

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY AND MARITAL HEALTH: A
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF LONG-TERM MARRIAGES

by

David Caldwell Dixon

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Submitted to the Faculty
of Liberty University
in partial fulfillment of
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Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia

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Chair Date

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Committee Member Date

ABSTRACT

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY AND MARITAL HEALTH: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF LONG-TERM MARRIAGES

David Caldwell Dixon

Center for Counseling and Family Studies

Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia

Doctor of Philosophy in Counseling

This is a phenomenological study examining the shared experiences expressed by 10 couples who have been married one time for more than thirty years and have been described as practicing Christian spirituality within their marital relationship. The data was collected by one source, the researcher, as the couple's participated in a joint interview.

Two major Christian spirituality themes emerged from the couple's interviews. The first major Christian spirituality theme was *being and doing*. The *being and doing* theme interplayed throughout the interview with the emerging process factors of *affectionate expression, bonding, and commitment*. The second major Christian

spirituality theme which emerged was *marriage and growing*. As couples told their stories a Marital Growth Model emerged from the study which included the outcome variable of *hope* which existed within the vernacular of many of the participants interviewed.

This study has implications for enrichment programs for churches as well as aiding premarital and young couples in understanding the developmental processes of marriage from a Christian spirituality perspective. Suggestions for future study include qualitative research to other faith religions, mixed populations, and cultures.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Overview

For many couples who seek counseling it is imperative they receive it from a Christian perspective. In fact, many will not attend marital therapy unless the counselor is a professing Christian who integrates faith into the counseling process (Hook & Worthington, 2009). As such, it is necessary to investigate the intersection between counseling and spirituality (Jones & Butman, 1991; McMinn & Campbell, 2007; Richards & Worthington, 2010). In particular, what role does a couple's Christian spirituality play in the phenomenon of marital wellness?

Couples often tell stories about their marriages that are personal, relational, and spiritual. Professional counselors spend years listening to couples tell their stories of love, loss, restoration, and hope. The investigation process of *story* is a valuable means of obtaining information about the experiences of a couple (Beitin, 2008). As couples tell their stories themes emerge allowing for the exploration and discovery of the positive contributors to marriage. These contributors can be and are often spiritual in nature. As such, the interest is in phenomenological qualitative analysis that is suited for investigating abstract processes and for generating theory on spiritual topics (Aten & Hernandez, 2005).

The objective of this study is to conduct a qualitative analysis. In doing so it is important to identify certain philosophical assumptions related to the research, in

particular, the researcher's axiological assumption. Creswell (2007) explains what he means by axiological as it pertains to qualitative research:

All researchers bring values to a study, but qualitative researchers like to make explicit those values. This is the axiological assumption that characterizes qualitative research. How does the researcher implement this assumption in practice? In a qualitative study, the inquirers admit the value-laden nature of information gathered from the field. We say they "position themselves" in the study. (p. 18)

For years the voice in psychology was to exclude God from practice (Kahle & Robbins, 2004). This bent limited the domains of healing to the mind and body of a person. Recently, an awakening has provided a greater understanding of what it means to be human, as spirituality is increasingly being investigated. Empirical research shows that religious and/or spiritual people live healthier lives affecting their physiological processes including improved cardiovascular, neuroendocrine, and immune functioning, and reductions in cancer, stroke, and suicide (McCullough, Larson, Hoyt, & Koenig, 2000; Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Powell, Shahabi, & Thoresen, 2003; Seeman, Dubin, & Seeman, 2003). Current research shows the support of spirituality's impact on one's interpersonal health as well as a person's emotional and physical health. The psychological field has some spiritually-based couple's treatments which have impacted the Christian literature in improving couple distress (Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 2001; Stanley, Trathen, & McCain, 2000; Worthington, 1999; Worthington, 1996; Worthington, 1989; Wright, 1995).

A recent Gallup poll reports that 92% of Americans believe in God, 78% of Americans consider themselves Christian, and 55% claim that their religion is very important to them (Gallup, 2011). Counseling often addresses issues of meaning and purpose in a person's life so it is not surprising that people seek religious or Christian counseling services. Research also expresses that those seeking counseling desire integration of faith into practice and deem it appropriate for clinicians to express their religious beliefs (Bergin, 1980; Bergin 1991; Miller, 1999; Rose, Westefeld, & Ansley, 2001). For Christian couples seeking marital counseling it is a priority for them to seek a religious counselor and many would not go to counseling unless the professional was a professing Christian (Hook & Worthington, 2009; Ripley & Berry, 2001). This awakening of values in the faith community among professionals has impacted Christian universities and graduate schools in providing professional counseling degrees that integrate psychology and theology. Examples of these Christian schools include: Rosemead School of Psychology, Wheaton University, Fuller Theological Seminary, George Fox University, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and Liberty University among others. Also, professional organizations such as the American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC) and the Christian Association of Psychological Studies (CAPS) have arisen to provide specific training in the integration of psychology and Christian theology. These organizations also follow codes of ethics that are distinctively Christian in the field of psychology and counseling. Additionally, the American Psychological Association (APA) has a special division (Division 36) devoted to the

psychology of religion, and a scholarly journal, *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*.

One positive outcome is that the psychological community now recognizes the importance of religion and spirituality in the health and well-being of persons. One negative for the Christian community is that it is not always clear what is meant by Christian counseling approaches (McMinn, Staley, Webb, & Seegobin, 2010).

The emergence of integrating faith into the counseling process has brought with it the incorporation of values, particularly spiritual ones to the foreground of psychotherapy to promote healing and growth (Richards, Rector, & Tjelveit, 1999). This awakening among counseling and psychology is cause for great celebration, but with it comes a great responsibility on faith-based clinicians to be competent when dealing with ethical issues of client welfare and causing no harm to their clients. Proper spiritual interventions can be profound when done responsibly by a trained Christian counselor (Jones & Butman, 1991; McMinn & Campbell 2007; Richards & Bergin, 2005; McMinn, Staley, Webb, & Seegobin, 2010). Training is important for counselors who practice from a Christian spiritual integrative perspective so they avoid the pitfalls of being coercive and rigid that are often associated with the religious counselors (Rose et al., 2001; Richards et al., 2005; Tan, 2003). Specifically, training in the robust field of marriage counseling should be empirically supported. For two decades traditional behavioral couple therapy (TBCT) was the gold standard in treatment (Christensen, Wheeler, & Jacobson, 2008). But even distressed couples who receive TBCT treatments have marginal success rates in

preventing relapse and divorce (Christensen, Baucom, Atkins, & Yi, 2010; Christensen, Yi, Atkins, Baucom, & George, 2006; Dunn & Schwebel, 1995).

Recently, emotionally focused marital therapy (EFT) has proven to be empirically supported and helpful for couples counseling (Bradley & Furrow, 2004). EFT focuses on the creation of secure attachment bonds within a couple while promoting unacknowledged attachment related emotions (Johnson, 2004). The emergence of EFT could also provide a bridge from attachment to spirituality as there is a correlation between attachment and spiritual concepts such as forgiveness (Kachadourian, Fincham, & Divalla, 2004).

The institution of marriage for Christians is deteriorating. In fact, in a 2008 study when evangelicals and non-evangelical born again Christians are combined in an aggregate class of born again adults, their divorce rate is almost identical to that of non-born again adults: 32% versus 33%, respectively. George Barna writes, “There no longer seems to be much stigma attached to divorce; it is now seen as an unavoidable rite of passage” (Barna Group, 2008). The culture might perceive that the institution of marriage as a system whose time has passed, but perhaps answers can be found in the qualitative study of the impact Christian spirituality has on marital wellness. For the Christian, spirituality transcends beyond symptom reduction techniques to a place of meaning and purpose in people’s lives (Shafranske, 2010; Miller, 2010).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how Christian spirituality impacts marital health in long-term marriages. This study, which will be qualitative in design, allows the investigator to map a couple's human relationship beyond the common spiritual constructs, i.e. measuring religious activity such as couples church attendance and how it impacts their marriage, to the more non-materialistic constructs, i.e. constructs that provide an in depth picture of how couples share spiritual experiences in marriage (Shafranske, 2010). These non-materialistic constructs are often characterized by couples using spiritual terminology such as: blessed, holy, heavenly, and spiritual to describe their marriages (Mahoney et al., 1999). All in all, the investigation will look at long-term marriages whose core beliefs as a couple perceive God manifesting and reflecting in their marriage

The counseling field has awakened to embracing spirituality as a legitimate part of treatment. As an evangelical Christian, the researcher wants to identify the spiritual processes that emerge in long-term Christian marriages. The qualitative nature of the research will pursue an understanding of the essence of the marital experience for Christian couples who have been married for more than 30 years. This research will be conducted through interviewing couples with this shared experience and analyzing the data for themes, subthemes, and significant statements and or beliefs that describe the

meaning of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Moustokas, 1994). All in all, my hopes are to contribute to the field of the integration of counseling and Christian spirituality, particularly as they apply to marital health.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact Christian spirituality may have on marital health in long-term marriages. The researcher will evaluate the spiritual processes that emerge within Christian long-term marriages. The principle research questions framing this study are:

1. What role, if any, does a couple's Christian spirituality play in the marital health of a long-term marriage?
2. What specific Christian processes emerge, if any, such as: uniquely Christian themes or variables that contribute to marital health in long-term marriages?

Operational Definitions

In order to provide distinctness regarding what is being investigated in this study, the fundamental terms used in this research will now be operationally defined. These terms include marital health, Christian spirituality, and long-term marriages.

Marital Health

In this study to provide an operational definition of marital health, it is prudent to have some understanding of the diagnostic coding of marital problems. Conflict between couples has been portrayed in written stories, music, theater, and motion pictures. Many have experienced both the highs of being in love and the lows of a love gone awry. In the last forty years researchers have begun to study couple interaction, in particular, how conflict can impact an individual and the family in which he/she lives. The DSM-IV-TR has relegated marital problems to the category “other conditions”, specifically, “Partner Relational Problem”. The DSM-IV-TR describes the V-Code (V61.10) Partner Relational Problem as:

A pattern of interaction between spouses or partners characterized by negative communication (e.g., criticisms), distorted communication (e.g., unrealistic expectations), or non-communication (e.g. withdrawal) that is associated with clinically significant impairment in individual or family functioning or the development of symptoms in one or both partners. (p. 737)

Therefore, one view of marital health is the antithesis of the diagnostic V-coding of partner relational problems. For the purpose of this study, marital health is defined by positive patterns of interaction between spouses verbally (e.g. words spoken of encouragement and affirmation), cognitively (e.g. thoughts of admiration towards his or her spouse even in times of stress), and behaviorally (e.g. spouses turn towards one another in times of conflict and stability). In addition to the above V-Coding and in keeping with current research a couple’s emotional patterns of interaction are also included in the definition of marital health (e.g. validation and non-disengaging from a

spouse's emotions is significant in emotional regulation and connection of a couple) (Johnson, 2004; Young, 2005). Additionally, for the purposes of this study a couple's spirituality will also be a measure of health in the couple's relationship (Call & Heaton, 1997; Goodman & Dollahite, 2006; Larson & Goltz, 1989; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2008; Mahoney et al., 1999; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999; Wilson & Musick, 1996). It is also important to clarify what marital health is not in order to operationalize the definition with precision. Marital health is not the mere absence of conflict, for a healthy couple has conflict, but marital health includes a couple's ability to understand, honor, and respect each other within their day-to-day lives (Gottman, 1999). All in all marital health is personified by the participants in this study as couples who have learned to navigate through life circumstances by clear positive expressions of communication, action, thought, and emotion within their day-to-day lives.

Christian Spirituality

Spirituality refers to the state of being spiritual and is defined as "the quality of involving deep, often religious, feelings and beliefs, rather than the physical parts of life" (Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2011, on-line). The use of spirituality pertains to the parts of a person that transcends the material to the immaterial and where experience is felt as profound and having a transcendent element (Gorsuch & Miller, 1999; Miller, 2010; Miller & Thoresen, 2003; O'Grady & Richards, 2010; Shafranske, 2010; Sperry, 2010). Hill and Pargament (2003) say, "...the term spirituality is

increasingly used to refer to the personal, subjective side of religious experience” (p. 64). One might describe spirituality as emotional, inward, unsystematic, and freeing in expression (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001). Spirituality can be vague, mystical, and hard to grasp. For the purpose of this study the investigator wants to bring an operational definition to spirituality that is distinctively Christian. In an attempt to avoid getting bogged down in the specific dogmas or doctrine of various denominational beliefs the researcher uses three criteria to distinguish a spiritual Christian from a non-spiritual Christian. This is not an attempt to render any salvific judgment, but to define as clearly as possible the spiritual core beliefs associated with the subjects in the sample. For the purpose of this study, Christian spirituality is operationally defined as spirituality that is: (a) evidenced by the believer living a transformed and changed life; (b) evidenced by the believer’s participation in the spiritual disciplines such as: prayer, meditation, evangelism, missions, giving/tithing and study; (c) evidenced in the Bible as demonstrated by believers who are motivated by the triune God to glorify God and enjoy Him forever (Westminster Shorter Catechism). In everyday living the spiritual Christian is compelled to live his or her life as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:31 “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” In a marriage based on Christian spirituality, the relationship motivation is to bring glory to God, as opposed to a motivation of making one’s spouse happy or any other motive (Erickson, 1992; Lints, 1993; Milacci, 2003; Packer, 1973; Sosin, 2008). All in all Christian spirituality is

epitomized by the participants in this study as couples whose reason for marriage is to reflect and bring glory to God in their day-to-day lives.

The focus of this research is limited to Christian spirituality not because other forms of spirituality are less important, but because Christian spirituality is the lens through which the researcher views the world and the lens through which many of his clients view the world. In particular, this lens emphasizes the core constructs discussed in the previous paragraph. Therefore, it is the investigator's aspiration in response to his call as a Christian counselor and pastor and from the urging of those before him in the field of Christian counseling to further integrate research from a Christian perspective (Hook & Worthington, 2009; Jones & Butman, 1991). Specifically, one objective of this study is to research themes and/or subthemes that contribute to marital wellness. The intent would be to provide a deeper understanding to the Christian spiritual processes that might emerge with usefulness to future researchers and clinicians.

Long-Term

Research varies on the criterion for what determines a long-term marriage. Mackey and O'Brien (1995) considered a long-term marriage as one that has lasted at least 20 years. Other studies interviewed marriages of longer than 45 years (Pnina, 2009), 40 years (Dickson et al., 2002), and 30 years or more (Robinson & Blanton, 1993). The descriptive phrase *long-term* is operationalized in this study to mean couples who have been married only one time in their life for 30 or more years. Studies identify

that people are living longer and marriages are lasting for several decades so the operational definition provides a good sample for this investigation (Henry, Miller, & Giarrusso, 2005). Also, a 30 year or more range protects against recall bias that is more prevalent with ageing. A positive recall bias is described as maximizing positive events and minimizing negative past life experiences (Cartensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003; Charles, Mather, & Cartensen, 2003; Nimtz, 2011). The researcher acknowledges a great deal of data on why marriages do not last and less data on why they do. Current qualitative research gives contributions to longevity in marriage to such things as: friendship, love, similar backgrounds or interests and recognition of traditional role division (Bachand & Caron, 2001; Pnina, 2009). For this study emphasis is given to the impact of Christian spirituality on long-term marriages.

Locating Myself as a Researcher

I am a spiritual person. In fact, my Christian faith is the essence of who I am. Qualitative researchers are often vitalized by the very things which bring them passion (Moustakas, 1994). For me, being a person of faith in Jesus Christ is at the heart of what I do as a husband, father, son, professional counselor, and minister of the Gospel. To dismiss God from my personhood would confine me and quench the very flame that burns deep within my soul.

It is important for me to *position myself* in my study. As a Christian, a professional counselor, and pastor I have been providing marital therapy for eighteen

years. Many of the couples I see, whether Christian or non-Christian, have similar variables that attribute to marital wellness. These variables include, but are not limited to such things as: attachment (Collins & Read, 1990; Davila & Bradbury, 2001; Holland & Roisman, 2010); commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley, Trathen, McCain, & Bryan, 1989); forgiveness (Fennel, 1993; Fincham & Beach, 2007; Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2005; Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2004; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005; Worthington, 2003; Worthington, 1994); relationship acceptance (Cordova, Jacobson, & Christensen, 1998; Doss & Christensen, 2006); resilience and coping (Baucom, Sayers, & Sher, 1990; Bradbury & Fincham, 1991; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992; Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1996; Karney & Bradbury, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Karney & Frye, 2002; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001); satisfaction (Broderick & O’Leary, 1986; Fincham & Linfield, 1997; Gaunt, 2006; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000); interaction quality (Gottman & Driver, 2005; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey, Christensen, & Malmuth, 1995; Holman & Jarvis, 2003; McGinn, McFarland, & Christensen, 2009); social support (DeLongis, Capreol, Holtzman, O’Brien, & Campbell, 2004; Major, Cooper, Zubek, Cozzarelli, & Richards, 1997); marital and personal efficacy (Booth, Johnson, & Edwards, 1983). Being involved in ministry I have experienced couples whose perceptions and insights are uniquely and distinctively Christian, perhaps a hybrid of sorts to other couples. While many of the same variables contributing to the health of marriage exist so do particular marks of Christian spirituality that seem to set these

couples apart from others. These couples of faith have a perception of marriage which is intriguing to me and to which I deem relevant for study.

My values as a Christian are paramount to me and in my profession as a counselor these values can be critiqued and scrutinized. For decades the psychological community taught in graduate programs “value-free psychotherapy” (Kahle & Robbins, 2004). This teaching implies I am supposed to leave my values aside as I enter into a therapeutic relationship with my clients. However, as such, there resides, for me and others in the helping profession, the responsibility to intersect the worlds of psychology and spirituality (Miller, 2010; O’Grady & Richards, 2010; Shafranske, 2010; Sperry, 2010). This includes the need to acknowledge that many people look for counselors who address spirituality and integrate faith into therapeutic models (Hook & Worthington, 2009; Ripley, Worthington, & Berry, 2001).

My location as a researcher requires me to admit my strong relationship with God. I do so not in religious superficiality or shallowness, but to uphold ethical guidelines of research in my field of professional counseling. Part of my contribution to my profession is to speak to the integrative issues in the field of counseling and faith. To me life without God is an existential journey that ends with purposelessness and pain. J.I. Packer (1973) writes:

Knowing about God is crucially important for the living of our lives. As it would be an Amazonian tribesman to fly him to London, put him down without explanation in Trafalgar square and leave him, as one who knew nothing of English or England, to fend for himself, so we are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs

it. The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know about God. Disregard the study of God and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfold, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. (pp. 14-15)

Like many who spend their days counseling couples it is perplexing to me when two who identify themselves as followers of Jesus Christ, profess their undying love for one another, and yet have chosen to leave and walk away from their marriage. The impact of leaving a marriage is never limited to that particular relationship, but also includes children, friendships, finances, job, and places of worship. Many professing brothers and sisters in Christ whom I have counseled have chosen to walk away from the covenant relationship they made with their spouse before God and others. Christian marriages that have pledged to love, comfort, and honor, have been marred by the world, the flesh, and the Evil-One. As such, many professing Christians find it convenient to leave than to stay and keep their commitment.

Through the years I have been struck by the church's response to problem marriages. Strong evangelical churches who believe in the Bible as God's word, who preach and teach transformation living to their people, and who encourage the practice of spiritual disciplines have thrown the proverbial life preserver to distressed couples. They do so by providing a plethora of enrichment programs to improve everything from relational intimacy, to communication, and conflict resolution. As a professional counselor who is on staff at a large Southern Baptist church, I have noticed that my

marital case load increases when our church hosts one of these types of marital enrichment courses. My observations have led me to believe that generally healthy couples respond well to this type of course while the couples, who are in crisis, worsen. Many couples attend these programs as a last ditch effort to save their marriage only to become disenfranchised feeling like failures within their marriage and faith. The marital enrichment material becomes information taught but not caught and is often used against the spouse instead of what it was intended to be used for, help and growth. The research confirms this as dissolving a marriage seems to no longer carry the negative connotations that it once did. As cited previously even among “born again” Christians the divorce rate is at 32% (Barna Group, 2008).

When I was a teenager, I struggled with algebra so I looked to a friend to tutor me. My friend was excellent at getting the right answer, but not good at showing me the work of how he got his answer. Thus, my friend’s help was not helpful. Many times this is how the church responds to troubled marriages. The church is willing to provide all the right answers to couples when it comes to the complexities of a relationship (e.g. communication, conflict resolution, sexual intimacy, commitment, understanding spousal differences, biblical roles of the husband and wife, and finances). With good intentions the answers to marital problems are given as antidotes to troubled couples often increasing the tension in the relationship. So, what was meant to be helpful becomes more troublesome. Just like having the answers in algebra did not help me because I had not understood the intricacies of the subject. Giving marriages prescriptive answers can

cause more harm than good. Material that is good, truthful, and well-meaning is limited in scope to generally healthy couples. Lest I be misunderstood, today's marital enrichment material is not bad or wrong, but it could be better. The Pharisees complained to Jesus that he was eating with the tax collectors and sinners, and Jesus responded in Matthew 9:12, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." The church that is reaching out to its community is going to attract the sick not the well. This means it needs to be equipped to handle the distressed couple not with a model of prescriptive answers, but a model that promotes a trajectory of health and marital satisfaction.

Along the way, I have met many Christians who present a deep faith and who appear to thrive in their relationship in plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; and in sickness and in health. The church and Christian communities all over the world provide stories of committed lovers who enjoy one another and foster healthy relationship. These couples are the window into the soul of a marriage that flourishes over the life span of a Christian marriage. This prototype of a Christian couple is found in popular stories like that of Dr. Robertson McQuilkin. McQuilkin had been married to his wife Muriel for more than 40 years when she was stricken with Alzheimer Disease. At the pinnacle of his life in a thriving ministry as President of Columbia International University he chose to resign to care for his wife. He writes,

The decision was made, in a way, 42 years ago when I promised to care for Muriel "in sickness and in health...till death do us part." So, as I told the students and faculty, as a man of my word, integrity has something to do with it. But so

does fairness. She was for me fully and sacrificially all these years; if I cared for her for the next 40 years I would not be out of her debt. Duty, however, can be grim and stoic. But there is more: I love Muriel. She is a delight to me—her childlike dependence and confidence in me, her warm love, occasional flashes of that wit I used to relish so, her happy spirit and tough resilience in the face of her continual distressing frustration. (pp. 22-23)

Many of McQuilkin's Christian friends advised him to institutionalize his wife noting that she would get accustomed to the new environment. But during his resignation announcement he proclaimed, "I don't have to care for her. I get to! It is a high honor to care for so wonderful a person" (p. 23). As a researcher it is my assumption that there are more stories that exist like Robertson McQuilkin in our Christian communities. Christian couples who have chosen the suffering of keeping a vow over the potential comfort of leaving a commitment.

A similar story is found in the life of Sheldon Vanauken whose book *Severe Mercy* tells a story of true love. The book contains 18 letters by C.S. Lewis as Vanauken and he were close friends, and wrote to each other at the time of his conversion and through the illness and death of Vanauken's wife, Davy. Through the course of the book Vanauken realizes that his love for his wife was a *pagan love* because it was human, a love between two fallen people. In his pagan love Vanauken idolized his wife. He longed to achieve timelessness with her, but in the end he realized this type of longing had to be put to death for it could only be found in God. Vanauken (1977) explains the struggle:

I didn't want us to be swallowed up in God. I wanted holidays from the school of Christ. We should, somehow, be able to have the Shining Barrier intact and follow the King of Glory. I didn't want to be a saint. Almost none of this did I consciously know—just longings.

But for Davy, to live was Christ. She didn't want to be a saint either; she was too humble even to think of such a thing. She simply wanted God—almost totally. His service was her freedom, her joy. She loved me, she loved our sharing; but ultimately, all there was to share was Christ and His service. I knew it was so with her. (p. 136)

Perhaps, it is this type of theme described in *Severe Mercy*, death to self and oneness with God through Jesus Christ that contributes to the essence of marital wellness in Christian marriages. Maybe, it is this type of attribute or one like it that is unique to Christian spirituality that sustains marriages for the long haul and strengthens a couple's resiliency through the life span of the marriage.

There are several reasons I'm passionate about this research. First, I care about this topic because I believe God cares about the institution of marriage. One of the most used metaphors in the Old Testament is that of a wedding between the bride, the Israelites, and the groom, God. For example in the book of Hosea the Lord speaks through the prophet Hosea, "I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion; I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord" (Hosea 2: 19-20). Also, in the New Testament Jesus uses the wedding metaphor as he is the groom and the church is the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5: 25-27; Revelation 21: 2 & 9). The continual use of the marriage metaphor

from Genesis to Revelation is a pronouncement that God takes marriage seriously and upholds it as an institution to be cared for.

Second, as a professional in the mental health field I am trained to care about various issues but this issue strikes a chord because of its impact on the family and ultimately on society. As a person who sees life through a Judeo-Christian perspective, specifically, an evangelical Christian worldview I believe this issue has and will continue to tarnish the bride of Christ, the Church. Present research highlights the gulf between growing up in an intact family versus growing up in a broken family. Children experience problems across various domains such as academics, externalization of behaviors, depressed mood, lower social competence, lower self-esteem (Amato, 2000; D'Onofrio et al., 2005; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Divorce also is associated with poor outcomes in transitioning from childhood to adulthood. Many who experience divorce have an increase in psychological problems, socioeconomic status, early sexual activity, producing children outside of marriage, cohabitation, less confidence in relational commitment, and marital discord (Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004; D'Onofrio et al., 2000; Amato, 1999). The legacy of divorce is a scar that follows children into adulthood. It even impacts one's spirituality as children who grow up in divorced families might be particularly vulnerable to possible alienation from their faith tradition or struggle with reconciling their own spiritual identity (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2009; Marquardt, 2005). The exile from the institution of marriage will continue to affect negatively the

health of marital relationships. Marriages today are wandering in the wilderness! Husbands, wives, and children are lost in a land that does not feel like home. It would be my desire from my research to bring hope to the displacement of hurting marriages. My Christian faith tells me that the exile was not the end of the story. The story concludes with the faithful coming home to a place where healing and peace exist. Perhaps, through this study insights can be made into Christian spirituality and its effects on marital wellness in efforts to turn marriages from exile back towards home.

Lastly, as I pen these words I am a couple of days shy of my own 20 year anniversary to my beloved wife, Jennifer. In some ways marriage has not been what I expected. When I was young, I idealized marriage and raising a family in a Christian home while being in fulltime ministry. My nostalgic thinking was met with the reality that marriage is hard work and to intertwine your life with another person is difficult. As a married couple we have finished degrees, had children, made many moves, experienced financial stress, gone through serious health problems and surgeries, had conflicts with people we love, traveled to foreign countries, and served in full-time ministry. Marriage has not been what I expected, in fact; I believe my marriage has been so much more, as Jennifer and I have sojourned together interdependently we have allowed for struggle and therefore, personal and interpersonal growth. The circumstances that made the journey difficult also made for an opportunity of marital enrichment. Lest one think I and my wife have arrived at some marital utopia that would be far from the truth. I believe healthy marriages are un-utopian: babies cry, children get sick, siblings quarrel,

unexpected guests come by, spouses have conflicting schedules and so on. In fact, healthy marriages have a lot of loose ends with their own complexities as two fallen people live their lives in a fallen world. At the same time the Christian marriages that I have a passion to study have an understanding of the design and the Designer of marriage. This allows a couple to re-focus themselves in times of difficulty, hardship, and even desperation. The focal point for this type of marriage is less about reaching the pinnacle of happiness and more about being conformed to the image of God. The conformity to which I speak is the design which God has established through the Scriptures and I believe to be the essence of what makes for marital health in Christian couples. These fundamentals of a Christian marriage bear the image of God and are essentials to marital health.

So this is where the researcher locates himself. In some ways I do not feel equipped to tackle the complexities of the subject matter. My insecurities sometimes overwhelm me with self-doubt to the point of wondering if my voice is competent or not. However, within the recesses of my self-doubt lies a passion for the subject and a duty to investigate. I am ready to learn what couples can teach me about Christian spirituality and marital wellness with hopes of adding towards a Christian model for couples. As a husband who fails to sacrificially love his wife every day, I enter into my research with humility. At the same time, I also enter my research with enthusiasm and a deep commitment to present the findings with the utmost precision and honesty.

Summary

This chapter introduces a response to the crisis of marriage by suggesting an increased understanding of Christian spirituality and the relevance it potentially plays on marital health. First, an overview of spiritual integration was given in view of marital wellness. Second, the purpose of the study was given along with an introduction to the qualitative nature of the research. Finally, the researcher uses popular Christian literature and his own narrative to introduce the essence of the investigation into how Christian spirituality impacts marital wellness. The intention of the investigator is to define emerging spiritual processes of themes and sub-themes that could benefit the Christian professional and the church at improving the trajectory of marriage within the Christian community. The next chapter will review the literature pertinent to the topic of Christian spirituality and long-term marital health. The literature review will begin by addressing relevant topics on the subject broadly while gradually narrowing the subject matter to the investigative topic of Christian spirituality and long-term marital health.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter a detailed narrative review of the literature pertinent to the phenomena of spirituality and long-term marital health will be provided in the following areas: an analysis of long term marriages; an investigation of marital health within the marriage relationship; and lastly, spirituality and marriage. After these three broad areas are addressed a narrowing of the literature will take place to analyze long-term marriages and marital health; long-term marriages and spirituality; and spirituality as it relates to marital health. In examining the literature it was determined that the research was sparse pertaining to spirituality and the long-term health of a marriage which is the rationale for this phenomenological inquiry.

Long-Term Marriages

There is a plethora of research literature which focuses on younger marital relationships. Literature is sparser when it comes to long-term marriages and the insights one can gain from analyzing couples through the lens of time. When analyzing long term marriages specific relationship challenges emerge as well as positive attributes that bring success to the couple relationship (e.g. Henry, Miller, & Giarrusso, 2005; Kaslow & Robinson, 1996; Parker, 2000; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993). Through the review of the literature insights were gained from both the quantitative and qualitative

perspectives bringing richness to the research (e.g. Banchard & Caron, 2001; Henry et al., 2005; Kaslow & Robinson, 1996; Levenson et al., 1993; Parker, 2000; Robinson & Blanton, 1993). The quantitative research emphasizes such things as: the importance of recognizing change in the traditional roles of husband and wife over the life span of the marriage; identifying the emotional behaviors expressed by couples in conflict which are less emotionally negative in older couples than middle-aged couples; identifying that wives are more affectively negative than husbands, whereas husbands are more defensive than wives; and long-married couples that are satisfied have a greater capacity to demonstrate emotional positive listening skills (e.g. Cartensen, Gottman & Levenson, 1995; Pina, 2009; Pasupathi, Cartensen, Levensen, & Gottman, 1999). Also, quantitatively long-term marriages address keys to stability in the relationship such as: being involved in an intimate relationship with a likeable significant other; being committed to both marriage itself and the partner as a person; and humor (Lauer, Lauer, & Kerr, 1990).

Qualitative researchers use the quantitative data to develop a more in-depth look at longevity in marriage. Qualitative researchers inquiring about long-term marriages often build their interviews around the contributing factors found quantitatively. The interview is an attempt to discover exactly what about the particular variables help couples survive over a long period of time. This is done by asking a series of open-ended questions related to the contributing factors (Banchard & Caron, 2001). Thus, quantitative research might identify intimacy as a contributing factor to long-term

marriages, but the qualitative researcher discovers the essence of what a couple means by intimacy. This is seen in the study by Robinson and Blanton (1993) in which they studied key characteristics of enduring marriages from a phenomenological perspective. The key elements studied were: intimacy, commitment, communication, congruence, and religious orientation. The study confirms the quantitative data, but also added a depth and understanding to these characteristics. For example, Robinson and Blanton (1993) describe intimacy in the following way:

They described ways in which closeness to their spouse permeated the relationship, encompassing the emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of their marriage. This closeness involved shared interests, activities, thoughts, feelings, values, joys, and pains. Intimacy grew out of involvement with one another through good times as well as bad and was facilitated by mutuality, interdependence, support, and caring. (p. 40)

Therefore, quantitative and qualitative research complement one another as key elements emerge from long-term marriages. Increased clarity occurs as narratives are explored and coded.

Marital Health within the Marriage Relationship

There is a robust amount of literature from a quantitative perspective on health and marriage. This adds to the interest and the importance of the subject matter from a qualitative perspective since there is comparatively less qualitative research available. Therefore, in order to understand marital health process variables were examined from a quantitative perspective to give an understanding of the variables that exist in couples

who experience marital satisfaction, happiness, and overall health within the marriage. It is important to differentiate and operationalize the terms process variables and outcome variables because they can overlap e.g., commitment can be measured as a process variable, but also as an outcome variable. *Process variables* in marital research are measureable or observed factors that usually relate to couple interaction (Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004). In the marital relationship a couple's interaction comes in many shapes and sizes and can affectively impact how an individual feels about his/her spouse positively or negatively. Specifically, communication style as pertains to problem solving within the marital relationship. Gottman (1999) states:

What can make a marriage work is surprisingly simple. Happily married couples aren't smarter, richer, or psychologically more astute than others. But in their day-to-day lives, they have hit upon a dynamic that keeps their negative thoughts and feelings about each other (which all couples have) from overwhelming their positive ones. They have what I call an emotionally intelligent marriage. (p. 3)

This observational research found that couples in functional high quality marriages have different ways of handling conflict than do couples in dysfunctional, unstable marriages. The functional couples are called regulated and the dysfunctional couples are called non-regulated. The difference between these two groups is that the non-regulated couples make frequent, ongoing and excessive dysfunctional interaction and the regulated couples do not (Holman & Jarvis, 2003). Therefore, when it comes to marital health a couple does not have an absence of conflict, but has the ability to problem solve in styles and behaviors that are not harmful which in turn produces higher

rates of satisfaction (Fincham & Linfield, 1997; Gottman & Driver, 2005; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey et al., 1995).

Outcome variables in marital research are the emerging negative or positive effects which can be contributed to or determined by various process factors. These include but are not limited to such things as divorce rates, distress, marriage satisfaction, interpersonal commitment, marital conflict, marital and personal efficacy, and happiness (Kline et al., 2004). As an example of an outcome variable Gottman and Levensen (2000) studied predictors of the outcome variable divorce early in marriage and later in marriage that emerged from observing couple's interaction. Gottman and Levensen (2000) state:

A different set of variables predicted early divorcing than predicted later divorcing. Negative affect during conflict predicted early divorcing, but it did not in later divorcing. By contrast, the lack of positive affect in events-of-the-day and conflict discussions predicted later divorcing, but it did not predict early divorce. (p. 737)

This investigation includes process variables such as: attachment (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990; Davila & Bradbury, 2001; Holland & Roisman, 2010); commitment (e.g., Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley, Trathen, & McCain, 1989); forgiveness (e.g., Fennel, 1993; Fincham & Beach, 2007; Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2005; Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2004; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005; Worthington, 2003; Worthington, 1994); acceptance (e.g., Cordova et al., 1998; Doss & Christensen, 2006); coping within the marital relationship (e.g., Baucom et al., 1990; Bradbury & Fincham, 1991; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992;

Finchum, Beach, & Nelson, 1996; Karney & Bradbury, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Karney & Frye, 2002; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001); interaction quality (e.g., Gottman & Driver, 2005; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey, Christensen, & Malmuth, 1995; Holman & Jarvis, 2003; McGinn, McFarland, & Christensen, 2009); social support (e.g., DeLongis et al., 2004; Major et al., 1997); marital and personal efficacy (e.g., Booth et al., 1983). The qualitative researcher benefits greatly from the quantitative researchers' work in determining process and outcome variables as it aids in the organizing of the interview as well as the analyzing of the data collected.

Process Variables within Marital Health

Marital health as it relates to attachment concerns itself primarily in two aspects of the relationship. First, research shows attachment security brings beneficial care to romantic partners as couples make provisions for their spouses (Feeney, 1996). Second, secure attachment brings healthy communication particularly in the areas of reciprocity and flexibility as couples show an ability to share in topics of discussion as well as demonstrating problem solving compromise (Keelan, Dion, & Dion, 1998; Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991).

Commitment is a variable to marital health and encompasses two important areas of personal dedication and constraint. Personal dedication implies an ambition of a person to maintain or better his or her relationship for the common good of the couple. This is evidenced by both partners' desire not only to be in a relationship but to improve

it by their behavior. Constraint is marked by forces that hinder an individual from maintaining the relationship regardless of the partner's dedication. The constraint arises from internal and external pressures that are costly such as: economic, social, personal and psychological stability (Stanley et al., 1992). Constraints might be barriers to a relationship ending, but it does not serve as a measure of interpersonal commitment or dedication within a couple's relationship (Rhoades et al., 2010). A couple who demonstrates marital health is marked by a personal commitment or dedication as they sacrifice and invest in the life of another as if it was their own. Therefore, a healthy couple grows their commitment less out of external constraints and more out of a desire to be in a loving relationship. This posturing of a healthy couple also enhances commitment when feelings temporarily ebb and flow in a relationship.

The health of a marriage is marked by forgiveness and has motivated researchers to investigate factors that can promote or impede forgiveness (Davis, Hook, Van Tongeren, & Worthington, 2012). There is also the promotion of forgiveness in couple and family therapy as an intervention to bring healing to these systems (Worthington, Jennings, & DiBlasio, 2010). This variable of marital wellness is defined as “a motivational transformation in which negative feelings decrease and positive feelings toward the transgressor increase” (Kachadourian et al., 2010, p. 334). Many researchers and clinicians view forgiveness as a cornerstone of a successful or healthy marriage (e.g., Kreici, 2004; Worthington, 1994). Forgiveness in research is often correlated with secure attachment bonds (Kachadourian et al., 2004). This means that secure attachment with a

spouse promotes improving difficulties in the marriage caused by transgressions.

According to research many partners believe that the ability to forgive and be forgiven is one of the most valuable contributors to marital health and longevity (Davis et al., 2012; Fenell, 1993).

Relationship acceptance is one of the core process components in integrative behavioral couple therapy and is often correlated to outcomes such as marital satisfaction and or marital health (Cordova et al., 1998). The concept of acceptance is seen when an individual is encouraged to acquiesce or accept negative feelings or the events that give rise to them. Doss and Christensen (2006) state:

Relationship acceptance is an adaptive and constructive affective-cognitive reaction to an event, usually a behavior by the partner. In the clinical context, researchers are usually concerned with increasing acceptance so that previously unpleasant events are experienced as more tolerable, less problematic, and, in some cases, even useful and beneficial. Thus, researchers are usually concerned with a reaction to a negative event (e.g., partner's criticism) or the lack of a positive event (e. g., infrequent physical affection). However, acceptance can refer to the level of approval or positive reception to any event, positive or negative. (p. 289)

This emphasis on acceptance is an important trend in the prevention of relationship discord and is key factor in healthy marriages. The Cognitive-Behavioral Marital Therapy founders Baucom and Epstein (1990) emphasize acceptance of one's spouse as part of constructive communication along with other variables that enhance a couple's relationship such as paraphrasing, open questioning (i.e., asking for more information), and providing positive feedback.

Life brings with it stress, instability, and loss from both an emotional and physical point of view. How a couple copes with the realities of life contributes to the health of a marriage. Couples who cope well tend to buffer spouses from psychological distress and negative life events (Karney et al., 1995). The process variable of coping, as in how well a couple copes to the evolutionary changes of marriage is a source of satisfaction or frustration within the marital relationship. In the literature coping is often described as an attribution (Bradbury, Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1996; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Karney & Bradbury, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Karney & Frye, 2002). An attribution within the development of a healthy couple views their spouse's behavior positively as a result of internal affirmative cognitions and dismisses their spouse's negative behaviors as a the result of transient external causes. An example of this would be the wife who sees her husband constantly leaving his tools in the way of parking her car in the garage as he being such a hard worker verses him being irresponsible. Likewise, the husband who comes home from work to an unorganized house sees his wife not as lazy, but that she is busy caring for their three children under the age of five. Unhealthy couples, in contrast, perceive their spouse as the cause of negative behavior and find transient, external causes for positive behavior (Karney et al., 2000). From the previous example, the husband leaves his tools in the way of his wife parking her car because he is lazy and only thinks of himself. Likewise, the wife only cleaned up the house today because her mother is coming over not because she cares for him. All in all, how a couple copes plays a prominent role in theories of

relationship development and has been seen as an object to change in preventing marital distress (Bradbury & Fincham, 1991; Baucom, Sayers, & Sher, 1990; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001).

Social support is seen as a process variable to marital health. In general, social support is affiliated with better psychological health which reduces the negative stressors associated as people are exposed to disturbing life events (Major, Cooper, Zubek, Cozzarelli, & Richards, 1997). In marriage individuals who feel cared for and valued through a support system of friends, family, and other relationships are a predictor of health (Birditt & Antonucci, 2007). Spouse and family are important to the health of a marriage, but friends who freely give companionship increase feelings of daily well-being (Sherman, deVries, & Lannsford, 2000). Literature reveals that there are differences between married males and females in regards to relationship to social support. It is well documented that women are more likely to have a wider network of family and friend relationships (Scott & Wegner, 1995). Whereas men benefit from the accompanying social support related to marriage, they also tend to struggle more with isolation than women (Davidson, 2004). Overall, married men report stable social networks, but usually they are primarily oriented around the marital relationship (Davidson, 2004). Examination of social support as a process variable in the context of health and marriage is essential to understanding the benefits of support networks as marriages experience stressful life events.

Outcome Variables within Marital Health

Marital satisfaction is often associated with positive feelings toward a spouse, commitment, and affective and behavioral interactions within the couple relationship. Higher levels of these variables yield a higher level of marital satisfaction. Conversely, higher levels of affective or negative behavior result in lower levels of marital satisfaction (Broderick & O'Leary, 1986).

Marital satisfaction is also associated with personality traits. For instance, are there predictors in satisfaction outcome as it relates to personality? Research has studied such things as: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Shiota & Levenson, 2007; Watson et al., 2000). In one particular study that examined the above five personality traits only extraversion, conscientiousness, and agreeableness emerged as predictors of satisfaction, and only openness showed little relation to satisfaction (Watson et al., 2000). Personality also brings up an interest of whether similar personalities between husband and wives bring greater satisfaction.

Literature indicates that married individuals report better physical and psychological health than those who are unmarried (Birditt & Antonucci, 2007). These findings point to personal efficacy being one of the outcomes to marital health. Personal efficacy relates to but is not limited to such marital health variables as: lower rates of problem drinking and illegal substances; lower rates of risk taking behavior; higher rates of social support in dealing with life stressors; reduction in mortality rates; and encouragement of overall healthy living as marriage tends to promote a sense of

obligation to others (Horwitz & White, 1991; Robbins & Martin, 1993; Umberson, 1987, 1992; Waite, 1995).

Outcome variables can also be negative in nature such as disagreements, disappointments, and difficulties (Henry, Miller, & Giarrusso, 2005); marital conflict (Dickson et al., 2002); distress (Clements et al., 2004); negative interaction, commitment, and relationship confidence (Kline et al., 2004). Research that yields negative outcomes is invaluable to creating marital process models that improve overall marital health and wellness (Coan & Gottman, 2007).

Spirituality and Marriage

The focus of this review is pressing because the secularization of societies throughout the 20th century has elevated questions about the importance and impact of spirituality in contemporary family life (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). In the analysis of marriage and spirituality it is important to bring some conceptualization of the intersection between marriage and spirituality. Much research has been done on distal religious variables that are related to marriage (e.g., individuals' frequency of church attendance, homogeneity of partners' church affiliation) (Mahoney et al., 1999). Mahoney and colleagues (1999) introduces the concept of a more proximal variable which views marriage as having a spiritual character and significance within the relationship. Mahoney et al. (1999) elaborate on this type of proximal variable by stating:

This religious variable taps the extent to which partners perceive God to be active or reflected in the marital relationship. Within many Judeo-Christian traditions, marital vows between husband and wife are likened to the love and covenant between God and people, and God is often described as potentially influencing or being present in marriage. (p. 323)

An understanding of the proximal variables, or the more sacred qualities to which couples describe their marriages, delineates a clearer picture of the intersection of marriage and spirituality. All in all, it helps conceptualize what it is about spirituality that relates to marriage. For example, Mahoney et al., (1999) reports that couples use the following statements to describe their marriages: “God is present in my marriage”; “My marriage is influenced by God’s actions in our lives”; or “My marriage is symbolic of God and what I believe about God” (p. 333). These types of statements should facilitate awareness among counseling professionals to the importance of spirituality and marriage.

Goodman and Dollahite (2006), build on the research of Mahoney et al. (1999) exploring a better understanding of the importance of these proximal aspects. In their qualitative research they not only identify couples that perceive God in the marriage, but also analyze to what extent and specifically how a couple perceives God to be active in their relationship (Goodman et al., 2006). A majority of the couples perceived God as personal, relational, and spiritual. These themes provided insight that the couples viewed marriage through a lens of spirituality. Goodman et al., (2006) state:

Whether the issues were personal, relational, or spiritual, they often saw marriage as part of God’s plan for this life. As will be seen in subsequent sections, this view of marriage creates an environment ripe for perceiving God to be active in marital life. (p. 146)

From the identification that God as active and involved in marriage the researchers identified the processes of how God is active in marriages i.e. that God is a God of doing, that God is a God of Being, and that God has indirect Divine influences. These processes provide outcomes which bring about such things as: unity, growth, motivation, happiness, and peace (Goodman et al., 2006).

Religiousness impacts family and marriage life but it does not answer this question: What specifically about religion is it that impacts marriage and family (Thomas & Cornwall, 1990). Currently, most researchers are limited in their religious perceptions and have a difficult time with the sacred from a more abstract perspective which bolsters qualitative research as it requires meaningful personal participation from subjects experiencing the manifestation of a transcendent God (Aten & Hernandez, 2005). Describing religious beliefs and practices in marriage is easier than describing spirituality because of clearer agreement on what religious behavior is: praying together, going to church together, reading the Bible together, and so forth. Markman et al., (2001) describes *spiritual* as:

When people think about spiritual, words that come to mind are sacred, personal, soulful, peaceful, and so forth. What these words have in common is a relation to the core belief system people hold as well as the deeper ways people become connected in life. (p. 254)

The challenge set forth by researchers is to begin to decode the more spiritual words that describe marriage and the implications to the marital bond (Markman et al., 2001). This decoding could unlock key contributors to spirituality and marital health.

The understanding of spiritual descriptive words could impact future marriages by strengthening or possibly transforming marital relationships.

Long-Term Marriage and Marital Health

Long-term healthy couples may provide clues to the variables involved in growing and promoting wellness in marriages because these couples over time have been able to discover what works in creating durability and stability in the marital unit.

Quantitative researchers have identified a number of factors that are important to long-term marriages including the following: love, affection, humor, change in perception of traditional roles, increase in emotional and responsive listening, commitment, altruism, and an increase in responsive listening that is less emotionally negative and more affectionate (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levensen, 1995; Lauer & Lauer, 1986; Pasupathi, et al., 1999; Pnina, 2009).

The qualitative data supports and compliments the preceding quantitative factors identified in the area of long-term health and marriage. Hurst (2005) writes, “Qualitative literature offers an alternative study. Qualitative research is especially relevant to marriage because it focuses on interaction between people and emotional dynamics, which are essential to marriage and difficult to study quantitatively” (p. 48). Bachand and Caron (2001) used a qualitative methodology to interview 15 couples who had been married at least 35 years to explore longevity and happiness in a marriage. Part of the investigation was to analyze the husbands and wives perceptions as relates to contributing

factors of long-term marriage. The question asked to these husbands and wives was: “Why do you think that you have been married for as long as you have?” The most common answers in the study for wives were seen in the following areas: freedom to pursue individual dreams/individuality, similar backgrounds/similar interests, friendship, and love. Other answers by wives included that the spouse is a good person, supportive, and committed. The three most common answers by husbands were similar to those of wives. These included friendship, love, and similar backgrounds. The remaining answers for the husbands, however, were somewhat varied than those given by wives. These included similar values, respect for other feelings, and commitment (Bachard et al., 2001). The results indicate that there are similarities to the factors that contribute to longevity in a marriage, but that it is dissimilar for each individual within the marital relationship.

In the interactive process of qualitative research long-term marriages generally demonstrate three markers of health which are seen in overall happiness, the managing of conflict and in the expression of sexuality. These emerging themes are expressed as couples share their narratives about marital health and longevity. Happiness, managing conflict, and the expression of sexuality are thematic contributors which could provide insights into a developmental perspective of marital health.

Happiness

Regarding the health of long-term marriages Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995) (as cited in Hurst, 2005) did a qualitative study interviewing 50 couples who described themselves as happily married. Happiness in this study was seen as a couple, who felt respected, cherished, and that their love was growing. The researchers identified nine psychological tasks that contributed to lasting marriages: (a) detach emotionally from family of origin; (b) build couple identity while remaining autonomous; (c) build family while maintaining marital relationships; (d) confront adversities of life; (e) create a safe environment for expressing differences and anger; (f) establish imaginative and pleasurable sex life; (g) share humor; (h) provide emotional nurturance and encouragement; and (i) draw sustenance and renewal from images of courtship and early marriage (Hurst, 2005). These qualitative findings are consistent with previously mentioned quantitative research (e.g. Carstensen, Gottman, & Levensen, 1995; Lauer & Lauer, 1986; Pasupathi, Carstensen, Levensen, & Gottman, 1999; Pnina, 2009), but also contribute additional variables like: detaching emotionally from family of origin; establishing an imaginative and pleasurable sex life; and drawing sustenance from the early years of marriage.

Managing Conflict

As mentioned previously, marital health within the marriage is not determined by the absence of conflict, but how a couple handles conflict when it occurs. In one

qualitative study (Dickson et al., 2002) insights are provided into descriptions of how conflict was experienced by twenty-five couples who were married 40 years or more. The researchers describe two themes that emerge from the study. The first theme indicates that long-term married couples feel that it is not worth the effort to engage in conflict and often use various measures such as deflecting, de-emphasizing, and humor to disengage from it. Secondly, a theme suggests that conflict patterns in long-term marriages are not static, but dynamically change as marriages move into various stages later in life (Dickson et al., 2002). These findings are consistent and contribute to previous quantitative research (Henry, Miller, & Giarrusso, 2005; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993).

Sexuality

The expression of sexuality in long-term marriages is seen as a contributor to marital health. It is often thought that sex is one of the biological activities that becomes obsolete as couples age, but many couples enjoy the benefits of a healthy sex life throughout the life course of their marriage (Kaplan, 1990). Hinchliff and Gott (2004) in a qualitative study of 69 participants and a mean length of marriage at 43 years revealed that sex expressed and enhanced love in long-term marriages. Hinchliff and Gott (2004):

Sexual satisfaction was perceived by most participants to be given within intimate relationship, and this related not only to gaining pleasure for oneself but also pleasuring the other, which was seen as a key benefit to sex. Naturally then, we found overwhelming agreement that engaging in sexual activity was good for the marriage. (p. 601)

Expression and enhancement of love through sex was commonly seen as most meaningful at the start of marriage, but progresses with many benefits through the life course of the relationship and thus is seen as dynamic in nature as it relates to longevity and marital health (Hinchliff & Gott, 2004). Physiological changes occur later in life which can cause less penetrative sex, but health is seen in these couples as they adapt by having more general physical contact such as: touching, hugging, and fondling (Hinchliff & Gott, 2004).

Long-Term Marriages and Spirituality

There is a gap in research on the effects of spirituality on long-term marriages. In essence does spirituality contribute to the longevity of the marital relationship? Some researchers have given brief association to longevity in marriage and spirituality as it relates to such things as moral values, faith in God, recognition as a sacred institution, and greater religiousness (Fenell, 1993; Kaslow & Robinson, 1996; Lauer & Lauer, 1986; Lauer, Lauer & Kerr, 1990; Mahoney et al., 2008).

Robinson and Blanton (1993) report religious orientation is important in enduring marriages. In interviews conducted with 15 couples that had been married for over 30 years these couples identified three areas of impact: social support, encouraged marital commitment, and moral guidance (Robinson et al., 1993). Robinson et al., (1993) state:

Religious faith encouraged marital commitment through the value placed on the marriage bond through spiritual support in times of difficulty. Some subjects

pointed to the increased intimacy that resulted in sharing such an intimate thing as one's religious faith. As one spouse stated, "It has kept us close...it has been a strengthening bond, the fact that we both believe in something that big." (p. 42)

This sharing and bonding of religious faith is often referred to as religious homogamy which Robinson et al., (1993) imply as impacting the longevity of the marital relationship. Myers (2006) describes religious homogamy as "the extent to which husbands and wives hold similar religious beliefs and participate jointly in religious practices" (p. 292). Myers (2006) and Robinson et al., (1993) are consistent with other research on religious homogamy and the impact on marriage (Mahoney et. al., 2008).

Mackey and O'Brien (2005) used both quantitative and qualitative research when interviewing 20 couples on the significance of religion and long-term marriages over 20 years. Their goal was to move away from correlation research that found couples who attend religious services have better satisfaction in marriage than those couples who do not (e.g., Mahoney et al., 2008). These types of distal factors are discussed previously in the section on *spirituality and marriage* (Mahoney et al., 1999). Mackey and colleagues (2005) reports that religion impacted 65% to 70% of marriages positively through the life course of the marriage with only 10% saying that religion had a negative to mixed effect on their relationship. Perhaps, more intriguing was the identified emerging theme from the study (Mackey et al., 2005):

A prominent theme about the significance of religion during recent years was spirituality. More than any other aspect of religion in these marriages were references to one's inner life, values, and increasingly less reliance on the structures of religion with which respondents may have been identified in earlier years. (p. 54)

This data suggests perhaps a movement from religiosity, such as attending religious services, to spirituality which Mackey et al. (2005) characterize as “reflections on personal values and how they shape one’s life, especially relationships with others” (p. 58).

Although there are many good studies that report the positive impact of religion and or spirituality on long-term marital health most have focused on the distal factors and not on the proximal factors (e.g. Fenell, 1993; Kaslow et. al., 1996; Lauer et.al., 1986; Lauer et al., 1990; Mahoney et al., 1999; Mahoney et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 1993; Mackey et al., 2005). More research is needed in the study of religious and or spiritual variables promoted by long-term marriages who have experienced the manifestation of God in their relationship and who are seen as healthy couples.

Spirituality and Marital Health

In a meta-analytic review of 94 studies published in journals from the 1980’s and 1990’s greater religiousness is credited with a decreased risk in divorce, improved marital functioning, and better parenting practices and child adjustment (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2008). Greater individual religiousness and religious homogamy between couples has consistently been associated with lower divorce rates, greater marital satisfaction and greater commitment to the marital relationship (Call & Heaton, 1997; Larson & Goltz, 1989; Mahoney et al., 1999; Wilson & Musick, 1996).

Some have tried to attribute marital conflict in communication and domestic violence to religiosity in the marriage but have been unsuccessful (Brinkerhoff, Grandin, & Lupri, 1992; Schumm, Obiorah, & Sillman, 1989).

It is important in this study to set apart *Christian spirituality* as it is the focal interest of this investigation pertaining to long-term marriages. Many popular authors such as Harley (1986, 1994, 2001), Smalley (1996), Smalley and Trent (1989), Wright (1995), and Chapman (1979, 1996) have written on marriage enrichment from a distinctively Christian viewpoint. Evidence based researchers have created Christian approaches to marital interventions such as Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg (2001), Stanley, Trathen, McCain, and Bryan (1998), and Worthington (1989, 1994, 1996, 1999) in which the promotion of spiritual concepts such as forgiveness and commitment are encouraged.

Forgiveness strategies have been explored by clinical researchers and are associated with such things as: better conflict resolution and stronger marriages (Fincham, Beach, & Davilla 2004; Krejci, 2004; Orathinkal & Vansteenwegen, 2006). The conceptualization of what forgiveness is, and is not, is emphasized by some clinicians so clients can be protected from misconceptions (Sanderson & Linehan, 1999). Often forgiveness is associated with Christianity but by no means does Christianity have the exclusive rights to this concept (Worthington, 2003). Worthington (2003) states:

Forgiveness is often associated with Christianity. But Christianity does not own forgiveness. To be human is to have experienced hurt, offense, betrayal and rejection. Forgiving is one way that all creatures can deal with those events that

wound the soul. Forgiveness—like love, honesty, justness, truth, responsibility, accountability, altruism, gratitude, compassion, mercy, grace, rationality, and creativity—resides in the common grace given by God to all people. To forgive is human. (p. 61)

Worthington (1989, 1996) has developed an intervention that promotes the spiritual concept of forgiveness in the marriage relationship which contributes to the intimacy, communication and conflict management between spouses as they learn to forgive each other of past hurts. This intervention addresses the misconceptions associated with Christian forgiveness such as: forgiveness is forgetting what was done to the betrayed, and forgiveness means that the betrayed should always enter back into the relationship if he or she has truly forgiven. These misconceptions can lead to harm and not health within the marital relationship.

Commitment is an outcome variable associated with marital health. It can be seen as enhancing marital quality by a couple committing to a higher order or set of ideas (Booth, Johnson, Branman, & Sica, 1995). As previously discussed in the *process variables within marital health* section there are two types of commitment in a marriage relationship: personal dedication and constraint commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Clinicians often associate constraint as negative but as Stanley and Markman (1992) states this is “only when personal dedication and satisfaction have diminished” (p. 604). Booth and colleagues (1995) report that less religious people have less marital happiness because of less commitment to a higher order:

On the other hand, for individuals who are less religious, marital happiness is the basis of commitment. If the relationship is going well, commitment is high. The

individual is likely to report the quality of the relationship accurately, whether it is going well or poorly. To do so is consistent with the individualistic orientation of understanding oneself in the quest for self-fulfillment. If nonreligious individuals report the quality of their relationship based on this individualistic orientation and religious individuals report the quality of their marriage in keeping with a higher commitment, then less religious individuals should report less marital happiness because they will be reporting unhappy relations as well as happy ones. Averaging unhappy and happy relations will give less religious people a lower overall marital rating. (p. 665)

Commitment gives a long-term view to marriage which is a Christian perspective of God's design (Stanley et al., 1998). It provides a sense of freedom to the marital relationship. According to Stanley et al., (1998): "It (commitment) frees you to grow closer because you feel secure enough to take risks of disclosing more about yourself. Great security comes from knowing your mate will be there when it really counts" (p. 180).

A long-term view of commitment is often referred to in Judeo-Christian marriages as *covenant*. In the late 1990's a covenant marriage movement grew out of concern that no-fault divorce laws threatened the institution of marriage (Cade, 2010). As of today three states (Louisiana, Arizona, and Arkansas) have legislated making a covenant marriage license available which has heightened requirements for entering and exiting a marriage (Brown, Sanchez, Nock & Wright, 2006). Baker and colleagues (2008) in their qualitative study report covenant marriages see their marital status as a dynamic symbol to display publicly their values and beliefs. One of the subjects in the Baker et al., (2008) study stated:

I'm in this because I've made a commitment, and this is the most important thing, and in the way I view what marriage is, it's my job... When you got married, the Lord entered into the covenant, and he's not going to back down, because he can't, because he's God. But I could if I wanted to. But I'm not going to do that because I made a vow. (p. 165)

The legislating of God in marriage through covenant by religious persons has resulted in much criticism from feminist and non-traditional marriages (Baker et al., 2008). More research needs to be done from this perspective to determine overall marital health, but it can be used by clinicians, in particular with Christian clients to clarify expectations, commitment levels, and the spiritual atmosphere of the marriage.

Summary

This chapter provided a review of the literature pertinent to the phenomenon of spirituality and long-term marital health. The literature review was divided into six sections which started broadly and gradually narrowed during the examination process. The six sections were identified as: an analysis of long-term marriages; an investigation of marital health within the marriage relationship; spirituality and marriage; long-term marriage and marital health; long-term marriage and spirituality; and spirituality as relates to marital health. It was determined that the research is sparse as pertains to spirituality and long-term health of marriage. The deficit in the research makes for the rationale of this phenomenological inquiry. The researchers' aspirations are to add insights that perhaps aid future researchers and clinicians in the trajectory of marriage enrichment courses, and marital and pre-marital counseling within the Church and

Christian community. In the next chapter the phenomenological method will be explained followed by the details of the experiment, to include: the role of the researcher, the interview process, the selection of the participants, the data collection process, the selection of participants, the data collection process, the interview guides, and the data analysis. Lastly, the trustworthiness of the study will be described.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

Introduction

The preceding chapters clarified that there is a compelling need for research in the area of Christian spirituality and long-term marriages. Examination on what factors contribute to marriages that last, rather than what keeps them from lasting perhaps can provide counselors, pastors, and other professionals clues for creating marriages that will endure the test of time.

Many researchers have made a call for this type of investigation suggesting the qualitative approach is the most effective and efficient method for understanding spiritual experience because spiritual experience is subjective in nature and requires personal participation from the one having the experience (Aten & Hernandez, 2005; Goodman & Dollahite, 2006). Also, qualitative research is especially relevant to marriage because it focuses on interactions between couples and emotional dynamics, which are foremost to marriage and difficult to study quantitatively (Hurst, 2005). Quantitative and qualitative research on marriages has suggested that there is a positive correlation between religion and greater marital happiness and functioning (Booth, Johnson, Branaman, & Alan, 1995; Lambert & Dollahite, 2006; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993). These studies have focused more on distal aspects of religion, i.e. church attendance in relationship to outcomes such as satisfaction, stability, and coping (Mackey & O'Brien, 2005; Mahoney et al., 1999; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2008). The distal areas of religion are

only able to make generalizations regarding the intersection of spirituality and marriage and are void of the more subtle but significant attributes of religion like beliefs, values, and regular processes that couples practice in Christian spiritual marriages (Goodman et al., 2006). For example, couples that go to church together might have a more satisfying marriage, but what are the specific processes involved in this shared spiritual experience which bring the satisfying outcome? This research endeavor was selected as a response to the void in the research to obtain a deeper understanding of the essence of Christian spirituality and marital health within long-term marriage relationships.

In this chapter, the necessary components used to execute this phenomenological inquiry are detailed. First, the phenomenological research method applied in this study is described, along with the explanation for its use. Next the research is defined and details regarding the experiment are discussed, such as: the role of the researcher, the interview process, the selection of participants, data collection process, interview guides, data recording, and data analysis. Finally, procedures used to address the trustworthiness of this study will be described.

Phenomenological Methods

The scope of this study is guided by a phenomenological method that describes the meaning of several individuals' lived experiences of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Participants are deliberately chosen based on their human experience of the phenomenon and are co-researchers as they are encouraged to become active

participants (Moustakas, 1994). This active participation is rooted in the interview process which is conducted by the researcher in a non-threatening environment and contributes as a valuable means of obtaining information about the participants shared experiences (Beiten, 2008; Van Manon, 1990). The researcher's perceptions are explicit throughout the interpretation of the experience as he pursues a deeper understanding of the lived phenomenon (Kazdin, 2003).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology seeks to bring meaning to a universally experienced phenomenon. The basic purpose allows the researcher to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to the essence of its nature (Van Manen, 1990). The investigator gathers narratives from participants who have experienced the phenomenon, and develops a synthesized representation of the essence for all of the individuals (Creswell, 2007). Moustakas (1994) gives this descriptive of the phenomenological approach:

The aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions general or universal meanings are derived, in other words the essences or structures of the experience. (p. 13)

The phenomenon of interest for my study represents an intersection between psychology and spirituality, as long-term Christian marriages are investigated to bring clarity of how God is manifested in couple's lives. This phenomenon is persistent in

everyday life in the routines of religious families (Van Manen, 1990). As a pastor and professional counselor the importance of the phenomenon stems from a passionate professional and personal interest in the institution of marriage. In many long-term Christian marriages God is perceived to be involved in the couple relationship. Not merely that one couple is “more religious” than another, but rather these couples manifest their Christian spirituality in the processes of marriage (Goodman et al., 2006). Capturing the essence of the experience by entering the world of these long-term Christian marriages and developing an understanding of the internal spiritual processes is the goal of the phenomenological approach and this researcher. Specifically, the researcher desires to move closer to a model of understanding of what is different about healthy long-term Christian marriages.

The Role of the Researcher

An essential element of the phenomenological investigation is the role of the researcher. The first challenge of the researcher is to produce a topic and question that have both a collective meaning and personal significance (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological researcher’s questions grow out of his passion of the topic and his interests inspire a more and more profound search for meaning (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenologist would be negligent not to include discussions about philosophical beliefs of phenomenology along with the methods in this form of analysis (Creswell,

2007). The researcher is expected to be engaged in the process and take an instinctive position, making his impressions explicit (Van Manen, 1990).

In this study, the researcher will be an active contributor as he serves as the interviewer and positions himself in a natural setting with the participants. The researcher will interview couples together as this will allow for them to interact around a question and create meaning or supplement each other's answers. This type of interview allows couples to provide information about joint behavior not seen in individual interviews (Beitin, 2008). The researcher is self-aware of the value-laden nature of the information gathered in the study and admits his biases as he conceptualizes the perceptions of the participants' stories (Creswell, 2007; Van Manen, 1990). A phenomenon often has differing meanings to the various people involved. Different analysis of the phenomenon is to be expected. The essence is shaped by the language and meaning available to the participants (O'Connor et al., 2001).

The Interview Process

The interview process explores the participants' narrative giving meaning to language used. The active interaction by the researcher helps develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Beiten, 2008, Moustakas, 1994). The interview allows for engagement by the researcher that is conversational in style which develops cohesion with the participants making for a richer experience (Van Manen, 1990). Broad questions are used in a timely way to facilitate the acquiring of rich vital

descriptions of the participants' experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This open-ended style interviewing allows for freedom of expression while eliciting uninhibited responses (Mackey & O'Brien, 2005). The interview questions are generally broad. Creswell (2007) writes,

The participants are asked two broad questions: What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon? Other open-ended questions may also be asked, but these two, especially, focus attention on gathering data that will lead to a textural description and a structural description of the experiences, and ultimately provide an understanding of the common experiences of the participants. (p. 61)

It is imperative that the interview process has direction and that the interviewer is acquainted with the interview questions so he will not struggle in irrelevant confusing narratives. The language and timely way in which the questions are asked assist the participant in responding honestly and comprehensively (Moustakas, 1994). Participants are asked to tell about specific events in order to gain accurate descriptions of applicable experiences (Van Manen, 1990).

The stories of the participants are first collected in their genuine voice from verbatim accounts of their experiences and perceptions (Moustakas, 1994). Interviews are transcribed and significant statements, sentences, quotes and themes are emphasized to provide understanding to how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). From these statements and themes the researcher trims the non-essential parts in order to accurately and deconstructively understand the essence of the experience that is most relevant to the focus of the study (Van Manen, 1990).

This study seeks to add to the information that already exists on the phenomenon of Christian spirituality and long-term marriages as well as contribute to a model of understanding of what is different about Christian marriages. The thematic data hopes to provide insights to the less distal religious contributors of marital health while expanding literature on the spiritual processes within the marital relationship that contribute to the wellness of a marriage. This type of spiritual study of validating of religious experience is best explored through the phenomenological approach because of its subjective nature (Macknee, 2002).

The researcher's experience as a professional counselor and pastor and his interest in and affection for things spiritual have provided him with the determination to describe the notion of Christian spirituality and how that description impacts long-term marriages. In particular, how Christian spirituality affects the health of long-term marital relationships. Also, this study addresses the void in the literature by phenomenologically researching the link between Christian spirituality and marital health within the context of long-term marriages.

Selection of Participants

It is essential that the research participant has knowledge of the phenomenon and is interested in understanding its nature and meaning (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The participants are the experiential experts of the phenomenon being studied (Rudestan & Newton, 2001). A criterion sampling method aids the researcher in quality control by

selecting participants that meet common characteristics (Creswell, 2007). Participants for this study have mutual characteristics that create homogeneity within the participant group. Characteristics for this study are couples who have a common interest in Christian spirituality and are willing to communicate sufficiently about their beliefs and the influences these have had on their marriage. Another criterion is couples who have been married only one time and for at least thirty years. Much conflict exists concerning what exactly constitutes long-term marriage. While most agree that a long-term marriage is one that has endured an extensive length of time, the precise duration of this type of study varies (Bachand & Caron, 2001). Since this study is investigating couples, it requires the construction of a shared reality as they redefine their individual separate realities (Robinson & Blanton, 1993). This shared reality is one expression of the meaning of Christian spirituality in their marital relationship. However, no two couples experience spirituality or marriage in the same way. Therefore, it is desirable that the participants be allowed to communicate the phenomenon as experienced in their marriage in their own terms, revealing the substance of their marital relationship (Robinson et al, 1993). These various interpretations of the phenomenon are expected. The essence is shaped by the language and meaning available to the participants (O'Connor et al., 2001).

Researchers recommend a homogenous sample of 5 to 25 participants (Creswell, 2007). At some point in the interview process the researcher is no longer gaining any new information with each interview. The researcher anticipates a discontinuation of fresh information. The design of the study provides an applicable number of participants that

the process yields a saturation point (Moustakas, 1994; Redestam & Newton, 2001). The criterion selection processes in the following paragraph make certain that participants meet the characteristics of Christian spirituality and long-term marriage, and other relevant criteria to this study.

Acquiring Participants

Purposeful sampling is closely affiliated with qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). This means that the researcher chooses the participants and the location of the investigation because they have an understanding of the research problem and the phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2007). A purposeful sampling strategy that is associated with phenomenology is criterion sampling. This type of sampling is imperative in phenomenological study because it requires that the individual represent people who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). Inclusionary and exclusionary criterion of the participants are detailed in the below section and are considered in the sampling process of the study (Redestam & Newton, 2001). The criterion for this study is specific to the Christian culture and to married couples and can be generalized to these specific populations. It is predicted that acceptable participants will be obtained. The method of criterion will be applied in the recruitment and selection of the final participants (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher will promote this study through the Elder body at a large Southern Baptist church in Matthews, North Carolina. The Elders will nominate 40 to 50 couples who

meet the research criterion for long-term, healthy, Christian marriages. A Likert scale will be used by the Elder board providing for quality control and narrowing process. The Likert scale will include questions involving a couple's marital health and Christian spirituality including scaling such things as prayer, meditation, evangelism, missions, tithing, and Bible study. An example of the Elder board couple evaluation is seen in Appendix A. From the nominated couples the Elders will come to a consensus of 20 couples as potential participants. The researcher will contact 10 couples from the consensus allowing for a potential pool of couples if some choose not to participate.

Participants of Study

This study is interested in couples who have been married one time for at least 30 years and who relate to the phenomenon of Christian spirituality in marriage and desire further understanding of the experience. For this study 10 couples will be interviewed who have met general criteria but also have a deep interest in understanding the nature and meanings of the phenomenon and are willing to give a lengthy interview, be tape-recorded, and ultimately published in a dissertation (Moustakas, 1994). Limitations are deliberately imposed in the selection of participants in a phenomenological design restricting the populations from being generalized (Rudestam & Newton, 2001).

Criteria of Participants

The selection criteria for the participants are listed below. The criteria ensure that the 10 selected couple participants have homogeneity regarding the characteristics that are vital to this study. The defined criteria for couples participating in the study include:

1. The couple has been married only one time for at least 30 years.
2. The couple self-reports that their marriage is healthy and meets the criteria of marital health, Appendix B, and described on page 9 of this study.
3. The couple meets the criteria defining Christian spirituality described in Appendix C, and page 10 of this study.
4. The couple is interested in exploring their experience of long-term Christian marriage and how it influences the marital relationship.
5. The couple meets a consensus by the Elder board in which a Likert scale is used for quality control and increasing trustworthiness.

Informing Participants

The phenomenological design recruits participants by apprising possible couples of the opportunity to participate in the study. The sample selection process is intentional in acquiring participants who are of a homogenous group with common characteristics relevant to the study (Creswell, 2003). The criterion sampling process provides a good opportunity to find participants that meet the inclusionary criteria (Redenstam & Newton, 2001).

After participants are identified, the researcher will contact the prospective participants by phone and conduct a 15 to 20 minute pre- interview to discuss the nature and purpose of the study. This pre-interview is also a time for the researcher to assess if the participants are truly interested in the subject matter and are willing to commit to the time involved to the interview and data collection process (Moustakas, 1994).

When the researcher officially propositions the individuals to participate in the study, each individual will be given informed consent to participate which details the important elements of the research, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time (Creswell, 2007). The consent form can be found in Appendix D. The specific elements of the consent form include: the central purpose of the study and data collection; statement of confidentiality to protect participants; the risk factors for participants; the possible benefits received by participants; and a place for the participant and the researcher to sign the consent form validating the agreement (Creswell, 2007).

Data Collection Process

There will be one data source for the study. The couple will participate in an interview together. The interview acts as a means to exploring and gathering narrative information on the phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990). The rationale for interviewing the couple together is that it allows the couple to interact around a question and create meaning or supplement each other's answers. It also provides an environment where altering answers to the question is less likely in the presence of the other (Beitin, 2008).

Interview Guide

The interview guide is designed to engage the couple in conversation and prompt discussion on the experiences of being in a long term, healthy, Christian marriage. The guide is used by the researcher to gain further in-depth understanding on the essence of longevity, health, and Christian spirituality in the couple relationship. The questions are broad and open-ended in design with the rationale of not leading the couple (Creswell, 2007). The framework for the interview guide emphasizes the three domains relevant to this study regarding a couple's relationship, including: longevity, health, and Christian spirituality. Each domain of study has a first order broad question for the couple allowing the interview to be led by the participant's narrative. Then each area of study allows for a follow up question or a second order question used to illicit more understanding to the domain of questioning. Finally, the interview guide allows for a non-specified question in each area of study i.e. is there anything else you would like to say regarding this topic? The rationale for the non-specified question is to allow the couple the freedom to exhaust all their experiences on the topic. The interview guide used for the couples is listed in Appendix E.

The first question asks the couple to tell the investigator how their relationship has unfolded through the years. This question initiates conversation and engages the couple in a dialogue of expressing their story through the life span of their relationship. The question engages the couple to reflect historically on the phenomenon of long-term

marriages (Moustakas, 1994). The second order question on this topic allows the couple to illicit more thoughts on the phenomenon as they are asked to talk about what they see as the contributors to longevity in their marriage. Finally, the couple is asked a non-specified question allowing for exhaustive information on the area of longevity in marriage.

The second question asks the couple to describe the health of their marriage. This non-leading question allows the couple to illicit their own thoughts on the phenomenon of what a healthy marriage is. The second order question asks the couple to identify factors that have contributed to the health of their marriage. This question originates from other literature on the subject from a quantitative perspective, but is set forth to illicit more clarity on the subject from a phenomenological point of view with the specific demographic of Christian couples (Banchard & Caron, 2001). Lastly, the couple will be asked a non-specified question allowing for a saturation of information in the area of health and marriage.

The third question identifies the couple as Christian and then asks them to describe the essence of Christian spirituality in their marriage. Much like the above inquiries the intention of the researcher is to keep the question broad in hopes to illicit information that is helpful for this area of study. The second order question asks couples to explain how they perceive God as being involved in their marriage. This question is influenced by the literature to allow couples to explain the processes of Christian spirituality in marriage (Goodman et al., 2006; Mahoney et al., 1999; Ripley, 2003). In

conclusion, the couple will be asked a non-specified question in order to be exhaustive on the topic of Christian spirituality and marriage.

Data Collection

Recording equipment will be used in the interview process to record the couple's responses to the interview questions. The use of audio recordings creates an opportunity for accuracy in transcriptions. The researcher will also record data through field notes to log important observations (Creswell, 2007).

There is a total of eight questions on the interview guide. Three first order questions followed by second order questions and concluding with a non-specified question in each of the areas of interest. The sequence of questioning will follow the interview guide, see Appendix E. It is thought that each couple interview will take approximately ninety minutes to complete.

Ethical issues arise when data is collected. The intent of the researcher is always to protect the participants and maintain anonymity (Creswell, 2007). All ethical issues regarding data collection will be provided in informed consent which is reviewed and signed by the participants. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University ensures safety for all research participants. This is done as the IRB does not grant approval for conducting research unless the design of research has met the conditions for approval. These conditions meet federal regulations for privacy and confidentiality of all research participants.

Data Analysis

When the interview is completed the data from the audio recording will be transcribed by a hired transcriptionist. The researcher wanting to provide high ethical standards in protecting the participants will have the transcriptionist sign a confidentiality agreement, see Appendix F. After the transcription is complete the researcher will review the text of the audio recording. Then the participants will review the transcript of their interview (member-checking) assuring accuracy (Creswell, 2007). Once the transcription is approved, the text will be loaded into the qualitative research software NVIVO to conduct a thematic data analysis (QRS, International, 2009). NVIVO is a CAQDAS (Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software) developed to enhance the accessibility of qualitative data by overcoming the limitations of paper data collection and creating usefulness for data management and coding processes (Wickham & Woods, 2005). NVIVO improves the researcher's ability to organize large volumes of raw qualitative data into collectable information that aids in conducting trustworthy research. Specifically, NVIVO aids the researcher in four areas: 1) an overall managing of the transcribed interview data; 2) an increased efficiency in the data analysis by eliminating "cut and paste" between software applications; 3) the creation of node categories which allows the researcher to pinpoint select words and phrases from participants transcriptions organizing them into relevant information and collective themes; and 4) it aids the researcher in creating transparency, rigor, and reliability as it acts as a guide in

the qualitative research processes (Wickham et al., 2005). All in all, a dual process of using both NVIVO and the researcher's careful evaluation of the transcripts will improve the trustworthiness of the findings (QRS International, 2009).

The researcher will analyze themes for each couple interview and construct a thematic analysis of the transcriptions. A theme is a form of capturing the phenomenon or lived experience by which the couple is elaborating on in the interview (Van Manen, 1990). Differing responses and unique responses will be investigated and included in the result section. The themes from each couple interview will then be compared and reported in the results section. Two outside reviewers will analyze the data and provide insights and feedback to the investigator to increase the trustworthiness of the analysis.

The interview guide for the couples participating in the research will allow for a framework in comparing data, themes and other findings between the couples. This data will be analyzed, scrutinized, and compared. It is anticipated that the couple interviews will provide rich information on their lived experiences of being in long-term, healthy, Christian marriages. All thematic data will be detailed and reported in the results section.

Trustworthiness

Quantitative researchers use the terms internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity but qualitative researchers have developed their own language to describe these aspects of systematic study. According to Rudestam and Newton (2001), "In naturalistic (qualitative) research the trustworthiness of the design becomes standard

upon which it is likely to be judged, and the Method chapter becomes a major component upon which this judgment is based” (p. 98). The methods in quantitative research of validating data is different from that of qualitative research in which validation is an attempt to assess the accuracy of the findings described by the researcher and participants. Thus, methods by qualitative researchers should demonstrate accepted strategies to document accuracy of their studies creating trustworthiness (Creswell, 2003). Various methods are used to address the trustworthiness of this study and are discussed in the preceding paragraphs.

In qualitative research, the researcher needs to clarify biases from the outset of the study as it is important that the reader understand the positioning and the assumptions the researcher brings to the inquiry (Creswell, 2003). This clarification of biases creates authenticity within the body of research and builds trust between the researcher and reader (Creswell, 2003). This positioning of the researcher is found in the *locating the researcher* section of this paper in chapter one, starting on page eleven. The positioning includes an acknowledgement of his personal commitment to Jesus Christ, and how he actively synthesizes his Christian core beliefs into his world as a father, husband, professional counselor, and pastor.

The selection of the participants in this study by criterion and purposeful sampling requires participants to have experienced the phenomenon along with meeting the criterion, as seen in Appendix G. This organized strategy of participant selection is

significant in generating credible data for this inquiry. This selection process brings overall trustworthiness to the investigation.

Triangulation, refers to researchers making use of multiple and different methods, investigators, and theories providing comparison and contrast which increases the staying power of the data (Creswell, 2003). This study provides various protocols in the data collection process providing forms of triangulation and validation, such as: interviewing the couple together where altering answers to the questions decreases (internal validity) ; the use of an interview guide for questioning which by design decreases leading questions; use of member-checking in the data analysis to assure accuracy in transcription (descriptive validity); use of CAQDAS to improve data management and coding processes (internal validity); and lastly, the use of two outside reviewers to analyze the data while providing feedback to the researcher to increase the overall trustworthiness of the analysis (interpretive validity).

According to Van Manen (1990), "... phenomenological descriptions have universal (intersubjective) character" (p. 58). Thus, generalizing the participants lived experience is common for the reader (Creswell, 2003). The robust and rich descriptions are sufficiently detailed to strengthen the transferability of the findings (external validity) (Craft, 2009; Kazdin, 2003). Generalizations to other settings and other participants are modest and should be done with reservation. In this phenomenological study, application lies in the design which provides a model for future studies with similar populations of lived experiences to include long-term, Christian, healthy couples.

Summary

Chapter three provides the specific design elements used in this phenomenological inquiry. The role of the researcher, the interview process, and details about the selection of the participants set the framework for developing the essence of the study. The section on data collection processes provides features in the inquiry such as the rationale of the interview guide, the interview questions, and how data is recorded and analyzed. The validity of the study is implored through the trustworthiness of the interview narratives validated by the research participants and the outside reviewers.

The basis of the study is capturing the essence of what role a couple's Christian spirituality plays in the health of a long-term marriage. The investigation through a phenomenological lens hopes to illicit the processes related to the lived experiences of these types of couples. It is anticipated that this study will illuminate and contribute to the current body of literature on this topic while increasing an understanding of Christian spirituality as it relates to marital health. The next chapter will discuss the details of the research findings and the themes that developed from the phenomenological analysis of the collected data.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to further understand what role if any Christian spirituality has on the health and longevity of the marital relationship. Specifically, what uniquely Christian themes, sub-themes, processes, and/ or factors contribute to longevity and marital health within marriages?

This chapter begins by giving a brief description of the participants in the study. The remainder of the chapter discusses Christian spiritual themes and sub-themes identified from the participants' descriptions and the Christian spiritual factors affiliated with marital health in long-term marriages. In particular, the primary Christian spirituality themes of *being and doing* and *marriage and growing* are referenced by all couples interviewed throughout all domains. The sub-themes of *affectionate expression*, *bonding* and *commitment* are referenced by most of the couples interviewed throughout all domains. The participants' transcriptions were handled with utmost care and competency in order to not take away from the original meaning. The researcher did make necessary adjustments in the transcriptions from spoken language to written word in order to bring better fluency to the readers. For example, phrases such as *you know*, *and so, I mean*, and *I think* were often omitted to create better flow within the narrative, but without altering meaning. Also, there were places where the punctuation of a comma or period was added to enhance meaning within the narratives avoiding rambling and

run-on thoughts by the participants. The couples participated in member checking to confirm that changes made to the transcriptions did not alter the meaning associated with the participants answering of the questions. This process increased the trustworthiness of the research.

Descriptions of Participants

All participants were couples who were married one time for at least thirty years and were identified and described by the Elder Board as couples who have a healthy marriage and who are spiritually mature in their Christian faith. Relationships were considered by the elder board to have marital health based on the couples demonstrating patterns of positive interaction verbally, cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally. The couples' spiritual maturity was observed individually and relationally. The couples nominated by the Elder Board were perceived as motivated in their marriage to bring glory to God through their relationship with each other. Both husbands and wives agreed to participate in a face-to-face interview with the researcher. The number of years the couples were married ranged between 30 and 58 years. The participants have been members of the church between 15 and 43 years. To protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms were used in place of the participants' real names throughout this study.

Clay and Ann

Clay and Ann have been married for 35 years. This marriage is the first for both. They have three adult children all of whom are married. The couple has five grandchildren. Clay is 58 years old, and Ann is 55. They have been members of the church for 22 years. Ann currently works full-time as a Children's ministry associate at the church where she focuses on the spiritual development of preteens. Clay works as a sales representative for a national paper company. He has served on the deacon board and actively volunteers with Ann in the preteen ministry.

Mike and Diana

Mike and Diana have been married for 52 years. This marriage is the first for both. They have four adult children, all of whom are married. Two of their adult children are on their second marriages. The couple has seven grandchildren, and one grandchild who is deceased. Mike is 71 years old, and Diana is 70. They have been members of the church for 34 years. Both Mike and Diana co-owned a successful real estate company before retiring several years ago. Mike serves as an adult Sunday school leader and Diana currently serves on the personal committee at the church.

Bill and Carol

Bill and Carol have been married for 50 years. They have three adult children all of whom are married. The couple has 13 grandchildren. Bill is 74 years old, and Carol is

74, also. They have been members of the church for 43 years. Bill and Carol co-owned a successful computer software company before retiring several years ago. Both travel to Africa on a regular basis with a son who is a physician to serve in a mission hospital. Bill has served on the deacon board and Carol has served on various church committees and is active in the women's ministry of the church.

Arion and Wendy

Arion and Wendy have been married for 35 years. They have two adult children of whom one is married. The couple has no grandchildren. Arion is 58 years old, and Wendy is 57. They have been members of the church for 34 years. Arion works as a risk engineer for a construction company, and Wendy works as an office manager. Arion has served as a Sunday school teacher and deacon for many years while Carol is a regular greeter on Sunday mornings.

Mike and Nancy

Mike and Nancy have been married for 30 years. They have two adult children, and neither is married. Mike and Nancy are both 53 years old. They have been members of the church for 18 years. Mike is a successful business owner and Nancy was a stay at home mother. Mike presently serves as a Sunday school officer and Nancy serves on the personal committee and is active in Women's ministry at the church.

Lance and Rachel

Lance and Rachel have been married for 50 years. They have three adult children all of whom are married. The couple has nine grandchildren. Lance is 74 years old, and Rachel is 71. They have been members of the church for 21 years. Lance is a retired pastor and Rachel is a retired public school teacher. Both have active ministries as Lance continues to serve in various interim pastorates and Rachel is a popular speaker within women's ministry.

Rob and Amarie

Rob and Amarie have been married for 52 years. They have two adult children one is married the other widowed. The couple has five grandchildren. Rob is 72 years old, and Amarie 73. They have been members of the church for 22 years. Rob served as church administrator for approximately 15 years after a successful career in insurance and Amarie was a stay at home mom and has her Master's degree in counseling. Both are very active in Crown Ministry which is a church-wide small group ministry that teaches financial stewardship from a Biblical perspective.

Roger and Sherry

Roger and Sherry have been married for 30 years. They have two adult children, and a child that lives in the home. Roger and Sherry are both 55 years old. They have been members of the church for 17 years. Roger is a plastic surgeon and Sherry is a stay

at home mother. Roger is a weekly attender to Sunday services and Bible study and Sherry regularly serves in women's ministry as well as volunteering as a Sunday school officer.

Mathew and Robin

Mathew and Robin have been married for 46 years. They have two adult children that are not married. Mathew is 69 years old, and Robin 67. They have been members of the church for 15 years. Michael is a successfully retired business owner and Robin was a stay at home mother. Michael has served on the deacon board and presently teaches a Sunday school class. Robin is active in serving in Women's ministry at the church.

Dean and Elizabeth

Dean and Elizabeth have been married for 58 years. The marriage is the first for both of them. They have three adult children of whom two are married and one is divorced. Dean is 80, and Elizabeth is 79. They have been members of the church for 20 years. Dean is a successfully retired insurance salesman and Elizabeth a retired buyer for women's clothing store. Dean has served on the Deacon board and Elizabeth is an active greeter at the church.

Primary Themes from the Interview

As couples shared the stories of their marriage two primary themes began to emerge as they reminisced on the longevity, health, and Christian spirituality of their marital relationship. The first is the theme of *being and doing* that ran throughout all domains and is infused within all the emerging sub-themes. The second is the theme of *marriage and growing* that emerged within all the couple's interviewed across all domains. It is important to note that both themes were intertwined with Christian language throughout the interview and epitomized the couples desire to bring glory to God through their relationship with each other.

Being and Doing

The longevity, health, and Christian spirituality domains consisted of the primary theme of being and doing. The *significance in the being* theme appeared in all three domains, a total of 50 times within the emerging sub-themes of the study. The being theme is described by couples as a spiritual place where they share life experiences together which is felt deeply within their relationship with each other and God and contributes to the development of the marriage. It is less action oriented and more transcendent in nature and is steeped in the teachings of Christianity. An example of this is the Pauline teaching on communal unity and the sharing of each other's being in Christian community expressed in 1 Corinthians 12 and Galations 3. Both passages

emphasize a common experience shared in *body* and *spirit* by believers. This experience was expressed by the couples as they shared their stories during the interview.

Bill expressed his deep emotion felt in his spirit towards his wife Carol which exemplifies the “being” theme of their marital relationship. Bill describes the sharing of “unconditional love” capturing the spiritual nature of their marital relationship. As unconditional love is given in the relationship, the essence of being is experienced through trust. He said, “The unconditional love I have had for Carol is a thing that just jumps out at me to start with. There’s just no question at all about her trust in me”.

Similarly, Robin captures the essence of the significance of being in her marriage to Mathew. She explains the sharing of life with her husband Mathew through the Holy Spirit which captures the transcendent nature of their marriage. Robin said,

Basically, I have more peace and joy now than I did when we first got married, and that is only because of the Holy Spirit directing me and guiding me. It is the first thing I do every morning to ask God to direct my life the last thing I do at night is to thank Him. God has blessed me personally and in my relationship with Mathew. He’s given us so much and we don’t deserve any of it, but He’s given us so much in our marriage and our family. And I’ve grown a lot as a Christian by letting the Holy Spirit guide me. And Michael is a wonderful example of a good Christian man, a good Christian father, and he has this quiet strength. He’s not loud or anything like that. He just has this quiet strength that you feel safe and God has just blessed him with so many attributes that I wouldn’t trade anything.

The *significance in doing* theme is described by couples as a place where they share life experiences together that are action oriented. These shared experiences can be spiritual in nature, but do not have to be, and are contributors to the development of the marriage. The significance of the doing theme was referenced a total of 50 times

throughout the study within the emerging sub-themes and across the domains of longevity, health, and Christian spirituality. This is a primary theme because couples described religious action or activities that were seen by the couple as having contributed to the longevity, health, and Christian spirituality of the marriage.

Ann gives the essence of doing within her shared life experience with her husband Clay as they participated in various religious activities. Ann said,

But through the years, I think of the things that we've done. We've taken Bible studies together as couples and then separate. I would do something with women. He would do something with men, but it was the same subject. We took a financial class together at church and marriage classes with other couples. You know, we've actually worked on things together that have helped our marriage.

The shared experience of doing together in the relationship is also seen in other spiritual ways such as, prayer, attending church, doing activities with Sunday school friends, and serving together. Carol captures the doing theme shared within her life with her husband Bill as they benefited from participating in church. Carol said,

The church has been a vital part of our lives. It's where we have found good friends. It's where we found places of service. It's where we just plugged in to and I can't imagine what our lives would have been like without our friends at church. When we moved to Connecticut, we had two babies and one on the way and didn't know anybody and there was a little church up there that took us in made us feel warm and --Yeah. I don't know how people do life without that community that God gives us through other believers.

Marriage and Growing

The couples in this study offered detailed insights into the longevity, health, and Christian spirituality of their marriage. The researcher found the participants open and

genuine as they reflected on their past personal accounts of their marital relationship. The primary theme of *Marriage and Growing* emerged as an outcome to the being and doing interplay of the sub-themes across the longevity and health domains. The couples seasoned this theme with language that was influenced by their day- to- day Christian spirituality. This theme emerged in all 10 couples interviewed and was referenced a total of 32 times throughout the experiment. The couples used descriptive words for growing such as *mature*, *developed*, and *blossomed*. Most couples described their growing marriage through some type of process of tension or painful experience. This process of tension is communicated by the participants in such things as: “realization that the spouse was not perfect,” “the raising of children,” “differences in personality,” “problems with one or the other’s family of origin,” “serving in the military” and “health related issues.” The tension these couples expressed within their narratives reflected a nature within the marriage that was steeped with Christian spirituality. The couples spoke using language, such as: “deep friendship, trust, and understanding,” “much deeper kind of appreciation,” “allowances of differences,” “something spiritual,” and “made us stronger.”

Sherry and Roger dialogued about the growth of their marriage that emerged through conflict and struggle within the marital relationship. The struggle allowed for opportunities of perseverance and growth. Sherry said,

We haven’t had the healthiest of marriages over 30 years. It was not emotionally healthy. That’s only been in the last five years, mainly, to me. And that was out of crisis and that was out of dealing with things.

And Roger replies with a rawness and a reality of how painful their marriage was and

how they have worked to get on the “same page”. Roger captures the idea that marriage is a dynamic relationship that grows through hard work. Roger said,

And there are times I didn't want to be married to you (Sherry) and there are times that you didn't want to be married to me, but we persevered through it. A lot of times it was because we weren't connected because we just weren't. Whether it was me being open emotionally to you or you being emotionally open to me we just needed to get on the same page. It's only in the last couple of years we've worked on getting on the same page.

Likewise, Amarie talks of the difficulty in her marriage with Rob as they learned to healthily separate from her mother in the early years of their relationship. She speaks of the criticism that Rob took during this separation process. This painful process emerged into an opportunity of marital growth in their love for each other. Amarie seasons her language with Christian spirituality emphasizing the importance of her and Rob's faith. Amarie said,

It was good in many ways, but it was painful because in our family, you never said no to the matriarch of the family. And you suffered a lot of consequences if you did. So, that was tough. I'm sure it was tough on him (Rob) especially because he was being criticized all the time and I didn't want to see those kinds of things. He is my husband. But in the end God blessed us and our love for each other has increased. And we are there for each other through thick and thin.

Summary of the Interviews

Two primary themes emerged within the interviews that are foundational to how Christian spirituality develops over time throughout the day-to-day lives of long-term healthy marriages. The first is the theme of *being and doing* within a marriage. The being and doing theme emerges within all three domains of the study as well as within all

three sub-themes. The being theme is described as a more transcendent place within the marital relationship where a couple experiences the communal unity of body and spirit with each other and God. This differs from the doing theme described by couples as a place where they share life experiences together that are action oriented. The second theme of *marriage and growing* emerged as an outcome to the interaction of being and doing within the sub-themes of the study. This interplay of sub-themes was across the longevity and health domains. The couples used language that was seasoned with Christian spirituality as they expressed their relationship as a dynamic one which grew from life experiences lived day-to-day that were often filled with tension, pain, and suffering. From a developmental perspective, the emergence of this primary theme allows for a couple in the early years to formulate a trajectory for their marital relationship.

Table 4.1

Summary of the number of times the being and doing Christian spirituality theme was referenced within the couple interviews

Marital Domains	Marital Processes	Number of Couples-Being	Number of Couples-Doing	Total Number of Couples	Total Number of Times Referenced
Longevity	LAE	4	4	6	9
	LBO	6	7	7	27
	LCO	9	5	10	19
Health	HAE	4	6	10	24
	HBO	3	9	10	27
	HCO	3	3	5	9
Christian Spirituality	SAE	6	5	8	17
	SBO	8	8	10	34
	SCO	7	3	8	13

Note. LAE = Longevity and Affectionate Expression, LBO = Longevity and Bonding, LCO = Longevity and Commitment, HAE = Health and Affectionate Expression, HBO = Health and Bonding, HCO = Health and Commitment, SAE = Christian Spirituality and Affectionate Expression, SBO = Christian Spirituality and Bonding, SCO = Christian Spirituality and Commitment

The above table will be referenced throughout the following sections on longevity, health and Christian spirituality. The findings in the table capture the essence of what role a couple's Christian spirituality played on longevity and health within the marriages interviewed. The table is representative of the findings from the phenomenological investigation which elicited responses of lived experiences of the researched couples. The *being and doing* primary theme is separated out and represented in the table. For example, four couples elicited a *being* response under the longevity

domain within the marital process factor of affectionate expression. Likewise, four couples elicited a *doing* response under the longevity domain within the marital process factor of affectionate expression. The table also displays a total number of six couples out of 10 interviewed that referenced the being and doing theme within their answers. Lastly, the table lists the total number of times couples referenced the being and doing nature within a particular domain of a specific marital process. For example, within the longevity domain of affectionate expression the couples referenced the being and doing nature nine times.

Explanation of the Organization of Findings

Within the findings of the study brings a need for proficient organization to best understand the results. Each section is separated by the three main domains of study within the experiment: longevity, health, and Christian spirituality. Within each domain the emerging marital processes of affectionate expression, bonding, and commitment will be discussed, as well as, how the emerging primary theme of *being and doing* interacted within each of these sub-themes. Also, the primary theme of *marriage and growing* will be explained as an emerging outcome factor of the interplay of being and doing within the marital processes. This foundational theme of marital growth does not interact with the marital processes as much as it emerges from their interaction with the being and doing theme. Finally, each section will include quotations from the participants which

bring support to the findings and convey the essence of the impact Christian spirituality has on longevity and health within long-term marriages.

Longevity

The interview questioning on longevity is an attempt to discover the factors that contribute to long-term marriages. Each couple shared their story through the answering of interview questions on longevity which contributed to the preceding findings. Through the couples narratives within the longevity domain factors emerged that described the essence of a successful couple relationship over time.

Affectionate Expression

Within the marital domain of longevity the sub-theme of affectionate expression emerged as a process factor. This process factor is a personification of marital health as it is an expression of communication by the couples through action, thought, and emotion within their day-to-day lives. The affectionate expression was demonstrated by the marital couples and referenced nine times in the longevity domain of the interview. An affectionate expression is described by the interviewer as a spouse's spoken word that is seasoned with language that is endearing of the other, and or/ deliberate acts of kindness towards one's spouse. The researcher first observed this type of voice with the couples during the second order question on longevity. The essence of their communication was

demonstrated behaviorally through acts of kindness and verbally by the deep fondness of their language used to describe their spouse.

Being and doing. In referencing the affectionate expression, the primary theme of *doing* was observed by four couples who used phrases such as, “to lift her up,” “what’s best for her,” “loving him as my soul mate and best friend,” “everything I want in a husband, I got,” “I think more of him than I do what I want,” and “I never want to do anything to deliberately hurt him.” Also, specific language was attached to affectionate expression which was seasoned with the *being* theme. Five Couples were observed using such words as, “love,” “admire,” “respect,” “trust,” “accepting,” and “selfless.” The primary theme of doing and being was intertwined all through the affectionate expression sub-theme within the longevity domain. The following are examples of affectionate expression:

Mathew communicates trust, respect and acceptance of his wife Robin as a contributor to longevity in their marriage. Their dialogue catches the essence of the significance in being and doing factors. He said,

I think trust, respect and accepting the individuality of Robin. I strive to be aware of her needs and meeting those needs in a number of ways. I look at her as a part of marriage. My job is to be protective of her, to lift her up and do what’s best for her and ultimately for our family.

Robin emphasizes her wanting to make her husband happy, she responded,

I think of Mathew first and what will make him happy? I’m not so sure I’ve always done that? Being there for him and loving him. He is my soul mate and my best friend. Being at home with him is like a sanctuary where I know every thing’s going to be okay, regardless of the situation...I think we are aware of the other’s feelings. We are kind. I mean, we just do the things or try to do things

that help the other. The thing is our marriage is not about me. I think more of him than what I want and what I need because I never want to be doing anything to deliberately hurt him at all.

Dean and Elizabeth comment on their own marriage and the forgetfulness of the things that once were important and now are less meaningful. Their difficulties provided opportunity for outcomes such as love and admiration. Dean said, "It's worth going through all the hardships. It's worth everything because you end up with a partner that you love and admire and all the not very meaningful things disappear." Elizabeth responds to her husband's thoughts and agrees how the "little flaws" are now forgotten, she said,

I think that is one of the hardest things for a marriage to accomplish to be able to know that you can agree with your spouse in a way that is congenial with both of you...This is admiration and respect. Everything I would want in a husband, I got. I have forgotten all the little flaws and the things that are not.

Arion and Wendy also communicate affection to the other. Wendy speaks words of admiration of Arion because of his support of her career which emphasizes the foundational doing theme. She said, "He has supported me. I mean, I have a career. I work and he has supported me the whole way through. He has said, 'go for it', as I have him." Arion responded that respect and Christianity are positive contributors to their marriage. He said,

Well, I think it's built upon respect. I mean, you respect each other and appreciate each other for what they bring to the marriage. I also think a common theme is just the Christian aspect of it. I mean, if we weren't Christians, we probably would not be married.

Mike and Nancy talk of the respect they have for each other which has contributed to the *being* theme within longevity of their marital relationship. Mike said,

Well, the respect goes deep there, David, because I've got to be respectful of her needs and can't be selfish with her time and my time. I can't be selfish and leave a dirty kitchen or dirty --- it's just sheer respect. I wouldn't want to be treated that way so why should I treat her that way? And sometimes I have to deny myself to leave things orderly and or have an agreed upon understanding of what's acceptable to her and what's not. This is what's made living together easier for us.

To which Nancy responded that respect is something that is mutually shared between her and Mike. She said,

Well I'm very fortunate that I don't have to work. I could work if I wanted to. So, I'm respectful of Mike that he goes off and works most days and I try to do my part in the raising of the kids. I try to be a part of things that are kingdom focused because I would be very irritated if I were the man and the wife was just off playing tennis every day or whatever. You've got to make your life count and it's even better when we're doing a ministry together. On that, we've found that we work very well together.

Bonding

The sub-theme of bonding emerged as a marital process factor within the domain of longevity. This process factor is a demonstration of marital health as it is an expression of communication by the couples through action, thought, and emotion within the day-to-day living. Bonding was referenced twenty-seven times within the questioning on marital longevity which is seen as significant within this study. Bonding was briefly touched on in the first and second order questions on long-term marriage, but appeared to strengthen as the couples answered the third order question on longevity. *Marital bonding* is

described as how couples experience togetherness emotionally, physically, and spiritually within the marriage relationship.

Being and doing. Christian spirituality continued to be weaved throughout the dialogue within the longevity domain. The significance of *being* theme was observed by six couples as impacting one's relationship with God and each other. Couples used phrases such as, "we really put the Lord in the middle, at the center of our home," "we just let God take care of everything," "It's more than just friendship. It's a spiritual bond," and "the Lord really blessed us and allowed us to get through things in His strength." Similarly, seven couples described the "doing" aspect of their bonding together such as, "enjoy a lot of the same things," "share common interests," "working alongside," "doing stuff," and "just the two of us." Couples described some of the activities they enjoyed doing together as, "hiking," "golf," "woodworking," "bicycling," and "going out to dinner." The doing aspects also took on the form of Christian spirituality as couples dialogued about such things as, prayer, going out with Christian friends, doing Bible studies together, and doing ministry together. Bill described how he shares common interests with his wife Carol which creates togetherness and has contributed to the longevity in their marriage. Bill reported:

We enjoy a lot of the same things. We enjoy the outdoors, hiking, and now we've both gotten into golf. We enjoy playing with each other and with other couples. That is a delight. So, just some common interests I think have contributed to our marriage.

Similarly, Amarie explained how she sought out common interests that she could do with her husband Rob. These common interests promoted togetherness in their marriage. In the following quote she talked about how woodworking and bicycling allowed for her to spend time with her husband which put emphasis on the *doing* theme.

Amarie stated:

I thought I needed to find out what are some things I can sit and talk with Rob about. So, I looked at things that he enjoyed and woodworking was one of them. So, I started woodworking alongside of him and we would be doing things and talking about things that were not just children or home related. And we had good times. We got the kids and the girls involved with us and we had a major project every winter. We made a grandfather clock and a three story Victorian doll house...And then we did bicycling. We did a lot of touring bicycling and that got us out exercising, as well as, being together doing something.

The bonding sub-theme is also reflected in the following quote from Amarie. The difference is that Amarie moves from the idea of *doing* togetherness with her husband to *being* together with him. This reference emphasizes the being theme as Amarie talks about inviting God to change their angry hearts towards each other. Amarie said,

One thing that stands out to me when I talk with young couples today is they say, "Well, do you have any advice?" I say, "One thing is that if you have something that you cannot agree on or that you're really angry about, both of you get on your knees and take it before the Lord because He's going to change your heart. But if you keep taking the anger out on the other it will separate you." Just to pray about it when it doesn't look like there's any way to resolve it has really helped us.

Commitment

The sub-theme of commitment emerged as a marital process factor within the domain of longevity. This process factor is a demonstration of marital health as it is an

expression of communication by the couples through action, thought, and emotion within their day-to-day living. The commitment process factor also personifies a couple's Christian spirituality. This is expressed in their day-to-day lives by personal dedication and constraint to do anything that would tarnish the reflection of this marital institution that is God ordained. Commitment was referenced nineteen times within the questioning on marital longevity which is seen as significant within this study.

Being and doing. The sub-theme of commitment was seen within the longevity domain of the interview. Within the longevity domain of the interview commitment is discussed as being committed to each other but also, being committed to the marriage itself. The participants referenced commitment in marriage as an institution set apart from the individual self and used phrases that can be identified with the *being* theme of the study. A total of nine couples used language capturing the essence of commitment as something set apart from self or each other, couples used phrases such as, "the commitment we made to marry was it," "marriage is covenant," "God ordained, and serious business," and "commitment to doing and being what Christ wanted us to do." The spiritual lens with which the participants see the process factor of commitment is one in which couples identify it as something bigger than just the two being married to each other. It is this type of Christian spiritual language that communicates the being theme within a committed relationship. One couple described commitment in the phrase, "the bond that tied." The *doing* theme was referenced by five couples within the commitment sub-theme and is described as being committed to some action such as, being committed

to not being angry at each other; being committed not to divorce; being and committed to work together.

Clay captured the essence of longevity in his marriage by expressing his thoughts on being committed. He expressed commitment from the *doing* theme where he and his wife are committed to working it out. He communicates being committed to the marriage which in turn creates an environment of working through conflicts, Clay shared:

I don't think either one of us got married with the idea that it would be short or that there was a way out. Do you know? Like, if the marriage doesn't work out then I'll get divorced. So, I think the commitment we made to marry was it. You have to work it out. If there's a knock down drag out fight you just go through it until you get a resolution.

Clay's wife Ann shared that being committed to the marriage was a Covenant they made with not only each other, but God. So, they see marriage as something separate from themselves which emphasizes the nature of their marriage. Ann said, "Well, marriage is a covenant. It's a commitment we made. And because we are married, then under God's guidelines we live our married life."

Similarly, Rachel shared the essence of being committed to Lance. She explains how her relational love for Lance does not equal her relational love for God. Rachel is committed to the Lord and in essence that relationship is bigger than her marital relationship with Lance. The following description depicts the being theme of the marital process factor, commitment. Rachel being committed to the Lord transcends the conflict she may have with Lance and aids in grounding her. Rachel said,

Well, I was of the opinion when I was dating in high school and as I went to Baylor that the person I met should love the Lord more than he loved me, and I

think Lance had that same idea. And I think when you hit these little bumps like when he was working so hard-- I would have to ask myself, what's the center of this situation?

The *doing* theme is described by Robin in her relationship with Mathew as she explains being committed to the action of accepting her and her spouse's imperfections.

Robin said,

I think we've grown an awful lot together because in the beginning you're not as mature as you are now and you go through a lot of things where you think the person that you married is almost perfect. But then you realize they're not. So, you learn to love them for who they are and you also see some defects in your own self that you need to accept and correct.

Likewise, Roger gave the essence of the doing theme within the sub-theme commitment. He explains how he observed his parent's divorce which influenced his commitment to not divorcing. So, in essence his parent's divorce was an incentive to be committed to not divorce. He said,

Yeah, that's what I was going to say. My folks are divorced and maybe that is a negative example. When they divorced I was 18 and basically an adult so I didn't quite feel the loss that I might have if I'd been younger. At the same time, when I was 28 and getting married, I saw my mom and dad both remarried. Maybe in some regards the situation was better, but there wasn't a lot to be gained, basically, by a divorce.

Marriage and Growing

The following excerpts are from the interview questioning on longevity which shows the emergence of the theme *marriage and growing*. The couples seasoned this theme with language that was influenced by their day- to- day Christian spirituality. This primary theme developed as the *being and doing* nature of affectionate expression,

bonding, and commitment interacted within the study. *Marriage and growing* was referenced a total of 12 times within the longevity domain. The couples described their marriages as dynamic and having changed through the life course of the relationship.

Bill and Carol provided a look at the maturity of their marriage from infatuation to something much deeper. Bill said,

Well, from infatuation in the beginning, to all the excitement of being with each other, to just a much deeper kind of appreciation and a realization of a depth of love that I have for Carol. It (love) was there at the beginning but you just understand it more completely now.

Carol responded that coming to an understanding of their differences has contributed to the emergence of trust which has allowed for their marriage to reach depths not found in the beginning. The idea of trust builds on the significance in being factor previously identified. She stated, “I agree. It’s definitely become a really deep, deep friendship of trust and understanding and allowances for our differences and seeing things that early on were much harder to see.”

For many couples the development and growth of their marriage came from difficulties they shared in the beginning and continued at points in the life cycle of the marriage. Lance and Rachel shared this description of growing through tension in the marriage through Lance’s military service as a Chaplain in the Vietnam War. But through the struggle the marriage emerged into something bigger than romance and friendship. Lance describes his marriage as blossoming into something spiritual. Lance stated:

I think we had moments like most people where there were strains on the marriage. We were talking about it the other day. I worked very hard and long

hours. I was gone to Vietnam a year, and those things were strains on our marriage. I think the major conflict we had was Rachel would tire of that sometimes and say, “Hey, Jack, you’ve been gone too much and you need to get home.” And I was overworked and that was true... I often say to kids that are getting married, you ought to love your partner the least today that you’ll ever love them because your marriage ought to grow. You ought to love them more 50 years from now than you do today. And I believe I certainly do and I think Rachel does. Our love has really matured and grown and it’s more than just romance. It’s more than just friendship. It’s a spiritual bond, as well as all those things, too.

Mike and Diana also related to the tension of marriage and growth through enduring financial struggles and the raising of children. Mike said,

I think the early years of our marriage were as passionate as young people tend to be. But also volatile as the stress of finances and the stress of raising children, made it tough. But we just never really accepted or thought about anything other than being married... So, I think as we’ve gotten more mature and our children have grown we’re more happy. We have a great marriage and a lot of great times together, but we’ve had some really tough times, also.

Diana reiterated Mike’s comments of how endurance through struggle leads to strength within the marital relationship. She says:

I agree with most of what he said. We really had a lot of maturing to do financially to just make a living. But I think we feel real strongly that the struggles made us stronger people, you know. And we taught all of our children how to be workers and all of that. So, there were a lot of benefits that came out of the struggle.

Mike and Nancy spoke of the growth of their marriage as seasons and the raising of the children was a difficult season, because of their different backgrounds growing up. But now as “empty nesters” they look at the growth they have made with a sense of hope as they have entered into a new season. Mike stated,

So now we’ve gone through the season of raising kids, and that was difficult. As

loving as she makes it sound, it's hard because we come from different backgrounds and different training issues. We had a season of learning and pulling resources together to learn how to do it. We can't do it our way necessarily. We needed to know the correct way. We've progressed into empty nesters now and we're in a new season. So, we look at life and marriage in different seasons.

Nancy clarified Mike's statement about the raising of children being a difficult season where she and Mike pulled together. Nancy reaffirmed Mike's thoughts that raising children was tense. She said, "So, when I said earlier about having a baby made us a family, it's also the thing (the disciplining of children) that has caused the biggest angst and that's been hard."

Summary within the Longevity Domain

The longevity domain within the couples interviewed was seen as an outcome variable to marital growth. The sub-themes of affectionate expression, bonding and commitment were seen as significant catalysts to the growth of marriage as couples spoke their narratives. The Christian foundational theme of *being and doing* was representative of the impact it played throughout the interview questioning on longevity. Out of 10 couples interviewed six couple's referenced affectionate expression, seven couple's referenced bonding, and 10 couple's referenced commitment within the context of factors contributing to longevity of marriage. From the findings it appears that the process factors of *bonding* and *commitment* emerge as significant contributors to marital longevity within Christian marriages. Within the interview questioning on longevity *bonding* was referenced 27 times and *commitment* 19 times.

Health

The interview questioning on health is an attempt to discover the factors that contribute to marital health within couples. Each couple shared their story through the answering of interview questions on health which contributed to the preceding findings. Through the couples narratives the essence of marital health was captured as couples told stories of their learning to navigate through day-to-day life circumstances.

Affectionate Expression

Within the marital domain of health the sub-theme affectionate expression emerged as a process factor within the couples interviewed. This process factor is a personification of marital health as it is an expression of communication by the couples through action, thought, and emotion within their day-to-day lives. Couples demonstrated affectionate expression as it was referenced 24 times in the health domain of the interview which is seen as significant within this study.

Being and doing. Within the second order question on health many of the couples flavored their language toward their spouse with deep admiration and respect. Again, within the affectionate expression sub-theme the presence of the foundational theme *being* permeated the dialogue of four couples. The significance of *being* within the outcome of health domain is expressed by the couple's words which are less action oriented and indicate more a sharing of the other's personhood. These more transcendent concepts are seen in words such as, "loving," "kind," "wonderful," "good," "respectful,"

“committed,” “intelligent,” “independent,” and “smart.” Likewise, the *doing* theme permeated the processes of affectionate expression within six couples. In answering the interview questions within the health domain the couples expressed words of action in their fond communication towards the other. The couples used phrases such as, “wonderful father and husband,” “he will help anyone do anything,” “what you see is what you get,” “strong Christian woman,” “very strong person,” and “he is smart.” The following are examples from the interviews that provide the essence of the affectionate voice within the health domain of the study infused with the *being and doing* theme.

Robin stated:

Well, he’s a wonderful father and husband. With Mathew it’s God first and then his family next. He is good. He is very kind to everybody. He will help anyone do anything he possibly can. Basically, what you see is what you get. He is trustworthy. He is loving. He is kind. He is the provider. He is a wonderful father. Just a good, kind person. He is respectful I think to everyone. He is patient.

Mathew responded, “I think character of the individual. When I look at Robin I see the integrity of a very strong Christian woman. She is a wonderful mother that is very committed and a strong person.”

Arion and Wendy also gave the same type of affectionate expression towards the other in their interview. Arion used many descriptive words to describe his love and deep respect for her. His chosen words permeate the *being and doing* theme that is foundational to the health of the relationship. Arion stated:

I think the love for your spouse is right at the top there. You have to have that.

And I keep going back to the respect thing. I mean that's one of the things that attracted me to Wendy back many years ago was that I respected her intelligence, her independence, her work ethic, her looks, her cooking, and all that good stuff.

Wendy's response was a little more humorous but still affectionate towards her husband.

Wendy responded,

My dad asked a few years ago, "What in the world was it that attracted me to Arion?" I said, "Because he is smart, he is a very smart person". I said, "I figured if you hang with people that are smarter than you are or run with them, you're going to be smart". Plus, there was not a whole lot that he can't do. You know, most guys can't do a lot of handy dandy things.

The significance in *being* theme is often times more hidden than the *doing* theme as they are more transcendent and expressed in words such as, love, admiration, and or respect towards the spouse. Elizabeth's affectionate expression to Dean is seen in the following excerpt from their interview. Elizabeth said, "There is admiration and respect. Everything I would want in a husband, I got. I have forgotten all the little flaws and the things that are not." Dean interjected, "Yeah, it wasn't easy sometimes."

Similarly, Rachel spoke the same type of affectionate words towards Lance, who is a retired pastor. Rachel stated:

I think it helps to have a husband that you're proud of. I know a lot of preacher's wives that are married to guys that their not proud of. I was always proud of what he (Lance) did. And I think that if you are married to somebody that you're really proud of then you teach your children to be proud of what Dad does and they end up really respecting him. I think that is a really big deal, and a big asset to have in marriage. To respect and have pride for the person you're married to. And I do.

Lance agreed with Rachel's statement and he reciprocates the admiration back to his wife. Lance replied,

And that's acted out in our kids. Our kids are extremely respectful. As we grow older, that has become really evident. They are the kind of kids that just come in and take over and do what you need done which is a great asset. And I believe that the mother sets the stage for that kind of thing. I believe it happens when they're young and I believe she either puts down on her husband making him the villain or she lifts him up and she is proud of him and they learn to be. And Rachel was wonderful in doing that. I think our marriage has been one where we had a common call and God called her just like He called me and He has blessed her ministry. I woke up to the fact that she had a great ministry sometime in the middle of our marriage and since that time, I've really tried to help her be a minister.

Bonding

The sub-theme of bonding continued as a marital process factor within the domain of health. This process factor is a demonstration of marital health as it is an expression of communication by the couples through action, thought, and emotion within the day-to-day living. Bonding was referenced 27 times by couples within the questioning on marital health and is seen as significant within this study.

Being and doing. In referencing bonding the couples used descriptive words emphasizing the *doing* theme. The essence of *doing* within the bonding theme was captured by nine couples in words such as, "serving together," "having fun together," "good friends to share part of our lives with," "service together at church," and "working together in conflict." In the health domain couples expressed the *being* part of togetherness emerging within the marital relationship. The *being* theme is demonstrated by three couples in phrases such as, "God has opened the windows of heaven and blessed us," "a common purpose...of doing what God wants you to do," and "I think the Lord

really blessed us and allowed us to get through things in His strength.” The above phrases showed the influence of Christian spirituality within the health domain as couples move from being together to sharing in spirit together. The experience of this type of spiritual bonding within the marital relationship allows for unity and the outcome of health.

Bill gives the essence of bonding and the significance of *doing* as he describes his relationship with Carol. His description includes doing life together in service and in relationship with friends. He said,

If you live to a healthy age like we have, there are a lot of years left over on the other side in which we enjoy serving together. We enjoy having fun together. We’ve had really good friends to share this part of our lives and take trips together.

Bill’s wife Carol responded, “And it’s really been a fun time in our lives when you think about it. A really rewarding time that God has blessed us with in our lives.” Bill also emphasizes being blessed by God in his life together with Carol enjoying friends and serving. The *being and doing* theme within the following excerpt emphasizes bonding as a process factor in Bill and Carol’s marriage. Bill stated:

We have experienced such a depth of joy in relationships and we just feel God has opened the windows of heaven to bless us. And I say that and it really manifests itself in relationships. We’ve been honored in such a wonderful way by friends in the places we’ve served. It gives us a joy in life that is hard to put a handle on exactly how but it’s encouraging and energizing for us at this stage of our lives.

Similarly, Rob and Amarie described bonding through church service and the action of doing. Rob aided couples in financial counseling and Amarie joined him in this

service. Rob said:

We talked about the factor of our involvement together in the Lord's work which I think is a very steady thing. You've got a common purpose and you feel that you're doing what God wants you to do and there is a unity that comes with that (common purpose). So, I think it gives you great health in your situation and a nice combination. So, I just think it's those kinds of things that contributed to the health all the way on various levels.

Amarie responded, "And it made me feel important, too. It wasn't Rob just does this, you know."

Mike and Diana described bonding as a part of the doing aspects of marital health. In their marriage Mike and Diana described taking action to work through disagreements that emerged from their relationship with each other. In the interview Mike indicated that a trusting friendship was something that has developed from a hurtful past of broken trust. Diana stated, "I think you've got to be good friends. You've got to be able to really count on each other. I mean, I can count on Mike." Mike responded,

Yeah, and that's a challenge for her because there were some times in the past when I betrayed her trust. Stuff will happen now that on the surface would be trivial, but it will bring back memories of a betrayal of her trust in me. And so, then that causes conflict and we have to work through it. I think we do a pretty good job of working through it now, but that's some of the scars that have been left over from some tough years.

Bill expressed the importance of *being* in relationship with God as the foundation of health within his marital relationship with Carol. Bill said, "Well, I would say that the foundation and the root in the beginning was us individually coming to a personal relationship with the Lord and that provided the cement to begin to see health grow."

Commitment

The sub-theme of commitment continued as a marital process factor within the domain of health. This process factor is a demonstration of marital health as it is an expression of communication by the couples through action, thought, and emotion but was not seen as significant compared to the longevity domain of the study. Commitment was referenced nine times by couples within the questioning on marital health.

Being and doing. The sub-theme of commitment was seen within the health domain of the interview. The expression within the health domain was not as pronounced as the earlier longevity domain, but commitment was still referenced by five couples. In referencing commitment within the *being* theme of the health domain three couples used descriptive language referencing God as a part of their marital commitment to one another. Couples used phrases such as, “To me that’s the glue,” “you know that God has walked beside you and you have stuck together through thick and thin,” and “our church was basically our source of focus and common commitment, which was good.” Likewise, the *doing* theme of commitment within the health domain is referenced by three couples using descriptive language by one or the other spouse. Within the *doing* theme spouses expressed their commitment to actions which contributed to the overall wellness of the marriage, such actions as, not deliberately saying hurtful things, deliberately working on the marriage, praying, and going to church.

The following is an excerpt from Elizabeth and Dean which showed their commitment to the Lord emphasizing the *being* theme of the marital relationship, but also

pointing out the *doing* theme that is present in Elizabeth's statement of needing to learn how to get fulfilled by the other. Elizabeth said,

Well, I think the strongest thing is having the Lord in your marriage as a member. To me, that's the glue... There are so many young people ready to divorce within the first year of marriage and you are just getting to know each other! They want to get out of it right quick because they're not happy, they're not fulfilled. Well, you have to learn to get fulfilled with your partner.

Likewise, the following excerpt by Amarie gives the essence of the *being* theme within the commitment sub-theme. Her relationship with Rob is intertwined in her relationship with God and she feels valued because of it. Amarie said,

Well, I think this side of heaven there will still be some unhealthy things. Disagreements that seem like nothing's going to change because one or the both of you won't change. But it comes down to asking God to increase your love for each other. And to be there for each other through whatever has been. God has walked beside us and helped us stick together through thick and thin. I remember one time I was to have surgery and I told Rob that the marriage vows say through sickness and in health and I said, "You've got me in sickness and I've got you in health." He has always been there for me and encouraged me and helped me through a lot. And that has meant a lot.

Lastly, Diana spoke of the *doing* theme within commitment from a Christian spirituality perspective. Diana said,

Well, I think we try to do a daily devotion together, pray together. We talk about the Lord. We see His hand in our life and others and that's very important, but the factors that contribute, I think again, just our determination. I strongly believe that love is commitment to a large degree and it shows itself in that commitment to the other person.

The *doing* theme is described within a spiritual context of action as Diana expressed doing devotions and praying together as a catalyst to their commitment to each other.

Marriage and Growing

Within the health domain couples indicated their marriage was not always healthy, but something that grew and emerged from tension, conflict and pain. Out of the thirty-two references to *marriage and growing* during the interview process thirteen of those were made during the couple's responses on the health of their marital relationship. The phrases that were used to describe growth and assigned to health were such things as, "grown emotionally," "emotional maturity," "accepting differences," "seeing each other as complimentary," and "wounds being healed."

Rachel described the health of their marriage as she speaks of difficulty of Lance's recent diagnosis of cancer. As Rachel described health she seasons her response with words of Christian Spirituality. Her language was descriptive of how she absorbed Lance's pain and identified with his suffering. This identification with another's hurt and pain can be seen as contributing to the health and growth of the marriage. Rachel stated:

I think we're very healthy. We are living on borrowed time now because Lance's cancer was diagnosed five and a half years ago. It was a real shock to the both of us. But to me it was like a kick in the stomach. But God had His hand in it the whole time. You ask Him to give you strength, and He has--- And we've grown through it all. Our children have rallied to this and it's been another miracle that God's given him an extended life. And we've had a chance to reflect on our years together and I wouldn't choose anybody else.

Lance replied to Rachel with some humor that he thought their 50 year marriage was going to survive and then he explained the growth of their marriage through emotional maturity and a love bond. Lance's words were affectionate towards his wife as he spoke.

Lance stated,

I think we're going to make it. I think the health of our marriage has grown through the years and I think a lot of people live their whole life and they're emotionally immature. They just don't ever grow up emotionally. I think we understand each other. I think we're sensitive to each other. Rachel is the kind of person that does things that I need done without my asking or thinking about it and hopefully, I do those kinds of things for her as well. And that's kind of an emotional maturity that develops. I think that our love has grown. You don't walk through old age unless you have a real love bond.

Lance ends his statement reflecting on his own parent's marriage. He exhorts that if a couple does not grow and mature through the marriage in the end they will be unhappy.

Lance stated:

A lot of people get old and things change in their life and they just fuss and fight all the time. They live together. My mom and dad didn't have a happy marriage at all and the older they got, the more unhappy it got. And I watched them do that. And when you get old and the inhibitions that you'd had before kind of disappear and you are who you are.

Similarly, Bill reflected on the health of his marriage to Carol as growing. Bill projects health as accepting the differences between him and his wife Carol. As Bill saw his differences with Carol as less nuisances and more complimentary the marriage emerged healthily. His comment is imprinted with his own Christian spirituality. Bill stated:

And so, it has grown over the years and it's enabled us. Carol said earlier that (heath) is working through and accepting the differences that we have. And I see them (differences) as complimentary, and as God's gifts to me. Some of those things early on in our marriage were irritants, but now I see them as gifts from God to help tune my health.

Sherry reflected on her relationship growth with Roger and emphasized the work that went into health by healing the wounds from their marriage. Sherry spoke with a

sense of hope for the future as she and Roger have gotten closer through the process of growth. She said,

And plus, the health thing is because we've worked through it. I mean we're healthy just from the strength we have received from the wounds (of the past) being healed. You know, woundedness and healing, woundedness and healing, woundedness and healing. And I feel like it's at a good stage right now because I feel like we've made it this far. I mean, not even made it, but we've gotten closer with things. There's a sense of--- what can happen now? He hadn't left me yet. So, I don't think he will.

Amarie described the health of her marriage with Rob as growing. In doing so she emphasized her Christian spirituality and the importance of growing separately, being part of a Christian community, and having other friends apart from her relationship with her husband. Amarie stated:

Also, as far as the spiritual health of our marriage, there have been times when I have seen us grow but not at the same time. I was very new to my relationship with Christ in the beginning and Rob already had a very solid grounding. So when I was really hungry for the Word and for teaching, it seemed like I grew by leaps and bounds and Rob did not. And then at other times Rob would grow and I would not. It was like we were growing, but not at the same time.

Summary within the Health Domain

The health domain showed the process factors of affectionate expression and bonding as significant to contributing to marital wellness and growth. As couples told their stories affectionate expression and bonding emerged as significant contributors whereas commitment was not as significant as within the longevity domain. The Christian foundational theme of *being and doing* was significant as it continued to emerge within the interview questions on health. Specifically, the action oriented theme

of *doing* is captured by descriptions of couples taking positions of togetherness within their marriage. This position promotes health as couples actively participate in the action oriented aspects of the marital relationship. Common positions of togetherness that couples participate in are such things as: communication, child-rearing, recreational activities, and friendships. Sometimes these activities emphasize Christian religious practices such as: going to church, reading the Bible, prayer, and serving in ministry. Also, a position of being one together in the marital relationship emerges as couples move from the doing aspects of togetherness to the being aspects of togetherness. This position of being one together is deeper and more spiritual in form than the doing aspects of couple togetherness. This more transcendent position permeates throughout the health domain of this study and emphasizes the Christian spiritual nature of the participants. This position of being one together is captured in phrases that are Christ centric in nature and emphasize the relationship the couple has with God and each other. This Christian spirituality that is shared within the marital relationship is foundational in promoting communal unity and or bonding within the marriage between husband, wife, and God. All in all, 10 out of 10 couples interviewed referenced the sub-theme affectionate expression, 10 couples referenced bonding, and five couples referenced commitment as a contributing marital process within the health domain of the research questioning. These findings reflect *bonding* and *affectionate expression* as significant contributors to marital health within Christian marriages. Within the interview questioning on health *bonding* was referenced 27 times and *affectionate expression* 24 times.

Christian Spirituality

The interview questioning on Christian spirituality is an attempt to discover the impact a couple's faith has on marital health and longevity. Each couple shared their story through the answering of interview questions on Christian spirituality. Through the couples narratives within the Christian spirituality domain factors emerged that described the essence of a relationship impacted by a couple's faith.

Affectionate Expression

Christian spirituality was a foundational construct within the study. The sub-theme of affectionate expression emerged as a process factor within the questioning on Christian spirituality. The marital couples referenced affectionate expression seventeen times in the Christian spirituality domain of the interview.

Being and doing. Within the affectionate expression sub-theme the presence of the foundational theme *being* permeates the dialogue of six couples. The significance of *being* is foundational to the domain Christian spirituality and is expressed by words that capture the unity of the spirit in their relationship. The couples interviewed used phrases such as, "God has blessed me personally and in my relationship," "We look at and process life differently and God helped me," "I feel God's love for me through Roger." The significance of *doing* theme is captured by five couples using words that describe actions within the interview. These actions within the Christian spirituality domain are religious in nature and cover aspects such as: choosing non-hurtful words in

communication; forgiveness; and personal change for the good of the relationship.

The following are examples of the foundational *being* theme found within the marital process of affectionate expression. Carol spoke of the being aspect within the Christian spirituality domain as she conveyed the importance of accepting her husband Bill's different personality. She described how God helped her to begin to accept Bill and his differences. Carol said,

One of the things I felt very strongly God taught me at some point in our lives was that I needed to appreciate the differences that we have in our personality. We look at and process life differently and God helped me to see this as a positive and not as something to always change in Bill. Bill is a very feeling person. We are opposites as far as men and women.

Likewise, Sherry explained how Roger demonstrates the significance of *being* within their shared Christian spirituality. Her words are an example of the deep sharing that goes on within one's being with each other and God. Sherry said, "I feel God's love for me through Roger. His unconditional love! I feel totally accepted by him and have always trusted him that he wouldn't let me down."

The *doing* aspect of Christian spirituality was demonstrated within couples affectionate expression by various processes. Forgiveness is an example of a doing affectionate expression demonstrated by married couples and expressed by Elizabeth towards her husband Dean. Elizabeth said, "We knew that if we had a disagreement that it needed to be solved. We have this thing that we do and no matter who's at fault, we both say we're sorry."

Similarly, one couple expressed the need to choose their words wisely in their

communication towards one another. The spoken word to one's spouse is an example of the thematic significance in *doing* aspect of affectionate expression within the marital relationship. Robin said,

I would say words hurt. Be careful of what you say. Do not speak in anger. Walk away. Be patient and kind. I think so many times people speak out in anger and they don't realize that they can be very hurtful. Fortunately, we didn't have that problem, but I see it so often. If I had to tell a young person one thing they definitely need to have the Lord and Holy Spirit in their life and go to Him and ask Him and talk to Him and listen. The main thing is to listen to what He has to say. But respect and love the boy or the girl, the man or the woman, basically, as God has loved you because I just think that the tongue is a cruel thing that I've seen in a lot of younger marriages. It is very, very cruel.

Lastly, Sherry expressed how Roger actively has sought to change himself which is a demonstration of affectionate expression within the primary theme of *doing*. Sherry said, "Well, he works on himself. He allows himself to change. Better than I do. I mean, he'll see something or if it's brought to his attention that it needs to change and he does."

Bonding

The sub-theme of bonding continued as a marital process factor within the domain of Christian spirituality. Bonding was referenced 34 times by couples within the interview questions on Christian spirituality. Bonding was seen as significant in the Christian spirituality domain.

Being and doing. Within Christian spirituality domain the couples described the *being and doing* foundational theme that impacted marital growth. The *doing* theme

within this domain heavily emphasized the spiritual nature of the relationship, and often emphasized the Christian principle of growth through suffering. Eight couples spoke of various heartaches such as, the raising of children, miscarriages, difficult finances, wayward children, divorced children, death of parents, the death of grandchildren and other loved ones. Also, the *doing* theme within the Christian spirituality domain yielded such things as, church friendships, prayer, service in church, and studying the Bible. Many of the couple's narratives allowed for the expression of the being theme within the marital relationship. The being theme is cited by eight couples from a position of sharing in various action oriented life experiences such as, raising children, going to church, and reading their Bible. The sharing in this *doing* position allows for the expression of the being theme to emerge. In essence, a couple's sharing of life together allows for the potential of a deeper unity of the spirit as the two become one within the marital relationship. The oneness position flourishes out of a committed relationship with God and with each other and is a shared experience within some Christian couples.

The following dialogues captured the essence of oneness that is experienced within the being theme of the process factor bonding. Rachel described this being one with each other and God at the very heart of her relationship with Lance. She said,

Well, essence to me means what it boils down to. It's the very heart of it. And the essence of spirituality in our marriage is that for us, it is maintaining an individual relationship with God every day, uniquely, that is yours and not depending on Lance to be my spiritual essence. I really value my unique relationship with God and he does, too. You have to maintain your own spiritual relationship with God. And then, when each of you has that, it's acted out.

Lance responded to his wife and said,

I think that Christ has been the center of everything that we've done in marriage. I think we evaluate who we are and where we're going and what we do by what we believe God wants. He hasn't been secondary. He hasn't been a peripheral kind of experience.

The centrality of Christ and God as expressed by Lance and Rachel was also seen in Clay and Ann's marital relationship which resonated being one as a couple committed to God first and then expressed within the marital relationship. Ann said,

That was always in my bottom line, He, God, is at the center. He's the whole focus of what and why we do what we do. Why we raised our children; why we are financially sound; why I take my next breath. I can't say when God wasn't involved. There are times that God showed up in mighty ways and got us through some things. But it wasn't like it was a God thing and He went away. He was here (in the marriage) every day.

Nancy and Mike continued this same being theme expressed in *being* one with each other and God which emphasized a covenant relationship. As God and Christ become central their marriage enjoyed a unity that is spiritual in nature, which promoted oneness bond. Mike said,

I mean, it's a commitment. We've been to a lot of weddings recently and you hear the vows over and over again. I listen to the words, and it's come together as one. It's God ordained and it's serious business. It's a serious covenant, so we're committed. And I take it serious [*sic*].

Nancy follows up to Mike's thoughts and described God at the core of her *being* and her example of love which flowed in expression towards her husband Mike. Nancy said,

Well, I can't help but throw in the spiritual aspect of that because it's what it is. We both are believers and that's the core of who we are. And if you're a believer, you know that God is love and He is our great example of love. And Mike and I truly love each other.

Lastly, Arion captured the theme of being and the process factor of bonding attributed to the marriage as he expressed how his relationship with Christ is reflected in his relationship to Wendy. Arion's expression emphasized the transcendent nature of being one with God and each other as he used the word *sacred* to describe the marital relationship. Arion says,

I think the spiritual essence of it (the marriage) is seen in as you grow in Christ, you are to emulate Jesus. And if you do that, then you are going to reflect that in how you treat your spouse and treat your marriage. It's based upon that. It's a sacred thing.

Commitment

The sub-theme of commitment continued as a marital process factor within the domain of Christian spirituality. Commitment was referenced thirteen times by couples within the questioning on marital health.

Being and doing. The sub-theme of commitment was seen within the Christian spirituality domain of the interview. The expression within the Christian spirituality domain was similar to that of the health domain in the total number of references, but commitment was expressed by eight out of 10 couples compared to five within the health domain. Seven couples referenced commitment within the *being* theme of the spirituality domain using descriptive language in referencing God as a part of their marriage to one another. Couples used phrases such as, "center of everything that we've done in marriage," "abiding trust and faith that God loves us and He's for us," "it's a unity of spirit that binds us together," "We're both committed to each other, but we're also both

committed to the Lord and there's nothing any more important," and "having Christ as the focus of our marriage was the focus of our marriage." Likewise, the doing theme of commitment within Christian spirituality is referenced by three couples. Spouses communicated active expressions of Christian spirituality which were perceived as catalyst to marital commitment. The contributors to commitment expressed were such things as, prayer, scripture reading, and growing up in Christian families.

The following is an excerpt from Lance and Rachel which showed their commitment to Christ as the center. This expression captured the essence of the *being* theme of their marital relationship. Lance said,

I think that Christ has been the center of everything that we've done in marriage. I think we evaluate who we are and where we're going and what we do by what we believe God wants and I think He hasn't been secondary. He hasn't been a peripheral kind of experience... When you put Christ first in everything, time, money, energy, He honors that and blesses that and your family becomes stronger and better and that seems counterintuitive, but I really believe that that's the way it works, and that's what we've done.

Similarly, Bill and Carol's expression of the *being* theme was demonstrated within the Christian spirituality domain of the interview. The couple used Christian expressive language regarding the spirit as that which "binds them together." Carol said, "I think it's an abiding trust and faith that God loves us and He's for us." Bill replied, "And it's a unity of spirit that binds us together and how you define that... the Bible sort of speaks of it as a mystery, you know, but it manifests itself in a depth of love and trust that is, it's real."

Mike expressed the *being* theme as he and Diana dialogued on Christian

spirituality within their marital relationship. He expressed their commitment to each other, but also of their supreme commitment to God first. Mike said,

I think we both are totally committed to the Lord. We totally believe basically the truths of Christianity and Jesus Christ. We don't always walk the talk like we should, but we always believe it and we always come back to it pretty quickly if we wander off course. I think that's probably the foundation. We're both committed to each other, but we're also both committed to the Lord and there's nothing any more important than that in our marriage.

The *doing* theme of commitment within the Christian spirituality domain was communicated through expressions of Christianity within the marriage. Roger captured the importance of being committed to reading scripture which grounds him in his marital relationship with Sherry. Roger said,

I guess what I would say is when difficult times came (in my marriage) I had a sense that I knew what the right thing to do was because of my spiritual understanding. And that has been how I think I experienced God in my life, and God in my marriage. It comes not through voices but through reading of the Scripture.

Marriage and Growing

Within the Christian spirituality domain couples indicated that their marriage grew from enduring life difficulties. Out of the 32 references to *marriage and growing* during the interview process seven of those were made during the couple's responses within the Christian spirituality domain of the interview. Similar to the other domains the couples referenced *growing* in their marital relationship through such struggles as, the raising of children, difficulties with the health of a child, working through issues of forgiveness, and appreciating differences in personalities, and trials.

Mathew explained how he and Robin endured years of struggle of not being able to have children due to a rare blood disorder within her family. This was a painful struggle for them which resulted in being able to eventually have children. The language Mathew used gave God the credit and refers to the struggle and the end result as a “blessing.” Mathew said,

The blessing of children after 10 years and the knowing of Robin’s family’s blood problem. We tried to have children and were unable to have children. We had miscarriages, and so seeing now our children grown and the blessing of that, we give thanks to Him.

Mathew’s response triggered Robin to talk about the difficulties in seeing her mother struggle with ovarian cancer and the growth that emerged within her which eventually blessed the marriage. Robin said,

God was there when my mother had ovarian cancer and then she had an aneurism in her head and I can remember so vividly sitting in the hospital and I was praying and could feel this stillness come over me...He’s helped us with the kids. He’s helped us at times when we were much younger with financial situations. He’s given me a lot more patience which I did not have very much of in my earlier years. I am a much calmer, more relaxed, peaceful person as I’ve grown. I see the blessings through my children. They’re very considerate of us, and I see God’s hand in all of that as He helped us to be able to work out situations that we probably could not have worked out on our own. And He’s blessed our marriage. I can see He has been there all throughout our marriage.

Bill speaks of how he has grown in his ability to practice forgiveness with his wife Carol. This triggered Carol to talk about how the Lord has given her the ability to see Bill’s personality differences as something to appreciate and not aggravate as much. Bill and Carol’s ability to see life from the others point of view is something that emerged over time. Bill said,

It's an ongoing thing for me when one of the two of us says to the other, "Hey, forgive me" and there is forgiveness, there is a deeper bond in the relationship. When I'm out of sorts with Carol or seeing things differently, it's hard for me to have a good night's rest, you know, until I get it right, until I ask her to forgive me. And she feels, I think, I know she does, the same way. There haven't been very many days where we struggle with unforgiveness. Occasionally, early on in our marriage there were days, maybe weeks when we couldn't get it exactly right, but the frequency has diminished dramatically of lapses where we are out of fellowship with one another.

Carol said,

I forget what we were dealing with, but one of the things that I felt very strongly that God taught me at some point in our lives was the need to appreciate the differences that we had in personality and in the way that we looked at life. I was always trying to get Bill to think like me, or to process things like me. Then I realized we made pretty good decisions by the way he processed and the way I processed. Bill is a very feeling person. I am the logical and rational thinker, it's got to make sense, you know. And so, that was hard for us early on. Especially if we'd attend seminars and I'd think, they're not talking about us. That's not the way we percolate, but finally God got to me that we were a team even in our differences. We are really a gift to one another and should be rather than an irritation to one another.

Bill and Carol gave insight to the developmental perspective of a marital relationship.

That marriage is a dynamic relationship that grows over time or dies over time depending on the couple's ability to navigate through difficulties and stress. In Bill and Carol's relationship marital growth was experienced through adaptation and a reliance on God to bring understanding through their shared Christian spirituality.

Summary within the Christian Spirituality Domain

The 10 couples interviewed dialogued about their Christian spirituality throughout the study. Christian spirituality was not limited to its exclusive domain, but was infused

within the longevity and health domains of the study as previously discussed. The primary themes of *being and doing* and *marriage and growing* are in essence how Christian spirituality was portrayed within the study of long-term healthy marriages. The sub-themes of affectionate expression, bonding and commitment are seen as significant marital processes that were inspired by Christian spirituality and promoted marital growth within the couple's narratives. Out of 10 couples interviewed eight couples referenced affectionate expression, 10 couples referenced bonding, and eight couples referenced commitment within the questioning on Christian spirituality. *Marriage and growing* within the Christian spirituality domain was referenced seven times during the interview. Similar to the longevity and health domains couples referenced marital growth as something developed over time as couples navigated through life struggles. The primary theme of *marriage and growing* was often infused with the couple's Christian spirituality as "God" was often referenced as being present during the struggle or as the sustainer through the struggle.

All in all, the *being and doing* Christian primary theme emerged throughout all the domains and was predominant within the Christian spirituality domain. The *being and doing* theme interacted with the emerging process variables of *affectionate expression, bonding, and commitment*. These process variables mutually influenced one another as the couple's Christian spirituality played out within all the domains. In particular, *bonding* and *affectionate expression* appear to have more influence on the marital health domain whereas *bonding* and *commitment* had more to do with longevity.

The *marriage and growing* primary theme emerges as an outcome variable from the health and longevity domains which was seasoned with Christian spirituality language by the participants. The next chapter will discuss the above emerging primary Christian themes and emerging process variables within the health, longevity, and Christian Spirituality domains. Also, a marital growth model will be introduced identifying *hope* as an emerging outcome variable associated with the marriage and growing primary theme.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to further understand the role of Christian spirituality in the phenomena of marital health and longevity within long-term marriages. Over the years there has been a multitude of research conducted in the above areas of longevity, health, and the influence of a couple's spirituality. However, literature relevant to the phenomena and spirituality is limited (Fenell, 1993; Kaslow & Robinson, 1996; Lauer et al., 1986; Lauer, Lauer & Kerr, 1990; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2008), particularly when investigating Christian spirituality that is less a demonstration of religious practices and more a manifestation of God shaping one's life resulting in the impact of the marital relationship (Goodman & Dollahite, 2006; Mahoney et al., 1999).

This qualitative study was performed from a phenomenological perspective with 10 married couples who met the criteria for longevity, health, and Christian spirituality as set by the controls of the experiment. The method used was a face-to-face interview of the couples that was digitally recorded. The interviewer used an interview guide to increase the trustworthiness of the interview process. A transcriptionist was also used in the transcribing of the interviews. The transcriptionist signed a confidentiality form to protect the couples and to increase trustworthiness of the research. The transcriptions were validated by the couples, no assumptions were formed prior to analysis of the data, and pseudonyms were used to protect the couple's anonymity.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings of the research. Discussion will involve the emerging Christian spirituality themes of *being and doing*, and *marriage*

and growing. Also, the sub-themes or process variables of *affectionate expression*, *bonding*, and *commitment* which ran throughout the longevity, health, and Christian spirituality domains of the couples' narratives are reviewed. From the preceding themes and sub-themes an emerging marital growth model is introduced as well as the emergence of the Christian spirituality theme of *hope* which captures the essence of the couple's stories.

Emerging Christian Spirituality Themes

As couples expressed their stories the essence of their relationship emerged from a Christian spirituality perspective. The first theme influenced by the couple's Christian spirituality is the theme of *being and doing*. The *being and doing* theme appeared across the longevity, health, and Christian spirituality domains and was infused within the dialogue of the couples interviewed. This primary Christian spirituality theme of *being and doing* emanated also within the sub-themes or process factors of affectionate expression, bonding, and commitment throughout this study. The *being* theme focuses on the importance of the more transcendent aspects of the marital relationship. These abstract aspects are marked by the couples' shared expression of Christian spirituality within their marriage. It is the spiritual place where couples share life experiences together which are felt deeply within their relationship with each other and God. These shared experiences transcend the physical realm of the persons to the spirit of the persons resulting in communal unity of the marital relationship. Mackey and O'Brien (2005) reference the importance of the inner life and values of marriages. In the literature this type of variable is described as proximal (Mahoney et al. 2005). The *being* factor is proximal as it reflects more on how God is experienced and manifested in the marital

relationship versus the more distal areas of religious participation or *doing* aspects of spirituality. The proximal factor which is identified in this study as the *being* theme is identified by the literature as an area of further research (e.g. Fenell, 1993; Kaslow et. al., 1996; Lauer & Lauer, 1986; Lauer et al., 1990; Mackey et al., 2005; Mahoney et al., 1999; Mahoney et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 1993).

The *doing* theme presented in this study is also infused within in the sub-themes or process factors of affectionate expression, bonding, and commitment. Consistent with the literature, the *doing* factor is more distal (e.g., Mahoney et al., 1999). The distal is more easily seen and attributed to the *doing* aspects of spirituality. The *doing* aspects of Christian spirituality are credited with the more tangible aspects of religiosity such as prayer, Bible study, and going to church. As the *being and doing* theme interplayed with the above stated process factors the couples expressed marital growth within their relationship.

The *marriage and growing* emerged as an outcome variable and the second primary Christian theme within the study. This theme, like the *being and doing* theme is also expressed within couples interviewed using Christian spirituality vernacular. The theme *marriage and growing* surfaced in all 10 couples interviewed and within all three domains. The significance of this allows for a developmental perspective of marriage as couples formulate a trajectory for the marital relationship. In long-term healthy couples the quantitative literature has identified variables that promote growth including: love, affection, humor, change in perception of traditional roles, increase in emotionally responsive listening, commitment, altruism, and an increase in responsive listening that is less emotionally negative and more affectionate (e.g. Carstensen, Gottman, & Levensen, 1995; Lauer & Lauer, 1986; Pasupathi, Carstensen, Levensen, & Gottman, 1999; Pnina,

2009).

The qualitative literature also supports the *marriage and growing* theme, in particular the relevance of emotional interaction between married couples (Bachard & Caron, 2001). This is significant because as couples interact with emotional health they reap the outcomes that promote growth in the marriage such as: managing conflict, happiness, and the expression of sexuality (e.g. Bachard et al., 2001; Blakeslee, 1995; Dickson et al., 2002; Hinchliff & Gott, 2004; Kaplan, 1990; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993; Wallerstein & Hurst, 2000).

Longevity

Through the couples' narratives within the longevity domain factors emerged that described the essence of a successful couple relationship over time. These process factors were influenced by the interplay of the Christian spirituality theme of *Being and Doing* which contributed to the outcome of marital growth. The process factors of bonding and commitment emerged as significant contributors to the longevity domain within the study. The process factor of affectionate expression appeared within the longevity domain, but was not seen as significant as bonding and commitment.

Affectionate Expression

The sub-theme or process variable affectionate expression is described as the spouse's spoken word that is seasoned with language that is endearing of the other, and/or deliberate acts of kindness towards one's spouse. The researcher observed and

provided evidence in the findings chapter that identifies affectionate expression as a contributor to the longevity of the couple's relationship. These findings correlate to previous quantitative and qualitative research contributing to marital longevity such as: long-term married couples that are satisfied have a greater capacity to demonstrate emotional positive listening (e.g. Cartensen, Levenson, & Gottman, 1995; Pasupathi, Cartensen, Levensen, & Gottman, 1999; Pina, 2009), and long-term married couples experience high levels of intimacy in sharing thoughts, feelings, values, joys and sorrows (Robinson & Blanton, 1993).

Being and doing. The process factor of affectionate expression and the Christian spirituality primary theme of *being and doing* interplayed within the longevity domain. The affectionate expression of *being* within the longevity domain is the deeper way in which the couple came together and interacted through the communal sharing of one's spirit to another as believers in Christ. The *being* aspect of the marital relationship is where couples perceive God as *being* active within the marital relationship. Couples actively expressed the *doing* in their use of adoring words and behavior towards their spouse. Also, these expressions were communicated in spiritual language and were often observed by the researcher as fond and tender to the spouse.

Bonding

The sub-theme or process variable bonding was observed within the longevity domain of the couple's narratives. Bonding is described within the study as how a couple experiences togetherness emotionally, physically, and spiritually within the marriage relationship. Bonding correlates with the previously reviewed literature on contributors to longevity such as: intimacy, congruence, and attachment (e.g. Collins & Read, 1990;

Davila & Bradbury, 2001; Holland & Roisman, 2010; Robinson & Blanton, 1993).

Bonding was seen as a significant contributor to the longevity domain within the couples interviewed in this study.

Being and doing. The process factor of bonding and the Christian spirituality primary theme of *being and doing* interplayed within the longevity domain. The *being* theme played out within the sub-theme of bonding as couples expressed a shared unity of the spirit of God. Often couples expressed themselves by referring to each other using the plural pronouns of *we* and *us* while articulating shared life experiences. This plural expression was often followed by Christian overtones of being spiritually bonded with each other and God. For example couples expressed themselves in the longevity domain in the following way: “we really put the Lord in the middle, at the center of our home,” “we just let God take care of everything,” and “the Lord really blessed us and allowed us to get through things in His strength”. The *doing* theme played out within the couples from a Christian spirituality perspective as couples expressed a bonding through actively pursuing the religious aspects of Christianity such as: prayer, socializing with church friends, going to Bible studies, and serving in various facets within the church.

Commitment

The sub-theme or process variable of commitment within the couples interviewed is seen as a significant contributor to the longevity of marriage. It is important to note that commitment in previous studies is seen both as a process and outcome variable (e.g. Clements et al., 2004). The commitment process factor also personifies a couple’s Christian spirituality. This is expressed in their day-to-day lives by personal dedication and constraint to do anything that would tarnish the reflection of this marital institution

that is God ordained. Within this study commitment is an observed and spoken factor that relates to the couple's interaction and thus is seen as a contributor to the outcome instead of the outcome itself. The researcher recognizes the overlap, but the interaction of commitment was more pronounced as a process factor particularly as the Christian spirituality theme played out within the couple's narrative. Within the longevity domain of the interview commitment is discussed as the couple being committed to each other, but also to the marriage as an institution of God and therefore something to care for. This observation is similar to the previously discussed literature review on commitment as expressed in Chapter 2 (e.g. Lauer, Lauer, & Kerr, 1990).

Being and doing. The process factor of commitment and the Christian spirituality primary theme of *being and doing* interplayed within the longevity domain. The *being* aspect of commitment infused the Christian spiritual nature of the couples narratives. This was demonstrated as couples spoke of marriage as an institution that is larger than themselves, often God ordained and thus being something to take seriously and to care for. The interplay of the *being* theme within the commitment sub-theme was significant as couples used their spiritual lens to bring into focus the essence of this important institution which contributed to longevity and marital growth. The *doing* aspect of the couple's commitment played out in practical ways in which the couple committed themselves to some factor that aided them in keeping the marriage together. For example, couples expressed commitment to such things as: not staying angry with each other, not divorcing, and working together through marital difficulties.

Marriage and Growing

The primary theme of *marriage and growing* emerged as an outcome variable as

the *being and doing* theme engaged with the sub-themes of affectionate expression, bonding, and commitment throughout the interview questioning on longevity and marriage. The researcher acknowledges that couples can have longevity within a marriage without the above mentioned process factors, but within this study these processes are seen as significant to longevity and marital health which are markers for marital growth and share likeness with previous research (e.g. Cartensen et al., 1995; Lauer et al., 1990; Pasupathi et al., 1999; Pina, 2009). The emergence of the *marriage and growing* theme out of the interplay of the Christian foundational theme of *being and doing* allowed for couples to express the essence of their marriage from a distinctively Christian perspective often using descriptive vernacular that saw marital longevity as something that matured over time usually resulting from some type of struggle. The researcher realizes this type of language is not only characteristic to Christian couples, but it emerged as a consistent theme within these Christian couples interviewed. This identified developmental perspective of marital growth could be a significant contributor to longevity within Christian couples as they enter into the marital relationship.

Health

Through the couple's narratives within the health domain the identified sub-themes of affectionate expression, bonding, and commitment repeated themselves. These process factors are a personification of marital health as they contribute to the communication of couples through action, thought, and emotion within their day-to-day lives. Similar to the longevity domain these sub-themes were influenced by the interplay of the Christian spirituality foundational theme of *Being and Doing* and contributed to the health of the marital relationship. Health is considered an outcome variable to a growing

marriage and was portrayed significantly through the process factors of affectionate expression and bonding as expressed in the telling of the couple's stories. The process factor of commitment was also portrayed through the interview, but was not seen as significant.

Affectionate Expression

As previously discussed, affectionate expression is defined as the spouse's spoken word that is seasoned with language that is endearing of the other, and or deliberate acts of kindness towards one's spouse. The researcher observed and provided the findings in Chapter 4 that identified affectionate expression as a significant contributor to the health of the couple's relationship. This couple cooperation through affectionate expression demonstrates how a couple affectively feels and behaves towards their married partner and is consistent with previous research on couple interaction (e.g. Clements et al., 2004; Gottman, 1999); relationship acceptance (e.g. Cordova et al., 1998; Doss & Christensen, 2006; Baucom & Epstein, 1990); and the positive attribution state of the marriage (e.g. Bradbury et al., 1996; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Karney & Bradbury, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Karney & Frye, 2002). In the interviews couples often spoke that affectionate expression was not a factor that existed in the beginning of the marriage, but as a process that emerge over time as couples learned to navigate through their life stressors. This ability to develop affection toward the other spouse is seen as a contributor to marital health and is referenced by previous literature (e.g. Fincham & Linfield, 1997; Gottman & Driver, 2005; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey et al., 1995).

Being and doing. The process factor of affectionate expression and the Christian spirituality primary theme of *being and doing* interplayed within the health domain. The *being* theme played out within the affectionate expression factor as couples used vernacular that was more transcendent in nature in describing their spouse's personhood. The Christian spirituality influence was expressed in the heavenly characteristics in which one spouse communicated to the other and often this affectionate communication was reciprocated and shared. Couples used words such as: loving, kind, respectful, wonderful, and committed. Couples actively expressed the *doing* theme in their communication towards their spouse. As referenced in the findings, in Chapter 4, couples actively expressed adoring words with inflection that demonstrated an action of positive posturing towards their spouse emotionally, communicatively, and cognitively. Through the interview a spiritual posturing emerged as couples demonstrated the foundational Christian spirituality theme of *being and doing* within the process factor of affectionate expression. This emerging Christian theme is seen by the researcher as pivotal to the outcome variable of health within a growing dynamic marital relationship between two believers.

Bonding

The sub-theme or process variable bonding was observed within the health domain of the couple's narratives. As previously stated in the section on longevity, bonding is described in this study as how a couple experiences togetherness emotionally, physically, and spiritually within the marriage relationship. Bonding is seen as a significant contributor to the health of a marriage and correlates with the previously

reviewed literature on attachment security within married couples. Secure attachments between married couples benefit from the sharing of two lives together (e.g. Feeney, 1996). A couple's secure attachment allows for healthy reciprocity in the sharing of one's life with another in the marital bond (e.g. Keelan et al., 1998; Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991). The process variable of bonding is also correlated to the Christian spiritual concept of forgiveness which is viewed by some researchers as a marker of a healthy marriage (e.g. Kachadourian et al., 2010; Worthington et al., 2010; Worthington, 1994).

Being and doing. The process factor of bonding and the Christian spirituality primary theme of *being and doing* interplayed within the health domain. The bonding sub-theme is marked by the *being and doing* expression of the couple's spirituality. The *being* aspect of bonding is marked by a *position of oneness* and was spoken by couples interviewed during the health domain. The *position of oneness* is set apart for the Christian couple whose spirituality is intrinsic to their personhood and shared through their relationship with God and each other as they live out their lives day to day. The *position of oneness* experienced by the couples interviewed was reflected in their speech as many used language such as: "the Lord really blessed us," and "(the Lord) allowed us to get through things in His strength". The vernacular used by the couples in the interviews points to a communal sharing of the spirit that is uniquely Christian and provides marital oneness between the couple and God. This unity in the spirit is seen by the researcher as a contributor to marital health within the couples interviewed. Similarly, the *doing* aspect of bonding is best described as a *position of togetherness*. The *position of togetherness* is characterized by the couple's participation in activities

which are seen to be contributors of health. These activities can be Christian in form such as: praying, going to church together, and studying the Bible together. The *position of togetherness* can also include activities that are less Christian in nature such as: going to a movie together, dining with friends together, and playing tennis together.

Commitment

The sub-theme or process variable of commitment within the couples interviewed is seen as a contributor to the health of the marriage. Consistent with the literature, commitment within the health domain was marked by couples' expression of their commitment to each other in duty, and also in dedication to the other's life as if it was their own (e.g. Rhoades, Stanley, Kelmer, & Markman, 2010; Stanley et al., 1992). Commitment as duty emerged as couples spoke of being dedicated to the working out of internal and external pressures of the relationship from raising kids, to finances, to varying schedules. Commitment as something bigger than the individual person in the relationship played out within the couples interviewed encountering Christian spirituality overtones and believed to be a contributor to the health of the marriage.

Being and doing. The process factor of commitment and the Christian spirituality primary theme of *being and doing* interplayed within the health domain. The *being* theme within the process factor of commitment implies and references God as being a part of the marital commitment to one another. In the sub-theme of commitment the couples communicate a sharing in the marriage as an institution that is set apart and is to be cared for by each participant because it is God ordained. This distinctively Christian perspective of commitment emerged to be a contributor to the health of marriages within

the interview process. The *doing* theme of the couple's commitment played out similarly to the longevity domain in practical ways in which the couples actively committed themselves to not doing the things that contribute or diminish the health of the relationship. For example, couples expressed commitment to such things as: not deliberately saying hurtful things, working together to improve the quality of the marriage, praying, and going to church.

Marriage and Growing

The primary theme of *marriage and growing* emerged as an outcome variable as the *being and doing* theme engaged with the sub-themes of affectionate expression, bonding, and commitment throughout the interview questioning on health and marriage. The identified sub-themes show likeness to previous literature on such process factors as: couple cooperation, positive couple attributions, relationship acceptance, attachment security, and commitment. These identified sub-themes are seen as significant to the health of the marriage and ultimately to the dynamic marital relationship.

Christian Spirituality

The researcher hopes to bring some light to the previous gaps in research regarding what specifically about a couple's Christian spirituality impacts the marriage (e.g. Thomas & Cornwall, 1990). As couples told their stories within the Christian spirituality domain the identified sub-themes within the longevity and health domains repeated themselves. As previously addressed Christian spirituality can be seen as vague, mystical, and hard to grasp. The couples in this study meet the criteria discussed in the operational definition referred to earlier in the study. In general, the 10 couples

interviewed were selected because they were motivated in their marital relationship to bring glory to God as opposed to making their spouse happy or any other motivational reason. Consistent with the literature, the couples interviewed in this study saw marriage as a part of God's plan for this life (e.g. Goodman & Dollahite, 2006). Similar to the longevity and health domains the sub-themes of affectionate expression, bonding, and commitment are influenced by the interplay of the Christian spirituality foundational theme of *being and doing*. The *being and doing* theme is congruous with identified concepts of proximal and distal used to describe the intersection between spirituality and marriage as introduced earlier in this chapter (e.g. Mahoney et al., 1999). Similar to the couple's narratives within the longevity and health domains the interaction of the process factors with the *being and doing* theme emerge within the Christian spirituality domain and is seen as a contributor to the outcome factor of *marriage and growing*.

Affectionate Expression

The sub-theme or process factor affectionate expression is previously defined as the spouse's spoken word that is seasoned with language that is endearing of the other, and or deliberate acts of kindness towards one's spouse. The researcher observed and provided evidence in the findings chapter that identifies affectionate expression as a contributor to the longevity and health of a marriage. The language used by the couples is often seasoned with Christian vernacular and manifested itself within the Christian spirituality domain. The difference in affectionate expression within the spirituality domain compared to the longevity and health domains is the overt Christian language that placed God as being central and personally involved in the marital relationship. These findings correlate to previous research on Christian spirituality in which distinctive

Christian language and behavior is identified within the marital relationship (e.g. Aten & Hernandez, 2005; Goodman et al., 2006; Markman et al., 2001; Mahoney et al., 1999; Thomas & Cornwall, 1990).

Being and doing. The process factor of affectionate expression and the Christian spirituality primary theme of *being and doing* interplayed within the Christian spirituality domain. Whereas in the previous domains of longevity and health the *being and doing* emerged within the questions asked, in this distinctively Christian domain the couples repeated similar spiritual vernacular, but also narrowed the scope capturing the unity of the spirit in the marital relationship. This unity of the spirit is teased out as the being and doing theme interplays with the process factors. The *being* theme played out within the affectionate expression factor as couples used vernacular that was more specific referencing “God” as involved in their lives personally, but also in their marriage. For example, couples said such things as, “I feel God’s love through Roger,” and “God has blessed me personally and in my relationship”. Similarly, couples verbalized the theme of *doing* acts that could be interpreted as demonstrations of affectionate expression, such as: choosing non-hurtful words, choosing to forgive, personal change for the good of the relationship.

Bonding

The sub-theme or process variable bonding was observed within the spirituality domain of the couple’s narratives. Bonding is described within the study as how a couple experiences togetherness emotionally, physically, and spiritually within the marriage relationship. A couple’s Christian spirituality is of emphasis in this study and the *being and doing* theme interplays with the bonding sub-theme. The findings within the bonding

process factor of the Christian spirituality domain correlates with the previous literature which refers to religious homogamy as impacting the marital relationship (e.g., Mahoney et. al., 2008; Myers, 2006; Robinson & Blanton, 1993). This literature reveals that husbands and wives that share together in similar religious beliefs and religious practices experience relational benefits. Similarly, studies show that marriages that share in each other's inner life show benefits to the marital relationship (e.g., Mackey & O'Brien, 2005).

Being and doing. The process factor of bonding and the Christian spirituality primary theme of *being and doing* interplayed within the Christian spirituality domain. The bonding sub-theme is marked by the *being and doing* expression of the couple's spirituality. The *being* aspect of bonding emerged within the *position of oneness* similar to the health domain but is more pronounced within Christian spirituality. This *position of oneness* described by Christian couples mirrors the expressions by the couples within the other domains. Their narratives were seasoned with vernacular descriptive of spirituality and intrinsic to their shared lives as Christians. This sharing of life is seen in the *doing* of their collective religious practices, but also in the sharing of their spirit *beings*. As couples share in the *doing* aspects of religious life together they also have opportunities to share in each other's inner life together experiencing communal unity or oneness of their spiritual beings. In the interview process many of the couples spoke of this oneness in their narratives expressing being in relationship with God and with each other, and God being the center of everything to which all of life is filtered including the marital relationship. Likewise to the health domain of the study, the *doing* aspect of bonding emerged as a *position of togetherness*. The *position of togetherness* is characterized by the couple's participation in activities which are seen to be contributors

to marital growth.

Commitment

The sub-theme or process variable of commitment within the couples interviewed emerged within the Christian spirituality domain. Commitment unfolds within the Christian spirituality domain similar to previous literature which describes it as a process variable based in personal dedication (e.g., Stanley & Markman, 1992). Couples in the study often described being committed to something larger than themselves similar to former studies that viewed marriage as part of God's design which provides security to the relationship and allows for relational growth (e.g. Stanley et al., 1998).

Being and doing. The process factor of commitment and the Christian spirituality primary theme of *being and doing* interplayed within the Christian spirituality domain. The *being* aspect of commitment emerged within the language that unfolded from the couple's narratives. The marital couple's commitment is expressed in their love to God and Christ which in turn is a reflection of their love and commitment to one another. The *doing* aspect of the couple's commitment played out similarly to the other domains as religious practices demonstrated by couples which emphasized commitment to God and each other.

Marriage and Growing

The primary theme of *marriage and growing* emerged as an outcome variable as the *being and doing* theme engaged with the sub-themes of affectionate expression, bonding, and commitment throughout the interview questioning on Christian spirituality. Within the Christian spirituality domain couple's narratives told stories of marital growth

through enduring life difficulties such as: raising children, health difficulties, working through broken trust, learning to appreciate different personalities, and various personal trials. The couples' stories tell of adaptation to emotionally charged situations correlating with the literature that identifies long-term healthy couples as couples who learn how to adjust emotionally (e.g. Bachard et al., 2001; Dickson et al., 2002; Hinchliff and Gott, 2004; Hurst, 2000; Kaplan, 1990; Levenson et al., 1993; Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1995). The couples that adjust over time reap the outcomes that promote growth in the marriage. The outcome variable *marriage and growing* is significant from a Christian spirituality perspective because it allows for couples to formulate a trajectory for their marriage that includes struggle, but struggle that is not in vain as it produces opportunities for growth. From a Christian spirituality perspective the "growing" theme is seen throughout the pages of the Bible.

Emerging Marital Growth Model Based in Christian Spirituality

As couples expressed their stories through answering questions from the interview a model of marital growth emerged. This distinctively Christian model of marital growth (depicted in Figure 5.1) promotes the foundation for discussion in this chapter. The model developed as couples described the essence of Christian spirituality within the context of their marriages. The Christian nature of the couple's relationship manifested itself throughout the interview process across all three domains of study including longevity, health, and spirituality. Within the marital growth model, the Christian spirituality theme of *being and doing* emerged throughout all domains and was

predominant within the Christian spirituality domain. Similarly, certain process variables emerged as sub-themes within the marital growth model which were seasoned with the *being and doing* theme. The *being and doing* theme interacted with the emerging process variables of *affectionate expression*, *bonding*, and *commitment*. The interplay of these process variables with the Christian theme of *being and doing* contributed to the longevity and marital health within the couples studied. These process variables mutually influenced one another as the couples' Christian spirituality played out within all the domains. In particular, *bonding* and *affectionate expression* appeared to have more influence on the marital health domain whereas *bonding* and *commitment* had more to do with longevity.

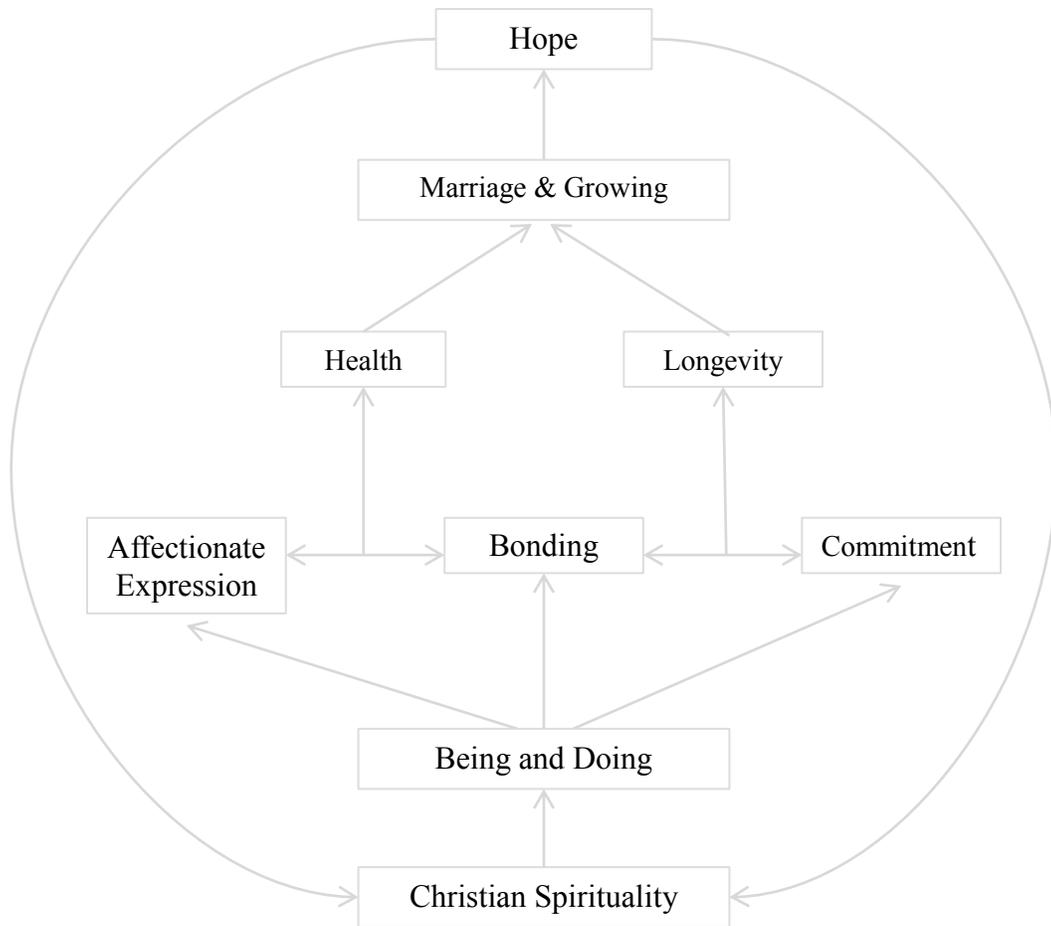
The *marriage and growing* primary theme emerged as an outcome variable from the health and longevity domains which was seasoned with Christian vernacular by the participants. All 10 couples interviewed at some point in the study used language that described their marriage as *growing*. In essence couples saw marriage thematically as *growing* and often used Christian vernacular to describe this dynamic relationship. This emerging developmental perspective of *marriage and growing* within the marital growth model allows couples to formulate a trajectory in the marital relationship promoting health and longevity.

Lastly, *hope* emerged within the marital growth model as an outcome variable to the couple's development over time. As couples told their stories of struggle in their marriages they communicated through the lens of time which often spoke of hardships,

but also of promise as the relationship matured through the years. This Christian spirituality theme of *hope* appeared and was associated with the *marriage and growing* primary theme within the couple's interviews. The Christian theme of *hope* flourished as couples reflected back over the life span of their marriage and the difficulties they experienced not with disappointment and discouragement but with a sense of *hope* knowing that the struggle made them stronger.

Figure 5.1

Christian spirituality integrated into marriage: Emerging marital growth model



Christian Spirituality

As couples told their narratives two Christian spirituality themes emerged. The first was the primary theme of *being and doing* which interplayed within all the emerging process variables of affectionate expression, bonding, and commitment. The second was the primary theme of *marriage and growing*. *Marriage and growing* emerged as an outcome variable and manifested itself within the longevity and health domains. As couples grew healthily over time they also reflected back with a sense of hope of the here and now of their marital relationship.

Being and Doing

The couples interviewed expressed the primary theme of *being and doing* that extended throughout the narratives of the participants. Sharing in the *being* aspects of the couple's Christian spirituality was seen as significant and was described in phrases such as: "the more you allow the Holy Spirit to work in your life it translates into making marriage more like what it's intended to be," "We don't deserve any of it, but He's given us so much in our marriage and our family," "ultimately, I am to present my bride as an offering to Christ, without blemish," "I see the fruits of the Spirit in him and that's not something you can do to yourself. It's just there, so that's God. That's experiencing God in the marriage," "we are to emulate Jesus and if you do that, then that's going to be reflected in how you treat your spouse, your mate, and your marriage". These phrases capture the essence of the transcendent nature of the *being* theme which runs throughout the marital interviews within this study. The *being* theme is pronounced within the study as the couples continually use language describing the sharing of life as a spiritual place

which is felt deeply within the marital relationship between husband, wife, and God.

A part of the primary theme of *being* within the study is the adjoining theme of *doing* that extends throughout the narratives of the participants. The sharing in the *doing* aspects of the couple's Christian spirituality was seen as significant within the study and was described in such words and phrases such as: "raising children," "church attendance," "a believer marrying a believer," "daily devotion together," "pray together," and "fellowshipping with friends who are believers". The significance in doing theme is seen across all domains expressing the impact of a couple's Christian spirituality on marital growth.

Marriage and Growing

This primary theme developed as the *being and doing* nature of affectionate expression, bonding, and commitment interacted within the study. *Marriage and growing* is an outcome to this interplay of the identified process variable. This interplay and the subsequent emergence of growth in the marriage are often marked by struggle. Specifically, couples described their marriage as being "blessed" from some tension within the life cycle of the marriage. The shadow that the "blessed" couple casts is one of difficulty, pain, and tension. These painful but growth providing factors are described by the participants in such words and phrases such as, "unable to have children," "miscarriages," "my mother passed," "ovarian cancer," "aneurism," "sickness," "differences in personality," "opposites," "trials," "valleys," and "sin". It is from the shadow of pain and tension that the Christian spirituality theme of marriage and growing emerges.

From a Christian spirituality perspective the *marriage and growing* theme is seen

throughout the pages of the Bible. The imagery of the scriptures is often agrarian in nature as Paul writes of the seed that sprouts forth once it dies in 1 Corinthians 15. Also, the creation story took place in a garden that was created by God and consisted of the tree of life that was forbidden for Adam and Eve to eat from or they would surely die (Genesis 1-3). God's story follows the theme of *growing* through his plan of creation, fall, and redemption of the Israelites. At one point in His story God called His chosen people the "vineyard of the Lord" (Isaiah 5:7), and at another point in their disobedience He called them a "wild vine" (Jeremiah 2:21). For Christians God's botanical language climaxes with the hope given in Isaiah 11:1, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit". The *Branch* the prophet is speaking of is Jesus Christ who said in John 15:1, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that bears fruit he prunes so that it will even be more fruitful". For many of the participants interviewed the theme *marriage and growing* took on a spiritual experience as couples encountered painful life circumstances that brought about opportunities for marital growth manifesting within the longevity and health of the marriage.

Affectionate Expression

Within the marital growth model the *being and doing* Christian spirituality theme interplayed with the process variable of affectionate expression across all three domains within the study. An affectionate expression is described as a spouse's spoken word that is seasoned with language that is endearing of the other. The affectionate expression can also be described as acts of kindness towards one's spouse. The couples interviewed

consistently demonstrated affectionate expression through communication, behavioral acts, and emotion. The couples often used affectionate expression that was seasoned with Christian vernacular and the interviewer observed it as influential in the Christian couple's ability to navigate their marital relationship through life circumstances promoting marital growth.

Bonding

Within the marital growth model the *being and doing* Christian spirituality theme interplayed with the processes variable of bonding across all three domains within the study. Bonding is described within the study as how a couple experiences togetherness emotionally, physically, and spiritually within the marriage relationship. For example, from a Christian spirituality perspective couples often experienced the *being* theme as couples unified their spirits as they shared in the sufferings of various heartaches such as: raising children, miscarriages, difficult finances, wayward children, and the death of family members. This oneness in spirit flourished within the couples interviewed. Similarly, the *doing* theme influenced the bonding of the couple from a Christian spirituality perspective as the couple shared in religious activities such as: Bible study, going to church, and raising children. So, as the *being and doing* theme interplayed with the process variable of bonding the couple experiences marital growth within their relationship.

Commitment

Within the marital growth model the *being and doing* Christian spirituality theme

interplayed with the process variable of commitment across all three domains within the study. Couples in the study often described being committed to each other but also described being committed to something larger than them as they saw marriage as a part of God's design. The *being* theme interplays with the process variable of commitment as couples see God as an active part of their marital relationship which unifies and cements the relationship. Similarly, the *doing* theme played out within the process variable of commitment as couples expressed being committed to practicing Christian expressions of their faith such as prayer, scripture reading and raising their children in a Christian home. Therefore, as the Christian spirituality theme of *being and doing* interplayed with the process variable of commitment the couples interviewed expressed a growth within their marital relationship.

Hope

The marital growth model gives a developmental perspective of how a Christian marriage emerges over time. Unique to the couples interviewed in this study is how the couples reflected back over the life span of their marriage and spoke with language filled with *hope*. As discussed previously many of the couples expressed various difficulties and sufferings within the development of the relationship, but as they reflected on the past and spoke of the present and the here and now they used language which captured the *hope* of the marital relationship. *Hope* is an emerging outcome factor within the marital growth model. As the *being and doing* Christian spirituality theme interplayed with the identified process variables of the couple's marital relationship the couples described the outcome of their marriage as *growing*, or maturing often through suffering

and pain. This Christian spirituality theme of *growing* is reflected by the couples from a perspective that is seasoned over thirty plus years of marriage.

Many of the couples interviewed used vernacular which spoke with a sense of *hope*. As couples dialogued within the interviews they communicated *hope* in their marital relationship. For example, many of the participants reflected on the developmental process of the marriage i.e. in the beginning “our relationship was here, but now it is here” and the couples described the here and now as a good and better place than where the marriage came from. Therefore, in reflection the couples spoke with *hope*. For example, Robin and Mathew capture the essence of the emerging *hope* of their forty-six year marriage as they reflect on it over time. Robin says,

I think we’ve grown an awful lot together because in the beginning it is not as mature as it is now. You go through the early years where you think the person you married is almost perfect, and then you realize that they’re not. So, you learn to love them for who they are and you also see defects in yourself that you need to accept and correct. But I got married until death do us part and God has blessed this marriage. We were not as mature as we are now, by any means... I can truly say I loved him very much when I married him, but now it’s such a deeper love. It is a love you really can’t describe. He is, by all means my better half. He is my friend, my companion, my husband and I wouldn’t change a thing, darling.

Similarly, Bill and Carol exchange dialogue that provides *hope* from a developmental perspective of their marital relationship. Bill says,

Well, from really infatuation to begin with and just an excitement about being with each other to just a much deeper kind of appreciation and a realization of a depth of love from Carol to me. While it was there at the beginning you just understand it more completely now.

Carol responds giving insight into the metamorphosis that unfolded over time within her marriage to Bill which supports the *hope* seen in the marital growth model.

Carol said, “I would agree with that that it’s definitely become a really deep, deep friendship of trust and understanding and allowances for our differences and seeing things that early on was much harder.”

Lastly, Amarie exhorts *hope* in her relationship with Rob as she reflects on the emergence of their marital relationship. She says,

It unfolded very quickly with some difficult issues to resolve and now, has moved into a phase that is really, really pleasant because we’ve got time to do some of the things that we didn’t have time to do before and wanted to do early on and it’s delightful.

For the participants their *hope* emerges from a sense of struggle and suffering which is a theme throughout Christian history and the Bible. *Hope* can be seen as subjective as it is described as something “unseen” as cited in Romans 4:28. Of course, a subjective *hope* is clarified within Christian spirituality as believers make God the object of their *hope*. Clearly, for the couples interviewed God himself is “the hope” as the God of hope (Romans 15:13). As couples reflected back on their shared lives together as husband and wife they did so with a sense of *hope* as God had emerged to become the object of hope in their marriages.

Conclusions

Many of the findings in this study are consistent and confirmed through previous quantitative and qualitative research on contributing factors to marital health and longevity. The emerging process factors of *affectionate expression, bonding, and commitment* are similar and consistent to previous studies. The emerging primary

Christian spirituality theme of *being and doing* is consistent with the proximal and distal religious factors that have emerged in previous literature.

What is compelling from this study is how the *being and doing* Christian spirituality theme interplayed with the emerging process factors of *affectionate expression, bonding* and *commitment*. These process variables mutually influenced one another as the couples Christian spirituality played out within all the domains. In particular, *bonding* and *affectionate expression* appeared to have more influence on the marital health domain whereas *bonding* and *commitment* had more to do with the longevity domain. This interplay is described through the participants' stories from the interview questioning. What sets the narratives apart within the study is the spiritual nature of the vernacular used by the couples. The couple's voices are often descriptive of a transcendent God who is active in their individual lives and in their marriage. This actively personal God shares in their being as individuals and as couples. The intimate sharing of life between husband, wife, and God is seen in this study as a contributor to longevity and health within the marital relationship.

A distinct finding of this study is that of the Christian spirituality theme of *marriage and growing*. What sets this theme apart in this particular study is how the couples express marital growth as often emerging from pain and suffering within their lives together as a marital couple. This is consistent with the literature that identifies marriage as a dynamic relationship, but is unique in this study in its thematic Christian

emphasis.

Another distinct finding from a Christian spirituality perspective is the outcome factor of *hope* that emerges from the couples' dialogue. Previous literature from Christian researchers has expressed an interest in hope (e.g. Markman & Stanley, 2001; Worthington, 2003; Worthington, 1999; Worthington, 1996). What sets the hope apart in this study is the developmental lens in which the couples are looking back through the various life stages of their marriage. This historical perspective consists of more than thirty years of marriage to one person and in most cases at some point marriages marred by life experiences such as, death, disappointment, and struggle. But for the couples in this study who are described as Christian and who are distinctively practicing their spirituality on a day to day basis the suffering of life brings with it a sense of hope as the participants shared their stories.

Limitations

Limitations in this study could be that the interviews were conducted with couples and not separately with the individual husband and wife. Separate individual interviews might have rendered more open honest answers that might not have been present within the joint interview format of the study. Separate interviews might cut down on the nostalgic presence that can be present within older couples. Also, the size of the population and the geographical specificity of the sample could be seen as narrow and thus limited in generalizability. Specifically, 10 couples were used in the sample. These couples were from the Piedmont region of North Carolina in the United States. In

particular, Southeast Charlotte, and a large Southern Baptist Church which is middle to upper class socioeconomically. Lastly, participants could have been influenced by the Christian nature of the study in which they perceived an importance, and wanting to oblige the couples could have overly emphasized the impact of their Christian spirituality on the marital relationship.

Delimitations within the study included operationalizing the sample population. This operationalization comprised of defining the specific terms which set apart the couples being interviewed and thus strengthening the sample. The sample was determined by couples who were identified as having been married one time for thirty or more years, also definitions were operationally defined for “health” and “Christian Spirituality”. Individual interviews might have led to more open and honest answers regarding the subject matter, but joint sessions provided dialogue and the ability for the researcher to observe couple interaction providing insight into the specific identified marital processes that individual interviews might not have rendered. The nostalgic presence in long-term marriages that is often seen in joint interviews as a limitation can also be seen as a contributor to marital growth.

Implications

The nature of qualitative research does not lend itself to the generalization of the outcome data to other populations. In particular, this study is limited in its generalization to other marital relationships. However, because of the alarming marital statistics and the societal impact of failed marriages on the culture and the family, we must continue to pursue contributors to health and longevity within the marital unit (Nimtz, 2011).

Statistics also convey that spirituality could be a positive contributor to the outcomes of health and longevity within a marriage (e.g. Call & Heaton, 1997; Fenell, 1993; Kaslow & Robinson, 1996; Larson & Goltz, 1989; Lauer et al., 1986; Lauer et al., 1990; Mackey & O'Brien, 2005; Mahoney et al., 2008; Mahoney et al., 1999; Robinson & Blanton, 1993; Wilson & Musick, 1996). Where research is limited is in conveying what specifically is it about spirituality that contributes to health and longevity? (e.g. Aten & Hernandez, 2005; Thomas & Cornwall, 1990). This qualitative study that is phenomenological in its view may have implications in the development of a marital growth model that is steeped in the integration of Christian spirituality. A Christian developmental growth model for marriages may have implications for marital enrichment programs for churches, for pastors conducting pre-marital and marriage counseling, and for counselors who work with couples that indicate a Christian faith. Additionally, these findings can aid premarital and young couples in understanding what contributes to marital growth. The implications to pursue this new perspective of contributors to marital growth moves away from the prevailing deficits model which looks at contributors to marital distress. This change from “what a couple shouldn’t do” to “what a couple should do” could provide a trajectory of growth for premarital and young couples to strive for as their marriages unfold over time.

Future Research

Further research for the impact of Christian spirituality on marital longevity and health is needed from a qualitative perspective because of the present gap in literature

using this approach verses the more abundant quantitative research. Specifically, phenomenological studies, which allow for participants to tell their stories and are often rich with data as they use descriptive language, may further capture the essence of what it means to have a long-term, healthy, Christian marriage. As stated in the previous implications section most research conveys a deficits viewpoint within the marital relationship, i.e., what are the contributors to distressed marriages. This allows for future qualitative research to focus away from this deficits approach to more of a positive contributor's approach, i.e., what are the factors that contribute to marital growth.

Within the findings chapter of this study the Christian primary theme of *being and doing* impacted three process factors of affectionate expression, bonding, and commitment. The *being and doing* theme is similar to previous literature on religious perceptions of couples (e.g. Goodman & Dollahite, 2006; Mahoney et al., 1999). Also, previous literature addresses similar types of process factors which influence health and longevity (e.g. Bachard et al., 2001; Carstensen et al., 1995; Lauer & Lauer, 1986; Mahoney et. al., 2008; Myers, 2006; Pasupathi et al., 1999; Pnina, 2009; Robinson & Blanton, 1993). Future research should be on going focusing on the influence Christian spirituality has on marriages.

The findings of this study also included the Christian spirituality outcome variable of *marriage and growing*. Some literature sees marriage as a dynamic process that is emerging out of the life cycle of the marital relationship (e.g. Dickson et al., 2002). This implication can be further developed from a Christian viewpoint as pointed out in the findings chapter in which couples saw growing as a result of various difficulties, pain, and suffering within the marital relationship.

The findings of this study revealed that *hope* is an outcome factor to longevity and

health within Christian couples. The *hope* of this study is similar to that described by other researchers (e.g. Markman & Stanley, 2001; Worthington, 2003, Worthington, 1999). This research was unique in that the population of study was Christians and *hope* was expressed as couples reflected back on their marriage. Given this, future studies could focus on the impact of *hope* within the marital relationship. Specifically, are there factors that contribute to the growing of *hope* within the marital relationship?

Lastly, future studies can be done with other religious faiths from a qualitative view point to further understand spirituality's overall impact if any on marital health and longevity. The incorporation of other mixed populations, cultures, and religions could tease out similarities and differences of various faith practices and the impact they might have on marital health and longevity.

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Appendix A

Likert Scale: For Potential Research Participants

Topic: Christian Spirituality and Marital Health

Potential Participants Names: _____

Please circle the answer that best reflects your current knowledge of the couple.

1. The couple identified above has been married one time for at least 30 to 40 years.

Yes No

2. The couple above is in a marriage that demonstrates positive patterns of interaction verbally (e.g., speaks affirmation about the spouse), cognitively (e.g., thoughts of admiration about the spouse), and behaviorally (e.g., shows kind acts towards spouse).

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided
Disagree Strongly Disagree

3. The couple above demonstrates their Christian beliefs and values by the way they live and interact with each other?

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided
Disagree Strongly Disagree

4. The couple is grounded in the evangelical, protestant religious tradition?

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided
Disagree Strongly Disagree

5. The couple above sees the practice of spiritual discipline (e.g., prayer, meditation, evangelism, missions, tithing/giving, and Bible study) as:

Very Important Important Moderately Important
Of Little Importance Unimportant

6. Based on what you know about the couple and what you know about the research study what type of participant do you think this couple would be?

Very Good Good Barely
Acceptable Poor Very Poor

Appendix B

Criteria for Marital Wellness

For the purpose of this study, marital wellness is defined by positive patterns of interaction between spouses verbally (e.g., words spoken of encouragement and affirmation), cognitively (e.g., thoughts of admiration towards your spouse even in times of stress), and behaviorally (e.g., spouses turn towards one another in times of conflict and stability). Marital wellness is not the mere absence of conflict, for a healthy couple has conflict, but marital wellness includes a couple's ability to understand, honor, and respect each other within their day-to-day lives (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007; Gottman, 1999). Additionally, for the purposes of this study a couple's spirituality will also be a measure of health within a couple's relationship.

Appendix C

For the purpose of this study, Christian spirituality is operationally defined as spirituality that is: (a) found throughout the pages of the Bible which is God's spoken word to his people; (b) evidenced by the believer living a transformed and changed life; (c) evidenced by the believer's participation in the spiritual disciplines such as: prayer, meditation, evangelism, missions, and study; and (d) grounded in the evangelical, protestant religious tradition. (Erickson, 1992; Lints, 1993; Milacci, 2003; Packer, 1973; Sosin, 2008)

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

Title of Project: Christian Spirituality and Marital Wellness in Long-Term Christian Couples: A Phenomenological Study

David Dixon, M.A., L.P.C.S, Doctoral Candidate
David Jenkins, Psy.D, Committee Chair
Liberty University

I, _____, agree to participate by being interviewed for a research project entitled: *Faith and Marital Wellness in Long-Term Christian Couples* being administered by David Dixon as an authorized part of his doctoral program at Liberty University.

Purpose: I understand the purpose of this study is to investigate the intersection between a couple's Christian spirituality and their marital health within the context of their relationship which meets the criterion of a long-term marriage (interpreted for this inquiry as 30 or more years).

Procedure: I understand I will participate in an interview by the researcher with my spouse that will last approximately last 90 minutes. The interview session will be audio taped and transcribed by a transcriptionist. I also understand I will be given a copy of the transcription to validate the accuracy of the interview.

Confidentiality: I understand that my name will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and my identity as a participant will be protected by the researcher. The researcher and the transcriptionist are the only people who will have access to the tapes. The transcriptionist will sign a confidentiality agreement to keep my information confidential.

I understand that there may be risks and/or discomforts associated with this study. These include: the processing of possible painful memories of the couple relationship and the processing of personal information that is often seen as private. But also I am aware of benefits associated with my participation about my experiences in this qualitative research. These include: the processing of enjoyable times in the marriage relationship as well as a self-awareness to the satisfaction that comes with an enduring marriage. I am aware that participation in this study is voluntary and I am free to decide not to participate or withdraw at any time without affecting my relationship with the researcher.

I understand that the researcher may contact me during the study by email or phone regarding relevant information about the study. I understand that there are no guarantees

Appendix E

Interview Guide

- I. Domain 1: Longevity in the marriage
 1. First order Question
 - i. Tell me how your marriage has unfolded through the years?
 2. Second order Question
 - ii. In your own words what has contributed to the longevity of your marriage?
 3. Third order Question: a non-specified question
 - iii. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the longevity of your marriage?
- II. Domain 2: Marital Health
 1. First order Question
 - i. In your own words describe the health of your marriage?
 2. Second order Question
 - ii. Identify and discuss the factors that have contributed to the health of your marriage?
 3. Third order Question: a non-specified question
 - iii. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the health of your marriage?
- III. Domain 3: Christian spirituality
 1. First order Question
 - i. Please describe to me the essence of Christian spirituality in your marriage?
 2. Second order Question
 - ii. How have you experienced God as being involved in your marriage relationship?
 3. Third order Question: a non-specified question
 - iii. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your Christian spirituality in your marriage?

Appendix F

I _____ will hold all information gathered from the research inquiry in strict confidence. I understand I can be held legally responsible for any information that is breeched.

Transcriptionist

Researcher

Appendix G

The defined criteria for couples participating in the study include:

1. The couple has been married only one time for at least 30 years.
2. The couple's self-reports that their marriage is healthy and meets the criteria of marital health, Appendix B, and described on page nine of this study.
3. The couple meets the criteria defining Christian spirituality described in Appendix C, and page 10 of this study.
4. The couple is interested in exploring their experience of long-term Christian marriage and how it influences the marital relationship.
5. The couple meets a consensus by the Elder board in which a Likert scale is used for quality control and increasing trustworthiness.