

Supporting Families Through Divorce

A Resource Guide for Family Ministry Leaders

Pastoral Care • Programs • Resources • Best Practices

Divorce touches nearly every congregation. Research suggests that close to half of church members who go through a divorce quietly leave their church — often because they feel judged, invisible, or unsure they belong. This is a pastoral crisis, and it is also an extraordinary opportunity for the church to be exactly what it is called to be: a field hospital for the wounded, a community of grace.

This guide equips family ministry leaders with the practical tools, programs, and best practices to build a church culture where divorcing families are met with compassion, kept connected, and supported through one of the most painful seasons of their lives.



Understanding the Pastoral Opportunity

Divorce is not a single event — it is a multi-year process involving legal disruption, emotional grief, housing and financial upheaval, co-parenting stress, and identity reconstruction. Families in this season are not looking for judgment. They are looking for someone to stay.

What Research Tells Us

- Nearly 50% of church-going adults who divorce leave their congregation — often feeling judged, isolated, or simply overlooked
- Children of divorce are at elevated risk for school difficulties, behavioral problems, and long-term mental health challenges when they lack consistent community support
- Pastoral presence — even simple check-ins — significantly reduces the sense of abandonment that divorcing adults report experiencing from their church
- Families who remain connected to a caring faith community during and after divorce show measurably better outcomes for both adults and children

“The church sometimes exacerbates the pain of divorce by its response — or lack thereof. Do we fear that showing compassion implies support for divorce? Maybe we just don’t know what to say.”

— Carolyne Call, The Christian Century



The ministry opportunity: *The family going through divorce is not leaving the faith. They are wondering if the faith community will leave them. Your consistent, non-judgmental presence answers that question before they have to ask it.*



What Divorcing Families Need from Ministry Leaders

The needs of families in divorce shift over time. Understanding those phases helps you deploy the right kind of care at the right moment.

Phase 1: The Crisis (First 3–6 Months)

This is the period of shock, acute grief, and practical chaos. Families need presence and practical help more than programs.

- Reach out personally — a call or visit from a pastor or ministry leader means everything
- Offer concrete practical help: meals, childcare, help with logistics
- Provide a referral list of Christian counselors, attorneys who are known for integrity, and community resources
- Assure them they belong here, they are not a source of embarrassment, and you are not going anywhere
- Gently remind children's ministry staff so children can be watched for distress

Phase 2: The Process (Months 6–18)

The initial crisis passes but the grinding work of divorce — legal proceedings, co-parenting adjustment, new financial realities — continues. This is when many families quietly disappear.

- Continue consistent, low-pressure check-ins — do not assume they are fine because the acute crisis has passed
- Connect them to a DivorceCare or similar support group if they have not already
- Ensure children are enrolled in age-appropriate support (DC4K or similar)
- Watch for the “ghost effect” — families who stop attending without formally leaving
- Be intentional about including single-parent families in church events that typically assume two-parent households

Phase 3: Rebuilding (18 Months and Beyond)

Adults and children begin to stabilize but need continued belonging and support as they rebuild identity, routines, and — eventually — consider new relationships.

- Celebrate milestones and growth, however small
- Connect them to community beyond divorce support — small groups, service teams, mentorships
- Provide resources for single parenting (Single & Parenting curriculum, connection to community)
- Be ready when dating or remarriage questions arise — have resources and counselors in place



What to Say — and What to Avoid

Ministry leaders often avoid divorcing families not out of judgment, but because they don't know what to say. Here is a simple guide.

Words That Open the Door

- › “I don't have the right words, but I want you to know I'm here and you are not alone.”
- › “This congregation is your home and that is not changing.”
- › “You don't have to have it together to be here.”
- › “Have you found a counselor yet? I have a list if you'd like some names.”
- › “I'm going to check in with you in a couple of weeks — not because I'm watching you, but because I care.”
- › “Your children are going to be okay, especially with a parent who loves them like you do.”

What to Avoid

- Theological lectures about divorce during the crisis phase — there is a time for truth and it is not week one
- Asking for details about what happened or who was at fault
- Avoiding them because you are close to both spouses and feel caught in the middle
- Making assumptions about their spiritual state or level of faith
- Treating them differently in group settings — this signals shame
- “Everything happens for a reason” or “God has a plan” in the acute grief phase
- Disappearing after the first initial contact — consistency is what they will remember



Caring for the Children in Your Congregation

Children of divorce are often the most invisible members of a family in crisis. They come to church, sit in class, and participate — while carrying an enormous weight that no one talks about. Your children's ministry and youth ministry teams are on the front lines.

Train Your Children's Ministry Team

- Brief your team when a family announces a divorce — with appropriate confidentiality
- Watch for behavioral changes: withdrawal, aggression, clinginess, acting out
- Create space for children to talk — one-on-one conversations during free time, art, play
- Do not ask children about what is happening at home — let them lead
- Never ask children to choose sides or express an opinion about a parent
- Celebrate and affirm them consistently — their sense of worth is fragile right now

What Helps Children Most

- Consistent adult presence at church — the same teacher, the same face, week after week
- Peer connection — knowing they are not the only one
- Age-appropriate groups like DC4K (DivorceCare for Kids) that normalize their experience

- A sense that church is stable when everything else is not
- Not having to explain themselves — being welcomed without conditions or questions



Practical idea: Consider designating one trusted adult in your children's ministry as a consistent 'anchor' for each child going through family disruption — someone who knows their name, notices when they're off, and checks in consistently. This one relationship can be profoundly stabilizing.



Building a Divorce Ministry Structure in Your Church

A reactive, ad-hoc response to divorce — responding only when families come to you — means most families never get the support they need. A proactive structure ensures no one falls through the cracks.

The Three Pillars of a Divorce Ministry



Adult Support Groups

DivorceCare and similar programs provide structured, consistent community for adults in every stage of divorce. Run these groups regularly, not just when someone asks.



Children's Support

DC4K (DivorceCare for Kids) provides a 13-session, Christ-centered support group for children navigating divorce. Run it in parallel with DivorceCare for maximum family impact.



One-to-One Care

Stephen Ministry or trained lay caregivers matched with individuals for ongoing, confidential weekly support. Not counseling — presence and listening.

A Recommended Referral Network

Every family ministry leader should maintain an up-to-date, curated list of:

- Licensed Christian counselors (individual, family, and child-focused) — including those who accept insurance
- Family law attorneys known for their integrity and approach to minimizing conflict
- Financial counselors or planners familiar with divorce financial planning
- Co-parenting apps and tools (OurFamilyWizard, TalkingParents)
- SDA-specific counselors via sdamentalhealth.org and nadfamily.org

Create a Single-Parent-Friendly Culture

- Review your church calendar — are most events structured for two-parent households?
- Designate a scholarship or benevolence fund for single-parent families who cannot afford programs
- Intentionally include single parents in small groups alongside married couples — not in a separate silo
- Offer childcare during adult programs so single parents can attend
- Celebrate Mother's Day and Father's Day in ways that acknowledge diverse family structures



Curricula & Programs for Divorce Ministry

These are the most effective, church-ready programs for supporting divorcing families. Most are turn-key — they include leader guides, participant materials, and ongoing support.

DivorceCare [ADULTS • SUPPORT GROUP • 13 SESSIONS • VIDEO-BASED]

The most widely used church-based divorce support program in the world, available in more than 24,000 churches across 100+ countries. A 13-session, video-based program that walks participants through the grief, legal, financial, and relational dimensions of divorce and points them toward healing in Christ. Run it on a regular cycle, not just when a crisis arises. Includes an extensive group leader guide and online support. Free to find groups at divorcecare.org.

 divorcecare.org

DivorceCare for Kids (DC4K) — Church Initiative [CHILDREN • 13 SESSIONS • VIDEO-BASED • CHRIST-CENTERED]

A 13-week, biblically grounded small group program for children of divorce, designed to run in parallel with DivorceCare for adults. Children discover coping strategies, emotional vocabulary, and God's love through age-appropriate games, journaling, stories, and songs. A trained lay leader can run it. Leader's guide and curriculum now available free of charge. Ideal as a complementary ministry alongside any adult divorce support program.

 dc4k.org

Single & Parenting — Church Initiative [SINGLE PARENTS • 8 SESSIONS • VIDEO-BASED]

Designed specifically for single parents navigating the season after separation or divorce. Covers parenting alone, dating as a single parent, financial pressures, and emotional recovery. Video-based and designed for a small group or one-on-one mentoring context. A natural next step after DivorceCare for families with children. Also from Church Initiative, the team behind DivorceCare.

 divorcecare.org/single-and-parenting

Stephen Ministry — Stephen Ministries St. Louis [ONE-TO-ONE • LAY CAREGIVING • ALL SITUATIONS]

Trained lay caregivers who meet one-to-one with care receivers for confidential, Christ-centered weekly support. Stephen Ministers are not counselors — they are trained listeners. Ideal for individuals who are not ready for a group setting or who need ongoing support beyond a program cycle. Available in more than 14,000 congregations across 190 denominations. Ask Stephen Ministries about training your own Stephen Leaders.

 stephenministries.org

The Smart Stepfamily Small Group Resource — Ron L. Deal / FamilyLife [BLENDED FAMILIES • 8 SESSIONS • VIDEO-BASED]

As families stabilize post-divorce and begin considering remarriage, this 8-session small group curriculum by Ron Deal equips both couples and church leaders to navigate the unique dynamics of stepfamily formation. Includes participant guides, leader resources, and access to bonus online content. A natural follow-on ministry to DivorceCare for families moving into the next chapter.

 smartstepfamilies.com



Books for Ministry Leaders

These books equip ministry leaders to understand the full experience of divorce — for adults, for children, and for the congregation — and to respond with theological grounding and practical wisdom.

Surviving an Unwanted Divorce — *Lysa TerKeurst with Dr. Joel Muddamalle & Jim Cress* [FAITH • PERSONAL • THEOLOGY • 2025]

Written from Lysa's personal experience of an unwanted divorce after nearly 30 years of marriage, this 2025 book addresses the hardest faith questions surrounding divorce with both biblical depth and pastoral warmth. Co-written with a theologian and a licensed counselor. Excellent to recommend to care receivers, and deeply informative for leaders wanting to understand the spiritual landscape of unwanted divorce.

The Smart Stepfamily — *Ron L. Deal* [BLENDED FAMILIES • PASTORAL • SMALL GROUP]

The essential resource for ministry leaders working with families post-divorce who are navigating single parenting or considering remarriage. Covers the unique dynamics of stepfamily formation, loyalty binds in children, and how the church can effectively minister to this often-overlooked population.

 smartstepfamilies.com

Helping Children Cope with Divorce — *Edward Teyber* [CHILDREN • RESEARCH-BASED • PRACTICAL]

A compassionate, research-grounded guide for understanding how children of different ages experience and process divorce. Equips ministry leaders and children's workers to recognize distress, respond appropriately, and support parents in giving their children what they need most.

Mom's House, Dad's House — *Isolina Ricci* [CO-PARENTING • PRACTICAL • REFERENCE]

The practical co-parenting handbook. Useful to keep as a reference to recommend to families navigating joint custody and parallel households. Addresses communication, consistency between homes, and protecting children from conflict.



Christian & SDA Organizations and Networks

These organizations provide denominational support, professional counselor networks, and ministry training specifically designed to help church leaders care for families in transition.

NAD Family Ministries — *North American Division, SDA* [SDA • TRAINING • RESOURCES • COUNSELOR DIRECTORY]

The official SDA family ministry hub for North America. Offers training events, curricula, a counselor directory, and the Journal of Family Research and Practice — which includes articles on divorce, blended families, and financial planning for families in transition. Your first call for denominationally-aligned resources.

Adventist Mental Health Directory — *SDA Mental Health Network* [SDA • COUNSELOR
FINDER • ENGLISH & SPANISH]

A searchable directory of Adventist licensed counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists. When you refer a family to professional counseling, this ensures they connect with a counselor who shares their faith values and understands their church context. Essential for every ministry leader's referral list.

 sdamentalhealth.org

FamilyLife Blended — *FamilyLife / Ron Deal* [BLENDED FAMILIES • POST-DIVORCE • CHURCH
PARTNERSHIP]

A division of FamilyLife specifically focused on blended family ministry. Offers the Blended & Blessed one-day event, the FamilyLife Blended podcast, church partnership resources, and leader training for building a stepfamily ministry in your congregation. Particularly valuable for churches with a significant population of single parents and blended families.

 familylife.com/blended

Focus on the Family Counseling Network — *Focus on the Family* [COUNSELING •
REFERRALS • RESOURCES]

Offers a free pastoral counseling consultation line (1-855-771-HELP), a searchable network of licensed Christian counselors, and an extensive library of articles and resources on divorce, single parenting, and blended families. A useful referral point for families who need more than peer support.

 focusonthefamily.com

Smart Stepfamilies Ministry Training — *Ron Deal* [LEADER TRAINING • CHURCH
EQUIPPING]

Equips church leaders to build stepfamily and single-parent ministries in their congregations. Includes the Blended & Blessed event license, leader training events, and church curriculum kits. Ideal for churches wanting to move beyond reactive care to proactive ministry for post-divorce families.

 smartstepfamilies.com



Caring for Yourself as a Ministry Leader

Supporting families through divorce is emotionally demanding work. You will hear painful stories, navigate complexity, and sit with people in acute grief. You cannot do this well without attending to your own wellbeing.

- Maintain your own supervision or peer support structure — do not process this work alone
- Know your limits: your role is pastoral presence and referral, not clinical therapy
- Debrief regularly with a trusted colleague or supervisor after difficult conversations
- Protect your spiritual disciplines — they are what sustain you in this work
- Be aware of secondary trauma: repeated exposure to crisis can affect your own emotional state

- Celebrate the small wins — a family that stayed, a child who smiled, a person who said thank you

“You are not the Savior. Jesus is. Your job is to be present, to point, and to stay. That is holy work — and it is enough.”

Quick-Start Checklist

- ☐ Launch or affiliate with DivorceCare
- ☐ Launch DC4K alongside DivorceCare
- ☐ Train or recruit Stephen Ministers
- ☐ Build a counselor referral list
- ☐ Create a single-parent-friendly culture audit
- ☐ Brief children’s ministry team on warning signs
- ☐ Designate a family ministry point person for divorce care

Referral List Must-Haves

- ☐ Christian counselors (individual, family, child)
- ☐ Family law attorneys (ethical, low-conflict approach)
- ☐ Financial planner familiar with divorce
- ☐ sdamentalhealth.org (SDA counselors)
- ☐ nadfamily.org (NAD Family Ministries)
- ☐ divorcecare.org and dc4k.org
- ☐ stephenministries.org