

Single again, Catholics looking to find place in church

Many couples share everything during their marriage, from a favorite restaurant to friends and, perhaps most importantly, a parish.

For some, it's the parish where they were wed or had their children baptized, but a cataclysmic event in a marriage- divorce, separation and death- can change everything for a practicing Catholic.

"People who experience the separation of a spouse often have very painful experiences, and for some individuals who must go through a divorce they feel alienated by their friends and even their church," said Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, superintendent of Catholic schools. "We need to make an outreach so that they feel part of the faith community and not pariahs."

That's where the Baltimore Catholic Single Again Council can help. Using local chapters, the council aims to be a largely independent ministry to newly single people. Some of the groups are budgeted by parishes as well.

All of the chapters will assemble for a conference April 18 at Loyola College's graduate center in Columbia. There, Catholic singles will be able to discuss issues facing them and participate in workshops.

"A lot of what we're hearing is that these men and women love their church," said council president Mary Ann Leard, also a parishioner of the Church of the Annunciation, Rosedale. "We love marriage. We're just sorry it didn't work out."

Ms. Leard endured her own issues when she divorced her husband of 19 years in

1986. She found comfort in the advice of several clergy and religious and eventually local groups. She turned to Friends of Mercy, a support group at Baltimore's Mercy High School for divorced, separated and widowed people.

Single Again's roots, Ms. Leard said, started in 1989 with the creation of SWORD (Separated, Widowed or Divorced). The archdiocese's evangelization outreach and education offices had associations with the group, which eventually developed into Single Again.

She said some people are unaware there is refuge from perceived isolation.

While Single Again works inside parishes, the association between the group and the archdiocese has been "loose."

That bond was re-strengthened this past fall as group leaders met with Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien and other officials to talk about Single Again's work can help build bridges of understanding.

Ms. Leard said she was "very impressed," with the archbishop's interest in Single Again's concerns.

Dr. Valenti felt Single Again's "need to have more connection," with the archdiocese.

"My first obligation was to make sure that they were heard," Dr. Valenti said.

Although Dr. Valenti has no hard statistics, principals have told him there is a "marked increase" in single parent homes in schools.

Single Again leaders believe there should be more education about the annulment process for divorced Catholics and how they can go about obtaining one.

St. Mark in Catonsville, St. Timothy in Walkersville, St. Jane Frances de Chantal in

Pasadena, Our Lady of the Fields in Millersville and St. John the Evangelist, Columbia, all have strong Single Again groups.

The Our Lady of the Fields group operates as a catch-all for Anne Arundel County, according to organizer Jeanne Hoover, and is one of the Baltimore's most active Single Again chapters.

Ms. Hoover said she regularly meets up with members at meetings for movies and to go dancing. Singles will often come to Our Lady of the Fields for game nights. Such activities are a common occurrence for groups all over the archdiocese.

While the common perception is that the group is for divorced singles only, there are many who have lost their spouse and are hurting in their own ways. While bereavement groups exist, widows and widowers find commonality with other newly single people.

"It's good to be with someone else and just get out of the house," Ms. Hoover said. "Some people don't want to be home alone."