

Divorce culture: A congregational challenge

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It's not easy for churches to address what sociologist Barbara Dafoe Whitehead has termed the "divorce culture." For one thing, the changes in laws and attitudes that have made divorce easier to obtain in the past half century represent an advance for women. Having freed themselves from economic and legal dependency on men, women are able to leave relationships involving emotional abuse and violence. No one wants to jeopardize that hard-won freedom.

Furthermore, divorced people are well represented in the churches' pews and pulpits. No wonder, then, that church leaders are reluctant to speak out on divorce, or hesitate to speak forcefully about the benefits of marriage. The reluctance is further enforced by the fact that congregations and denominations have worked hard to minister to divorced people and to overcome previously entrenched prejudices. No one wants to return to a time when the "stigma of divorce" kept divorced people away from church.

Despite these complications, however, churches cannot be silent about the culture of divorce and its social consequences. Judith Wallerstein's book on the "unexpected legacy of divorce" is only the most recent in a series of studies demonstrating the social costs of divorce and documenting especially the long-term harm done to children when marriages dissolve.

It may be more politically correct to engage the "systemic" issues that threaten children—poverty, inadequate public assistance and poor schools—than to address the seemingly private issues of marital choice and parental responsibility. But if churches want to "put children first," as the slogan has it, they need to speak openly about the effects of divorce on children, and commit their resources to aiding and supporting marriages.

Can churches promote marriage as a fundamental social good and a moral norm without stigmatizing those whose marriages fail? We think they can. In fact, we've

seen them do it. A community that knows that all people—single, married and divorced—fall short of the kingdom of God is uniquely free to speak the painful truth about human brokenness. And a community that lives by the forgiveness of sins is uniquely free to hear the gospel's challenge to be faithful in marriage, as Christ is faithful to the church, and to welcome children as God welcomes us.