

Spiritual cul-de-sac: How the church fails the divorced

by [Carolyn Call](#) in the [July 24, 2013](#) issue



I never expected to be a divorce statistic. I confess that I clung to a particular and private hubris: I thought that because my husband and I were ordained, we were immune to divorce. After all, didn't I as a pastor understand the spiritual aspects of marriage better than most? Surely my faith life was such that my marriage could not fail.

Yet seven years after my wedding I found myself struggling to make sense of a lost marriage. I learned that a strong faith does not guarantee a strong marriage. I also found that divorce had an unexpected impact on my own spiritual life and my relationship with God. It was as if a firestorm had cleared away the forest, burning down the trees of my self-deception and hubris. I found myself in a landscape where it was impossible to hide from the roving eye of God. Life in this new landscape was barren at times, and yet the ashes nourished growth.

Despite the warm and loving support of family and friends, few truly understood what was happening to me. Deep spiritual questions plagued me. When I married, I believed that it was God's will for me to be in this relationship for life. Was I wrong? Had I failed God? Could it be God's will that a marriage end? What did God want of me now? There were few people with whom I could discuss such questions. I couldn't

share the yawning grief that would suddenly bloom when I stumbled on my husband's handwriting scribbled in the margin of a book. I couldn't explain the persistent questions about who I was without my spouse. And I couldn't describe how I was wrangling with God and questioning my faith. The spiritual isolation was profound.

Over time I met and spoke with other people of faith who were divorced, and I began to wonder if there were parts of this experience that we held in common. Were any of the spiritual struggles the same? How did divorce affect their understanding of God? Was it possible to grow spiritually through divorce? My investigation into these questions led me to research and write about divorce.

I considered the role of clergy and congregations in the process of a member's divorce. How could congregations reach out to and embrace those going through divorce? What could clergy learn from hearing the diverse voices of those who had been down this road? They receive little seminary training for the spiritual and theological questions that arise from divorce. In my case, I learned more from speaking with those involved in divorce. Their struggles, questions and stories, along with my own experience and reflections, helped me see my role as a pastor more clearly.

If and when divorce happens, it usually comes as a surprise. I have yet to meet a married couple that expects to get divorced. For most of us, the marriage vows are part of a sacred ritual surrounded by scripture, prayer and blessing. The liturgical language seals the commitment, declaring that "the two shall become one" and "those whom God has joined together, let no one separate." Our words reflect the teaching of scripture and are spoken with reverence and awe. We light unity candles or pour sand, treasuring the symbolic gestures and visuals that mirror our words. We make vows with the utmost sincerity; we mean the words we speak.

To me, this was the most mysterious aspect of divorce. How could these words spoken before God no longer hold any truth? It's a question that's rarely discussed. Instead I heard unsolicited and unwanted answers to the unasked question, "Why did my marriage end?" Well-intentioned people would say, "Every marriage has its struggles," as if my divorce came about because we couldn't agree on the children's bedtime. The underlying message was, "you took the easy way out," "you've given up" or "you obviously didn't try hard enough."

These people assumed that divorce is a kind of cheating; in other words, if we had taken our marriage seriously enough, it would have worked. This assumption glosses over the fractured, damaged and sinful reality of human life. Divorce among God's people is a fact. Even though we strive for a spiritual ideal, marriages can fail. Contrary to some conventional wisdom, divorce is not easy, and for most of us it is not entered into lightly.

Divorce is the final and painful destination of a relationship that has broken down irretrievably. How and why that breakage happens is often a mystery, but both brokenness and mystery are sometimes exacerbated by the responses of religious communities. Perhaps congregations and clergy fear that extending compassion for individuals during divorce offers a tacit support for divorce. Their reluctance to engage may reflect an unspoken fear of contagion. Whatever the reason, congregations and clergy often leave divorcing individuals alone.

My research uncovered stories of rejection by fellow Christians and a stunning lack of empathy from congregations. Participants also spoke of being ignored by clergy, judged openly and even encouraged to leave the church. This is sad but also deeply ironic. Divorce is the time when we most need our brothers and sisters in faith, the time when we crave compassionate companionship and a sense of inclusion and acceptance. This is a time when our faith may be challenged, when the providence of God seems thin and when our own guilt grows and blooms.

Divorce is the broken place. We may have experienced betrayal (our own or our spouse's), humiliation, rage, despair and hopelessness. It's the place where God's presence is most needed and where a well-placed word of grace can help someone to heal.

Perhaps congregations and pastors struggle over the divorce issue because it presents an empathy dilemma. People have a better understanding of how to cope with death or a malingering illness. In these cases we know who the victims are. We can draw from cultural and theological scripts. Divorce, on the other hand, lacks a script. It can go on for years (think custody battles) and is rarely ever simple. With few exceptions both partners share the responsibility for a divorce, and that responsibility can be messy and discordant.

Loved ones of mine were eager to put divorce into categories they understood, such as perpetrator and victim. They vilified my husband and declared me either a victim

or at least “better off.” The complex emotional reality of divorce confused them. They wondered why I claimed responsibility when it was my husband who had the affair. How could I still be grieving three years later? How could I still love someone who had hurt me?

Sometimes the complexity of divorce is veiled even to those in the middle of it. It is easier to proclaim that “my divorce happened because my husband couldn’t stay faithful” than to admit one’s own role. It takes time, patience, flexibility and humility to tease apart the multiple strands of choices, reactions, decisions and experiences that lead a marriage to an end. A healthy outcome is clarity about one’s own role in both the marriage and the divorce.

What happens if we don’t take the time for that reflection? The result can be perpetual spinning in a spiritual cul-de-sac, a place of stuckness, stunted growth and limited vision. We lose our forward momentum, and our focus strays from God. Despite the constraints, cul-de-sacs are also attractive and comfortable. Take the cul-de-sac of victimhood. To see myself as a victim in my divorce earned me compassion and support from others. It felt good to be told that the divorce had nothing to do with me.

Yet over time the label of victim didn’t sit well. Did it reflect the truth? Was it spiritually honest? Was “victim” now my spiritual identity?

The cul-de-sac of bitterness offers temptation as well. How many men and women refer to their former spouses only by a derogatory epithet? When one defines one’s life by “what was done to me,” one embitters and desiccates one’s soul. Other cul-de-sacs include vengeance, despair, isolation, guilt, rebound relationships, perpetual anger and the belief that one is unlovable. Each offers sweet yet unfulfilling fruit. Clergy are uniquely placed to encourage us out of cul-de-sacs and point us to a more expansive vision of life with God, a vision that acts as a new orienting point.

Clergy can also help when reflection takes divorced individuals to dark, secretive corners where the raw or battered conscience hides. Here we explore sin and brokenness in our own lives. Who better than clergy to speak to forgiveness and repentance? A minister can bring a balm of grace while also helping to untangle the knots of guilt, responsibility, recrimination, remorse—and forgiveness of one’s self and the other. This task is a holy service.

Cul-de-sacs remind us that divorce affects all aspects of one's life. There are few other experiences with such far-reaching and insidious consequences. The divorce blade cuts into our sense of identity, our self-esteem, our perception of God, our hopes for the future, our relationships with family and friends, our jobs, finances, beliefs and worldviews, and our faith. It's an indiscriminate process that tears a fabric that's been woven over years. Wise pastors know how to listen without judgment. They remember that every marriage is a deep, private, multifaceted reality that outsiders can never completely understand and that the cracks that lead to the chasm of divorce are often hidden. The life of a couple grows more complex as years pass, with every experience adding to the unique tapestry that is their marriage. Pastors must treat that tapestry with humility and with respect.

Pastors can meet people where they are and offer compassion without commiseration. They can expect tangled emotions and self-esteem issues. They can expect questions of identity and remind the divorced person that he or she has an identity as a beloved child of God. For someone who's been left by a spouse, pastors can provide comfort in grief and companionship as that person walks toward new life. For someone who initiated the divorce, pastors can provide a place where that person will be heard without judgment. Pastors must remain mindful of their own biases, resist gossip and speculation and instead offer a place of careful listening and authentic acceptance. They can ask, "Where is God in all this?" and admit that they may not know the answer. But they can encourage the question. They may not see the place or role of God clearly, but they can stand beside someone as he or she rebuilds a life and can bless that building.

That act of blessing by clergy or congregation can be critical. My research revealed that participants' spiritual lives either flourished after divorce or withered away. All were challenged and none were unchanged. Some believers felt drawn to God in new ways and experienced God anew in religious rituals and faith groups. A loving religious community brought healing. Their perception of God underwent an expansion, and they leaned on a God who was both larger and closer than they had previously realized. Hand in hand with this shift in perception was a change in their view of themselves. The greatest gift of divorce, some said, was humility. They no longer claimed to control their futures and no longer judged themselves or others with unreasonable expectations. Their empathy expanded in concert with their humility and turned into gentleness, a softening of the spirit.

For those who turned away from God, the landscape was more barren and hostile. Their exile usually came from assuming that their faith would protect them from suffering. A woman said to me, with equal measures of anger and confusion, “How could God do this to me? I’ve done everything right.” She had attended church regularly, been a “good” wife and mother, cared for her husband and done as the church commanded. In the sacred space between parishioner and pastor, ministers can carefully and lovingly question the assumptions underlying this woman’s question and gently remind her that when it comes to suffering, God offers us presence, not protection.

Finally, there were those who drew closer to God even though they left their faith communities. There was the realization, for some, that the behavior of a congregation did not mirror God’s attitude toward them. Where the congregation rejected, God accepted. Where the congregation judged, God forgave. This reimagining of God as separate from a specific church body was liberating and healing. Private study, prayer and conversation with trusted others were largely responsible. Eventually some of those individuals found their way to a new set of spiritual practices where they flourished.

Every divorce is the result of two people’s characters and choices, not just one. Pastors are in a unique position to help explore and clarify that reality. They can encourage divorced individuals to walk out of their spiritual cul-de-sacs, the places where they may spin in circles as victims or as perpetrators or as unlovable or in despair. Clergy can remind those who are divorced that God desires that they flourish, be forgiven and be loved. The road to spiritual health following divorce is a rocky one, and reaching a healthy horizon is not guaranteed. Clergy can be compassionate companions on the journey.