

Caring for Widows and Widowers

When Peg Moser, pastor of John St. UMC in Camden, Maine, saw the description of Julie Yarborough's *Beyond the Broken Heart: A Journey Through Grief Program Kit*, she thought of members of her congregation who were struggling to cope with recent losses. Several women's husbands had died in the last three years, one just six months previously. One woman had lost both her husband and her son, another's mother had died, and another had lost many of her friends in the previous year.

Peg purchased the kit, negotiated a schedule for the eight sessions, and began promoting the study through Sunday worship announcements, articles in the church newsletter, email announcements, and posters. She invited people to look at the program materials, which she displayed in the church office. Two weeks before the first session, a well-known and highly respected widow, who had looked over the material and signed up to participate, stood in the narthex before and after worship, clipboard in hand, to answer questions and write down the names of those expressing interest.

Nine women participated, and most were present for all eight sessions. By starting these sessions in October, Peg hoped to help prepare them for the difficult Thanksgiving/Christmas holiday seasons. Trust built quickly. By the fifth week even those usually considered shy were contributing to the discussion. Peg observed that author Julie Yarborough's openness about her own experiences and feelings helped participants feel safe sharing theirs. On the other hand, a widower in the congregation told Peg that he chose not to attend because, although he remembers his wife fondly, he did not need to talk about his sadness at losing her. After the experience, Peg concluded that she would probably not encourage someone to participate immediately after such a loss, and perhaps not until at least six months later. When she offers the program again, she plans to extend an invitation to the community.

With increased awareness of the number of widows and widowers participating in the ministry of John St. UMC, the church leaders sought to extend love and care in tangible ways:

- Holding a dinner after worship one Sunday, inviting all widows and widowers as guests of honor. Other church members prepared, served, and cleaned up after the meal.
- Inviting all widows and widowers to come forward during a worship service, expressing appreciation for their presence and dedication to the church, and praying with them.
- Creating a bulletin insert listing odd jobs or special needs with which a widow or widower might need help - such as carpentry, yard work, and rides to appointments - and setting up a system to coordinate volunteers for these tasks.
- Inviting a lawyer to lead sessions on finances and estate planning, which had surfaced as an area of critical need.

Most churches organize to prepare a light meal or refreshments following a funeral or memorial service and to provide meals for the family for weeks or even months after a death. After the initial flood of supportive care, widows and widowers may desire ongoing companionship and encouragement as they adjust to their "new normal." Experts say it may take two years or longer to grieve the loss of someone close. Although some may choose to keep their

feelings to themselves, many who grieve would welcome the opportunity to pour out their feelings to loving friends willing to simply listen with compassion and empathy. Such emotional catharsis can help those who mourn move through grief to comfort and eventually peace. Advice-giving, unless it has been requested, may come across as lack of understanding and may discourage further sharing. By teaching our church members and friends empathic listening skills and training them to respond without judgment, resisting the temptation to tell others how they should think and feel, the church can foster a healing environment and supportive relationships.

Most painful of all for widows and widowers is the experience of becoming suddenly “invisible” and feeling unwelcome as a single person in a crowd of couples. Newly-single individuals may worry that couples will be threatened by their presence, yet long for friendship and interaction with the opposite gender. Those left to raise children alone will especially appreciate church members and friends who step up to help fill in the gaps and serve as extended family. An active Singles Ministry might offer opportunities for fellowship and service, older widows and widowers could serve as mentors to those more recently bereaved (perhaps through Stephens Ministry), and intergenerational activities that involve all ages would also be welcome.

The Bible repeatedly declares the sacred importance of caring for the widows, who were more vulnerable than widowers in Bible times. This is still an important ministry, not to be left to chance, but organized and coordinated so that no one is neglected or left out. Widows and widowers need to stay involved with life, and the church can help them do so. If the church fails them, and they are left to seek companionship and meaning elsewhere, they will have experienced a double loss: their mates and their church family as well. Widows and widowers may initially reject invitations to join in group activities, but their healing will likely be enhanced by continued engagement with others and participation in activities of interest. Respond to “I don’t think so” or “no” by saying “I’ll check with you that morning to see if you have changed your mind, if that is okay.” Keep the door open, while respecting the mourner’s unique needs and path to healing.

The following resource list includes reading material that some have found helpful and programs that churches can use to address the specific needs of widows and widowers. See also “When the Storms of Life Are Raging...,” “In the Valley of the Shadow of Death,” and other [Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources](#) articles for [Ministering with Those in Crisis and Transition](#) at www.marriagelovepower.net - or search by topic or title at www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries.

Jane P. Ives, United Methodist Marriage and Family Ministries Consultant (8/30/2015)

10 Quaker Lane, Portland, ME 04103, 207-797-8930, Janepives@gmail.com

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Resources for Caring for Widows and Widowers

Reading List

Curriculum and Program Resources

Websites

Reading List

Inside the Broken Heart: Grief Understanding for Widows and Widowers, by Julie Yarbrough (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012) The author describes her own painful journey through grief to hope, as guided by her biblical understanding and her relationship with Jesus Christ. This short concise book is highly recommended for church and personal use. The author has also published an excellent curriculum kit for group use; see review below.

Journeying Through Grief, by Kenneth Haugk (Stephen Ministries, 2004) These four short books are designed to be given to the bereaved at specific intervals after a loss. *A Time to Grieve* is recommended for three weeks after the death of a loved one, *Experiencing Grief* for three months after, *Finding Hope and Healing* for six months after, and *Rebuilding and Remembering* for eleven months after. Each book focuses on what the bereaved is likely to be experiencing at that point in time. The author's warm, caring style offers empathy, compassion, and hope to the reader by sharing Biblical truths, insights about grief, and stories providing comfort and reassurance. The *Journeying Through Grief Giver's Guide* provides sample letters to adapt and send with each book and ideas for tracking when and to whom they are given. www.stephenministries.org.

"Losing Someone Close," by Robert DiGiulio (*CareNotes* #20600 (Abbey Press Publications), 800-325-2511, www.carenotes.com . The author offers assurance and shares helpful ways to cope with the loss of a loved one, noting that "The one that you have loved and lost will always be with you, in memory and in prayer, for the love between you is a spiritual bond that death cannot sever."

The Pain From the Death of a Spouse: A Diary of Life, Love, Death, and Sorrow, by Buddy Rogers (Westbow Press, 2014). The author shares his own story of pain following the death of his wife after fifty-five years of marriage, along with his experience of God's love, support, and comfort.

When the One You Love is Gone, by Rebekah Miles (Abingdon Press, 2012) "When a loved one dies, you don't get over it, but you can move forward. The bad news is that we never fully 'get over' the loss of those we hold most dear; we bear those scars to the grave. The good news is that God is at work in us turning our loss and pain into something beautiful. God can take the scars and the mess and the heartache of our lives-- yours and mine-- and use it to give new life, new life to us and new life to others." (Cokesbury review) The reflections in this book will be helpful

for those who are grieving and to the pastors, counselors, and friends who accompany them on the journey.

Widow to Widow: Thoughtful Practical Ideas for Rebuilding Your Life, by Genevieve Davis Ginsburg (Da Capo Press, 1997). The author offers assurance that the emotional turmoil and overwhelming emptiness experienced by widows and widowers is normal. Readers will be calmed and comforted to know they are not alone. The book contains helpful suggestions, although many of those are geared more toward older women who may not have developed a career of their own.

Curriculum and Program Resources

Beyond the Broken Heart: A Journey Through Grief Program Kit, by Julie Yarbrough (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012). This attractive program package contains a Leader Guide with information for organizing, preparing for, and leading an 8-week grief support and ministry group; a DVD with 8 video segments, 9 to 12 minutes each, one for each session of the program; one copy of the participant book with a chapter for each of the 8 sessions; one copy of a daily devotional book for participants; and one copy of a pocket-size booklet for participants. You will also find material for two supplementary sessions: "Grief at the Holidays" and "Peace of Mind: Financial Management for Life." The content is well-grounded theologically and Scripture-based, and the Leader Guide offers many flexible options for adapting the program to a specific situation.

Griefshare: A Ministry of Church Initiative (250 S. Allen Rd., P.O. Box 1739, Wake Forest, NC 27588-1739, 800-395-5755 (US and Canada), 919-562-2112 (local and international), 919-562-2114 (fax) www.griefshare.org. A comprehensive Leader's Guide and an instructional videotape, "Leading GriefShare Effectively," provide training for laypersons to lead weekly seminars and support groups providing long-term, ongoing support for those who are bereaved. The thirteen video sessions combine practical information with a biblical, Christ-centered focus on spiritual aspects of the grieving process. Participants receive a workbook with space for taking notes, a daily Bible study, a weekly journal, a resources guide, and "Care Cards" with scripture and quotations from each session. Church Initiative provides publicity material and offers free telephone support for your leadership team, as well as listing your group in its database so that people who need this program can find you.

Websites

www.thegrieftoolbox.com - This website offers articles, healing activities, and guidance for support groups, which can be registered – and found – on line. The accompanying Facebook page sends regular posts of encouragement and inspiration to your Facebook news feed. You can also sign up for email messages, e-newsletters, and Twitter; watch videos, participate in discussions, share poetry and artwork, and purchase books, mementos, and curriculum materials for group use.

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