

Faith Pulpit

Real Religion, Part 2

Care for widows should be viewed from two perspectives immediate and long term. First, the death of the husband must be addressed. The wife's world is devastated. Her lifelong companion and provider is gone. Words do not do justice to the instant, entire, irreversible change that occurs at the moment a woman loses her mate. Special consideration must be given to this time and the immediate days and weeks that follow.

Immediate Ministry

We must realize that a woman instantaneously experiences a transition from dependence to an independence for which she is not prepared. As a result, fellow believers need to "be there" right away. Probably the best comfort Job received from his friends was their presence and concern (Job 2:11-13). Unfortunately, their offering of solutions for the cause of his problems produced the opposite of comfort. We need to learn from them. We need to "be there," but avoid platitudes and hackneyed advice.

Since this is a very emotional time, those who want to bring comfort feel very awkward. That is natural, but the worst thing we can do is avoid the person or say nothing at all about the death of her mate. We need to show support by our presence and assurances of love, care, and prayer. Words of genuine concern (without being "peppered" with exhortations and attempts at "solving" God's providential activity) can be a great comfort. Talk with her about her husband and the events surrounding his death. She wants to talk about him. Share with her in this.

The widow is not the only one grieving. Thus, we need to talk also with sons, daughters, and other family members who are hurting as well. Share with them how their father (brother, grandfather) was a blessing to you. Though you may never have met them before, do what you can to make them feel that they are among friends in a new environment during a traumatic time.

Be practical. Do not ask, “Is there anything I can do?” Ask, “What can I do?” Better yet, do the obvious. Bring a meal and help organize others to do the same. Provide lodging for out-of-town relatives and friends. Do the dishes, laundry, vacuum, dust, clean the house (when it does not interfere with the guests). Mow the lawn and weed the flowers. Offer to locate boxes of photos and memorabilia in the attic for a memory table at the visitation and memorial service.

Clear your schedule so you can show your support by attending the visitation, memorial service, interment, and following meal (if it is open to other than family). Do not forget the unique expression of thoughtfulness demonstrated by sending flowers. When the day of the memorial service is over, remember there are many pressing concerns that the widow now faces. Give her permission to call you any time, day or night. Insist that you want her to do this if she needs help or just needs to talk.

Depending on your background and skills, help her with decisions. She is faced with financial, insurance, and legal matters that must be addressed very soon. If you have the expertise, volunteer your time to help her make intelligent decisions. One of the dear ladies who assisted in this article faced doing taxes, which she had not done before. It was a matter of legitimate concern. Helping in such areas that may appear to be mundane for us is vital for widows. Even if you do not have experience in these matters, you can make phone calls and mail forms concerning name changes, documents needed, et cetera . Follow the “Golden Rule” and try to imagine what would be a help and encouragement to you in the same situation.

First Weeks and Months

The second perspective from which to view widows is long term the weeks, months, and years following her husband’s death. Though we had an emotional attachment to her husband, our emotional wounds heal much more rapidly than hers. Although we may be limited in counseling knowledge, we must be aware that our friend is in a grieving process. Therefore, our care and understanding are very important for weeks and months after the death of her spouse. If you have lost a husband, this may be the time to share how the Lord gave you comfort and enabled you to cope. Again, this should not be a “preachy” approach, but one that provides comfort and hope.

During this time, there is still a great need in practical areas. Assist in follow-up calls and mailing thank you notes and legal forms that seem to appear constantly. This type of assistance and friendship helps enable her to “get on her feet.” Perhaps the first six weeks to two months are the hardest. Make sure you are visibly available in assisting during these crucial days. This time may involve holidays, birthdays, her anniversary, Father’s Day or Mother’s Day, or other significant events. Make sure you contact her on those days. On “extra special” days, make sure she is with family or with you.

Committed Ministry (Long Term)

Since the ministry of deacons began with care for widows, it only seems appropriate that they be vitally involved in ministering to these ladies. It would be both beneficial and biblical for a church to have a practical plan for assisting widows. Perhaps the deacons could take the responsibility for a widow or a few widows for several months or a year. A rotation would enable the deacons and their wives to minister to several over a period of a few years. The deacon and his wife should minister personally in the areas identified below. In areas where they do not have expertise, they could locate another in the church to “get in on the blessing.” Such a ministry for deacons would provide encouraging assistance to widows and give deacons a greater sensitivity to the needs of others.

Emotionally . . . The value of our caring presence cannot be quantified. Spending time with a widow is invaluable. Remember, other than on the phone, many do not have anyone to talk to when they are at home. Consequently, just listening is a ministry. Allow her to cry, and cry with her. Invite her for a visit. Have her over for meals. Take her on a family outing—a picnic, restaurant, weekend trip, or vacation. Take her shopping and buy something special for her. If she has children, baby sit and let her have some “down time” shopping or taking a walk in the park.

Enable her to expand her world by sharing a new recipe or introducing a new hobby or skill such as scrapbooking, stamping or decorating. Ask her to share with you a skill she has. This will help her see how she can make contributions that are valuable to others, and it will increase the bond between you.

Help her plan some trips for herself or with her children. This helps brighten the future and creates positive anticipation. Make sure you give her some “seed money” for the trip. You will enjoy obtaining information and discounts for her. Seeing her joy will be rewarding for you and your family as you help her prepare.

The “little things” really matter. Send a note, a special friendship card, and occasional flowers to show you remember. As mentioned above, all the firsts are very important. That first Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year, Easter, and anniversary are times that especially remind her of memories with her husband. Make sure family or you share those memories with her. Make her next and following birthdays and other important days special for her. Mark down the date of her husband’s death so you and others can call or visit. This shows you have not forgotten. If she has younger children, remember their birthdays and other special events as well. Acknowledge and encourage them in their activities and accomplishments.

It is natural for widows to spend time with each other. You may be able to facilitate the formation of such groups, but it is crucial that we involve them in our families as well. They should be included in circles of married friends. Also, it is good to have a ladies day or night out. This should include both married and widows. It is a great opportunity to have fun, but it is also a good time to talk about the widows’ husbands and memories.

Domestically . . . If the widow has younger children, it is in order to discreetly provide a father and grandfather figure. There are some areas in which there is no substitute for a male image. Conversely, it may be helpful to have a widow “adopt” your children as her grandchildren. You can include her in Sunday meals, school plays, and church programs. In our mobile society in which relatives frequently live hundreds of miles away, being included in such activities enables her to contribute to family life and be blessed at the same time.

Spiritually . . . Since she always sat with her husband in church, the first service back can be very traumatic. To help, invite her to sit with your family, and let her know you would like her to join you as frequently as she desires. In fact, it would be thoughtful to pick her up and take her to church with you. Then you can walk in with her on the first time back. Also, offer to take her to the evening services, especially in the months when it is dark. Make sure you take her to church fellowships and special functions. Help her get involved in a ministry of the church when she is ready. Here is an area where deacons and their wives can be very helpful, since they know the needs of the church and the unique gifts of the widow. Be her prayer partner and stay current with her requests and with God’s answers to her requests.

Financially . . . To help the widow “get on her feet” it is very thoughtful to give her financial gifts and/or pay some bills. Those who have fiscal abilities should help her with financial planning, including taxes, investments, insurance, and banking procedures. Guidance in finding employment may be another need. Someone with her best interests in view can help her locate a job and make sure she is able to get the necessary benefits package. The very emotional experience of selling/buying a home should be accompanied by personal support and sound counsel. She would no doubt appreciate the same assistance in the purchase of a new car, though it is not as complicated. At any rate, it is essential that a widow receive advice from those who truly have her best interest at heart. Unfortunately, there are some people in the world who would like to take advantage of widows.

Practically . . . There are two major areas of maintenance that the widow faces her car and home. These are areas that fall right into the deacons’ sphere of service. These also make for great ministry projects for teens and families. Many may take it for granted, but such a routine task as filling the car with gas for the first time at a self-serve pump can be a challenge for one who has never done it before. Why not establish a rotation system with others to regularly wash and vacuum her car? The same can be done for oil changes and regular maintenance. This may simply involve calling her to remind her, if she prefers to take the car to a friend of the family herself. When major repairs are needed, a mechanic in the church could be a great blessing by donating his labor and discounting the parts. When this is not possible, men should make sure she takes her car to a garage that will be sympathetic and equitable.

As with a car, the need for home repairs never seems to come at the right time. It would be wise to have handymen “on call” for a widow’s home maintenance needs. Plumbing, electrical, and appliance

repairs can be very costly. Individuals with that experience can render a great service by meeting those needs. Furniture needs to be assembled or moved for cleaning. Christmas and seasonal décor must be brought out or stored. Sidewalks and driveways need to be shoveled, and lawns must be mowed. Windows need to be washed, and interiors and exteriors need to be painted occasionally. Carpets must be cleaned and drapes hung or cleaned. Gutters should be cleaned and leaves raked. We get the picture, don't we?

In summary, whether they are emotional, spiritual, financial, domestic, or practical, a widow's needs are great, and we have abundant opportunities to help them and show our faith by our works. James says our works on behalf of widows are a demonstration of real religion. Does the Lord witness real religion in our relationship to widows?

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