Colorado Springs, where he created a regular workshop that eventually became the basis for his book, *Developing a Divorce Recovery Ministry: A How To Manual*.<sup>13</sup> Smoke, Talley, Reed, Flanagan, and several others involved in divorce recovery ministries were all active in the National Association of Single Adult Ministries, through which the idea of divorce recovery groups spread.

### Fresh Start Seminars

In 1980, Bob Burns was asked to start a divorce recovery ministry immediately after being called to Church of Our Savior in Philadelphia, where his senior pastor had just returned from hearing about Jim Smoke's work at a Single Adult Ministries conference. After reading Smoke's book and doing a literature review, Burns first tried a ten week seminar series. He found the format less than life changing because people picked and chose which sessions to attend. After trying a retreat setting and receiving virtually no registrations, his team attempted a Thursday-Saturday seminar. He found it difficult to find speakers who were divorced, had reflected on their experience from a Biblical perspective, and were willing to speak publicly about what they had learned at a time when divorce was still a great embarrassment that often caused Christians to leave their church. Not divorced himself, Burns spoke out of the experience of his wife, who came from a family beset by multiple divorces. He recruited Diane Langford, a divorced Christian psychologist, and Tom Jones, homiletics professor from his alma mater, Covenant Seminary. Jones was reluctant to speak publicly for the first time about his own divorce experience, but the result was powerful. Burns recalls,

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<sup>12</sup> Reed, *Life After Divorce*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Flanagan, *Developing a Divorce Recovery Ministry*, 17.

It was an amazing experience of seeing the Holy Spirit show up. We were just stumbling along, trying to be authentic, trying to be faithful to the Scriptures and also be faithful to the pain of the experience people were going through. We were not trying to use that pain as a vehicle to manipulate them for the Gospel, but at the same time, we were saying ‘the Gospel is what will answer your pain.’<sup>14</sup>

From that point on, the format of the Fresh Start Seminars was such that Thursday night covered the stages of divorce and recovery, Friday night spoke to single adult life, Saturday morning discussed Biblical views on marriage, divorce, and remarriage, and then Saturday afternoon would feature electives. After the first seminar, the team asked Tom Jones to develop an elective on single sexuality, which eventually became two books and a stand-alone seminar: “Sex and the Single Christian.” Another elective leader whose material was eventually incorporated into books was Tom Whiteman, an early seminar participant who had thought of himself as disqualified from ministry because of his own divorce, even though he was a Bible school graduate, licensed counselor, and Ph. D. candidate. Whiteman became a featured speaker, co-author with Burns of the *Fresh Start: Divorce Recovery Workbook* (1992),<sup>15</sup> author of many other books on topics related to divorce, and eventual president of Fresh Start Seminars after it became a full time, nonprofit ministry. Burns himself used the Fresh Start seminar as the topic of his 1985 dissertation, and turned his notes into the 1989 book *Through the Whirlwind*.<sup>16</sup>

Burns recalls that during the 1980s Fresh Start Seminars quickly spread from his own church and community to congregations throughout the United States, and even to some in Australia and Great Britain, as local congregations around the world were attempting to develop ministries to separated and divorced people. The seminars were intended to equip and encourage

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<sup>14</sup> Bob Burns, phone interview by Kirk Hille, August 22, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Bob Burns and Tom Whiteman, *The Fresh Start Divorce Recovery Workbook* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Burns, *Through the Whirlwind*.

the local congregations to develop their own ministries of ongoing care and healing by combining in-depth, Biblical reflection on the issues with the best of social science scholarship. Though no detailed, comprehensive program was provided, a growing catalog of books, workbooks, and even a follow up seminar were developed. In St. Louis, for example, John Splinter was inspired to found Second Chapter Divorce Recovery Ministries, which led to his 1992 publication of *The Complete Divorce Recovery Handbook*.<sup>17</sup>

However, as demand grew for Fresh Start seminars, follow up, coaching, and support became more difficult. At the same time, the speakers and facilitators began to be fatigued by the exhausting schedule of travel and presentation. Just as the original leadership for the Fresh Start seminars had come from God's redemption of the experiences of participants, the solution to the dilemmas of an exhausting schedule and an excessive span of care would grow out of the Fresh Start ministry in an unexpected way.<sup>18</sup>

#### Video Based Curricula

Following his own devastating divorce in 1987, Steve Grissom participated in a Fresh Start Seminar sponsored by his church. Encouraged and engaged in his own recovery, Steve not only became an organizer for the seminar, where he got to know Tom Jones and Thomas Whiteman, but he asked his church leadership whether he could try to start an ongoing support group for divorcees. They said, "By all means!" After receiving their blessing, Steve "duct taped together" a course for a home group from various books he had read and found it to be "pretty effective for what it was." Then, when Steve remarried in 1991, his wife Cheryl helped him lead several groups at the church or in their home. However, Steve found himself asking God,

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<sup>17</sup> John P. Splinter, *The Complete Divorce Recovery Workbook* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> Burns, interview, 22 August 2016.

‘Lord, why doesn’t somebody make a program that is easy to administer for lay people like me so that I have something really effective to offer to these people on an ongoing basis rather than trying to reverse engineer stuff that other people have produced?’ I kept asking that question in my head. It’s dangerous to ask those questions because in essence I got the tap on my shoulder that said, ‘Well, Steve, why don’t you?’ I thought, ‘Wait a minute, I’m not a pastor, I’m not a counselor, I’m just another guy with a divorce story. Nobody’s going to want to hear my story as the root of a divorce ministry.’ What God reminded me of was my additional career experience as a broadcast journalist: I gathered information and assembled it in a way that communicated it well. That became the format for what became *DivorceCare*. I had moved on into some other areas of management and business so I had some experience in the other side of getting a ministry launched.<sup>19</sup>

Steve set about identifying the leading experts in divorce and recovery topics from a Christian perspective. He read their books, “highlighted them like crazy,” developed a list of questions that he wanted to ask them, and started contacting them. Much to his surprise, most of those he contacted agreed to let him interview them and use the footage without reimbursement purely in order to help divorcees who would see the tapes. With his broadcast background and affinity for technology, Steve decided he would try to travel as a “one man band,” trying to record credible interviews by himself, without a crew. Dr. Jim Talley, who had moved back to his native Oklahoma after becoming a licensed psychologist and had written extensively on reconciliation, remembers being one of Steve’s first subjects:

He had this idea that some of these churches that couldn’t afford to hire these high dollar people to fly in, because they got paid honoraria, travel, and all that, that he would just go around and video tape them and then make that available. He said, ‘I don’t have any money, I don’t have any royalties, you just have to do this for the ministry,’ and I said, ‘Come on.’ He flew into Oklahoma City and I met him out at the airport, picked up his luggage and stuff. I started to walk away with his bag and he said, ‘No, no, I have another bag.’ Here comes this box around the corner: it’s a brand-new video camera, in the box, never been opened, never been set up. I said, ‘What?!’ So, we spent the first couple of hours getting things turned on.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Steve Grissom, phone interview by Kirk Hille, August 19, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Talley, interview, August 21, 2016.

Soon Steve's wife Cheryl was enlisted to travel with him and help run the equipment during the interview sessions. Steve remembers that "At the time most church videos were 'man at podium for thirty minutes.'" Steve used on-location video and story-telling, profiling people and showing them in their environment, with the best production values he could achieve on an extremely low budget. Along with Dr. Jim Talley, those who agreed to be interviewed included Dr. Bob Barnes of Sheridan House Ministries, financial advisor Larry Burkett, the late Greek scholar Dr. Spiros Zodhiates, Bible teacher Doug Easterday, the late author Dr. Myles Munroe, Dr. David Seamands, psychotherapist Dr. Les Carter, singles pastor Gary Richmond, grief expert Dr. H. Norman Wright, and urban pastor Dr. Tony Evans.

Steve was relieved to be able to rely on the opinions of renowned experts as he had "sweat bullets over" having to address theological issues, such as the permissibility of divorce. Since he did not consider himself to be a theologian, nor could he produce different editions for each different denominational view, he chose limit the discussion to what seemed clear in Scripture: that divorce is permissible, though not necessary, for adultery or abandonment. He recognized that on other issues, such as abuse, a local church would have to investigate and intervene appropriately according to its own understanding of Scripture.<sup>21</sup>

On this topic, Bob Burns asserts that during the decades in which divorce recovery ministry was being developed, a re-examination of the Scriptural texts regarding divorce and remarriage allowed churches to extend grace to many involved in divorces without dismissing the authority of Scripture. He notes that whereas John Murray's 1961 work *Divorce*<sup>22</sup> focused primarily on the restrictive nature of Matt. 18–19, Stan Ellisen's 1977 *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church*<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Grissom, interview, August 19, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> John Murray, *Divorce* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1961).

<sup>23</sup> Stan Ellisen, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977).



and Jay Adams' 1980 book *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*<sup>24</sup> included 1 Cor. 7 in a significant way, adding abandonment to adultery as possible grounds for divorce. A plethora of additional studies were published in the 1980s and 90s, culminating with the 2002 work of David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*,<sup>25</sup> which considered neglect and abuse as potential reasons divorce might be permissible. Burns notes that William Heth, who in 1985 had denied any Biblical grounds for divorce in the book *Jesus and Divorce: The Problem with The Evangelical Consensus*, after the turn of the century reconsidered and changed his position to admit that there were at least two legitimate Biblical grounds for divorce. Burns feels that there were parallels between growing exegetical examination of the texts and growth in the development of divorce recovery ministries, though many churches still do not take the time to carefully consider the Scriptural issues involved in developing their programs.<sup>26</sup>

Steve Grissom agrees that though He did not see a shift in denominational standards, the decades in which divorce ministry has emerged have seen a shift toward grace in helping people to recover and reconcile, regardless of the circumstances. He contends that "It has to be the local church walking with a person through the process, interpreting Scripture into the situation as only they can get to know it. There are books and there are resources, but I really believe that the most effective way is a church that knows at least one of the marriage partners and is attempting to restore the marriage...there is no book, tape, or video that can substitute for that."<sup>27</sup>

After editing together the video footage to produce cohesive sessions, Steve drew on his experiences leading a local group to produce workbooks and leaders guides explaining how to

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<sup>24</sup> Jay Edward Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1980).

<sup>25</sup> Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*.

<sup>26</sup> Burns, interview, August 22, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Grissom, interview, August 19, 2016.

use the materials. He released the first edition of *DivorceCare* as a kit in 1993, not knowing if anyone would buy it. However, the program became increasingly popular and in a few years the organization he had created to produce *DivorceCare* became Church Initiative, a self-funded non-profit. Since then two updated editions have been produced, as well as three complementary support group programs: *DivorceCare for Kids*, *GriefShare*, and *Single & Parenting*.

With the growing popularity, accessibility, and affordability of *DivorceCare*, demand for Fresh Start seminars declined and the ministry was suspended in 1996. According to Bob Burns, The American Association of Christian Counselors bought the “Fresh Start” name and rights in the late 1990s.<sup>28</sup> Around the same time the AACC produced *Life After Divorce*, a competing video-based support group series featuring Tom Whiteman among its divorce recovery experts.

#### Two Recent Trends

At the turn of the twenty first century, two developments in particular affected the divorce support group movement. The first was the decline of single adult ministries in churches. In a 2012 article for *Leadership Journal*, Adam Stadtmiller, an associate pastor at North Coast Calvary Chapel in Carlsbad, California, reported that of sixteen large and well known churches he contacted, none had more than part time program positions directed toward single adults, in contrast to the “glory days” of the eighties, and nineties, when many of the same churches had singles groups numbering in the hundreds. Based on his own ministry experience, Stadtmiller suggested that the reason “singles ministries” collapsed is that several of their key assumptions were flawed. First, segregating singles into their own group ensured instability rather than commitment. Since most would prefer to be married, singles were not invested in the group long

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<sup>28</sup> Burns, interview, August 22, 2016.

term and would leave if there were not enough eligible prospects, or marry if there were. Also, focusing on challenges faced by singles—loneliness, dating, wholeness, finances, etc.—created a support group effect, further increasing the desire of healthy singles to graduate. Add to that the prevalence of people traumatized by divorce or chronically single due to poor social skills and the groups became uninviting and excessively difficult to maintain. The result is that divorce recovery ministries became more often integrated into pastoral care or mixed adult ministries.<sup>29</sup>

A related development was the advent of social media, through which the “meet market” function of singles ministries became obsolete and new groups emerged. Steve Grissom notes that the “Find a Group” function on the DivorceCare website and lists of those subscribing to daily emails are growing sources of referrals.<sup>30</sup> Jim Talley describes “Fight Club” support groups encouraging individuals to fight for their marriages in the Oklahoma City area connected by Group Meet smart phone applications.<sup>31</sup> In addition, social media have birthed new groups such as the “women only” Picket Fences Divorce Recovery Ministries<sup>32</sup> and RADiCAL.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Literature Review: What Makes Divorce Recovery Effective?**

As divorce recovery groups have been developed and adapted over time in response to social change, those who study such groups have attempted to determine and describe the factors that make such programs more or less effective. Sheila Kessler, in one of the first journal articles

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<sup>29</sup> Adam Stadtmiller, “What Happened to Singles Ministry?” *Leadership Journal* (Summer 2012) accessed August 19, 2016 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2012/summer/singlesministry.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Grissom, interview, August 19, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Talley, interview, August 21, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> “Our History” accessed August 18, 2016 <http://www.picketfences.org/our-history.html>.

<sup>33</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions” accessed August 22, 2016 <http://radicalrecovery.org/f-a-q/#8>. RADiCAL stands for Rising Above Divorce in Confidence And Love.

to describe divorce adjustment groups, argued that they provide belonging and identity so individuals can let go of the past and develop a new autonomy. Such groups provide a safe place for divorcees to vent their negative emotions and learn from both the shared and contrasting experiences of their peers. The specialized nature of the groups promotes both acknowledgement and acceptance of the facts that participants are divorcing and that divorce requires adjustment, helping them to overcome denial. The groups also generally teach methods for dealing positively with the negative emotions involved. Kessler noted that specific difficulties often included concerns over whether members could accept various stages of divorce, the desire of some to regain intimacy by finding an immediate ‘rebound relationship,’ mood swings, time exaggeration, task paralysis, vengefulness, and extreme emotional sensitivity that could, conversely, produce either guardedness or an approach/avoidance effect.<sup>34</sup>

The leader of one such group, Don Bissett, in a 1990 article described incorporating the therapeutic goals of Joy and David Rice into his divorce recovery ministry in San Antonio.<sup>35</sup> The goals, described in the 1985 book *Living through Divorce: A Developmental Approach to Divorce Therapy*, included supporting and allowing for the participant's initial grief reaction, including reactive depression, facilitating the participant's dealing with the practical, immediate consequences of marriage or relationship dissolution, facilitating disengagement from and the release of the relationship, and encouraging the re-emergence of hope, with plans for change in the future.<sup>36</sup> Bissett also described guidelines that shaped the process of his group as follows:

1. The group is confidential. Everything that is said in the room stays in the room.
2. You can ask questions but, no one has to answer the question.
3. We share out of our

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<sup>34</sup> Kessler, “Divorce Adjustment Groups,” 250–55.

<sup>35</sup> Don Bissett, “A Church-Sponsored Divorce Recovery Group Experience,” *Journal of Family Ministry* 4, no. 2 (1990): 45–53.

<sup>36</sup> Joy K. and David G. Rice, *Living through Divorce: A Developmental Approach to Divorce Therapy* (New York: Guilford, 1985).

experience and not out of our opinion. 4. We don't give advice unless it's asked for. 5. We follow no predetermined agenda. We follow whatever direction the group chooses to take on that particular evening. 6. The group is open. No one has to commit to attending the group for any particular number of sessions.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the group's open agenda, Bissett reported that certain topics regularly and predictably arose, such as the perceived causes of divorce and their cultural antecedents: infidelity, economic independence, no-fault divorce laws, narcissism, unrealistic expectations of marriage, and gender differences. Other frequent topics of passionate discussion and debate included custody of children, single parenting, establishing new relationships, and recovery differences between initiators and non-initiators of divorce.<sup>38</sup>

In Bissett's assessment, the recovery group served several beneficial functions in the divorce adjustment process. Not only did the group provide companionship during a time of intense social alienation, but it provided a safe and supportive environment for emotional catharsis, a forum for participants to seek advice at a time when their emotional devastation hampered decision making, and spiritual strength as an embodiment of the comfort found in Christ.<sup>39</sup> Psychosocial research by Lisbet Oygard, et. al., a decade later confirmed that:

Four therapeutic factors seemed to be of particular importance. First, meeting people with the same thoughts and feelings, and increased insight of themselves and others. Further, feeling accepted and supported, and expressing difficult feelings were important factors. Group participation increased the subjects' well-being, for example, they felt more normal and less depressed.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Bissett, "A Church-Sponsored Divorce Recovery Group Experience," 45.

<sup>38</sup> Bissett, "A Church-Sponsored Divorce Recovery Group Experience," 47.

<sup>39</sup> Bissett, "A Church-Sponsored Divorce Recovery Group Experience," 53.

<sup>40</sup> Lisbet Oygard, et. al., "An Evaluation of Divorce Support Groups: A Qualitative Approach," *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 32, nos.3-4, (2000): 149.

## Social Support

In 1977 a new publication, *Journal of Divorce*, reported research by Helen Raschke confirming that higher levels of social support were related to lower levels of stress post-separation and post-divorce.<sup>41</sup> Four years later Barbara Brown reported that social support contributed significantly to divorce recovery and described how outside relationships could be encouraged through divorce adjustment groups, but noted that the structured group experience, rather than development of relationships per se, enhanced the divorce adjustment.<sup>42</sup>

Describing the positive adjustment results of a ten week Fisher-based group in 1988, Maria Vera concluded that social support was one of several important individual factors that affect divorce adjustment, along with multiple concurrent stressors, life events, who initiated the separation, and the passage of time.<sup>43</sup> That year Ann Johnson reported similar very similar findings and suggested that separated or divorced persons may use peer support groups in three ways: (1) to help with the process of divorce adjustment, (2) as an ongoing community, and (3) as a place to gain assistance when life events stir a need for emotional, informational or companionship support.<sup>44</sup> In 2007, Elizabeth Krumrei et. al., found more specifically that during the post-divorce period network relationships are important in promoting positive adjustment, while individual relationships are important for buffering against maladjustment. “Therefore, if a client is not part of a reliable group, he or she should be encouraged to seek out a support group, church community, or social club...clients who do not have close, one-on-one relationships, and

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<sup>41</sup> Helen J. Raschke, “The Role of Social Participation in Postseparation and Postdivorce Adjustment,” *Journal of Divorce* 1, no. 2 (1977): 129–39.

<sup>42</sup> Brown, “Divorce Adjustment and Social Support,” 123.

<sup>43</sup> Maria Ines Vera, “The impact of divorce groups on individual adjustment: A single case and group comparison approach,” Ph. D. diss., Florida State University, 1988.

<sup>44</sup> Ann Marie Lutton Johnson, “Postseparation/divorce adjustment for persons in peer support groups,” Ph. D. diss., The Fielding Institute, 1988.

clients who have lost such relationships in the divorce process should be encouraged to pursue ways of developing and replenishing such relationships.”<sup>45</sup>

### Emotional Expression

Participation in a divorce recovery group not only helps to replenish relationships, but establishes a new community based on a common traumatic injury, promoting the cathartic expression of grief, anger, bitterness, and other negative emotions which would be unwelcome or even overwhelming in other social groups. Such catharsis is thought to be healthy and healing, as the very act of verbally admitting one’s feelings is a step toward taking control of them. Thus Edward Friedman, for example, found significant trends toward improved self-esteem, resolution of anger, and especially disentanglement for those in divorce adjustment groups compared to a control group. He also found a moderately strong reduction in negative mental health symptomology for those in adjustment groups.<sup>46</sup> Lisbet Oygard found specifically that catharsis, along with universality and cohesiveness, were related to a recovery groups’ impact upon adjustment to divorce among females, and catharsis to adjustment among males.<sup>47</sup>

In a 1996 dissertation, Richard Gastil attempted to review the body of divorce adjustment research to determine the validity of the assumption made in many books and curricula that because divorce usually involves intense grief, the adjustment process could be understood in term of the “stages of grief” introduced by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in her book, *On Death and Dying*. Gastil noted that, while some progress had been made in defining psycho-social

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<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Krumrei, et. al., “Post-Divorce Adjustment and Social Relationships: A Meta-Analytic Review,” *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 46, no. 3–4 (2007): 162.

<sup>46</sup> David Samuel Friedman, “Divorce recovery: Effects of a divorce adjustment group,” Ph. D. diss., University of Arizona, 1987, xii.

<sup>47</sup> Lisbet Oygard, et. al., “Therapeutic Factors in Divorce Support Groups,” *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 36, no.1–2 (2001): 141–58.

adjustment with regard to function and identity, verification of such a theoretical process of divorce adjustment had not been possible due to inherent methodological problems.<sup>48</sup>

Nonetheless, describing divorce recovery as encompassing the stages of grief not only validates the chaotic emotions involved, it allows their expression in constructive ways that encourage empathy among those who have not experienced them. Paul Peckman, for example, in his dissertation of the same year described the stages of grief in detail, noting that

The purpose of highlighting these stages is to raise the issues with pastoral counselors: ‘If you were experiencing symptoms of these states, with the possible exception of the ‘final’ stage—acceptance, would you expect yourself to think clearly, act properly, respond promptly? Would these factors possibly have a numbing, blinding, disorienting effect upon you that might preclude your seeking help, proffered or otherwise? Might an understanding of all this make you adjust your approach, alter your assumptions, and modify your actions?’<sup>49</sup>

#### Insight and Intervention

Divorce recovery groups provide more than just social support and the opportunity for necessary emotional expression, however. In 1978, Sheila Kessler reported research finding that groups structured with skill building exercises improved post-divorce self-concept in a way that unstructured and control groups did not.<sup>50</sup> The next year, Sara Bonkowski and Brenda Wanner-Westly reported that divorce adjustment groups could be effective in a range of settings that included family service agencies, outpatient mental health clinics, public schools, churches, or the offices of private clinicians. However, they found it essential that, because of the complexity of issues involved, such groups must be led by trained, experienced leaders. It was also important

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Gastil, “The Process of Divorce Recovery: A Review of the Research,” D. Psy. diss., Biola University, 1996, 54.

<sup>49</sup> Peckman, “Internal and External Factors,” 14.

<sup>50</sup> Sheila J. Kessler, “Building Skills in Divorce Adjustment Groups,” *Journal of Divorce* 2, no. 2 (1978): 209–16



that the topics covered be grounded in theory and relevant to the needs of group members.<sup>51</sup> For this reason Bruce Fisher had built his Rebuilding Seminar on an educational, rather than therapeutic model, explaining that “There is an underlying philosophical belief in education that we are capable of taking charge of our lives. With information, guidance, and support, we can learn to make loving choices...”<sup>52</sup>

The curricula of most divorce recovery approaches cover a remarkably similar set of topics in rather similar ways, seeking both to inform participants on issues in which they may lack knowledge and to encourage the sharing of insights between participants. Such peer counseling encourages both current accuracy and personal accountability. Despite the nonjudgmental nature of the group described by Don Bissett, for example, he explained that when participants were about to make self-defeating decisions, the facilitator would ask them whether they would like advice from the group. Through such interventions, the group had prevented members from negative responses to divorce that included giving up property rights, moving away in an attempt to escape from grief, retaliatory affairs, slander campaigns, involving children in parental conflict, and doing physical harm to people or property.<sup>53</sup>

External interventions and insights are essential during a time when the turmoil of emotional trauma tends to impair decision making. A 1989 study by William and Susan Doherty et. al., found that women, in particular, tend to struggle with declines in both financial and psychological well-being following a separation while increasing their use of alcohol and other

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<sup>51</sup> Sara Bonkowski and Brenda Wanner-Westly, “The Divorce Group: A New Treatment Modality,” *Social Casework* 60, no. 9 (Nov 1979): 552–57.

<sup>52</sup> Bruce Fisher, *Facilitator’s Manual for Rebuilding: When Your Relationship Ends*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Impact, 2004), viii.

<sup>53</sup> Bissett, “A Church-Sponsored Divorce Recovery Group Experience,” 47.

substances.<sup>54</sup> Barry Frieman found that men, in particular, struggle with the welfare of their children, the stress caused by the divorce, the behavior of their ex-wives, and the social isolation they experience after the separation. They benefit from the recovery group's combination of honest, direct feedback and professional insights,<sup>55</sup> as do their children.<sup>56</sup>

### Freedom in Forgiveness

Promoting both personal forgiveness and some form of reconciliation between former spouses is another function of recovery groups, long advocated by clergy but only recently supported by social scientists. As early as 1983 Robert Coates encouraged the involvement of ministers in divorce mediation where possible, noting that in addition to the feelings of depression, detachment, anger, hopelessness, self-pity, confusion, fury, sadness, and loneliness described by social scientists, divorcees also typically have feelings of failure, fear, and guilt, which call for “a ministry of humility and healing . . . in the midst of brokenness.”<sup>57</sup> The following year Robert Hurst described his recovery work with over fifty divorced individuals as having many dimensions of spiritual direction, including the use of journaling in cycles of confession, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.<sup>58</sup>

A 2004 study by Mark Rye et. al. found many advantages for divorcees in being able to forgive their former husband or wife, even if they are unable to restore their marriage:

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<sup>54</sup> William Doherty, et. al., “Marital Disruption and Psychological Well-Being,” *Journal of Family Issues* 10, no.1 (March 1989): 72–85.

<sup>55</sup> Barry B. Frieman, “Challenges Faced by Fathers in a Divorce Support Group,” *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 37, no. 1–2 (2002): 163.

<sup>56</sup> Kim Bastaitis, et. al., “Do Divorced Fathers Matter? The Impact of Parenting Styles of Divorced Fathers on the Well-Being of the Child,” *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 55, no. 5 (2014): 363–90.

<sup>57</sup> Robert B. Coates, “A Ministry of Mediation: The Divorce Settlement,” *Journal of Pastoral Care* 37, no.4 (1983), 275.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Hurst, “Discerning Religious Meaning in the Divorce Adjustment Process,” *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 74, no. 2 (Spring 1984), 17–33.

To begin, it appears that forgiveness of an ex-spouse relates to improved mental health. Specifically, forgiveness of an ex-spouse related positively to Existential and Religious Well-Being and negatively to Depression and Anger. In addition, it appears that letting go of negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward an ex-spouse is more closely related to mental health than developing a positive response toward an ex-spouse. This does not preclude the possibility that developing a positive response toward an ex-spouse has other benefits for the individual. However, this finding may provide encouragement for those divorced individuals who want to forgive, but who believe that it is unrealistic for them to respond positively toward their ex-spouse. It appears that merely learning to let go of negative feelings, thoughts and behaviors can be beneficial.<sup>59</sup>

In 2010 Alaine Aysta confirmed that the ability to forgive an ex-spouse correlated to divorce adjustment in recovery group settings.<sup>60</sup> However, research by Juliet Rohde-Brown and Kjell Rudestam the next year found that not only was the ability to let go of anger and forgive one's ex-spouse a significant deterrent to depression, being able to forgive oneself was essential in order to avoid becoming an angry person.<sup>61</sup> Since retaining anger and unforgiveness are known to contribute to psychological and physical illness, it was not surprising that a 2013 study by Magon Saunders et. al. of African-American Christians recovering from divorce reported that participation in Christian divorce support groups positively influenced both forgiveness levels and health outcomes.<sup>62</sup>

### Holistic Hope

In addition to encouragement toward forgiveness, there is a body of evidence suggesting

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<sup>59</sup> Mark S. Rye, et. al., "Forgiveness of an Ex-Spouse: How Does It Relate to Mental Health Following a Divorce?" *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 41, no. 3-4 (2004): 48-49.

<sup>60</sup> Aileen Aysta, "A quantitative study of forgiveness and divorce adjustment in divorce recovery groups," Ph. D. diss., Capella University, 2010, x.

<sup>61</sup> Juliet Rhode-Brown and Kjell Erik Rudestam, "The Role of Forgiveness in Divorce Adjustment and the Impact of Affect," *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 52, no. 2 (2011): 109-24.

<sup>62</sup> Magon M. Saunders, et. al., "Can Christian Divorce Support Groups Influence Forgiveness and Health Outcomes in Black Divorcees? A Phenomenological Investigation," *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 54, no. 7 (2013) 550-75.

that faith based divorce recovery groups provide a comprehensive philosophical framework that helps participants to find hope for a better future even in the midst of emotional devastation. The Christian emphasis on hope may help to explain the provocative finding of a 2003 study by Samuel McCage that the increases in divorce adjustment scores among participants in a *DivorceCare* course were only moderately higher than those in a control group participating in a Sunday School class. McCage found that divorce adjustment in his study correlated with spiritual well-being: as divorce adjustment increased so did spiritual well-being, and as spiritual well-being increased so did divorce adjustment. In interpreting his findings, he noted that

“A key component of the *DivorceCare* program is small group interaction and group support. While the control group did not receive the treatment, the Sunday School classes may have provided similar group interaction and support. Rather than concluding that *DivorceCare* was not beneficial, one might argue that Sunday School classes are just as helpful as *DivorceCare*.”<sup>63</sup>

In fact, a 2007 phenomenological study of another small *DivorceCare* recovery group by Howard Downing found that the common experience of participants included (a) disbelief with shame connected to identity, (b) forms of cognitive dissonance and immobility, (c) tendencies toward self-protection and blame, (d) recognition of need to change oneself, (e) a struggle to face reality, and (f) a willingness to examine the quality of their interpersonal relationships. He argued that “when people go through crises in their lives, academics and complex philosophies seem to be beyond their grasp due to their pain and fear. It is during these times that people start asking the very serious questions basic to life and death.”<sup>64</sup> Advocating the development of more church divorce recovery groups, Downing concluded,

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<sup>63</sup> Samuel V. McCage, “The Effectiveness of *DivorceCare* on Divorce Adjustment and Spiritual Well-Being,” Ph. D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003, 41.

<sup>64</sup> Howard L. Downing, “A Phenomenological Study of the Experience of a Suburban, Faith-Based, Divorce Support Group,” Ph. D. diss., Union Institute and University, 2007, 38.

The relevance of a “faith-based” divorce support group has significant cognitive, philosophical underpinnings to provide direction when one is in a fog of confusion. Not all support groups are created equal as participants revealed [from] their previous experiences. Surrounding an individual with supportive therapy can facilitate and navigate a grieving person through the difficult struggles with deep core issues, and toward substantial hope. Participants discovered there is no shortcut, though many still try to find it. This is especially helpful when the painful and fearful dark side of the soul emerges. Fleshing out the truth in supportive actions communicates louder than mere words or rules. Members of the group nurtured one another to examine, discuss, challenge, compare, ask hard questions, strengthen, or in several cases, to make changes in their worldview.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Downing, “A Phenomenological Study,” 176–77.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **THE PROJECT DEVELOPED**

Compelling reasons for developing a divorce recovery ministry can be found in Scripture, missional theology, cultural trends, and social science research. Yet how does a small, Christian congregation with no history of recovery ministries start a divorce recovery group? How would those initiating such a ministry measure its effectiveness? What obstacles might have to be overcome to implement such a project? To these questions we now turn.

#### **The Project Design: How Was a Divorce Recovery Ministry Initiated?**

As in almost any new ministry, after determining the need for and value of the proposed program, the next questions to be answered have to do with leadership: who could develop the necessary competencies and would be interested in taking on the responsibility for getting it going? Who among the staff and leadership of the congregation will provide oversight and accountability to ensure the integrity and quality of the effort? How will it be related to the existing ministries of the congregation?

#### **Leadership Recruitment**

In the design of this project, the answer to the first question was readily apparent. As noted in chapter one, I was greatly helped in my own divorce recovery by a handful of caring, Christian friends, so I was eager to “pay forward” their intervention. As both the researcher in this project and the pastor of the congregation involved, it was obvious that I would be involved in development and leadership of the new ministry, though I had no prior experience leading or even participating in a formal recovery group.

However, there are at least three good reasons why such a ministry should not be attempted by a single individual. First, divorce recovery groups deal with people who are at an emotionally unstable and vulnerable point in their lives. There is a high incidence of mental illness, substance abuse, and sexual promiscuity among divorcees as they try to cover up and compensate for the intense pain they are experiencing. A single person's facilitation of a support group, which will most likely meet when no one else is around to observe, would make it impossible to avoid time spent one on one with members of the group arriving early or staying late. Such a situation provides no defense against any temptation to indiscretion, physical attack, or false accusation of inappropriate conduct.

Second and equally important, many of the issues involved in divorce and separation are seen differently by people of differing gender, and animosity toward 'the opposite sex' in the wake of divorce is not uncommon. Having both a male and a female facilitator not only ensures that participants of both genders will feel more comfortable, it promotes a fair and forthcoming conversation regarding gender issues. In particular, a mixed gender team of formerly divorced facilitators who have rebuilt their lives and learned from their experiences to succeed in marriage may provide not only balanced leadership but a positive model for participants.

Not mentioned in chapter one was 'the rest of the story,' that a year after resuming pastoral ministry in a new parish, I began to date an amazing single mother who had returned to the congregation six years after her own divorce. We subsequently married, and with a background in social service and a passion for ministry, René became the outstanding co-facilitator of our divorce recovery group.

A third reason for not attempting to initiate a divorce ministry with only one leader is the issue of sustainability. A group with only a single facilitator will have no choice but to

reschedule their meeting in the event of the facilitator's illness or an emergency. Not only can that produce scheduling difficulties for everyone involved, it can disenfranchise group members who depend on the group for the emotional support they need to get through the week. The facilitator, for his or her part, is under greater pressure and more easily burned out by leadership of the group without the support of another facilitator. Should the group grow or sensitive issues need to be discussed, there is no provision for dividing into two groups to facilitate conversation. Finally, should the single facilitator become incapacitated or called to another ministry, it would be problematic if there is not another facilitator to take over leadership.

For these reasons, even with a husband and wife team of facilitators, our group benefited from the participation of another leader from our congregation. Permanently separated from his wife, he not only provided his own helpful perspective on divorce and separation but served as a backup co-facilitator when my wife was unable to participate due to illness.

In the Leader's Guide for *DivorceCare*, Steve Grissom recommends that churches seek leaders who profess faith in Christ, demonstrate spiritual maturity, have experienced divorce or separation, have recovered from past hurts, have participated in a recovery group, and have a sense of calling. He suggests that if the leaders of a congregation are not already aware of people who might fit that description, they ought to advertise internally using their church bulletin, newsletter, or website, hold an information meeting, set up a display to draw interest at a church ministry fair or other event, and give short presentations to recruit at church group meetings. Once divorce recovery groups have been meeting for a few cycles, graduates of the group would likely make the best candidates for new facilitators.<sup>1</sup>

Though leadership was easy to establish in our case, the relationship of the divorce

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Grissom, *Divorce Care Leader's Guide* (Wake Forest, NC: Church Initiative, 2012), 34–38.



recovery group to other ministries was less clear. Our congregation is organized around six ministry teams: Relationship, Discipleship, Worship, Stewardship, Leadership, and Elders. While there are discipleship components in the divorce recovery curricula, we ultimately determined that the primary purpose of the ministry was to care for and build up members of our community, connecting them to our congregation when possible, so in our case the divorce recovery ministry came under the umbrella of our Relationship Team. In other congregational structures divorce recovery might fit well under human care, outreach, or evangelism boards.

### Curriculum Determination

After determining the initial leadership for a divorce recovery group and its place in the congregational structure, a curricular approach must be chosen. Because the members of our team lacked experience as participants in divorce recovery groups, were already struggling to keep up with other responsibilities, and were convinced of the advantages of adding audio-visual presentations to a social learning environment, we very quickly decided to investigate and compare two video curricula of which I was aware. During my own divorce, I had been unable to work a recovery group into my work and parenting schedules, but friends had recommended *DivorceCare*, so it seemed to be one option worth investigating. As I began working on this project my advisor suggested the *Life After Divorce* curriculum offered by the American Association of Christian Counselors, so I decided to investigate that option as well.

As an independent study in the doctor of ministry program, I watched, compared, and evaluated all twelve sessions of *Life After Divorce* and the thirteen sessions of the *DivorceCare* curriculum along with accompanying leaders guides and student pages. An in-depth discussion from a Lutheran perspective of the theological and practical issues which either set one program apart or which they both shared is contained in Appendix One, “Comparative Theological

## Analysis of Video Curricula and Suggested Adaptations: *Life After Divorce* or *DivorceCare*?"

Although it seemed clear that either series could be adapted and used by a Lutheran congregation provided that the facilitator could clarify the cross of Christ as the focus of faith and sort out some confusion of Law with Gospel, the *DivorceCare* program was chosen due to its many practical advantages: 1) more explicit discussions of theological issues, 2) a more interesting and up to date visual style, 3) the insights of a larger pool of divorce experts, 4) the testimonies of a greater number of divorcees, 5) considerably more ethnic diversity, 6) the effective use of a visual metaphor to reinforce the message of each session, 7) a professionally designed participant workbook with session outlines and space for notes, 8) well written daily Bible studies reinforcing the sessions for each week, 9) professional promotional materials, 10) better name recognition, and last but not least, 11) a professional website providing free promotion of our group through a directory service, free leadership resources, and free referrals of potential participants in our local area.<sup>2</sup>

### Logistics Planning

After determining the curriculum, the location and timing of the group had to be decided. Given the antipathy regarding churches among some in our community, we considered holding the group on the neutral grounds of a local school or community center, but ultimately thought it more important to connect the ministry to the congregation, limit the cost, and simplify the logistics by holding it at our church facility. Monday nights were chosen due to availability in both the church and my personal calendar.

In the past January has been an excellent time to start new ministries and we had hoped to

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<sup>2</sup> Kirk Hille, "Comparative Theological Analysis of Video Curricula and Suggested Adaptations: Life After Divorce or Divorce Care?" 2015.

start the group shortly after the New Year. It seemed an optimal time, since the holiday season often brings emotional turmoil and loneliness for separated and divorced people, many resolve to make a new start in the new year, and the short, cold winter days are the best time to lure people indoors who would otherwise be engaged in the many outdoor sports opportunities our region has to offer. However, a delay in getting the project proposal approved forced the start date back to February 22<sup>nd</sup>. Fortunately, there was still just enough time to squeeze the 13 curricular sessions, plus a final focus group, into a spring season that ends with Memorial Day Weekend in our recreation oriented community.

After considering the schedule suggested in the Leader's Guide and the timing of similar groups advertised in our area, we decided to hold our group from 6:30-8:30 pm. Two hours seemed to be the minimal time required for introductions or a review of the prior week's material, viewing of a 45-minute video segment, a short break, and a reasonably long group discussion. However, even with earlier work schedules than some cities and without the traffic congestion of others, it would be a stretch for some people to make it from work and try to get a bite of supper by 6:30, while those parents who needed to get their children to bed on a school night would need to leave no later than 8:30.

To encourage parents with children to participate, we decided to offer free child care for those who would register for it in advance. The offer required finding a qualified member who could be trusted to provide excellent care in our nursery and funding for their pay, but it was felt necessary to include divorcees whose parenting plan gave them custody on Monday nights. The only cost participants would be asked to reimburse would be the \$15 cost of the workbooks.

### Advertising Campaigns

A critical issue after recruiting leadership, determining curriculum, and deciding the

logistics is the recruitment of participants, particularly for a small church in the beginning stages of developing such a ministry. After all, the project would be pointless without participants!

Immediately after deciding to use the *DivorceCare* materials, I registered our group at [www.divorcecare.org](http://www.divorcecare.org) so that our course information would appear whenever anyone used the “Find a Group” online search engine from a nearby zip code. In addition to instructions on how to access the free listing on their website, the *DivorceCare* “Starter Kit” included 50 full color tri-fold brochures and 50 full color 8 ½” x 5 ½” bulletin inserts. These we personalized with the information about our group, including dates, time, a contact name and phone number, a location map, and the address of the web page on the church website where I had created a registration form for *DivorceCare*. Although we did not expect advertising *DivorceCare* on our own website to reach beyond our congregation members, we wanted those interested in our group to register on our website so that we would know that they were coming and so that they could be familiar with our congregation before setting foot in our building. We also invited our members and friends through our Facebook page, Sunday bulletin, verbal announcements, and a weekly email blast I send out every Wednesday called “Post It from the Pastor.”

The printed flyers we sent by mail with a cover letter to every Lutheran congregation in our city, all other Christian congregations near our church, the three nearest elementary schools, and the office of Lutheran Community Services. In an effort to prevent the letters from being thrown away unopened we also sent email messages alerting the recipients to the letters on the day they were sent. Two sample cover letters can be seen in Appendix Two: Advertising Letters.

Since the printed bulletin inserts were too few for the number of bulletins we print each week and the congregation could be otherwise informed, I used them as small publicity posters, obtaining permission to put them up at several local libraries, community centers, stores, and

social service agencies. Some of our congregation members also put them up at their businesses.

Another means employed in an effort to recruit group members and obtain registrations was an outdoor banner sign. Since our congregation is located along a major arterial and has a member who works for a sign company, we designed and were able to purchase at a discount a good quality, double-sided 3' x 5' temporary banner which could be posted on a sturdy frame along the street in the weeks prior to and including the beginning of the group. Purchase of the DivorceCare curriculum granted use of their professional graphics and marketing approach, so the sign read:

Separated? Divorced? We can help.  
DivorceCare meets Monday nights 6:30–8:30  
[www.pilgrimchurchspokane.org](http://www.pilgrimchurchspokane.org)

Recognizing that divorcees are more likely to search the internet than the streets for a recovery group, we also advertised online. For many people, Craigslist has replaced newspaper classified ads because listings are free and can be searched, so I posted three ads for our group at [Spokane.craigslist.org](http://Spokane.craigslist.org) under “Groups,” “Classes,” and “General Community.” The ads read:

Separated? Divorced? A new Divorce Care video seminar and recovery support group will meet on Mondays, 6:30–8:30 pm beginning February 22 at Pilgrim Lutheran Church, 2733 W Northwest Blvd in Spokane. Topics include anger, loneliness, new relationships, finances, children, and forgiveness. Child care is available if requested in advance. Workbook costs \$15 but scholarships are available. To register online, go the "What We Do" tab at [www.pilgrimchurchspokane.org](http://www.pilgrimchurchspokane.org).

Employing a new advertising tactic for our church, I created a Google Adwords account and set up a campaign to post an ad for our group on the search results page of anyone in our local area searching on Google for a term related to our new ministry. Terms I chose included “divorce,” “care,” “recovery,” “group,” “attorney,” “divorce papers,” “divorce online,” “separation,” “lonely,” “single parent,” “pilgrim,” “Lutheran church,” “Lutheran churches,” and

“Bible studies.” Once an Adwords account is approved and active, the account holder is charged only when viewers actually click on the ad and are redirected to the associated website, and the cost can be limited to a few dollars per day and/or to a price for the entire campaign. Google was running a special incentive for new advertisers offering \$100 in free credit to anyone purchasing \$50 worth of advertising, so I set up the campaign to be limited to \$50 at no more than \$5 per day in order to ensure that the ads would run for at least ten days and not exceed our total budget. On those days, anyone in a local zip code using Google for a search that included our designated terms might see and have the opportunity to click on the following ad:

Divorced? Separated?  
DivorceCare meets Monday 6:30–8:30  
Feb 22-May 23 Free child care!  
[www.pilgrimchurchspokane.org](http://www.pilgrimchurchspokane.org)

Finally, two additional media were enlisted in an attempt to get the word out about our group. With the permission of the moderator, we posted a message on the Facebook page of our local neighborhood association. We also submitted a public service announcement to a local Christian radio station through the form on their website.

### Facilitator Training

In order to prepare for facilitation of the groups, the co-facilitators made use of both the *DivorceCare Leader’s Guide* and the 34-minute leader training video included with the curriculum. The video is intended to be a tool for both initiation of the ministry and ongoing training of new leaders, as either a single workshop or in three shorter sessions. The three video segments explained the components and role of *DivorceCare* as an “emergency room” ministry to those suffering the trauma of divorce, described the interaction of a successful leadership team, and gave tips on hospitality, encouragement of group members to participate fully in the recovery process, and facilitation of positive discussion among participants.

As part of the preparation for effective leadership, it was important to develop a set of guidelines to which members of the group would agree in order to promote safe, positive interactions. Several examples could be found in the “Leader Zone” section of the *DivorceCare* website. The most important elements of these were combined and clarified to form the set of guidelines found in Appendix Three, intended to encourage but not demand participation, promote sensitivity and good manners, maintain confidentiality, and prohibit dating between group members for the duration of the course.

### **Research Tools and Methodology: How Was Effectiveness Evaluated?**

The DivorceCare curricular materials made many claims regarding the effectiveness of the program and provided many suggestions regarding effective group facilitation. Yet how could effectiveness in divorce recovery be defined and measured? Would there be a way to quantify the effect for the sake of comparison to other approaches, or for that matter, to the passage of time? Certainly, participants in any divorce recovery effort would have opinions of the effectiveness of the approach, but how could we elicit an honest sharing of those opinions and get a sense of their objective validity?

#### **The Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale**

In the process of researching the history and literature of divorce recovery groups, it was found that the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale, developed by Bruce Fisher for his 1976 dissertation then revised and statistically improved in 1978, had become a very commonly used measure of divorce adjustment in work with groups. The FDAS was designed to compare adjustment to the ending of a love relationship before and after Dr. Fisher’s Rebuilding Seminar. The Divorce Seminar Center in Boulder, Colorado, which allows potential participants to take the FDAS online, claimed that “the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale is the universally accepted

measure of divorce adjustment and has been taken by almost a million people.”<sup>3</sup> By contacting Jerry Zimmer, a colleague of the late Dr. Fisher who continues his work through the Rebuilding Seminars, I was able to obtain the necessary tools and permission to use the FDAS in measuring the adjustment of participants in our recovery group.

The FDAS is made up of 100 questions to which individuals respond according to a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (almost always) to 5 (almost never). The questions are randomly distributed but evaluate the respondent in six categories: level of self-esteem, ongoing investment in the previous relationship, level of anger, feelings of sadness and loneliness, readiness to trust another person in an intimate relationship, and readiness for social interaction. *The Facilitator’s Manual for Rebuilding* notes that “it is not designed to measure a person’s mental or emotional illness although researchers have found a high correlation between the FDAS and other personality instruments such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory.”<sup>4</sup> Higher scores in each sub-category, and particularly higher total combined scores, indicate better adjustment.

Research data on the FDAS indicates that the test-retest Alpha Internal Reliability is .985, which is considered high for a personality test. The sub-test scores range from .87 to .95 in reliability. The facilitator’s manual notes that while there are no numerical statistics for the validity of the FDAS, the consistent statements of test takers that the questions accurately reflect their feelings indicates that the face validity for the FDAS is high. Since FDAS scores also consistently go up over time as divorce adjustment takes place, the time validity is also considered to be high. Finally, the correlation between informal surveys of Rebuilding Seminar

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<sup>3</sup> “The Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale” accessed December 30, 2015. <http://www.divorceseminarcenter.com/fdas.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Fisher, *Facilitator’s Manual for Rebuilding*, 163.



participants regarding divorce adjustment improvement and scores on the FDAS also suggests that the instrument is a valid measure of adjustment.<sup>5</sup>

Scoring of the FDAS in this case would be done by hand, using answer sheets and sub-test transparencies provided by Jerry Zimmer and also available on pages 149–58 of the facilitator’s manual. In order to avoid errors in scoring, each set of test results would be certified by scoring each answer sheet at least twice.

### The Focus Group Interview

In order to validate and clarify the results of the FDAS through a qualitative measure, it was decided to convene a voluntary focus group as a fourteenth session of our *DivorceCare* group. I was familiar with focus group interviews from a college group dynamics course and experience in church capital campaigns. In preparation for the experience a consent form (see Appendix Six) was prepared for participants clarifying the purpose, structure, and privacy of the interview. Since the recovery group size was likely to be small, it was expected that all participants would be asked to participate, but in order to make clear the voluntary nature of the focus group it would be held on the next Monday following formal conclusion of the course. Permission would be explicitly requested to make a temporary digital audio recording of the interview session in order to eliminate the need for a note taker and ensure accuracy in recording the reactions of the participants.

Appendix Five lists the fourteen open ended questions formulated for the interview group. Some of them were intended to be particularly broad: “How do you think the course affected your own divorce recovery?” Others were more specific to elements of the divorce group

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<sup>5</sup> Fisher, *Facilitator’s Manual for Rebuilding*, 142.

experience: regarding specific aspects of the DivorceCare curriculum and the recovery group experience: “How would you describe your relationship with other participants in the course?” A few questions investigated the perceived efficacy of specific elements in the *DivorceCare* curriculum: “How helpful was it to discuss the grief process in relation to divorce?”

### **Project Implementation: How Was the Research Carried Out?**

The day of our first DivorceCare group meeting, a few final preparations were in order. Having discovered that the church calendar did not reflect the reservation of an outside group to use the church fellowship hall, we were forced to move the meeting to our Youth Room. This had the advantage of being a more intimate, secluded, and comfortable space, with couches and overstuffed chairs that could be rearranged to form a circle in order to encourage group interaction. However, it necessitated directional signs leading people from the parking lot upstairs and the video projector, sound system, and DVD player required more set up. In addition to preparing the *DivorceCare* materials, Group Guidelines, and FDAS materials, we also set up a hospitality table with name tags, pens, workbooks, snacks, and hot chocolate, coffee, or tea. One facilitator waited at the hospitality table while the other watched from the parking lot for people seeking the group.

#### **The First Session**

Anticipating the difficulty first time guests might have in finding the meeting room, the start of the meeting was delayed. Eventually five people arrived to participate in the first session, “What’s Happening to Me?” in addition to the two facilitators. One other participant was expected and may have been dissuaded by the many vehicles crowding the street and parking lot due to the concurrent meeting. Those who attended admitted that it had taken a great deal of courage to show up, and the DivorceCare materials had suggested that the initial group would

likely be small, so five participants seemed to be a positive start.

Of the five participants, two were males and three females. Three had been divorced for several years but were still struggling to recover, one was separated and awaiting mediation of spouse initiated divorce arrangements, and one was permanently separated but not divorced due to retirement financial implications. One member of the group was a member of the host congregation, one was a former member thinking of returning, one was a member of another Christian congregation, and two did not indicate any church affiliation. Child care had been provided, but none of the participants required it so the child care worker was sent home early.

The researcher began by introducing himself and the purpose of the group by telling the story of his own divorce and the help he received from a Christian counselor and friends who had themselves experienced painful divorces. The format of the group was explained as well as the research being done. The members of the group gave verbal assent to their participation and signed the “Group Guidelines” forms, including emergency contact numbers.

The researcher then explained the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale and the participants, including the co-facilitator, took the time to complete the one hundred questions. To promote confidentiality each of the participants chose a two-digit number to identify their answer sheet.

After the FDAS was completed the group members each shared their own divorce or separation experience, beginning with the co-facilitator. The group seemed increasingly comfortable as they each shared their stories. Group members offered nods of agreement and encouraging comments as they listened to each other.

The *DivorceCare* workbooks were then explained and the video was introduced and shown. Afterward, a break was scheduled, but the participants seemed more eager to discuss the video, so the researcher led a brief discussion. Participants seemed to resonate with the emotions

and experiences shared in the video and expressed that they felt it very helpful. Particular feelings expressed were a sense of devastation, isolation, emotional exhaustion, and loneliness.

The session was concluded with prayer and encouragement to invite friends. When asked whether the group would rather move to a more accessible classroom for future sessions they expressed a preference for the intimacy of the youth room in which the first session was held.

### The Following Sessions

Seven divorcees participated in the second session, “Finding Help,” in addition to the two facilitators. All of the participants from the first week returned as well as two additional male participants, one of whom had contacted the facilitator in advance and one of whom simply showed up. The video was shown and discussion went well, though differing viewpoints were clearly represented. One of the males had just been told by his wife one week earlier that she wanted a divorce, and he was clearly still in shock. The group was generally empathetic and compassionate, allowing him to process his grief aloud even when he began to ramble or his emotions strayed into anger.

Both of the new participants took the FDAS in another room while I explained the preliminary results to those who had participated the previous week. I had printed an explanation from Dr. Fisher of the FDAS results on the back of the scoring sheets I returned to participants.

The following week six divorcees participated in the third session, “Facing My Anger,” in addition to the two facilitators. Two of the original female participants did not return, though one had sent an email stating that a change in schedule would prevent future attendance. A new female participant did participate, even bringing food to share with the group. In the conversations, however, she stated many “new age” views which were respected but not validated by the rest of the group. One of the male participants tended to sideline the discussion

with lengthy diatribes regarding the ongoing renegotiation of his parenting plan in court.

In the fourth week six divorcees participated in the session “Facing My Depression” in addition to the two facilitators. The female who had attended for the first time the prior week did not return, but a new young woman joined the group. She was referred by a counselor and chose the group because it was close to where she lived and had started latest of any of the groups in the area. She was particularly grateful for the group and shared a moving story of how her husband’s addiction and abuse had caused her to file for divorce despite her still loving him passionately and protesting how wonderful he was. The group affirmed her decision to separate from her husband for her own protection and to prevent further enabling of her spouse. She was familiar with the writings of Bruce Fisher from her research and was eager to take the FDAS.

Six divorcees also participated in the fifth session, “Facing My Loneliness,” in addition to the two facilitators. One male was unable to attend due to work, while one of the two females absent from the prior two sessions returned, explaining that her children and then she had been sick. Discussion was somewhat tangential, as participants did not seem to want to talk directly about their loneliness. Various aspects of loneliness were discussed, however, along with approaches for dealing with it.

In addition to the two facilitators, seven divorcees participated in the sixth session. The opening discussion required little prompting, but one male going through a particularly difficult mediation in the process of his divorce dominated the discussion. The video in this session, “What Does the Owner’s Manual Say?” contains arguably the most difficult subject matter of the course but was well received and generated good discussion about what grounds for divorce might be acceptable in God’s eyes. In addition to adultery and the desertion of a believing spouse by an unbeliever, the group wondered about desertion by a believing spouse, abuse, and drug

addiction as a form of desertion. The group was cohering more each week, and it was difficult to get discussion started after the break because participants were sharing photos of their children.

The seventh week five divorcees participated in the session on “New Relationships” in addition to one of the facilitators. Missing were three regular participants and the female co-facilitator. Included was a new woman who had divorced her husband after thirty years because neither felt like continuing to work at their marriage.

Discussion prior to the video included each person present telling their story for the benefit of the newcomer, a review of the prior week’s lesson, and some introductory discussion of the topic. One group member is permanently separated from his wife but unwilling to divorce her, which would diminish her retirement income, so the question of new relationships was particularly pointed for him. The video was adamant that married people do not date, which he seemed to accept. Much of the discussion that followed revolved around the new group member, who seemed very self-assured, yet inadvertently revealed some areas of struggle and confusion.

### Mid-Course Adjustments

Since new participants continued to join the group for the first seven sessions, name tags were necessary and each session began with group members sharing their stories. The repeated sharing of personal stories enabled members to remember not only each other’s names but some critical insights from each other’s experiences.

After seven weeks, it became natural to begin each session with the question, “How was your week?” This took the place of the questions suggested in the *DivorceCare* Leader’s Guide, which were intended to reinforce the “On My Own” daily Bible studies. Two factors may have contributed to the change. First, those participants not completing the daily studies had not been able to participate in the opening conversation. Second, the suggested questions tended to be

condescending and overly didactic, such as “According to the Scriptures in Day 4, what kind of accountability friend should you find? Why is this important?”<sup>6</sup> Even though I had attempted to modify the questions by making them less directive (see Appendix Four: Divorce Recovery Session Plans), the questioning approach had seemed more appropriate for a Christian Bible study group than for a Bible based community support group.

Attendance continued to average seven people and the videos generated discussion quickly enough that “icebreaker” questions were unnecessary and so were discontinued after the fourth session. The discussion each night tended to carry on until the agreed ending time, so we never did use the “Cover Activity,” a written reflection on the DivorceCare cover art suggested for two of the sessions. The eighth session, covering “Financial Survival,” provoked a good discussion despite all but one of the participants seeming to have their finances in order. The ninth section, on “Kid Care,” also generated interest even among participants who did not have children.

For session eleven we found it helpful and appropriate to separate the group by gender for viewing and discussing the video on “Single Sexuality.” Since my wife and co-facilitator was ill and unable to lead the women the prior week when we had planned to cover that topic, we rearranged the order of sessions slightly, covering “Forgiveness” that night and postponing “Single Sexuality” until the following week. This worked out well, except that then there were only two male participants the following week. A larger number in the group would have been less awkward and would likely have resulted in more candor in the conversation.

### The Final Sessions

The twelfth session, on “Reconciliation,” turned out to be a favorite of some group

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<sup>6</sup> Grissom, *DivorceCare Leader’s Guide*, 109.

members, who appreciated the idea that reconciliation was possible between spouses even when restoration of their marriage was impossible. The group also found the thirteenth session, “Moving On,” to be uplifting in its emphases on reducing fear, finding hope, and growing from the experience of divorce through God’s guidance and power. By this time relationships in the group had become fairly close and supportive, so members were reluctant to conclude the course. Consequently, all eight of the remaining regular participants agreed to return for the focus group the following week. In order to add an element of celebration and completion to the final session, one of the group members suggested having “Banana Splits” as a treat for the following week before the group split up, and each group member agreed to bring an ingredient.

The last evening session began with the building of Banana Splits, since the ice cream and other ingredients could not be kept out until the normal break time, and there was surprisingly little comment about the irony of such a treat being enjoyed by people whose marital split had nearly driven them bananas! As people ate, I explained and obtained signed copies of the Focus Group Consent Forms. Since one group member who had wanted to participate in the focus group was called to work out of town, I had arranged to interview him separately and explained the situation to the group. The focus group interview that followed is transcribed in Appendix Seven, with the individual interview responding to the same questions noted. An evaluation of the participant responses will be part of the next chapter.

At the conclusion of the Focus Group Interview, participants discussed their next steps. Several maintained that they would like to be part of the next group, scheduled to begin in the fall, particularly if they had not been present for the first few sessions. Though vacations and outdoor recreation in our region make scheduling gatherings during the summer difficult, several asked that we plan some type of reunion, so the group set a date and the facilitators invited the



participants to their home for a cookout on that day. As had become customary, the group shared prayer concerns and the discussion ended with a prayer by the facilitator.

The Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale was then administered to the participants for the second time, as a post test. Group members expressed excitement over the prospect of seeing whether and how much their scores had changed since beginning the group. Several stayed for a few minutes after completing the inventory in order to express their gratitude or fondness for each other and help us clean up the room for one last time, even though it was getting late in the evening. Finally, all the members of our first divorce recovery group departed, and a time of reflection and evaluation began.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **THE PROJECT EVALUATED**

Implementation of the strategies described in the previous chapter succeeded in gathering participants for an initial divorce recovery group, and the informal feedback of group members seemed to indicate that those who continued to participate in the course found it to be valuable. Yet could the effectiveness of the experience in promoting divorce adjustment among participants be quantified by the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale? Could the factors which participants felt promoted divorce adjustment be identified through the qualitative analysis of a focus group interview? This chapter will describe and discuss the results of the FDAS administered to participants at the beginning and the end of the course, then explore the factors which participants in the focus group interview felt contributed to a sense of improved adjustment, as well as those which informal observation suggested contributed to ongoing participation in the group. The validity and limitations of the study will then be examined, followed by a consideration of the project's strengths and weaknesses.

#### **Quantitative Findings and Analysis: What Did the FDAS Indicate?**

##### **Adjustment Improvement**

In all but one case, participants in the divorce recovery group exhibited higher scores on their Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale post-test as compared with their pre-test. Among the seven participants in our divorce recovery group who completed both a Pre-test and Post-test, the total adjustment score increased an average of 53.6 points. The difference in each sub-scale and

in the total adjustment score for each of the individuals is shown in the table below. Participants are listed by an identifying number each chose in order to protect confidentiality. The average change in each sub-scale and the total adjustment score is shown at the bottom of the table.

Table 1. Differences in Scores:

Participant Number	Personal Worth	Partner Separation	Anger Dissipated	Grieving Completed	Open to Intimacy	Social Worth	Total Adjustment
20	+8	+5	+2	+4	0	0	+19
22	+17	+9	+19	+28	+4	+7	+74
34	+33	+29	+11	+36	+10	+11	+130
57	+2	0	+7	+30	+8	+5	+52
66	+17	-1	+5	+16	+5	+2	+44
76	+7	+27	+4	+10	+8	+4	+60
99	-2	0	-1	-4	0	+3	-4
Average:	+11.7	+9.9	+6.7	+17.1	+5.0	+4.6	+53.6

The six sub-scales of which the FDAS is comprised may bear some correlation to several of the factors described by focus group participants as contributing to their perception of DivorceCare effectiveness. For example, the FDAS is meant to measure a person's perception of self-worth. It likewise attempts to determine adjustment in terms of the participant's level of grief. Another measured perception is dissipation of anger, which may be directly related to forgiveness of the ex-spouse. Disentanglement and openness to social intimacy, also measured factors, would seem to be prerequisites for new relationships and may be related to future hope. Average increases in each of the sub-scales were: 11.7 points on Personal Worth, 9.9 points on Partner Separation (or Disentanglement), 6.7 points on Anger Dissipation, 17.1 points on Grieving Completed, 5.0 points on Openness to Intimacy, and 4.6 points on Social Self-Worth

(For individual scores, see Appendix Eight: Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale Results).

However, Dr. Fisher himself cautioned that “the total score is more meaningful and important than the subtest scores.”<sup>1</sup> While the insights of the participants shared in the focus group certainly reflect the factors they perceived to have been helpful, the FDAS was administered to provide some quantification, for the sake of comparison, of the overall effectiveness of the divorce recovery group. It was not designed or intended to corroborate the effectiveness of the specific factors cited in the focus group study. Nor was statistical analysis within the scope of this project, though the average increase in overall and subscale scores would seem to support the effectiveness of the DivorceCare group in promoting divorce adjustment.

#### Comparison Scores

The average overall increase of 53.6 points is comparable to an average overall increase of 66 points reported by Dr. Fisher in a study of forty *Rebuilding* courses held in eight states and an average gain of 43 points reported by Fisher in a separate study of groups whose facilitators had not participated in a training workshop.<sup>2</sup> The average overall increase in our group was therefore in the middle of the reported range, lower than that of a typical *Rebuilding* group but higher than that of a typical *Rebuilding* group with untrained facilitators.

The skill level of the facilitators would certainly seem to be a plausible variable in the effectiveness of the divorce recovery group. Other factors described by Fisher as likely to affect the overall gains of a group include that 1) females typically have lower gain scores during the course of a group, 2) older participants typically have lower gain scores than younger

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<sup>1</sup> Fisher, *Facilitator's Manual for Rebuilding*, 159.

<sup>2</sup> Fisher, *Facilitator's Manual for Rebuilding*, 161.

participants, 3) males whose decision to divorce was mutual have a more difficult time adjusting to divorce than those who individually initiated the divorce, while females whose decision to divorce was mutual have an easier time than those who initiated the divorce by themselves, 4) scores typically go down after the legal process of divorce is initiated, and 5) non-initiators of divorce score lower immediately after the divorce but then reflect gains, while initiators typically score lower after seven months of separation than they do in the first six months.<sup>3</sup> Among our seven test subjects, four were female, six were more than forty years old, one was a male mutual divorce initiator and three were female sole initiators at least six months past filing for divorce, all factors which Fisher suggests would have a dampening effect on adjustment scores. On the other hand, Fisher suggests that divorce recovery groups are typically 2/3 female while our group was more evenly split, a factor that would be expected to positively affect adjustment scores.

In addition to the scores reported by Fisher, the authors of several other studies using the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale have published the average overall score increase of participants in their divorce groups so that they can be compared with our group. In 1986 David White reported in his dissertation for St. Andrews University that he used the FDAS to test the effectiveness of a ten-week divorce recovery seminar he had developed for use by Seventh Day Adventist pastors. The average overall increase in scores for his participants was 48 points.<sup>4</sup>

The next year, David Friedman reported in his University of Arizona dissertation that he used the FDAS to test the effectiveness of the ten-week long Tucson Divorce Recovery program. The average overall increase in scores for his treatment group was 36 points compare to a 16

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<sup>3</sup> Fisher, *Facilitator's Manual for Rebuilding*, 162.

<sup>4</sup> White, *Development of the Participant's Manual for a Divorce Recovery Seminar*, 122.

point average increase for those in a comparison group, a difference he considered significant.<sup>5</sup>

In 1988 Maria Vera reported in her Florida State University dissertation that she had used the FDAS to measure the effectiveness of a ten week *Rebuilding* based seminar and compared the results to other measures of psychosocial health. She reported an average overall increase of 64 points and found that it largely correlated with improved well-being in the other measures.<sup>6</sup>

David McCage, in his 2003 dissertation for Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary reported using the FDAS to compare the effectiveness of a *DivorceCare* group to a control group consisting of participants in an adult Sunday School class. He found an average overall increase of 48 points for the *DivorceCare* group compared with an average overall increase of 14 points for the control group. He did not find the difference between the two groups to be statistically significant given his small sample size, but concluded not that the *DivorceCare* group was ineffective, but that similarities between the two groups made both rather effective at helping divorcees to adjust.<sup>7</sup>

A study reported in 2008 by Dragica Vukalovich and Nerina Caltabiano used the FDAS to measure divorce adjustment before and after a six week *Rebuilding* based group intervention in Australia to determine whether gender influenced the outcomes. The authors found no gender differences in post-intervention scores, but described the 43.5 point average overall increase in FDAS scores as reflecting “significant adjustment gains.”<sup>8</sup> In comparison to this and the other professionally evaluated studies cited above, the 53.6 point average gain on the FDAS of our

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<sup>5</sup> Friedman, *Divorce recovery: Effects of a divorce adjustment group*, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Vera, *The impact of divorce groups on individual adjustment*, 88.

<sup>7</sup> McCage, *The effectiveness of DivorceCare on divorce adjustment and spiritual well-being*, 41.

<sup>8</sup> Dragica Vukalovich and Nerina Caltabaino, “The Effectiveness of a Community Group Intervention Program on Adjustment to Separation and Divorce,” *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* 43, no. 3 (2008): 145.

group participants would seem to confirm the effectiveness of our *DivorceCare* group in aiding adjustment to divorce and separation.

#### An Anomalous Score

It is interesting to note that one participant in our group did not evidence an increase in divorce adjustment over the course of the group as measured by the FDAS. In fact, the individual's post-test score was four points lower than the pre-test score! Were it not for the anomalous score, the average score increase in our group would have been just over 63 points.

Dr. Fisher wrote in his facilitator's manual that "Almost every class I taught had a person whose post-test score was the same or lower than their pre-test score."<sup>9</sup> Further, in his "Helpful Hints for Interpreting the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale Profiles," Fisher anticipates the possibility of a lower post-test score, explaining to participants,

Some of you may have a lower post-test score than the pre-test. Usually this means you were denying feelings when taking the pre-test. The post-test score, after participating in the ten-week seminar, usually is more meaningful because you may have overcome any denial you had when taking the pre-test.<sup>10</sup>

Observation of and conversation with the individual in our group whose scores did not increase confirmed as a possibility Dr. Fisher's suggestion that denial regarding feelings may have been at play. The individual involved was unusually dispassionate and seemingly ambivalent regarding divorce in the earliest group sessions despite being drawn to a divorce recovery group, and the individual became more animated and involved as the course proceeded. The focus group feedback given by the individual also indicated a personal belief that significant

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<sup>9</sup> Fisher, *Facilitator's Manual for Rebuilding*, 161.

<sup>10</sup> Fisher, *Facilitator's Manual for Rebuilding*, 152.

progress in recovery had been made in contrast to the lack of increase in FDAS scores. Finally, the individual sought out another divorce recovery group to join following the conclusion of our group, a fact that would seem to be at odds with consistently high adjustment scores.

### **Qualitative Findings and Analysis: What Did the Focus Group Indicate?**

The focus group interview was the primary qualitative measure used in an attempt to determine the effectiveness of various elements of the divorce group experience as evaluated by participants. Although all of the questions used in the focus group interview were designed to be “open” in the sense that they could not be answered with a “yes” or “no,” half of the questions were also open in the sense of providing no prompt regarding a particular facet of the divorce recovery group, as in “What, if anything, surprised you about the *DivorceCare* divorce recovery course?” (These were numbers 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 13, & 14 in Appendix Six: Focus Group Questions.) The other half of the questions provided prompts pointing to a specific facet of the recovery group, such as “How helpful was it to discuss the grief process in relation to divorce?” Transcription, grouping, and content analysis were used to determine eight factors commonly cited as contributing to participant adjustment.

#### **Social Support**

First and most often cited as contributing to the effectiveness of *DivorceCare* was the social support that participants felt they received in the group, not only because the group guidelines promoted safe and supportive interaction, but because the shared experience of group members encouraged openness and honesty. The supportive nature of the group was described as being uniquely helpful in that other social groups did not share in the experience of divorce, and were therefore unable or uninterested in talking at length about the issues involved. In fact,



the first response in answer to the question, “What, if anything, surprised you about the *DivorceCare* divorce recovery course?” was a participant blurting out, “Being able to freely talk about sexuality. I didn’t expect it to be so free that we would be able to talk about it, which was pleasant.” Asked later to describe the most valuable part of the course, that participant commented, “I just feel like the strength of sharing and the listening to the sharing, the support.”

As one participant explained, “the comradery, just knowing other people have been through this...to talk to other people about it... You can’t talk to a married person like that, that has never been through a divorce.” Asked later to specifically describe what was valuable about the group, another participant answered “I would say the personal testimonies from everybody.” Asked whether he meant on the videos or in person, he replied “Both.” Another participant explained, “When we got together and talked about everybody’s scenario it was helpful to see that you’re not the only one going through the same problems. There might be little differences, but a lot of the same feelings.” When prompted to describe their relationships with each other, participants agreed that the group was “friendly,” “supportive,” and a “life-saver,” with many affirming, as one did, that they would miss the group after its cessation: “It’s just this huge blessing to me and I waited so long to do this and I just feel like I’m going to miss not being here on Monday nights.” Another noted, “I always liked hearing from everybody and I always liked hearing all the different perspectives and I looked forward to this night a lot. During the week I was like, ‘How many more nights till Monday?’” A third commented, “It’s encouraging to have this group. One of the aspects I love the most is when we pray at the end of the session and praying for each other through the week. If court dates were coming up, I found myself thinking of you more and more and praying for you; and just the fellowship of the shared experience.”

### Helpful Information

A second and perhaps related factor participants cited as contributing to the value of the group was the sharing of practical, relevant information, both in the videos and in group interaction. As one put it, “I learned a lot from other people’s experiences, what other people are going through when they have kids at different age groups; what they face and their struggles with extra-curricular activities, meeting the ex-spouse, their new relationships, and being in awkward situations, but then at the end of the day it’s just you there.” One of the first responses regarding what surprised participants about the course was “I was surprised and appreciated how many different experts they had: it wasn’t just four or five people, it was twenty or thirty.” The participant later said of the curriculum, “It answered more of the questions I had and brought up questions that I hadn’t thought of.” Another, when asked what was valuable about *DivorceCare*, commented ““I liked the different perspectives from the pastors, the counselors...when they would share in depth about something, a particular topic. It was so insightful and it was typical and it was grounded and it was just the truth...” Prompted to describe practical issues addressed in the course they found particularly helpful, participants included the effects of divorce on children, ways of working for reconciliation with ex-spouses, the need to set boundaries, and several commented on the importance of financial discipline. By way of contrast, participants had difficulty responding to the question, “What parts of the course were least valuable?” The only specific answer was from a participant who commented, “the financial side wasn’t important for me...It just wasn’t my issue, but I definitely wouldn’t have left it out.”

### Grief Facilitation

Among the practical issues participants mentioned as valuable were discussions of grief

and depression. One participant commented,

What they said about negative thoughts that lead to negative emotions and lead to negative perception about your life and so you need to get out of that cycle...think about something positive and it pulls you out of the negative cycle of depression, anxiety, fear, loneliness...Sometimes it's not really possible, but most of the time it is, especially with the help of others. If it's not possible by yourself then go seek someone else.

Asked specifically how helpful it was to discuss the grief process, a participant stated "I think it's very valuable to discuss the whole process and to hear other people's points of view and their histories as far as moving forward in the grief process.... I think many people miscalculate the time involved in healing." Another mentioned the value of "being able to take enough time to heal so that you can get on with your life; shut the door to the past first before you can open up the door to the future." Others affirmed that "I liked looking at the various stages of grief, too" and "it's really expected and that's kind of what you need to feel in order to heal from it." Participants seemed to find the discussion of grief helpful even if their separation had occurred many years earlier. As one put it, "I could empathize with other people in what they're going through because I went through the same thing... everybody was at different stages of the divorce process. Some were real fresh and some not as fresh, but I know what it was like, that feeling, and that process was pretty rough." One participant who acknowledged that the discussion of grieving had changed how she felt about her own situation stated, "I've just come to accept it...the fact that, okay, I am a single parent, I'm raising these three kids, and it's okay. I think at the beginning I was still pretty angry..." Another participant recognized his personal progress even while acknowledging an understanding that his grieving would be an ongoing process: "I think I'm in a much better place now than when we started, but I'm still frustrated that this had to happen. I'm definitely ready to move on and take steps forward and stop looking

back, but I still get a little torqued off when I sit down and start thinking about why it happened.”

### Hope Restoration

Along with facilitating the grief process, participants described the divorce recovery group as instrumental in restoring their ability to hope. One noted, “There was just a lot of hope and looking toward the future instead of focusing on the past in all those videos.” She later explained that as a result of the course, “I think I feel more confident and hopeful: at least I can make better choices in the future because I feel like I’m changing.” When asked how he would describe *DivorceCare* to a friend, another participant commented “I would recommend going through it because it will help you realize that there is hope...even though it doesn’t seem like there’s any.” Asked specifically what effect, if any, the course had on their ability to feel hopeful about the future, one participant elicited laughs from the group when he replied “I now know that I do have a future.” Another responded “maybe there’s a future to look forward to...maybe I won’t be too dysfunctional for too long; maybe someday I’ll have a functional relationship with somebody, and more than that, a spiritual relationship.” A third stated of his divorce, “It’s another chapter in my life. There is a tomorrow. At first I had to take it day-by-day, but now I can see light at the end of the tunnel, and things get better with time.”

### Forgiveness Extension

A common obstacle to grieving through divorce which can preclude the restoration of hope is the retention of anger or bitterness. Many of the participants commented on their progress in overcoming anger and beginning to extend forgiveness toward their ex-spouse as a result of their *DivorceCare* experience. One participant stated, “I think the main thing that I learned about is learning to forgive and to move forward, to let go of all the bitterness—that’s probably the

biggest thing.” He credited *DivorceCare*, saying “It’s changed my feelings towards my ex that she’s healing, too, and made a mistake. I learned to forgive her and move on.” Another described the effect of the group on her by saying,

I think it just helped me deal with it and face it and move through it. There was just a lot of different areas I feel it helped me. To forgive, and just to heal, I feel I learned a lot about myself, and that was really good. And I learned boundaries and I learned how important they are.

A third participant described the group experience as encouraging her “to listen to other people’s experience of their separation and divorce and to try to think of it through my ex-husband’s eyes...I don’t think I would go as far as empathy...but awareness.” When asked to describe something learned or relearned from in *DivorceCare*, a participant stated her conviction “that judging doesn’t work because I can’t judge anybody fairly either. Even if you’ve known them for years you still can’t judge them because you don’t have all the information. You just don’t know the amount of suffering that they’ve gone through.”

Another explained that the course had caused her “To revisit the topic of forgiveness...you forget about grace and you need to be reminded about forgiveness—I needed to be reminded about forgiveness toward my ex...” Another group member extended the comment by describing a related issue: “I think too, with that, forgiving myself for my part that I played in the whole thing and what it caused my kids.”

### Self-Esteem Renewal

Self-forgiveness touches on a related factor which causes many who go through separation or divorce to become emotionally unstable and vulnerable to rebound relationships: the devastating effect of spousal rejection on self-esteem. One participant expressed that an important learning in *DivorceCare* was “to value myself: that I’m not just a worthless person that

was discarded for somebody else.” Another explained, “I totally victimized myself and I think that I’m doing a little bit better on that...I feel like I’m a whole lot less emotional about it because I’ve been able to kind of deal with some of the emotions and work through them.” When asked what part of the course was most valuable, the participant responded, “I think the session on loneliness was my favorite, because that, I think, is the biggest challenge that I face a lot of the time is just being lonely and being sad...the most valuable thing that I took away from that lesson was that I’m vulnerable and that I need to treat myself as if I’m vulnerable, so some of the things that I did before when I was single, I can’t do those right now...” Recovering some of the positive self-regard lost in divorce not only enables individuals to practice self-care and be more comfortable as singles, it engenders confidence. As another participant expressed,

...buying your own house and all the things that I did not have to do when I was married...I’m learning myself...if something breaks I can at least I can find somebody who knows the answer...it’s empowering to know that you don’t have to rely on somebody to do something, you know? You can do it yourself.

#### Gospel Proclamation

The rising self-esteem of participants in the *DivorceCare* group did not seem to be due to denial or narcissism, but seemed to be the result of confrontation with the Christian Gospel. As one participant put it, “I’m fun to be with by myself. Before the course, I was kind of scared to spend time on my own, I guess, but I was really encouraged to spend time on my own and talk to God.” Among the first surprises expressed by participants in the group regarding the curriculum was “the amount of Biblical support behind it, and... many references in the book.” Asked how the group had affected her, the participant later explained, “I feel like I have a lot more inner strength, especially because of the verses that I had mentioned earlier that helped me deal with my feelings.” Another gushed about the group experience, “you just want good news, and it was

very helpful, very encouraging, inspiring, and awesome.”

Asked specifically what effect, if any, the course had on their relationships with God or the church, one participant stated, “It’s been just another constant reminder that I can’t do it on my own. I have to have the support of a church and the constant reassurance that God’s in control and so.” A second responded,

I’m just grateful, too, for His grace and forgiveness and love, unconditional love, because it’s a confusing time to go through and it takes a lot of time to heal. You just have to have Him to heal. I don’t know how people do it without Him and the encouragement when you read the Bible or go to church or hear a song or even those speakers on the video.

A third explained how the emphasis on God’s grace enabled her to sort out her emotions:

I didn’t know how to even start talking to God about it, but what *DivorceCare* has done for me is compartmentalize the trash, like: “Okay, this is recycling. This is anger. This is loneliness.” And then I was able to talk about those specific things one at a time to God because it was once a week that we were meeting so I felt like I had words to tell Him instead of just feelings that were overwhelmed.

Speaking specifically of the video presenters, a fourth participant stated,

I liked the emphasis on God and how He’s with you. They’re so deep in Scripture and you feel a greater closeness and relationship with each week and each reminder, each Scripture verse that they give. I think it’s so important because there’s a danger as you are going through all of this and this muck, there’s a danger of falling away, you know? It’s just so reassuring that He’s there and He walks with us in every aspect. I thought the course did an excellent job of keeping that foremost in thought.

The Gospel proclaimed in the group was not one of cheap grace, but of costly forgiveness through God’s own sacrifice, given as a free gift in Jesus Christ. Participants understood that God’s grace calls for a response of trusting obedience, as another participant pointed out:

Well, I’m grateful for His direction and also, I liked to learn that God’s will be done, not mine, because He knows the path. I don’t know the path, but ultimately His will is the way to go. That’s where I’ll find contentment, even if I don’t know if I want it at times. I’m like, “I want that!” and think that any kind of thing might do, but ultimately if I can just remember that God’s will be done, not mine, on the inside—when I start remembering inside things start unfolding.

The obedience that comes from trust in God's gracious love was expressed by one participant in relation to his congregation: "I've come to have a better understanding of how the church looks at divorce. I don't know that I really understand it yet, but I have a better understanding of it now." For another participant, the faith basis of *DivorceCare* found application in his family:

It's brought me a lot closer to God, and it's made me a better dad, probably. It's hard to say what I would have been like if we had stayed married, but I cherish the time I do have with my kids a lot more because I don't see them as much, and it's brought me closer to God, quite a bit. It's humbled me as a person.

#### Relationship Guidance

A final factor that participants cited as contributing to the effectiveness of the divorce recovery group experience was the opportunity to carefully consider the pros and cons of engaging in a new relationship. One participant noted that a perk of being single is "that it's fun meeting new people. Kind of starting over like a teenager." Yet the same participant appreciated the cautions in the *DivorceCare* presentations and discussions, explaining that

...it helped me to slow down a little bit and not feel rushed to look for another relationship...I feel like I'm being more attracted to healthier personalities now, rather than just outward appearance. I'm more attracted to spirituality and that's encouraging.

Another participant credited the group experience with bringing her to the realization "that you shouldn't marry someone that you're infatuated with; you have to wait for the infatuation to go away...I like to paint those red flags green! And I need to put down my paintbrush and examine them."

At the same time, she later expressed that "being single again can be fun. It can be an adventure and be an opportunity to relearn yourself and learn exactly what you're going to go for in your next relationship if you want one, or relearn your values and learn what was done to you



or you did that wasn't okay and to grow in that." The *DivorceCare* emphasis on living and relating to others by the grace of God rather than through one's own devices was affirmed by another participant, who concluded, "I learned that in a relationship it doesn't work and you have to give it to God because you're not in control."

### **Observations Regarding Participation: What Made the Group Viable?**

Although the focus group interview was prepared in order to formally evaluate the effectiveness of the group, an informal but rather obvious measure of group effectiveness became apparent during implementation of the project: participation. As is often said, "People vote with their feet." Before discussing the effectiveness as measured by the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale and as expressed in the focus group interview, it seems worthwhile to describe two factors mentioned in informal conversations which influenced participation in the group.

#### Effective Marketing

During the second group session, an informal poll of the seven participants revealed that one had heard about the group directly through advertisements within our congregation, while another had been encouraged to participate by family members who had learned of the group through congregational announcements. One member had been referred to us by a pastor who had received both our email and direct mailing regarding the group. One person had used the "Find a Group" search engine on the *DivorceCare* website at the urging of a friend who leads a grief support group. Another participant who later joined the group mentioned that she had seen the group both on the *DivorceCare* website and on our outdoor banner sign, though she was unsure which she had seen first. Surprisingly, three people had learned about the group through the targeted ads on the Google search page, which were nearly an afterthought! None of the

participants had learned of the group from announcements made at other churches, posters on community bulletin boards, radio station public service announcements, institutional referrals, Facebook, or Craigslist, though these are the means of promotion most often suggested by members of my congregation when advertising to our community is discussed.

### Effective Scheduling

Timing was also mentioned as a factor in participation, both by members who completed the group and by those who dropped out. Most participants in our group worked full time jobs and many had custody of their children at least half of the week, so meeting in the evening and on a day when they were not the custodial parent seemed to promote participation among those who completed the group. Of the four people who attended sessions but dropped out, two specifically described scheduling difficulties as the reasons for their departure. Of the two others, one described himself as “needing space” due to the immediacy of divorce proceedings, while the other claimed to be “being further down the road” in divorce recovery than the group.

### **Project Validity and Limitations: What Can We Conclude?**

As noted in chapter four, the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale has been used in hundreds of studies to measure divorce adjustment. It has been shown to have an Alpha Internal Reliability score of .98 for overall scores, indicating that individuals retaking the FDAS have an extremely high likelihood of achieving a similar score unless they have somehow changed in the interim. In addition, the FDAS demonstrates face validity, the recognition by test takers that the questions accurately reflect their experience; time validity, a consistency of scoring with changes that occur over time after a separation or divorce; and survey validity, a correlation with informal observations of seminar participants regarding their own sense of divorce adjustment.

The responses of participants in this project also supported these aspects of validity, as participants were enthusiastic about the experience of taking the FDAS, generally demonstrated improvement over time, and volunteered responses in the focus group interview which largely correlated with FDAS score results. In addition, favorable comparisons with the total average adjustment scores from a select group of published studies measuring divorce adjustment in groups using the FDAS would seem to confirm not only the FDAS as a valid measure of adjustment but the divorce recovery group at the center of this project as an effective instrument in encouraging the recovery of participants from the pain of divorce.

However, certain limitations in the scope of the project and the conclusions which may be drawn from it must be acknowledged. Several factors limited the research. First, the sample size in the project, though typical of many divorce recovery groups, was very small, raising the possibility that the results obtained were not representative. Although the experience was reported as effective by participants in helping them to heal from their divorce and separation experiences, the claim to effectiveness of the group will increase in validity as a larger number of people participate in the group over time.

Second, the pain and trauma being experienced by those who volunteered to participate in the divorce recovery group made the formation of a control group receiving minimal or no intervention unethical. Therefore, the project cannot be considered to be a controlled scientific experiment sufficient to isolate and prove that the curriculum, methods, or any of the factors reported by participants as helpful were those responsible for their improved divorce adjustment.

Third, the voluntary, self-selecting nature of the group likely biased it toward those most likely to take responsibility for their recovery by seeking help from others. While the group approach seemed to succeed with those willing to join and actively participate in the group, it

was not a random sample of the divorced population and no conclusion should be drawn regarding the effectiveness of forming such a group for those who are not willing to either take responsibility for their recovery or participate in a support group.

Further, the literature review and execution of the project both suggest that there are a great many variables influential in the divorce recovery of a particular individual. Gender, age, years married, initiator status, existing social support, religious beliefs, wealth, education, ethnicity, mental health, personality, and the presence of children are just a few of the factors thought to influence divorce recovery. Such factors are beyond the control of group facilitators, so as the fine print in advertising often warns, “results will vary.”

### **Project Strengths and Weaknesses: To What Extent Did We Succeed?**

The participants drawn to our first divorce recovery group were much more likely to be involved in a Christian church than would be a random sample of divorcees from the community. The obviously Christian content as described on the *DivorceCare* website and the location of the group on a Lutheran church campus may have made non-Christians hesitant to participate in the group, so the effectiveness of divorce recovery ministry as an avenue for sharing the Christian Gospel with complete unbelievers remains untested. Locating the group in a Christian church would be a strength in its convenience for Christians were it not an obstacle for non-Christians.

However, in many important ways the group succeeded in becoming a missional community. A clear strength of the project was that participants genuinely cared for one another, quickly forming a close-knit community centered on the redemption and hope offered in Christ. Deep, honest conversations occurred in response to the video presentations and accompanying studies that clarified Biblical views on the essential topics of forgiveness, salvation, self-worth,

relationships, and reconciliation with God as well as with each other. Several participants were not currently active in a church, yet they were able to experience genuine Christian care and measurable life transformation through the truth spoken in love. Group members expressed a willingness, and even eagerness, to invite and include non-Christian friends struggling with divorce to participate in the future as the group is repeated.

Unless the host church is very large or until enough participants have cycled through the group to refer an adequate number of new prospects, a weakness of developing a divorce recovery ministry is that it requires a significant amount of effort to advertise it in the community. The *DivorceCare* website is a helpful referral source with a high profile on internet search engines, but churches determined to develop a divorce recovery ministry will want to ensure that they invest adequately in electronic and new media advertising of their own.

On the other hand, once the marketing has succeeded in gathering participants for the group, a strength of divorce recovery ministry is the ease of using curricular resources now available. *DivorceCare*, in particular, provides not only helpful and engaging videos for discussion, but professional advertising resources, well written participant and leader's guides, online leadership resource pages, and an instructive leadership training video. The curriculum encourages divorce recovery as a ministry not only to divorced church members but through separated and divorced church members to members of the community on an ongoing basis by considering the needs of inexperienced leaders in the design of the materials.

A similar strength is the generally orthodox, Biblical approach the *DivorceCare* curriculum takes toward sensitive topics that are of great concern to separated and divorced people. Initial fears that the Reformed theological bias of its creators would require extensive revision of the curriculum, for example, proved unfounded. While a "sinner's prayer" and the

evangelistic portions of the videos and workbook are explicit, they also seem carefully worded to be acceptable for Christians coming from Lutheran and other orthodox theological perspectives. Likewise, the guidance given on marriage, divorce, remarriage, and reconciliation reflect a balanced, Biblically-conservative, compassionate, and consensus view of Christian doctrine. The approach of *DivorceCare* is very pastoral as the authors clearly recognize the devastation most divorced people are already suffering under the weight of sin and repeatedly offer the costly grace of Christ as remedy.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

As she sits in her usual place on the over-stuffed couch in the church youth room, the young woman is describing to her new friends how she can barely believe the progress she has made in the three months since she joined their divorce recovery group. Having grieved through her divorce with the support of others who have experienced similar pain, she feels that her heart is beginning to mend. She has resolved to forgive her ex-husband for his betrayal and has begun the process of letting go of her anger and hurt. Though she has come to recognize that her marriage will likely never be restored, she has begun to rebuild her life as a forgiven child of God, seeking to grow in faith and discernment through the trauma of her divorce experience. She is resolved to avoid any kind of rebound relationship and is instead focused on becoming a whole person, confident and comfortable as a single person, though hopeful that it might someday be God's will that she remarry.

Nearby, the single mother of three children smiles in response and shares her own sense of the progress she has made since the group began. Though convinced that she will probably never remarry, the young mother explains that she has come to a better acceptance of her situation and now feels more connected to the Christian community. She no longer feels so stigmatized by her divorce and is resolved to return to regular participation in a church so that both she and her children can be nurtured in their faith. Though her life as a single parent and busy professional continues to demand all the time and energy she can muster, she no longer feels isolated and alienated from God. She expresses gratitude for the support and strength she has felt in the divorce recovery group.

Up near the video projector, the pastor who has been facilitating the group smiles in appreciation and offers up a silent prayer of thanks to God for the work of the Holy Spirit in gathering and healing the members of the group. He remembers well his own first steps toward recovery and recognizes that through this ministry his own healing is continuing to take place. He exchanges glances across the room at his new wife, who is co-facilitating the group, and sees in her eyes the same gratitude that God has redeemed her own divorce experience by using it as a means for sharing the love and forgiveness of Christ with others who are desperate to hear it but disenfranchised by their own divorces.

### **Ministry Contributions: How Did the Project Affect the Congregation?**

The purpose of this project was to develop a divorce recovery ministry at Pilgrim Lutheran Church in Spokane, Washington that participants would find effective in helping to heal the emotional, social, and spiritual devastation of divorce. In doing so, it was hoped to also initiate meaningful, mutual relationships with community members, create opportunities to share the good news of Jesus Christ with those who need to hear it, provide a ministry to and for divorced members of the congregation, and increase perceptions in the community of the congregation as a valuable resource for not only our members, but our neighbors.

Without question, both the focus group responses and the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale increases indicated that the project achieved its primary purpose of establishing a divorce recovery ministry that the majority of participants found effective in helping them to heal from the personal devastation of divorce. In addition, meaningful, mutual relationships with community members were established, at least temporarily, which created opportunities to share the good news of Jesus Christ with those who needed to hear it. During the summer months



following the pilot group described in this project a group reunion was held, and in the fall the group began anew with two of the previous group members participating in order to continue their recovery and the relationships formed. One of those is a member of the congregation who has begun to see the recovery group not simply as meeting a personal need but as a place of ministry to others. The extent to which development and promotion of the new ministry has increased community perception of the congregation as a valuable resource is unknown, but informal conversations with participants in the second divorce recovery group seem to indicate that such is the case. In fact, three members of the second group discovered the group through the banner sign posted outside the church building, and a fourth member, who found the group on Craigslist, has become very enthusiastic about the group and its message despite initial trepidation setting foot inside a church due to “God issues.”

The development of an attractive, supportive, small group community that incarnates the love of Christ and introduces outsiders to the redemption found in Him was precisely the hoped-for contribution to the ministry of Pilgrim Lutheran Church. As the congregation plans to develop additional “missional groups” in the coming year, the divorce recovery group may serve as a model for other groups through its focus on a hurting and often overlooked population, its practice of listening to, caring for, and including people from all walks of life and religious backgrounds, its investment in advertising outside the congregation, and its emphasis on life change and healing through the good news of Jesus Christ. In addition, raising the profile of a group often stigmatized even within the Christian church may well serve to help the larger congregation become a more accepting, inclusive community.

### **Research Contributions: What Did the Project Add to the Field?**

The research component of the project specifically proposed, first, to describe the process of launching a divorce recovery group. A detailed description of this process is given in Chapter Four: The Project Developed. Second, it was intended to determine whether such a group could make a quantifiable difference in the divorce adjustment of participants. The Analysis portion of Chapter Five: The Project Evaluated describes how the results of the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale administered in the first and final sessions of the divorce recovery group seem to indicate a quantifiable improvement in the divorce adjustment of group participants that compares positively with other divorce recovery groups. Third, the research was designed to qualitatively examine how helpful various aspects of the divorce recovery group were found to be by participants. The Findings portion of Chapter Five describes participant responses to focus group questions indicating that particularly helpful aspects of the divorce recovery group were the social and emotional support other group members provided, the helpful information conveyed in the presentations and interpersonal exchanges, the facilitation of grief through identification and management of its component emotions, the restoration of hope through sharing of the message of Christian redemption and stories of personal recovery, the extension of forgiveness both within participants themselves and toward their former spouses, the renewal of self-esteem through the proclamation of the Gospel, and Biblical guidance regarding future relationships.

These findings have implications for the broader context of both theological and theoretical research. In the realm of theology, the project demonstrated the suitability of divorce recovery ministry in general, and the *DivorceCare* curriculum in particular, as compatible with Lutheran understandings of Biblical teachings regarding marriage, divorce, remarriage, and reconciliation. Further, divorce recovery ministry was demonstrated to be an effective extension of God's

mission to reconcile the world to Himself through the participation in and the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Rationale was given and specific steps in the development of such a ministry were described in order to encourage others to consider establishing a divorce recovery ministry as a missional outreach to the community through the members of their congregation.

In the realm of social science research, the project seemed to validate the effectiveness of a church based divorce recovery group in general, and the *DivorceCare* curriculum in particular, as facilitating divorce adjustment. In addition, participants identified social support, insightful information, grief facilitation, hope restoration, forgiveness extension, self-esteem renewal, and relationship guidance as specific factors they found effective in the curriculum. These factors can be compared with previously published studies identifying social support, insightful information, emotional expression, forgiveness extension, and hope restoration as factors common to effective divorce adjustment groups as validation and bases for further investigation.

An unexpected contribution of the project was some documentation of the development of divorce recovery ministry in American Christian churches. Unable to find any published history describing how church divorce recovery originated, I was fortunate to be able to interview Steve Grissom, founder of DivorceCare, and with his encouragement, two pioneers of divorce recovery ministry, Dr. Jim Talley and Dr. Bob Burns.

### **Personal Contributions: How Did the Project Promote Growth?**

The experience of conducting the project and creating a divorce recovery ministry has not only been beneficial for the congregation and for the larger context of ministry, but has made profound contributions to my own personal and professional growth. For one thing, it has promoted my own ongoing divorce recovery. Even six years after my divorce was final and three

years after my remarriage to a wonderful Christian woman, there are days I still struggle with the guilt, grief, and the stigma of having been divorced by my first wife. Sharing my story in the safe context of a divorce recovery group seems to decrease the alienation that I continue to feel, while helping others to overcome their own sense of stigmatization. Repeatedly working through the video presentations, discussions, and Bible studies reminds me that the feelings of sadness and occasional anger I continue to experience are not unique, but normal for those who have experienced the trauma of divorce. The regular reassurance of forgiveness and the hope of redemption through Christ Jesus which are deeply embedded in the divorce recovery curricula are not only essential for those new to the divorce experience, but for me as well. Even though I continue to struggle with the consequences of divorce, it no longer defines my life, but is now a reminder of the deliverance found through faith in Christ. I am grateful to God for using this ministry to redeem my own failure, and feel privileged to be able to pay forward the help I received from caring Christian friends when I myself was devastated.

The theological research necessitated by the project was also profoundly beneficial in requiring me to dig deeper into the texts and interpretive issues of Scripture regarding divorce, remarriage, and reconciliation. Although I had already studied many relevant passages and documents while going through my divorce and before deciding to remarry, I had also been confronted the week before my wedding by a fellow pastor who raised doubts about my objectivity and insisted that remarriage was not permitted unless the ex-spouse had remarried. Having re-examined both the texts and their historic interpretations over the course of this project, I am now more fully convinced of the Biblical permissibility of remarriage for those divorced against their will even if the ex-spouse has not yet remarried. At the same time, after further research into both Scriptural and social science literature I am even more adamantly

opposed to the initiation of divorce in all but the direst circumstances and more aware of the dangers of rebound relationships, which often result in the failure of subsequent marriages.

On a more positive note, I found research into divorce ministry as an extension of the *Missio Dei* to be tremendously encouraging. Divorce recovery ministry is, above all, about reconciliation of an individual's relationship with God and his or her ex-spouse, even when restoration of the marriage is impossible. In the process of convening, conversing with, caring for, and sharing counsel with divorcees, a missional community can be established through which the Holy Spirit is able to communicate the Gospel to even those outside the church at a time when they are already repentant and open to transformation. I find myself advocating for recovery ministries and considering how I can encourage more people in my congregation and church body to be involved in such missional group development.

Also, encouraging on a personal level was interaction with three pioneers in divorce recovery ministry. Steve Grissom, Jim Talley, and Bob Burns were each not only gracious in granting an extended telephone interview in order to describe the origins of divorce ministry, they were also each inspiring and insightful with regard to how God works to accomplish His mission even through our foibles and failures.

In addition to the personal growth experienced as a result of the project, I believe it has prompted significant professional growth. Not only have I increased my knowledge base regarding Scriptural and social science research into divorce, recovery, and remarriage, but I have developed the skills necessary to initiate and facilitate a recovery group. Leading the group sessions has required an improvement in listening skills, flexibility, patience, and the ability to guide the meeting through encouraging questions and responses.

I have also sharpened my skills in and understanding of the application of theological and

theoretical research to the practice of ministry in my congregation. As I consider initiating new ministries in the future, I anticipate using much the same process as that used in this project: developing a clear statement of the problem and purpose, designing the project, establishing an evaluative measure, researching the theological and theoretical bases of the proposal, implementing the process, and analyzing the results with regard to their contributions to my congregation, community, and church body.

### **Future Recommendations: Where Do We Go from Here?**

The success of this project in developing an ongoing divorce recovery ministry that was determined to be effective both by the focus group feedback of participants and by the more quantifiable improvement in Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale scores over the course of the group's duration argues strongly for its replication in other congregations. As noted in the introduction, divorce is not only emotionally devastating and socially alienating, but often spiritually destructive to members of the Christian church. Confronted with the heart-breaking failure of their marriage, divorcees are often stigmatized and abandoned by their support network at the moment of their greatest need, causing many to be bitter toward God and His people.

Yet this project has also demonstrated that such trauma can serve as an opportunity for the Gospel to be communicated through the redemptive message and caring community of a divorce recovery group. The development of video based recovery curricula enables any church to develop such a group with the investment of a few hundred dollars and the commitment of a few devoted leaders. The group need not be led by the pastor, but is probably best served by male and female co-facilitators who have themselves sufficiently recovered from divorces, with the pastor's blessing and support.

The findings of this project that participants particularly valued the emotional and social support, relevant information conveyed in presentations and personal exchanges, the expression of raw emotions, the restoration of hope and self-esteem through the message of Christ's redemption and personal recovery, encouragement toward forgiveness, and Biblical guidance regarding relationships may well serve to inform the development of other missional groups. Given the success of the project in our congregation, consideration is being given to the establishment of similar missional communities centered on such concerns as parenting, financial recovery, and grieving the death of a loved one.

The longitudinal impact of the divorce recovery ministry in this study was not measured, so questions recommended for future research include whether participants continue to improve over time, whether they seek out formal social groups for continued support, whether those who were alienated from the Christian church become more likely to join a church as a result of their experience in a divorce recovery ministry, and whether the church can effectively follow up the divorce recovery group by encouraging unchurched participants to continue on in a more general, missional small group. Also, admittedly, the sample size in this project was small, so continued administration of the FDAS over time to successive groups or across all of the *DivorceCare* groups in a metropolitan area would provide a larger sample to confirm the validity of the curriculum in promoting divorce adjustment. Statistical analysis, not a part of this project, might then be worthwhile.

Another question which arose in this project that would be worth investigating is whether, given the increasingly negative perception of Christian churches among the unchurched in this and similar communities, establishment of a *DivorceCare* group in a more neutral, public place such as a school or the back room of a coffee shop might draw more interest from outside of the

Christian church. Presentation of the extended sample session *Surviving the Holidays*, produced by Church Initiative for use in drawing more participants to *DivorceCare* sessions after the emotional Christmas and New Year's holidays, might serve as the basis for comparing attendance in public versus parochial settings.

In any event, it is the strong recommendation of the author of this study that Lutheran churches who are looking for an effective means of extending the mission of God to include an overlooked population of hurting people in their congregation and community should consider development of an effective, video-based divorce recovery ministry. The stories of participants will be heart breaking, but the message of reconciliation and redemption through Jesus Christ, the Healer of Broken Hearts, will be life changing for everyone involved.



## APPENDIX ONE

### COMPARATIVE THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF VIDEO CURRICULA AND SUGGESTED ADAPTATIONS: *LIFE AFTER DIVORCE* OR *DIVORCECARE*?

Having themselves experienced the pain of divorce, in 1993, Steve and Cheryl Grissom developed the video-based divorce recovery curriculum *DivorceCare*®, which has been used in some form by 18,000 congregations and was recently released in a third edition.<sup>11</sup> In 2005, the American Association of Christian Counselors copyrighted its own video-based divorce recovery curriculum, *Life After Divorce*, which is promoted among the nearly 50,000 members of the organization, though the number of congregations offering this alternative is unknown. The two curricula are very similar: both were produced in the southeastern United States; both feature teaching by experts on divorce recovery interspersed with the testimonies of those who have experienced the effects of divorce; both are designed for use in a small support group; both include leader guides and either worksheets or a workbook for participants; both assume familiarity with Christianity, if not prior church involvement on the part of participants; and both come from an Evangelical, Reformed theological perspective.

The last two similarities pose significant challenges for a Lutheran intending to initiate a video-based support group in a state where the dominant religious affiliation is “none” and the limited resources of a small congregation preclude the creation of a divorce recovery curriculum “from scratch.” Therefore, this analysis intends to compare the theological issues raised by the two curricula to Lutheran teachings in order to identify the curricular adaptations necessary for use by a Lutheran congregation attempting to develop a video-based divorce recovery group.

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<sup>11</sup> “Our History” accessed November 6, 2015. <http://www.divorcecare.org/startagroup/about/history>.

Though strikingly similar, the topics covered by the two curricula do vary slightly:

<u><i>Life After Divorce</i> Sessions:</u>	<u><i>DivorceCare</i> Sessions:</u>
1. Early Emotions	1. What's Happening to Me?
2. Moving Toward Acceptance	2. The Road to Healing and Help
3. Moving Through Grief and Loss	3. Facing My Anger
4. Stages of Grief	4. Facing My Depression
5. Releasing the Pain and Bitterness	5. Facing My Loneliness
6. Forgiving the Unforgivable	6. What Does the Owner's Manual Say?
7. Building a New Life	7. New Relationships
8. Five Keys to Starting Over	8. Financial Survival
9. Barriers to New Relationships	9. Kid Care
10. Finding New Relationships	10. Single Sexuality
11. Children and Divorce	11. Forgiveness
12. Supporting Children through Divorce	12. Reconciliation
	13. Moving On, Growing Closer to God

The *Life After Divorce* curriculum offers two sessions on helping children through divorce, while the *DivorceCare* series focuses on children in only one session, but includes an important and practical session on financial survival. The video presentations for these sessions contain little theological content apart from encouragement to entrust to God both the parenting and the financial struggles inherent in divorce. Recurring theological issues are addressed by the other sessions in both curricula, however. These can be summarized as three questions of great importance and interest to divorcees: How can Christian faith help a person heal from the traumatic emotional injuries of divorce? To what extent must forgiveness and reconciliation with a former spouse be accomplished for spiritual health? And, under what circumstances may a person rightly pursue new relationships which could lead to remarriage?

### **Faith and Emotional Healing**

Both curricula focus primarily on emotional healing from the traumatic injuries of divorce, the need common to believers and unbelievers that makes divorce recovery groups a promising

avenue of outreach for churches. Both also feature interviews which take for granted belief in God, acceptance of Scripture's authority, and church attendance, tendencies which seem likely to undermine the effectiveness of the courses in outreach to unchurched, post-modern unbelievers. Yet neither consistently makes clear how faith in Christ aids in emotional healing beyond providing moral wisdom and good examples.

The *Life After Divorce* series features lengthy teaching sessions in which prominent Christian psychologists describe emotional healing from a theoretical perspective, with heavy emphasis on the "stages of grief" popularized by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. In the first session, Dr. Thomas Whiteman encourages viewers to honestly confront the pain of divorce, and the accompanying worksheet assures them that "because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail." (Lam. 3:22). However, no context is provided for this or any other of the Scriptures cited to explain the necessity of repentance and forgiveness, so such promises are without the potency of grace. The workbook goes on to quote Whiteman and Peterson from the book *Fresh Start*:

This business of getting a fresh start can be hard work. The good news is that God does most of it; he will work miracles that will leave us amazed. But he invites us to work along with him. We need to take responsibility for seeking our own wholeness and the wholeness of our relationships.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Whiteman and Randy Peterson, *Fresh Start*, quoted in the *Life After Divorce Workbook* (Forest, VA: American Association of Christian Counselors, 2005), 12.

Clearly Whiteman has in mind cooperation with God's Spirit in the process of sanctification, but the wholeness he describes is impossible without an understanding of the justification provided by Christ. The second session concludes with a divorcee describing an Easter service in which the pastor had congregants think of the most traumatic, destructive event their lives, then compare it to Jesus' resurrection, asking: "Is it at all possible that God will take your worst moment and turn it into His greatest triumph in your life?" In this way, Whiteman and the producers use Christ's death and resurrection as an example of God's ability to bring triumph from tragedy, yet never explain that Christ's passion was more than an example: that in providing forgiveness of sins and a new, eternal life for us, Jesus was providing the means by which we can be honest about our failures, trust in God's redemption, and experience new life in His Spirit. Whiteman makes a similar move when he quotes Paul, "I have learned to be content in all circumstances," but fails to share Paul's insight into the secret of such contentment: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Phil. 4:12) A clear explanation of soteriology would greatly enhance the intended comfort and encouragement for divorcees struggling not only with grief, but with guilt and alienation from God. Similarly, an explanation of eschatology, Christian belief in God's righteous judgment and the remaking of heaven, earth, our physical bodies, and our relationship with God following Jesus' return would seem to be an important source of hope to discuss with those struggling to overcome the anger and depression involved in grief.

In contrast to *Life After Divorce*, the *DivorceCare* curriculum is much more overtly evangelistic. At the beginning of the participant workbook is a five-page graphic presentation titled "The Foundation for Healing: A Personal Relationship with Jesus Christ," which contends that in order to be healed one must surrender to Jesus as personal Lord and Savior through faith.

Participants are repeatedly directed to these pages in the video presentations, and in the final session Steve Grissom instructs viewers to close their eyes and pray with him the sample “prayer of faith” from the presentation.

While Grissom’s evangelistic emphasis is admirable, his approach often comes across as preachy, simplistic, and confusing, particularly with regard to Law and Gospel. For example, in the second session Ecc. 3:1–8 is quoted to support the need for time to recover, as Grissom asserts that God is patient, and if we try to rush through grief we may miss the maturing God desires to produce. However, that message of comfort is turned into law as he states, “God wants the best from us, not just the best for us.” Although viewers are encouraged to find their identity in being a child of God, Grissom gives no explanation of what that means, and even seems to contradict it with statements such as “Our character is the sum of the choices we have made.” Similarly, the final speaker in session two urges divorcees to rest in the arms of God and reach a place where they can look back to see God’s work in their lives for good, yet Jesus’ words, “come to me and I will give you rest” are interpreted to mean that “He will challenge you to do what He wants to you to do so that you can experience joy in the future.”

Such confusion of law and gospel is unfortunate, as there are times, such as at the end of the third session, when Grissom does explain the need for all people, as fallen sinners, to be reconciled to God through the cross of Christ, avoiding what otherwise would have been a moralistic and self-righteous tone. Also, the “On My Own” daily Bible studies in the DivorceCare workbook are structured around the main points of each week’s video, helping to explain some of the Scripture references and delving more deeply into how the redemption that comes through faith in Christ can serve as the basis for emotional healing and spiritual growth. The study accompanying session three, for example, helpfully employs Eph. 4:26–27 and

passages from Proverbs to warn against sin and encourage positive outlets for anger. Better yet, it quotes Rom. 12:19 and 2 Thes. 1:6 to assure readers that God will avenge injustice. Best of all, it quotes Gal. 5:16 to indicate God's Spirit as the source of strength to resist seeking revenge and other sins that often accompany anger.

Such Biblically referenced explanations are reassuring, since Lutheran Christians understand the need for God's initiative in both justification and sanctification. As Luther wrote,

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way, He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth...<sup>13</sup>

The language of "The Foundation for Healing: A Personal Relationship with Jesus Christ" in the *DivorceCare Participant Workbook* emphasizes "surrender to Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior," reflecting the curriculum's origins in an evangelical church. Yet *DivorceCare* aspires to be a resource for all denominations, so it seems carefully worded to avoid alienating other confessions by suggesting that such surrender is possible apart from faith and the work of the Holy Spirit through God's Word:

The first step is to believe that Jesus is God's only Son and that He died to pay the price for your sins (the things that you have done wrong). "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). After believing this, you need to turn control of your life over to Jesus. In effect, He becomes the center of your life. He can stabilize your life's orbit.<sup>14</sup>

The role of the Holy Spirit is not always made explicit, but it is mentioned far more often in *DivorceCare* than in the *Life After Divorce* curriculum, and Bible references extend beyond

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986), 15.

<sup>14</sup> Steve Grissom, *Divorce Care Participant Workbook* (Wake Forest, NC: Church Initiative, 2004), xiii.

moral examples to provide reassurance of forgiveness in Christ, motivation through His Gospel, and empowerment through the Holy Spirit.

### **Forgiveness and Reconciliation**

Both curricula clearly and consistently describe divorce as contrary to God's will. Both also insist that recovery requires forgiveness of one's ex-spouse, regardless of whether repentance is evident, and encourage participants to pursue reconciliation with their ex-spouses to the extent it may be possible.

In *Life After Divorce*, however, little mention is made of the need to seek God's forgiveness regarding one's personal contributions toward the failure of the marriage. Instead, Dr. David Stoop spends the fifth and sixth sessions describing forgiveness of one's ex-spouse as a matter of freeing oneself from the consequences of bitterness. Stoop uses God's forgiveness of humanity as a model and quotes Scripture to debunk several myths regarding forgiveness: that it must be quick, that it condones the offense or minimizes the damage done, and that it requires forgetting or reconciling. Such insights into forgiveness are helpful, but when Stoop contends that Jesus says to forgive for our sake and describes forgiveness as a gift we give to ourselves, he neglects the powerful motivation provided by the Christian Gospel: we forgive the debts we owe each other, no matter how painful, because God in Christ forgave us an unimaginably greater debt (Matt. 18:21–35). As Paul wrote, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Eph. 4:32)

A contrasting approach is taken by the *DivorceCare* curriculum, in which the sixth session is so straightforward regarding the sinful nature of divorce that it risks the alienation of unbelievers. "What Does the Owner's Manual Say?" describes divorce as a betrayal of the

covenant relationship of marriage and a sundering of the one flesh union which God has established to illustrate the union of Christ and the Church. Steve Grissom flatly states that incompatibility and irreconcilable differences are Biblically unacceptable grounds for divorce, explaining that only sexual unfaithfulness and abandonment, which have already broken the marriage, are justifiable ground for divorce in God's eyes. Fortunately, Grissom follows up his explicit statements of God's Law with explicit statements of the Gospel.

If your spouse divorces you for unbiblical reasons, it is not your fault or responsibility. If you have done everything you can, you do not need to seek forgiveness. You can only take responsibility for your own sins. If your conscience is still troubled, you can confess what you did wrong during the marriage and trust that God will forgive you.<sup>15</sup>

Even if the divorce was obtained for unbiblical reasons, Grissom gives hope that God forgives for Jesus' sake and urges acceptance of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf. Then he advises divorcees to seek the forgiveness of those who have been hurt by the divorce, including their ex-spouse. If possible, he urges that reconciliation should be sought; if not, he counsels them to fix what can be fixed and move on.

*DivorceCare* devotes its eleventh session to the forgiveness of ex-spouses motivated by an awareness of God's forgiveness. Divorcees who are struggling to forgive themselves are encouraged to recognize that God has forgiven them and are urged to trust His perfect judgment rather than their own feelings. However, that confidence is undermined by a voice-over insisting that forgiveness is accomplished by verbally asking for it:

Forgiving others is an event and a process. The same is true when it comes to receiving God's forgiveness. We all need to be able to look back at a time, an event, where we've prayed to God and admitted that we haven't been perfectly obedient to

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<sup>15</sup> Steve Grissom, "What Does the Owner's Manual Say?" *Divorce Care*, Session 6, (Wake Forest, NC: Church Initiative, 2015).



him. That event should also include a moment where you believe that Jesus suffered and died in your place, taking the punishment that you deserved for disobeying God. Finally, that event should include a commitment on your part to live according to what Jesus taught. That event makes you a Christian...<sup>16</sup>

From a Lutheran perspective, such a focus is misdirected: it is not the event of our believing that reassures us, but the event of Christ's sacrifice on the cross for us, which we gratefully believe and to which we respond. Conspicuously missing is any mention of baptism or communion, the marks by which the Christian church is known and events Christ explicitly commended to His followers so that they might have objective assurance of God's grace and acceptance into His family. The omission is not surprising given *DivorceCare*'s ecumenical aspirations, but the substitution of a verbal prayer, moment of recognition, or commitment to repentance reflects a distinctively Reformed theology and ignores the very acts by which Christ Himself defined His disciples.

Following the session on forgiveness, *DivorceCare* devotes its twelfth session to steps that could lead to reconciliation in whatever form is possible with one's former spouse. Steve Grissom makes clear that though reconciliation is always God's will, restoration of the marriage may not be possible. In some cases, a friendship may be possible, while in others civility may be the most that can be achieved. In any event, the Bible studies for the session make a case for Christians to take the initiative in reconciliation with their spouses in response to God's initiating our reconciliation, though the suggested motivation is that of the Law: what divorcees "should" do in order to imitate God. A more helpful focus would be the restoration of God's intention for relationships made possible through His forgiveness and the future He is preparing. True, those

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<sup>16</sup> Grissom, *DivorceCare*, Session 11.

who believe they did no wrong in their marriage are appropriately confronted with God's Law and ought to consider their own self-deception. However, it seems reasonable to assume that the majority of those participating in a divorce recovery group are already feeling remorse and a desire for restoration to whatever extent is possible. More emphasis on the new life made possible by Christ and the empowering guidance of the Holy Spirit would provide much needed hope for those who feel that their situation is hopeless.

### **Dating Relationships and Remarriage**

Though Christian churches vary in their teachings regarding the Biblical permissibility of divorce and remarriage, both curricula take positions that are faithful to Scripture and consistent with a Lutheran understanding of the issues. Both curricula affirm God's intention that marriage be a lifelong union in which a man and a woman are united as one flesh, citing Jesus' words: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So, they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." (Matt. 19:5-6) Both also, therefore, describe divorce as always destructive and contrary to God's will for marriage.

However, both also acknowledge that adultery breaks the one flesh union of marriage by introducing a third party. Therefore, both recognize the exception stated by Jesus: "And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." (Matt. 19:9) As the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations puts it: "When a spouse commits fornication (i.e., is guilty of sexual unfaithfulness), which breaks the unity of the marriage, the offended party who endures such unfaithfulness has the right, though

not the command, to obtain a legal divorce and remarry.”<sup>17</sup>

In addition, both curricula recognize abandonment as a second circumstance in which divorce is Biblically permissible because the bond of marriage has already been permanently broken, based on the words of Paul:

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. . . . 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. (1 Cor. 7:12–15)

The CTCR likewise acknowledges abandonment as a reason divorce may be righteously pursued, explaining that “a spouse who has been willfully and definitively abandoned by his/her partner who refuses to be reconciled and is unwilling to fulfill the obligations of the marriage despite persistent persuasion may seek a legal divorce, which in such case constitutes a legal recognition of a marriage already broken, and remarry.”<sup>18</sup>

As described above, *DivorceCare* is explicit in stating that sexual unfaithfulness and abandonment are the only Biblical grounds for divorce and in calling for repentance so that forgiveness may be obtained by those who have divorced for any other reasons. *Life After Divorce*, while describing divorce as generally contrary to God’s will, focuses on recovery without specifically calling for repentance in the case of Scripturally unmerited divorces.

Regarding the permissibility of remarriage, the *Life After Divorce Workbook* defers to the doctrines of whatever church body is offering the course, but devotes sessions to new relationships and sexuality in the expectation that most divorcees will consider remarriage.

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<sup>17</sup> “Divorce and Remarriage: An Exegetical Study,” (St. Louis: The Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1987), 38.

<sup>18</sup> “Divorce and Remarriage: An Exegetical Study,” 38.

Similarly, *DivorceCare* devotes its sixth session to new relationships and its tenth session to single sexuality, recognizing that the vast majority of divorcees will enter into new relationships, and two thirds will remarry. Both curricula warn against sexual intercourse outside marriage and debunk the excuses divorcees often offer to justify engaging in it. The motivation for celibacy in both is surprisingly Gospel oriented and consonant with a Lutheran understanding of sex as a gift. As Bobbie Reed puts it, “In defining our sexuality, God gave us the standard of celibacy outside of marriage and faithfulness within marriage because He knows that is how we can best enjoy His gift to us.”<sup>19</sup>

While the *Life After Divorce* sessions emphasizes the psychological pitfalls of post-divorce dating relationships, the *DivorceCare* videos emphasize the spiritual recovery necessary for successful relationships and, when permissible, remarriage. In order to allow time for complete recovery, reconciliation with one’s spouse, and perhaps even the restoration of one’s marriage, both curricula recommend that divorcees wait for a period of time after their divorce is finalized, generally at least a year, before dating or developing new, potentially romantic opposite sex relationships. *DivorceCare* in particular makes clear that premature dating detracts from and delays the journey of healing, while the emotional demands of recovery prevent recent divorcees from making wise relationship decisions. For example, in the devastating loneliness of divorce, selfishness often fuels a desperate desire for a dating relationships in which individuals demand rather than giving love, and those who date out of desperation tend to bring the same dysfunctions to relationship after relationship. In addition, *DivorceCare* contends that waiting until one is healed often results in one being drawn to a different kind of person. The

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<sup>19</sup> Reed, *Life After Divorce*, 167.

Commission on Theology and Church Relations also warns against rushing into remarriage when restoration of one's first marriage is still possible. In addition, it warns against remarriage without evidence of genuine repentance in the case of those who divorced without Biblical grounds:

In cases of the remarriage of persons divorced for reasons not Biblically sanctioned, true repentance would presuppose a genuine desire to reconcile with one's estranged spouse.... There are circumstances, however, where reconciliation and restoration of a broken marriage simply are not possible, either because the former spouse has remarried or is unwilling to be reconciled. In such cases remarriage becomes a possibility. Considerable caution must be exercised by pastors, however, lest what may be considered possible under exceptional circumstances come to be interpreted as license to disregard God's will in this regard. By no means may encouragement be given to go on sinning "that grace may abound." (Rom. 6:1-2)<sup>20</sup>

With such similar teachings on dating, sexuality, remarriage, forgiveness, reconciliation, and the role of faith in emotional healing, either series could be used by a Lutheran congregation to form a divorce recovery group, provided that the facilitator were able to clarify the cross of Christ as the focus of faith and sort out some confusion of Law with Gospel. In fact, both could be strengthened through a Lutheran emphasis on Christ's death as expiatory rather than just exemplary, offering the divorcee not only forgiveness, but a new life motivated by the Gospel and empowered by the Holy Spirit. However, of the two, *DivorceCare* would seem the easiest to adapt, given its more explicit discussions of theological issues and well written accompanying Bible studies.

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<sup>20</sup> "Divorce and Remarriage: An Exegetical Study," 41.

## **Suggested *DivorceCare* Curricular Adaptation**

### **Session 1 “What’s Happening to Me?”**

Without dismissing the evangelistic emphasis prominent in the videos and workbook, care will need to be taken to explain the recovery group purposes and format in a way that includes unchurched unbelievers. The open-ended questions and facilitation guidelines in the leaders’ workbook should prove helpful in affirming participant emotions and allowing them to question or disagree with assertions in the video.

### **Session 2 “The Road to Healing”**

If the video or prior week’s Bible studies prompt discussion of the relationship between Christian faith and healing, further explanation may be required regarding the healing that comes, not just from imitating the example of Christ, but from experiencing God’s forgiveness and redemption through Christ.

### **Session 3 “Facing My Anger”**

Rather than quizzing participants regarding the prior week’s “On My Own” study, asking open ended questions regarding any learnings from it and summarizing the big ideas seems more likely to include and encourage those who are not yet open to Bible study. It also may be helpful to emphasize God’s justice and the power of His Spirit to overcome anger over the Biblical warnings against sinning through anger.

### **Session 4 “Facing My Depression”**

The emphasis on Christ’s incarnation and rejection as the basis for belief in God’s sympathy may need explanation, especially for those outside Christianity and those severely depressed.

### **Session 5 “Facing My Loneliness”**

Since this session really pushes the evangelistic presentation and makes assertions such as “it’s a

choice to worship God rather than our feelings,” the facilitator may have to explain the Christian assertions and accommodate the needs of those not already integrated into the Christian faith so that a relationship may be built through which they can come to faith. In particular, rather than emphasizing the power of the will, an explanation of how God’s Spirit enables the response of faith would seem helpful.

### **Session 6 “What Does the Owner’s Manual Say?”**

This session is likely to raise questions and create hard feelings regarding the legitimacy of various grounds for divorce. The title could be changed to “Facing My Guilt” in keeping with prior session titles in order to de-emphasize the inadequate manual metaphor for Scripture and more accurately describe the felt need addressed. It may also be helpful to preface the video by acknowledging the variety of responses to divorce among Christians and explaining the video as a means of understanding why the reaction is so varied.

### **Session 7 “New Relationships”**

If the issue of remarriage was not raised in the last session, it undoubtedly will in this one. A clear explanation of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation may be a helpful addition.

### **Session 8 “Financial Survival”**

The emphasis on finding contentment in Christ is helpful, and no adaptation seems needed.

### **Session 9 “Kid Care”**

The emphases on entrusting children to God and responsible parenting seem to require no adaptation.

### **Session 10 “Single Sexuality”**

The emphasis on sexual purity is balanced by an explanation of forgiveness in Christ, but could be bolstered by an explanation of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and the means of grace.

**Session 11 “Forgiveness”**

Since this session focuses assurance of our forgiveness on the event of making a verbal commitment to God, an important adaptation will be redirecting the focus onto the death and resurrection of Christ, into which we are invited to be baptized, and the assurance that comes with the means of grace.

**Session 12 “Reconciliation”**

The facilitator will need to walk a fine line in this session, encouraging reconciliation to the greatest extent possible and avoiding legalism even while explaining the need for repentance.

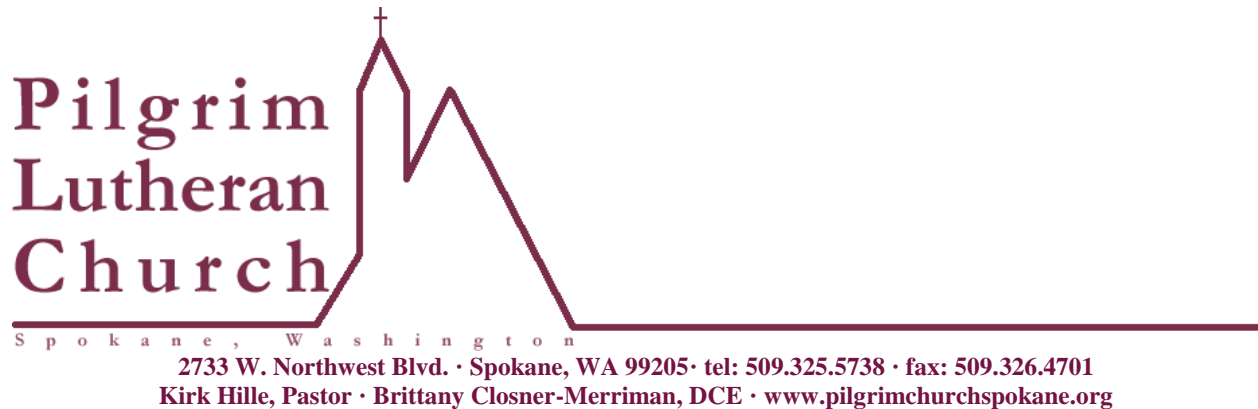
**Session 13 “Moving On”**

In this session, viewers are urged to close their eyes and pray the “sinner’s prayer.” Most of what follows is a commercial for ministry involvement. It may be best to stop the video ahead of these and begin the final discussion, letting participants draw their own conclusions regarding next steps in recovery.



## APPENDIX TWO

### ADVERTISING LETTER TO LOCAL CHURCHES



February 5, 2016

#### **DIVORCECARE SEMINAR/SUPPORT GROUP BEGINS FEBRUARY 22<sup>nd</sup>**

Dear friends,

Enclosed are brochures and a flyer describing the DivorceCare seminar/support group our congregation will be hosting on Monday nights, 6:30-8:30, beginning February 22. We would appreciate your help in getting the word out about this new ministry by including it in your church announcements. Also, if you know of anyone who might benefit from the program, we would appreciate your sharing the material with him or her. We have additional brochures available if you need them.

DivorceCare is a Christian video seminar series featuring some of the nation's foremost experts on divorce and recovery topics. The video seminars are combined with support group discussion of the materials presented in the videos. Childcare is provided for children through fifth grade. Participants can sign up on our website, [www.pilgrimchurchspokane.org](http://www.pilgrimchurchspokane.org), under the "What We Do" tab.

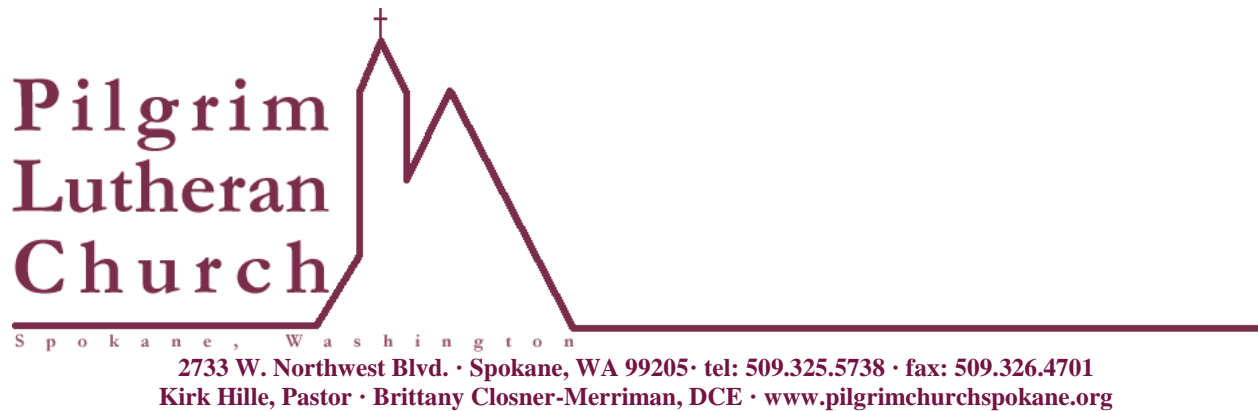
Please feel free to call me at 325-5738 if you have any questions or would like more information about our DivorceCare seminars.

Thank you so much!

Kirk Hille, pastor  
Pilgrim Lutheran Church

*A congregation of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod*

## ADVERTISING LETTER TO LOCAL SCHOOLS



February 5, 2016

### **DIVORCECARE SEMINAR/SUPPORT GROUP BEGINS FEBRUARY 22<sup>nd</sup>**

Dear friends,

Enclosed are brochures and a flyer describing the DivorceCare seminar/support group our congregation will be hosting on Monday nights, 6:30-8:30, beginning February 22<sup>nd</sup>. We are reaching out to you because the program includes a special section on helping children through divorce that we feel would benefit some of the families you serve.

If you feel it appropriate, we would appreciate your help in getting the word out about this new opportunity by including it in your communications with parents. Also, if you know of anyone who might benefit from the program, we would appreciate your sharing the material with him or her. We have additional brochures available if you need them.

DivorceCare is a 13 week video seminar series featuring some of the nation's foremost experts on divorce and recovery topics. The video seminars are combined with support group discussion of the materials presented in the videos. Childcare is provided for children through fifth grade. Participants can sign up on our website, [www.pilgrimchurchspokane.org](http://www.pilgrimchurchspokane.org), under the "What We Do" tab or by calling our office.

Please feel free to contact me at 325-5738 if you have any questions or would like more information about our DivorceCare seminars.

Kirk Hille, pastor  
Pilgrim Lutheran Church

*A congregation of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod*

## APPENDIX THREE

### DIVORCE RECOVERY GROUP GUIDELINES

#### **SHARE**

There is no requirement to talk or share in the group, though we will be encouraged to do so.

#### **LISTEN**

When someone else is speaking, we will focus on what that person is saying in order to learn from and support that person. We understand that good listening builds relationships.

#### **BE SENSITIVE**

Those of us who are naturally outgoing will make sure we don't dominate the group. Those who are introverted will make an effort to participate. We will respect our differences.

#### **BE WELL MANNERED**

We will be polite and positive, not only when speaking about each other, but when speaking of our exes, in order to keep the group a safe, warm, healing, and encouraging experience.

#### **MAINTAIN CONFIDENTIALITY**

In order to encourage trust and openness within the group, we will not talk about things we hear from other members of the group with those who are outside the group.

#### **NO DATING WITHIN THE GROUP**

Recognizing that the purpose of this group is to help, support, heal, grow, and recover, we will not date other group members, which could harm us as individuals and as a group.

#### **BE ON TIME FOR MEETINGS**

Knowing that our schedules, traffic, and other issues can delay us, we will attempt to arrive before the group starts so that we will not disrupt the meeting by arriving late.

**I commit to these guidelines and will do my best to make this group a positive and healing experience for everyone who participates.**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Emergency Contact Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX FOUR

### DIVORCE RECOVERY GROUP SESSION OUTLINES

#### Divorce Care Session 1: What's Happening to Me?

- 6:15 Arrivals:** 1) Name Tags 2) Guidelines & Workbooks 3) Refreshments
- 6:30 Welcome:** 1) Introduction
- A) Divorce Story
  - B) Facilitator Role
  - C) Doctoral Research
  - D) Divorce Care: video seminar, support group, workbook exercise
- 2) Co-Facilitator and Other Participant Introductions
- 3) Group Guidelines
- 6:50 FDAS:** 1) Measure Current Adjustment
- 2) Measure Adjustment Progress
- 3) Contribute to Divorce Recovery Research
- 7:10 Begin DVD** Time 39 minutes—note outline on page 1 of workbook!
- 7:50 Break**
- 8:00 Discussion:** 1) What idea or suggestion from the video was most/least helpful to you?
- 2) How have you experienced 'energy loss' with separation or divorce?
- 3) Did the video make you rethink any expectations life right now? How?
- 4) With whose story from the video could you most identify? Why?
- 8:30 Closing:** 1) Encouragement: Invite Others!
- 2) Next Week: What Helps/Hinders Healing?
- 3) Prayer Requests

## **Divorce Care Session 2: Finding Help**

- 6:15 Arrivals:** 1) Name Tags 2) Guidelines & Workbooks 3) Refreshments
- 6:30 Welcome:** Introductions for Newcomers (Facilitator, Video/Discussion/Workbook)
- 6:45 On My Own:** 1) What did you find helpful in the workbook exercises? Why?  
2) Have you found yourself praying more than before your separation?  
3) If so, what have your prayers been like?
- 6:55 Big Ideas:** 1) Separation and divorce reduce emotional energy and mental capacity  
2) Finding safe people to process the experience with is important  
3) God can handle honest prayers—and in fact prefers them!  
4) There is hope for your future  
5) God has not abandoned you
- 7:00 Video** Time 41 minutes
- 7:41 Break!**
- 7:50 Discussion:** 1) Which part of the video was most helpful to you today?  
2) What feelings stand out in your ‘tangled ball of emotions’?  
3) What significant losses are you feeling the need to grieve?  
4) What is the next step in processing your grief?  
5) What are ways you are personally tempted to numb the pain?  
6) How can you avoid letting your divorce become your identity?
- 8:15 FDAS:** 1) Return and explain FDAS charts  
2) Encourage new participants to take the FDAS  
3) Prayer Requests  
4) Next Week: Facing My Anger

### **Divorce Care Session 3: Facing My Anger**

- 6:15 Arrivals:** 1) Name Tags 2) Guidelines & Workbooks 3) Refreshments
- 6:30 Welcome:** Introductions for Newcomers (Facilitator, Video/Discussion/Workbook)
- 6:45 On My Own:** 1) Last week we talked of divorce not defining us. How are you defined?  
2) Why does God urge us to think of what is true, noble, right, pure etc.?  
3) What are some ways you can experience more of God's presence?
- 6:55 Big Ideas:** 1) God is able and willing to heal broken hearts  
2) God gives us His words so we can know the truth  
3) God values you as a beloved child  
4) God loves you even when you feel unlovable  
5) God is able to be with you at all times
- 7:00 Video** Time 40 minutes
- 7:40 Break!**
- 7:50 Discussion:** 1) ICEBREAKER: What's a pet peeve of yours when driving?  
2) How did the video change your understanding of anger?  
3) What is your style of expressing anger? Is it healthy or unhealthy?  
4) What could help you control or express your anger appropriately?  
5) How could you better deal with anger coming from others?  
6) Given that anger can be good or bad, what will you do differently?
- 8:15 Close:** 1) Workbook cover exercises  
2) Prayer Requests and Prayer  
3) Return and explain FDAS charts  
4) Encourage new participants to take the FDAS  
5) Next Week: Facing My Depression

## **Divorce Care Session 4: Facing My Depression**

- 6:15 Arrivals:** 1) Name Tags 2) Guidelines & Workbooks 3) Refreshments
- 6:30 Welcome:** Introductions for Newcomers (Facilitator, Video/Discussion/Workbook)
- 6:45 On My Own:** 1) When you struggle with anger, how do you deal with it?  
2) When is anger bad? What strategies do you use to get rid of bad anger?  
3) What power does the God of the Bible offer for dealing with anger?
- 6:55 Big Ideas:** 1) There are good reasons to limit anger  
2) Unhealthy responses to anger bring negative results  
3) Those who believe in God believe He will avenge them  
4) You can control anger rather than the other way around  
5) Christian believers rely on God's Spirit to help with anger
- 7:00 Video** Time 39 minutes
- 7:40 Break!**
- 7:50 Discussion:** 1) ICEBREAKER: What was the lowest point of this last week for you?  
2) What part of the video did you most relate to today?  
3) In what ways has depression affected you?  
4) What losses are you grieving that are contributing to depression?  
5) What other reasons for depression (worthlessness etc.) do you fight?  
6) What ways of dealing with depression seemed most helpful to you?
- 8:20 Close:** 1) Workbook cover exercises  
2) Prayer Requests and Prayer  
3) Next Week: Facing My Loneliness

## **Divorce Care Session 5: Facing My Loneliness**

- 6:15 Arrivals:** 1) Name Tags 2) Guidelines & Workbooks 3) Refreshments
- 6:30 Welcome:** Introductions for Newcomers (Facilitator, Video/Discussion/Workbook)
- 6:45 On My Own:** 1) What strategies do you find most helpful in dealing with depression?  
2) How helpful for you is Scripture when struggling with depression?  
3) Does it make a difference if Bible heroes (Elijah) suffered depression?
- 6:55 Big Ideas:** 1) Christ invites us to pray honestly about our despair  
2) Scripture can help center us when emotions seem overwhelming  
3) The comfort of Scripture can keep us from overreacting to our emotions  
4) We can share comfort received in Scripture with others who are down  
5) God can strengthen us to use healthy means of dealing with emotions
- 7:00 Video** Time 42 minutes
- 7:42 Break!**
- 7:50 Discussion:** 1) How has divorce/separation affected relations with family and friends?  
2) Is your loneliness mostly self-imposed, or from others abandoning you?  
3) In what ways have you dealt with loneliness? Were they good choices?  
4) In your own words, what does it mean to be a healthy single person?  
5) What new strategies could help when loneliness overwhelms you?
- 8:20 Close:** 1) Workbook cover exercises  
2) Prayer Requests and Prayer  
3) Next Week: What Does the Owner's Manual Say (Facing My Shame)



## **Divorce Care Session 6: What Does the Owner's Manual Say?**

- 6:15 Arrivals:** 1) Name Tags 2) Guidelines & Workbooks 3) Refreshments
- 6:30 Welcome:** Introductions for Newcomers (Facilitator, Video/Discussion/Workbook)
- 6:45 On My Own:** 1) What was helpful in this week's Bible study on loneliness?  
2) How can you sense God's presence when you feel lonely?  
3) What does Ecc. 3:1–7 mean to one who thinks loneliness is permanent?
- 6:55 Big Ideas:** 1) Jesus knew profound loneliness  
2) So God is with us in our loneliness  
3) Our feelings are not the entire reality  
4) Helping others who are lonely helps us  
5) Loneliness is a season, not a permanent state
- 7:00 Video** Time 37 minutes
- 7:37 Break!**
- 7:50 Discussion:** 1) In one sentence, what stood out for you in this video?  
2) Why do you think marriage as a covenant before God was emphasized?  
3) Did the video cause you to look at marriage or divorce any differently?  
4) With what Biblical teachings on marriage and divorce do you struggle?  
5) What questions about separation or divorce do you still have?  
6) How can a 'tool kit' (prayer, study, counsel, church & Spirit) help you?
- 8:20 Close:** 1) Workbook cover exercises  
2) Prayer Requests and Prayer  
3) Next Week: New Relationships

## **Divorce Care Session 7: New Relationships**

- 6:15 Arrivals:** Refreshments
- 6:30 Welcome:** How was your week?
- 6:45 On My Own:**
- 1) Has your thinking changed or clarified on Biblical grounds for divorce?
  - 2) In what ways might consulting the Bible help you during this time?
  - 3) According to Scripture, how does God view divorced people?
- 6:55 Big Ideas:**
- 1) We will not regret following God's instructions
  - 2) Understanding what God allows can lessen anxiety
  - 3) Scripture is better able to tell us the truth than the world
  - 4) Scripture can also transform our lives
  - 5) Scripture enables us to see ourselves as God does
- 7:00 Video** Time 42 minutes
- 7:37 Break!**
- 7:50 Discussion:**
- 1) What advice would YOU give a separated friend about dating again?
  - 2) What lessons have you learned from post-divorce dating mistakes?
  - 3) What is the most compelling reason to wait before you date again?
  - 4) In what ways do you need to grow before entering a new relationship?
  - 5) How can a relationship with God helped you in this season of life?
- 8:20 Close:**
- 1) Prayer Requests and Prayer
  - 2) Next Week: Financial Survival

## **Divorce Care Session 8: Financial Survival**

- 6:15 Arrivals:** Refreshments
- 6:30 Welcome:** How did your week go?
- 6:45 On My Own:**
- 1) When is a divorced person ready to begin a new relationship?
  - 2) How close are you to being content as a single?
  - 3) In what ways can we learn contentment?
- 6:55 Big Ideas:**
- 1) Differentiating between wants and needs is crucial before starting anew
  - 2) Another person cannot know or meet all our needs; God alone can
  - 3) God meets our needs through His presence and His people
  - 4) Honest self-assessment is also crucial before starting new relationships
  - 5) Readiness for a new relationship comes when we are whole as a single
- 7:00 Video** Time 42 minutes
- 7:37 Break!**
- 7:50 Discussion:**
- 1) What is the biggest financial stressor in your divorce or separation?
  - 2) What is the biggest fear you have in your financial situation?
  - 3) To what extent do you budget? If you don't, what prevents you?
  - 4) If you do budget, what have you learned from the process?
  - 5) What practical money-saving tips can you share?
- 8:20 Close:**
- 1) Prayer Requests and Prayer
  - 2) Next Week: Kid Care

## **Divorce Care Session 9: Kid Care**

- 6:15 Arrivals:** Refreshments
- 6:30 Welcome:** How did your week go?
- 6:45 On My Own:**
- 1) What did you think of the story of the single divorcee with 8 children?
  - 2) What principles of financial survival do you remember from last week?
  - 3) How helpful were the various scriptures cited in the study?
- 6:55 Big Ideas:**
- 1) God can provide all our needs
  - 2) A budget can free you from worry
  - 3) Money and possessions do not bring contentment
  - 4) God created us to help each other
  - 5) God is able to take care of the details
- 7:00 Video** Time 42 minutes
- 7:37 Break!**
- 7:50 Discussion:**
- 1) How have your children been impacted by your divorce and separation?
  - 2) What actions during the divorce negatively affected your child?
  - 3) What steps can you take to better connect with your children this week?
  - 4) What challenges do non-custodial parents face? How can they be met?
  - 5) What advice would you give custodial parents? Non-custodial parents?
- 8:20 Close:**
- 1) Prayer Requests and Prayer
  - 2) Next Week: Single Sexuality

## **Divorce Care Session 10: Single Sexuality**

**6:15 Arrivals:** Refreshments

**6:30 Welcome:** How did your week go?

**6:45 On My Own:**

- 1) What reasons were given for compassion on misbehaving children?
- 2) What methods of reducing parent-child conflict were discussed?
- 3) How can parents be good examples to children even amidst divorce?

**6:55 Big Ideas:**

- 1) God is gentle and can enable you to be gentle
- 2) He can help you to provide a stable home life
- 3) God's compassion can help you be compassionate if your kids act out
- 4) Gentleness and patience can help ease parent-child conflict
- 5) A parent's example is important, especially in speaking of their ex

**NOTE: THE GROUP SEPARATES BY GENDER FOR THE REST OF THE SESSION!**

**7:00 Video** Time 42 minutes

**7:37 Break!**

**7:50 Discussion:**

- 1) How do Christianity and our culture differ in how they view sex?
- 2) Which of the "Yeah, Buts" on p. 92 do you struggle with?
- 3) What activities could you use to redirect sexual energy when tempted?
- 4) Do you have accountability relationships? How have they affected you?
- 5) What have you decided regarding how you will handle single sexuality?

**8:20 Close:**

- 1) Prayer Requests and Prayer
- 2) Next Week: Forgiveness

## **Divorce Care Session 11: Forgiveness**

- 6:15 Arrivals:** Refreshments
- 6:30 Welcome:** How did your week go?
- 6:45 On My Own:**
- 1) What's your plan for fleeing sexual immorality and honoring God?
  - 2) Why are accountability partners important? What quality do they need?
  - 3) What should we do if we feel guilty about sexual sin?
- 6:55 Big Ideas:**
- 1) Sex bonds people spiritually, so casual sex causes spiritual harm
  - 2) The benefits of purity outweigh temporary pleasure
  - 3) To remain pure, singles usually need to have a clear plan
  - 4) Accountability partners can be an essential part of a plan to stay pure
  - 5) It's not too late to choose and maintain purity
- 7:00 Video** Time 41 minutes
- 7:37 Break!**
- 7:50 Discussion:**
- 1) What emotion do you experience when you consider forgiving your ex?
  - 2) What misconceptions about forgiveness did the video mention?
  - 3) How does one begin to take steps to forgive their ex-spouse?
  - 4) If you've forgiven your ex, how'd you do it? Was it easy or a process?
  - 5) Does God's forgiveness influence how you view forgiving your ex?
- 8:20 Close:**
- 1) Prayer Requests and Prayer
  - 2) Next Week: Reconciliation

## **Divorce Care Session 12: Reconciliation**

- 6:15 Arrivals:** Refreshments
- 6:30 Welcome:** How did your week go?
- 6:45 On My Own:**
- 1) Do you have a plan for fleeing sexual immorality and honoring God?
  - 2) Why are accountability partners important? What quality do they need?
  - 3) What should we do if we feel guilty about sexual sin?
- 6:55 Big Ideas:**
- 1) Sex bonds people spiritually, so casual sex causes spiritual harm
  - 2) The benefits of purity outweigh temporary pleasure
  - 3) To remain pure, singles usually need to have a clear plan
  - 4) Accountability partners can be an essential part of a plan to stay pure
  - 5) It's not too late to choose and maintain purity
- 7:00 Video** Time 42 minutes
- 7:37 Break!**
- 7:50 Discussion:**
- 1) How did the video affect your understanding of reconciliation?
  - 2) What level of reconciliation do you think possible with your ex?
  - 3) What are things you do that sabotage your interactions with your ex?
  - 4) How can your conversations be more productive and less antagonistic?
  - 5) Has your ex expressed a desire to restore your marriage?
- 8:20 Close:**
- 1) Prayer Requests and Prayer
  - 2) Next Week: Moving On!

## **Divorce Care Session 13: Moving On**

- 6:15 Arrival:** Refreshments
- 6:30 Welcome:** How did your week go?
- 6:45 On My Own:**
- 1) Why take the initiative in pursuing reconciliation with an ex-spouse?
  - 2) What forms can reconciliation take? Which do you anticipate for you?
  - 3) If your ex desires reconciliation, how can you see genuine change?
- 6:55 Big Ideas:**
- 1) What is God calling us to do?
  - 2) What does His Word say we should do?
  - 3) Can we see the fruit of repentance?
  - 4) We are responsible for our own actions and reactions
  - 5) Remember Joseph: ‘What you meant for evil, God meant for good.’
- 7:00 Video** Time 43 minutes
- 7:43 Break!**
- 7:50 Discussion:**
- 1) Are you more optimistic than when we began? Why or why not?
  - 2) What emotional trash do you need to get rid of?
  - 3) Have you felt your past determining your future? Has that changed?
  - 4) What signs indicate that we are healing from divorce?
  - 5) What is your next step after participating in this group?
- 7:45 Close:**
- 1) Next week: Banana Splits, Focus Group, and retake the FDAS
  - 2) Plans for a reunion next month?
  - 3) Prayer Requests and Prayer



## APPENDIX FIVE

### FOCUS GROUP CONSENT FORM

**Introduction:** Thank you for considering participation in a focus group interview regarding your experience in a divorce recovery group. This research is being done by Kirk Hille, M. Div., as part of a major applied project in the doctor of ministry program at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, under the supervision of Dr. Richard Marrs, Ph.D. Should you have questions about this interview, you can reach Kirk Hille at (509) 325-5738 or Dr. Marrs at (314) 505-7287.

**Procedure:** Should you consent to the interview, you and other participants will be asked several questions regarding your experience in order to learn more about the value of divorce recovery groups. The interview is expected to take 1-2 hours of your time. An audio recording of the interview will be made and analyzed to evaluate the effectiveness of various components of the recovery group but will be erased at the conclusion of the research to protect your privacy.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question that you do not wish to answer. You may also withdraw from the study at any time.

**Risks:** There are no known risks associated with this interview. However, it is possible you may experience distress in the course of the conversation. If this happens, please inform me promptly.

**Benefits:** While there is no guaranteed benefit, it is possible that you will enjoy sharing your answers to the questions or find the conversation meaningful. The study is intended to evaluate the effectiveness of the divorce recovery group in order to improve future groups at our location and to provide information regarding effective recovery methods to other congregations.

**Confidentiality:** Your name will be kept confidential in all reporting and writing regarding this study. A pseudonym (made up name) may be substituted for yours to preserve your anonymity.

**Publication:** The results of this study will be shared with my adviser and several academic reviewers. It may also be published and possibly shared with other academic institutions. In that case, names and identifying details will be changed to preserve confidentiality.

**Authorization:** By signing below, you are agreeing to a recorded interview for this research study. Prior to signing, please be sure any questions you may have are answered to your satisfaction. If you agree to participate, a copy of this document will be given to you.

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Form based on Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 235-6.

## **APPENDIX SIX**

### **FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

- 1) What, if anything, surprised you in the divorce recovery course?
- 2) How do you think the course affected your own divorce recovery?
- 3) How have your feelings about your situation changed since you began the course?
- 4) What would you describe as the most valuable parts of the course? Why?
- 5) What parts of the course seemed less valuable to you? Why?
- 6) What effect, if any, did the course have on your ability to feel hopeful about the future?
- 7) What is something you feel you learned or relearned through the course?
- 8) What practical issues did the course address that you found helpful?
- 9) How helpful was it to discuss the grief process in relation to divorce?
- 10) To what extent was it helpful to consider how your identity and roles have changed?
- 11) What effect, if any, has the course had on your relationship with God or the church?
- 12) How would you describe your relationship with other participants in the course?
- 13) In what ways do you anticipate moving forward now that the course is concluded?
- 14) How would you describe the divorce recovery course to a friend?

## APPENDIX SEVEN

### FOCUS GROUP TRANSCRIPT

*Speakers are identified by randomly chosen numbers to preserve confidentiality.*

*\*Responses from an additional interview recorded on June 6, 2016 asking the same questions of an individual who desired to participate but was unable to attend the final session are indicated.*

KH: It's Monday the 23rd of May, 2016 and we're going to talk about how the Divorce Care experience went. It was my first time, and René's first time, going through it. So I prepared some questions, but they are just starter questions. The first one is: What, if anything, surprised you about the Divorce Care divorce recovery course? Think about what your expectations were before you walked in here: was there anything that surprised you?

99: Being able to freely talk about sexuality. I didn't expect it to be so free that we would be able to talk about it, which was pleasant.

34: The amount of Biblical support behind it, and just, like, there's so many references in the book, and that was very good. *(Interruption omitted)*

20: I think the comradery, just knowing other people have been through this: it's so easy to talk to other people about it. I don't know what I expected; I was just really surprised at how awesome and easy and encouraging it was to know that all these people have been through this and we all get it—everybody gets it. You can't talk to a married person like that, that has never been through a divorce.

76: I was surprised and appreciated how many different experts they had: it wasn't just four or five people, it was 20 or 30.

KH: The second question is: How do you think the course affected your own divorce recovery? Or your separation—what effect do you think it had on you?

\*57: I think the main thing that I learned about is learning to forgive and to move forward, to let go of all the bitterness—that's probably the biggest thing.

20: I think it just helped me deal with it and face it and move through it. There was just a lot of different areas I feel it helped me. To forgive, and just to heal, I feel I learned a lot about myself, and that was really good. And I learned boundaries and I learned how important they are.

22: One of the aspects I thought was interesting in learning, in kind of that journey of learning about yourself also was to listen to other people's experience of their separation and divorce and to try to think of it through my ex-husband's eyes, and his experience, and that—I think that comes with time; it's been years since my divorce, but it really changed a little bit how I saw my ex-husband, and even now, how I would deal with him. That was eye opening for me; that's something I never really spend a lot of time on.

KH: Would you describe that as empathy, or understanding, or...

22: Hmm. That's a good question. I don't think I would go as far as empathy (*laughs*) in all honesty, but awareness. We'll go with awareness.

34: I think it was most of all just comfort for me to be able to be around people who are going through this at the same time I was, and also to hear all of the hope that came from it. There was just a lot of hope and looking toward the future instead of focusing on the past in all those videos. I feel like that they kind of focus on the future and how to heal instead of on thinking about the past and whatever that does, you know, trying to analyze whatever happened. It was more future focused.

99: I also feel that it helped me to slow down a little bit and not feel rushed to look for another relationship. It's been a little while for me, yet I don't feel that I would have been ready

a few weeks back. So I think I'm closer now. I feel like I'm being more attracted to healthier personalities now rather than just outward appearance. I'm more attracted to spirituality and that's encouraging.

76: Good, for me: it answered more of the questions I had and brought up questions that I hadn't thought of.

KH: Can you think of any examples?

76: Not really off the top of my head, but I remember just quite a few evenings going home and going, "That—that's why!" or "That makes sense."

KH: Here's a more specific question, kind of drilling down here: How have your feelings about your situation changed since you began the course? We talked a little bit about how thoughts changed, but your feelings about your situation—how have they changed?

76: About our present situation now, or about the actual divorce?

KH: Either/or.

76: I think I'm in a much better place now than when we started, but I'm still frustrated that this had to happen. I'm definitely ready to move on and take steps forward and stop looking back, but I still get a little torqued off when I sit down and start thinking about why it happened or that it had to happen.

34: I think I was more, really, emotional about it, and, like, really upset that it was happening to me. I totally victimized myself and I think that I'm doing a little bit better on that. Just kind of realizing that he did what he did, I did what I did, and that's pretty much all. I don't know, I feel like I'm a whole lot less emotional about it because I've been able to kind of deal with some of the emotions and work through them.

99: Built up some strength.

34: Yeah, I feel like I have a lot more inner strength, especially because of the verses that I had mentioned earlier that helped me deal with my feelings.

66: I think I've come to have a better understanding of how the church looks at divorce. I don't know that I really understand it yet, but I have a better understanding of it now.

KH: Anybody else on how your feelings have changed since you began the course?

20: I think for me I've just come to accept it. You know, like, "it is what it is." It's a new life now, and just accepting the fact that, okay, I am a single parent, I'm raising these three kids, and it's okay. I think at the beginning I was still pretty angry at him. (*Interruption omitted*)

99: Okay, I'll share one. Well, I think I feel more confident and hopeful, at least I can make better choices in the future because I feel like I'm changing.

\*57: It's changed my feelings towards my ex that she's healing, too, and made a mistake. I learned to forgive her and move on.

KH: The next question is: What would you describe as the most valuable parts of the course and why?

76: I would say the personal testimonies from everybody.

KH: On the video or in person?

76: Both.

20: I liked the different perspectives from the pastors, the counselors—I really liked the counselors, I can relate to that, and the pastors, but just the perspective when they would share in depth about something, a particular topic. It was so insightful and it was typical and it was grounded and it was just the truth. Like, "You know, that's right: everything in that video was true and you can't deny it." And it's freeing, it's freeing to hear that. Cause with all the crud that you go through when you go through divorce, you just want good news, and it was very

helpful, very encouraging, inspiring, and awesome.

34: I think the session on loneliness was my favorite, because that, I think, is the biggest challenge that I face a lot of the time is just being lonely and being sad that I don't have his arm to hold or his hand to hold or someone to come home to. Even if he's in PJs and been watching porn all day at least I had someone to come home to, you know? And I guess the most valuable thing that I took away from that lesson was that I'm vulnerable and that I need to treat myself as if I'm vulnerable, so some of the things that I did before when I was single, I can't do those right now, just for a while. Like, I had made plans to stay in Jamaica for a couple of weeks. Later, just after that my friend and I started having really negative feelings about that, and I realized it was because I'm vulnerable and need to take care of myself. And that would be something that I would do before I got married—go to another country and just spend time by myself and be silly; be responsible but go on adventures—climb waterfalls by myself and just be silly, but this is not a time when I can do that because I feel that I would be more susceptible to, like, if someone were to come up and ask for my friendship, I would be more susceptible to that. And I think that was a really good lesson for me to learn.

KH: Anybody else? Valuable parts?

99: I just feel like the strength of sharing and the listening to the sharing, the support.

\*57: When we got together and talked about everybody's scenario it was helpful to see that you're not the only one going through the same problems. There might be little differences, but a lot of the same feelings.

KH: The flip side is: What parts of the course seemed less valuable to you and why—if you were designing the course you would have left this out?

34: I don't think I would have left it out, but the financial side wasn't important for

me simply because I didn't have kids, I didn't have all the stuff that other people have to go through. It just wasn't my issue, but I definitely wouldn't have left it out.

76: I thought it was pretty comprehensive and I don't know if I'd leave anything out. I mean, I wasn't here for the sex talk, but maybe even adding and updating it for the issues that are happening these days with pornography and expand that issue and that aspect of cause for divorce.

KH: Anything else that seemed less valuable or maybe that you would have done differently if you were Steve Grissom (*Divorce Care developer and video host*)?

76: If you're asking what would have been nice if they had done it differently, it would be nice to have a transcript to look at of the videos. Sometimes there was so much good stuff coming at you in the videos you couldn't write it down fast enough, and not only couldn't you write it down fast enough there wasn't enough room. And there are times you're going, "I think I'm too far ahead or behind; what he's saying is good and I want to write it down but you can't write it down that fast."

66: I understand what Steve's role was, but I would like to have heard his story a little bit. (*Group murmurs in agreement*)

76: Because he was divorce and remarried, right?

KH: Right. My understanding is that was kind of the impetus: after he remarried, he and his wife, who you never see either, put this together at their church and then it grew into a national thing from there.

66: As a matter of fact, that's one of the things that I enjoy about this: that René's here.

KH: Yeah, me too! (*Group laughs*)



66: I mean I like to see the couples together that are coming from the same place.

\*57: I never really thought of anything less valuable, because there's so much less valuable stuff around. (*Laughs*) Everything was valuable, pretty much.

KH: This one is going to seem a little redundant because a couple of you have mentioned it already, but what effect, if any, did the course have on your ability to feel hopeful about the future?

76: I now know that I do have a future. (*Group laughs*)

99: It means hope, and maybe there's a future to look forward to.

(*Various group members voice agreement*)

99: Yes, maybe I won't be too dysfunctional for too long; maybe someday I'll have a functional relationship with somebody, and more than that, a spiritual relationship.

\*57: It's another chapter in my life. There is a tomorrow. At first I had to take it day-by-day, but now I can see more light at the end of the tunnel, and things get better with time.

KH: This is going to be the hardest question, probably: What is something you feel that you learned or relearned through the course?

99: Throughout the course?

KH: Just through the course, something that you feel you learned or relearned, so it could be something new or it could be something that maybe you had put out of your mind because of the emotions of the whole thing that came back to you—either way.

34: I'm fun to be with by myself.

20: Absolutely!

34: Before the course I was kind of scared to spend time on my own, I guess, but I was really encouraged to spend time on my own and talk to God. I finally found out that, no, no,

I remember: it was fun to spend time by myself.

99: And that it's fun meeting new people. Kind of starting over like a teenager.

*(Murmured agreement)* Okay, like in my twenties, not a teenager. *(Group laughs)* I'm a little more mature than that.

34: I wish I had more time to answer that question. I mean it's hard to flip through all this (looking through notes in workbook).

22: I thought it was helpful, just from my personal point of view, to revisit the topic of forgiveness, because you focus on it for a while, and things get comfortable, and you're kind of going along the way. Then a big bump happens, and you forget about grace and you need to be reminded about forgiveness—I needed to be reminded about forgiveness toward my ex-husband. I really think that we forget—we forget we need to keep that attitude when painful things happen through separation and divorce and communication afterwards if you have children together. So that was a powerful session for me: forgiveness.

20: I think too, with that, forgiving myself for my part that I played in the whole thing and what it caused my kids. So I'm dealing with that: just forgiving myself.

34: Okay, so another thing I learned about myself is that you shouldn't marry someone that you're infatuated with; you have to wait for the infatuation to go away. That shouldn't be the basis for your marriage. And the second thing that I learned is that I'm a professional painter: I like to paint those red flags green! And I need to put down my paintbrush and examine them.

66: I like your thought about forgiveness. It's something that always has to be reminded.

99: Just a reminder that judging doesn't work because I can't judge anybody fairly

either. Even if you've known them for years you still can't judge them because you don't have all the information. You just don't know the amount of suffering that they've gone through, past or present.

\*57: [I learned] to value myself: that I'm not just a worthless person that was discarded for somebody else. That was a tough one.

KH: We talked a little bit about practical issues; for some people, like finance wasn't really an issue. What practical issues did each of you find helpful? Was there anything that you got a practical tip on something, or that you were glad they covered because you had a particular area that you had more questions on or that was more relevant to you?

20: There were a couple. One was how it affects kids. That was really eye-opening and good. The other one was that reconciliation one, where they had different camps where you are at in it—that was helpful.

76: Yeah, I would say the reconciliation one and then also the different times when they talked about boundaries.

66: That reconciliation doesn't necessarily mean getting back together; just learning where your boundaries are.

99: Trying to live in harmony with everybody.

34: I liked what they said about negative thoughts that lead to negative emotions and lead to negative perception about your life and so you need to get out of that cycle. And it's really quite easy: all you have to do is think about something positive and it pulls you out of the negative cycle of depression, anxiety, fear, loneliness. Pretty much anything that's negative if you find yourself in that negative cycle, then get out: it's pretty simple. Takes practice, though. Sometimes it's not really possible, but most of the time it is, especially with the help of others. If

it's not possible by yourself then go seek someone else.

KH: Any other practical issues?

99: I'm looking at finances, that's practical.

22: I agree with you: I think there are some individuals that would benefit from that financial session. I know that my husband handled quite a bit of our business financial affairs and I wish I had had some of that advice when we were separated and first divorced. It would have been helpful. I find that to be probably one of the most practical sessions in Divorce Care.

99: Anybody that has to live in two separate households now, they have to look at this all carefully, how you spend.

\*57: The workbook: it was nice to be able to go back over some of the things that we covered in class and there's still some chapters that I haven't finished yet, but it's nice to have that workbook.

KH: One area that we haven't really touched on yet, maybe because it was early on, is: How helpful was it to discuss the grief process in relation to divorce?

34: What lesson was it? (*Various voices respond that it was at the beginning*)

22: I think it's very valuable to discuss the whole process and to hear other people's points of view and their histories as far as moving forward in the grief process and then you find yourself falling back, and moving forward, and falling back. It's validating to hear other people that have gone through that and have come through it as well because I think there is room for becoming discouraged—you think you're further ahead than what you really are, you know, and then also the grief process as far as giving yourself time to heal. I think many people miscalculate the time involved in healing.

99: There was a quote, I can't remember it now, but it talked about pulling up the old,

rotten roots and getting them out of the way, the debris, so that the new shoots can start growing in your life. Being able to take enough time to heal so that you can get on with your life; shut the door to the past first before you can open up the door to the future.

20: I liked looking at the various stages of grief too. I thought that was really helpful: the different stages you go through. Because they're all valid and you go through that when you go through divorce.

22: Kind of reassuring, don't you think, too, that "oh, I'm feeling this way but that's okay because it's really expected and that's kind of what you need to feel in order to heal from it."

\*57: It was good because I could empathize with other people in what they're going through because I went through the same thing. I could see that, and everybody was at different stages of the divorce process. Some were real fresh and some not as fresh, but I know what it was like, that feeling, and that process was pretty rough.

KH: To what extent—and there was some discussion of this during the course—to what extent was it helpful to consider how your identity and your roles have changed? For example, you go from being a co-parent to being a single parent, and you go from being a couple to being a single, and you go from being the person who just does the lawn work to being the person who now has to do all the inside stuff or vice versa. To what extent was it helpful when we touched on those kinds of things? Can you think of anything that struck you about that?

76: I think just the fact that they acknowledged that that was part of the deal, it made me think, "Yeah, this is normal in this situation."

KH: Anybody else? Any particular issue revolving around how your role has changed?

34: That being single again can be fun. It can be an adventure and be an opportunity

to relearn yourself and learn exactly what you're going to go for in your next relationship if you want one, or relearn your values and learn what was done to you or you did that wasn't okay and to grow in that.

20: I think, too, just like buying your own house and all the things that I did not have to do when I was married, all the stuff that he did. He did everything and now I'm learning myself. Like, I am learning just a ton of how to do stuff on YouTube, you know? I'm like, "How do you fix a toilet? I don't know!" But now I know; you know what I mean? Like all those things you just took for granted because he just did it. Now you have to do it and you have to figure it out.

KH: And how do you feel about that?

20: I don't know—it's kind of freeing, I mean, like, my aunt has this side of her that she could build a house if she wanted to, and I have a cousin that's the same way. I could never do that, but it's kind of nice to know that if something breaks I can at least I can find somebody who knows the answer. I might not have the answer but I can be resourceful and find somebody that does. I don't have to fix everything but right now I'm thinking of building my own deck. I mean, why not?

22: It's empowering.

20: It is empowering. Yeah, it's empowering to know that you don't have to rely on somebody to do something, you know? You can do it yourself.

KH: What effect, if any, has the course had on your relationship with God or the church?

76: I think for me it's been just another constant reminder that I can't do it on my own. I have to have the support of a church and the constant reassurance that God's in control

and so.

22: I'm just grateful, too, for His grace and forgiveness and love, unconditional love because it's a confusing time to go through and it takes a lot of time to heal. You just have to have Him to heal. I don't know how people do it without Him and the encouragement when you read the Bible or go to church or hear a song or even those speakers on the video. The encouraging words, that affirmation; it's healing.

34: I think before Divorce Care this whole situation was like a giant pile of trash that I felt was all over me and I didn't know how to even start talking to God about it, but what Divorce Care has done for me is compartmentalize the trash, like: "Okay, this is recycling. This is anger. This is loneliness." And then I was able to talk about those specific things one at a time to God because it was once a week that we were meeting so I felt like I had words to tell Him instead of just feelings that were overwhelmed.

22: I liked the emphasis on God and how He's with you. They're so deep in Scripture and you feel a greater closeness and relationship with each week and each reminder, each Scripture verse that they give. I think it's so important because there's a danger as you are going through all of this and this muck, there's a danger of falling away, you know? It's just so reassuring that He's there and he walks with us in every aspect. I thought the course did an excellent job of keeping that foremost in thought.

99: Well, I'm grateful for His direction and also I liked to learn that God's will be done, not mine, because He knows the path; I don't know the path, but ultimately His will is the way to go. That's where I'll find contentment, even if I don't know if I want it at times. I'm like, "I want that!" and think that any kind of thing might do, but ultimately if I can just remember that God's will be done, not mine, on the inside—when I start remembering inside things start

unfolding.

\*57: It's brought me a lot closer to God, and it's made me a better dad, probably. It's hard to say what I would have been like if we had stayed married, but I cherish the time I do have with my kids a lot more because I don't see them as much, and it's brought me closer to God, quite a bit. It's humbled me as a person.

KH: Two more questions. How would you describe your relationship with other participants in the course? This question's not awkward, is it? (*Group laughs*) Maybe, "How would you describe that dimension?"

99: Friendly. Supportive. Life-saver. (*Group laughs*)

20: I know I feel like I'm going to miss this group.

34: Yeah.

20: It's just this huge blessing to me and I waited so long to do this and I just feel like I'm going to miss not being here on Monday nights.

22: It's encouraging to have this group. One of the aspects I love the most is when we pray at the end of the session and praying for each other through the week. If court dates were coming up, I found myself thinking of you more and more and praying for you; and just the fellowship of the shared experience.

20: And when you weren't here we missed you! (*Group laughs*) We all missed you.

34: I always liked hearing from everybody and I always liked hearing all the different perspectives and I looked forward to this night a lot. During the week I was like, "How many more nights till Monday?" (*Group laughs*)

99: I know it's hard to have this and then it's not going to be there. What am I going to do with my Monday nights? Yow!



KH: You can come back in September.

99: I think I will, at least for the stuff I missed. See if I see some new faces, too...

\*57: I learned a lot from other people's experiences, what other people are going through when they have kids at different age groups; what they face and their struggles with extra-curricular activities, meeting the ex-spouse, their new relationships, and being in awkward situations, but then at the end of the day it's just you there. Sometimes it bothers you but you just have to let go of it, give it to God, because otherwise it will eat you up if you keep it inside yourself.

KH: This is kind of a related question: In what ways do you anticipate moving forward now that the group is concluded? Kind of a "what now?" question.

\*57: I'll still take it a day at a time and I have my kids quite a bit, and my work, and I do a lot of stuff that keeps me occupied, extra-curricular activities, hanging out with family is huge. Family is a big support.

76: I'm looking forward to, especially now that work has slowed down for me, going through and rehashing some of the stuff that I haven't been able to completely hash through. Go through it again on my own.

20: I want to go through the book again too and read some of the stuff that I wrote and read some of the stories because I didn't read all of the stories of my "On My Own" [section]. I also want to talk to my friends who've never come through a group like this and tell them to come. Encourage them, too, to come and do a group like this. And maybe even go with them, I don't know, I would do this again in a heartbeat.

99: I already had a friend say that he would do Divorce Care too. A different one than the Presbyterian Church: Rebuilding. He doesn't know if he would be afraid to date anybody that

hadn't gone through some kind of program to deal with their divorce because they wouldn't have any idea what direction they were moving in if they weren't working on themselves and their heart and all the other stuff.

66: See you in September. *(Group laughs)*

34: I'm going to just do a combination of what everybody said: go through the book, hopefully, if I can find the time/motivation and go to another Divorce Care for sure, especially since I missed the first three, which I think are important, and I also missed seven, because I was on vacation that week. So I want to get those ones that I missed. I think I also want to listen to several of them again for sure and maybe put a different colored pen in there so that I could see the changes there are in what I think if any.

*(Joke made by another participant omitted to preserve confidentiality)*

22: Divorce Care, I think, is similar to reading Scripture: you can read Scripture and then six months later read the same thing and get something different from it, something more, and I believe that to be the case with Divorce Care. Through the different stages as you travel on this road you're gonna get different things from it, or you'll be reminded, or you'll have a new situation that you didn't have when you went through it the first time. *(More omitted to preserve confidentiality. Participants asked how the group was advertised and discussed those they know going through divorces whom they might invite in the future.)*

34: Four of my co-workers including me are going through a divorce right now. I should have asked them to come. I just didn't even think of it, and I don't know if they are Christian. I think they probably are, but even if they aren't.

22: It's very practical information to be had, even if you're not a believer.

34: Yeah, for sure.

KH: One of the questions I had was, “Is this too Christian? Are people not going to come because it’s too Christian?” But it seems to be pretty practical; even if people aren’t believers.

76: I think it’s pretty well balanced.

99: Well, I saw the banner out front in my travels around. It kind of stuck in my head, and then I looked up the Divorce Care on whatever site it was that listed Divorce Cares in town. I think I called, yeah, I called, too.

*(Conversation strays to attendees who dropped out for various reasons.)*

KH: So, this is just a follow up, and this is the last question: How would you describe the divorce recovery course: How would you describe Divorce Care to a friend? If you were inviting them how would you describe it? What would be your summary?

66: Solid.

34: I would say it puts a name on your feelings and separates them into different weeks so you can deal with them.

22: Deep, comprehensive.

20: Supportive, encouraging feelings.

76: Well done. I thought it was very good.

99: It give you hope.

76: Needed.

\*57: I would recommend going through it because it will help you realize that there is hope and that there is, even though it doesn’t seem like there’s any: it’s just crashing down with the legal system and then the kids, and you just lost half of you—you got ripped away—physically it eats you, financially it wrecks you, starting over, and spiritually I ask myself “What

did I do to deserve this? Am I really that bad of a person?" But you can't control other people. It takes two to make a relationship work...I learned that in a relationship it doesn't work and you have to give it to God because you're not in control.

KH: Well, that's it for the designated focus group questions unless anybody has anything else to say that they want on record! (*Group laughs, session ends.*)

## APPENDIX EIGHT

### FISHER DIVORCE ADJUSTMENT SCALE RESULTS

Table 1. First Session Scores:

Participant Number	Personal Worth	Emotional Separation	Anger Dissipation	Grief Completion	Open to Intimacy	Social Worth	Total Adjustment
20	107	99	31	100	32	36	405
22	99	99	29	86	35	33	391
34	86	70	40	73	14	32	315
57	104	103	39	82	20	35	383
66	77	97	42	84	15	31	346
76	93	63	44	98	17	37	352
99	105	100	51	108	32	35	431

Table 2. Final Session Scores:

Participant Number	Personal Worth	Partner Separation	Anger Dissipated	Grieving Completed	Open to Intimacy	Social Worth	Total Adjustment
20	115	104	33	104	32	36	424
22	116	108	48	114	39	40	465
34	119	99	51	109	24	43	445
57	106	103	46	112	28	40	435
66	94	96	47	100	20	33	390
76	100	90	48	108	25	41	412
99	103	100	50	104	32	38	427

Table 3. Difference in Scores:

Participant Number	Personal Worth	Partner Separation	Anger Dissipated	Grieving Completed	Open to Intimacy	Social Worth	Total Adjustment
20	+8	+5	+2	+4	0	0	+19
22	+17	+9	+19	+28	+4	+7	+74
34	+33	+29	+11	+36	+10	+11	+130
57	+2	0	+7	+30	+8	+5	+52
66	+17	-1	+5	+16	+5	+2	+44
76	+7	+27	+4	+10	+8	+4	+60
99	-2	0	-1	-4	0	+3	-4
Average:	+11.7	+9.9	+6.7	+17.1	+5.0	+4.6	+53.6

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