

# Divorce and Beyond Facilitators Guide

Here are some simple directions for facilitators on organizing, running and evaluating the *Divorce and Beyond* program in your parish, congregation or other organization. The strength of this program is the willingness and ability of the participants to share with each other what they are going through. The job of the facilitator is to allow that sharing to take place in a non-threatening and supportive environment.

The facilitator's role will change during the course of the program. In the beginning you will do a lot of the talking—in order to get the group started, familiarize the members with the purposes of the program, establish the ground rules, and keep things going until the end of the session. As the members become more familiar with the procedures and more comfortable with each other, they will naturally assume more responsibility during the sessions.

Bear in mind that very few groups look upon the facilitator as merely one of the group; the participants may even look at you as an "expert." As the group progresses, try to limit how much you join the discussions. When you do join in, be sure to clarify that your sharing or contribution to any discussion is personal, not professional.

Some facilitators work as teams of two. One assumes the responsibility for all the sessions: initial contacts, opening and closing meetings, timekeeping, etc. The other helps with discussions. When the program is run again with a different group, the roles can be reversed. Besides the obvious advantages to the group of having more than one facilitator, sharing responsibility and having support and a backup will greatly reduce your susceptibility to burnout.

It is especially helpful—but not required—if one or both facilitators have gone through a divorce themselves. This gives credibility to the facilitator's comments and makes it easier for the participants to open up. However, no one who is divorced should attempt to facilitate a group if he or she has not successfully worked through the issues of his or her own divorce.

## Who is This Program For?

*Divorce and Beyond* has been designed for people who are divorced or who have already filed for divorce. It is not intended for people who are still "on the fence" about the future of their marriage. This distinction must be made clear in the publicity for the program and to the participants as they register. When people contact you about the sessions, reiterate that the program is only for those who have at least begun legal proceedings for divorce. (Those who have not made a decision to divorce need a different kind of help. Also, there is a remote chance that you could be blamed for encouraging

someone to get a divorce.)

Keep in mind that the people who come to this self-help group are not psychologically ill; they are just looking for some help during a crisis. *Divorce and Beyond* focuses on the difficulties and emotions prevalent during the transition—or "mourning"—period of the divorce process. This process usually lasts nine to twelve months after the divorce is final. However, those who have been divorced for years but have not effectively dealt with this stage of their divorce also can benefit from this program.

The sessions deal with the emotional issues faced by divorced adults themselves. Children are discussed only briefly, to the extent that they might be affected by the subject matter under discussion. Divorced people often focus entirely on their children and fail to address their own problems. The goal of *Divorce and Beyond* is to help all divorced people—whether or not they are parents—to achieve some understanding and stability in their own lives. Those who have children will then be better able to help them do the same.

## What Is Divorce and Beyond?

This program is a self-help group. That means there are no "leaders," "teachers," "counselors" or "healers." The main responsibility for what happens during the ten recommended sessions rests with the group itself. Some information is provided in the brief reflections and exercises in the book, but the primary source of learning is the sharing of experiences, feelings and insights among the people attending the discussions. Growth will come from what each member chooses to do with what he or she has learned.

This is a closed group. After the second week no new members should join the current group. This is because participants are asked to devote considerable time and effort to working through the problems and emotions that emerge during the early stages of divorce and to share deep feelings and sensitive experiences with each other. Participants will not feel free to express their feelings until they become comfortable and learn to trust each other. A closed group offers stability and an atmosphere that fosters ease and trust.

## Why Even Have a Group?

Newly divorced people need a program such as this to help them work through the "mourning period" of their divorce with others who understand and share their special problems and frustrations. They need a safe place to gather and meet others who are working toward the same goals. A reminder: Those who are not Catholic or Christian can benefit from this program and should be welcomed.



*Divorce and Beyond* groups work best with a minimum of five and a maximum of fifteen participants. If more than fifteen people apply for a group, start a second group at another time or with another facilitator.

### Is There a Format For the Sessions?

Yes. It is critical that the facilitator be a careful time-keeper. Start on time and end on time. Two reasons for this are:

- People who are recently divorced are usually stressed out and often very busy. You are respecting their situation by respecting their time.
- The participants are more likely to be prompt and to stick to the business at hand when they know the time is strictly limited.

In outline form, the elements of each session are:

- **Introductions:** Members share with each other their reflections from the previous session, including any issues they have worked on during the week regarding their divorce. This is optional but highly recommended, but should go on only for a few minutes.
- **Reflections:** There are one or two reflections in each session. It is recommended that these be read aloud, with participants taking turns reading a paragraph or two at a time.

- **Exercises:** The exercises at the end of each reflection should be done during the sessions and then discussed.
- **Closing:** The facilitator sums up the discussion and closes the session.
- **Before the Next Session:** At the end of each session are suggestions for carrying on the process. Some activities are one time only; others are meant to be practiced until they are habitual. The facilitator should encourage participants to work on the issue that has just been discussed and to report on their efforts at the beginning of the next session.

### When and Where Does the Group Meet?

Results are best when there is one week between sessions. This maintains the flow of the process yet gives the participants time to work on their issues. If meeting weekly is not feasible, meeting every other week is a workable alternative. Meeting more often is usually counterproductive.

Usually the group meets in a room at a church or school. Park district or community buildings or even private homes also can be used. Ensure that privacy is maintained for the group, and be careful not to play host or hostess too much. The group is gathering for help, not socialization.

## Getting Started

1. Gather a Leadership Team of two to six people and train them in effective group facilitation skills. They should read the *Divorce and Beyond* book from cover to cover and study all of the recommended reflections and exercises. Ideally the Leadership Team will be made up of one or two people from a church ministry staff (or some similar position), and two to four others who have volunteered to be facilitators. It is important that at least one person on the Leadership Team has gone through a divorce personally and dealt successfully with the issues divorced people face.
2. The Leadership Team should develop a Mission Statement for the program. Here is an example: *Divorce and Beyond is a parish-based self-help program for newly divorced people based on the premise that sharing thoughts, feelings and experiences with others in the same situation is one of the most helpful ways to move beyond the pain of divorce.*
3. Design a plan to run this program two or three times over a year's time:
  - Select the dates, time and locations.
  - Assign duties to the Leadership Team, including who is going to facilitate each set of sessions.
4. Publicize the program:
  - Develop a flier and bulletin announcement.
  - Ask churches in your area to put announcements in their bulletins.
  - Send a short news release to newspapers in your immediate area.
5. Personally invite a group of divorced people to attend the ten-session program:
  - Develop a list of potential participants from inquiries generated by the publicity and—most importantly—from a list of people you know have been recently divorced.
  - Send those people personal invitations to attend the sessions and follow up with a phone call.
  - Create a registration form that gathers each participant's name, address, phone number, e-mail



address, how many children they have, how long they were married, and how long they've been divorced. (This information will help you recognize participants and address personal, relevant comments to them. It also helps you be sure the people coming to the group are in fact divorced.)

6. Organize the first set of sessions:

- Keep the group to no more than fifteen people.
- If more than fifteen people register, break them into smaller groups of five to ten if you have enough facilitators. If you don't, have a cutoff number and then either refer additional people elsewhere or inform them they will be first on the list for the next program. (Be sure to call them for the next program.)
- Send out a schedule with specific times, places and directions for the ten sessions.

- Purchase a copy of the *Divorce and Beyond* book and a notebook for each participant at least a week before the first session is to begin.

7. Run the ten sessions following the book.

8. Finish the series with one of the prayer services.

9. Provide information on annulments in your diocese for those who are interested.

10. Have a short evaluation of the program with the participants and invite some who are finishing the program to consider joining the leadership team. Have a meeting of the Leadership Team to evaluate the first set of sessions, make any changes or adaptations that are necessary, and plan a second set of sessions.

## Guidelines for Effective Facilitators

You have accepted an invitation to help people who are experiencing the pain of a recent divorce by offering them a safe place to reflect upon and share their feelings during a critical transition time in their lives. Those of you who are professionally trained to work with small groups may want to skim this section for hints on delivering divorce-specific outreach. For those who are not professionally trained, this section will give you some clear assistance in developing the skills necessary for effective and helpful divorce outreach.

*Divorce and Beyond* is primarily a self-help program. It is based on the premise that sharing thoughts, feelings and experiences with others in the same situation is one of the most helpful ways for the recently divorced to move beyond the pain of divorce. It is the participants' responsibility to help each other and learn.

As a facilitator it is your job to help create a climate in which the self-help occurs. You have the crucial task of getting participants to start sharing with each other by encouraging them to open up. Your own warmth and caring will provide the momentum and encouragement needed to help your group grow through these sharing sessions.

To become a good facilitator you must:

- Have the time and disposition for this particular ministry. People in pain need to talk, and they need someone to listen without being judgmental.
- Like people and be upbeat and hopeful.
- Be sensitive to the delicate nature of this highly emotional subject matter.
- Have gone through some training for leadership, particularly as pertains to grief.
- Be able to respect confidentiality. What is said in the sessions must remain there.

- If you have been divorced yourself, you must be able to separate your divorce experience from the participants' experiences. You must also be past the initial hurting stages of divorce and have begun or completed the Catholic annulment process or have received thorough and effective therapy or counseling. It would be especially helpful if you have participated in a *Divorce and Beyond* program yourself.

No matter how experienced you are at working with people, you won't handle everything perfectly during the *Divorce and Beyond* sessions. Here are some pitfalls to watch out for:

- Avoid falling into the role of "rescuer." Caring for people does not mean you must "fix" them or solve their problems. Listen attentively and acknowledge and respect the feelings participants express.
- Watch your facial and body language. You have to be especially careful of giving the appearance of rushing people or making judgments. The participants will take their cues from you.
- Do not try to impose your own agenda on the participants.
- Remain objective and unflappable. You may feel troubled by something a group member says, but members must feel free to express their emotions and not be inhibited by the fear that they will be made to feel foolish, stupid or bad. Negative feelings will be expressed. Convey to the group that all feelings are real and should be acknowledged and accepted in the group sessions. One of the purposes of the group is to help members deal with their negative emotions in positive ways.
- Allow some—but not all—digression from the session outlines in the book. You will need to exercise some



- judgment and discretion when this occurs. When the digression becomes unrelated small talk, try to bring the group back to the topic. If that fails, it might mean that the group does not feel comfortable with sharing their feelings and opinions on the subject at hand or that the participants are simply bored with the topic. Honor their wishes and move on to the next question or exercise. If the digression touches on a significant topic that captures the interest of the group, it may be desirable to let it continue. The reflections and exercises are designed primarily as discussion openers, not as a rigid curriculum. If the group finds a better way of sharing, that's fine. Just be sure the group is aware of what is happening and freely chooses this course.
- Be flexible and understanding. The suggestions for further work at the end of each session may not be completed by all members. Stress the benefits of that work and reinforce those who do it. That's all you can do.

- Diffuse the emotions. Some sessions may get quite emotional. Try bringing the group down slowly, at least five minutes before you begin the closing part of the session. Insert a question, make a general or neutral comment, or even present something humorous to talk about.
- Be prepared to refer. Some members need outside help. Prepare a list of resources—such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, counselors, domestic violence safe havens, and priests or ministers—for those who need more help than you can provide. At the beginning of the first session let the group know that you have a list of such resources and will share it with them confidentially.
- Don't get uptight. The people in the groups often care as much about you as you do about them. They will be as accepting of your mistakes as they are of their own. Let your warmth and concern come through; don't worry about minor mistakes.
- Remember that it is better to be kind than to be right.

## Sample Script for a First Session

(Meeting time is usually 90 minutes.)

### 1. Welcome

We want to welcome you here tonight. I'd like to begin with a short prayer. (You may use one of the prayers in the back of *Divorce and Beyond* or any other prayer.)

### 2. Introductions

Let's begin this evening by telling each other our name, how long we were married, how long it's been since we separated from our spouse, how many children we have, and what we hope to get from this evening. I'll start.

Note: On the night of the first meeting, it is suggested that you ask the participants to respond to three questions in writing: What do you want your life to be like in a year? What do you hope to get out of this *Divorce and Beyond* program? What does the ending of your marriage represent to you at this time? (A sentence or two for each is sufficient. Participants should put their answers into an envelope with their name on it. Collect the envelopes. Let the participants know you will keep them safe until later in the program. At the final session give them this envelope to open, read, reflect on, and discuss.)

### 3. State the Purpose

Our purpose here is to offer support and understanding to people who are divorced or have filed for divorce. We do this by studying the concepts presented in the *Divorce and Beyond* program. We will then be sharing

our feelings and struggles around the problems of divorce. Because it is difficult for us to trust, it is important that we listen to the person who is speaking and keep confidential whatever is shared. Some of us may discover we need more help than this group can provide. The issues we are dealing with are difficult. As facilitators, we do have some additional resources we can share with you confidentially after the meeting. Lastly, we respectfully inform you that this is not a dating service. People here are hurting and need ministering, compassion and understanding—not a new companion! Please be respectful of everyone's right to be here and find healing without having to worry about the dating issue.

### 4. State the Ground Rules

As we begin we'd like to mention a few considerations we ask you to have for the people in this group:

- Respect the confidentiality of all members. Anything said in these sessions should stay here.
- Talk only about *your* feelings—not those of others.
- Respect the feelings of others—make no judgments.
- Do not criticize the actions or beliefs of others.
- No one has to share; you may just listen. If you don't want to say anything, merely say, "I pass."

Note: These ground rules should be printed on a poster or table card and displayed prominently at each meeting. The facilitator should refer directly to them anytime they are being ignored.



### **5. Begin with the Topic for the Evening**

Today we will focus our discussion on Session One of *Divorce and Beyond*. (If you ever select a reading or reflection other than *Divorce and Beyond*, be sure to cite the source.) Each time we meet, we'll cover one session. You each have been given a book and a notebook. Bring them each week. Use the notebook for any writing we do and for your work between sessions.

### **6. Reflection Reading Time**

Most of the time, we will read the Reflection sections together. (Ask for a volunteer to start.)

### **7. Exercises**

We are now going to do Exercise One. Write your responses in your notebook. When all or most of you are

done, we will discuss your responses. (Repeat for Exercise Two where it occurs.)

### **8. Before the Next Session**

There are suggestions at the end of each session for further work that you can do to use what you have learned to help heal. It is important to do this.

### **9. Close the Session**

Thank you for coming. We look forward to seeing you next session. (Give time and place of next session. Offer a simple prayer to end the session. The Our Father will always do.)

### **10. Fellowship Time**

You are all welcome to stay after the meeting to talk informally. We have some refreshments available.

## *Special Situations*

### **The Shy Participant**

In many groups, particularly those dealing with crises, there are participants who do not contribute much to the discussions. They may be natural listeners rather than talkers, or they may be afraid to express their opinions or feelings. In either case, make sure they know they are invited to participate but that they will not be pressured to do so. They will share what they choose to share once they become comfortable with the group. Respect that.

### **The Dominating Participant**

During the initial sessions you will usually find that one person will tend to take charge of the meeting. Such a person can make the others uneasy, and they will look to you to keep control. Be diplomatic, but make it clear that a self-help group has no leaders. The goal of this group is to learn *from* and *with* each other as equals. If this person is particularly forceful and you find yourself unable to cut him or her off diplomatically during the meeting, arrange to meet after the session and explain privately how his or her forceful manner could inhibit the participation of other members.

### **The Problem-Solving Participant**

Self-help groups often include an "expert." This person presents a solution as the only good alternative and has a way of relating his or her experiences and responding to opposing views that implies the problem-solver has all the answers. This person should be handled in the same way as the dominating participant.

### **The Emotionally Overwrought Participant**

On occasion one or more members may want to lead the group into a highly charged emotional situation unrelated to the objectives of the session. If this is allowed to continue, someone may become distraught or even lose control. It will be necessary for you to discreetly calm things down and gently bring the meeting back into focus. When emotional outbursts occur, frequently another participant will be alert enough to change the subject or at least move to a less emotionally charged plateau. That defuses the situation. It is important, however, that you make a point of talking to the disturbed participant before he or she leaves the meeting. If you think that person needs to discuss his or her emotions or problems in greater depth than the group can provide, make a referral to someone qualified to help. Your list of professionals will come in handy here.

### **The Digressing Participant**

Every group seems to have at least one digresser, who occasionally strays far from the topic and rambles on and on and on. Often the other group members will handle this themselves. If they do not, it will be up to you, in fairness to the whole group, to gently but firmly bring the discussion back to the issue. (This is not the same situation as when the group as a whole digresses into an issue that everyone wants to explore. That kind of digression is often fruitful and should be allowed to continue for a reasonable amount of time.)

# After Divorce and Beyond

*Divorce and Beyond* is a proven approach to the exploration of what it means to be divorced and how to develop the tools to deal with life in an honest and realistic way.

Once the program is completed, group participants are called to rebuild their lives using the tools they have learned from the group support. It is important that people be encouraged to do this work. The *Divorce and Beyond* series runs for ten sessions; the group may want to continue to meet informally once a month for a few months. People who have finished the program will be more successful in their recovery work if they have opportunities to connect with each other every now and then.

However, facilitators need to caution against the group becoming a stopping place in life's journey. Often it is easier to come to a group on a regular basis and benefit from the social interaction than to integrate into life as a "single again" person. It is not good ministry work to keep "single again" people tethered to the divorce support group. They must find their own ways to socialize through other activities; there are many service opportunities in every community and church for competent, caring, adult helpers. Encourage the *Divorce and Beyond* "graduates" to move into these other areas for greater spirituality and growth.

Be sure to invite participants who exhibited some leadership qualities to join the Leadership Team for the *Divorce and Beyond* program. The benefits for them are many. They will be giving service. They will get the chance to experience the book's material again. They will be able to see how far they have come from the day they first walked in the door for help. They will move further away from their pain and reach out to the newly hurting.

People will come to the group because they have heard of the good work you are doing with divorced people. Some might say they need help right away, so

## Facilitator's Prayer

*First, Father, let me be mindful  
of who I am and where I come:  
I was one of them, I am one of them.  
I will always be one of them.  
I have grown from the roots of their pain  
and the heavy limbs of their loss,  
and I am now the leaves of a higher branch  
that fill with the sunshine of new life.  
I have grown from the very anguish  
that now roots itself in the spirit of these,  
my brothers and sisters.*

*Then, Lord, help me open the doors to their hearts:  
give me eyes that can see their hidden pains,  
ears that can hear their silent needs,  
and a voice that will reach and rouse their withered hope.  
Let them see me as an example of recovery;  
let them see in themselves the ability to do the same  
through the gift of self-healing  
that you have planted inside of us all.  
Garnish my words to them with your compassion  
and wisdom.*

Vincent Marquis

you may want to consider developing a group that will be waiting for the next offering of *Divorce and Beyond* at your location.

Evaluate your program with your Leadership Team after you run each set of sessions. Discuss what went well, what did not go so well, and determine what you want to change for the next program. Look ahead to the next year of ministry. Plan and publicize when you will start the next offering of *Divorce and Beyond*.

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