

MINISTERING TO WIDOWS

IS THERE A CONGREGATION OR COMMUNITY WITHOUT A WIDOW?

It is a pandemic no one talks about. Impacting more women than men, its effects are equally devastating to both: the death of a spouse. There are an estimated 258 million widows¹ and about ninety-two million widowers² in the world today. While many associate widows and widowers with old people, there are many who lose their spouse at an early age, through war, violent conflicts, famine, a terminal illness, an unexpected accident, or suicide.

Significant loss has existed since sin entered the world. In the Old Testament, God makes specific promises to widows and provides protection from exploitation, commanding compassion and care for the vulnerable (Deut 27:19; Ps 146:9; 147:3; Isa 54:4–5). Prior to His death, Jesus provided for His widowed mother (John 19:26–27). The early church grappled with the needs of widows and the responsibility to look after them. The apostle James, writing to believers,

specifically states that they should look after the widows and orphans (Jas 1:27). The widowed are very dear to God's heart and should be close to our hearts as well.

Widows around the world face varying challenges, but one in ten lives in extreme poverty.³ Death is expensive, and funerals can be costly. This article looks at general principles that may be adapted to fit cultural and local situations. Although the biblical mandate specifically mentions widows, in the twenty-first century there is a need to minister to widowers as well. Many of their needs are similar, but some are quite distinct.

IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF A SPOUSE

The loss of a spouse is a life-shattering event. Regardless of age, the length of the marriage, or the cause of death, the death of a spouse changes us, bringing with it a bewil-

dering spectrum of emotions. C. S. Lewis said of grief, “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.”⁴ Whether expected or not, when confronted by the reality of death, a person will not be their usual self.

Presence Ministry

There are countless practical details that need to be decided following the death of a spouse. Church members can provide practical support through “presence ministry.” What this looks like will vary depending on circumstances and culture. Traditionally, widows and widowers would be supported by their families. But due to the pressures of modern life and the breakdown of the extended family, that type of support is not always available. The church family can fill this gap by offering gender-appropriate support: we can ease the initial trauma of loss by sitting with the widowed person, helping them make funeral arrangements, assisting with filling out necessary forms, and cooking meals. Creatively finding out what practical help the person needs and providing it without being asked, or providing little gestures of kindness will show the bereaved that there is someone who cares. This ministry should continue for as long as is necessary, supporting and evolving as the widowed person begins to integrate their loss into daily life. It is

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important to know there is someone on whom they can call.

Apples of Gold in Settings of Silver

Solomon writes, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Prov 25:11, NKJV). Words can heal or hurt, particularly at times of loss. Death is uncomfortable, awkward, and embarrassing. Few know what to say and cover their discom-

fort by mumbling platitudes or ignoring the subject completely. You should *not* say, “Could be worse.” Things could be better, too! The current status of a person’s feelings is not up for debate. While it is true that as believers, we have the hope of seeing each other again on the resurrection morning, the loss of a spouse’s presence, love, help, and wisdom is keenly felt now.

Visit the bereaved as soon as possible and keep visiting them or arrange for others to visit. Remember, the deceased person has a name; use it. Share your favorite memories or something you admired in the dead person. It shows they are not forgotten, and for the surviving spouse this is like a healing balm for a wounded heart. Ask them to tell you about their spouse. Actively listen as they tell their stories. Sharing the story of their spouse is one way of processing what has happened. Asking questions can aid in that process.



Share texts of comfort for the widowed, like Psalms 23, 28, 34, 46, and Hebrews 4:14–16. Offer promises that God will provide daily strength, such as Lamentations 3:21–22. Remind them of the reality and hope of the resurrection in John 10:27–30, Philippians 1:21–23, and Revelation 21–22.

MID- TO LONG-TERM SUPPORT

Friends usually contact the widowed upon first hearing of their loss, but after the funeral, life moves on for others while the widowed is left grappling with the

new reality of being alone. It is often several weeks or even months after the death that a person fully realizes the permanence and full dimension of spousal loss. When the first wave of support and condolences has vanished one often experiences great loneliness. This is when a visit, phone call, or handwritten letter can express tangibly that the widowed is not forgotten.

Practical Help

An extension of “presence ministry” is providing practical help, particularly with jobs that the deceased spouse may have done. This may be anything from cutting the grass to technical support with computers or cooking.

Support Versus Control

There are no right or wrong ways to grieve. Each person is unique and experiences loss differently. It is easy to get impatient, feeling that if only the widowed would do this or that, things would be so much better. Your ideas may be good, but not for the person concerned. Suggest and point out alternatives, but make sure the widowed has the time and space they need to make their own decisions.

Often the pain of losing a spouse is so overwhelming that the widowed may be tempted to numb the emptiness and grief by distracting their mind through alcohol, gambling, or other addictions. Don’t be judgmental. Rather, offer professional help and let the person know that they are still needed and loved.

Reintegration

Following bereavement, going to church alone is often difficult. Planning in advance for someone to sit with them, or alerting the deacons and deaconesses so they can sensitive-

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ly help them, can make it easier. In larger churches it is easy to miss someone. A creative idea, developed by the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church, is giving a pin to bereaved people to wear to church. This is a discreet way of letting the deacons and deaconesses know that this person may require some extra care.⁵


Moving On

After a while, people express the hope that the widowed will “get over it” or “move on.” Significant loss is not something one gets over or moves on from. Rather, it is a journey of learning to “move forward” and finding ways to integrate the loss into the new reality of life. Love does not end with death, but rather takes on a different form. No longer is it possible to talk and interact with their spouse. The widowed will remember the person with whom they shared their life and will be grateful for them. This is partly an internal journey, but encouraging them to share stories of their life, writing, or creative projects as they move forward, may be a blessing to many.⁶

Remembrance

Grief is like waves. Sometimes it comes without warning, but there are also flash points: anniversaries, birthdays, and the holidays. Remembering the widowed at these times can ease their pain and help them integrate their loss into their new reality.

PREPARATION FOR THE DEATH OF A SPOUSE

Death is both certain and often untimely. Helping families in the church to support the widowed creates opportunities to facilitate discussions between spouses regarding their wishes when one dies. Having these conversations in advance can provide much comfort and help in times of great pressure. 

¹ See “International Widows’ Day,” United Nations, accessed October 8, 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/observances/widows-day>.

² See Joseph Chamie, “Widowhood: Stressful and Unprepared,” IPS News, February 3, 2020, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2020/02/widowhood-stressful-unprepared>.

³ “International Widows’ Day.”

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), 5.

⁵ Heart Lifters, <https://heartlifters.org>, is a ministry developed by the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church for those who have lost a spouse through death, divorce, or dementia.

⁶ Although not the result of spousal loss, a good example of a creative project is the Golden Shoes Project, a series of street art installations consisting of shoes painted gold by a community. Each pair represents a life lost to violence; each installation is a visual symbol of the total lives lost throughout one year in a specific city. See “About,” Golden Shoes Project, accessed October 8, 2020, <http://www.goldenshoesproject.com/about.html>.

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