Divorce and the Church: What You Need to Know, What You Can Do
“Hi, Pastor, I’m sorry to be calling so late. I just got home and discovered that my wife has moved out. She left a note saying she’s not in love with me anymore and that she’s filing for divorce. I don’t know what to do.”

Maybe you’ve received a call like that late at night. Or maybe you’ve had a discussion like this with a member of your staff:

“I haven’t seen Steve and Lois at church lately. What’s going on with them?”

“Haven’t you heard? They got divorced. After it was finalized, Steve abandoned his faith and Lois left the church. She said she no longer felt like there was a place for her here.”

Divorce.

It’s a word marked by sadness, pain, and broken dreams. It signals the bitter end of a relationship that was supposed to last a lifetime—one that began with the words, “What God has joined together, let no man separate” (Mark 10:9).

Standing at the center of this tragic situation is a couple—a man and a woman who committed their very lives to one another only to discover that things would not turn out the way they envisioned. Their divorce has had a terrible impact on their children. It has caused tension and fractured relationships with extended family members and friends. It has brought devastation not only to their own relationship, but to those around them, as well as maybe to their health and even their livelihood.

If you’ve seen a situation like this unfold for a couple in your congregation, you know how difficult it can be—and not just for the family at ground zero. That’s because, in big and small ways, divorce also impacts the church.

The Study: An Overview of Divorce in the Church

But what is the extent of that impact? That’s the question Focus on the Family and LifeWay Research sought to answer with a recent study of divorce in the church. The research focused on three distinct groups: 1) Protestant pastors; 2) churchgoing Americans in healthy marriages; and 3) churchgoing Americans who had divorced in the past five years.

Before exploring the study, it’s important to note that committed church attendance decreases the likelihood of divorce. University of Connecticut sociologist Bradley Wright’s analysis of General Social Survey data confirms that frequent church attendees divorce at a lower rate than those who attend church less frequently. That’s the good news—it points to the importance of committed religious observance in holding marriages together. At the same time, Focus on the Family and LifeWay’s study reveals that divorce continues to be a serious concern facing churches.

For example, 40 percent of pastors who responded to the survey said that at least one couple in their church separated or divorced in the past year. Clearly, there is work to be done. But it is work worth doing! Our research highlights the fact that there are important ministry opportunities to pursue, both in terms of cultivating stronger marriages within the church and also ministering to individuals who have been impacted by divorce.

It should go without saying that creating a better survival rate for marriages is not the ultimate goal. The Church’s mission is to make disciples who follow Christ in every area of life and in every relationship. As a pastor or ministry leader, you understand this better than most.

Even so, it’s important to understand that marital strife and divorce can threaten to detract from, and ultimately
derail, the Church’s mission. By investing in strong marriages as a church and by helping to shepherd your congregation in the pursuit of healthy relationships, you are contributing to that overarching goal of making disciples and carrying the light of the Gospel.

Dr. Greg Smalley, Focus on the Family’s Vice President of Family Ministries says, “A Christ-centered marriage is one of the strongest forces on earth because it reflects the deeper truth of Christ and His love for His bride. That is why it is under attack. While the impact is not always immediate and obvious, nothing can more negatively affect your church’s ministry and mission, and thwart future growth, than hurting marriages and divorce.”

With these thoughts in mind, let’s explore the research further and examine what it means for you, your church, and the families God has entrusted to your care.

**Overview:**

**The Impact of Divorce on the Church**

When it comes to the negative impact of divorce on both individuals and the church body as a whole, the Focus on the Family/LifeWay study revealed a number of important findings. Here are some of the most noteworthy:

- 47 percent of those who divorced in the past five years said that they left the church they attended before the divorce.
- Rarely will both members of a couple remain at the church they attended after a divorce—only 10 percent do so.
- One in five divorced couples said they stopped attending church entirely following the divorce.
- In addition, more than a third of couples said at least one of their children stopped attending church following the divorce.
- 32 percent of the divorced couples surveyed said they ended up tithing less to their church than they did prior to the divorce, and more than a quarter of this group stopped giving to their church altogether.
- One out of every six pastors in the survey reported that a divorce in their church created a leadership void.
- 31 percent of the pastors surveyed said that a divorce resulted in the fracturing of other relationships within their church.
- 11 percent of pastors said that a divorce hurt the church’s reputation.
- 10 percent of pastors reported that a divorce “halted their church’s momentum.”
- 9 percent of pastors reported that an adult Sunday school class or small group disbanded as the result of a divorce.

**Suffering in Silence:**

**The Pain beneath the Surface**

Given the sobering findings above, it’s natural to ask, “How could this have been avoided? What are some of the warning signs that will help me, as a church leader, intervene and offer counsel and assistance before a couple reaches the point of divorce?”

Unfortunately, even for the most troubled couples, the warning signs can be difficult to spot. Our research revealed that before a divorce, couples in troubled marriages often look a lot like their happily married counterparts at church. Both couples in happy marriages and those facing serious marital discord participate, serve, and lead in the church at similar rates. Specifically, our research found that:

- Three months prior to their separation, 70 percent of regular churchgoers who divorce are attending church once a week or more, compared to 87 percent of couples in healthy marriages.
- Similarly, 46 percent of couples who divorce and 41 percent of those in healthy marriages reported being involved in small groups at their church.
- 34 percent of couples who divorce and 31 percent of those in healthy marriages served in community ministries at their church.
- 39 percent of couples who ended up divorcing and 44 percent of couples in healthy relationships held positions of responsibility at their church.
FROM THE SURVEY:

**Individuals in Healthy Marriages:**
*How often do you personally attend worship services at a Christian church? (Select One)*

**Divorcees:**
*Three months prior to separating from your former spouse, how often did you personally attend worship services at a Christian church? (Select One)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Healthy Marriages</th>
<th>Divorcees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than once a week</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About once a week</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once or twice a month</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Individuals in Healthy Marriages:**
*What is your level of commitment to your church today?*

**Divorcees:**
*Three months prior to your separation, what was your level of commitment to your church?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commitment Level</th>
<th>Healthy Marriages</th>
<th>Divorcees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completely committed</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very committed</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat committed</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat uncommitted</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very uncommitted</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completely uncommitted</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Vulnerability Gap:**
*People are Hesitant to Share Their Struggles*

What is going on here? How can couples facing a deep crisis in their marriage serve and lead in their churches at roughly the same rate as their happily married counterparts?

As a pastor, you know that it’s often possible for men and women who are struggling with serious challenges to put on a brave face, bury their pain, and arrive on Sunday morning with a smile and a sunny demeanor that masks the reality of the hurt and dysfunction they are experiencing at home.

Our research only confirms this. The sad reality is that a significant percentage of churchgoers who are on the brink of separation keep quiet at church about their marital problems. Specifically, our survey revealed that:

- Of those who divorced, less than half discussed their marriage problems with their lead pastor.
- Only 13 percent of those who divorced reported speaking to another church staff member about their marriage difficulties.
- Only one in ten couples who divorced talked to a member of their small group or Sunday school class about their trials at home.
- Amazingly, a full 31 percent of respondents told no one at their church about the marital difficulties that eventually resulted in their divorce.

**FROM THE SURVEY:**

“My church is a safe place to talk about marital difficulties.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreement Level</th>
<th>Healthy Marriages</th>
<th>Divorcees</th>
<th>Pastors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Sure</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Asked of those divorcees who attend church today.*

You might find these figures surprising. We all want our churches to be places where we can be open and transparent, where we can lay our burdens down. Unfortunately, in our social media-dominated world, many families feel the need to cover up their brokenness. Whether it’s from a fear of rejection or just a desire to look as happy and fulfilled (seemingly) as their Facebook friends, many people would rather cover up their pain than reach out for help.
The Communication Gap: Raising Awareness That Help is Available

But our research suggests that there is another factor at play here, as well—and that is that many couples may not realize help is available, at least not at their church. This doesn’t necessarily mean that churches aren’t offering help. But our study shows that there is a clear disconnect between the marriage-enriching resources a church offers and the degree to which parishioners take advantage of those resources. While most pastors say their churches offer counseling referrals and other marriage helps, fewer churchgoers agree. Consider the following:

- 77 percent of pastors say their churches offer a wide range of marriage support services, including resources such as books and videos.
- 75 percent of pastors say their church offers referrals to professional counseling outside the church for couples who are experiencing marital difficulties (or other problems).

HOWEVER...
- Only 38 percent of churchgoers in healthy marriages believe their church offers resources to promote healthy marriage.
- And only 21 percent of those who divorced were aware of resources from their church to help strengthen marriage.

It is possible, of course, that pastors who responded to the survey were overstating the extent of their church’s marriage ministry. But it’s also possible that even in churches with a broad range of marriage resources, many men and women in the congregation are simply unaware that such tools exist. If couples facing serious marital struggles don’t even know help is available at their church, there is clearly a gap in communication.

FROM THE SURVEY:

Does your church offer any of the following marriage support services to people in the church? (Select all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Healthy Marriages</th>
<th>Divorces</th>
<th>Pastors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-marital counseling or education for engaged couples</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital counseling provided by the church</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referrals to professional counseling outside the church</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage resources available (e.g. books, videos)</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sermons several times a year that specifically address marriage</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>68%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminars or short-term classes on marriage topics</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult small groups/Sunday School classes devoted to married couples</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled child care for a date night or parents night out</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest speakers on marriage topics</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministries aimed at supporting divorced individuals</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage retreats</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pastors were asked the frequency that they preached sermons that specifically address marriage.
Pastors:
*Which of the following barriers would your church need to overcome to provide additional support for married couples? (Select all that apply)*

- Our church is providing sufficient support for couples (61%)
- Couples are not asking for additional support (61%)
- Couples in our church don’t seem to need help (42%)
- Lack of staff time (40%)
- Not feeling qualified as marriage experts (34%)
- Lack of finances (33%)
- Lack of ideas that would work in their context (22%)
- Not knowing what to offer (22%)

The Challenge and the Opportunity

People expect local churches to host and conduct weddings for churchgoers. But the church’s investment in marriage should be so much more robust than that! Opportunities exist to minister to couples before marriage, to provide practical help during marriage, to readily assist those experiencing marital difficulties, and to minister to individuals who go through a divorce.

According to Dr. Greg Smalley, “The tragic reality is that most churches do very little to actively strengthen and equip couples to have Christ-centered, satisfying, and long-lasting marriages... the kind pastors hope will truly impact this generation for the Gospel. This is not an indictment of the pastor, but a grim reality they face with available staff, budgets, ministerial priorities, and the sheer volume of the couples that need help.”

Although the challenges to creating a dynamic, forward-thinking marriage ministry can seem daunting, it’s imperative that local churches assume a proactive role in serving couples at every point in their marriage. Being forthright with this expectation that couples need help, and that they will encounter difficulties, is the type of authentic ministry needed to encourage couples to seek help from within the church.

For those who have already experienced divorce, churches have the opportunity to communicate the forgiveness available through Jesus Christ. One third of divorcees feel they have failed God because of their divorce. While the grief that comes with the end of the marriage may last for some time, reconciliation with God can begin immediately.

Dr. Gary Oliver, Executive Director of the Center for Marriage and Family Studies at John Brown University, has summed up the Church’s mission well when it comes to marriage ministry: “The church has been called to be a lighthouse for people. The church is the source of solutions for what ails a lost and dying society. The church isn’t primarily about buildings, budgets and business. I enthusiastically agree with the growing number of Christian leaders who believe that developing a comprehensive marriage ministry is one of the most effective means of helping our people learn what it means to be ‘conformed to the image of His son’ and of outreach into our communities.”

Post-Divorce Ministry

As we have already noted, our survey suggests that one third of divorcees feel they have failed God because of their divorce.

Many things change after a divorce. It is rare for both members of the couple to continue attending the same church. So, often divorcees are in need of new church connections. One third of divorcees agree that a friendship from church has grown more strained after their divorce.

But at the same time, almost seven in ten divorcees agree that their divorce has brought them closer to God (69%). Churches that are willing to minister to people going through divorce or rebounding from divorce often can participate in this transformation. Individual churchgoers who have experienced divorce indicate that their divorce is much more likely to have a positive impact on their relationship with God than negative.
• 32% of divorcees say that one impact of their divorce is that they are “much more interested in their relationship with God.”

• 22% are slightly more interested in their relationship with God

• 33% say their divorce has had no impact on their relationship with God

• 8% are slightly less interested in their relationship with God

• 5% are much less interested in their relationship with God

While many churches are doing many good things to invest in marriages, churchgoers who divorce indicate many churches could be doing more.

• 4 out of 10 divorcees wish the church they attended prior to their separation had done more to teach them about healthy marriage.

• 44% of divorcees wish the church they attended prior to their separation had given them more hands-on help to have a healthy marriage.

Church leaders cannot wait for problems to emerge among couples in the church before they act. Yet, our research suggests that this is the posture of four in ten pastors. Asking, “How much should my church invest in marriage?” is similar to asking, “How much should I teach about grace or forgiveness or redemption?” Those biblical themes are likely evident in much of your ministry, and we earnestly believe that an emphasis on healthy marriages should be approached with similar frequency and urgency. Support for marriage is always needed in practical and relevant ways!

Proactive: 10 Marriage Ministry Guidelines for Churches and Pastors

At Focus on the Family, we believe that strong marriages—and, by extension, healthy families—are the bedrock of a thriving, life-giving, world-changing, Gospel-centered church. That’s why it’s so important that even as churches and pastors work to come alongside those who are facing marital crises or divorce, they must make every effort to invest in stable, healthy marriages before they reach a point of crisis. The old adage is true, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

With this in mind, here are ten Marriage Ministry Guidelines for you to consider as you pray about how to invest in stable, healthy marriages within your own congregation:

1. Focus on the Gospel and its impact on marriage. The purpose of each individual and couple is to glorify God. God designed marriage as a covenant relationship between a man and a woman “until death do us part.” Sin has corrupted marriage in both small ways and in large and devastating ones. Yet Jesus came to redeem us from sin’s curse. It is so easy for a couple to become obsessed with an argument or the finality of divorce that they lose sight of the hope found in the Gospel of grace.

2. Foster community in your church. Individuals and couples need relationships with other believers who will care about them, encourage them, and ask tough questions. Small groups, Bible studies, or Sunday school classes for adults are essential to ensure couples are “doing life” together with other believers.

3. Offer pre-marital counseling to all couples engaged in your church, either on site or off site by a qualified staff member. Thankfully, 90 percent of churches currently require premarital counseling prior to the wedding date. Research shows that couples who engage in some form of premarital counseling are 30 percent less likely to get a divorce.

4. Empathize with those facing marital difficulties. Acknowledge the reality of marital struggles from the pulpit so that couples in your congregation who are experiencing strife at home will know that they are not alone. Don’t be afraid to talk about relational obstacles, especially as they relate to marriage, and make them a frequent point of application in sermons.

5. Draw on the human resources in your own congregation. Find a spiritually mature couple in your church that has gone through divorce in their past. Ask them to specifically reach out to any couple that separates in your church. In addition, find one or more mature mentor couples in your church with thriving relationships that can organize and plan helpful classes, retreats, or events to invest in marriages.
6. **Network with other churches.** Your church is not alone in this important work. Talk to other pastors and church leaders in your area and agree to keep each other informed of the things each is doing to invest in marriage. Activities that take a lot of planning, such as retreats, seminars, or simulcasts can be planned together or by a larger church. Then other churches can send a group of couples to that event and benefit from the Kingdom mindset of the all churches involved.

7. **Work with Christian counselors.** Identify Christian marriage counselors in your area and create a referral list. As a pastor or ministry leader, counseling every couple that may need help in your church may not be your skill and may not be possible during certain seasons. Furthermore, some couples may prefer the confidentiality of a neutral third party outside your church. Once your referral list is in place, **frequently tell your church that you have a list of counselors available for those facing marital difficulties.** As our study shows, even in churches with counseling referrals in place, many couples simply aren’t aware that such help is available. Don’t keep the information to yourself! Finally, consider budgeting to cover the cost of the first visit for a couple taking advantage of a referral.

8. **Keep the communication lines open with both individuals when a separation or divorce occurs.** Let them know you care and that you want them connected in a solid, Gospel-centered church—even if it is not *your* church. If either feels the need to find a new church, be prepared to offer recommendations.

9. **Start a ministry to care for those who divorce.** Providing practical help and biblical guidance through this time of grieving and transition is crucial. Consider starting a **Divorce Care** group in your church.

10. **Connect with Focus on the Family.** We’re committed to coming alongside you as you endeavor to invest in the health of the couples in your congregation and minister to those who are hurting. In fact, we can offer direct assistance with many of the action items listed above, whether it be our premarital and mentoring curriculum **Ready to Wed**, our **nationwide referral network of Christian counselors**, or our **Thriving Pastor website**, which includes additional resources to help you foster healthy marriages in your congregation, among many other things. We’ve also created a free resource that explores the ins-and-outs of creating a church-based marriage ministry in much greater detail—request your copy today!

**Conclusion**

Dr. Greg Smalley once said, “The Church should be the number-one ‘distribution center’ for healthy marriages in the nation because of its unique role. After all, 80 percent of marriages began in one! Because of this, the Church has a unique opportunity to build a relationship with couples that can last throughout their entire marriage.”

Our prayer is that you and your church will catch the vision for making an intentional, pro-active investment in the health and vitality of the marriages in your congregation, even as you strive to provide added ministry and support for those who have already been impacted by divorce. We hope that the research and resources outlined in this booklet will give you and your team some valuable insights and information as you endeavor to strengthen marriages in your church—for the sake of Christ and His Kingdom.

**A Brief Note on Methodology**

LifeWay Research conducted three surveys for this study sponsored by Focus on the Family. A phone survey of 1,000 pastors provided a representative view from those leading Protestant churches. To obtain perspective from solid marriages, an online survey was conducted among individuals in healthy marriages who attend church once a month or more. Finally, the most poignant perspective came from an online survey of 1,000 Americans who divorced in the last 5 years and who were attending church at least once a month three months prior to their separation.