

Community helped mend fractured life

By Constance A. Hanser
Guest contributor

When my marriage disintegrated 10 years ago, I felt confused, angry, sad, tense, inadequate, and unworthy. For me, church was a community of loving, caring, compassionate people.

I was among the lucky ones, and it pains me that everyone does not find the love I received from my church community at the time of separation and divorce.

As a

parish secretary, I knew personally the bishop, priests and religious in the archdiocese where I then lived.

I can still remember my first words to a Sister of Mercy — the first person with whom I shared the knowledge of my failing marriage: "My whole world is falling apart!" She helped me through my admission that my relationship with my husband was fractured and most probably headed for a complete break. This simple acknowledgement was a big step for me, as I had been in denial for almost three years.

The parish community to which I belonged at the time was also wonderful. I can't remember how the fact of my divorce became known, but rather than turning away, I embraced church all the more. I had taught religious education in the past, but I became a reader and eucharistic minister as well. My pastor helped me submit my papers for an annulment when I was emotionally able to do so, and the staff of the Marriage Tribunal was sensitive and caring.

About a year after my divorce, a support group for separated and divorced Catholics was formed by archdiocesan Catholic Charities, and I became an active member. The whole concept of church took on new meaning — the wounded healing the wounded. I felt Christ's presence in my life as never before. The gospel words, "Whatever you do for the least of my people, you also do for me" became real.

My participation in the local support group led to my becoming the archdiocesan representative on a regional board of directors. In 1983, I was elected regional director, coordinating ministry to the divorced in five Northwestern states. I also served as a member of the board of directors for the North American Conference of Separated and Divorced Catholics.

As a participant, coordinator or presenter at many conferences sponsored by this organization, I have met wonderful bishops, priests and religious who lovingly embrace the community of the broken in spirit. I have also met many good, but pained people who even today suffer rejection at the hands of their church communities.

Rejection is among the most difficult feelings to overcome because it eats at the very heart of one's self-worth. In the case of a separation and ultimate divorce, the rejection is doled out by someone to whom you pledged your life and love. Whether you are the instigator or the recipient of the announcement that love has died and the marriage is no longer life-giving, the hopes and dreams with which you entered that bond are shattered. Feelings of failure, guilt and low self-esteem abound.

We are often so embarrassed about the problems in our marriages that we keep them hidden until we can no longer conceal the physical absence of our partner. We fear the reaction of family and friends — and some do add to the rejection, blame and guilt we already feel. But the ultimate rejection for many people is the response of the church — that community of believers who claim to follow the example of Jesus.

Jesus didn't condemn those who were unable to reach the ideal. The woman at Jacob's well had been married five times and was living with a man to whom she wasn't married. Instead of admonishment, Jesus offered her living water, and she, in turn, became a disciple, spreading the good news of salvation.

We, as followers of Christ, should also be willing to lovingly embrace someone who has not lived out the ideal — and have any of us?

Unfortunately, I have heard numerous stories of quite the opposite. Many of my divorced brothers and sisters have been chastised by an official representative of the church for "not sticking it out" regardless of the pain in the marriage. Others tell of being asked to resign from teaching religious education, reading at Mass, or continuing to serve as a eucharistic minister.

The once-welcoming community no longer embraces one who so desperately

Continued on page 26

the love you share.



Building strong Catholic families

The Fishers suggest the following as ways for parishes to support and affirm families:

- Rename our parish councils as parish family councils.
- Restructure our thinking to ask, "How does what I do affect the family?"

- Appoint two good listeners as family advocates in each parish, to ensure that families' pleas are heard by parish staff.

- Hold family-forum listening sessions to discover the diverse needs of families. Catholic schools staff should take part.