



STAND IN THE GAP FOR WIDOWS

SMALL GROUPS MINISTRY GUIDE

*****A special thank you to our partner organizations, Balcony Women and Asbury United Methodist Church of Tulsa who contributed to the creation of this guide.***

Why Widows? It's Biblical.

The Bible has a lot to say about the care of His widows. It directly references widows about eighty times in scripture. The Bible says widows are to be treated with honor and compassion and offered protection so that no one takes advantage of them. God keeps a watchful eye on His widows and as imitators of God, we are called to do the same.

James 1:27 tells us that "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress."

Stand in the Gap for Widows has learned through research and experience that healing during loss (primary and secondary losses) takes time and intentionality with a focus on the connection between the mind, body, and spirit. We don't just focus on short term immediate assistance, but long term practical, emotional, spiritual needs. Too often, the perception is that once a funeral is over and a widow begins to appear to have regained normalcy in her life, no need exists for her care. Nothing can be further from the truth.

We are committed to learning from widows what they need and then working with churches and organizations to provide the tools to meet those needs. We have interviewed 300 widows, partnered with the University of Oklahoma Center of Applied Research for Nonprofit Organizations to survey 800 widows and conducted a Facebook poll to survey 625 widows.

We have learned through our research that 73% of churches do not have a specific ministry for widows, 50% of widows leave their church home because their needs are not being met and 17% of widows look for a church that has a widow ministry.

Stand in the Gap for Widows has collected invaluable resources for our partners to use as tools to meet their widow community's practical, emotional, spiritual needs. Our Program Director works directly with our partners providing logistical and practical guidance as well as resources such as our Widow Ministry Tool Kit. The kit includes ministry guides: Widow Support Group Guide, Widow Social Guide, Card & Book Guide, Car Care Guide, Home Maintenance Guide and Financial Guidance.

Utilizing our tool kit in its entirety is the optimal solution to meeting the needs of His widows, but we also know that may not be practical within your church or organization, so we have designed the guides to function together as a whole or as independent ministry options. We encourage you to discuss the ministry options with our Program Director to see which would be the best fit for your organization. Many of our

partners begin with a single widow ministry option and then gradually add and grow.

God recognized the widow's plight and rose to her defense: "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling" Psalm 68:5. A person who denied justice to a widow was cursed by God: "Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow" Deuteronomy 27:19. Laws and special provisions were put in place to safeguard widows against neglect and abuse.

Since God honors widows and treats them with compassion, believers should do the same: "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow" Isaiah 1:17.

STAND IN THE GAP WIDOW SUPPORT GROUP GUIDE

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed this word of the Lord: "Plead for the widow." Isaiah 1:17. Stand in the Gap for Widows is an amazing opportunity to be the hands and feet of Christ.

The widow support group methodology is based on Psalm 68:5-6, "...a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families..." Since 1997, participants in Stand in the Gap support groups have started out as acquaintances, grown into close friends, and eventually developed into "families".

The structure of each meeting is a five-step process that allows the Holy Spirit to change hearts and minds:

- ***Open in prayer and invite the Holy Spirit to lead the meeting.***
- ***Share any God Sightings and scripture.*** A God Sighting is how a widow is experiencing God working in her life.
- ***Have a healthy discussion and find helpful tools regarding the issues presented.*** These discussions can be facilitated by our small group curriculum, written especially for widows and available in the Tool Kit.
- ***Present where each member needs to see God move in her life.***
- ***Close in prayer and wait on the Holy Spirit to work.***

This process places all the responsibility for the transformation of human hearts on the Holy Spirit. No person truly fixes another person. That is the work of God. God answers prayer. Our responsibility is to provide a loving, supportive community that creates the necessary, safe, and healthy environment for transformation. This is a tried-and-true method that is built on the wisdom of the Word.

A widow support group is encouraged to meet for a minimum of one year. Most of our widow ministry support groups continue to meet after their initial one-year anniversary. The meetings should be scheduled monthly, once or twice a month is optimal. Scheduled meetings should be in session for at least an hour. This may seem like a major time commitment, and it is. However, most bible study programs require more time. Our small group curriculum is written for two meetings per month. If you chose to meet once a month, the curriculum will last for two years.

Support groups can consist of 4 to 40 widows. As your group grows in number, you will need to create smaller support systems within the larger group to make sure the widows emotional needs are met outside of your regularly scheduled meetings. Our Program Director can give you the resources and guidance on how to implement these systems. Through research and practice, we have found the optimal group size is approximately ten people. If you grow larger and need assistance, please reach out.

Some of our partners have opted to only host widows within their organization and others design their group to be an outreach. The size and structure of your widow support group will be determined by your access to volunteers and the resources available to you. Stand in the Gap will guide your organization with the best-case practices that will help you succeed.

Where will you hold your first support group meeting?

Stand in the Gap for Widows recommends that you choose a comfortable setting. Some support groups meet in a quiet room that is part of the church campus. Other groups meet in homes. This is entirely your decision. A local restaurant may not be an optimal location due to the nature of the support group meeting. Widows will need to feel safe sharing and a public setting may not be conducive to allowing them this opportunity.

Who is in charge?

Ideally, there are volunteers who function as co-leaders serving with several committee members.

Co-leaders are responsible for organizing and conducting the monthly meetings, maintaining a focus on God's love and on practical discussions. They keep a journal of prayer requests and are responsible for keeping the group on track and creating an environment of unity.

Committee members assignments:

- **Meeting Reminder Volunteer** - Volunteers are responsible to coordinate with the church to access room assignments and reminds the group members of the monthly meetings via email or text message.
- **Social Volunteer** - Volunteers are responsible for planning group outings. It is important to establish bonds within the group outside the normal group setting. Hosting fun fellowship quarterly gatherings like going to lunch, meeting at a park, and going to a movie create a sense of community. One of our partners has a set lunch date following each of their monthly meetings.
- **Roster Volunteer** - Volunteers are responsible for creating and updating the group roster. A sample roster is provided for you in the resource section. It is important to remind the group that all information provided in the roster will remain private within the group and must not be shared. The roster is utilized to help the community lift up and encourage each other by supporting their friends on dates of remembrance and in times of need.
- **"Who to call when..." Roster Volunteer** - Volunteers responsible for creating and updating a list of safe and reliable service industry professionals. Widows are often the target of unscrupulous people. Having a list of industry professionals that others in the group trust is a helpful start when dealing with a stressful issue. Some partners have even added a section on "who not to use when..." if they have had a bad experience.
- **Remembrance Volunteers** - Volunteers responsible for lifting up and encouraging group members on special and triggering dates such as sending birthday cards or calling a widow on the anniversary of her husband's heavenly birthday. A list of dates is listed on the sample roster located in the resource section.

The above is presented as the optimal structure for a support group, but the reality is that some groups form with one or two volunteers taking on most of the volunteer roles. It is important to make sure that the person taking on the volunteer responsibility is doing so with a loving mindset and is careful of not becoming a victim of volunteer fatigue. A ministry will be short-lived if it's leaders and volunteers become overwhelmed. Our most successful partnerships have been ones that utilized both widow support group members and non-widowed women volunteers.

The Meeting Reminder Volunteer, Roster Volunteer, and "Who to call when ..." Roster Volunteer can easily be delegated to a non-widowed woman outside of your group that has a heart for widows. The Social Volunteer and Remembrance Volunteers should be composed of widows within the group. The social and emotional element of being a widow makes this necessary in order to meet the widows needs.

FIVE STEP MEETING AGENDA

STEP ONE: Invite the Holy Spirit to Lead the meeting.

First, the group opens with a prayer that invites the Holy Spirit to take the true leadership role in the meeting. You may pray extemporaneously or follow the “Come Holy Spirit Prayer” located in the resource section.

In a Stand in the Gap for Widows support group, everything is bathed in prayer. Every discussion we have, every decision we make, begins and continues through to the very end in prayer. There is no substitute. If there is no prayer, then there is no success in our ministry.

We have personally witnessed the failure of widow support groups because the group’s focus turns from God centered to social centered. We realize widows need both components in their lives that is why we suggest having the social events aspect in conjunction with the monthly support groups.

The key to a successful support group transformation is inviting the Holy Spirit to each and every meeting. They can meet as a group forever, but if they do not invite the Holy Spirit, nothing will change on their grief journey.

STEP TWO: Share God Sightings and Scripture

Each support group member keeps a journal of prayer requests, God Sightings, and helpful scripture that the group members share at each meeting. We encourage each widow to choose a scripture to focus on based on their current needs and commit it to memory until the next meeting. It is helpful for the group leader to have a list of bible verses to give when asked for a recommendation. A list is provided in the resource section. The journal documents each meeting of the support group and is consulted during the meeting as a helpful reminder about what has been discussed.

Why keep a list of prayer requests and their answers? There are two reasons for this. First, there’s documentation over time of how God has answered specific prayer requests. Second, when prayer requests are written down, they cause active expectancy. Support group members are eager to see what God will do.

After opening in prayer, the group leader asks for any God sightings, answers to prayer, share inspiring insights or relevant scripture that moves them. A God Sighting may be an ordinary or miraculous moment that caused you to recognize God’s presence in your life. A God sighting may be a “coincidence,” a nudge, an awareness, that still small voice, an answer to prayer, or any situation where you recognize the Holy Spirit at work. Looking for and celebrating these moments strengthens our relationship with God.

The prayer journal as a whole helps to build faith in the group. Those who aren’t accustomed to sharing prayer requests begin to see the advantage of taking all needs to God. Nearly everyone in the support group begins to grow in their faith. It also helps knit the hearts of the group together by writing down what God has done. Keeping a record of the Holy Spirit’s responses does not allow us to forget all he does for us.

STEP THREE: A Healthy Family Discussion

A healthy family discussion takes place when each person feels safe enough to voice their opinions, feelings and problems. Group members should know the other members will listen and care. This knowledge leads to more willingness to take the risk of being known.

The support group leader will provide the discussion topics for each meeting. The purpose of the topics is to start the dialog for the meeting. Think of the topics as conversation starters. A leader should not be legalist and feel as if they have to cover all the topics they bring to each meeting. The leader’s goal is to get the discussion started and the widows will guide the meeting discussion to meet their current needs. Once there is a lull in the conversation, the leader can introduce another topic.

Very often, the discussion takes the form of asking clarifying questions, then brainstorming about possible solutions/tools, sharing wisdom from the past experience of support group members and when appropriate, their understanding of God's word. It is helpful for them to learn the tools other widows have found helpful in coping with grief. Some tools they will find helpful and others will not work for them.

The goal of each meeting is twofold. We want each widow to leave with healthy tools they can try to implement on their grief journey and have sense of comfort in knowing they have a community supporting them. Widows need other widows and to know they are not alone.

Small Group Curriculum

Small groups can choose to use the Stand in the Gap for Widows small group curriculum located in the small group resources section of the Tool Kit. This curriculum was written especially for Stand in the Gap for Widows and will facilitate 24 small group meetings, enough to take your group through one year, meeting twice a month. The curriculum addresses issues including: loneliness, vulnerability, relationship changes, solo parenting, and fear of the unknown. A Leader Guide with additional prompts and insights is included in the Tool Kit as well. Discussion topics may also be derived from various widow blogs and social media widow support group pages, and Stand in the Gap for Widow's Facebook page.

Some "Dos and Don'ts"

- Don't take on the role of counselor.
- Don't rush in to rescue or fix. Give God a chance.
- Don't assume that your answer or idea is the only solution. God is the only one who sees the whole picture.
- Do encourage free-flowing discussion, with no one member of the support group dominating the conversation.
- Do rely on the Holy Spirit to use His methods on His timetable to bring about changes.

Small group discussions are designed to offer encouragement, share healing tools, tell each other the truth in a loving manner, validate each other's grief journey, accept each other's struggles, spur one another on towards growth, promote making healthy choices, and form lasting community bonds.

In their book, *How People Grow*, Dr. Cloud and Dr. Townsend write, "People's most basic need in life is relationship. People connected to other people thrive and grow, and those not connected wither and die."

Potential Problems

Every support group member should feel free to share without the feeling of judgment and feel secure in the knowledge that all conversations are privileged and stay within the group. This includes the content in the support group roster. When this concept is breeched, it is hard to maintain a healthy and successful support group environment. It is important to mention this often in the group setting.

The widows in your group are on the same grief journey, but they take a variety of different paths. All healthy paths should be validated, and the leader's job is to make sure no one is made to feel as if their path is invalid. If you feel a widow is on an unhealthy path, speak to her privately and encourage her to seek professional help whether through her pastor or doctor. Do not attempt to solve the issue yourself. Why should we confront? Because Jesus calls us to live in truth, with eyes wide open. A support group leader should deal with and resolve problems honestly and help group members address problems in a positive way to help them change both attitudes and behaviors.

Some unhealthy paths we have encountered have been coping with grief by use of alcohol or drugs, unhealthy online relationships, and allowing others, that may not have their best interest at heart, control their lives.

The support group meeting should be a time for all (who wish to participate) to have an opportunity to share. If you find one member that tends to dominate the conversation, there is a tested method to correct this. It is helpful to have a co-leader or member that you have discussed this scenario with before it presents itself. You can use them to redirect the conversation by politely interrupting and asking the co-leader or member a question about the current topic. They know this is their cue to help steer the conversation. For example, "Donna, how do you feel about..." You can also use this as an opportunity to move to the next topic. Our Program Director can offer additional tools in dealing with this issue. It is important to correct this situation in a timely manner before it disrupts the progress of your group.

It is also important to never force a member to share. When they are ready and feel comfortable they will share their heart. They are listening and absorbing what they need.

There are times when neediness can become a problem in a group. When it manifests itself in an unhealthy way, the support group leaders should address the problem privately. A person who is overly needy may take up too much time in the group or seem to be in a constant crisis with no part of the crisis ever being resolved. They may have emotional dependency that the group cannot meet. They might display an inability to be comforted. They might come to regard the group as not doing enough, or the relationships with members as not being enough.

Tread gently when discussing how their husbands passed. Take in account the manner in which their husband died. Our groups consist of loss due to a prolonged illness, sudden illness, accident, murder, and suicide. You will need to navigate this gently when it comes up in discussions.

Remember, you can always consult with the Stand in the Gap for Widows Program Director about these issues of concern.

STEP FOUR: Where Do I Need to See God Today?

The third item on the agenda of the spiritual family meeting is a presentation of needs. Needs may be spiritual, emotional, relational or practical.

Sharing these concerns with each other is an invitation for prayer and the wise council of other members of the group. Because every member of the group is a widow, there's a chance that one of your group members has experienced a similar situation.

If you have a large support group, please consult our Program Director on ways of breaking into smaller groups within the larger group to make this time more meaningful and manageable.

In previous groups, widows have shared needs related to:

- Children
- Loneliness
- Anxiety
- Loss of Hope
- Finances
- Home Maintenance
- Fear
- Vulnerability
- "Moving On"
- Dwelling In Grief
- Work
- Faith
- Loss of Friends and Family Support

Knowing that others have been in similar situations, we find comfort in the knowledge that we are not alone, our feelings are not wrong, and our emotions are not abnormal. Another way to begin this conversation is to ask, "What's keeping you up at night?"

STEP FIVE: Pray and Wait

The Stand in the Gap for Widows process may appear to be incomplete. It is.

We believe that only in our powerlessness do we recognize our need for God and allow the Holy Spirit to direct us. The Stand in the Gap process hinges on the assurance that the Lord will order our steps, if we seek him above our own individual agendas.

Each small group prays in a way that is defined by the group. The Holy Spirit is invited to do His work, in His timing, to bring about His desired answers in the life of each woman.

There is no established timetable for widows as to "what should happen by when". People heal in various ways and over different lengths of time.

Allow your Stand in the Gap support group meeting to be a time of love and safety that fosters the experience of God's presence and individual growth.