

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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The Widowed

Judy Wright Mathews

“For the aged and infirm, for the widowed and orphans, and for the sick and the suffering, let us pray to the Lord.”

The Prayers of the People, Form I, *The Book of Common Prayer*

As a child, when I heard the word widow, I thought of an old woman dressed in black, a person who needed our prayers. When I became a widow, I felt no connection with that child's image. Later, when I had an income, which I earned, a home I had purchased as a widow, and supportive friends, I felt guilty when an entire congregation prayed for me. I wanted to stand up and say, “. . . but I'm all right; let's pray for the others.”

Why do we pray for the widowed? First, 99.9 percent of the widowed receiving Church Pension funds are women. We pray because women have been — and are — victims of society (including churches in some situations.) Some former practices were so terrible, they are difficult to understand today. Have we ever heard of a man throwing himself on the funeral pyre of his dead wife, as women did, in the custom of *suttee*? Although that is an extreme example at one end of the spectrum, worldwide customs and laws — including some of those in the U.S. — have created ongoing life conditions that make women legally inferior to men. Example: Three states are still needed to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment.

What about the Episcopal Church's widowed? We who receive income from the Church Pension Fund probably have a better opinion than others of how our church deals with the widowed in the area of finance. Finance, however, is only part of our existence. Who are the “we” who receive funds and are reading this? Of the 8,297 people receiving pension benefits from the Church Pension Fund, 70 percent are clergy, and 30 percent are surviving spouses; of these, almost all are women, with an average age of just under 77. As of May 2003, 38 percent of our clergy had retired.

I surveyed a group of male and female surviving spouses who had been widowed for between a few months to eighteen years, and clergy whose spouses had died. I asked if they had received support, following their spouse's death, from (1) the church, university, etc. where the spouse had worked, (2) support from friends, (3) support from their spouses' colleagues. Although many feel they received support, less than half the widows feel they received support from the church. One widow said that she had received support from her women friends, but that “couples drop widows.” Some who said they did not get support feel strongly about that. One widow defined her situation by quoting Gandhi. Asked what made him most sad in life, Gandhi replied that it was the hard hearts of well-educated people, including some in organized religion.

One surviving spouse said, “I don't think most clergy spouses (or pew sitters) realize what happens when the clergy person dies.” What does happen if one's house is no longer one's home and when one's income is altered drastically?

By now, you are thinking this is “preaching to the choir.” True, but when we look at ourselves and ask why we are the way we are, we sometimes get a fresh look at life, and perhaps, a helpful look at our own lives. Why are clergy widows and widowers any different from those whose spouses were attorneys or

teachers? I believe we are different because of our being a part of the Episcopal Church. Very few widows of attorneys find themselves in court with clients of their deceased spouses. I doubt the surviving spouse of a teacher goes into his or her former classroom. But most of us find ourselves in church — albeit not always the one we had attended with our spouses. Whether we do anything other than attend the Eucharist, that service brings back memories, and puts us into contact with parishioners. This continued contact can be healing and helpful; it can also be painful.

And then, The Peace. Seeing couples around me embrace is sometimes the hardest part. Being single in church is what hundreds do every week. For some it comes easily and naturally. For some, it is a reminder of now being alone. Before we were alone, was a trip to the grocery store or getting the car washed a truly meaningful experience? Surely not. But going to church often was and still is. When we enter that place where our spouse was so involved — be it the same sanctuary or not — we can feel inexorably alone.

The common advice we have all been given is to “get on with your life.” Some have been able to do that more easily than others. A big part of that ability is to create new memories, to find new friends — *and we must*. Often we find friends who share our love of travel, sports, reading, and — especially important for many of us — the Episcopal Church.

Some widows have not been fortunate in the area of finance. One widow, whose husband died only fifteen months before serving thirty years in the ministry, found her income cut considerably. For those, “getting on with your life” may become “getting by” with less income and for those who had lived in rectories, a loss of their familiar homes. The few in the survey who were still living in church-owned homes at the time of their spouses’ deaths are all women. Where and how does one move at our average age of 77? Answers may come from those of us who have experienced these same losses. Can we reach out? Do we?

As the women’s revolution mushroomed, many of us who grew up in the ’30s and ’40s found ourselves standing with a foot in each of two worlds. The title, “Father Knows Best,” a popular television series many of us remember, was a mantra. When did we women know best? Often, when we did, we were careful to hide it. Fast-forward to the present; we widows are now making all our own decisions. If we don’t know what’s best now, when will we? So we reach out and ask for help from other widows, and learn from their experiences.

The role of a clergy spouse is as varied as that of a clergy person. And the role is transformed into a myriad of different lives when that clergy spouse is given a new identity: widow or widower. Who is she or he, really? What other identities might we own?

New laws and life styles have allowed women to vote and to be ordained, have ushered in the era of stay-at-home fathers, and have altered religious and secular governing bodies to include women along side men. Perhaps, someday, all surviving spouses will benefit from still more progressive customs and laws. Until then, the widowed may need our prayers.



Judy Wright Mathews, a widow for 17 years, is member of the Church of the Holy Comforter in Tallahassee, Florida. She is active in the Florida State University (FSU) Academy, which offers classes and activities to retirees. Judy works with her parish food pantry, delivers food to homebound clients, and reads on the radio for the blind. Judy has two grown children and three grandchildren. She is the widow of the Rev. Lex S. Mathews.



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