



HOW THE CHURCH SHOULD RESPOND TO CHILDREN OF DIVORCE Page 1 of 4

By Linda Ranson Jacobs

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In this fourth and final installment dealing with the spiritual development of children, we will look at how the church should respond to children of divorce and why it is absolutely essential that we do something.

What We Need To Do In the Church to Help Spiritual Development



Judith Wallerstein, in The Unexpected Legacy, the Twenty Five Year Landmark Study, advocates for strengthening marriages. This can be accomplished through marriage retreats, Bible studies on what the Bible says about marriages and numerous other means. We have to model good marriages for the child of divorce. We have to mentor the children in divorced families and expose them to happy and healthy two-parent families.

Doug Dees in Baker's Hand Book of Single Parenting calls it grafting. He says to graft a

single parent family with a two-parent family. Grafting is where you place or join a single parent family into the healthy two-parent family like you would graft one plant into another one. The two-parent family can help parent the child in the single parent family. The two-parent family can walk alongside the single parent.

We need to teach children what the Bible says about divorce. We don't need to heap condemnation on them but gently explain that divorce is not God's design for us. They need to know that God allowed divorce because of hardness of heart but that He hates divorce. He hates it because he knows how much divorce hurts everyone, including the children. However, God's forgiveness can extend even our parents when they sin.

Churches need to make a point to integrate the church family into the local community. Years ago the church was the community. Everything revolved around the church. It is going to take a church to raise a child of divorce. A single parent can't do it alone. In my opinion when a child from a divorced home graduates from high school, the entire church should stand up and celebrate this accomplishment. The church needs to be standing behind and beside these children.

In order to render Bible stories relevant to the child of divorce use traditional children's Bible stories but take a unique approach. Take into consideration the difficulties children of divorce face each and every day. Choose stories that address these issues and will point children in crisis to Jesus Christ as their source of healing.



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Repeatedly remind them that God can fill the void and become the parent that is missing in their day-to-day life.

The following stories offer guidance on how you might approach a child of divorce when using a story from the Bible. I'm not suggesting that you change the meaning of the lesson but adapt it so the child of divorce can be impacted just like the child from a two-parent family.

Jesus Calms the Storm (Matthew 8:23-27)

We all have storms in our lives. Divorce is like a storm. It disrupts your life but Jesus can protect you in the storm of divorce.

The Woman at the Well and the Children (John 4:5-26, Matthew 19:13-15)

Children need to know what the Bible says about divorce. In this story you can talk about the glue that holds commitments and marriages together. God can forgive the divorced person. For children that have divorced parents, they need to learn to forgive them.

Jonah Gets Angry (Jonah 1-4)

Children of divorced parents often get mad at their parents and even at God for not doing something to stop the divorce. In the story of Jonah, bring out how Jonah got mad because God didn't destroy the people of Ninevah. It's okay to be angry but we have to get over our anger. The people of Ninevah repented and God forgave them just as He can forgive us.

The Mother and Son Who Had to Leave, Genesis 21:8-20

Many children involved in a divorce have to separate from a parent and a sibling. It's hard enough to lose a parent but to lose a brother or sister in addition to a parent creates a very lonely life. This story talks about how two half brothers were separated. God provided for both brothers.

Brothers Have to Help at Home (2 Kings 4:1-7)

This story is a good example of how everyone in a family needs to pull together and work to support the family. Everyone in a divorced family can help. God provides miracle for us today.

Josiah, the Eight-Year-Old King (2 Kings 22)

Sometimes, kids in divorced families get upset because they have to take on so many more responsibilities. This story relays that Josiah was only 8 years old, and he had to run an entire kingdom. Josiah chose to follow the



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Lord just as kids today can follow what God wants them to do even though their parents may not be following God.

Throughout all these stories, emphasize how God is in control and provides for people. We have to tell the child of divorce that God is God. He is not like the parent that left them. We can't compare God to any human. Because of their feelings toward a parent, we need to admit to them they may have to work harder or exhibit more faith than others but they can do it.

Establishing Authoritative Church Communities

Children today must have communities that will connect with them and give them opportunities to connect each and every day. Children need authoritative communities if they are to survive and thrive today and the tomorrow. The Hardwired to Connect report discussed in a previous article was not developed with the child of divorce in mind; these solutions can certainly apply to the child of divorce and the church. Briefly the ten solutions are:

1. Include children and youth so they can connect
2. Treat children as ends in themselves
3. Warm and nurturing year round
4. Establish clear boundaries and limits – God's plan
5. Use lay leaders with a passion
6. Be multi-generational with exposure to Grandparent type people
7. Have a long-term focus
8. Encourage spiritual development (mentors)
9. The people reflect and transmit shared understanding of what it means to follow God's design for His people
10. Teach dignity and respect of all persons even other cultures, countries.

What Will the Church of the Future Look Like?

Today only 42% of teens 14 – 18 years of age live with their original birth family. This means that in the near future that almost 60% of young adults will have experienced their parent's divorce. Many of them will turn their backs on the typical church. Many of them will say they are religious but won't want to have anything to do with organized religion. One research study I read said that 62% of children from divorced homes were more likely than children in two parent homes to no longer identify with the faith of their parents.

Many of them don't understand, or have never been exposed to, committing to a church or religious institution.



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However, they still maintain at some point they want to get married, and they don't want their children to go through what they have. Yet, they have no model for creating a healthy viable Godly marriage.

If we don't reach out to this population, church as we know it will become obsolete. We have to reach out, try to understand and bring this population through our doors. Otherwise after my generation dies, the church will cease to exist.

The flip side of this picture could be a stronger more Christ-centered and Godly church which could very well evolve. It will be hard but not impossible to bring the young adults to the Lord and through the doors of the church. I believe God is still in the business of miracles and ultimately in control. If we can reach out, then the next generation and the next generation will be saved.

Research shows (from "The Effects of Divorce on America" by Patrick Fagan and Robert Rector, from www.worldandi.com) Religion has been found to have beneficial effects on physical and mental health; education level; income; virginity in teens; crime addiction and general happiness. Church attendance is the most significant predictor of marital stability; it's closely related to sexual restraint in teens; associated with lower crime rates well as the lower use of drugs and alcohol abuse.

It is time for the church to step up and be a healing and supportive community for children of divorce.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Linda Ranson Jacobs is one of the forefront leaders in the area of children and divorce. She developed and created the DivorceCare for Kids programs. DC4K is an international program for churches to use to help children of divorced parents find healing within the arms of a loving church family. As a speaker, author, trainer, program developer and child care center owner, Linda has assisted countless families by modeling and acting on the healing love she has found in Jesus Christ. More great articles about how to successfully minister to the child of divorce in your church can be found at Linda's website [Healthy Loving Partnerships for Our Kids \(HLP4\) \[http://www.hlp4.com\]](http://www.hlp4.com). Linda also offers support, encouragement, and suggestions to help single parents and those working with single parent children. She can be reached by e-mail at Linda@hlp4.com.

