

Faith Strategies for Healing from Divorce and Uncoupling

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The following report is a working draft in process. Please contact Dr. Jenkins at kejenk@wm.edu if you have comments or wish to suggest additional resources.

This is the print-ready version of the online resource by the same name. Visit us at <http://www.congregationalresources.org/FaithStrategiesDivorce/About.asp> to see it online.

The Project

How do individuals experience divorce through religious practice and community? How are faith communities responding to divorce and uncoupling?

I have spent four years listening to stories of searching for spiritual healing and supportive congregational networks during separation and divorce. I have interviewed religious leaders and divorced individuals from Evangelical and Mainline Protestantism; Catholicism; Black Baptist congregations; Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Judaism; and Unitarian Universalism. I have also attended support groups and special religious events for the divorced in many of these communities.

I want to introduce here some of the rituals and practices for divorced members that I have found beyond one-on-one ministerial counseling. I outline some of my research to date in each tradition, preliminary findings regarding major challenges and issues faced by religious communities as they attempt to provide formal practices for the divorced, and a list of selective resources that leaders and divorced individuals found useful in each tradition.

My research is clearly not representative of all religious experience, but my findings do provide a window into the number and kind of approaches at work in U.S. religious communities. Admittedly, I hope in this preliminary report to promote confidence that an attention to how individuals experience divorce within their religious communities has the potential to strengthen faith and families, as well as enhance religious membership, participation, and congregational life. I hope it will inspire the continuation, creation, and support for meaningful practice.

I have found many efforts in faith communities to transform what is often a devastating life event into an opportunity to grow stronger in faith and religious community. Yet, there is no question that the lingering shame and stigma surrounding divorce deeply influences a person's religious experience. In most cases, the rituals and practices I found were borne despite persistent cultural and congregational silence and stigma. In

one memorable exchange with an elderly Conservative rabbi, as I questioned him about the construction of divorce ritual, he answered, "Why would we want a ritual for a plague?"

I sensed consistent concern on the part of some religious leaders that creating new rituals and practices for the divorced might somehow sanction and encourage relationship dissolution.

And yet, as they faced the end of what was supposed to be a sacred, life-long union, many members of these congregations worked to embrace practices that reinforced acceptance from and full participation in their faith. They embraced the idea, well put by Rabbi Perry Netter (2002: 112), author of *Divorce is a Mitzvah*, that "to make order out of chaos is a highly religious act." They took seriously the Evangelical Christian DivorceCare program suggestion that "the emotional support you need [in getting through divorce] comes from your spiritual life being stable first." And perhaps most significant to those who see the creation of divorce practices as a portent of marriage devaluation, the majority of these members and their religious leaders unquestionably reaffirmed marriage and sacred life partnerships as they worked to heal, forgive, and begin anew.

Catholicism

My research in Catholicism centered in a divorced Catholics' organization that took shape in the early 1970s, born under the charismatic direction and authority of Father James J. Young (from the Paulist Center in Boston, Massachusetts) and Sister Paula Ripple.

Catholic Divorce Ministry's webpage (www.nacsd.org/) highlights regional and national conferences, retreats, and support groups. Its stated purpose reads: "We believe that the Church has a rich treasury of people, scripture, tradition, and pastoral ministry on which it can draw to serve its members whose marriages end in divorce. We strive to lay open this wealth and make known Christ's abundant love so that all who suffer from separation and divorce might experience healing, reconciliation, and new life."

CDM's support groups and conferences offer workshops on anger, forgiveness, helping children post-divorce, annulments, and remarriage. CDM and its affiliated regional organizations also offer training workshops for divorce ministry leadership on starting and maintaining a support group. Conferences, support groups, and retreats are open to people from all faiths and those who do not identify with any particular religious tradition/community. Catholics who have experienced the death of a spouse are also included. Several of the Catholics I interviewed had also participated in the national healing program called "Beginning Experience" (www.beginningexperience.org/).

Judaism

I began my search for divorce practice in the Conservative Movement. One of the first rabbis with whom I spoke suggested that I read *Divorce is a Mitzvah*, by Rabbi Perry Netter. Netter has also written a very helpful pamphlet entitled, "Parenting through a Divorce," published in 2003 by Life Lights. Netter is a rabbi from Los Angeles who has been divorced. His title is clearly provocative and invites misinterpretation. He does not mean to say that individuals are commanded to divorce but that divorcing well is a mitzvah (a moral law or commandment).

Several Jewish individuals and leaders from Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative Judaism that I interviewed were engaged in making the get (Jewish divorce ritual) or newer separation ceremonies meaningful healing/ending rituals. I found most of the ritual innovation for divorced and separated Jews outside of Conservative synagogues—in Jewish Family Service organizations, Centers for Jewish Healing, Reconstructionist and Reform Judaism, and explicitly feminist organizations. Support groups for the divorced were found in Jewish Healing Centers and Jewish Family Service organizations. The website, www.ritualwell.org, a project of the Jewish Women's Project of the JCC in Manhattan and the Jewish Women's Gender Studies Program of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, was also a popular source for divorce practice.

I found an interesting recreation of traditional ritual at Mayyim Hayyim. Founded in 2004, Mayyim Hayyim is a Living Waters Community Mikveh (mikveh is the Jewish ritual bath) and Education Center in Newton, Massachusetts. Its mission statement reads: "To reclaim and reinvent one of our most ancient Jewish rituals—immersion in the mikveh—for contemporary spiritual uses and to make this new, sacred space open and accessible to all Jews in the Greater Boston area." I visited the center in the fall of 2007 and interviewed one of the volunteers/guides. I also interviewed a divorced woman who had gone through an immersion at Mayyim Hayyim after receiving her Jewish divorce. Several other women with whom I spoke were planning to conduct a similar ritual at their local mikveh.

Evangelical and Mainline Protestantism

My search for divorce ritual and practice in Protestantism began with fieldwork over six months at a formerly Pentecostal church in New England. This church was shaping its church mission, programming, and physical structure on the Saddleback Purpose-Driven Church model. This church adopted the DivorceCare program, a 13-week video/Bible study series. It was also acquiring Saddleback's Celebrate Recovery program for addictions and challenging life issues like divorce.

During a phone conversation with DivorceCare's producers, Church Initiative, a representative told me that 10,000 churches in the U.S., Canada, and several other countries were using DivorceCare. I analyzed the DivorceCare video series and conducted informal interviews and a focus group. I also attended a DivorceCare group that met at a United Methodist church in a southern state.

The DivorceCare program is essentially a marriage of a support group model and an evangelical Bible study/prayer group. Ministers and lay leaders at both churches praised the ease with which DivorceCare allowed them to start a badly needed support group. Participants also have access to a DivorceCare website that leads them to other resources.

DivorceCare is explicitly evangelical. However, outside of the videos, the extent to which the DivorceCare experience is evangelical likely varies with the leaders and the church communities. In the support group that I attended in the United Methodist Church, there was a Catholic woman present. As a person of the Jewish faith who had been divorced, I was welcomed to participate in the group and to speak from my own religious perspective. DivorceCare also has a program for children, DivorceCare4Kids, that was offered at the Methodist church and met at the same time as DivorceCare.

I found many groups for the divorced in Protestant churches across the country that operated under a support group model. Groups ranged from secular to religious in content and programming, and most presented as being open to people from various religious and non-religious backgrounds.

For example, in searching for practices for the divorced in mainline churches in Northern California, I spoke with a representative from the Menlo Park Presbyterian Church Divorce Recovery Group, a group that grew out of their singles ministry and has been in existence for over twenty years. Their divorce recovery series incorporates speakers and videos, as well as small groups. The Menlo Park website has helpful resource links and books.

The National Baptist Convention, USA holds a yearly Singles Conference that includes smaller groups for the divorced.

Challenges and Issues

Volunteer Pool: Most of the approaches I found were grounded in a support group model. This model necessitates committed volunteers and ministry leaders who are willing to dedicate a significant amount of time and energy to training and facilitating. Given that we live in a society where the demands of the workplace are high and more and more families are composed of dual wage earners, locating such volunteers was a major challenge.

Financial: Tight budgets and lack of financial resources on the part of religious communities and their members who are experiencing separation and divorce present significant problems. To maintain support groups, conferences, and workshops, ministry leaders and members often need to travel and take time away from work and family obligations.

Many individuals who are recently divorced find themselves in a precarious financial position. Women, especially, suffer financially post-divorce. As women tend to participate in higher numbers in these groups (and in religious communities in general), attention to their financial needs is essential as a congregation thinks about programming for the divorced. Many women have physical custody of their children and may have to pay for or arrange babysitting if they wish to attend an event or group.

The individuals with whom I spoke encouraged serious consideration of these needs through organized babysitting, programs for children of divorce that meet at the same time, and possible budget allocation for programming.

Getting the Word Out: Promoting awareness of existing programs is a challenge in many traditions. A significant number of respondents in each tradition told of difficulty in searching for a religious support group and what they perceived as a general lack of programming for the divorced. Informing clergy and members of the religious groups and practices available seems to be of crucial and ongoing importance.

To Monitor or Not: Leaders of support groups had concerns about monitoring and structure. Do you group together individuals who are newly divorced and have a separate group for those who have been out of the marriage for a significant period? Is the group "open," meaning can people walk in without calling first and talking to the group leaders? Some group leaders felt that it was important to determine whether

persons were so bereft that they could not function in a group; others left the door open for all and found this worked well.

Another monitoring concern was gender: do you segregate? A major concern from almost all group leaders was that the group not become a "dating service." Most groups did allow men and women—and even in my limited sample, it became clear that members did date each other while still in the group. In one case they married.

Contributing to Stigma: Some religious leaders and individuals voiced concern that addressing divorce and uncoupling by creating separate practices and groups may heighten shame or stigma, and that the effort should be placed instead on making sure that they were made to feel a part of the larger church community. Indeed, many of the individuals with whom I spoke felt that they had benefited from the pastoral counseling model, as well as having drawn comfort and meaning from religious music and regular worship. The creation of explicit rituals and practices/groups for the divorced then involves a conscious balancing of these dynamics.

Congregational Model as Nuclear Family: Most of the divorced individuals with whom I spoke belonged to congregations where they felt excluded as a single divorced individual or parent. This was especially true in the case of those Jewish individuals who were members of Conservative synagogues. When congregations think deeply about how the divorced experience membership in their communities, they are necessarily addressing a larger issue regarding singles and making their programming and worship a place where all are included.

Opportunity to Bring in New Members and Sustain the Old: Ending a marriage or long-term partnership can both push one away from religious community and draw one into a congregation. The people with whom I spoke confirmed these possibilities. In most of the practices detailed here, there is openness to participation by people of other religious communities or people without a faith background. In several cases, I heard stories of members converting to new religious traditions or joining congregations on the basis of involvement in religious programming for the divorced.

Marriage and Life Partnership as Sacred: Despite fear on the part of some religious leaders that rituals for the divorced will encourage divorce, in my research to date I have found reinforcement of marriage and/or exclusive intimate partnership as sacred relationships. Many of these divorce practices included lessons on building new "healthy" relationships and defining good marriages.

Whether or not same sex marriages were affirmed depended, of course, on religious traditions and congregations. My research clearly suggests that introducing new practices and rituals for the divorced does not endanger deeply felt religious ideology. Marriage and sacred relationship ideals are often reaffirmed through these new practices and rituals for the divorced and uncoupling.

Involving Men in Faith Communities: Men participated in all of the support groups I studied and in some cases led groups. They were active in workshops and conferences as well. Women made up the majority of group and new ritual participants. In one particular case, men in a community complained that a support group had been formed for women only; the organization allowed both men and women the following year and had several male participants. In another case, a man was allowed to participate in one

support group session, but not allowed to be a part of the follow-up session. He was clearly disappointed that there was no place for him to go.

Congregations should think deeply about the religious and spiritual concerns of both men and women who are experiencing divorce and uncoupling.

Resources

- **Catholicism**

Beginning Experience (Organization)

<http://www.beginningexperience.org/>

Beginning Experience offers programs for adults and children grieving the loss of relationships—whether through divorce or death. The core weekend programs are supplemented with "pre-weekend" and "post-weekend" workshops.

Catholic Divorce Ministry (Organization)

<http://www.nacsd.org/>

A ministry of the North American Conference of Separated and Divorced Catholics, Catholic Divorce Ministry offers groups, resources, and trainings that address "the religious, emotional, financial, and parenting issues relative to separation, divorce, and remarriage.

Catholics Experiencing Divorce: Grieving, Healing, and Learning to Live Again (Revised Edition) (Book)

Vicki Wells Bedard and William E. Rabor, Authors. Ligouri, MO: Ligouri Publications, 2004.

Of value to both Catholics and non-Catholics, this book provides comfort and support to those going through divorce. Included are comments on the annulment process, the rite of confession, and approaches to the prospect of remarriage.

Divorcing, Believing, Belonging (Book)

James J. Young, Author. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984.

James Young discusses the emotional processes involved in divorce, from separation to remarriage. The author also addresses prayer, forgiveness, trust, and the role of the Catholic Church.

Finding Your Way through Divorce (Book)

Kathy Brewer Gorham, Author. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2006.

Drawing on both personal experience and research, Kathy Brewer Gorham helps persons who are divorcing cope with loneliness, fear, resentment, numbness, despair, guilt, and grief. She also explains how to forgive, move on, and re-connect with others.

Healing the Wounds of Divorce: A Spiritual Guide to Recovery (Book)

Barbara Leahy Shlemon, Author. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1992.

Barbara Leahy Shlemon writes of the deep pain she experienced when her marriage of 30 years ended, and of her healing process. Chapters in this book focus on coping with difficult emotions as well as on dealing with finances, children, and relatives.

Pieces to Peace (Book)

Jackie Blair, Claire Briand, Helen E. McCabe, Editors. Hancock, MI: NACSDC, 2003.

Written by and for members of the North American Conference of Separated and Divorced Catholics, this book addresses the difficulties and growing edges faced by anyone experiencing the loss of a relationship.

This Blessed Mess: Finding Hope Amidst Life's Chaos (Book)

Patricia H. Livingston, Author. Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2000.

Patricia Livingston's stories and insights explore the science of chaos and the reality of life's messiness. They also offer personal and spiritual resources for responding with humor, hope, and grace. Readers are encouraged to "laugh amidst the mess," to look for goodness, to "hang in there," and to pray.

• **Judaism**

Divorce Is a Mitzvah: A Practical Guide to Finding Wholeness and Holiness When Your Marriage Dies (Book)

Perry Netter, Author. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2002.

Rabbi Perry Netter discusses Jewish wisdom about divorce, helping readers understand its impact on oneself, one's family, one's friends, and one's children. Questions addressed include "Is divorce kosher?"; "Why is this happening?"; and "How do we continue to raise children together?"

Jewish Lights Publishing (Publisher)

<http://www.jewishlights.com/>

Jewish Lights Publishing is devoted to producing and selling books "that reflect the Jewish wisdom tradition for people of all faiths, all backgrounds." Readers interested in divorce and other life transition issues may want to check out the "Grief and Healing" or "Life Cycle and Parenting" sections of its website.

Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones (Book)

Debra Orenstein, Editor. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998.

Many life transitions—such as menstruation, childbirth, menopause, and divorce—are not honored in traditional Judaism or other faith traditions. Rabbi Debra Orenstein seeks

to remedy this situation by bringing together 50 writers who offer prayers, poems, and rituals for such occasions.

Mayyim Hayyim (Organization)
<http://www.mayyimhayyim.org/>

Based in Newton, Massachusetts, Mayyim Hayyim seeks to honor the mikveh (or "ritual bath") as a significant Jewish ritual for times of transition—including divorce. In addition to providing a place for this ritual practice, Mayyim Hayyim offers articles and other educational materials as free downloads from its website.

National Center for Jewish Healing (Organization)
<http://www.ncjh.org/>

Begun in the early 1990s, this organization has established local healing centers throughout North America and provides consulting, education, publications, and program models for those seeking Jewish healing resources. Its website supplies numerous links to relevant sites. Bibliographies and downloadable reports cover topics ranging from getting closer to God to forming healing circles.

The Outstretched Arm: 2004 Special Edition, "The Crisis of Divorce" (Booklet)
New York, NY: National Center for Jewish Healing, 2004.

The Outstretched Arm, published by the National Center for Jewish Healing, features articles focusing on healing and covering many topics—from addiction to separation to forgiveness. Each issue is between eight and ten pages long. The fall 2004 issue deals specifically with divorce.

Parenting through a Divorce (Booklet)
Perry Netter, Author. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing.

Part of the "Life Lights" booklet series from Jewish Lights Publishing, this booklet, written by Rabbi Perry Netter, provides advice on parenting responsibly and nurturing relationships with children during times of separation and divorce. Twelve copies are sold per pack, making it a good purchase for congregations or support groups.

Ritualwell.org (Web Resource)
<http://www.ritualwell.org/>

This website is part of the Jewish Women's Project of the JCC in Manhattan and the Jewish Women's Gender Studies program of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Rituals for many life passages, including separation and divorce, are featured on this site. Website visitors are encouraged to be creative in adapting these rituals to their needs.

Talking to God: Personal Prayers for Times of Joy, Sadness, and Celebration
(Book)

Naomi Levy, Author. New York, NY: Alfred Knopf, 2002.

This book from Conservative Rabbi Naomi Levy discusses prayer and presents prayers for many occasions—from daily life to major life transitions. Included are prayers for those facing marital troubles, divorce, and a second marriage.

To Begin Again: The Journey toward Comfort, Strength, and Faith in Difficult Times (Book)

Naomi Levy, Author. New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1999.

Naomi Levy focuses on grieving and healing in the aftermath of personal loss. Holding that God cannot prevent tragedy, she invites readers to consider "how can I go on?" after loss has occurred, rather than "why did this happen to me?"

• **Evangelical and Mainline Protestantism**

Celebrate Recovery (Organization)

<http://www.celebraterecovery.com/>

A ministry of Saddleback Church, Celebrate Recovery helps participants deal with addictions and other issues. It emphasizes personal responsibility, mutual accountability, adherence to biblical teaching, and a commitment to Christ. Its website includes resources, conferences, and contact information for local groups.

Divorce Care (Organization)

<http://www.divorcecare.org/>

DivorceCare supports healing and renewal for people going through divorce. In addition to providing contact information for local groups, its website points visitors to relevant books, brochures, and leadership training materials. An online six-week Bible study is available for personal or group study through the website's "Hope, Help, and Healing" section.

Divorce Recovery (Menlo Park Presbyterian Church) (Organization)

http://www.mppcfamily.org/app/w_page.php?id=851&type=group

Menlo Park Presbyterian Church offers a divorce recovery ministry that includes small groups, speakers, book referrals, and online links to sources of useful information—including state divorce laws, a divorce blog, interactive bulletin boards and message centers, and the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement.

Singles Conferences of the National Baptist Convention (Organization)

<http://www.nationalbaptist.com/Index.cfm?FuseAction=Page&PageID=1000044>

The National Baptist Convention holds yearly conferences for single individuals; conference themes vary from year to year. In 2008 the theme was "Singles, Looking Unto Jesus: The Author and Finisher of Our Faith." The conference also published "Singles: Strengthened, Secure, and Spirit Filled," which highlighted the 2007 conference. This publication is available for \$12.50 from Penny Howell, Bethel Missionary Baptist Church, 224 North Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard, Tallahassee, FL, 32301.

- **Unitarian Universalism**

Let's Talk About Divorce and Broken Relationships (Booklet)

Colleen McDonald, Author. Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association.

<http://www.uua.org/documents/mcdonaldcolleen/divorce.pdf>

This booklet offers a Unitarian Universalist (UU) perspective on separation and divorce. It explains how UU principles shed light on divorce, how divorce affects families, and how congregations can support those who are experiencing major life transitions such as divorce. Reflection questions and suggested action steps are included.