

WHAT CHURCHES (AND PASTORS) SHOULD KNOW ABOUT WIDOWS

800,000 join our ranks every day. We are a fast growing demographic noticed by new home builders and a lucrative niche for health and beauty products. We are invited to dinners by financial planners and surveyed by designers for home features that will convince us to sign on the dotted line.

In contrast, one pastor described us by saying we moved from the front row of church to the back row of church and then out the door. We moved from singing and serving to solitude and silent sobbing, and then on to find a place we belong. Approximately 50% leave the church they attended as a couple.

Scripture says the character of a nation is shown by how it treats us, in fact the character of individuals and the church is shown by how it treats us. 103 references to us in scripture indicate that we are close to God's heart.

Who are we? We are the invisible among you – the widow.

I am one. I am a part of the fastest growing demographic in the United States as baby boomers age. We lose 75% of our friendship network when we become one; 60% of us experience serious health issues in that first year. One third of us meet the criteria for clinical depression in the first month after our spouse's death, and half of these remain clinically depressed a year later. Most experience financial decline.

If someone had described this scenario to me five years ago, I would have stated emphatically, "It can't be so! In the community of believers we support each other. We walk together on the journey." I look back on my own responses to women who became widows and realize how little I understood, how little I empathized, how seldom I walked beside them. Many, in fact, became invisible whether it was in ministry positions, small group participation, or social events. Of the approximately 50% who leave the church they attended with their spouse, some reconnect to a place that matches their needs.

If someone had quoted the friendship statistic, I would have thought, "That won't be me." With the network that surrounds Bob and me, I will never experience loss of that magnitude. Yet I did. Connections that are primarily through our husbands, change and departures, while appropriate, are still painful to process.

May I help you understand us by describing some of my personal experiences? Becoming a widow means nothing is the same. With Boob's exit to heaven absolutely every iota of my existence has changed: my calendar, my check book, what's in my frig, the wake-up alarm time, the thermostat, the traffic pattern in the bedroom, which restaurants I can enter, and yes, the look in my children's eyes when they step in the door on holidays. My living space is more cluttered, make-up is seldom used, and I am familiar with the smell of car oil as I sit in Lube Right next to the overdone coffee wondering what Bob did when he waited here.

There are other changes so private and personal they cannot be shared. Loneliness and solitude are words that are not descriptive enough of the space that becomes the cocoon of the widow. We discover that our journeys are very different and we fit in no mold. However, we have an incredibly strong connecting bond that links us to each other because of our shared experience.

What do we have in common? We discover we are vulnerable as never before. We are pressured to purchase products we neither need nor can afford. Salespersons use their influence as 'our friend' and even fellow believers looking out for us.

We are concerned about our finances. Most experience financial decline. Women experience fewer years of employment and less income which often impacts their preparation for being alone or retired. In my decades as a church goer, I have never heard a message on 1 Timothy 5:8 (a passage which admonishes believers to provide for their family) which included appropriate attention to wills, trusts, and life insurance. The likely event that one person in the marriage will exit to heaven before the other with its financial implications are important to address. While in biblical times, God's people were told to take care of the widows and orphans among them, it is assumed now that the government through Social Security and other programs will care for the invisible among us – a theory for which the numbers do not work.

Our emotions change more drastically than the reversals on the extreme Sheikra roller coaster ride at Busch Gardens – a ride I entered ignorantly rather than have my grandsons unaccompanied through the long line. I regretted that ride immensely as a 200 foot drop rearranged my insides. Imagine this contrast. Two

become one in marriage. At nineteen years of age I embarked on my journey with Bob that lasted 41 years, 2 months, and 21 days.

Sixteen months after meeting Bob, this 19 year old sophomore who had never been to Chicago or heard of Moody Bible Institute married a man who knew his life calling was to serve God through Moody Broadcasting. Finishing degrees, farm girl becoming city girl, moving six times, having children, adopting children, church choirs, lots of hospitality where ever we lived, and traveling to 40 countries together was part of the journey. I became an educator – a teacher and counselor in public high schools for 26 years – yes, a working mom. As he followed his calling he led the MBI network to 36 owned and operated stations. He negotiated with the Federal Communications Commission successfully and was able to begin a satellite ministry that at times has served 600 affiliates. We parented our children to adulthood which was unquestionably the greatest challenge in our marriage. We enjoyed the marriages of three and worked and toiled over our home as two chose to have their wedding receptions in our yard. No smile was broader on either Bob's face or mine than watching our three incredibly handsome African American grandsons grow.

In an incredibly productive season of his life while serving as Vice President of Moody Broadcasting, treasurer of National Religious Broadcasters, and board member of HCJB (Heralding Christ Jesus Birth – an international broadcasting group), Bob fell. The inconvenience and pain of a dislocated shoulder began the journey to doctors through disease, through sorting through our theology, to facing the bleak reality: Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis is untreatable, fatal, and had gripped Bob's body.

Less than three years after that fall he entered heaven willingly: I gave him up with more than reluctance. Our 'one' was not ripped in 'two.' My inarguably better half was gone and the gapping wound created by his exit had every nerve ending screaming even though I was supposed to be numb. The ride on the Sheikra was docile compared to this.

While every widow's story is different, we all share the common understanding of a loss that is final beyond description. There will be no phone call, no plane delayed but still landing, no second chance to right our past regrets. Sitting curled up on the cold ground watching the gardener gently work the grass seed into the

fresh dirt on my husbands grave set me apart forever from the life I once had. Other widows understand that.

What else do we share? We gain a fresh perspective on Scripture. 2 Corinthians 1:3, 4 is so relevant. No one can comfort us like another widow. In turn we are moved deeply when we see another woman enter this experience and we want to comfort her in her grief. We study the 103 Scripture references to widows with desperation to find whether we are invisible to God as well. With gratitude we discover that we are not only close to God's heart, but He measures everyone by how they treat us. (James 1:27) This is both a comforting and sobering insight. Widows, orphans, prisoners – the voiceless – God chooses to speak for us.

He instructs that our needs be met (Deut. 24:17) through the church's tithes if necessary (Deut 14:29; 26:12, Acts 6:1-4) He instructs that in our vulnerability we be given our legal rights, (Isaiah 1:17; Luke 18:1-8) He commends us for our sacrificial giving. (Mark 12:42-43) He tells our story – the widow at Zarephath and her generosity, (1 Kings 17:9) the widow, her pot of oil, her faith and obedience. (2 Kings 4:1)

As I studied Scripture on widows these themes emerged:

To the widow:

...be generous regardless of the quantity of your possessions, no one's 'stuff' is their own anyway

...be filled with faith, you can't help but be when you see how special you are to your Creator and your new husband.

To the church:

...The significance of your church is not in its numbers but that its priorities match those of God

...The character of your leaders is not measured by their popularity or power but by their attention and care for the powerless and voiceless among them.