

Single Parents: A Vital Part of the Church

With the increase in single-parent families, the Church must prepare to better minister to them. This includes the children as well as the parents. Not all single-parent homes result from death or divorce. An increasing number of women are choosing medical technology to have a child before marriage. Other single-parent families result from adoption and births out of wedlock.

Many professionals see the grief process for the divorced or widowed single parent as similar. While these similarities exist, the relationships are quite different. Those single-again as a result of death experience a finality to the relationship that divorced people do not. Due to the children, divorced couples maintain contact as their parenting roles continue. An effective ministry recognizes and addresses the uniqueness of each situation.

According to Mervin E. Thompson in *Starting Over Single* the first stage is shock. It is almost impossible to feel or decide anything. Individuals are numb all over. Shock is a state of disbelief, an inability to accept what has happened to us.

Second is denial. This occurs when a dinner place is still set for the absent spouse, clothes remain in the closet, holding to dreams of reconciliation, not accepting the reality of death, or signing cards using both names. Denial is living a lie.

Third is emotional overload. Holding feelings inside causes this. Verbalizing feelings help to put them into the proper perspective.

Disappointment and failure is the fourth stage. While most common as a result of divorce, the widow/er may share these feelings. Here persons deal with their failure as well as those feelings coming from family members and friends. They must cope with perceptions of disgrace, disappointment, and shame. They grieve over time poorly spent and the rough edges of the relationship. The widow/er faces questions of "Could I have prevented my spouse's death?"

Fifth is fear. It includes fear of the future, losing control, coping with all the changes, and managing life to name a few. Fits of anger and crying come when least expected or appreciated.

Anger is the sixth stage. Feelings of abandonment, rejection or perceived rejection, and bad memories cause anger. There may be anger at the ex-spouse, the individual, someone else, or even God that such a thing could happen. Feelings of anger are normal and natural, although there are definitely appropriate and inappropriate ways of expressing them.

Not expressing anger leads to depression. Depression is the most dangerous dynamic of the grief process. It lowers our resistance to physical illness. It may be an attempt to escape reality.

The eighth stage is dependency. While grieving, it is easy to become overly dependent on another. A person may give the decision-making authority to someone else. This should not lead to a new relationship before finding a spirit of independence.

For the person experiencing divorce, there is often a surprising sense of sadness. This sadness results from the loss of friends, family history, and good memories. It is normal for these feelings to come and go during the divorce proceedings.

The children of single-parent homes face many adjustments and questions. Children of divorce often blame themselves saying, "If I'd behaved better, or if I hadn't gotten so angry then Mom and Dad would still be married." After losing a parent due to death, children may blame themselves for the illness or accident causing the death. While ministering to the parents, realize the pain and questions of the children.

Workers in the children's department have an important role in the children's lives. These teachers must be aware of the questions children will ask and how to answer them. The questions center on why, love, and self-worth. Answer the questions honestly giving encouragement and building self-esteem.

A child may say, "Mommy says Daddy doesn't love us/me anymore." In response, affirm the child by saying, "You're such a neat person your Daddy loves you. Sometimes daddies and mommies say things they don't mean because they have hurt feelings."

Or "Is my mommy or daddy bad?" "Everyone makes mistakes. Sometimes mommy or daddy need time to think-to figure out what is the right thing. They sometimes forget to tell or show how much they love you."

It may be necessary to consult with the parent, making sure you don't contradict what's said at home. Make it clear you don't want to confuse the child or contradict the parent. Most parents understand and appreciate your concern. This also allows you to befriend and encourage the parent.

The increase of single-parent homes provides the rationale for evaluating the criterion of contests and participation in activities. Can we deny a child winning a contest or participating in a musical or play because of absences caused by court-ordered visitations? The child isn't responsible for the decisions. The distance between homes may prevent attending practices. In a small church, both parents may be uncomfortable about being there for the same services.

The Sunday School teacher needs to remember birthdays and other special occasions. Spending time with single-parent children gives them a sense of importance. Teachers often fill a needed role. This includes attending sports, school, and other activities as often as possible.

Be aware of the children of single-parent homes as you plan trips, parties, retreats, and other activities requiring money. The single parent, especially the single mother, may be living on a limited budget. Some of the extras taken for granted by others often become luxuries for them.

As a result of court-ordered visitations, some children will attend your Sunday School on irregular-regular basis. The attendance may be every other week or just once a month. Recognize these patterns and work to make the child feel part of the class.

Some churches may opt to address single-parent needs during Sunday School. There are three basic philosophies:

1. Keep them in classes with all other adults regardless of marital status.
2. Put them in the single adult class or start a single adult class.
3. Begin a class designed for single parents.

Let's consider the rationale for each position. Many churches face difficulties resulting from building limitations and size of the congregation. Consideration of adult needs is often a low priority when facing space limitations. If space prohibits forming a new class, there are other ways to meet their needs. If the adult class is aware of single parents and their needs, compassion, understanding, and support often come naturally. Other classes may require education before much integration occurs. Some single parents feel a part of a class and continue to attend following divorce or death. If this happens, the teacher must be aware of these individuals and circumstances class discussions.

The second philosophy states they are part of the single adult group. While they are single adults, children can cause conflict. Those without children may have difficulty understanding where the single parent is coming from. They may have difficulty comprehending the restrictions children place on the parent. While it is possible for the two groups to mesh, some education needs to occur. This provides the single adult without children the opportunity to become a support to the single parent. It becomes a give and take situation. Giving love, encouragement, emotional and financial support fills the free time and conquers some of the loneliness many single adults experience. Investing in the lives of others gives a sense of fulfillment and usefulness.

The third position is to begin a single-parent ministry. While this is ideal, it will not be immediately possible for all churches. Since this does not relieve the church of its responsibility to single parents and their children, design a single-parent ministry to meet the needs of the parents and children at the same time. While attending support and recovery groups for the parents, the children participate in programs dealing with childhood stresses and pressures. If the programs run simultaneously, babysitting is only necessary for pre-schoolers.

Sharing feelings and concerns allows children to realize many of their feelings are normal and acceptable. They often share anger and other emotions with peers they might not readily share otherwise.

Before these sessions end, bring the parent and children together. Help them to see themselves as a family. They need to realize they are OK just the way they are. Develop some family pride. Provide time to practice in a controlled environment the skills learned during the previous meetings.

Whichever philosophy your church decides to take, the important thing is to minister to single parents. One of the basic needs is for friends who listen. The single parent doesn't need platitudes or judgmental remarks. Their need is for a friend to listen while expressing emotions. They need someone to hold them accountable for attitudes and signs of self-pity. They need someone to pray for them and walk beside them during this dark time. They need hugs, pats on the shoulder, and words of encouragement--someone to tell them they have value and worth.

Another need is for assistance. Many single mothers face a dramatic change in life-style following death or divorce. Many live at the poverty level. They need scholarships for the children and themselves to attend camps, retreats, and other activities. This also includes many social activities whether as a class or as a part of a group. Many will need assistance when faced with house and car maintenance. They often need food and clothing. The holidays are difficult as they accept the difference between what was and is. While it may be court-ordered, many receive only partial child support payments. There is a large number that never receive any support payments. The never-married mother rarely receives any child support.

Parenting should be a team effort. The single parent faces responsibility for the household as well as the pressure from work. Here are some ways members of the congregation can minister to the single parent:

1. Volunteer baby-sitters to allow the single parent time alone.
2. Casseroles or surprise meals that free the parent of one responsibility.
3. Assistance with house and car repairs and maintenance.
4. Make offers for help specific, including date and time.