



Based on recent studies:

- Widowed is fastest growing demographic in the world.
- Approximately 1M women in the United States become widowed every year.
- 1/3 of women who become widowed are under 60 years old.
- 50% of women will leave the church attended with their husbands within 12 months of becoming a widow.

Many people who have unresolved grief will attempt to cover their feelings with unhealthy, excessive behaviors such as excessive shopping, eating disorders, overuse of prescription medications, alcohol/drugs, or destructive relationships.

There is no instruction book on how to grieve. Everyone grieves in their own way and at their own pace. Still, there are four basic needs of all people who are grieving:

- Emotional
- Spiritual
- Social
- Physical

## WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE SAY?

In the Bible there are over 100 references to widows and orphans. This shows us that widows and orphans are very close to God's heart.

Throughout the Old Testament we are told that God defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow. He commands us to care for widows and orphans.

In the New Testament we see many references of Jesus' love and compassion for widows. In Matthew and Acts, the Apostles were called to share the good news of God's love, Jesus' death and resurrection, and God's plan for our redemption. The Apostles were commanded to Go, Teach, & Baptize. As the early church grew, we read about the concern that some widows were being neglected. The Apostles recognized this issue, sought out spiritual people known to be wise and honest and appointed them to the ministry of the widows.

In Paul's first letter to Timothy he gives clear instruction regarding the care of widows. The responsibility for their care first falls to their family. This was because women were usually not able to support themselves and families would expect the church to provide their financial support. In those cases, children were not obedient to God's commandment to "honor your father and mother", and widows became a financial burden on the church. However, the church was still to minister to widows by instructing families on their responsibilities and to care for older widows who had no family.

**SO, WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?** Care still falls to the responsibility of the family first. But it is the responsibility of the church to make sure the widow is being cared for. Sometimes that requires the church to work with the family to make sure needs are being met. Even when the family is involved, it does not relieve the church of God's command to care for widows.

### **WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR CHURCHES TODAY?**

Scripture is still relevant today. God's Word has not changed. He still has compassion for widows and orphans. He still commands the church to care for widows and orphans.

Today women are usually able to support themselves and are no longer a financial burden on the church. Nevertheless, when a person loses their spouse, their income is significantly reduced and lifestyles are forced to be altered. During the first few months of grief, the surviving spouse might experience anxiety over financial security. The Church should be there for support through prayer and financial counseling for the widow and her family.

Widows often become spiritually vulnerable when grief is unresolved. Some may feel neglected by their church family. Some may feel angry and abandoned by God. Some may question their faith. The Church should wrap the widow in so much love and mercy that she will feel comfortable in her emotions. The Church should reassure her that these emotions are not unusual and can be resolved in a healthy, safe environment.

Widows can become exhausted from grief, and neglect taking care of themselves. She sometimes becomes intentionally isolated. The Church should do routine wellness checks to make sure she is physically healthy and getting out of the house regularly.

Widows can become socially vulnerable and turn to social media outlets for friendships. This might be fulfilling but usually it is not. There are many who will take advantage of a widow's grief for their own benefit. The Church should provide Christian Support Groups where newer widows can be encouraged by widows who are further in their grief journey.

**ISN'T THIS THE PASTOR'S JOB?** No. Just like the early church, a Pastor's responsibility is to share the Gospel. Pastors should be involved in a widow's spiritual needs, and an effective widows' ministry must have the support of the Pastor of the church, but there should be a team of spiritual people known to be wise and honest, appointed by the church to oversee the needs of the widow.

### **WHY A TEAM?**

We all have different abilities and spiritual gifts that can be used to minister to widows. We have different personalities and relational styles. Everyone grieves in their own way and at their own pace. It is important for the widow to be comfortable with a ministry team that fits her personality and relational style. It is also important that the team has the abilities to assist with her specific needs.

We suggest a team of four. We recommend the team include the Pastor, a Deacon, a Sunday School Teacher or Small Group Leader and a widow who is a faithful member of your church and has been widowed for at least 24 months. If the widow has children in the home, add the Youth Pastor or Sunday School Teacher as an additional team member. These teams should be trained for this ministry. The team should be responsible for overseeing a widow's care but it is always good to ask other church members to get involved with specific needs when their gifts and abilities can meet those needs. It is important to have multiple teams. Multiple teams will prevent any team from being overwhelmed with the overall ministry.

**A word of caution.** Make sure the teams always include their spouses in this ministry. If a spouse is not available or included, a man or men in the church should never visit a widow without at least one woman from the church present. The same should be applied if women are ministering to a widower, at least one man from the church should be present.

## **WHAT SHOULD THE TEAM DO?**

Look for emotional, spiritual, social and physical needs and find ways to meet those needs.

Listen to her. Let her cry. She needs to have a safe environment to talk about her husband and her emotions. This is the healthiest way to resolve grief.

Look for signs of depression and isolation.

The team can also encourage the widow to get involved in things she enjoys doing.

The team can help the widow find a **Grief Rebuild Group** and a **Grief Support Group**.

***Grief Support Groups** are ongoing groups that meet on a regular basis. These groups are made up of individuals who have experienced loss. The groups give individuals opportunities to share and support each other.*

***Grief Rebuild Groups** are groups that meet for a short-term. Usually 6 - 8 weeks. The group is led by a trained individual who can help participants recognize their emotions and work through their grief with healthy behaviors. This process allows the individual to avoid unresolved grief and the long-term negative effects associated with it.*

Sometimes it is difficult for a widow to return to church. The team or someone from the team can sit with her or invite her to sit with them during Bible Study and Worship.

Make sure the widow is taking care of her health and seeking professional help if necessary. It is common for widows to have difficulty sleeping, eating, socializing, etc. and most have some short-term memory loss. This is part of the grieving process and usually gets better over time without medication. A trained team can reassure the widow that this is normal. At the same time, they can recognize things that might require professional assistance.

The widow might not recognize minor repairs needed on her home or car. Or, she might recognize repairs are needed, but she might not know how to do the repairs or who to ask for help. Be prepared to help with these needs.

## **HOW LONG SHOULD A TEAM MINISTER TO A WIDOW?**

Everyone grieves in their own way and at their own pace. We recommend a 2-year approach. Some widows might need more time with a team and some might need less time.

The following are some suggestions for a 2-year plan. Most of these actions are cumulative over the 2-year period.

### **At time of death and through the funeral -**

Make the family aware if the church can assist with music, programs, videos, funeral reception, etc.

Offer to go to the funeral home with the widow and her family when arrangements are made.

Assist with meals.

Offer to help with out of town family. Transportation to and from airport, lodging, etc.

Help her clean the house or help with laundry and errands.

### **By the end of the first month –**

Meals – take a meal to the widow and eat with her or invite her to eat with you. Have a meal team to provide a couple of freezable meals per week for first 2 months then one per week for next two months.

Be visible. Visibility can be in many forms, a card, flowers, a phone call, meeting the widow somewhere for coffee, an in-home visit, etc. Get to know the widow and let her get to know you. Some widows will want more person-to-person visits. Some may not want any personal visits. Don't force it. Everyone grieves in their own way and at their own pace. Always be sensitive to her needs and emotions. Always call first before you make a person-to-person visit. Always follow through. Regardless of how you are visible with the widow, allow her to share her fears and concerns as this is a critical part of processing grief.

Obtain a copy of **What Now? A Practical Resource Guide for Kentucky Widows** and go through the book with the widow on your visits. This will help her know what to expect in the coming months and it will give her some assurance that she has people who will help her through many overwhelming tasks.

Calendar – set up a calendar of dates that are important to her such as birthdays, anniversaries, etc. During the year of loss, the widow will go through a difficult “year of firsts”. Use your calendar to acknowledge those dates with cards, calls, flowers, etc. Give her the opportunity to grieve and/or celebrate these special days with you. Make sure she has plans for holidays as they approach. If she does not, invite her to be a part of yours. This should continue at least through the 2<sup>nd</sup> year. Often second anniversary dates are harder than first ones. During the first year the widow is usually experiencing numbness, often referred to as “Widow Fog” or Widow Brain”. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> year numbness is less intense which makes the pain of grief more intense.

Finances – at this point she is probably recognizing a need to adjust her budget. She may have some unexpressed fears about her financial future. Open the door of communication so she feels comfortable expressing these concerns with you. Offer to assist with budgeting or ask someone in your church who is trustworthy and has this ability to meet with her.

Offer to help with cleaning, yard work, car and home maintenance, etc.

### **By the end of the first 3 months –**

Make sure she is taking care of herself and getting out.

Make sure she has addressed her finances.

Make sure she is personally safe – home security, cyber security, etc.

Make sure she is attending church. She might not be able to attend regularly yet, but make sure she is coming when she can. Sit with her or invite her to sit with you. Make plans for lunch after church. This will encourage her attendance.

Encourage her to attend a Christian Grief Rebuild Group as soon as possible. These groups provide a safe environment to identify and process emotions related to grief.

### **By the end of the first 6 months –**

Encourage her to get involved in a Christian Grief Support Group. Offer to go with her until she feels comfortable. You might need to do some initial research to help her find the right group for her. Talk to other widows and make some phone calls. Make sure it is a Christian group for grief support and not a dating group. Don't rely on Google. A quick search for widow support groups in your area will take you to dating sites for widows and widowers.

### **By the end of the first year –**

Plan a memorial service or celebration of life service at church to celebrate her husband. If she does not want any type of special service, at least make sure she has a healthy plan for the anniversary date and offer to spend part of the day with her if she plans to be alone.

### **By the end of 18 months –**

Help her recognize her purpose, her abilities and things she enjoys doing.

Find ways for her to get involved in short-term ministry projects at church.

Encourage her to tell her story at church and other small group settings.

Affirm her for how far she has progressed through so many challenges and changes.

### **By the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year –**

Help her find a place in the church where she can get involved in long-term ministry.

Encourage her to get involved in widows' ministry.

Keep affirming her.

### **WHAT CAN WIDOWS DO FOR OUR CHURCH?**

God commands the Church to care for widows. Not only because widows need care, but because following God's command is always for our benefit and His glory.

When the Church walks beside a widow as she grieves, she becomes a living, breathing testimony of God's Grace.

She has walked through the valley of the shadow of death beside The Shepherd and she is thriving.

She has a more intimate relationship with God because of her circumstances and she knows that God still has a plan for her.

She will be able to minister to others who are grieving because she knows the pain personally.

She will be eager to share her story of God's love and mercy, and the Church's compassion.

She can reach people for Christ in ways others cannot.

She will never get over the loss of her husband but if the Church effectively ministers to her, she will cultivate her love for the Church. She will lovingly commit her time, gifts and life-experiences to the Church that lovingly committed to her in her grief.

For more information or assistance contact: **Kentucky Joy In The Mourning 859-334-0690**

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