



STAND IN THE GAP FOR WIDOWS

SMALL GROUPS

FIVE STEP MEETING AGENDA

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.

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 small 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 small groups because the group's focus turns from God centered too 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 small groups.

The key to a successful small 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 small 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.

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. Small 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 small 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 small 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 small 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 curriculum options. These are located in the small group resources section of the ToolKit. Each of these curriculum options have 24 small group sessions.

The first curriculum is more topical and dives into many issues associated with widowhood, including loneliness, vulnerability, relationship changes, solo parenting, fear and the unknown and many more. There is also a Leader Guide with additional prompts and insights. This curriculum may be best if you have a great deal of newer widows or your group is new to meeting. The sessions do not have to go in order, so you may choose to use some lessons and not others, based on the needs of your group.

The second curriculum dives into the idea and meaning of Hope. This curriculum includes stories from leaders of widows groups who have been through loss themselves and found hope in God and sharing with others. There is also a Leaders Guide with additional prompts and insights. This curriculum is written to go in order from lesson 1.1 to 12.2 and each session builds on the last. This curriculum can be used at any stage of grief, but may be more appropriate for those that may be farther in their journey or groups that have been meeting for longer and are looking for a deeper understanding of what the future holds for them as widows.

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 small 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 small 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 small group roster. When this concept is breeched, it is hard to maintain a healthy and successful small 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 small 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 small 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 codependency can become a problem in a group. When it manifests itself in an unhealthy way, the small group leaders should address the problem privately. A person who is overly dependent 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 fourth item on the agenda of the small group 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 small 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 small group meeting to be a time of love and safety that fosters the experience of God's presence and individual growth.