

UnYoked

When Divorce Comes to Your Church

A Pastor's Guide to Caring for Christians in Crisis

A practical, compassionate framework for the first conversations, the hardest situations, and the path forward.

Prepared for pastors, elders, care teams, and ministry leaders

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START HERE

A Word to Church Leaders

When someone finally tells you their marriage is in crisis, your first words and next steps matter.

Most pastors and care leaders do not need another abstract debate about divorce. They need a calm, compassionate way to respond when a person is frightened, ashamed, angry, unsafe, confused, or already grieving the life they thought they would have.

This guide is not a substitute for counseling, legal advice, domestic-violence advocacy, or emergency intervention. It is a pastoral care tool: a way to slow down, listen wisely, protect people from harm, and help your church become a place where someone can receive truthful care without being abandoned or publicly reduced to the worst moment of their life.

THE AIM

Care for the person in front of you without rushing to pronounce a verdict, promise an outcome, or take on responsibilities that belong to licensed professionals, legal authorities, or trained advocates.

Inside This Guide

1. The first conversation matters	How to receive the story without panic, pressure, or premature advice.
2. Slow down before you pick a side	Why a church should resist simplistic labels and careful listening is not compromise.
3. Five questions before giving advice	A practical set of questions that surfaces safety, urgency, children, support, and next steps.
4. When safety must come first	What to do when abuse, coercion, threats, stalking, child safety, or self-harm concerns are present.
5. What not to say	Five common spiritual shortcuts that can add shame or create danger.
6. What hurting Christians need from church	Compassion, confidentiality, belonging, practical care, and a path forward.
7. Caring after the divorce	How to help people rebuild faith, relationships, parenting rhythms, trust, and purpose.

8. A simple church care pathway

A repeatable framework your team can use from crisis to community.

9. Team discussion and next steps

Questions to help your church decide what needs to change now.

1 | THE FIRST CONVERSATION

Receive the Story Before You Try to Solve It

The first goal is not to determine whether the marriage will survive. The first goal is to help a hurting person feel safe enough to tell the truth.

A person may come to you with divorce papers in hand, after discovering an affair, after years of quiet emotional depletion, after a frightening incident at home, or after the divorce is already final. They may be ashamed, defensive, desperate to be believed, or afraid of being judged. They may also be leaving out important details. Your role is to listen carefully without becoming passive, cynical, or prematurely certain.

Begin with steadiness

- Thank them for coming forward. A simple “I am glad you told someone” can lower the temperature immediately.
- Ask permission before you move into questions: “Would it be okay if I asked a few things so we can think clearly about what support you need?”
- Listen for facts, feelings, safety concerns, and immediate practical needs. Do not force a complete narrative in one meeting.
- Avoid promising confidentiality you cannot keep. Explain that you will protect privacy, but must act if a child or adult is in immediate danger or if reporting obligations apply.
- End the conversation with one or two clear next steps, not a long list of assignments.

A HELPFUL OPENING

“You do not have to carry this alone today. I want to understand what is happening, make sure you and the children are safe, and help you take the next wise step.”

What the first meeting is for

The first meeting is for receiving the person, identifying urgent risks, clarifying what support is needed next, and establishing a responsible follow-up plan. It is not for forcing reconciliation, deciding who is morally right based on one conversation, settling legal questions, or turning a crisis into a public church matter.

2 | DISCERNMENT

Slow Down Before You Pick a Side

Churches can do real harm when they decide too quickly who is the “good spouse” and who is the “bad spouse.”

A spouse who initiates a separation or divorce is not automatically rebellious, unrepentant, or the sole cause of the marriage breakdown. They may be responding to abuse, coercion, betrayal, danger, addiction, chronic abandonment, or a situation the congregation cannot see. At the same time, someone describing themselves as the wounded party may minimize their own actions or conceal serious harm. Wise pastoral care is neither gullible nor accusatory.

What careful discernment looks like

- Listen without treating the first account as the whole account.
- Separate compassion from endorsement. You can care deeply without immediately validating every conclusion.
- Ask whether the person has support beyond the church: a licensed counselor, physician, attorney, advocate, trusted family member, or safety plan.
- Do not demand that a person meet privately with a spouse when they fear retaliation, coercion, or harm.
- Do not use church discipline, public pressure, or theological slogans to force a person back into a dangerous setting.

PASTORAL POSTURE

Be slow to judge, quick to listen, clear about safety, and committed to truth. Compassion is not moral confusion. Discernment is not suspicion.

A helpful team practice

When possible, do not let one pastor or volunteer carry a complicated case alone. Use an appropriate, confidential care team or supervisor. Keep the circle small. Document only what is necessary. Do not turn someone's crisis into a staff-room story.

3 | FIRST QUESTIONS

Five Questions to Ask Before Giving Advice

These questions help a leader slow down and identify the kind of care the situation actually requires.

1. Is anyone unsafe right now?

Ask plainly about threats, violence, coercion, stalking, sexual abuse, weapons, child safety, escalating anger, or fear of going home. Safety concerns change the entire response.

2. What is happening with the children?

Ask where the children are, what they have seen or heard, whether they are safe, and whether they need additional support. Do not put children in the role of messengers, investigators, or emotional caretakers.

3. What has already happened?

Clarify whether the person is contemplating separation, has moved out, has filed, has been served, is living separately, or is already divorced. Ask what professional and pastoral help has been involved so far.

4. What support do you have this week?

Isolation amplifies crisis. Identify one or two safe people, a place to stay if needed, transportation, finances, child care, medical care, and spiritual support.

5. What is the next wise step - not the entire future?

The next step may be a safety plan, a counseling referral, a medical appointment, a legal consultation, a conversation with a trusted elder, or simply another meeting tomorrow.

A SENTENCE TO REMEMBER

Do not ask, "What should you do with your whole marriage?" before you know whether the person can safely get through tonight.

When Safety Must Come First

A church should never communicate that preserving a marriage is more important than protecting a person from harm.

If someone reports abuse, threats, coercive control, sexual violence, stalking, child abuse, credible threats of self-harm, or fear for their safety, treat it as a safety issue first. Do not turn it into a couples communication exercise. Do not require immediate joint counseling. Do not demand that the person confront the alleged abuser alone. Follow your church's safeguarding policies and local reporting obligations.

Red flags that require urgent attention

- Physical violence, threats of violence, strangulation, weapons, destruction of property, or threats to harm children, pets, or self.
- Sexual coercion or assault, including pressure or retaliation tied to sexual activity.
- Stalking, monitoring devices, control of money, isolation, confiscating documents, or preventing access to transportation, health care, work, or communication.
- Child abuse, neglect, exposure to violence, or credible concern that children are unsafe during exchanges or visits.
- Suicidal thoughts, statements about not wanting to live, or threats to harm another person.

WHAT TO DO

Call emergency services when there is immediate danger. For ongoing abuse, help the person connect with a qualified domestic-violence advocate or local crisis resource. Follow mandatory reporting requirements. Document facts carefully and avoid promising outcomes you cannot control.

What not to do

- Do not tell the person to “go home and submit” or to meet alone with a spouse to prove forgiveness.
- Do not schedule couples counseling as the first response to active abuse or coercive control.
- Do not contact the alleged abuser to “hear both sides” before considering the safety implications.
- Do not store sensitive details in insecure notes, shared spreadsheets, or casual emails.

5 | WORDS MATTER

Five Things Not to Say

Well-intended religious language can deepen shame, minimize danger, or make a person feel that the church is more interested in appearances than care.

Avoid this	Try this posture instead
“God hates divorce, so you need to make this work.”	God’s design for marriage matters. But this sentence, especially in a crisis, can sound like a command to remain in danger or absorb ongoing harm. Begin with listening, safety, truth, and wise care.
“You just need to forgive and go home.”	Forgiveness is not the same as immediate reconciliation, restored access, or removing wise boundaries. Forgiveness should never be used to erase safety concerns or bypass repentance.
“Do not talk to a lawyer.”	A legal consultation can be a responsible way to understand rights, responsibilities, safety options, and the impact on children. Pastors can encourage wisdom without providing legal advice.
“You must have done something to cause this.”	Every marriage has a story, but a hurting person should not be blamed for another person’s abuse, betrayal, or choices. Ask questions before assumptions.
“You will be fine. Just trust God.”	Faith is not denial. People often need practical support, space to grieve, skilled care, and a concrete next step alongside spiritual encouragement.

A BETTER QUESTION

“What has this season been like for you, and what kind of support would be most helpful right now?”

What Hurting Christians Need From Their Church

People recovering from divorce do not need a church to pretend the loss did not matter. They need a church that refuses to treat them as a problem to manage.

Compassion without gossip

People need to know their story will not become a prayer request without permission. Explain who will know, what will be shared, and why. Protect dignity. Be especially careful in churches where families, staff, and friend groups overlap.

A place to belong before they are “better”

Do not make belonging contingent on having a tidy story, a resolved legal situation, or a cheerful attitude. Invite people into ordinary church life: meals, groups, service, worship, parenting support, and friendships that do not revolve around their pain.

Practical help

- Meals, child care, rides, moving help, financial triage, safe housing connections, and help navigating community resources.
- A trusted same-gender mentor or care partner who knows how to listen without trying to fix every problem.
- Referrals to licensed Christian counselors, domestic-violence advocates, attorneys, mediators, support groups, and medical or mental-health professionals when needed.

Hope without pressure

Hope is not a promise that the marriage will be restored or that remarriage will happen. Hope is the confidence that God sees the person, is present in the pain, and can lead them into a faithful future even when the outcome is not what they wanted.

SCRIPTURE TO HOLD WITH CARE

Use Scripture to remind people of God's nearness, wisdom, mercy, and truth. Avoid using Scripture as a shortcut to silence grief, force reconciliation, or settle a complicated situation in one conversation.

How to Care for People After the Divorce

The church's responsibility does not end when the legal process ends. In many ways, the deeper rebuilding begins afterward.

After divorce, people often face waves of grief, loneliness, friendship loss, parenting stress, financial strain, church hurt, fear about future relationships, and confusion about identity. They may need a recovery pathway that is different from marriage counseling. They need discipleship that acknowledges what has changed and helps them rebuild life with Christ at the center.

Five areas of ongoing care

Emotional healing

Give people healthy spaces to process grief, anger, fear, guilt, relief, and unanswered questions.

Community

Help them reconnect with peers, small groups, mentors, and friendships that are not tied only to their former marriage.

Parenting

Offer practical support for co-parenting, children's emotions, family routines, and the strain of divided households.

Trust and boundaries

Help people recognize unhealthy patterns, rebuild discernment, and develop relationships marked by honesty and respect.

Identity and purpose

Remind people that they are not defined by divorce. Help them discover meaningful service, renewed purpose, and a future that is more than survival.

A PRACTICAL NEXT STEP

UnYoked Divorce Recovery is designed to give churches a document-based, discussion-driven small-group pathway for this stage of care. It helps participants work through friendship loss, emotional chaos, parenting, trust, identity, and renewed purpose in community.

8 | A REPEATABLE FRAMEWORK

A Simple Church Care Pathway

You do not need to have every answer. You do need a responsible way to move from crisis to care, and from care to community.

1. Receive the first conversation

Listen, thank the person for coming, assess safety, and do not rush to conclusions.

2. Clarify urgent needs

Identify immediate safety, children's needs, housing, finances, medical needs, legal questions, and mental-health concerns.

3. Connect the right support

Refer to appropriate professionals and advocates. Keep pastoral care in its lane; do not attempt to replace licensed or emergency services.

4. Offer a care plan

Set a follow-up meeting, identify one safe church contact, clarify what the church can practically provide, and protect confidentiality.

5. Invite into recovery and community

Offer a recovery group, mentoring, small-group connection, practical help, and a pathway back into ordinary church life.

6. Keep the door open

Recovery is uneven. Continue to check in after court dates, holidays, anniversaries, custody transitions, and major family changes.

FOR YOUR CARE TEAM

Create a short written protocol before a crisis arrives. Decide who responds, who follows up, how confidentiality is handled, when referrals are made, and how care is documented.

9 | TEAM CONVERSATION

Questions for Your Church to Discuss

Use these questions with pastors, elders, care ministers, women's and men's ministry leaders, or your small-group leadership team.

- When someone in our church is contemplating separation or divorce, what happens now? Is there a clear first response?
- Who is responsible for safety concerns, mandatory reporting, and referral decisions?
- Do our leaders know the difference between marital conflict, coercive control, active abuse, and a situation that needs professional help?
- How do we protect confidentiality while still involving the right people?
- What practical help can our church offer without overpromising or taking sides?
- Do divorced people in our church have a place to belong, grow, serve, and form healthy friendships?
- What language in our culture might unintentionally shame people or make them afraid to ask for help?
- What would make a person impacted by divorce say, "My church did not abandon me"?

A 30-day action plan

1. Name a point person for divorce and family-crisis care.
2. Build or refresh a vetted referral list for counseling, domestic-violence advocacy, legal aid, and crisis support.
3. Give key leaders a short confidentiality and safety training.
4. Decide how and when you will invite people into a recovery pathway.
5. Review your church language, announcements, and groups for places where belonging can be strengthened.

DO NOT WAIT FOR A CRISIS

The best time to decide how your church will respond is before someone is sitting in your office, holding divorce papers, and wondering whether they will still be welcome on Sunday.

NEXT STEP

Bring a Practical Recovery Pathway to Your Church

This guide helps you respond to the crisis. UnYoked Divorce Recovery helps you care for the rebuilding.

UnYoked Divorce Recovery for Churches is an eight-week, document-based and discussion-driven group resource for Christians navigating separation, divorce, and life after divorce. It gives a trusted pastor, care leader, or mature volunteer the structure to lead people through honest reflection, group discussion, Scripture, prayer, practical next steps, and renewed connection to community.

The Church Group Kit includes

- Complete Church Leader Guide with eight meeting plans, discussion questions, prayer prompts, and leader notes.
- Participant recovery materials covering friendships, emotional chaos, readiness and boundaries, co-parenting, trust, children, and identity.
- Confidentiality, care-boundary, safety, and referral guidance.
- Bonus devotional, reflection journal, purpose checklist, and vision-board resource.
- Permission to print participant materials for your registered group under the license terms.

EXPLORE THE CHURCH GROUP KIT

See how it works, what is included, and how your church can begin: toddtturner.com/unyoked-divorce-recovery-online-course-for-churches/

You do not have to solve every part of someone's story. But your church can become a place where a person finds wise care, truthful hope, practical support, and a path toward healing.

Important note: This guide provides general ministry guidance and is not legal, medical, mental-health, or domestic-violence advice. In an emergency or immediate safety situation, contact local emergency services. Follow applicable reporting laws and your church's safeguarding policies.