

Liberty University

Surviving a Divorce with an Intact Faith:

A Strategy for Ministering to Those Experiencing Divorce in the Church

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ABSTRACT

Surviving a Divorce with an Intact Faith: A Strategy for Ministering to Those Experiencing Divorce in the Church

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Effectively ministering to divorcees is a unique aspect of church leadership. The majority of church leaders have never experienced divorce, so the unique problems that divorce presents are not familiar to them. The purpose of this D. Min Thesis Project is to investigate those problems and develop strategies that will allow church leaders to minister to divorcees effectively. This will be accomplished using questionnaires and interviews where difficult questions are asked to divorcees, and honest answers are revealed. Church leaders will also be interviewed about their positions on divorce and their responses compared to those given by divorcees in order to determine where ministerial gaps exist. From these gaps, strategies will be developed that will help church leaders in their efforts to offer effective grace-filled guidance to divorcees. The results of this research will provide church leaders with multiple strategies that will be developed through direct input from divorcees, for effectively ministering to divorcees.

(156 words)

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Chapter One:

Introduction

Under the leadership of Governor Frank Keating, Oklahoma launched a state-wide marriage initiative in 1999 with the desired outcome of cutting the number of divorces in Oklahoma by one-third in ten years.¹ In order to attain the results he wanted, Gov. Keating enlisted the help of psychologists and marriage experts Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott. Unfortunately, this initiative did not work, and in 2016 was entirely cut from the budget of Oklahoma. In 2013, analyst Clifton Adcock wrote, “Over the past dozen years, the rates of divorce, unmarried cohabitation, and single-parent families have increased in Oklahoma while the percentage of households with married couples has declined, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.”² Some critics complained that the initiative took money away from more critical needs. Others complained that the goal was unattainable and, therefore, a waste of time. Whatever the reasons, the initiative failed, and Oklahoma's divorce rate remains higher than the national average.

Since the marriage initiative failed and divorce rates in Oklahoma have remained well above the national average, one may ask, “What can be done to help those who are divorced?” That help is where the church comes in. After quoting Genesis 2:24, Jesus continues and declares in Mark chapter 10: 9 (NIV), “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”³

¹ Les Parrott and Leslie Parrott, *Building Better Marriages in Oklahoma* (Tulsa: River Oak Publishing, 2001), 6.

² Clifton Adcock, “Oklahoma Marriage Initiative Fails to Halt Rising Divorce Rates,” *Oklahoma Watch*, last modified November 27, 2013, accessed August 29, 2019, <https://oklahomawatch.org/2013/11/27/marriage-story/>.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New International Version (Nashville: Harper Collins Christian Publishing, 2011).

The ultimate goal of marriage is until death do us part. However, as statistics have shown, that is not always the case. According to the American Psychological Association, “about 40 to 50 percent of married couples in the United States divorce. The divorce rate for subsequent marriages is even higher.”⁴ A 2008 study by sociologists Bradley Wright, Christine Zozula, and Bradford Wilcox found that divorce rates among individuals with no religious affiliation (51 percent) had higher divorce rates than Catholics (34 percent), Jews (39 percent), mainline Protestants (39 percent), and evangelicals (45 percent).⁵ Even if one were to accept that those with religious affiliation have a lower percentage of divorce than those without, it still means that more than three out of every ten marriages within the church will end in divorce.

Ministry Context

This reality of more than three out of every ten marriages within the church will fail drives the ministry context behind this project. The Cornerstone Church is a young church and an even younger replant. It was founded in 2014 by a group of families who had been abused and taken advantage of by their previous churches. One such example is when one of the founding families was asked to leave their previous church. This request was because the pastor wanted his daughter to marry the new youth pastor, and as long as they worked with the youth, the new youth pastor refused to accept the position. Another instance occurred when the founding pastor of Cornerstone Church was preaching at his previous church. During the sermon, someone in attendance stood up and asked a question unrelated to the sermon. Due to it not being

⁴ “Marriage & Divorce,” American Psychological Association, last modified 2019, accessed August 19, 2019, <https://www.apa.org/topics/divorce/>.

⁵ Bradley Wright, Christine Zozula, and Bradford Wilcox, “The Widespread View That Christians, Especially Evangelicals, Have Among the Highest Divorce Rates in the US may be Rooted more in ‘Moral Fears’ and Culture Wars Among and Between Conservative Christians and Non-Believing Critics than in Actual Fact,” *Religion Watch* 23, no. 7 (Sept-Oct 2008): 3.

immediately answered, the board told him that he was not fit to lead a congregation because he could not answer a simple question when asked. Each of the founding families has their own story about why they left, but these two are some of the reasons given as to why they felt abused and taken advantage of by their previous churches.

However, the founding families did not come from the same church. The single underlying thread that flowed through Cornerstone's founding was there is something wrong with the church, and it needs to be better. In less than a year, Cornerstone outgrew the pastor's living room and moved to a storefront. It remained there until a denominational leader approached the pastor about the possibility of merging with another church in town. Initially, there was much reluctance because the founding members feared they would again be saddled to a particular denomination and a specific way of operating as a church. After much prayer, the merger finalized in December 2017, and the two churches met as one for the first time in their building. The following year proved to have many growing pains and adjustments, but in late 2018 the church decided to stop trying to be the church for the members and instead be the community's church. For the first year after the merger, Cornerstone Church sought to strengthen all in attendance bonds, thereby strengthening the church. The singular purpose behind this decision was so that the new members could feel as though they belonged to the church, and their insight was valuable. The driving force behind the change of perspective was ensuring that new people knew about the church. There was very little outreach to the community for the first year because the focus was bringing everyone from two different churches together.

With this change in perspective, Cornerstone Church decided to develop a discipleship mentality and program to reach the communities and equip them. It was soon discovered that even though the immediate community is small and close-knit, the divorce rate is among the

highest in the state. In a report issued by the Oklahoma State Department of Health, in Wagoner County (where Cornerstone Church is located) between 1990 and 2017, a total of 2,375 marriage licenses were issued. In the same period, 2,202 divorce decrees were issued. The report also indicated that ten annulments had been granted during the same period.⁶ It is impossible to know precisely how many of the marriage licenses came from a previous divorce and subsequent remarriage, but suffice to say in 27 years, 163 more marriage licenses were issued than divorce decrees and annulments granted. This means that for every single divorce decree issued, there were 1.079 marriage licenses issued. However, in 1990 there were 188 marriage licenses issued compared to 448 divorce decrees. Meaning there were slightly less than 2.5 divorces to every marriage. For the first time in 2012, there were more marriage licenses issued than divorce decrees 274-265.⁷ This trend of more marriages than divorces continues through 2018, which is the last year of data publicly available. Further compounding the problem, a cursory glance at the phone book reveals that in the town of Wagoner, there are 26 churches. Wagoner is the county seat of Wagoner County.

One of the first identified areas that Cornerstone Church decided to focus upon was the divorced and remarried demographic, specifically in Wagoner. In 1850, Nathaniel Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter*. Within its pages, the story of Hester Prynne unfolds. After giving birth to a baby, Hester is forced to wear a scarlet “A” upon her dress to indicate that she is an adulteress. Tamala Ceasar explained her divorce and the reaction and treatment she received from her church. Ceasar writes, “I’ve been reminded that the Bible says remarriage is a sin and

⁶ Oklahoma State Department of Health, *Marriage and Divorce Statistics 1990 – 2017 By County of Issuance*, by Tom Bates. Annual Report, Oklahoma City: Oklahoma State Department of Health, 2018 www.ok.gov/health.

⁷ Ibid.

whoever marries a divorced woman will be committing adultery. I have been described as ‘tainted’.”⁸ Sadly, what the church is missing is that everyone is “tainted.” When sin entered the world, it tainted everything and everyone.

Since the merger, Cornerstone Church has seen its average Sunday morning attendance grow from the mid-50s to as many as 125 on Easter, with the average being around 75-80. Of those new attendees, there are mixed-race couples, divorced and remarried couples, widows and widowers, and single parents (both moms and dads). However, one common thread that runs through them is that they or someone in their direct family is divorced. For instance, one of the couples that helped found Cornerstone Church invited their friends who just remarried after an ugly divorce. That couple has since joined and invited other friends to attend and get involved. Another mixed-race family started attending because they heard that instead of being defined by one’s past, Cornerstone delights in one’s future. In that family, the wife has been married three times, and the husband twice. New people and families are getting involved, but it is not just the people in Wagoner. The truth is that fewer than 15 percent of those who regularly attend Cornerstone live in Wagoner. Of the founding members, none of them live in Wagoner. Wagoner simply was the middle point between where they all lived.

The phenomenon that is Cornerstone Church has even caught the attention of the state denominational leaders. This is despite the fact that Cornerstone Church has never openly affiliated with any denomination. Church leaders from other churches have visited Cornerstone Church for the Sunday morning worship service and have left uttering, “This is not normal.” On one instance, when the leader was leaving, he stopped and talked to the pastor and said, “This is

⁸ Tamala Ceasar, “Why the Church Needs to Stop Treating Divorce like the Elephant in the Room,” *Premier Christianity*, last modified August 2017, accessed August 19, 2019, <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2017/August-2017/Why-the-Church-needs-to-stop-treating-divorce-like-the-elephant-in-the-room>.

not normal. To see so many backgrounds all together worshipping and not worrying about what others are going to think.” The notion of being “not normal” causes the members of Cornerstone Church to rejoice. The foundation of Cornerstone Church is Jesus and exalting Him. If there is anything that gets in the way of worshipping Him, it is set aside. One of the founding principles is that a person’s past is never openly mentioned, no matter how bad. Therefore, alcoholics will walk in off the street and sit next to someone in a suit and tie and be welcomed. Cornerstone Church decided that someone’s past does not define them. That does not mean that they will not have a background check if they desire to work with the children or teens. When the church gathers in corporate worship as a collective body, a CEO is no more critical than the alcoholic sitting next to him. Collectively, the members of Cornerstone Church gather to worship Jesus and Him alone, instead of worshipping themselves.

As such, many conversations are had with individuals who are struggling with addictions, issues of divorce, or even suicide; amazingly, these individuals are not limited to church members or even attendees. They come from the immediate community and the surrounding communities. Therefore, Cornerstone Church is unique to meet individuals' physical and emotional needs, even if they refuse to have their spiritual needs met.

The birthing of this project happened through these interactions and conversations. When they are going through a divorce, many individuals, especially women, feel as though they are isolated and shunned. As Tamala Ceasar expressed earlier, she has been described as “tainted” by the church. This “tainted” notion is the same thought pattern that was evident at Cornerstone Church. Divorce is never the expected outcome of marriage. Ceasar declares, “No one enters a marriage expecting it to end in divorce.”⁹ Churches focus on marriage and emphasize it as

⁹ Ceasar, “Why the Church Needs to Stop Treating Divorce like the Elephant in the Room.”

important, worthwhile, and something to be protected. They are correct in that assertion. However, the world that Christians live in is not perfect. While worthy in their intent, churches' statements on the importance of marriage and the devastation of divorce tend to leave many believing that they are outsiders looking in.¹⁰ Because of their treatment by those they thought were their friends and fellow workers for the Lord, the result is often that they leave the church during this time, perhaps never to return.

Love and acceptance are bedrocks for Cornerstone Church. Instead of defining attendees by their past, i.e., the divorced woman or the widower, Cornerstone Church delights in assisting attendees in finding their future. Cornerstone Church places particular importance on the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17-19,

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

When someone misses a service on Sunday morning, they can be confident that someone within the church will have reached out to them by Sunday evening. When the author of Hebrews challenges the readers to spur one another towards love and good deeds, Cornerstone Church takes this as a personal challenge. It is one of the driving forces behind Cornerstone Church. From their perception of being abused and mistreated in church, the founders, from the beginning, were intentional about reaching out to those who they perceive as being abused and mistreated by the typical church and helping them.

¹⁰ Robert Buxbaum, "When Pastors Divorce: A New Approach to Congregational Healing," *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 49, no. 2 (1995). Pastor Robert Buxbaum discusses the impact his own divorce had on him, the congregation he was pastoring, and the ways the denominational leaders escorted him out of the pastorate.

Because of this, Cornerstone Church is unique in its ability to show empathy and love to others in bad situations. However, this is not the case with the majority of other churches and denominations. Pastor Robert Buxbaum's tale of being forced out of the ministry by an overzealous denominational board due to his divorce should be a wake-up call to the modern church. It shows the church that there is much to learn and that the church is behind the culture. Buxbaum has concluded that the reason the church is behind the culture is that, "Society no longer rejects the divorcing."¹¹ The only thing that divorced church members know is that they are "not eligible for remarriage in the church due to their divorce."¹² James 1:27 reads, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

According to *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, the word translated "widow" is "Feminine of a presumed derivative apparently from the base of chasma through the idea of deficiency; a widow (as lacking a husband), literally or figuratively -- widow."¹³ By the simplest definition, a woman who was married but now is "lacking a husband" is a widow. Therefore, a divorced woman by the simple notion of lacking a husband would fall under the same guidelines as a widow in James 1:27. As such, if the church desires to have a religion that is accepted by God the Father as pure and faultless, it must look after those who are orphans and lacking a husband (by extension a wife) in their distress. Yet, they know condemnation instead of grace and love. Divorcees need to know that God's grace overcomes even divorce.¹⁴

¹¹ Buxbaum, "When Pastors Divorce," 174.

¹² Hector A. Gonzalez, "Pastor's Theological Perspective on Divorce and Remarriage," *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* 31:1-2 (1999): 149.

¹³ "Strong's Exhaustive Concordance," James Strong, last modified 1890, accessed September 1, 2020, <http://rcbi-resources.yolasite.com/resources/Strong%20Exhaustive%20Concordance.pdf>.

Problem Presented

The divorce rate in America continues to grow both inside and outside the church membership. This would indicate that the number of divorces and, by extension, divorcees within the church are also going to continue to rise. However, divorcees have a hard time relating to anyone in church leadership for seldom have church leaders been divorced. There are programs such as DivorceCare that churches have begun to offer to help divorcees. According to the DivorceCare website, "Today, over 18,000 churches are equipped with one or more Church Initiative ministry programs."¹⁵ Yet, DivorceCare is specifically for the divorcee. Its design gives the church a tool to use to help divorcees in their time of need.

DivorceCare has made strides helping those affected by divorce, yet there continues to be nothing specifically designed to train church leaders. Church leadership might be the ones leading DivorceCare, but what steps and tools other than this particular program do they possess to offer empathetic grace-filled guidance to divorcees. Hartford Seminary performed and published a study in 1995, which showed 25 percent of clergywomen and 20 percent of clergymen had been divorced at least once. The study looked at several denominations, including Unitarian-Universalists, Assemblies of God, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Lutheran, American Baptists, Disciples of Christ, United Church of Christ, and Southern Baptist. The Unitarian-Universalists denomination led the way of divorced clergy with 47 percent of clergywomen and 44 percent of clergymen reporting to have been divorced. Within the Southern Baptist responders, the statistics were 4 percent of clergymen and 17 percent of clergywomen.¹⁶ As such,

¹⁴ Gerald L. Borchert, "1 Corinthians 7:15 and the Church's Historic Misunderstanding of Divorce and Remarriage." *Divorce and Remarriage Review and Expositor* 96 (1999): 126.

¹⁵ "Our History," DivorceCare, accessed September 5, 2019, <https://www.divorcecare.org/startagroup/about/history>.

especially within the more conservative denominations, inexperience with empathetically dealing with divorcees has made the situation worse and leads to a growing problem. The conservative problem becomes more evident when comparing the liberal Unitarian-Universalists who have a divorced clergy of roughly 45 percent compared to the conservative Southern Baptist, with roughly 10 percent of clergy being divorced. The problem is that many conservatives do not have personal knowledge of divorce and cannot offer empathetic guidance. The problem this project will address is the lack of training for church leadership to enable them to offer grace-filled empathetic guidance to divorcees.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this Doctor of Ministry project is to discover the similarities within divorces and analyze them in order to develop a training program designed to better equip church leaders in their efforts to offer grace-filled empathetic guidance to divorcees. Every divorce is indeed different; however, the possibility of discovering similarities that divorcees experience is vital in reincorporating them back into the church. By identifying, analyzing, and training the individuals in church leadership about those similarities, their efforts in offering effective, empathetic grace-filled guidance to divorcees will improve.

Definitions

There are many specific words or phrases that are going to be used in this project. Some of the words or phrases might be well-known; however, there is a possibility that they might not be, and to minimize any potential confusion, their definitions will be included. As such, the following words and phrases will be used, and when used, the corresponding definition will apply.

¹⁶ “Study Shows Average Divorce Rate Among Clergy,” Associated Press, last modified July 1, 1995, accessed September 5, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-07-01-me-19084-story.html>.

Adultery – Voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and another person who is not their married spouse.¹⁷

Cohabitation – The state of Oklahoma defines cohabitation as, “Cohabitation means that a man and a woman live together in a romantic relationship similar to marriage. However, the couple does not have to meet all the requirements as defined by common-law marriage.”¹⁸

Common-Law Marriage – Since this project is being completed in Oklahoma, Oklahoma’s guidelines will be used. The state of Oklahoma has set the guidelines that a common-law marriage must meet the following guidelines. The couple must have a permanent and exclusive cohabiting relationship and consider themselves husband and wife and “holding themselves out” publicly as married.¹⁹

Deacon – An appointed member of the local church who assists by serving other members and meeting material needs.²⁰

Divorce – The dissolution of a marriage contracted between a man and a woman by the judgment of a competent jurisdiction court.²¹

¹⁷ “Adultery,” Duhaime’s Law Dictionary, accessed September 5, 2019, <http://www.duhaime.org/LegalDictionary/A/Adultery.aspx>.

¹⁸ Aaron Thomas, “Remarriage and Alimony in Oklahoma,” DivorceNet, last modified 2019, accessed September 5, 2019, <https://www.divorcenet.com/resources/remarriage-and-alimony-oklahoma.html>.

¹⁹ “Common Law Marriage in Oklahoma,” Laws, last modified 2017, accessed September 5, 2019, <https://marriage.laws.com/common-law-marriage-oklahoma>.

²⁰ Mary Fairchild, “What is a Deacon?” Learn Religions, last modified January 23, 2019, accessed September 5, 2019, <https://www.learnreligions.com/what-is-a-deacon-700680>.

²¹ “Legal Definition of Divorce,” UpCounsel, last modified 2019, accessed September 5, 2019, <https://www.upcounsel.com/legal-def-divorce>.

Fault divorce – A type of divorce whereby one spouse is guilty of some offense that directly leads to the divorce. Most states within the United States of America no longer recognize this type of divorce.²²

Irreconcilable differences – A manner whereby a no-fault divorce is granted. It is a proclamation that two spouses cannot get along and that their marriage is broken and beyond repair.²³

Marital abandonment – Refers to a situation in which one spouse severs ties with the family, forsaking their responsibilities and duties to the family.²⁴

Marriage – A contract made in conjunction with the law, where a free man and a free woman reciprocally engage to live with each other during their joint lives, in the union which ought to exist between husband and wife.²⁵

No-fault divorce – A no-fault divorce refers to a type of divorce in which the spouse that's filing for divorce doesn't have to prove any fault on the part of the other spouse.²⁶

Ordination – The church's act in choosing, appointing, and setting apart through the laying on of hands certain persons to perform specific functions on behalf of the Church.²⁷ The two types of ordinations in this project are Deacon Ordination and Pastoral Ordination.

²² “Fault and No-Fault Divorce: An Overview,” FindLaw, last modified 2019, accessed August 28, 2019, <https://family.findlaw.com/divorce/an-overview-of-no-fault-and-fault-divorce-law.html>.

²³ Shannon Leamon, “What You Need to Know About Irreconcilable Differences,” Divorce and Your Money, last modified June 21, 2018, accessed September 5, 2019, <https://divorceandyourmoney.com/blogs/irreconcilable-differences/>.

²⁴ Dan Pearce, “Understanding Marital Abandonment,” Men’s Divorce, last modified 2018, accessed September 5, 2019, <https://mensdivorce.com/marital-abandonment/>.

²⁵ “Legal Definition of Marriage,” UpCounsel, last modified 2019, accessed September 5, 2019, <https://www.upcounsel.com/legal-def-marriage>.

²⁶ FindLaw, “Fault and No-Fault Divorce.”

Delimitations

Before continuing, there are a few proclamations and understandings that must be addressed. The first of these is the delimitations within this project. These are the self-imposed restraints of this project. This project is looking at strategies to reincorporate divorcees back into the church. As such, this is the first delimitation. This project will not look at data collected from individuals who have not been divorced in the same light as those who have. Additionally, this project is restrained because the individuals who will be looked at are currently in the church. As such, this will be a reactive project that will attempt to develop proactive strategies.

Another delimitation that must be acknowledged is those who are classified as church leaders will only be ordained individuals. As such, a non-ordained Sunday school teacher, though identified as a leader within the church, will not be classified as a church leader in this project. This restriction also applies to anyone who might be on staff at a church but is not ordained. This restraint is in place to ensure that church leaders have been set apart through the church's ordination process. Special consideration will be given to individuals who hold an ordination from a church other than the one they currently serve.

Additionally, special consideration will be given to those who are ordained but currently not serving in a local church. Pastoral ordination will hold more credence than a deacon ordination because the church's pastor will be held to higher standards by God than someone who holds a deacon ordination. If someone holds both a deacon ordination and a pastoral ordination, the pastoral ordination will be the one considered.

²⁷ Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *Must We Be Silent? Issues Dividing the Church* (Ann Arbor, MI: Berean Books, 2001), 131.

A final self-imposed restriction is for those who will be classified as “pastors.” In this project, “pastor” will mean the Senior Pastor as well as Youth Pastor, Music Pastor, Children’s Pastor, College Pastor, and Administrative or Executive Pastor, as long as they are ordained.

Limitations

Along with delimitations, there are limitations to this project. This project is designed in a three-fold manner. The first will be an anonymous questionnaire of church members. At the end of this questionnaire, those who participate will have a chance to share their contact information to have a group session with others to openly discuss issues and potential solutions. The second will be a questionnaire with church leaders that will be both a written and an oral questionnaire. This questionnaire will focus on church and denominational stances as well as personal beliefs. The final method will be the aforementioned group session. During this session, those directly impacted by divorce will scrutinize and evaluate topics as well as potential ideas and solutions.

Another limitation is that the questionnaire mentioned above for the church members will only be accessible online. This is to ensure anonymity unless the individual decides to relinquish their anonymity by giving their contact information. While it is impossible for one person to be able to identify everyone who might complete the questionnaire by their handwriting, it is possible to identify some.

Additionally, because of an inability to ensure that all church members complete the questionnaire, the possibility of incomplete results exist. Also, the results generated may not be entirely truthful. Both of these play a factor and are the reasons for the decision to have a small group panel as the third aspect of the study.

On the church leader side, they may provide incomplete information or refuse to answer specific questions because of the project's nature and study. Unlike the church member

questionnaire, the church leader questionnaires will be a physical paper questionnaire that they will be asked to fill out completely. The possibility exists that they will lose or misplace the paper, and the data not be correctly analyzed.

Another limitation is the size(s) of the communities that will be studied. Knowing that the average attendance of Cornerstone Church is only about 80 people, it could be necessary to include other churches in this study. However, the population of the towns and cities that those churches serve will play a factor. This project will be conducted in northeast Oklahoma, specifically in Wagoner and Cherokee Counties. Both of these counties have many rural areas that encircle a large city center. The United States Census Bureau estimates that as of July 1, 2018, the population of Wagoner County is 80,110, and Cherokee County is 48,675.²⁸ The vast majority of Wagoner County people are in the western portion of the county and result from spillover from the second-largest city in Oklahoma, Tulsa, which borders Wagoner County. Even if every person in Wagoner and Cherokee Counties participated in the study, that would mean that approximately 130,000 total people participated in the study. This population is but one percent of the total population of New York City. Therefore, the results garnered by this project will be specific to the region where the project was conducted and may not necessarily reflect the results of other areas.

Basic Assumptions

No project would be complete without first acknowledging that the researcher has certain assumptions about the project. The first assumption is that the individuals who complete the questionnaires will answer them completely and honestly. However, with a topic such as divorce,

²⁸ “Quick Facts: Wagoner County, Oklahoma; Cherokee County, Oklahoma,” United States Census Bureau, accessed August 28, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/cherokeecountyoklahoma,wagonercountyoklahoma/PST045218>.

this may not be the case. As previously mentioned, every divorce is different and has many underlying factors. Therefore, those who answer the questionnaire may hold back information to not feel hurtful emotions within themselves. To try to ensure that honesty is achieved, all questionnaires of church members will be anonymous. However, an optional section will allow the participant to relinquish their anonymity to be part of a larger group.

Another assumption is that, much like the church member questionnaires, church leaders will completely and honestly fill out the written church leader questionnaires. The difference between the church member questionnaire and the church leader questionnaire is that the church leader questionnaire will not be anonymous. Because of the lack of anonymity, church leaders may feel that they have to protect their church and denomination and, therefore, not answer questions thoroughly and honestly. To ensure complete and honest answers on the church leader questionnaires, individual churches and denominations will not be disclosed unless all church leaders for that church grant permission.

Continuing with the church leader questionnaires, the second section of the questionnaire will comprise their personal beliefs. The assumption is that they will be honest in their views, even if it goes against the church and denominational beliefs and standards. To ensure honesty, no individual church leader will be identified by name in the following pages. To ensure all church leaders' anonymity, their identities will not be disclosed and will remain known only by this project's researcher.

A further assumption is that the individuals who participate in this project will represent others within the area. As mentioned earlier, Wagoner and Cherokee Counties are rural counties with a singular large city where the majority of the county lives and multiple small communities surrounding them. Wagoner County has two such cities, but the disbursement of the county's

citizens follows the description above. Because the two counties have a similar distribution of their citizens, the assumption is that the sample studied will offer similar answers as others in the county.

Another assumption also stems from the questionnaire being utilized. However, this assumption is that individuals would want to participate in the larger group and be a part of this project's third aspect. Because of this project's nature, no one may volunteer to be part of a larger group of individuals.

Finally, to be transparent, it is worth noting that the researcher is the son of a multiple divorcee and is also married to a divorcee. The researcher's mother and wife will be asked to provide their perspective during the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire. If they decide they may be included in the focus group; that is the third aspect of this project. However, their answers will not be given more weight than anyone else's answers to avoid skewing the potential results.

Thesis Statement

Psalm 34:18 reads, "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." There are few descriptions more appropriate to describe the results of divorce than "brokenhearted" and "crushed in spirit." However, brokenhearted and crushed in spirit does not have to mean rejected by God. A 2015 study by Focus on the Family found that twenty percent of church-goers no longer attend church after a divorce.²⁹ A divorce does not necessarily have to mean that one is to be excluded from the faith. It may merely mean that one is hurt and needs to be ministered to uniquely. As a result of divorcees unnecessarily leaving the church, the

²⁹ Matthew Brown, "20 Percent of Church-goers no Longer Attend Church After a Divorce," Deseret News, last modified November 2, 2015., <https://www.deseret.com/2015/11/2/20575708/20-percent-of-church-goers-no-longer-attend-church-after-a-divorce>.

church and its leaders must be proactive in their approach to learning why they leave and developing strategies for bringing them back by ministering to them in intentional ways.

Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework

Literature Review

This review will focus on the literature relevant to the topic of divorce and remarriage within the church and works comparing and contrasting the doctrines in the New Testament. Additionally, the first century understanding of divorce will be examined, along with acceptable grounds for divorce and commonly held positions by mainline denominations. Next, beliefs held by divorcees, the offer of grace and forgiveness from God through the blood of Jesus Christ, and hope for the church's effort of reincorporation. This review will close out with a look at what is missing from the literature.

New Testament Teaching about Divorce

Renowned atheist Richard Dawkins notes that Jesus did not derive his ethics from Scripture because He was regularly departing from them. Instead, He argues that Jesus obtained His ethics from being observant and doing what is right for the people.³⁰ Intrigued by this observation, University of South Africa Professor of Old Testament and Near Eastern Studies, Eben Scheffler set out to examine similar texts that are found in the New Testament to determine where Jesus' ethics originated. Scheffler is particularly interested in the Matthean and Markan depictions of Jesus concerning divorce, specifically those found in Matthew 19:3-12 and Mark 10:2-12. He observes that when Jesus and the disciples leave the crowd in Mark 10 and return home that Jesus explains that the Law made adultery an act only committable by a male. However, adultery is not relegated to one gender; adultery can be (and is) committed by both genders.³¹ Scheffler concluded his dissection of the Matthean and Markan texts by noting that

³⁰ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), 250.

³¹ Eben Scheffler, "(The Markan and Matthean) Jesus' Appropriation and Criticism of the Torah: The Question of Divorce," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 67, no.1 (2011): 4.

Jesus was more concerned with human compassion than determining what to criticize and what to condone.³²

While examining the same passages of Scripture, senior professor emeritus of New Testament interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Robert Stein observed that Jesus did not teach a legalistic law, but instead sought to establish principles in order to reveal God's will.³³ In deviating from the stance that Scheffler presents, Stein gently nudges his readers to understand that instead of looking for the 'exception' whereby divorce is permissible, Jesus seeks to show and demonstrate that marriage is permanent.³⁴

In a further attempt to reconcile the passages of Scripture in Matthew and Mark, retired Southern Baptist Navy chaplain James M. Weibling presents an argument that Jesus completely forbade divorce. In response to those who argue that Jesus is using hyperbole in His discourse with the Pharisees, Weibling asks his readers why in the informal conversation with just the disciples in Mark 10:11-12, Jesus never indicated an acceptable exception.³⁵ Swedish theologian, author, and professor Evald Lövestam offers a possible reason for the informal setting's lack of exception. He notes that Matthew's exception clause is the equivalent in the Jewish framework of Mark 10. Lövestam further explains that in order to understand why the exception clause exists, one must understand the intended readers of the two Gospels.³⁶ Weibling notes that if an

³² Scheffler, (The Markan and Matthean) Jesus, 5.

³³ Robert H. Stein, "Is it Lawful for a Man to Divorce his Wife?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22, no. 2 (June 1979): 119.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

³⁵ James M. Weibling, "Reconciling Matthew and Mark on Divorce," *Trinity Journal* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 221.

³⁶ Evald Lövestam, "Divorce and Remarriage in the New Testament," in *The Jewish Law Annual*, ed. Bernard S. Jackson; (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 61.

exception clause were offered, the only reason would be because both the Jewish and the Greek cultures allowed the men to divorce arbitrarily.³⁷

Emeritus Professor of New Testament at Nazarene Theological Seminary and recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Wesleyan Theological Society, Alex R.G. Deasley argues that Jesus held that the only reason that Moses allowed divorce was because of human hardheartedness.³⁸ Deasley further insists that Jesus' teachings are based solely on the Old Testament Law, specifically the books of Genesis and Deuteronomy. This sentiment is agreed upon by professor and senior fellow at the Catholic Theological College in Melbourne Australia, Francis J. Moloney, who concludes that when discussing divorce, Jesus only uses Genesis and Deuteronomy and never mentions Malachi.³⁹

Kenneth LeRoy Smith, Sr.'s dissertation attempts to clarify Jesus' position. Much in agreement with Deasley and Moloney. Smith concludes that the Pharisees had wrongly interpreted the Mosaic Law for their benefit.⁴⁰ Andrew Cornes is the former director of training at All Souls, London, and current pastor of All Saints Church in Crowborough, East Sussex. Cornes adds additional clarification by noting how Jesus' comments on the Mosaic Law were explicitly made to distinguish God's will and man's sinfulness. He concludes that Jesus' words were designed to limit and control sins consequences.⁴¹

³⁷ Weibling, "Reconciling Matthew and Mark," 224.

³⁸ Alex R.G. Deasley, *Divorce & Remarriage in the Bible and the Church* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2000), 25-28.

³⁹ Francis J. Moloney, "A New Testament Hermeneutic for Divorce and Remarriage in the Catholic Tradition," *The Australasian Catholic Record* 92, no.3 (July 2015): 273.

⁴⁰ Kenneth LeRoy Smith, Sr., "Promoting Restoration in the Aftermath of Divorce" (D.Min. diss., Erskine Theological Seminary, Due West, SC, 2010), 27-30, Theological Research Exchange Network.

⁴¹ Andrew Cornes, *Divorce and Remarriage: Biblical Principles and Pastoral Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), 189.

Gerald L. Borchert is the Emeritus Professor at the Robert Webber Institute for Worship Studies and one of the translators for the New Living Translation of the Bible. Borchert offers that when the Pharisees began the exchange with Jesus in Matthew, that Jesus entered into a rabbinic debate not focused so much on marriage and divorce but instead on man's rights.⁴² Moloney appears to take the notion of man's rights a step further. He indicates that Jesus, being a Jew, clashed with the Mosaic Law not only in its understanding but also as it was practiced by those within the mainstream Jewish culture and religion not only during His lifetime but after it as well.⁴³

However, Jesus was not the only one to speak or write about divorce. The Apostle Paul also had much to say about divorce. Jay E. Adams is a former professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, director of the Doctoral program at Westminster Theological Seminary in California, and founder of the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation in Philadelphia. Adams identifies a topic that Jesus never mentioned and that the Apostle Paul answered in 1 Corinthians 7; the issue of a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever.⁴⁴ Professor of Political Science and adjunct professor of Comparative Religion and Communications at the University of Washington, Mark A. Smith, delves deeper into this topic by explaining what Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16.⁴⁵ Smith notes how Paul tends to offer additional information on subjects before providing his clarification. Smith points to verse 15 of

⁴² Borchert, "1 Corinthians 7:15," 127.

⁴³ Moloney, "A New Testament Hermeneutic," 277.

⁴⁴ Jay E. Adams, *Marriage Divorce & Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 45-50.

⁴⁵ Mark A. Smith, "Religion, Divorce, and the Missing Culture War in America," *Political Science Quarterly* 125, no. 1 (2010): 63-65.

1 Corinthians chapter 7 as one such example. Smith does offer criticism aimed directly at Paul for his lack of explicit guidance, noting how Christians over the years have had to attempt to understand what he meant with little in the form of guidance.⁴⁶

William A. Heth is a Professor of Biblical Studies, Christian Education, and Philosophy at Taylor University, and Gordon J. Wenham is a British Old Testament scholar. They offer a counter-argument to Smith by demonstrating how Paul is quoting from the Law, and therefore the needed guidance is provided through a historical perspective. Furthering their argument, Heth and Wenham argue that since Paul is quoting the Law, as Jesus did, that remarriage during the lifetime of either spouse is not prohibited.⁴⁷ Heth and Wenham further say that when Paul was writing 1 Corinthians 7, the “exception clause” was in the back of his mind and not something he was trying to avoid.⁴⁸ Vincentian priest, biblical scholar, and witness in the 1981 Creationism trial, McLean v. Arkansas, Bruce Vawter, adds to the argument. He notes that even though 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 does not deal with a “Pauline privilege” as it has come to be known, the notion of divorce is not far from Paul’s mind as he pens the letter.⁴⁹

Another area that many ascribe to Paul’s teaching is the issue of remarriage. Robert H. Stein addresses this topic by appealing to the notion of omission. He explains how in 1 Corinthians 7:15 when Paul writes that the believer is “no longer bound,” it implies the ability to remarry. Stein cautioned that the church or any other believer could not be dogmatic in their

⁴⁶ Ibid., 63-64.

⁴⁷ William A. Heth and Gordon J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce: The Problem with the Evangelical Consensus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), p75-78.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 138.

⁴⁹ Bruce Vawter, “Divorce and the New Testament,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1977): 536-537.

approach to this verse because neither permission nor rejection is explicitly stated.⁵⁰ Gerald L. Borchert joins Smith in the belief that Paul allows for remarriage. Using the same passage as Smith, Borchert denotes how the believer being “no longer bound” to their former spouse should free others from condemning all remarriages.⁵¹ Another to join this pattern of thought is Hector A. Gonzalez. Gonzalez holds a doctorate in Marriage and Family Therapy with concentrations in Child Development and Family Studies from Purdue University. He concludes that when one takes into account the notion of abandonment as seen in 1 Corinthians 7, if it is the non-believing partner that abandons the marriage, the other (or believing partner) is free to remarry.”⁵² Noted author and professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary, Craig S. Keener reminds his readers that the point of the passage in 1 Corinthians 7 is the avoidance of divorce. However, if remarriage is not to be permitted, Paul wrote the opposite of what he meant.⁵³

However, not everyone agrees with the notion that Paul allowed remarriage. One such person being Andrew Cornes. While he acknowledges that if an unbelieving partner were to leave a marriage, then the believing partner is free and no longer bound. The area of contention is the notion of Paul’s omission. Since Paul points out that the believer is no longer bound, there is no argument, but Paul does not say the believer can remarry; therefore, a dispute arises.⁵⁴ Kenneth Smith, Sr. appears to hold the same notion as Cornes. Smith, Sr. reminds the reader that

⁵⁰ Stein, “Is it Lawful,” 120.

⁵¹ Borchert, “1 Corinthians 7:15,” 128.

⁵² Gonzalez, “Pastor’s Theological Perspective,” 149.

⁵³ Craig S. Keener, . . . *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 61.

⁵⁴ Cornes, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 253-254.

legally, the woman was bound to her husband until he died or divorced her. However, if and when that occurs, Paul does not give her the right to remarry.⁵⁵

After examining the teachings of Jesus and Paul separately, it is essential to review them together to see if there are any areas where they diverge. David Instone-Brewer is one of the leading experts on divorce within the realm of New Testament teaching. He is a Research Fellow at Tyndale House in Cambridge, England. The litany of information and resources of Tyndale House has allowed him to examine and research the New Testament teachings in light of how the original hearers would have understood them. While highly praised for his work, his findings have led to controversy among his peers and fellow scholars. One such example is how he takes aim at the second-century church for being more concerned with sex than with properly teaching Jesus' and Paul's views on marriage, divorce, and remarriage.⁵⁶

Craig S. Keener applied his analysis a step farther by comparing the teachings of Jesus and Paul against each other in an attempt to discover where information might be lacking. In so doing, he observes that both Jesus and Paul allowed for remarriage even if both spouses were still alive.⁵⁷ It should be noted that both Jesus and Paul pleaded for the marriage to survive, but remarriage is allowable under certain circumstances. Robert H. Stein adds that he believes that Paul's words, specifically in 1 Corinthians 7:15, are similar to the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew and are not meant to be an absolute law to cover all situations.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Smith, Sr., "Promoting Restoration in the Aftermath of Divorce," 25.

⁵⁶ David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church: Biblical Solutions for Pastoral Realities* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2003), 154-6.

⁵⁷Keener, . . . *And Marries Another*. For an explanation on the teachings of Jesus see pp. 38-45; For an explanation on the teachings of Paul see pp. 54-62.

⁵⁸ Stein, "Is it Lawful," 120.

However, the views of Instone-Brewer and Keener have not always been accepted. It is only in the relatively recent history that a perspective other than adultery was acceptable for divorce. For instance, in 1788, Puritan minister Benjamin Trumbull published a book dealing specifically with Connecticut's divorce. In this book, Trumbull writes that divorce, as practiced in the state, is directly opposed to the authority and teaching of Jesus Christ. Continuing, Trumbull declares that the words of Jesus prove that divorce is unlawful in all cases except for incontinency.⁵⁹ This view was furthered by Yale College President Timothy Dwight IV, who had a series of lectures collected and posthumously published in 1818. However, President Dwight was not satisfied with just the words of Jesus; he included Paul's words in his lectures and declared that divorce was unlawful for any reason other than incontinency.⁶⁰

During his 31 year tenure at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon, J. Carl Laney specialized in the historical, geographical, and cultural backgrounds of the Bible; while becoming a prominent Reformed Church movement figure. Laney believed that Paul did not offer the "exception clause" as found in Matthew to his readers in 1 Corinthians because it had no application to believing Gentiles.⁶¹ The only options that Paul offers his readers are to stay single or to be reconciled. Laney suggests that this is appropriate because those are the same options that Jesus offered.⁶² As previously mentioned, many disagree with this position.

⁵⁹ Benjamin Trumbull, "An Appeal to the Public, Especially to the Learned, With Respect to the Unlawfulness of Divorces, in all cases, Excepting Those of Incontinency ..." (New Haven, CT: Meigs, 1788), 5-6, accessed September 2, 2019, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.35112204856746&view=1up&seq=10>. September 2, 2019.

⁶⁰ Smith, "Religion, Divorce, and the Missing Culture War," 61.

⁶¹ J. Carl Laney, "Paul and the Permanence of Marriage in 1 Corinthians 7," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25, no.3 (September 1982): 285.

⁶² Ibid.

However, David Dungan seems to strengthen Laney's position. The late David Dungan was a Distinguished Professor of the Humanities and Emeritus Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity and scholar of the synoptic problem. Writing specifically about the notion of remarriage, Dungan quips that the probability of Paul allowing for something (in verse 15) that a few verses earlier (verses 10-13) he forbade is highly unlikely. Additionally, he opines that remarriage was not allowed under the command of Jesus since the winning of the unbelieving spouse to Christ was to take precedence.⁶³

The late Joseph A. Fitzmyer served as an American Catholic priest of the Society of Jesus and professor emeritus at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, where he specialized in biblical studies, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Early Jewish Literature. He argues that the words of Jesus as found in the Matthew divorce texts appeal beyond Mosaic legislation and any ideal to the divine institution of marriage itself.⁶⁴ In agreement with Swedish theologian Abel Isaksson, Fitzmyer concludes that Jesus' view of marriage is an extension of an Old Testament attitude towards members of the priestly families who serve in the Temple.⁶⁵ Isaksson arrived at this conclusion by examining the priestly order found in Leviticus 21:7 and Ezekiel 44:22, coupled with Paul's writings in First and Second Corinthians and Ephesians. With the attitude towards the priestly families being one in which they were not allowed to divorce or even marry specific individuals, Isaksson sees this as Jesus' and Paul's motivation for the prohibition of divorce. Isaksson believes that Jesus taught His disciples that they were chosen for and consecrated to the service of God. Likewise, since God sanctifies marriage, it is also something

⁶³ David Dungan, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 97-98.

⁶⁴ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Matthean Divorce Texts and Some New Palestinian Evidence," *Theological Studies* 37, no.2 (1976): 226.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

that cannot be removed and forgotten.⁶⁶ Fitzmyer is quick to point out that this single area is one of the only areas that he and Isaksson agree.

First Century Understanding of Divorce

Any look at the literature that involves divorce would not be complete without looking at the Jewish understanding of divorce. Before continuing, it must be noted that this is a cursory investigation and is not meant to be exhaustive. The purpose of this investigation is to attempt to determine what the Jewish people would have understood by divorce and what it might have meant in religious circles.

Amy-Jill Levine holds the distinction of being a Professor of New Testament and the Mary Jane Werthan Professor of Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University. Additionally, Levine is an Affiliated Professor at Woolf Institute: Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations, Cambridge University. She is quick to point out that Jesus' teaching is keeping in line with Jewish teachers and prophets. This is because they had a particular worldview as well as a specific way of expressing it. She notes one such example being the debate over what is the proper way to follow the Torah.⁶⁷ Ultimately, the worldview that Jewish teachers and prophets held is what is essential.

To understand the Jewish teachers and prophets' worldview, it is vital to look at the two most prominent schools of thought – the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai. Robert H. Stein describes the significant difference between the Hillelites and Shammaites as a matter of proper interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1. Deuteronomy 24:1 reads, “When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found

⁶⁶ Abel Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple* (Lund, Sweden: Gleerup, 1965), 145-148.

⁶⁷ Amy-Jill Levine, “Misusing Jesus: How the Church Divorces Jesus from Judaism,” *Christian Century* (December 2006): 20.

some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house” (NASB). With the School of Hillel saying that a man can divorce his wife for any reason, even if she spoiled a dish for him. This line of thought comes from the notion of finding no favor in his eyes.⁶⁸ Jewish professor and researcher at Brown University specializing in the history of Jews and Judaism in antiquity, Michael L. Satlow adds that the interpretation of “does not find favor in his eyes” could mean something as petty as a wife’s declining beauty.⁶⁹

Whereas, the School of Shammai held that a man might not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her. The School of Shammai interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1 to mean that the only reason for divorce is because “he has found some indecency in her.” James M. Weibling has concluded that the intended meaning that Moses wrote has become obscured in time, which has led to heated debates about what constitutes a valid cause for divorce.⁷⁰ The founder of the Wilmington School of Bible at Liberty University, the late Harold L. Wilmington, adds another distinction between the two schools. He notes that the followers of Rabbi Shammai held that marital unfaithfulness as the only grounds for divorce that Moses offered. Whereas, followers of the more liberal Rabbi Hillel allowed a man to divorce his wife for virtually any reason.⁷¹

David Instone-Brewer points out that the idea of a divorce for any reason popularized by the School of Hillel is what became known as an “Any Cause” divorce, or in modern-times a no-

⁶⁸ Stein, “Is it Lawful,” 117.

⁶⁹ Michael L. Satlow, “One Who Loves His Wife Like Himself: Love in Rabbinic Marriage,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 49 (1998): 73.

⁷⁰ Weibling, “Reconciling Matthew and Mark,” 220.

⁷¹ Harold L. Wilmington, *Wilmington’s Bible Handbook* (Carol Springs, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1997), 538.

fault divorce.⁷² He also noted that by the time of Jesus, the “any cause” divorce was prevalent. This prevalence appears to be supported by the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus.⁷³ Josephus writes, “He that desires to be divorced from his wife for any cause whatsoever . . .”⁷⁴ Instone-Brewer notes that the Hillel style of divorce was not only the most common but also considered to be the most righteous form of divorce. He points to Joseph's story and his plan to divorce Mary, the mother of Jesus, quietly to bring no shame upon her (Matthew 1:19).⁷⁵ Instone-Brewer points to this any cause style of divorce as the basis for the question asked of Jesus in Matthew 19:3, “And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, ‘Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for *any cause*?’ (ESV, emphasis added).”⁷⁶ He also points out that the School of Shammai's influence is unknown because the only way their teaching has survived is through the writing of the School of Hillel. He further notes that after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, the only position that survived was that of the Hillelites.⁷⁷

Much like the Jewish understanding of divorce, it is necessary to investigate what the early church thought about divorce and how it viewed divorce. Again, this is not meant to be exhaustive. The purpose of this portion is to look at and try to figure out if the early church carried the same views as the church today or if they might have been different.

⁷² Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church*, 55-57.

⁷³ William Whiston, trans., *Josephus Complete Works* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishers, 1960), 99.

⁷⁴ Whiston, *Josephus*. This passage is found in Book IV of the Antiquities of the Jews, Chapter VIII, section 23.

⁷⁵ David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 115.

⁷⁶ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church*, 66.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 141. See also Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 114.

One of the first aspects that is noticed is that of culture. Renowned biblical scholar, former dean of the School of Theology, and professor of New Testament at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas Thomas D. Lea and Senior Professor of New Testament and Greek and the Dr. M.O. Owens, Jr. Chair of New Testament Studies David Alan Black explain how, in biblical times, only men could initiate a divorce and that women had no legal protection from the court.⁷⁸ British scholar of ancient philosophy, classics, and early Christian philosophy and theology, John M. Rist offers one possible reason why women had no legal protection. Rist notes that Ambrosiaster⁷⁹ held the position that women were not created in the image of God.⁸⁰ Rist goes on to declare that Basil of Caesarea had a similar stance as Ambrosiaster.⁸¹ Flatley Professor of Catholic Theology at Boston College, David G. Hunter, while acknowledging Ambrosiaster's position, also notes that Ambrosiaster was the only author in the first five centuries that permitted remarriage after divorce. Furthermore, Hunter suggests that Ambrosiaster was not alone in his approach to divorce and remarriage and that other authorities shared his views in the Western Church.⁸² Hunter points to Augustine, Tertullian,

⁷⁸ Thomas D. Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2003), 42.

⁷⁹ The Encyclopedia Britannica gives the entry for Ambrosiaster as the name given to the author of a commentary on St. Paul's Letters in the New Testament, long attributed to St. Ambrose (died 397), bishop of Milan. The work is valuable for the criticism of the Latin text of the New Testament. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ambrosiaster>, accessed September 3, 2019.

⁸⁰ John M. Rist, "Divorce and Remarriage in the Early Church: Some Historical and Cultural Reflections, in *Remaining in the Truth of Christ: Marriage and Communion in the Catholic Church*, ed. Robert Dodaro (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 82.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

⁸² David G. Hunter, "Did the Early Church Absolutely Forbid Remarriage After Divorce?," *Vergentis* 6 (July 2018): 47-48.

Lactantius, the Council of Arles in 312, and the Council of Elvira as examples that Ambrosiaster was not alone in his views.⁸³

Canadian theologian and researcher, David L. Snuth counters Hunter's argument on Tertullian acceptance of divorce and remarriage. Quoting his *Treatises on Marriage and Remarriage*, Hunter recounts that Tertullian held the position that if a woman were to remarry that she would have a husband in the flesh as well as one in the spirit and that it would result in adultery.⁸⁴ Snuth also addresses the Council of Elvira and the Council of Arles. Snuth's summation of the Council of Elvira was that remarriage was vigorously opposed, even to the point that if a woman were to divorce her husband, she would be excommunicated no matter the grounds. As for the Council of Arles, Snuth concluded that it was more lenient than the Council of Elvira and that there was no mention of ex-communication should a man remarry after his first wife's death.⁸⁵ Gordon Wenham agrees with Snuth but points out that of all of the church fathers, Ambrosiaster was the only one that did not believe remarriage after divorce constituted adultery.⁸⁶

With such a debate about what the church fathers did or did not support, it is essential to look at what happened within the church. The Jewish Chronicle Professor of Jewish Studies at University College London, M.J. Geller, proposes that one of the first things the early church did was abolish divorce within the church.⁸⁷ He then concludes that the basis of a divorce-free

⁸³ Ibid., 58-61.

⁸⁴ David L. Snuth, "Divorce and Remarriage from the Early Church to John Wesley," *Trinity Journal* 11, no.2 (Fall 1990): 133.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Gordon Wenham, "The Biblical View of Marriage and Divorce 3 – New Testament Teaching," *Third Way* (November 17, 1977): 7.

church can be found in the Sectarian literature of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the influence of the Essenes helped form early Christian doctrine.⁸⁸ Bruce Vawter seems to agree with the Essene notion forbidding divorce by offering the idea that marriage was indissoluble within the early church even beyond death.⁸⁹ This notion appears to be the acceptable case for most of church history. J. Carl Laney argues that divorce was prohibited in the western church until the sixteenth century when Erasmus suggested that the innocent party be able to divorce and remarry without penalty from the church.⁹⁰

Acceptable Grounds and Denominational Positions about Divorce

There is much debate about what is and is not an acceptable ground for a divorce. When asked, most scholars will point to Genesis 2, Deuteronomy 24, Malachi 2, Matthew 5 and 19, Mark 10, and 1 Corinthians 7. Genesis 2 is part of the creation account and sets the guidelines for a marriage. Deuteronomy 24 is part of the Mosaic Law, and is where the first acceptable ground for divorce is found.⁹¹ Malachi 2 declares that a man who hates and divorces his wife harms the one he should protect. Matthew 5, 19, and Mark 10 are the teachings of Jesus, and 1 Corinthians 7 is Paul's teachings. However, is that it?

From the School of Shammai perspective (which appears to be the same that Jesus adhered to in Matthew 19), divorce is only allowable due to adultery.⁹² Paul makes an allowance

⁸⁷ M.J. Geller, "Early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 57, no. 1 (1994): 82.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁸⁹ Vawter, "Divorce and the New Testament," 529.

⁹⁰ Laney, "Paul and the Permanence," 294.

⁹¹ For more information about what the acceptable ground is in Deuteronomy 24 refer back to the section on First Century Understanding on Divorce and the debate between the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai.

⁹² For the purpose of establishing acceptable grounds the School of Hillel perspective will not be considered since they advocated for divorce for any cause.

for desertion in 1 Corinthians 7, but only if an unbelieving spouse deserts a believing spouse. David Instone-Brewer asks the question, “What about abuse?”⁹³ He proposes an extreme situation whereby a spouse has never committed adultery or abandoned the other spouse, instead attempts to murder them. He asks, is that an acceptable reason for divorce within the church, or will the church forbid such a divorce?⁹⁴

Hector A. Gonzalez conducted a study of twelve pastors from different denominations, where he asked them their specific beliefs about divorce and what constitutes a permissible divorce within the church. Within his study, he divided the pastors into either prophetic or priestly categories, with the biggest classifier being that prophetic pastors held a relatively literal interpretation of the Bible.⁹⁵ Gonzalez discovered that the six prophetic pastors accept adultery as grounds for a divorce and allow for a literal interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7 where one party is a believer, and the other is not (Gonzalez does not give details about the priestly pastors for these two aspects). However, when he asked all twelve pastors about abuse within the marriage, all agreed it is not acceptable, but they disagreed whether it was an acceptable reason for divorce.⁹⁶

The notion of what is and is not an acceptable reason for divorce is of the utmost importance and is up for debate. H. Wayne House carefully presents arguments and counter-arguments from J. Carl Laney, William Heth, Thomas Edgar, and Father Larry Richards. House is a Distinguished Research Professor of Theology, Law, and Culture at Faith International

⁹³ David Instone-Brewer, “What God has Joined,” *Christianity Today* (October 2007): 27.

⁹⁴ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church*, 168.

⁹⁵ Gonzalez, "Pastor's Theological Perspective," 149.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 149-50.

University. Laney is a prominent Reformed Church movement leader. Heth is a Professor of Biblical Studies, Christian Education, and Philosophy at Taylor University. Edgar is a Distinguished Professor of New Testament Literature and Exegesis at Capital Bible Seminary in Lanham, Maryland. Finally, Father Larry Richards is the Founder and President of The Reason for Our Hope Foundation. The discussion ranges from no divorce and no remarriage to divorce and remarriage for a variety of reasons.⁹⁷ Joining the foray of acceptable divorce grounds is biblical scholar, theologian, and author Stanley A. Ellisen. In addition to sexual immorality, he includes prolonged desertion with no prospect of reconciliation as grantable even if not sought.⁹⁸

Lea and Black highlight that attempting to apply the words of Jesus in a fallen world is complicated. God intended that marriage is supposed to be a life-long commitment, and in a perfect world, it would be. However, Christians must not take Jesus' words so seriously that they interpret them in such a way to make divorce the unpardonable sin.⁹⁹ Additionally, they wrote when questioned about divorce in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul did not mention or provide the exception that Jesus did in Matthew because he was answering questions instead of preparing a systematic statement.¹⁰⁰

One of the leading Calvinist theologians and prominent complementarian, Wayne Grudem, is no stranger to this debate. For years, he held that the only grounds for divorce were adultery (Matt. 19:9) or desertion by an unbeliever (1 Cor. 7:15). He even went so far as to

⁹⁷ H. Wayne House, *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990). J. Carl Laney presents the position of no divorce and no remarriage, William Heth presents the position of divorce but no remarriage, Thomas Edgar presents the position of divorce and remarriage for adultery or desertion only, and Larry Richards presents divorce and remarriage under a variety of circumstances.

⁹⁸ Stanley A. Ellisen, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 57-59.

⁹⁹ Lea and Black, *The New Testament*, 240.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 411.

publish his textbook *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* in 2018 that stated the only reason for divorce was adultery or desertion. However, his view has now changed. In November of 2019, he presented a talk entitled “Grounds for Divorce: Why I Now Believe There Are More than Two.”¹⁰¹ During this talk, Grudem expressed his new belief by declaring, “Divorce for self-protection is morally permissible in situations where one spouse is repeatedly inflicting substantial harm on the other spouse, such that the abused spouse must leave the home for self-protection, and also in other situations that are similarly destructive to a marriage. This ‘substantial harm’ could be physical or mental/emotional (from verbal and relational cruelty).”¹⁰² As Grudem's change of belief signifies, the debate about what is acceptable and not when it comes to divorce is still to be determined. This debate is why it is essential to look at what is practiced in the church.

With Jesus and Paul allowing remarriage under certain circumstances, it is essential to look at the church's position. This section is not an assault on any particular denomination or its views. It just so happens that the most information about divorce and the denominational beliefs thereof come from the Roman Catholic perspective. Gerald L. Borchert argues that the unacceptability of divorce is so deeply rooted in the history of Christianity that no amount of research performed or discoveries made will make any difference.¹⁰³ Writing about his divorce, Pastor Robert Buxbaum concludes that society is ahead of the church. This conclusion is based

¹⁰¹ Rebecca Randall, “Wayne Grudem Changes Mind About Divorce in Cases of Abuse,” *Christianity Today*, last modified November 26, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/november/complementarian-wayne-grudem-ets-divorce-after-abuse.html>.

¹⁰² Wayne Grudem, “Grounds for Divorce: Why I Now Believe There Are More than Two,” last modified November 2019, accessed September 2, 2020, <https://www.waynegrudem.com/grounds-for-divorce-why-i-now-believe-there-are-more-than-two>.

¹⁰³ Borchert, “1 Corinthians 7:15,” 125-129.

on the treatment he received from his denominational leaders. He argues that unlike the church, “Society no longer rejects the divorcing.”¹⁰⁴

Buxbaum never identifies his denominational background in his article. However, he suggests that when a pastor divorces, it is assumed that the pastor will leave the congregation. Buxbaum then proceeds to discuss how this assumption and the subsequent removal harms the pastor and the congregation. He contends that the assumption of leaving and subsequent removal of the pastor teaches all that no matter what has been preached or taught, the church really cannot accept the divorced and divorcing and has nothing to offer in terms of healing.¹⁰⁵

Writing from the Roman Catholic perspective, Francis Moloney discusses how the Roman Catholic Church is steeped in tradition. It must face the confusion by examining and sticking to its traditions, instead of relying purely on mercy and compassion as Pope Francis would recommend.¹⁰⁶ Moloney seems to indicate that the Roman Catholic position must remain as it has been instead of how Pope Francis would prefer.

Mark A. Smith notes that before 1977, Catholic bishops in America threatened to excommunicate individuals who divorced and remarried outside of the church. He remarks how this provision no longer is in effect, but the Church’s canonical law updated in 1983 still forbids such individuals from partaking in the Eucharist.¹⁰⁷ Bruce Vawter highlights how for over a millennium, the Catholic church has exerted power over marriages within the church. In quoting the *Codex Iuris Cononici*, canon 1119, he described how the church could and sometimes dissolved a marriage if it desired that one of the married individuals work in a religious

¹⁰⁴ Buxbaum, "When Pastors Divorce," 174.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Moloney, "A New Testament Hermeneutic," 288.

¹⁰⁷ Smith, "Religion, Divorce, and the Missing Culture War," 71.

profession. Advancing to 1958 and beyond, he sheds light on marriage's pontifical dispensation even if non-believers have consummated the marriage.¹⁰⁸

Without giving specifics of precisely what churches or denominations he is talking about, Instone-Brewer comments how many churches have become so dependent on their traditions for how they do things that they leave no possibility for change when needed.¹⁰⁹ Stanley A. Ellisen adds that the Reformers did recognize specific grounds for divorce that were legitimate. However, the only way they were legitimate was when judged by the corporate body. He notes that since the early 50s, some Protestant churches have begun rethinking their positions because of the influx of divorcees.¹¹⁰

When looking at the *2000 Baptist Faith and Message*, which is the statements of faith of the Southern Baptist Convention, the topic of divorce is not included. The *Assembly of the Divines*, which governs the Presbyterian Church (USA), in Chapter XXIV, declares, “in addition to proscribing marriage of believers to papists, idolaters and heretics, permitted only two grounds for divorce: adultery and willful desertion. ‘The innocent party could remarry as if the offending party were dead.’”¹¹¹ The United Methodist Church’s stance on divorce is, “When a married couple is estranged beyond reconciliation, even after thoughtful consideration and counsel, divorce is a regrettable alternative in the midst of brokenness.”¹¹² Lutheran denominations

¹⁰⁸ Vawter, “Divorce and the New Testament,” 540.

¹⁰⁹ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church*, 203-204.

¹¹⁰ Ellisen, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 20-21.

¹¹¹ David Staniunas, “Marriage, Divorce and Mariners,” Presbyterian Church (USA), last modified June 26, 2014, accessed September 3, 2019, <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2014/6/26/marriage-divorce-and-mariners/>.

¹¹² *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 111.

believe that someone who divorces has broken the covenant with God, and as such, the full weight of the Law is upon them.¹¹³

Beliefs Held, Grace, Forgiveness, and Hope for Divorcees

Laura Petherbridge is an international speaker, featured expert on the DivorceCare DVD series, life coach, and she has been endorsed by *Five Love Language* author Gary Chapman as a leading expert in the struggle divorcees face within the church. In detailing her story of the day her marriage died, she shares how her divorce was a “soul-entrenched betrayal.” She describes how her husband went from being her safe place to nothing in a matter of seconds. She explains that one of the biggest challenges that she faced was knowing who she was.¹¹⁴

Tamala Ceasar is like Petherbridge. Ceasar describes being divorced and going to church as the elephant in the room – everybody sees it, but nobody is willing to talk about it or even admit that it is there.¹¹⁵ On Ceasar’s website, she includes the stories of other divorcees and how the church treated them. She tells the story of Loretta, who, after going through a divorce, realized that many people in her church found it difficult to support her and her son and also that some church leaders had no clue how to handle the situation, so they withdrew and hid.¹¹⁶

Another testimony from Ceasar’s website is that of Laurelle, who disclosed that even though she is not currently divorced, she is in the midst of a divorce. She claimed that she had

¹¹³ Church of the Lutheran Brethren, *Divorce and Remarriage* (Fergus Falls, MN: Faith and Fellowship Publishing, 2010), 8.

¹¹⁴ Laura Petherbridge, “10 Things I Wish Church Leaders Knew About Divorce,” Facts & Trends, last modified August 23, 2018, <https://factsandtrends.net/2018/08/23/10-things-i-wish-church-leaders-knew-about-divorce/>.

¹¹⁵ Ceasar, “Why the Church Needs to Stop Treating Divorce like the Elephant in the Room.”

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

been asked if she even tried in her marriage within her circle of church friends. When asked what they needed most from the church, Ceasar, Loretta, and Laurelle declared they needed support.¹¹⁷

This notion of church leaders not knowing what to do and so they withdraw and hide is present in the mind of church-going divorcees. It is not because they believe that their church leaders do not care about them. They believe that church leaders have no idea or understanding of what they are experiencing.

There is some validity to those beliefs. Oftentimes when a church sets forth an individual for church leadership, the “qualifications” found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are presented. In the minds of divorcees, the qualification that stands out to them is “the husband of one wife.” To the divorcee, this means that the church leader is automatically not like them and therefore has no way of personally understanding what is going on, even if the two have been life-long friends.

To complicate the matter further, Instone-Brewer has identified an area of concern. He notes that it is difficult to establish any consistency between the Old and New Testament within marriage and divorce. This lack of consistency is because traditional Christian teaching is that the Old Testament law is entirely different from the New Testament law. The Law of Moses allows for divorce and remarriage, and the traditional interpretation of the New Testament forbids both.¹¹⁸ This conflict leaves divorcees at a loss and feeling as though they have no support.

The final words of Jeremiah 31:34 read, “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” The author of the book of Hebrews repeats this same declaration in Hebrews 8:12. The idea that God will remember no more the sins of His people, or as some

¹¹⁷ Ceasar, “Why the Church Needs to Stop Treating Divorce like the Elephant in the Room.”

¹¹⁸ David Instone-Brewer, “Three Weddings and a Divorce: God’s Covenant with Israel, Judah and the Church” *Tyndale Bulletin* 47, no. 1 (May 1996): 1-2.

have phrased it, has caused many questions within the Christian faith. One curious person wrote the Billy Graham Evangelical Association (BGEA) and asked this same question about God forgetting sins and asked how it is possible. The BGEA replied that with God, all things are possible, then added that as humans, this is not something that man is not capable of doing before concluding the answer with Psalm 103:12, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."¹¹⁹

In 1989, Neil T. Anderson founded Freedom in Christ Ministries while he was a practical theology professor at Talbot School of Theology, La Mirada, California. Freedom in Christ Ministries' singular mission is to help people realize their new identity and freedom in Christ.¹²⁰ During his time at Freedom in Christ Ministries, Anderson identified what forgiveness is and what it is not. His list includes such things as forgiveness is not forgetting, forgiveness is a choice and a decision of your will, forgiveness sets you free, and forgiveness is choosing not to hold someone else's sin against them anymore.¹²¹ The notion of choosing not to hold one's sin against them is something Robert Buxbaum wishes would happen in more churches. He writes about a few divorcing pastors whom the denominational board removed and forced out of the ministry. In particular, he recounts the story of a female pastor who was the victim of abuse in her marriage and decided to file for divorce. Her superiors suspended her from ministry entirely and told her that she needed to be punished for her divorce.¹²² He notes that churches are

¹¹⁹ "Answers," Billy Graham Evangelical Association, last modified March 8, 2011, <https://billygraham.org/answer/how-can-god-forget-our-sins-which-is-what-i-understand-the-bible-says/>.

¹²⁰ "Mission," Freedom in Christ Ministries, accessed September 2, 2020, <https://ficm.org/about-us/mission/>.

¹²¹ Neil T. Anderson, *The Bondage Breaker* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2000), 222-224.

¹²² Buxbaum, "When Pastors Divorce," 174.

supposed to be places of healing and growth, yet most denominations are the first to throw out the hurting if the pastor is the one hurting.¹²³

Theologian and author G. Edwin Bontrager argues that the timing of the divorce (before or after salvation) is an irrelevant point. The most important aspect is that forgiveness is found through God, and the divorcee can still find inclusion within God's Kingdom. He concludes that it is the church's responsibility to act as an agent of forgiveness.¹²⁴

The notion that Bontrager puts forth that it is the church's responsibility to act as agents of forgiveness leads directly to grace. Protestant theologian and former Distinguished Professor of Theology at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon, Millard J. Erickson explains that the grace of God is how He deals with humans, not based on their merit or worthiness, but instead according to their needs. In other words, God deals with humans based on His goodness and generosity.¹²⁵ Grace and forgiveness must go hand in hand for the divorcee and the church. Gerald L. Borchert explains that the message of God's grace is not foreign to a correct understanding of the issue of divorce. He identifies that divorce is a tragedy, but it is not an unpardonable situation, and God's grace can turn tragedies in one's life into possibilities for their future.¹²⁶ President Emeritus and Professor of Faith and Public Life at Fuller Theological Seminary, Richard Mouw, recounts a story of one of his friends who has had two divorces. He tells that with the first divorce, his friend went to the pastor seeking advice and guidance, to be told that God would have a hard time accepting him from now on. With his second divorce, he

¹²³ Buxbaum, "When Pastors Divorce," 184-186.

¹²⁴ G. Edwin Bontrager, *Divorce and the Faithful Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1978), 154-173.

¹²⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 1998), 320-1.

¹²⁶ Borchert, "1 Corinthians 7:15," 129.

went to another pastor, and that pastor said to him that things happen and that he still had a future ahead of him.¹²⁷ This story reflects how vastly church leaders differ when it comes to divorce. Yet, what can never be forgotten is that divorce is not unpardonable, which leads to the hope of acceptance among divorcees.

“At one time or another, every sincere follower of Jesus struggles to formulate a Christian perspective regarding divorce.”¹²⁸ This struggle does not only apply to individual Christians, but it also applies to the church as well. As Richard Mouw’s preceding accounts demonstrate one pastor (and by extension, church) holds that divorce is something that God will have a hard time accepting, while another sees it as a non-issue. Robert H. Stein reached a somewhat controversial conclusion while trying to reconcile the passages in Matthew and Mark, where Jesus is asked about divorce by the Pharisees along with those in 1 Corinthians. Stein concluded that to make the statements of Jesus and Paul legal maxims to cover every situation would be wrong because neither Jesus nor Paul sought specific laws to include every possible situation. Instead, they were giving principles that would be guides to help the Church.¹²⁹ Stein further concludes that the Church needs not minimize the failure that divorce signifies, but instead needs to assure both individuals that God delights in forgiveness and that God forgets forgiven sin.¹³⁰

Bruce Vawter describes how Paul had to shift the context of his writing from that of a Jewish audience (as Jesus had) to a Gentile audience. Vawter then argues that on the same

¹²⁷ Richard Mouw, “Divorce is Tragic, But There is Hope,” Religion News, last modified April 5, 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2018/04/05/divorce-is-tragic-but-there-is-hope/>.

¹²⁸ Weibling, “Reconciling Matthew and Mark,” 219.

¹²⁹ Stein, “Is it Lawful,” 120.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

grounds of shifting context, other situations might arise in the modern world that require accommodations in the same manner experienced from the Matthean, the Lucan, the Markan, and the Pauline churches.¹³¹ It is recognizing that the context is what needs changing, not the content. Eben Scheffler provides another example of context change. He writes about how in the first century and before, polygamy was acceptable. Yet, today when polygamy is forbidden in most industrialized countries, if Jesus' teachings against divorce were to be applied in today's context, it would result in the worst kind of legalism imaginable.¹³²

Scheffler's claim is debatable, but it shows how the context of the message must be considered. Returning to the previous extreme example given by David Instone-Brewer about attempted murder and whether it is an acceptable ground for divorce, this is not ever directly addressed in the Bible, yet it is a reality today. Richard Lyon Morgan, who volunteers in pastoral care for persons with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia, has written a book entitled *Is There Life after Divorce in the Church?* While it might be a funny and catchy title, it is a reality for divorcees. The former pastor of Trinity Community Church in Tallahassee, Florida, the late Michael A. Braun, writes about a young lady from a very affluent family in the church he pastored. A few years after performing her wedding, she informed him that she was filing for a divorce because of a lack of marriage fulfillment. He describes reaching out and counseling her but being told to stop by the board of the church. He backed down and wrote of his regret for caving in to their demands. He then challenges the church to "get its hands a little dirty."¹³³

¹³¹ Vawter, "Divorce and the New Testament," 539-540.

¹³² Scheffler, (The Markan and Matthean) Jesus, 5.

¹³³ Michael A. Braun, *Second-Class Christians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 17-25.

Discovery

This literature review has examined the teaching found in the New Testament in regards to divorce, the understanding of divorce in the first century, the acceptable grounds for divorce as well as denominational positions, and finally, the beliefs held by divorcees and how grace, forgiveness, and hope for divorcees is possible. However, there is a topic that is missing in this review and literature in general. That topic is the role of church leaders in the reincorporation of divorcees back into the church.

It is not because there is a lack of information. There are many books about divorce; some of them are worthwhile to read and explore, while others are not. If one types “divorce” into a Google search, over 500 million results appear. This amount of information begs the question of why there is nothing available to help church leaders as they minister to divorcees. As previously mentioned, there are programs available for divorcees that some churches operate. Still, nothing is specifically designed to offer church leadership knowledge and guidance when the divorcee walks through the church door and needs assistance.

Recently, research has been conducted about blended families and the issues that church leaders face when dealing with those specific families.¹³⁴ However, this research focuses on equipping church leaders with the knowledge and tools needed to minister to blended families effectively. However, a blended family is simply a family where, at minimum, one of the parties has experienced a divorce. Within the “Theoretical Foundations” section of this project, divorce statistics will be examined, but for now, suffice to say that divorce rates for second and beyond marriages are much higher than those of first marriages. So while there is research to help

¹³⁴ William J. Perry, "Blended Families in Conflict: Essentials a Pastor Must Know" (DMin diss., Liberty University, 2013); Donna Hornik, "Can the Church get in Step with Stepfamilies," *U.S. Catholic* 66, no.7 (2001): 30-38; Ronald Lee Beck, "Effective Blended Family Ministry in the 21st Century Church" (DMin Thesis, Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009).

minister to blended families, the gap remains between initial divorce and remarriage (if it ever happens). The design of this project is to fill that gap.

Theological Foundations

Within the Bible, there are multiple accounts of Jesus interacting with either a divorcee or someone committing an act that would be grounds for a divorce. The first of these stories is the Samaritan woman's story at the well found in John chapter 4. The point in this account that needs emphasizing is when Jesus offers her living water, and she asks for it. The next few verses read,

He told her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true." (John 4:16-18)

This exchange helps set the tone for Jesus' ministry to the divorced, widowed, outcast, and downtrodden of His time and setting the example for His followers to do the same today. Ancient hearers would have heard the proclamation of her having five husbands and that the man she was with now not being her husband and immediately looked down on her. The circumstances as to why she had been married five times would be irrelevant. The sure fact that she was would be enough for her to be an outcast of society. However, instead of looking down upon her, Jesus revealed Himself to her.

Verse 25 reads, "The woman said, 'I know that Messiah' (called Christ) 'is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.'" In verse 26, Jesus replies, "I, the one speaking to you – I am he." Jesus knew society would look down upon her because of her past, yet He chooses to love her and provide for her eternal needs. Most importantly, verses 39-42 show how Jesus used her and made her valuable to the Kingdom of God. Because of her testimony, many Samaritans from the town believed in Jesus.

Writing about Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, Research Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology and Director of the Center for Biblical Studies at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Andreas J. Köstenberger, explains that this encounter had to bridge three major gulfs: 1) the ethnic gulf, 2) the religious gulf, and 3) the moral gulf. Köstenberger argues that the primary topic for this narrative is mission.¹³⁵ Between the time that the woman leaves (verse 28) and returns (verse 40), Jesus delves deeper into their mission, specifically evangelism for the outcasts. His disciples returned and urged Him to eat, only for Jesus to tell them that He has food they know nothing about. Jesus then explains, "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish this work" (v. 34). Jesus asks His disciples about a saying, "It's still four months from the harvest," only to tell them to open their eyes because the fields are ripe for the harvest. Emeritus Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, as well as co-founder of The Gospel Coalition, D.A. Carson explains this to mean, "Jesus is then saying, 'You think a certain gap must exist between sowing and harvest, but I am telling you that I have just sown the seed and the harvest is already taking place.'"¹³⁶

The proclamation from Jesus to His disciples to open their eyes and gather the harvest is Him giving them their ministry and purpose. The ministry of Jesus' disciples, and by extension, all those who proclaim to be Christians is to be sowers and harvesters. Jesus reminds them in verse 37 and 38 that, "One sows and another reaps is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor." Harold L. Wilmington notes, "Jesus exhorted his disciples concerning the importance of their

¹³⁵ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Encountering Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 73.

¹³⁶ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 229.

ministry.”¹³⁷ Carson writes, “They [the disciples] have already been commissioned to significant ministry; here, they are told that their fruitfulness is only possible because of the work of others before them.”¹³⁸

However, this is not the only story of Jesus meeting with someone who is an outcast in society. In John chapter 8, one finds the story of the woman caught in adultery. This account is vital for multiple reasons. Unlike the woman at the well, there is no indication that this woman had ever been married. Instead, she was caught in the very act that Moses allowed divorce for in Deuteronomy 24:1 – adultery.

Andreas Köstenberger refuses to write anything about this passage, citing, “We will not discuss the story of the adulterous woman in 7:53-8:11, because it is not found in the earliest manuscripts of John’s gospel and is almost certainly not original.”¹³⁹ Whether the story is authentic or not is not up for debate in this project. However, this story’s use further explains Jesus’ love and care for the outcasts of society.

In verses 3 and 4 of chapter 8, the Pharisees and the Law teachers brought a woman caught in adultery to Jesus to have Him prescribe punishment upon her. They quote the Mosaic Law and ask what Jesus has to say. He refuses to answer and instead bends down and writes something on the ground. As they keep demanding an answer, Jesus stood and said, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (v. 7). He then bent back over and continued to write on the ground. The crowd began to leave until Jesus and the woman were the only ones remaining. In verse 10, “Jesus straightened up and asked her, ‘Woman, where are

¹³⁷ Wilmington, *Wilmington’s Bible Handbook*, 609.

¹³⁸ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 231.

¹³⁹ Köstenberger, *Encountering Jesus*, 90-1.

they? Has no one condemned you?’ ‘No one, sir,’ she said. ‘Then neither do I condemn you,’ Jesus declared. ‘Go now and leave your life of sin.’”

This story illustrates Jesus’ grace. He had every right to condemn her, but instead, He extended grace. The Pharisees and the Law teachers did everything they could to condemn her and make Jesus pick a side. Instead, Jesus showed mercy. Wilmington writes that Jesus’ forgiveness and urging to end her ways showed “the wonderful balance between God’s grace and human responsibility.”¹⁴⁰ If it was true that she was committing adultery, then the woman has the responsibility to own up to her offense. However, instead of judging her and not letting her have the chance to do better next time, Jesus was respectful and allowed her to change her life.

In his closing words about this account, Carson points his readers to John 3:17, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” He then closes by writing, “The proper response to mercy received on account of past sins is purity in the future. NIV’s *leave your life of sin* establishes the point directly.”¹⁴¹

These two are not the only societal outcasts that Jesus showed grace and forgiveness. Located in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 9:20–22, Mark 5:25–34, Luke 8:43–48) is the woman's story with the issue of blood. According to the Mosaic Law,

When a woman has her regular flow of blood, the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean till evening. Anything she lies on during her period will be unclean, and anything she sits on will be unclean. Anyone who touches her bed will be unclean; they must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening. Anyone who touches anything she sits on will be unclean; they must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening. Whether it is the bed or anything she was sitting on, when anyone touches it, they will be unclean till evening. (Leviticus 15:19-23)

¹⁴⁰ Wilmington, *Wilmington’s Bible Handbook*, 613.

¹⁴¹ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 337.

Under normal conditions, this woman would have been unclean for seven days. However, Mark 5:25 says she was “subject to bleeding for twelve years.” Thus, she was unclean for twelve years. This meant that anyone who touched her would have also become unclean, so the probability of her having any associates or people she could talk to regularly is doubtful. The *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* reads, “Because intercourse was forbidden in this condition, and because Jewish Pharisaic tradition commonly encouraged divorce if a couple of childbearing age could not produce offspring, her condition had either prevented her marriage or ended it.”¹⁴² In her desperation, she reached out and touched the bottom of Jesus’ garment, causing Jesus to declare, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be free from your suffering” (Mark 5:34).

Another societal outcast would be the leper that Jesus healed in Matthew 8. Societal laws required lepers to be outside the city gates, and as someone approached, they had to scream, “Unclean.” Yet in Matthew 8, a leper approaches Jesus, knelt before Him, and declared, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” In verse 3, Jesus heals him and sends him to present himself before the priests to offer his gift and return to society.

Each of these people were societal outcasts in one sense or another, be it divorced multiple times, wrong religion, adulterer, an issue with bleeding that makes one unclean, or a leper. Yet, Jesus made time for each of them by meeting them where they were and restoring them for the Kingdom of Heaven. In this same manner, church leaders need to understand that their job is the same job that Jesus gave the disciples. They are to be on mission and seek to evangelize those who are outcasts. Tamala Ceasar’s story in Chapter One is a perfect example of

¹⁴² *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 1698.

an outcast. After her divorce, her church described her as “tainted.”¹⁴³ The woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery, the woman afflicted with bleeding, and the leper were all “tainted,” but Jesus made time for them and met them where and when they needed Him the most.

Theoretical Foundation

The pastor (*poimēn*) is to be the shepherd of the flock under his or her watch. This flock includes all who are in that particular church. Proverbs 27:23 reminds the shepherd, “Be sure you know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds.” This appeal, though, is not just for the Senior Pastor of the church. It is for all who have been set apart by the church. It is for the pastor(s) as well as the deacons. Author, blogger, and featured speaker on Focus on the Family, Elizabeth Oates shares a statement that a dear friend of hers shared with her many years ago. Her friend declared, “I think the church doesn’t know what to do with divorced people because the effects of divorce are so far-reaching.”¹⁴⁴

This statement is eye-opening and scary at the same time. Divorce is not just something that affects the parents and then is over. Statistics have proven this time and again. In the United States, 60 percent of second marriages end in divorce. Additionally, 73 percent of third marriages end in divorce. The average age of couples going through their first divorce is 30 years old, with 60 percent of all divorces involve individuals aged 25 to 39. The children of divorce are 50 percent more likely to marry another child of divorce. Finally, a person is 147 percent more likely to experience divorce if a close friend gets divorced.¹⁴⁵ Nicolas H. Wolfinger is a

¹⁴³ Caesar, “Why the Church Needs to Stop Treating Divorce like the Elephant in the Room.”

¹⁴⁴ Elizabeth Oates, “Pastoral Care for Divorced Women,” Care Leader, last modified June 13, 2016, <https://www.careleader.org/pastoral-care-divorced-women/>.

Professor of Family and Consumer Science and Adjunct Professor of Sociology at the University of Utah. He pushes these stats farther by stating that the risk of divorce is 50 percent higher when one spouse comes from a divorced home and 200 percent higher when both partners do.¹⁴⁶ In Exodus 34:7, God declares, “Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.” Divorce has the potential to be the generational curse found in this verse if it has not already achieved it.

This potential generational curse is why it is vital for church leaders to know and understand how to talk to divorcees. There can no longer be a hands-off approach to divorce in the church. Yes, divorce is tragic and is a breaking of God’s commandment, but so is neglecting people in their time of need. As the overseer(s) of the flock that God has placed under one’s leadership and guidance, it is that leader’s responsibility to empower his people. How is empowerment achieved? It varies from person to person and situation to situation.

However, there is a problem. As of this writing, there are numerous programs and guides for divorcees and their care. The most popular of which happens to be entitled DivorceCare. Yet, when one searches for a program designed to help equip church leaders as they work with divorcees, one does not exist. There are support groups for divorced pastors established in 1997 by other divorced pastors in the state of Kentucky.¹⁴⁷ There are reports of pastor starting

¹⁴⁵ “Divorce Statistics: Over 115 Studies, Facts and Rates for 2018,” Wilkinson & Finkbeiner Family Law Attorneys, last modified 2019, accessed September 6, 2019, <https://www.wf-lawyers.com/divorce-statistics-and-facts/>.

¹⁴⁶ Nicholas H. Wolfinger, *Understanding the Divorce Cycle: The Children of Divorce in their Own Marriages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 107-115.

¹⁴⁷ Ken Walker, “Divorced Pastors form Network to Help Others Facing Crisis,” Baptist Press, last modified May 14, 1997, <http://www.dev.bpnews.net/3336/divorced-pastors-form-network-to-help-others-facing-crisis>.

DivorceCare groups within their church. Yet, nothing for equipping pastors to minister to divorcees.

This lack of church leader knowledge is why this project exists. This project will anonymously ask divorcees the tough questions that church leaders would not ask in person. After analyzing the answers, a program will be developed whereby church leaders can be trained and taught what divorcees admit are needed. So that in the future, when the church leaders are approached for counsel or guidance by a newly divorced individual, they will be better equipped in their task. Not because of personal experience, but because they have received information directly from other divorcees about what they needed in their darkest moment. Additionally, this program will offer suggestions of things church leaders can implement in their churches to attract divorcees back to the church. Instead of continuing to be “tainted” as Tamala Ceasar classified her experience, the divorcee is embraced and loved.

Returning to the previous statistics, “If a person has strong religious beliefs, the risk of divorce is 14 percent less.”¹⁴⁸ Fourteen percent does not sound like much, but it translates to one out of every six marriages. That means that if a person with children has been divorced and is loved on and included in the church, their children, instead of their divorce rate being 50 percent as Nicholas H. Wolfinger discovered it could be 36 percent. This 36 percent is lower than the national average for first-time marriage divorces – 41 percent.¹⁴⁹

By better equipping church leaders to minister and guide divorcees, the generational curse of divorce within the church has the chance to drop to a point below the national average.

¹⁴⁸ Wilkinson & Finkbeiner, “Divorce Statistics.”

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

Church leaders are always looking for ways to reclaim territory from Satan. What better way than to take something that God created, Satan destroyed, and restore it for the children effected.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Design Intervention

The purpose of this project is to identify potential solutions and train church leaders in those solutions so that they can implement them and better minister to individuals who are divorced. Because every divorce is different, it is not possible to develop a single one-size-fits-all solution. This project will look at all respondents collectively and attempt to ascertain any common factors within their divorces. Therefore, the design of this project must be multifaceted. It seeks to obtain not only qualitative responses but also quantitative. In so doing, this researcher hopes to better understand divorcees and how they perceive the church and its leaders.

The intervention design for this project includes multiple approaches. The first item of the design is an anonymous online questionnaire given to the divorced church members. If there is a church member who does not have internet capabilities or is more comfortable utilizing a paper version of the questionnaire, paper copies will be available. However, the online version is preferred. There is one exception. That exception is that the members of the church's leadership will not complete this questionnaire. They will have a different questionnaire that they will be asked to complete. The church members' questionnaire will contain questions that are both quantitative and qualitative.

Initial Divorcee Questionnaire

From this church members' questionnaire, henceforth known as the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire, the first collection of data will happen. This questionnaire will be given to all divorced church members, with the exception of those mentioned above. The first question will again explain the study's purpose and offer the respondent the opportunity to have his or her answers not used in the study. After giving the option to opt-out of the study, respondents will be

asked to provide their age, marital status, number of marriages, and number of children. The number of marriages ensures that someone who has been divorced and remarried is not missed in the analysis.

The first question in the demographic section is gender, which is broken into male, female, and desire not to answer. After gender is the question about their age group; this question has seven options: 18-25, 26-34, 35-43, 44-50, 51-60, over 60, and desire not to answer. The demographic section's final question asks for the respondent's current marital status and their number of marriages. The options are: remarried, widowed, divorced, and desire not to answer, along with a blank where the respondent can enter a response for their number of marriages.

After the initial demographic questions, there are questions that ask for the respondent to rate their level of trust and comfort with the members of the church leadership on a scale of “Completely Uncomfortable/Untrustworthy” to “Completely Comfortable/Trustworthy.” Before these questions, there is a definition that reads, “The phrase ‘a member of church leadership’ means anybody that is a pastor, deacon, or small group teacher/leader within the church.” These questions include a section where the respondent can give a reason for their rating. The specific wording for these questions is, “Are you comfortable speaking with a member of church leadership about issues directly relating to divorce?” and “Do you trust the guidance of members of church leadership when speaking to them about issues directly related to divorce?” These ratings are important because it will allow the church members to identify potential areas where there is a disconnect between the church leadership and the members. The final question of the second section asks, “When dealing with issues directly related to divorce, who are you most likely to talk to in order to receive guidance?”

Beginning with the third section of the questionnaire, the respondent will be asked about their specific divorce. There are questions that ask if the respondent has anyone in their immediate family who has ever experienced a divorce. If so, what is their relation to the divorced individual? For this study, “immediate family” will consist of one’s mother, father, sister(s), brother(s), and children. The following questions will be very personal by design. They will include such topics as in the weeks and months following the divorce, how was your life directly impacted. Another question will be what did the church do to assist you during those times. Yet another question will specifically ask what interaction did the respondent have with the church leaders during the first few weeks and months following the divorce and what they would have desired the church and church leaders to do during those times.

These questions and ones similar to them will help establish a base level whereby intervention can start being developed, and perceptions might begin to change regarding how church leaders treat divorcees in their congregations. The specific questions in the third section are, “What year was your divorce,” “Prior to the divorce did you seek guidance from a member of church leadership,” “At the time of the divorce, were you an active church member? An active member of a church is someone who attends church an average of 3 times a month.”

These questions will be followed by, “At the time of your divorce, did you have children,” and “At the time of your divorce, how old were your children.” The respondent was given eight options and encouraged to select all that apply. Those options were Infant (under 1), Toddler (1-3 years), Pre-school (4-5), Grade School (kindergarten – 5th grade), Middle School (6th – 8th grade), High School (9th-12th), College-aged and/or out of the house, N/A. Next, the respondent will be asked if they were in any leadership position prior to their divorce and what happened because of the divorce. The next question will be, “Prior to the divorce, how were you

treated by the members of church leadership?” The options that will be offered for the respondents are “Welcomed,” “Invited to participate,” “Encouraged to help,” “Neglected,” “Unwelcome,” “A burden,” and “Other.” The same options will be given for the next question with the difference being instead of, “Prior to the divorce,” it reads “Immediately after the divorce.”

The next two questions will again be comparison style questions. They will read, “What did the church leadership do to help you during/after the divorce.” The options that will be given are, “Offered or suggested somewhere for counseling,” “Helped with monthly utility bills,” “Helped with finding a place to live,” “Helped with rent,” “Helped with food,” “Helped by providing clothing to child(ren),” “Talked to child(ren) about what was happening,” “Nothing,” and “Other.” The final question of the third section will be, “Do you think divorce is a hard topic for churches to discuss? Why or why not?” This question will also be asked in the church leader’s interview to compare the results directly.

Immediately following the questions of how the church and church leaders treated the individual will be questions that look into what programs the church offered during those initial weeks and months following the divorce. For instance, did the church provide any counseling or have a small group similar to DivorceCare that one could attend. Another possible answer might be that the church realized that divorce was an issue and started a Sunday school class (or other small groups) explicitly for divorcees. With this group's intention being a place that divorcees could learn and heal with others who have experienced the same. It is the hope that in this section, an intervention will be identified that a church has utilized. However, it is entirely possible that in this section, no intervention will be identified.

The specific questions in the fourth section of the questionnaire will be as follows, “Which of the following programs for divorcees does your church offer?” The options for this question are, “DivorceCare,” “Lilac Tree,” “The Oasis Experience,” “Evryman Programs,” “Other,” and “None Offered.” This question will be followed by asking, “Did you participate in any after-divorce support group?” The next questions will be, “If an after-divorce support program was offered would you attend?” and “If the church were to offer programs or activities for divorcees would you attend?” The next question will ask, “Which of the following divorce specific programs or activities does your church offer?” The options will be, “Small group and/or Sunday School class,” “Single again transition classes,” “Self-defense classes,” “Mentorship programs,” “Other,” and “Nothing offered.” The same options, except “Nothing offered,” will be given for the question, “What could the church offer that would make you want to attend and be involved?” The final questions of the fourth section will ask, “Was there any specific Scripture that helped you through the divorce,” “What was the Scripture,” and “How did it help?”

The next section of the questionnaire will ask the respondents what they would like to see the church do in the future regarding divorcees. This section will allow the respondents to give their advice and opinions for future intervention. This section and the proceeding section will be the most critical sections of the questionnaire. These two sections will tell the tale of what is currently happening and what divorcees and others directly affected by divorce desire to happen in the future. It is in these two sections that the respondent can genuinely get their buy-in into the study.

The fifth section will consist of two questions, which will be fill-in-the-blank style questions. The first question is, “What advice or suggestions would you like to give about

divorce for individuals in church leadership?” The second question will be, “How could the church better serve those who have been divorced?”

The final section of the questionnaire will offer the respondent the opportunity to identify themselves and be part of a focus group that will look directly at the issues discovered in the sections dealing with what is currently happening and what they would desire to happen in the future. The questionnaire will be available for completion for one month.

Church Leader Questionnaire and Interview

Church leaders will be given a questionnaire to complete during the same period that the church members complete their questionnaires. This questionnaire will be an informational questionnaire consisting of questions specifically about the denomination and their church. As the church leader completes this questionnaire, they will also be scheduled for a personal sit-down audio-recorded interview.

The denominational questionnaire will consist of five questions. However, there is a bold and underlined section before the questions which reads, “Please do not place personal positions within this questionnaire.” The purpose of this questionnaire is to obtain official denominational and church positions regarding divorce. Therefore, the first question is, “What is the specific denomination with which your church is associated?” The second question is, “Does your denomination and/or church have any official position regarding divorce? *For instance, divorce is unacceptable under all circumstances.* If so, what is that position?” The third question is, “Does your denomination and/or church have any official position regarding those who have been divorced? *For instance, divorcees are not allowed to be ordained.* If so, what is that position?” The fourth question is, “Does your denomination and/or church have any official position regarding proper acceptable grounds for divorce? *For instance, divorce is only*

acceptable as a result of adultery. If so, what is the position?” Finally, the last question is, “If someone who is a leader in the church (small group teacher, deacon, pastor) gets divorced, what are the denominational and/or church ramifications? For instance, he or she is asked to resign and/or relinquish ordination.”

After completing the questionnaire, the researcher will conduct a face-to-face audio-recorded interview with the church leader. During these interviews, a series of questions will be asked to identify the individual church leaders’ personal positions and beliefs about divorce and divorcees.

The first series of questions that will be asked of the leaders are, “With what denomination are you affiliated,” “How long have you served in ministry,” and “How long have you served in your current capacity and what is that capacity?” Like the church members’ questionnaires, the church leaders will be asked if they have ever been divorced. If the church leaders answer “no” to these questions, the interview will focus on their personal beliefs about divorce. However, if the church leaders respond “yes” to being divorced, then the same questions that were asked in the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire will be added to the end of the interview.

The next set of questions will look at the leaders’ personal positions about divorce and what they believe to be acceptable grounds for divorce. Immediately following these questions, the first scenario will be presented. The scenario is, “What would your guidance be in the following scenario? A member of the church files for divorce because that member’s spouse is having an affair. The member has come to you seeking guidance on what to do next.” The same scenario will be repeated two more times, but with different church members approaching them. The next individual will be a recognized leader in the church, such as a Sunday school or small group leader who is not ordained, and the final individual will be an ordained member of the

church. The purpose of this scenario is to determine if the same guidance would be offered regardless of position or if guidance would be changed because of the individual's status within the church.

Another scenario will then be presented, and the question will be asked if the scenario is an acceptable reason for divorce. The scenario is, "A husband admits to his wife that he is addicted to pornography and any time they are intimate he is envisioning someone else." The roles are then reversed, and the same question is asked if it is an acceptable reason for divorce. Afterwards, the leader will be asked what guidance would be given to each of the spouses in the above scenario. A third scenario will then be presented, again to determine if it is an acceptable reason for divorce. This scenario is, "One spouse is an alcoholic and when drinking becomes verbally abusive, but not physically, towards the other spouse." The scenario will then be changed to where the abuse is now physical, and the leader will be asked if that is an acceptable reason for divorce. As with the pornography addicted scenario, the leader will then be asked what guidance would be offered to each spouse.

The final two scenarios are designed to be polar opposite in nature. However, they both ask if that particular scenario is an acceptable reason for divorce. The first scenario is, "A spouse gets permanently injured and is no longer able to work and provide the lifestyle that the couple has grown accustomed to." Whereas, the second scenario is, "One spouse attempts to murder the other spouse." The second scenario seeks to answer the question that Dr. David Instone-Brewer posed in the "Acceptable Grounds and Denominational Positions about Divorce" section of Chapter 2. The final question of the Church Leader interview will be, "Do you think divorce is a hard topic to deal with in the church? Why or why not?"

If at any point, church leaders desire that their information and input not be used or considered during the analyzation phase, they may state their desire, and any information recorded before that point will not be used. If a church leader makes such a declaration, the recording device will be turned off, the interview will immediately end, and the interview in its entirety will be deleted from the recorder.

Focus Group

Once the church members' questionnaire and the church leaders' questionnaire and interviews have been completed, the focus group will convene. The focus group will consist of only those individuals who identified themselves and desired to be part of the group. There will be no limit as to how many participants can be involved in the focus group. As with the interviews with the church leaders, the focus group will also be recorded. The topics discussed during this focus group will come directly from those previously given in the questionnaire. A large portion of the group will focus on what they desire to see in the future and how it would have benefitted them during their time of divorce. It will be from the focus group that the majority of the intervention will be developed.

All recordings will begin with an explanation of the study, followed by everyone identifying themselves. After identification, a verbal statement of their desire to participate, and an agreement for the session to be recorded will be given. Even though these individuals will identify themselves and offer verbal agreeance to be recorded, their personally identifiable information will not be used in any version of the final report. If, at any point, participants within the focus group desire that their information not be used or considered during the analyzation phase, they may state their desire, and any information recorded before that point will not be used. If the individual is part of the focus group, he or she will be asked to leave the group so

that there is no chance from that point forward that the researcher may inadvertently use that individual's information.

The focus group's first few questions will be similar to those asked in the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire. The first few questions will be, "In what year was your divorce," "What was the basis of your divorce, i.e., adultery, irreconcilable differences, etc.," "At the time of your divorce, were you an active church member? An active member is defined as someone who attends church at least three times per month," "After your divorce, did you continue to attend the same church or did you change churches," and "What was the reason behind your choice to stay at or change churches?" After these initial questions, the focus group's remainder will focus on the divorcees' perceived treatment by church leaders and what they would like to see in the future for other divorcees. The final three questions of the focus group will be, "If you could offer a single piece of advice for the church leadership in how they interact with divorcees, what would it be." "What do you wish the church leaders would have known about divorce that may be beneficial to others in the future," and, "What could the church do to better serve those who have been divorced or are going through a divorce?"

All recordings will continue until a final prayer is offered. If, after the recording has ended, participants desire to provide more to the conversation, the individuals will be given two options. The first option will be for the researcher to start the recorder again, and the individuals identify themselves and their agreeance to have the conversation recorded. The second option will be for the individuals to write their ideas in an email and send said email to the researcher's school-supplied email address, fully understanding that others can access any information transmitted via email.

Church Leader Workshop

After the focus group and personal interviews with the church leaders are completed, the information obtained will be synthesized and used to create a four-part workshop for the church leaders. The first workshop will focus on the church leaders' personal beliefs in comparison to those held by the church and denomination. This information will be obtained through the individual interviews, the church leader questionnaires, and the information found in the “Acceptable Grounds and Denominational Positions about Divorce” portion of the Literature Review in Chapter 2 above.

The second workshop will show the church leaders the raw scores from the church members' questionnaire's trust and comfort level questions. By allowing the church leaders to get a glimpse of how their members score them on trust and comfort concerning divorce, this researcher hopes that the church leaders will begin to see where a disconnect might exist and make any necessary changes to eradicate said disconnect.

The third workshop will address the problems that divorcees faced in the weeks and months after their divorce. These are the problems that they identified in their questionnaire and from the focus group. This insight from those directly impacted could be invaluable. It has the potential to expose weaknesses in the church leaders. This workshop will revisit the second workshop and answer why the level of trust and comfort on the part of the church members are where they are.

The fourth and final workshop will give the church leaders the information that divorcees said they desired and what divorcees identified as being beneficial in the weeks and months after their divorce. The third and fourth workshops will explain what the divorcee experiences from the church in the negative and positive, if applicable, and what they specifically desire and what

has helped. These two workshops will expound on the strategies for the reincorporation of divorcees back into the church.

Post-Workshop Activities

After the workshops, a one-month pause in research will be given. This research pause is so that the church leaders can incorporate the information received during the workshops into their ministry. Once the break has concluded, a new online questionnaire will be given to those who participated initially (if needed, paper copies of the questionnaire will be available). This questionnaire will be much shorter than the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire, but will still incorporate some of the same questions and a few additional questions.

The first question will ask, “Did you complete the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire?” This question is to ensure that those who are completing the follow-up questionnaire provided answers initially. If someone answers “No” to the first question, their answers will still be counted, but their responses will not be weighted as heavily as those who did. The next two questions will be the same as from the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire. “Are you comfortable speaking with a member of church leadership about issues directly relating to divorce,” and “Do you trust the guidance of members of church leadership when speaking to them about issues directly related to divorce?” The purpose is to determine if there has been a change in perception from the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire to the follow-up questionnaire.

However, it will now include questions such as, “From the time that you took the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire, have the church leaders made any noticeable change in regards to how they interact with divorcees? If so, please explain your answer.” The final question in the follow-up questionnaire will be, “What additionally would you like to see in the future to help reincorporate divorcees back into the church?” Those who participated in the focus group will be

asked to identify themselves on the second questionnaire to allow for specific and individualized comparison of answers.

It is from this second questionnaire that any type of measurable results could begin to materialize. Furthermore, it is understood that the measurability in this study is subjective rather than concrete. However, the most critical aspect of ministry is people, and this study seeks to assist a specific people group, namely church leaders, in their attempts to offer guidance to divorcees. As such, the measurability must come from those affected rather than from those assisted. Therefore, the results' subjective nature is the only way to identify the success or failure of the project.

Implementation of the Intervention Design

In order to implement the above design, many aspects must be taken into consideration. One issue is the availability of resources. The resources for this project consist of two church member questionnaires (online versions as well as paper versions), a church leader questionnaire, a list of personal interview questions and scenarios for the church leader interview, a list of questions and topics for the focus group, and a recording device. If a respondent desires to complete a paper version of the questionnaire, proper writing utensils and a clipboard will be needed.

As previously mentioned, the design of this study is multifaceted. As such, the implementation and data collection are also multifaceted. The application of the research will be identical to the design. However, the analysis of the collected data will be complicated.

Initial Divorcee Questionnaire

The first aspect of implementation will be the creation of the church members' questionnaire and the creation of the denominational and church positions questionnaire. The

church members' questionnaire, as mentioned above, will include multiple sections, each of which will have to be analyzed individually. The first section that will need to be analyzed is the demographics section. This section will provide the researcher with the information to determine whether or not those responding to the questionnaire demonstrate a similar demographic breakdown as the broader community they will represent. For this section, the analysis will consist of a quantitative style of analysis.

With the church members' questionnaire, the subsequent analysis will be both a quantitative and qualitative analysis. The quantitative section will determine the respondents' trust and comfort levels concerning the church leadership as plotted by the respondent on a scale of complete trust/comfort to complete untrustworthy/uncomfortable. The qualitative aspect will be their responses and reasoning behind why they gave the answers they did. This data will be crucial for the second workshop, as described above.

Beginning with the third section of the church members' questionnaire, collecting specific data will be vital. This is in no means downplaying the first two sections, but those sections focused on demographics and feelings of trust and comfort; whereas, from this point on, the data focuses on previous intervention attempts of the church and ways that the church and its leaders have either helped or hindered the divorcee. In the third section and those that follow, the questionnaire's focus turns to the issue of divorce. Unlike with the first and second sections, where the data was collected and analyzed collectively, these sections will be collected and analyzed individually. This individual analyzation means instead of stating there were 40 respondents with an average age of 37 and 2 children, the data will be discussed in terms of two respondents said this. Another two said that.

After collecting and analyzing the data from the church members' questionnaire, a focus group will be formed to discuss the individualized data results. The focus will be identifying the current gaps and solutions within the church and offering advice and strategies for potential solutions in the future. As previously mentioned, this group will consist of individuals who are divorced (whether they have remarried or not) and individuals who have experienced divorce via an immediate family member. This group will be invaluable for the researcher by discussing issues of divorce from an insider's perspective rather than as an outsider looking in.

Denominational, Church, and Leadership Positions

For the second aspect of the study, which deals with the denominational positions, church positions, and the individual beliefs and views of the church leaders, this analysis will again be collective and individual. The collective aspect will focus on the written questionnaire and the denominational and church positions' responses. This data will be analyzed along with the data found in the "Acceptable Grounds and Denominational Positions about Divorce" of the Literature Review. In so doing, this data will attempt to determine whether or not there is a dominant position about divorce within American Christianity regardless of denominational affiliation. It will also show whether or not there are churches within specific denominations that hold to the denominational standards or if they have deviated from them. If there is a deviation, further analysis might show that this deviation results from the personal beliefs and positions of the church leaders. The potential for church leader deviation will turn the focus from a collective approach to an individual approach.

The individualized aspect of the data collection will turn its attention from the denominational and church positions to those held by the individual church leaders. In the above scenario of a deviation from denominational standards and views, it will be in this individualized

analysis that the potential reason might be discovered. Additionally, the individual church leaders' beliefs will be analyzed in the same way as those of the church members' questionnaire's final portions, with one exception. That exception is for church leaders who have been divorced.

Divorced church leaders will have their information analyzed twice. The first analysis will be with the church members' questionnaire and the second alongside the church leaders. The reasoning for this double analyzation is that the divorced church leader is in a unique position as a divorcee and a church leader. The divorced church leader has experienced both situations and will have a deeper understanding of the issues than a non-divorced church leader.

However, divorced church leaders are not going to be included in the focus group. This inclusion refusal is based solely on the notion that church leaders exert a great deal of influence upon church members. There is a potential that with the church leaders included, the conversation with the focus group might not be as robust and beneficial. If there are multiple divorced church leaders, then the discussion of a church leader's only focus group will be approached. If such a focus group does occur, the same questions and topics will be utilized, as discussed in the previous group.

Baselines

From this analysis, multiple baselines could be formed. One baseline could be a conflict between the official position of the denomination or the individual church and that of the church leaders. For instance, if the denomination does not allow for divorcees' remarriage, yet the church leader would be willing to remarry a divorcee under certain circumstances. Such conflicts in multiple church leaders could demonstrate a disconnect between the denomination and those

put in place to teach and protect those views. These differences between denominational/church positions and individual church leaders' positions will be the first workshop's topic.

Another baseline could be determined by taking information from the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire about their level of trust and comfort with the church leadership members and comparing it to their comfort and trust levels during the follow-up. Suppose it is discovered that a difference exists. In that case, this is significant because it will demonstrate that the divorcees' perception of the church leaders has changed due to the leader's awareness and efforts towards them. This difference would then begin to be able to explain a potential disconnect between church leaders and divorcees. The topic of the second workshop is this disconnect.

The third and fourth workshops will be built upon the information from the final portions of the church members' questionnaire and the focus group. Even though the information's analysis will be individualized for the workshops, it will have to be presented collectively with individual highlights. This information will be given to the church leaders so they will be able to hear the data and see it as well. With this information, the church leaders can begin to incorporate it into their ministries.

As important as all of the previous analysis has been, the most critical analysis of the entire study will be the final analysis. After the workshops have been presented, and time has passed, the subsequent questionnaire will determine if any change has occurred. This study's ultimate purpose is not merely to do research and ask questions, but rather to see lives impacted and churches changed. The single most significant determining factor of the project's success will be the change after the workshops. The final questionnaire was discussed and detailed in the previous section, but its importance cannot be overstated.

This second church members' questionnaire is where results will be determined. As previously mentioned, these results will be subjective and, as such, must be individually analyzed. Except for those who participated in the focus group self-identifying themselves on the second questionnaire, it will be impossible to compare individual first questionnaires to second questionnaires specifically. However, it could be possible to use the data collected to see the overall change by comparing the original and second.

From the individuals within the focus group questionnaires, it will be possible to make a 1-to-1 comparison and see if trust and comfort have changed and whether or not, in their view, the church leaders have made any noticeable changes. It will also allow for time to pass between the focus group and the second questionnaire for any new ideas to emerge as to what they would like to see the church leadership do to help divorcees. Whereas from the anonymous participant questionnaires, much of the same analysis can occur, but it will be impossible to do the same 1-to-1 analysis unless the participant offers something specific in the first questionnaire and references it again in the second.

As noted earlier, there is no way to give an absolute result for this study. After all, this study is based on perception instead of hard facts. Therefore, criticism will always exist with this study's findings because instead of being concrete results, the results are subjective. Subjective results can and will change with the passage of time and a change of location. It is vital to know and understand that this study's results are specific to the individuals in this study and may not necessarily be replicated if performed again with different individuals.

Chapter 4: Results

As mentioned in chapter 3, every divorce is different. As such, it is not possible to develop a single one-size-fits-all solution. Thus, the evaluation of the Initial Divorcee Questionnaires and the church leader interviews are vital to discover any underlying issue and whether church leaders are addressing them.

Evaluation of Initial Divorcee Questionnaires

The creation of the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire and its utilization established a baseline perception of churches and church leaders by divorcees. This data was collected entirely through the use of a voluntary online questionnaire. The entire questionnaire is located in Appendix A. The questionnaire consists of forty-two questions. The first section consists of two questions to obtain demographic information and two questions to determine the marital status and number of marriages. The second section looks at the comfort and trust level of divorcees concerning church leaders. Additionally, divorcees are asked who they would turn to when they needed advice.

The third section begins the discussion about divorce, those affected by it, and their church leaders' treatment before, during, and after it. The fourth section looks into whether there was any sort of post-divorce support offered to the divorcee. The final section provides the opportunity to give the church leaders suggestions on how to serve divorcees better. A total of 28 divorcees completed the questionnaire.

First Section – Demographic Results

The first section of the questionnaire revealed that seventy percent of the respondents were female. Additionally, fifty-nine percent were above the age of 51, thirty percent were

between 35 and 50, and the final eleven percent were between 26 and 34. The average number of marriages was two, and fifty-six percent reported being remarried.

Second Section – Comfort and Trust Results

The comfort level question began in the second section; sixty percent responded that they had some degree of discomfort. In contrast, only thirty-seven percent responded they were completely comfortable speaking with a church leadership member about topics directly related to divorce. A few of the reasons given for their discomfort were, “Do not want to talk about personal issues,” “Church leaders do not care,” “Church leaders are too judgmental,” and “Do not know who are the leaders in the church.” Conversely, respondents' main reason for having complete comfort talking to church leaders was “Personal knowledge and experiences.” The one respondent that answered neither comfort nor discomfort reasoned that, “Church leaders are not trained to handle divorce, but they still try.” When it came to trusting, the results were that fifty-two percent said they felt that church leaders were “Completely Trustworthy,” whereas forty-one percent had some level of lack of trust. The most common reason for their complete trust was, “You have to trust someone,” and “The Bible teaches to trust your leaders.” The top three responses for lack of trust were, “Lack of relevant advice or useless advice,” “Lack of empathy or concern,” and “Leaders talk to others that have no business knowing.” The second section's final question asked who the respondent would go to for guidance when dealing with divorce. Friend/family member and pastor tied as the most common answer, with each receiving twenty-eight percent.

Third Section – Problems Results

The third section revealed that fifty-four percent of those who divorced did not seek guidance before the divorce from a church leadership member, even though sixty-three percent

replied that a member of church leadership knew of the divorce before it was happening. Eighty-five percent responded that they had children at the time of their divorce, and seventy-eight percent of those children were younger than the 5th grade. When asked if they served in any form of a leadership role at the time of their divorce, twenty-six percent indicated they did. Those serving served in roles ranging from Sunday school teacher to Deacon, and one was on staff full-time as the Music Minister. Thirty-nine percent of those serving as leaders in the church said they were asked to resign their positions or voluntarily left.

The next section of the third section focused on the treatment of divorcees by the church leaders. This section allowed for multiple answers, so the percentages will probably add up to over one hundred percent. Before their divorce, seventy-four percent described their church experience as welcoming, thirty-three percent were encouraged to help, twenty-two percent were invited to participate in church activities, and seven percent said they felt neglected. However, when asked about their treatment after their divorce, fifty-eight percent said they felt welcomed, nineteen percent left the church entirely, fifteen percent were encouraged to help, fifteen percent were invited to participate in church activities, twelve percent replied they were unwelcome, seven percent replied a burden and neglected. The final four percent as outcasts. This perception change demonstrates that from before their divorce to after it, sixteen percent of divorcees perceived that they were no longer welcomed, eighteen percent were no longer encouraged to help, and seven percent were no longer invited to participate in church activities.

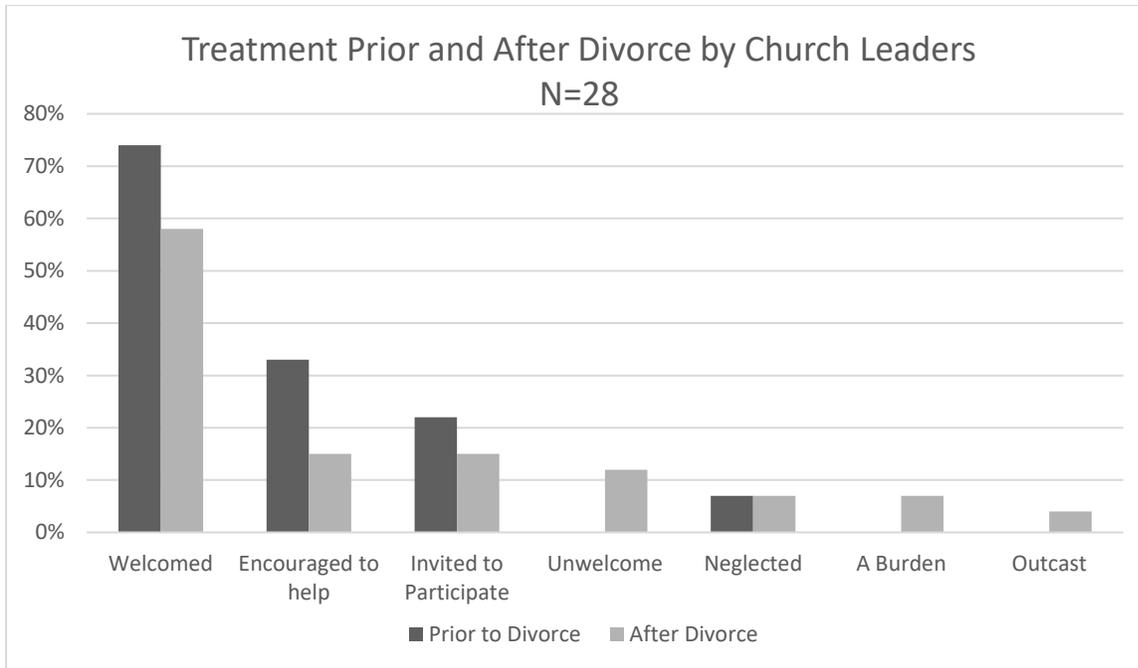


Chart 4.1 – Divorcee perceived treatment prior to and after divorce

This perceived treatment is shown further when asked what help the church leadership offered during and after the divorce. When asked for specifics about help received from church leaders during their divorce, forty-four percent responded they received no help, and thirty percent said they needed to get counseling. When asked about their help after their divorce, forty-eight percent said they received no help, and thirty-two percent said they were told to go to counseling, with 4 percent replying that they felt abandoned entirely by the church. However, a paradox arises with the next set of questions. Those questions deal specifically with whether the divorcee stayed at the same church, moved churches, or left the church entirely. When asked, fifty-two percent reported that they remained at the same church even though seventy percent considered moving to a different church. The top reasons for staying: friends or family attend, like the programs, raised in the church, and did not want to move the children. Thirty-three percent of those questioned replied that they moved to a different church. The reasons given for moving were: uncomfortable being around the people, felt abandoned by the church because of

the divorce, moved away from the area, asked to leave by church leadership, and changed denominations.

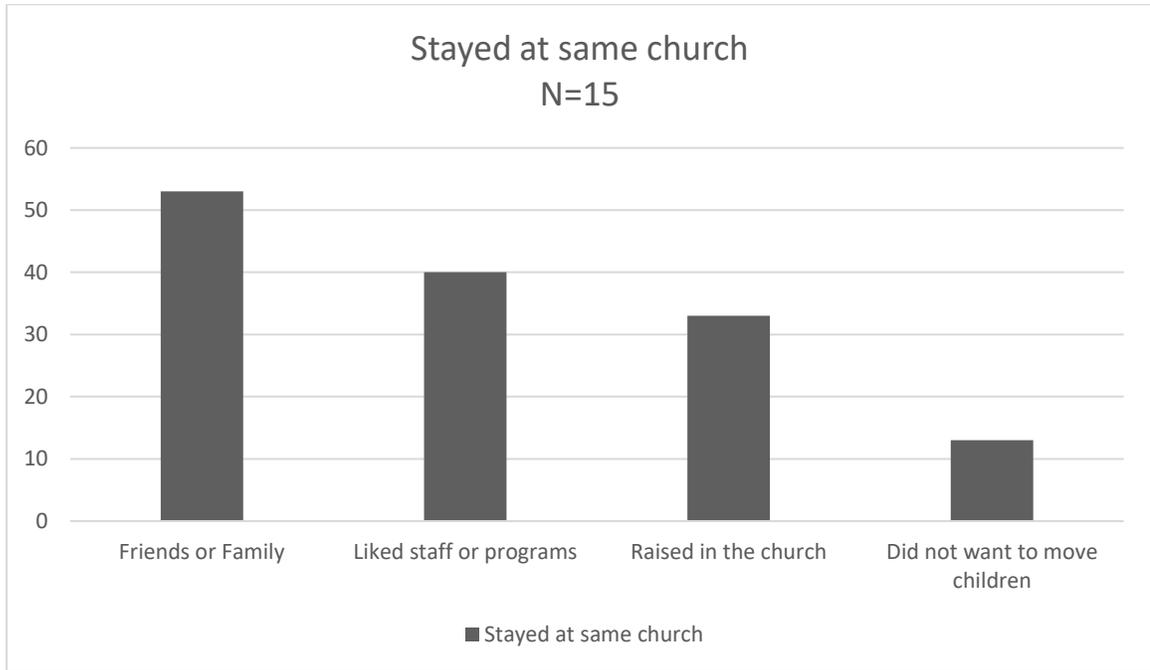


Chart 4.2 – Reasons for staying at the same church

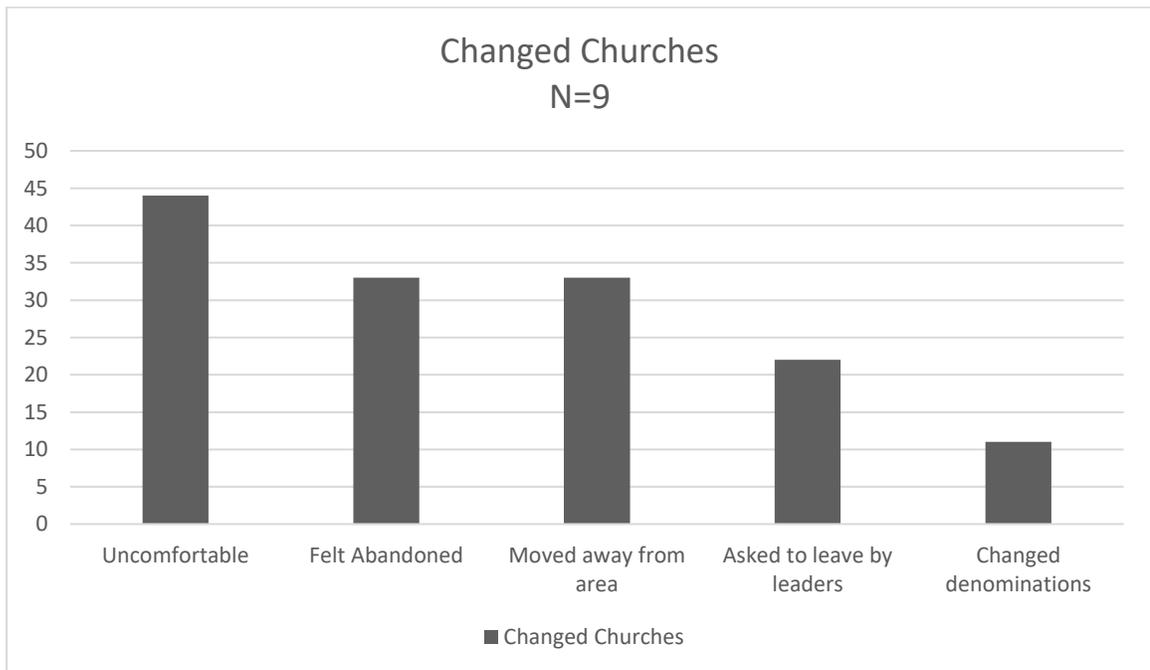


Chart 4.3 – Reasons for changing churches

The third section's final question asked whether or not the respondent thought divorce a hard topic to speak about and deal with in church. An overwhelming majority (74 percent -26 percent) answered that it was a hard topic. When asked why they gave their answer, twenty-seven percent replied divorce is taboo and looked on as a sin. Seventeen percent responded nobody agrees on why divorce happens; twelve percent think that church leaders lack knowledge about divorce and are not comfortable talking about it, eleven percent believed that it was due to erroneous teaching about divorce in the church. Another eleven percent believe that divorce goes against the Bible, and that is why it is a hard subject. For those who said divorce was not a hard topic, the most prominent reason was that divorce is normal.

Fourth Section – Solutions Results

The first part of the fourth section looks at any programs that the church might offer to help post-divorcees and whether divorcees attended or would attend if offered. No program provided was the number one response with fifty-six percent of the responses. Followed by DivorceCare with twenty-two percent, counseling with fifteen percent, and singles ministry at seven percent. However, of the respondents, only eleven percent participated in a post-divorce program, and all of them participated in DivorceCare. Yet, when asked if a program was offered would they have attended, sixty-five percent responded that they would have.

When asked what program they would like to see the church offer for divorcees, forty-four percent replied small group or Sunday school class, thirty-seven percent said single again transition classes, twenty-six percent said mentorship program, fifteen percent wanted self-defense classes, and eleven percent had no suggestion.

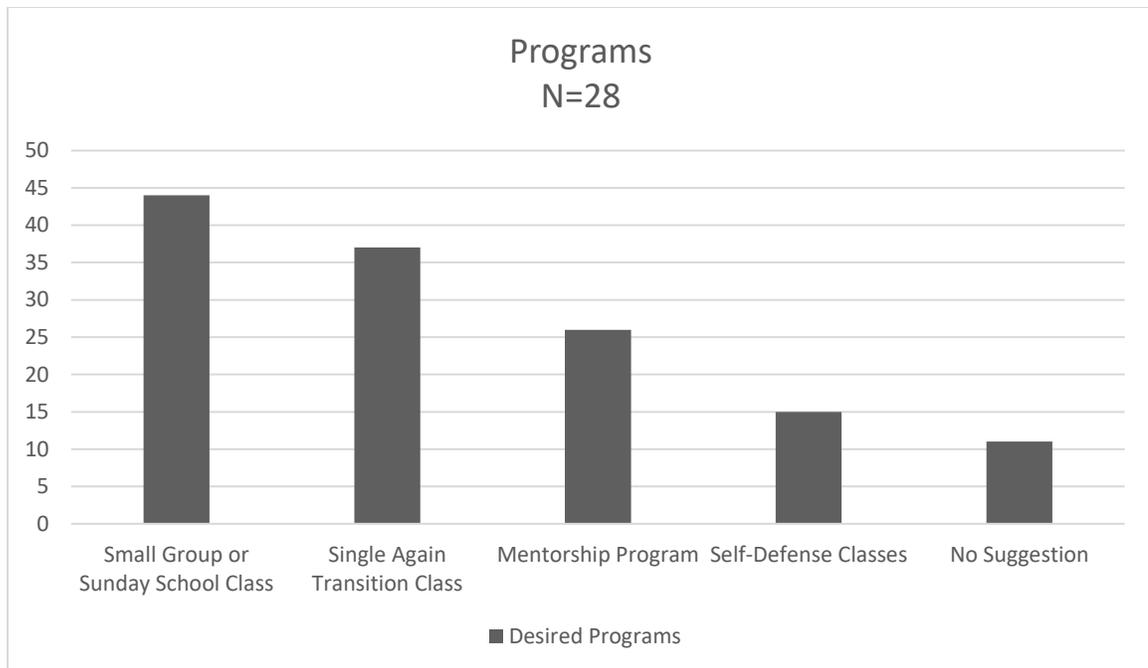


Chart 4.4 – Programs for churches to offer

Fifth Section – Future Suggestions

The final section consisted of two questions and focused on church leaders' advice about divorce and ideas of what the church could do better to serve those who have been divorced. Between the two questions, seventy-one percent replied, “Be welcoming, supportive, understanding, and accepting.” Twenty-four percent answered, “Do not judge and do not disclose information.” The final percentages were a combination of: “Allow divorcees to serve,” “Show interest in them,” “Extend grace to divorcees and be the church,” and “Be careful how you teach about divorce.” The complete questionnaire results are in Appendix B.

Discoveries from Initial Divorcee Questionnaire

The Initial Divorcee Questionnaire highlighted several areas where divorcees perceive church leaders are failing. One such area is the trust level of divorcees towards their church leaders. Even though fifty-two percent replied that they had “Complete Trust” in the leaders, their reasoning behind it leaves plenty of room for concern. When fifty-seven percent give their

reason as either, “You have to trust someone” or “The Bible teaches to trust your leaders,” the question must be asked do they truly even understand what trust is.

Another highlighted area came directly from the perceived treatment of divorcees by the church leaders prior to and after their divorce. When compared side-by-side, as chart 4.1 does, this perception is startling. Of the seven answers given, there was one that stayed the same after the divorce, and that was neglected. There were three areas that lowered after the divorce. Those areas are welcomed, encouraged to help, and invited to participate. The first two decreased by sixteen and fourteen percent, respectively, whereas invited to participate reduced by seven percent. Seven percent might not appear to be much on the surface, but it correlates to one person out of every fourteen divorces. Referring back to the “Ministry Context” in Chapter 1, since 1990, Wagoner County has had 2,202 divorces. That means, in that time, it is possible that one hundred fifty-eight people no longer felt invited to participate in a church where they previously participated.

The other three areas in the perceived treatment began at zero and rose. Those areas are unwelcome, a burden, and an outcast. Twelve percent of respondents declared that after their divorce, they felt unwelcomed at church. Seven percent replied they were burdens and four percent that they were outcasts. These are all areas that are blind spots for church leaders. Again, four percent may not seem like much, but it equates to one person out of every twenty-five, and for a small church, that is dangerous.

Still, another highlighted area is why divorcees decide to stay at the same church or leave. When looked at in charts 4.2 and 4.3, one discovers that the vast majority of those who stayed at the church stayed because they had a connection to either someone there or to the church itself. Whereas, for those who changed churches, the majority was because a relationship

they had was dissolved. If a church can get its members involved with other members, there is a high probability that if one gets divorced, the church can keep them attending during the transition period and minister to them. This is further enforced when looking at chart 4.4 and seeing that forty-four percent want a divorce-specific small group or Sunday school and twenty-six percent of respondents want a mentorship program. Divorcees want someone to help them during their transition.

Evaluation of Church Leader Interviews

The church leader interview was divided into four sections. The first section focused on the leaders' denominational affiliations, their length of time in ministry, their current ministry capacity and duration, whether they had ever been divorced, and finally if there had been any divorces in their immediate family. The second section was composed of two questions that looked at the leaders' personal opinions regarding divorce and acceptable grounds for divorce. The third section presented the leaders with different scenarios and asked their guidance and whether the scenario gave an acceptable reason for a divorce. The final part allowed the leaders to provide any additional information that they believed would be significant to the study. There was a total of twelve church leader interviews conducted. The interview questions are in Appendix C.

First Section – Denomination and Ministry Experience

The first question of the church leader's interview asked with what denomination the leader affiliated. Even though there were twelve interviews, there were thirteen denominations provided because a church leader currently works for two different denominations. The denominations were Southern Baptist at thirty-eight percent, Baptist at twenty-three percent, Free-Will Baptist at twenty-three percent, and Non-denominational at fifteen percent. The next

two questions looked at the leader's time in ministry and current ministry. The ministry's overall time ranged from five years to thirty-nine years, with the average being nineteen and a half years. For their present ministry, the range was from one month to fifteen years, with an average of five and three-quarter years. Twenty-nine percent of those interviewed were Senior Pastors, eighteen percent were Worship Leaders, and twelve percent were Deacons. The remaining were Director of Security, Outreach Director, Pastor's wife, Spiritual Advisory Board member, College Pastor, Finance Administrator, and Creative Arts Pastor. There is a total of seventeen leadership positions between the twelve interviewees.

Additionally, there were eleven men and one woman interviewed. When asked if the leader had ever experienced divorce, eighty-three percent responded no, eight percent yes, and eight percent never been married. When asked if anyone in their immediate family had ever been divorced, the answers ranged from grandparents to parents, siblings, an aunt, a cousin, and one daughter-in-law.¹⁵⁰

Second Section – Personal Beliefs

The second section looked at the church leader's personal beliefs on divorce and what the acceptable grounds for divorce would be. When asked what their position regarding divorce was, thirty-eight percent replied, "Not what God intended/God hates divorce." Next was, "Hate to see families torn apart," "All people are equal before God being divorced does not matter," and "Grace needs to be extended to divorcees" with fourteen percent each. With seven percent each, the final two answers were, "Nothing is wrong with it," and "Divorce happens."

The second section's final question asked the leader what would be acceptable grounds for divorce, in their opinion. Adultery/infidelity received thirty-seven percent, followed by

¹⁵⁰ During the interview a husband and wife were interviewed as well as a father and son.

“Safety concerns due to abuse” with thirty percent, and “Abandonment” with eleven percent. “Unbiblical beliefs,” “Whatever the Bible says,” “Drug use,” “Driven by personal experience,” “Perpetual unrepentant sin,” and “Varies on a case by case basis” each received four percent of the responses.

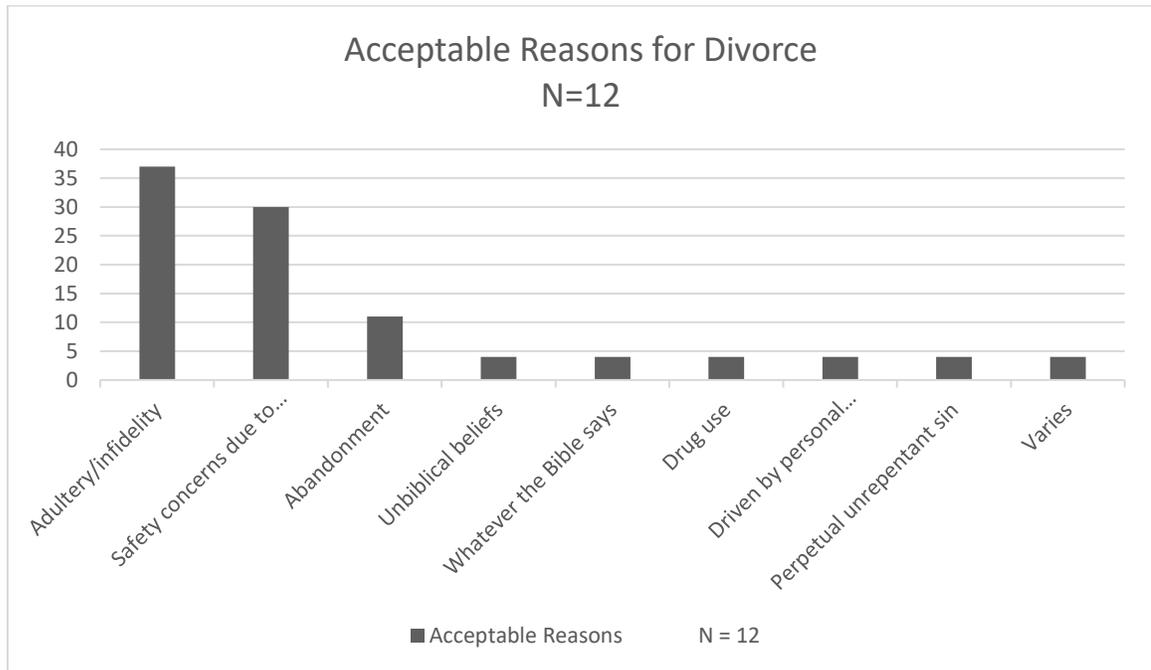


Chart 4.5 - Acceptable reasons for divorce according to interviewed church leaders

Third Section – Scenario Based Guidance and Acceptability

The third section began by asking what advice the church leader would give to different church members based on their church position. The scenario for the first three questions was that an individual within the church approaches the church leader seeking advice because they either planned to file or already had filed for divorce because their spouse is having an affair. The first individual was a regular church member. The second individual was a recognized leader within the church, who is not ordained. The final individual was an ordained leader within the church. Church leaders were encouraged to offer different answers and guidance, yet some decided to use their same answer for each scenario. The use of the same answer led to the

different scenario's answers being reasonably similar. However, for the regular church member, thirty-nine percent replied, “Determine if there can be forgiveness and reconciliation,” seventeen percent responded, “Offer to counsel,” “Tell them to salvage the marriage and work it out,” “Pray with them,” and “Confront the offending party” each received eleven percent. Finally, “Recommend separation,” and “Counsel to divorce,” each received six percent. For the non-ordained church leader, fifty-nine percent replied, “They would ask the leader to step away from the leadership position for some time.” With eighteen percent answering, “Determine if there can be forgiveness and reconciliation,” twelve percent “Tell them to salvage the marriage and work it out,” and “Offer to counsel” and “Confront the offending party,” receiving six percent of the responses each. For the ordained leader, the numbers are relatively similar, with forty-seven percent saying, “They would ask the leader to step away from the leadership position for some time.” The most significant difference between the ordained leader and the non-ordained leader is that twelve percent responded that they would ask the ordained leader to leave the church.

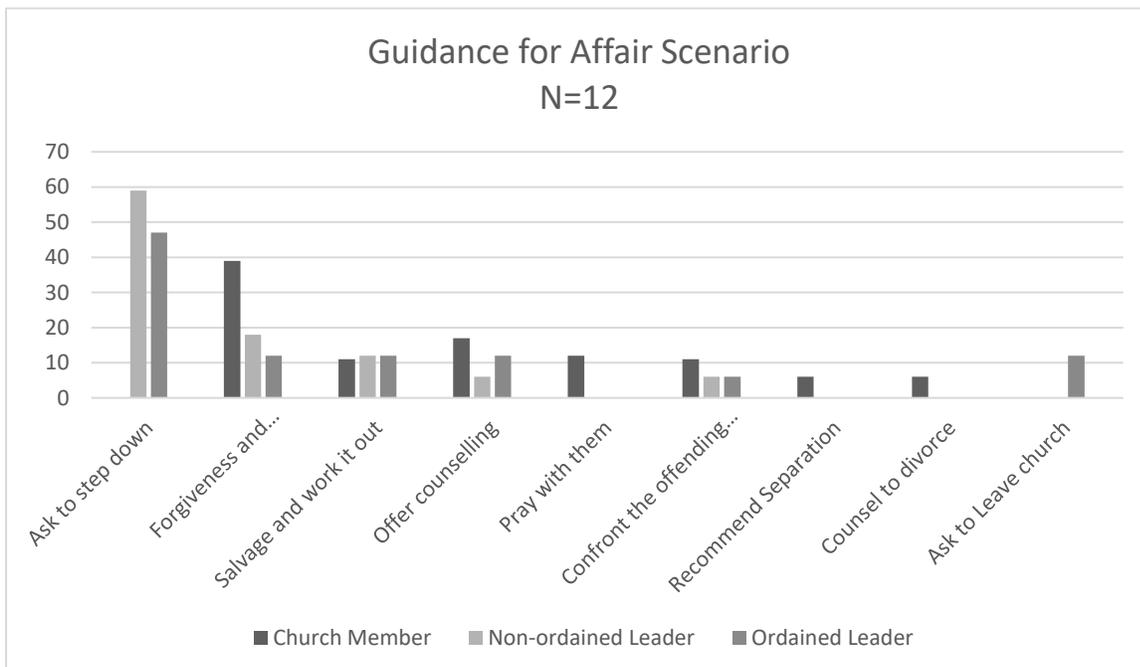


Chart 4.6 – Church leaders’ guidance for affair scenario

The next scenario asked whether a spouse addicted to pornography who admits to envisioning someone else when intimate with his or her spouse is a legitimate reason for divorce. The responses were almost equal, with fifty-eight percent saying that it was not an acceptable reason for divorce and forty-two percent saying it was. When asked what guidance they would offer to the betrayed spouse, the top three responses were thirty-nine percent would “Offer to counsel,” nineteen percent “Determine if there can be forgiveness and reconciliation,” fourteen percent “Tell them to salvage the marriage and work it out.” When asked what guidance they would offer the addicted spouse, the top responses were “Recommend professional counseling,” “Help them find some form of accountability,” and “Tell them to stop sinning and change.”

The third scenario asked whether an alcoholic spouse who is verbally abusive, but not physically abusive is an acceptable reason for divorce. With thirty-three percent of the responses, “No” was the most stated response. However, “No, but separate” followed with twenty-five percent, “Yes, if unwilling to change” had seventeen percent, and “Yes, if it is extreme,” “Yes, if it escalates,” and “No, need to address the issue of alcoholism first” each had eight percent. The scenario changed to no longer verbally but physically abusive. The responses changed to twenty-five percent, replying, “Yes, but separation is the first step,” seventeen percent each saying “Yes,” “Yes, if unwilling to change,” and “Unsure, but file criminal charges and separate. The final three responses of “Yes, but make sure the authorities are involved,” “Unsure,” and “No, but file criminal charges,” each received eight percent. When asked about their guidance to the non-alcoholic spouse, thirty-five percent replied, “Separate from the abuser.” Some of the other responses include, “Make sure that you are safe and at a place not easily findable,” “Seek professional help,” and “Extend grace to them.” As for their guidance to the alcoholic spouse, the

responses were, “Tell them to stop drinking and seek help,” “Explain what their addiction is doing to others,” and “Help them find a support group.”

The fourth scenario asked whether one a permanently injured spouse who could no longer provide the lifestyle the couple had grown accustomed to is an acceptable reason for divorce. All of the responses were that this was not an acceptable reason for divorce. The final scenario is whether a spouse attempting to murder the other spouse is an acceptable reason for divorce. The most common response was a shock when the question was asked, followed by uneasy laughter. After a pause, seventy-five percent replied, “Yes.” At the same time, “No, file criminal charges,” “No, need to investigate why it happened,” and “Unsure without knowing all the circumstances,” each received eight percent.

Fourth Section – Final Thoughts

The final section asked if they believed that divorce is a hard topic to speak about in church. Forty-two replied, “No,” thirty-three percent responded, “Yes,” seventeen percent answered “Maybe,” and eight percent expressed that, “Divorce is uncomfortable to talk about.” When asked why or why not twenty-four percent said, “Shame is involved in a divorce,” another twenty-four percent answered, “Many are affected, and divorce is a part of life,” and “Divorce is in the Bible,” “Divorces are too easy to get,” and “Fear of alienating church members or potential members” each received eighteen percent of the responses. The final question of the church leader interview allowed the church leader to provide additional information. “Christians must see that attacks on marriage are from the enemy” received seventeen percent of the responses. As did, “In marriage our enemy is not our spouse” and “The church needs to extend grace.” Eleven percent of the answers went to two different responses. Those were, “Marriage is important and must be protected” and “Divorcees need to think of the bigger picture (children

and future problems) not just about themselves.” The final responses each received six percent and were, “Have never counseled someone going through a divorce, I need to study more” and “Those not affected by divorce can never know the impact of divorce.” The complete interview results are in Appendix D.

Discoveries from Church Leader Interviews

The first discovery that emerged from the church leader interviews is that nobody can agree on what is and is not acceptable grounds for divorce. As mentioned in footnote 151, there was a husband and wife and a father and son that were interviewed during the interviews. The husband mentioned aspects that the wife did not, and the wife added reasons the husband did not include. The same is true about the father and son duo. Of the leaders, five of them were from the same church, and while they had similar answers, none of them had the same.

The next discovery was that while each of the leaders professed that the Bible was the basis for what is and is not acceptable for divorce, they found that a reason that was not explicitly stated in the Bible was grounds for a divorce. However, when the divorce would be one of convenience, i.e., the scenario where one spouse was permanently injured and unable to provide the lifestyle the couple had become accustomed to, every leader said that was not acceptable.

The final discovery of the interviews shows a possible disconnect between church leaders and divorcees. When asked if divorce was a hard topic to talk about in church, forty-two percent replied, “No,” thirty-three percent responded, “Yes,” seventeen percent answered, “Maybe.” Eight percent expressed that, “Divorce is uncomfortable to talk about.” However, when asked the same question, seventy-four percent of divorcees replied “Yes” and only twenty-six percent

“No.” While this may appear to be trivial, it shows that divorcees have a very different perception of divorce in church than church leaders.

Evaluation of the Focus Group¹⁵¹

The voluntary focus group was set up in three sections. The only people involved in the focus group were those who directly reached out to the researcher and requested to be part of it. As such, the focus group's answers could be skewed to either paint those in church leadership in a glowing light or the opposite in dim and uncaring light. The first section dealt with background information such as when the divorce happened, what was the basis of the divorce, determining whether or not the divorcee was an active church member at the time of the divorce, and learning whether the divorcee changed church or stayed at the same church and why. The second section looked at the divorcee's feelings during and immediately after the divorce and anything that the church and its leaders did during the same period. The final section looked to the future and what the divorcees wish that church leaders knew about divorce and what they would like to see the church do. This section will include direct quotes from the focus group. However, there will be no attribution to those who said it to ensure confidentiality.

First Section – Demographics and Marital Status

Three individuals participated in the focus group. All three were female, two have since remarried, and the third is in a serious relationship, which “Could lead to marriage.” The one in a serious relationship, her divorce was finalized in 2019, whereas the other two were finalized in 2001 and 2008. Everyone who participated in the focus group eventually stated that the basis for their divorce was irreconcilable differences. One of the participants initially said that her

¹⁵¹ As noted in the “Basic Assumptions” section of Chapter 1, the researcher's mother and wife are divorced. Each of them completed the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire, however in order to not skew the results of the focus group both decided not to participate.

husband abandoned her and their child when she joined the military, but toward the end of the group said that it was irreconcilable differences. Approximately half of the participants changed churches due to their divorce, and the primary underlying reason for this change was that they moved back to their parent's house to try to recover from the divorce. The others either stayed at the same church or were not active in the church before their divorce.

Second Section – Treatment by the church

The second portion asked the participants to think back to their divorce and the ensuing months after. They were then asked to remember their feelings and the treatment they experienced at the hands of their church leaders. The first question asked them to describe how the church leadership members treated the participant after the divorce. The first response was, "They did not know how to talk to me. They never asked anything. They just saw me as a divorcee and did not care to know any details." Another response was, "Automatically assumed that I wasn't divorced but was just another single mom because I started attending the church as a single mom." Still, another stated, "They did not care to ask or even allow me to assist in any way in regards to children's ministry. I was unworthy in their eyes." When asked if this was different from how they were treated before their divorce, the consensus was that because they changed churches, they did not have a reasonable basis for judging the difference. Yet one answered, "Church knew I was divorced but never tried to do anything for me. It was only when the others in the church took it upon themselves to start a group that the church took notice of us."

After much discussion, the question was asked, how did the church leadership help the participants during and after the divorce. The room fell silent, and then one spoke and said, "They told me of another church that was holding DivorceCare, and I should go to it." Another

said, “The leaders did nothing; it was another single mom who did something for me.” When asked what that something was, she replied, “She started a single mom’s Bible study.” Yet another replied, “I was a single mom too, and the feeling that I got was single mom’s ruin the ‘perfect’ church picture because they do not look exactly like everyone else, and therefore they do not fit into the same categories as everyone else.”

The final questions in the second section asked about their perception of church leadership during their divorces. The responses remained along the same lines as the previous questions with one offering, “Extremely lacking and because divorce is a sin in the Bible, most church leaders do not want to acknowledge it so that they do not have to deal with it. Worse yet, it does not matter what the circumstances are behind the divorce, ignore and pretend it is not happening.” Another answered, “Most of the time, they would say my name but did not even ask how I was doing or anything else. My pastor would not even shake my hand because I was divorced.” A woman who is now remarried to a pastor answered, “The church treated me as a black sheep and wanted to avoid me. Then I got remarried to a man who entered the ministry, and they are holding my divorce against him. I did not know him when I was married before. My ex filed for divorce, and I fought it, but the judge granted it. Yet, now my husband is being affected because of my past that he had nothing to do with.”

Third Section – Future Suggestions

The final section of the focus group allowed the divorcees the chance to offer suggestions and talk about things that had helped them as they went through their divorces. When asked if any programs they have been a part of were beneficial, Dave Ramsey’s Financial Peace was the only response. The group was then asked to give a single piece of advice to church leaders about interacting with divorcees. There were many responses, but the most common responses were:

“Divorce is not taboo. It happens today whether we want it to or not. By denying it or refusing to talk about divorce, all you are doing is hurting those who have been through it” and “Most divorcees are willing to share their experiences if they are approached with respect and care instead of judgment.” The woman who married a pastor equated the treatment of divorcees to the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15. Her statement was, “While talking to Jesus, the Canaanite woman begged for help, and as Jesus tried to send her away, she said, ‘Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.’ In the church, divorcees are those dogs, yet instead of being able to eat the crumbs, we are kicked to the side.” She continued, “If Jesus granted such great faith to her because of that single statement, why is it then that the church leaders look down upon us when all we are trying to do is get something to eat.”

The final question of the group was, “What could the church do to better serve divorcees and those going through a divorce?” The combined recommendation was, “Do more than listen. Try to learn about divorce, even if it is uncomfortable. You are going to deal with those who have been divorced or going through a divorce. So, you need to gain knowledge so that when you are facing it, you have something to draw from.” As the group was about to close, one of the individuals spoke up and made a single request. Her request was, “Please let whoever reads your report know that we do not hate church leaders. We love them. They are ill-equipped because they have never experienced the things we have, so they are starting from an unfair position. As tonight shows, we are happy to talk about our experiences as long as we are treated fairly.” A resounding “Amen” followed.

Discoveries from the Focus Group

The information gleaned from the focus group, while mostly anecdotal, shows how divorcees perceive the church and its leaders. The focus group revealed that divorce is hard, but

it is not fatal. The look in the woman's eyes who is married to a pastor as she was talking about the Canaanite woman was heartbreaking. Even though the researcher is from a divorced family and married to a divorced woman, that look is something that has never been seen before.

The first discovery from the focus group is that divorcees are humans. This statement is obvious, yet often forgotten. They are sinners just like everyone else and need grace just like everyone else. No one would ever deny that a divorcee is a human; however, after listening to their stories, that is the perception that they received from the church. The lady who mentioned that her pastor would not even say her name is an excellent example of the inhumane treatment that is perceived by divorcees.

The second discovery is that divorcees are willing to talk about their experiences if asked and treated with respect. The notion of treating someone with respect should be obvious. However, the overwhelming feeling that permeated the focus group is that those who are divorced will always be just that – divorced. No matter what they accomplish in their lives, they will forever be known as the divorcee.

A final discovery is that divorcees do not consider those in church leadership to be the enemy. Divorcees recognize that, for the most part, church leaders have not been divorced and therefore do not have the life experience that they do. As the previous discovery points out, divorcees are willing to talk about their experiences and help church leaders to attempt to be on a level playing field.

Evaluation of the Workshop

As with the other portions of this study, the workshop was divided into four parts. The first section looked at the denominational and church stance on divorce while comparing it to the

church leaders' positions during their interviews. The second section examined church leaders' perceptions based on the information gathered from the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire and the focus group. The third section dealt with the problems that divorcees experienced during and after their divorces. This information was gathered through the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire and the focus group. The final section of the workshop looked at potential solutions and programs that the divorcees said were beneficial to them or ideas that could be beneficial in the future. Again, this information was obtained through the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire and the focus group. Any evaluation made during this section is of an informal nature and based solely on the reactions and participation of those present.

The workshop was not attended by all who were interviewed. As such, there was a total of eight attendees. All attendees were male. The breakdown of those in attendance was four senior pastors, two worship or music ministers, a college pastor, and a deacon. One of the senior pastors represented a non-denominational church, one was Free-Will Baptist, and the other two were Southern Baptist. One of the music ministers was Southern Baptist, and the other was the individual who worked for both a Free-Will Baptist church and a Southern Baptist church. The college pastor was from a Southern Baptist Church, and the deacon was Free-Will Baptist.

The workshop's outline was divided into four parts to correspond to the four sections of the workshop. The first section was a direct look at and comparison of the denominational/church positions concerning divorce and comparing those to the individual church leaders' positions. This information was obtained through the Church Leaders Denominational and Church Questionnaire and the individual interviews with each of the church leaders. The second section of the workshop focused on the levels of trust and comfort of divorcees concerning communicating and sharing with church leaders about their divorce issues.

This information was obtained from section 2 of the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire. The third section of the workshop focused on the problems that divorcees faced within the church after their divorces. This information was obtained from section 3 of the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire and the focus group. Additionally, section 3 includes a glimpse into how the divorcee was treated by church leadership before the divorce. So, a comparison of before treatment and after treatment was provided. The final section of the workshop looked at programs and potential solutions as identified by divorcees in the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire and the focus group. Ideas and advice for church leaders about programs that are available for divorcees were also offered.

Denominational/Church Positions Regarding Divorce

Free Will Baptist and Southern Baptist were the only denominations identified by the church leaders.¹⁵² Each of the church leaders interviewed expressed that their church followed the guidelines set forth by the governing body and directed the researcher to the governing body for the exact guidelines. As such, calls were placed to both the National Association of Free Will Baptist (NAFWB) Headquarters and the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Headquarters for the conventions' official positions on divorce. The calls were answered, but both headquarters refused to make official statements on their views. Instead, they directed the researcher to the website. On the NAFWB website, an article by Jim McAllister entitled "When Divorce Comes to Church" appeared. McAllister writes, "This divorce problem among fundamental, Bible-believing Christians is reaching epidemic proportions."¹⁵³ McAllister then proceeds to explain

¹⁵² Baptist and Non-denominational were also said but there are no denominational guidelines for either of them.

¹⁵³ Jim McAllister, "When Divorce Comes to Church," NAFWB, last modified July 1994, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://nafwb.org/site/when-divorce-comes-to-church/>.

how to handle divorce in the church. He lists four steps: 1) Tell the truth in love, 2) Effective Counseling, 3) Ounce of Prevention, and 4) Heal the Hurting.¹⁵⁴ As this was the only thing on the NAFWB website that had anything to do with divorce, McAllister's article was used as the Free Will Baptist denominational position on divorce.

Under the "Frequently Asked Questions" section of the SBC website, one questioner asked, "Can a divorced person serve as a pastor or deacon, conduct baptisms, or serve the Lord's Supper in a Southern Baptist church?"¹⁵⁵ The answer that was given to this question reads in part, "The question of whether or not one is qualified to serve as a pastor or deacon if he has been divorced generally stems from the teaching in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 that the bishop/elder or deacon is to be 'the husband of one wife'... Thus, there is no single 'Baptist' position on this issue. Each local church determines for itself its interpretation of Scripture to this issue."¹⁵⁶

First Section – Denominational/Church and Leaders Positions

The previous statements from both the NAFWB and SBC websites were read at the beginning of the workshops' first section. One SBC leader asked, "What does that mean?" A Free-Will Baptist leader answered this question stating, "There is no official position about divorce." The SBC leader who asked the question said, "So what does that mean?" Another SBC leader replied, "Let's make one, and that will be the 'official' position for us." After a short discussion between the SBC leaders, an overarching statement was agreed upon, "Marriage is meant to be one man and one woman for life. Divorce is a sin against God, but it is not

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ "Frequently Asked Questions," SBC last modified 2020, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.sbc.net/about/what-we-do/faq/>.

¹⁵⁶ "Frequently Asked Questions" <https://www.sbc.net/about/what-we-do/faq/>.

unforgivable. Each divorce must be examined individually to determine if those involved are disqualified for ministry.” At which time, the NAFWB leaders asked if they could use the same position since, in their opinion, the statement from McAllister was “too broad and evasive.” Thus, both the NAFWB leaders and the SBC leaders agreed and used the same overarching statement.

Following this discussion, the leaders were given the collected information from their interviews about their divorce positions, and a discussion was had about how their answers either coincided or conflicted with the agreed-upon position. One leader spoke up and said, “It would appear as though our answers, for the most part, seem to line up with our statement.” Another said, “There are a few things that I am not sure about, but I would agree our collective answers for the most part agree. I am Southern Baptist, and it’s kind of surprising that Free Will and Southern agree about divorce. I was always told we did not agree about much.” After this, the analysis of the remaining interview questions was explained, and a time of discussion followed where questions were asked and answers given.

Second Section – Comfort and Trust

After a short break, the second section of the workshop began. This section focused on the divorcees’ perception of church leaders. The first thing presented to the leaders was their ratings for comfort and trust levels, as recorded through the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire. When the leaders saw that only thirty-seven percent of their members were “Completely Comfortable” talking to them about issues directly related to divorce, a silence fell over the room. After this, the top reasons for the lack of comfort were given. These responses were “Do not want to talk about personal issues,” “Church leaders do not care,” “Church leaders are too judgmental,” and “Do not know who are the leaders in the church” and one leader as he was

wiping away tears said, “I need to relearn my congregation.” However, when presented with trust level the church leaders learned that over half of those who responded claimed “Completely Trustworthy,” the mood lightened up. That was until they were told that over half of those who do trust them completely noted that it was because “You have to trust someone” or “The Bible teaches to trust your leaders.”

The workshop was silent for a little bit. Then a leader spoke saying, “So basically what you are telling us is that we have people we love and try to show God’s love to that are not comfortable talking to us or do not trust us and those who do trust us do not have a good reason why they trust us?” Before answering, another spoke and said, “Yes and no. What he is doing is giving us a chance to look through someone else’s eyes at us. This way, we can see ourselves as they do and thereby learn and be better able to serve them.” More discussion happened, and the leader who spoke first said, “I know this is not meant to be taken personally, it is to show us weak spots, but I cannot help to take this personally.” The oldest leader there said, “Let me ask you something. If someone were to tell you that the entire time you were preaching during service, your pants were undone, would you listen to them?” He nodded, and the older leader continued, “Well guess what, all of our pants are undone because this is an issue that we have not dealt with in our personal lives. We have no clue who answered the questions. For all we know, the only people who took this go to this church, and they are being gracious enough to pull back the curtain so we all can learn. If you do not want to learn, then leave.” A break was immediately given following this exchange in order to allow tempers and hurt feelings to cool down.

Third Section – Problems

The third section began by handing each of the church leaders a copy of the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire so that they could see the questions themselves and utilize it at their

church if they desired. After handing out the questionnaire, a disclaimer was given that this section's information would not be courteous and would even paint churches and their leaders in a bad light. Again, it was emphasized that none of this information was meant to be taken personally, and that it was informational by nature. The first piece of information presented was divorcees' perception of their treatment before their divorce compared to after their divorce. A lengthy discussion ensued that centered on the perception of feeling welcomed and how, before their divorce, seventy-four percent felt welcomed versus fifty-eight percent after their divorce. One leader noted how nobody felt unwelcomed before their divorce, but afterwards twelve percent did. The question was asked why they thought that might be. After a short discussion, the twelve percent difference was that most leaders have never experienced a divorce. Instead of saying something they should not and making the situation worse, they tend to be silent, which could give off the perception of not being welcomed.

A question was asked to the leaders whether or not they would be willing to counsel a recently divorced female in a one-on-one context. No one raised his hand to signal that he would be willing. One leader said he would only if someone else was present. An explanation was given that during the focus group, that was something that was mentioned. This topic was identified as one that needs to be explored because seventy percent of those who completed the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire and all focus groups were women. One leader said, "My wife has talked to a couple of women before about issues, and she is good at it." With permission from those in the focus group a portion of the focus group audio was played, that discussed the male/female dynamic and how a male leader trying to counsel a female could make the leader feel uncomfortable and potentially cause questions to arise. The third section ended with more

numbers and observations from divorcees on how they were treated and their perceptions of the leaders.

Fourth Section - Solutions

The workshop's final section looked at ideas and suggestions for the future and what church leaders could do to be more welcoming towards divorcees. The first suggestion was to allow divorcees to serve in ministry. The manner to which they could be allowed to serve would be something like a divorcee small group where they can talk to others in the same situation about overcoming obstacles and supporting each other. Another suggestion offered was to allow them to be part of or even start a ministry for divorcees. One leader spoke up and said, "But what if I do not agree with their ministry idea?" It was answered by another leader who said, "Do you have to do it? No, so why does it bother you? Pray for them and try to be available if they need you. Divorce is happening in the church, so we better figure out a way to help them, or we will lose them." Another leader said, "If you do not like what they are doing, send them my way. Our church is less than a mile from yours, and I will gladly take them and let them start a ministry that our church needs."

Another suggestion that was offered was to be intentional and start a small group that is specifically for divorcees and advertise it. Do not be afraid that it is going to take away from other small groups. If it does, that means that the other small groups have room to grow. By being intentional about creating a small group specifically for divorcees, it shows that they are valued and wanted. A leader who just planted a church spoke and said, "Next week, I am meeting with our board, and I am going to tell them that we are going to start a divorcee group. Our church sits in one of the largest divorce areas in our town, and we have been wondering how we are going to reach them; this is our answer." Before anything else could be said, a leader

spoke and said, “Offer classes, they will need to get back up on their feet. Things like Dave Ramsey’s *Financial Peace*, maybe think of some form of self-defense, and if they have children do a once-a-month child drop off so the adults can have some free time to be with other adults without children.” After this, more suggestions were made, and the discussion lasted for a few more hours. Everyone who attended the workshop was given a copy of the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire, the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire results, the results of the Church Leader Interview, and the results of the Focus Group.

Evaluation of the Follow-Up

The follow-up questionnaire was used to determine if there had been any change in the divorcees’ perception of church leaders since the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire. The entire questionnaire was nine questions long and can be found in Appendix E. The questionnaire focused on how divorcees perceived their church leaders. Additionally, with the inclusion of the 4-8-digit identification number from the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire, the researcher was able to look at the initial answers and compare them to the follow-up answers to see if individual perceptions had changed at all. There were only six individuals who completed the follow-up questionnaire. However, they completed the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire and provided their identification number in the follow-up questionnaire. Therefore, this evaluation will consist of a comprehensive picture evaluation and an individual divorcee evaluation.

The first question of the follow-up questionnaire asked whether or not they had previously taken the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire. As mentioned earlier, all 6 completed the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire as well as provided their identification numbers. The second question looked at the divorcee's comfort level concerning speaking with a member of church leadership about issues directly related to divorce. Only two of the respondents answered that

they had complete comfort when talking to a church leadership member. This meant that the other 4 had some level of discomfort.

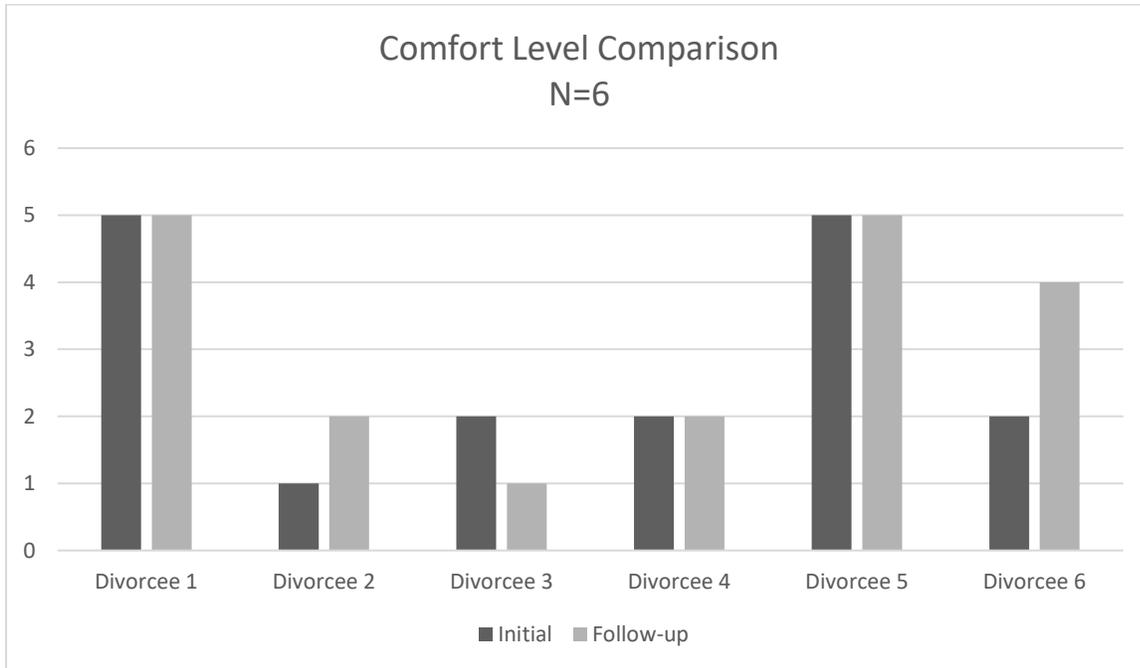


Chart 4.7 – Comparison of Initial v. Follow-up Comfort levels

Chart 4.7 shows the direct comparison of the six individuals' comfort levels who completed the follow-up questionnaires. The numbers on the left side correspond with the comfort level. “Completely Uncomfortable” is a “1,” “Somewhat Uncomfortable is a “2,” “Neither Uncomfortable nor Comfortable” is a “3,” “Somewhat Comfortable” is a “4,” and “Completely Comfortable” is a “5.”

The third question asked them to explain why they gave the rating that they did. For those who said “Completely Comfortable,” their answers were, “My past life does not define me, so it does not bother me to talk about it” and “They are my co-workers.” Those who had some level of discomfort reasoned that, “Leaders only want to push for reconciliation,” “Leaders do not

know how to answer the difficult questions that divorcees have,” and “I think leaders are more willing to listen so I will talk if asked.”

The next question focused on their trust level when speaking to church leaders about topics directly related to divorce. For this question, half answered that they had complete trust, while the other half responded that they had some level of distrust.

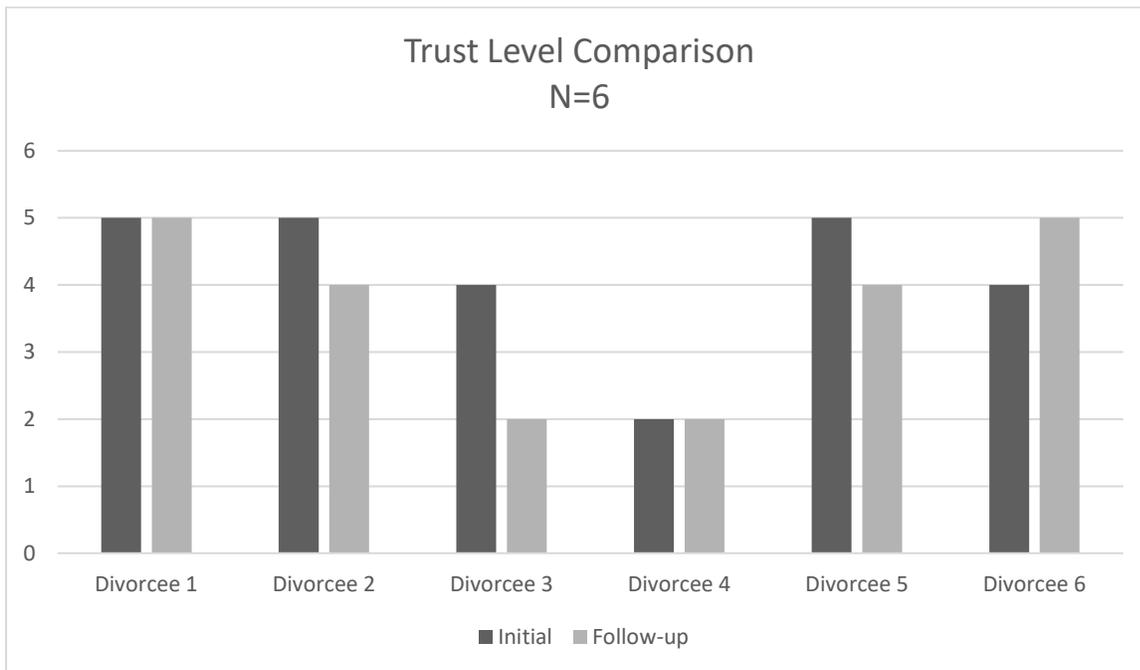


Chart 4.8 – Comparison of Initial v. Follow-up Trust levels

Chart 4.8 shows the direct comparison of trust levels of the six individuals who completed the follow-up questionnaires. The same scale is used in Chart 4.8, as is used in Chart 4.7.

The follow-up question asked for a reason behind their rating. Those who answered “Completely Trust” replied, “Leaders would not breach confidentiality/ personal friends” and “Leaders are intelligent and biblically strong.” The reasons given by those who expressed some

level of distrust were, “I do not fully trust anyone after my divorce,” “Leaders have no understanding,” and “Leaders appear to care more about divorcees, so I trust them more.”

The next question asked whether the divorcees perceived a heightened sense of awareness from their church leaders. Half of the respondents declared that they had perceived more awareness from church leaders about divorce. This question was followed by asking what observations had been witnessed that showed a desire by the church leaders to see divorcees’ lives impacted and changed for the future. Five of the six respondents declared that they had witnessed some signs that church leaders wanted to see divorcee lives affected. Their responses included, “Church leaders speak more openly about divorce,” “Church leaders talk more to divorcees,” and “Church leaders are allowing divorcees to serve in leadership positions. The one respondent that did not witness anything instead declared, “Churches are more open to LGBTQ than they are to divorcees. (This is a comparison, not a judgment).”

The final question in this section asked what suggestions divorcees would give to church leaders for the future. Six suggestions were offered: “Be more accepting and make divorcees more a part of the church,” “Create a Bible study specifically for divorcees,” “Let divorcees serve in ministry,” “Create a mentorship program for divorcees,” “Encourage divorcees to share their story,” and “Stop teaching that a 2-parent home is better. Two parents in an unstable home is not healthy.”

The follow-up questionnaire's final question asked whether those who participated in the focus group had begun to see their recommendations incorporated within the church. Three of the respondents did not participate in the focus group, so they answered “Not Applicable.” Of the remaining three, two answered “Yes,” and the other replied, “No.”

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The purpose of this Doctor of Ministry project was to discover the similarities within divorces and analyze them in order to develop a training program designed to better equip church leaders in their efforts to offer grace-filled, empathetic guidance to divorcees. Every divorce is indeed different; however, the possibility of discovering similarities that divorcees experience is vital in reincorporating them back into the church. By identifying, analyzing, and training the individuals in church leadership about those similarities, their efforts in offering effective, empathetic, grace-filled guidance to divorcees will improve.

However, this improvement to empathetic, grace-filled guidance is subjective to the individual divorcee, as was seen through the direct correlation of Initial Divorcee Questionnaire answers and their follow-up questionnaire answers. This subjectivity presents the most significant and most challenging problem with this or any other study designed to give church leaders insight into divorcees' lives. Every divorcee is different, and what works for one does not necessarily work for another. Additionally, what worked for one on a specific day may not work for the same person on a different day. This change is the problem with this or any other study like it. Humans change every day. So even if a discovered solution appears from a study similar to this one, it is only viable for the exact moment of its discovery. After that, the variables have changed, and the solution may not still answer the questions asked.

However, that does not mean that there are not solutions that can be learned and observations made. It means that to stay relevant with those who are being ministered to, church leaders must be conscious of the ever-changing environment that they live in and be diligent with their understanding of it.

Lessons Learned

As mentioned in the “Theological Foundations” portion of Chapter 2, there are multiple accounts in the Bible where Jesus interacted with the downtrodden or the outcasts of that society. Even though divorce is a regular occurrence in society today, it is still looked down upon within the church. This view became more evident during the interviews with church leaders as some noted that it does not matter what the situation behind the divorce, it is wrong, and the couple needs to “work it out.” Yet, when presented with a divorced woman in John 4, Jesus offered grace. Out of the eight different scenarios that were presented to the church leaders, the only times grace was mentioned was during the question about personal positions on acceptable grounds for divorce (by the one leader who had been divorced), guidance that would be offered to an abused spouse (they need to extend grace towards their abuser), and as a closing thought.

Jesus’ first approach was to extend grace, whereas the church leaders’ most common response to all of the scenarios was to remove the divorcees from their positions within the church. Yet, when asked why they would ask the leader to step down, all responded, “So that they can focus on the marriage and family.” While their reasoning is noble, the view that it gives to the divorcee is entirely different. Tamala Ceasar’s story mentioned in Chapter 1 is a prime example of this as she states that after her divorce, the church described her as “tainted.”¹⁵⁷ The church leaders might intend to help a divorcee by removing the stressor of leadership. Instead, they are inadvertently telling the divorcees that they are no longer wanted. Ways to correct this perception will be discussed below in “Recommendations for Church Leaders.”

¹⁵⁷ Ceasar, “Why the Church Needs to Stop Treating Divorce like the Elephant in the Room.”

A problem arises when looking at this study from a theoretical perspective. That problem is that there is nothing else that addresses church leaders through the eyes of divorcees. There are programs for divorcees designed to help them adjust, but nothing for church leaders to help them minister to divorcees. It is for that reason that this study incorporates fairly extensive questionnaires and interview questions. Instead of focusing directly on a singular aspect of ministering to divorcees, this study sets the baseline to be built upon in the future. This broadness allows for an overall approach to ministering, thereby equipping church leaders with a more substantial amount of information rather than a singular piece. This brings the study's focus back to finding ideas and strategies for ministering to divorcees, rather than an idea or a strategy. Even though this project is specifically designed for church leaders the two lessons learned that follow are for a broader audience and for the overall betterment of the church.

First Lesson – Love Divorcees

The first strategy for ministering to divorcees is loving them. The New Living Translation of the Bible records the words of Jesus in John 13:35 as, “Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.” This love for one another is the basis of any type of discipleship. Discipleship is the basis of this study. However, it is a particular people group that is the focus of this study, divorcees. Bobby Harrington writes, “Relationships, which are genuine life on life connections grounded in Christ-like love are the environment for discipleship.”¹⁵⁸ It is a cliché, but it is entirely accurate; people will never care how much you know until they know how much you care. It should come as no surprise that those who have the highest level of comfort and trust when speaking to church leaders about topics directly related

¹⁵⁸ Bobby Harrington, “Relationships,” last modified 2018, accessed August 20, 2020, <https://www.discipleship.org/relationships/>.

to divorce claim that their reason for their level is having a relationship with the leader. Whereas, those who have the lowest level of comfort and trust provide one of their most significant reasons as their not even knowing who the leaders are. Harrington continues by writing,

The Bible has many examples of people investing in relationships with other people. It's one thing to sit in a church gathering – watching and listening, but it's another thing to be taught about Jesus with a few others who know you well. In the context of relationships, truth can be transferred from one life to the next. Questions can be asked. Real-life stories can be shared. Sin can be confessed. Accountability can be offered. Encouragement can be given. This describes how Jesus made disciples. The ministry of Jesus makes it clear that disciple-making is a relational process built on trust.¹⁵⁹

Second Lesson – Develop Relationships with Divorcees

The most significant indicator of whether the guidance being offered by a church leader will be accepted and applied has little to do with the leaders' knowledge of the situation, but rather if the leader and the divorcee have a relationship whereby trust has been established. However, this does not mean that church leaders should not learn about their congregants and their situations. It means that those in positions of leadership should attempt to gain more understanding about their congregants, but they should do so while establishing a relationship with them.

Jesus said that His followers' love for one another would distinguish them from everyone else. Yet, one respondent wrote in the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire the reason for not being comfortable or trusting the church leadership was, "Pastors do not know what is going on, and they don't want to help those who are going through it. My story told me that they are more interested in making sure the church looks good to others, not that those within the church are

¹⁵⁹ Bobby Harrington, "Relationships."

cared for. I felt abandoned.” This respondent said he was a deacon within the church and that the other leaders in his church asked him to leave the church entirely because of his divorce. For somebody to believe that a follower of Jesus does not care about him is a travesty. This account was the only recorded one of someone in a leadership position being asked to leave because of a divorce.

While this project looked at 28 divorcees and their situations with only 6 completing the follow-up, if this study was to be given to a larger population, it would be safe to infer that the numbers described in Chapter 4 would be relatively the same. Some have complete comfort and trust because they have established a relationship with their church leaders and consider them to be friends. There would be others who would have no comfort or trust because they do not even know who the church leaders are, aside from the pastor. Finally, there would be the largest number of those questioned who would fall somewhere in the middle. It is this middle group that needs to be carefully observed. They are not the ones who are friends with the leaders or do not know who the leaders are. They are the ones who feel as though the leaders do not care. The notion of not caring is worse than not knowing who the leaders are.

Recommendations for Church Leaders

First Recommendation – Get to Know Divorcees

The first recommendation is getting to know the people that God has placed under the leader’s care. In a small church like Cornerstone Church, that is not a huge problem. However, if the church boasts tens of thousands of attendees, then that becomes a more significant problem. Those on the ministry staff cannot be expected to be the only ones responsible for getting to know the divorcees in the congregation and everyone in the church.

Second Recommendation – Implement a Family Deacon Ministry

One recommendation to help this situation would be to have a family deacon ministry in place. Not only would this eliminate the stress of the pastor to have to minister to everyone, but it would allow for one person to minister to a smaller number of people, thereby giving those families someone to talk to when a problem arises. A family deacon ministry would also help eliminate one of the reasons divorcees have a complete lack of comfort and trust. They would know who they could talk to within the church's leadership.

Third Recommendation – Begin a Recognition Ministry

Another aspect of getting to know the people that God has placed under the leader's care is that it shows that the leader cares. In a small church, a postcard in the mail for a birthday or anniversary from the leadership team shows that not only do they care, but they are willing to take time out of their day to make the recipient feel special. In a large church, mailing something would not be feasible. However, having a unique slide at the beginning of the month with everyone's names, birthdays/anniversaries, to wish them either a happy birthday or a happy anniversary is something that would be. This card or slide immediately tells the people highlighted that they are more than just numbers and that they are valuable to the church. Tony Schwartz writes, "How we're feeling — and most especially whether or not we feel acknowledged and appreciated — influences our behavior, consumes our energy and affects our decisions all day long, whether we're aware of it or not. Our core emotional need is to feel valued. Without a stable sense of value, we don't know who we are, and we don't feel safe in the world."¹⁶⁰ Even in an ever-changing world, the one place that safety should never be a question is at church.

¹⁶⁰ Tony Schwartz, "The Only Thing that Really Matters," *Harvard Business Review*, last modified June 01, 2011, <https://hbr.org/2011/06/the-only-thing-that-really-mat.html>.

Fourth Recommendation – Allow Divorcees to Serve

Another recommendation for church leaders is to allow divorcees to serve in ministry. No matter the denomination, churches are always looking for people to serve in the ministry. Children and nursery workers are always needed, among other positions. However, by allowing a divorcee to serve and fill a role in one of these ministries, church leaders tell the divorcee that they matter and are wanted. By enabling the divorcee to serve in ministry, a level of respect, comfort, and trust is developed between the divorcee and the church leader.

Moreover, as time continues, the divorcee may approach a leader and express a desire to start a single-again ministry. A single-again ministry could be a place where divorcees are able to openly talk and help one another. This particular ministry is not one that must be facilitated by a divorcee, but a non-divorced individual would have a harder time personally relating to the issues that divorcees may desire to talk about. As part of his Doctor of Ministry project, Charles Hughes noted, “While the church grapples with theological convictions regarding divorce, mid-life single adults who are single again often flounder in hopelessness, needing ministry that only the church can provide.”¹⁶¹ This hope could be provided with a single-again ministry facilitated by a divorcee.

It would be difficult to envision a church leader who does not want to help and love a church member. However, if this was the case by allowing a divorcee to begin a single again ministry, the church leader would be as involved as he desires to be. This limited involvement

¹⁶¹ Charles Richard Hughes, “Developing an Effective Ministry with Mid-Life Single Adults in a Mega Church” (D.Min. Thesis., Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 1998), 4.

would enable the church leader to invest time and energy into a ministry deemed more in line with his calling.

Fifth Recommendation – Create a Mentorship Program

A fifth recommendation would be to create a mentorship program for divorcees, especially recent divorcees with children. A recent divorcee with children is statistically far more likely to be a female.¹⁶² This could mean that the woman will need help learning how to handle money again. Having a mentorship program specifically for divorcees is an opportunity for other more experienced individuals in the church to love on them and help them get reacclimated to life as a single. If there are children involved, this program could take on the shape of extra grandparents for the child while giving the child someone else to be influenced by other than their parents. A mentorship program could also include a component where after due time, the child is left with the mentor for part of the night, allowing the divorcees an evening with their adult friends without stress and worry about having a child at their sides.

Sixth Recommendation – Invite Divorcees to Share Their Testimony

A final suggestion would be to invite divorcees to tell their testimony in open service. Victoria Maxwell in *Psychology Today* writes there are six steps to healing: 1) Acceptance, 2) Insight, 3) Action, 4) Self-Esteem, 5) Healing, and 6) Meaning.¹⁶³ Allowing divorcees to give their testimony and explain how God helped them through their divorce shows others who might either be divorced or going through a divorce that they are not alone, and that there is hope.

Shortly after Typhoon Haiyan devastated the Philippines in 2013, Patrick Seger of Samaritan's

¹⁶² Emy A. Cordano, "Why do Women get Child Custody in 90 Percent of all Cases? Isn't it Gender Discrimination?" *cor-law* (blog), last modified June 28, 2018, <https://www.cor-law.com/blog/women-get-child-custody-90-percent-cases-isnt-gender-discrimination.html>.

¹⁶³ Victoria Maxwell, "The 6 Steps of Healing You Need to Know: How to Reset to Wellness," *Psychology Today*, last modified April 21, 2015, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/crazy-life/201504/the-6-steps-healing-you-need-know>.

Purse wrote, “It’s been said that a person can live 40 days without food, four days without water, four minutes without air, but only four seconds without hope. Why? Hope provides the power that energizes us with life. Hope is a powerful thing. It keeps us going when times are tough. It creates excitement in us for the future. It gives us reasons to live. It gives us strength and courage.”¹⁶⁴ The hope for a divorcee is that they are not alone and that somebody else understands what they are going through. By allowing divorcees to share their testimony, they can fulfill what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so *that we can comfort those in any trouble* with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.” (emphasis added).

However, aside from providing comfort and hope to the divorcee in the audience who hears the testimony, the one who is giving the testimony can find healing and meaning. That person can see what God has carried him through and see His hand in the divorcee’s life. This recognition is why inviting divorcees to share their testimony is so important. The testimony is not just for themselves or even the other divorcees in the congregation. It is for everyone in attendance because it shows God’s love for the broken-hearted and hurting.

Concluding Remarks

Divorce is a problem, whether it is within the church or not. There is no end in sight as divorce appears to be fully entrenched in American society. However, it does not have to be what defines somebody within the church. Instead, being divorced is something that can be used as a witnessing tool for a lost society. In the “Theoretical Foundation” section in Chapter 2, it reads,

¹⁶⁴ Patrick Seger, “The Power of Hope,” *Samaritan’s Purse*, last modified December 24, 2013, <https://www.samaritanspurse.org/article/the-power-of-hope/>.

“In Exodus 34:7 God declares, ‘Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.’ Divorce has the potential if it has not already achieved it, to be the generational curse that is found in this verse.” All of the statistics, also located in Chapter 2, appear to back this claim as well. Yet, instead of allowing the statistics to dictate to divorced Christians their value and success, divorced Christians were empowered by their church leaders to use their testimony as a witnessing tool. By reclaiming their testimony from the lies of Satan, a divorcee can enter places that non-divorcees cannot. A divorcee can enter areas in other divorcees' lives that are broken and help them find the cure.

This witnessing power is only possible if instead of shying away from divorcees, a church leader steps up and welcomes them and ministers to them in the way they need. One study cannot discover the perfect way to reach all divorcees to be ministered to in their exact needed way. However, one study can find that one of the biggest problems that divorcees face within the church is that they feel abandoned in their hour of need. Instead of receiving help from their church leaders, divorcees have overwhelmingly shared that they are ignored because their church leaders do not know how to talk to them. Their church leaders do not understand what they are experiencing, so instead of potentially making it worse, they do nothing. The result is the divorcee feels unwanted.

This is reflected in the difference between pre-divorce feelings of being welcome and post-divorce feelings of being welcome. The pre-divorce percentage was 74 percent. In contrast, the post-divorce percentage was 58 percent. That is a 16 percent drop. Additionally, post-divorce, 12 percent replied that they felt unwelcomed. The lingering question is what happened. The most straightforward and most obvious answer, they got divorced.

Next Steps

The question must be asked, what is the next step with all of this data and information? The next step is quite simple; the data and statistics need to be disseminated to as many church leaders as possible. Not because there is some magic answer within that information, but rather so they can get a glimpse of the information and understand that there is a solution. Divorcees are no different than anyone else within the church. They are sinners in need of a Savior. However, unlike some other sins, their sin is easily visible, especially if children are involved.

Future Study One – Divorced Children

A future study that could be created from this study would look at whether the children of divorced parents are more likely to divorce themselves. All but 4 of the initial respondents had children at the time of their divorce. If it was possible to track down those children and see if they have experienced divorce, it could help verify the statistics in Chapter 2 and the generational curse premise since there were some that in their Initial Divorcee Questionnaire reported their parents had divorced as well as themselves. If a child had divorced, that would mean three generations minimum of divorce in their immediate family.

Future Study Two – Set Duration Post-Divorce Divorcee Perception

Another study that could follow this one is a study looking at divorcees' perception of church leaders' five years post-divorce. That study could determine whether the divorcees stayed at the same church or changed churches and how they view their current leaders. The average timespan between divorces in this study was 18 years, though some answered their divorce occurred less than a year ago. By establishing a set duration of time post-divorce, that study could check to see if the adage of time heals all wounds is true in the real world or just in make-believe.

Future Study Three – Divorced Church Leaders

A final study could look directly at divorced church leaders and how they would minister to other divorcees having been through a divorce themselves. In this study, there was only one leader who had been divorced. As such, his perspective and experience were virtually nullified by the other leaders who had not been divorced. This perspective study would target divorced leaders and see if they would minister differently to other divorcees because of their experience. This study could serve as a baseline for non-divorced church leaders and their approach to ministering to divorcees.

Summary

All of the previously mentioned potential studies would be interesting, but the question that remains is not a future study, but what is happening with divorcees now. That is where this study becomes essential. This study found that the most significant factor in successfully ministering to a divorcee is having a relationship with them. When asked why a divorcee stayed at the same church even after their divorce, 53 percent replied their friends or family attended the church. A relationship was in place within the church. Another 40 percent responded that they liked the programs or **staff** (emphasis added). There was some kind of relationship established that kept them at their church. A church leader does not have to have all the answers to all the questions that are being asked. Instead, a church leader must be available when someone needs to ask the questions.

A church is not a place that people go to because they have their entire life together. A church is a place that people go to because they know they need help. Divorcees are the same. They need help; they need love; they need understanding, but most importantly, they need to know that they are important to God. This is one area where if church leaders do nothing else,

they can show that all people are important to God. The final words of this study will be a combination of suggestions offered by divorcees. “Treat us like we matter,” “Remember that people who get divorced are still people and need to be loved,” and finally, “It is fine to talk about the divorce and let them know you and the church are there for them but don't make the divorce the focal point.” God is the focal point, and if that changes, all is lost.

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APPENDIX A

Section 1 - Demographics

Before continuing, please indicate the appropriate demographics.

1. Gender
 - Male
 - Female
 - Desire Not to Answer
2. Age Group
 - 18-25
 - 26-34
 - 35-43
 - 44-50
 - 51-60
 - Over 60
 - Desire Not to Answer
3. Current Marital Status
 - Remarried
 - Widowed
 - Divorced
 - Desire Not to Answer

_____ Number of Marriages

Section 2 – Ratings

The phrase “a member of church leadership” means anybody who is a pastor, deacon, or small group teacher/leader.

4. Are you comfortable speaking with a member of church leadership about issues directly relating to divorce? Please rate your comfort by circling the most accurate response, and then in the blank provided, explain your rating.

Completely uncomfortable

Somewhat uncomfortable

Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable

Somewhat comfortable

Completely comfortable

Please explain why you gave the rating that you provided.

5. Do you trust the guidance of members of church leadership when speaking to them about issues directly related to divorce? Please rate your trust by circling the most accurate response, and then in the blank provided, explain your rating.

Complete lack of trust

Somewhat lack of trust

Neither trustworthy nor lack of trust

Somewhat trustworthy

Completely trustworthy

Please explain why you gave the rating that you provided.

6. When dealing with issues directly related to divorce, who are you most likely to talk to receive guidance? Please explain your answer.

Section 3 – Problems from Your Divorce

The following section will ask questions about your experiences with divorce and how the church treated you. This section can be difficult as I am asking you to remember in detail how the church treated you immediately following and the first few months after the divorce. **If at any time you need more space, please write on the back of the forms.**

7. What year was your divorce? (Please list all divorces if multiple)
-
8. Before the divorce, did you seek guidance from a member of church leadership?
- YES
 - NO
9. At the time of the divorce, were you an active church member? An active member of a church is someone who attends church an average of 3 times a month.
- YES
 - NO
10. At the time of the divorce, did you have children?
- Yes, how many _____
 - No
11. At the time of the divorce, how old were your children? (select all that apply)
- Infant (Under 1)
 - Toddler (1-3 years)
 - Pre-school (4-5)
 - Grade School (Kindergarten – 5th grade)
 - Middle School (6th – 8th grade)
 - High School (9th -12th)
 - College Aged and/or out of the house

- N/A
12. Were you in any type of leadership position prior to the divorce? (select all that apply)
- Pastor
 - Youth Pastor
 - Other Church Staff (please specify)

 - Deacon
 - Sunday School Teacher
 - Small Group Leader
 - Other: _____
 - Not Applicable
13. If you were in a leadership position what happened because of the divorce?
- Nothing, remained in position
 - Voluntarily resigned
 - Asked to resign by church leadership or denomination
 - Other: _____
 - Not Applicable
14. **Prior to the divorce**, how were you treated by the members of church leadership? (select all that apply)
- Welcomed
 - Invited to participate
 - Encouraged to help
 - Neglected
 - Unwelcome
 - A burden
 - Other: _____
15. Did anyone in church leadership know that you were going through a divorce?
- Yes
 - No
16. Immediately **after** the divorce, how were you treated by the members of church leadership? (select all that apply)

- Welcomed
- Invited to participate
- Encouraged to help
- Neglected
- Unwelcome
- A burden
- Other: _____

17. Has anyone else in your immediate family experienced divorce? If so, who?

18. What did the church leadership do to help you **during** the divorce? (select all that apply)

- Offered or suggested somewhere for counseling
- Helped with monthly utility bills
- Helped with finding a place to live
- Helped with rent
- Helped with food
- Helped by providing clothing to child(ren)
- Talked to child(ren) about what was happening
- Nothing
- Other: _____

19. What did the church leadership do to help you **after** the divorce? (select all that apply)

- Offered or suggested somewhere for counseling
- Helped with monthly utility bills
- Helped with finding a place to live
- Helped with rent
- Helped with food
- Helped by providing clothing to child(ren)
- Talked to child(ren) about what was happening
- Nothing
- Other: _____

20. Why did you decide to stay at the same church? (select all that apply)

- Raised in the church

- Friends and/or family attended
- Liked the programs and/or staff
- Did not want to move children
- Other: _____

21. Did you consider moving churches?

- Yes
- No

22. Do you think divorce is a hard topic for churches to discuss? Why or why not?

Section 4 – Solutions

The following section looks at any programs or classes that the church might offer for those who have been divorced or directly affected by divorce.

23. Which of the following programs for divorcees does your church offer? (select all that apply)

- DivorceCare
- Lilac Tree
- The Oasis Experience
- Evryman Programs
- Other: _____
- None offered

24. Did you participate in any after-divorce support group?

- Yes
- No

25. If an after-divorce support program was offered, would you have attended?

- Yes
- No

26. Other than an after-divorce support group, which of the following divorcee specific programs or activities does your church offer? (select all that apply)

- Small group and/or Sunday School class
- Single again transition classes
- Self-defense classes
- Mentorship programs
- Other: _____
- Nothing offered

27. If the church were to offer programs or activities for divorcees, would you attend?

- Yes
- No
- Depends on program or activity

28. What could the church offer that would make you want to attend and be involved? (select all that apply)

- Small group and/or Sunday School class
- Single again transition classes
- Self-defense classes
- Mentorship programs
- Other: _____

29. Was there any specific Scripture that helped you through the divorce?

- Yes
- No

30. What was that Scripture?

31. How did it help you?

Section 5 – Future

This section is where you get to offer advice or suggestions for church leaders in the future

32. What advice or suggestions would you like to give about divorce for individuals in church leadership?

33. How could the church better serve those who have been divorced?

This is the end of the questionnaire. Thank you for your time and participation in it. If you would like to be part of a follow-up focus group that will look directly at the problems, solutions, and future suggestions from this questionnaire, please email, call, or text me with your name and phone number so that it can be scheduled once all questionnaires have been completed. In approximately 3-4 months, there will be a follow-up questionnaire that you will be asked to complete. Your completion of the follow-up questionnaire will allow for a complete understanding of the effectiveness of this study.

Brandon Wells

APPENDIX B

Divorcee Initial Questionnaire Results

N=28

1. Gender

70% Female

30 % Male

2. Age Group

37% 60+

22% 51-60

15% 35-43

15% 44-50

11% 26-34

3. Current Marital Status

56% Remarried

33% Divorced

11% Widowed

4. Number of Marriages

Average of 2

5. Comfort level

60% Some level of discomfort

37% Completely Comfortable

3% Neither comfortable or uncomfortable

6. Reason for comfort level

Completely Comfortable reasons

50% Personal knowledge and Experiences

20% Non-judgmental

10% Staff is like family

10% Co-workers

10% Time since Divorce

Some level of discomfort

50% Do not want to talk about personal issues

19% Church leaders do not care

13% Church leaders are like family

6% Church leaders are too judgmental

6% Fear of condemnation

6% Do not know the church leaders

Neither Comfortable or Uncomfortable

100% They are not trained to handle divorce but still try

7. Trust level

52% Completely trustworthy

41% Some level of lack of trust

7% Neither trustworthy or lack of trust

8. Reason for trust level

Completely trustworthy

36% You have to trust someone

21% No reason not to trust them

21% Bible teaches to trust your leaders

7% I was able to stay employed at the church

7% Personal friends

7% Church is open about marriage and divorce

Some level of lack of trust

27% Lack of relevant advice or useless advice

27% Lack of empathy or concern

18% Lack of discernment

18% Leaders talk to others that have no business knowing

10% People in positions of leadership that have no business being leaders

9. Seek guidance

28% Friend or family member

28% Pastor

16% Counselor

16% Deacon or Elder

7% Other Church Member

3% God

3% No one

10. Divorce Year

Average year was 2002 Ranged from 1980 to 2019

11. Seek guidance prior to divorce

54% No

46% Yes

12. Active Church Member at time of divorce

69% Yes

31% No

13. Children at time of divorce

85% Yes

15% No

14. Number of children

Average of 2

15. Ages of children (Multiple answers allowed)

26% Grade School (K-5th)

26% High School

22% College or out of the house

22% Preschool

19% Toddler (1-3)

15% No children

11% Under 1

11% Middle School

16. Leadership Position at church prior

74% No leadership position

11% Sunday School Teacher

11% Other Church Staff (non-pastor)

7% Deacon

4% Music Minister

4% Small Group Leader

17. Of those in leadership what happened as a result of divorce

71% Nothing, remained in position

29% Voluntarily resigned

10% Asked to resign

18. Treatment prior to divorce (Multiple answers allowed)

74% Welcomed

33% Encouraged to help

22% Invited to Participate

7% Not active in church

7% Neglected

19. Church leadership know of divorce

63% Yes

37% No

20. Treatment after divorce (Multiple answers allowed)

58% Welcomed

19% Left church

15% Encouraged to help

15% Invited to Participate

12% Unwelcome

7% A burden

7% Neglected

4% Outcast

21. Divorce in immediate family

74% Yes

26% No

22 Who was divorced (Multiple answers allowed)

32% Parents

29% Brother

26% Daughter

8% Daughter

3% Son

23 Church leadership help during divorce (Multiple answers allowed)

44% Nothing

30% Offered or suggested Counselling

11% Not Attending church

11% Helped with a place to live

4% Talked to children

4% Emotional support

4% Prayed for us

24. Church leadership help after divorce (Multiple answers allowed)

48% Nothing

32% Offered or suggested Counselling

12% Helped find a place to live

8% Talked to children

4% Left church

4% Emotional Support

4% Abandoned

25. Stayed at same church, moved churches, or Left church

52% Stayed at same church

33% Moved churches

15% Left Church

26. Why did you stay at the same church (multiple answers allowed)

53% Friends or family attend

40% Liked the program or staff

33% Raised in the church

13% Did not want to move children

7% Work for the church

27. If you stayed did you consider moving churches

70% Yes

30% No

28. Why did you change churches (Multiple answers allowed)

44% Uncomfortable being around the people

33% Felt abandoned by church because of divorce

33% Moved away from area

22% Asked to change by church leadership

11% Changed denominations

29. Why did you leave church completely

60% Moved

20% Because I felt like not going

20% Lost faith

30. Is divorce a hard topic

74% Yes

26% No

Yes

27% Taboo subject and looked on as sin

17% Nobody agrees on why divorce happens

11% Faulty teachings in church about divorce

11% Goes against the Bible

6% Church does not want to take sides

6% Churches are not comfortable talking about divorce

6% Church members judge without knowing the reason behind the divorce

6% People have no commitment

6% Nobody wants to see others hurting

6% Lack of knowledge or care on church leader's part

No

57% Divorce is normal during these times

14% Divorce is mentioned throughout the Bible

14% The Bible is clear about divorce

14% Divorce only happens when broken people get married

31. Which programs does your church offer

56% No program offered

22% DivorceCare

15% Counselling

7% Singles Ministry

32. After-divorce support group participation

89% No

11% Yes

33. What after-divorce program did you participate in

100% DivorceCare

34. If a program was offered would you have attended

65% Yes

35% No

35. Divorce specific programs or activities offered

52% None

27% Small groups

11% Mentorship groups

7% Single again transition classes

7% Single mom's class

4% Counselling

4% Self-defense classes

36. If church were to offer classes would you attend

63% Depend on what is offered

19% Yes

19% No

37. What could the church offer that you would attend

44% Small Group or Sunday school

37% Single again transition classes

26% Mentorship program

15% Self-defense classes

11% Nothing

38. Any specific Scripture that helped during the divorce

56% No

44% Yes

39. What Scripture

18% Jeremiah 29:11

9% Hebrews 13:5

9% 1 Corinthians 7:15

9% Romans 8:28

9% Galatians 5:1

9% Psalm 46:10

9% John 8:32

9% Proverbs 31:25

9% Romans 8:38-39

9% Psalm 37:5

40. How did that Scripture help

55% God is still with me

18% Freedom, Encouragement, Forgiveness, Self-Confidence, Courage

9% God works for my good

9% If the unbeliever leaves I am not responsible for the divorce

41. Advice for church leaders about divorce (Multiple answers allowed)

28% Be supportive and Accepting

24% Do not judge and do not disclose information

12% Treat divorcees like they matter

8% Be compassionate and have an open mind

8% Bring a counsellor on staff or have one you can recommend

8% Make sure to understand the full picture

4% Be careful how you teach about marriage

4% Offer counselling only if you have proper training and schooling

4% Allow divorcees to serve

4% Be More tolerable

42. How could the church better serve those who have been divorced (Multiple answers allowed)

31% Offer classes, help, or activities specifically for divorcees

23% Be welcoming and accepting

15% Be the church

15% Extend grace to divorcees

12% Show interest in them

12% Be understanding

12% Love them

APPENDIX C

Church Leaders

Denominational and Church Questionnaire

PLEASE DO NOT PLACE PERSONAL POSITIONS WITHIN THIS QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is the specific denomination with which your church is associated?

2. Does your denomination and/or church have any official position regarding divorce? *For instance, divorce is unacceptable under all circumstances.* If so, what is that position?

3. Does your denomination and/or church have any official position regarding those who have been divorced? *For instance, divorcees are not allowed to be ordained.* If so, what is that position?

4. Does your denomination and/or church have any official position regarding proper acceptable grounds for divorce? *For instance, divorce is only acceptable as a result of adultery.* If so, what is the position?

5. If someone that is a leader in the church (small group teacher, deacon, pastor) and gets divorced, what are the denominational and/or church ramifications? *For instance, be asked to resign and/or relinquish ordination.*

APPENDIX D

Church Leaders

Interview questions (Audio-recorded)

1. With what denomination are you affiliated?
2. How long have you served in the ministry?
3. How long have you served in your current capacity?
4. Have you ever been divorced? (If yes, ask section 3 questions from the Initial Divorcee Questionnaire, located at the end of this document)
5. What is your personal position regarding divorcees?
6. What are your personal beliefs about acceptable grounds for divorce?
7. What would your guidance be in the following scenario? A member of the church files for divorce because their spouse is having an affair. They have come to you seeking guidance on what they should do next.
8. What would your guidance be in the following scenario? A Sunday school or small group leader within the church files for divorce because their spouse is having an affair. They have come to you seeking guidance on what they should do next.
9. What would your guidance be in the following scenario? An ordained member of the church files for divorce because their spouse is having an affair. They have come to you seeking guidance on what they should do next.
10. In the event that someone who is ordained gets a divorce, would you ask for them to relinquish their ordination?

11. Is the following scenario an acceptable reason for getting a divorce? A husband admits to his wife that he is addicted to pornography, and any time they are intimate, he is envisioning someone else.
12. What if the roles were reversed, and it is the wife who is addicted?
13. What advice would you give to the betrayed spouse in the above scenario if they came seeking guidance? What about the addicted spouse?
14. Is the following scenario an acceptable reason for getting a divorce? One spouse is an alcoholic and becomes verbally abusive towards the other spouse when they drink. What if it is physical?
15. What advice would you give to the non-alcoholic? What advice would you give for the alcoholic?
16. Is the following scenario an acceptable reason for getting a divorce? A spouse becomes permanently injured and is no longer able to work and provide the lifestyle that the couple has grown accustomed to.
17. Lastly, is the following scenario an acceptable reason for getting a divorce? One spouse attempts to murder the other spouse.
18. Do you think that divorce is a hard topic to speak about and deal with in church? Why or Why not?

If divorced asked the following

1. What year was your divorce? (Please list all divorces if multiple)
-

2. Prior to the divorce did you seek guidance from a member of church leadership?
 - YES
 - NO

3. At the time of the divorce, were you an active church member? An active member of a church is someone who attends church an average of 3 times a month.

- YES
- NO

4. At the time of the divorce, did you have children?

- Yes, how many _____
- No

5. At the time of the divorce, how old were your children? (select all that apply)

- Infant (Under 1)
- Toddler (1-3 years)
- Pre-school (4-5)
- Grade School (Kindergarten – 5th grade)
- Middle School (6th – 8th grade)
- High School (9th -12th)
- College Aged and/or out of the house

6. Were you in any type of leadership position prior to the divorce? (select all that apply)

- Pastor
- Youth Pastor
- Other Church Staff (please specify)

- Deacon
- Sunday School Teacher
- Small Group Leader
- Other: _____
- Not Applicable

7. If you were in a leadership position what happened because of the divorce?

- Nothing, remained in position
- Voluntarily resigned
- Asked to resign by church leadership or denomination
- Other: _____
- Not Applicable

8. **Prior to the divorce**, how were you treated by the members of church leadership? (select all that apply)

- Welcomed
- Invited to participate
- Encouraged to help
- Neglected
- Unwelcome
- A burden
- Other: _____

9. Did anyone in church leadership know that you were going through a divorce?

- Yes
- No

10. Immediately **after** the divorce, how were you treated by the members of church leadership? (select all that apply)

- Welcomed
- Invited to participate
- Encouraged to help
- Neglected
- Unwelcome
- A burden
- Other: _____

11. Has anyone else in your immediate family experienced divorce? If so, who?

12. What did the church leadership do to help you **during** the divorce? (select all that apply)

- Offered or suggested somewhere for counselling
- Helped with monthly utility bills
- Helped with finding a place to live
- Helped with rent
- Helped with food
- Helped by providing clothing to child(ren)
- Talked to child(ren) about what was happening

- Nothing
- Other: _____

13. What did the church leadership do to help you **after** the divorce? (select all that apply)

- Offered or suggested somewhere for counselling
- Helped with monthly utility bills
- Helped with finding a place to live
- Helped with rent
- Helped with food
- Helped by providing clothing to child(ren)
- Talked to child(ren) about what was happening
- Nothing
- Other: _____

14. Why did you decide to stay at the same church? (select all that apply)

- Raised in the church
- Friends and/or family attended
- Liked the programs and/or staff
- Did not want to move children
- Other: _____

15. Did you consider moving churches?

- Yes
- No

APPENDIX E

Church Leader Interview Results

N=12

1. Denominational Affiliation

38% - Southern Baptist

23% - Baptist

23% - Free-Will Baptist

15% - Non-Denominational

12 interviews but 13 denominations because 1 interviewee currently works for 2 denominations

2. Length in Ministry

Range between 5 and 39 years

234 combined years in ministry

19.5 years average

3. Length in current ministry

Range between 1 month and 15 years

69.16 combined years

5.76 years average

4. Current capacity (multiple answers)

29% - Senior Pastor

18% - Worship Leader

12% - Deacon

6% - Director of Security

6% - Outreach Director

6% - Pastor's Wife

6% - Spiritual Advisory Board

6% - College Pastor

6% - Finance Administrator

6% - Creative Arts Pastor

12 interviewees but 17 leadership positions

5. Ever Been Divorced

83% - Never divorced

8% - Divorced once

8% - Never been married

6. Divorce in Immediate family (multiple answers)

38% - Sister

25% - Parents

17% - Brother

8% - Grandparents

4% - Cousin

4% - Aunt

4% - Daughter-in-law

7. Personal Position on Divorce (multiple answers)

- 38% - Not what God intended/God hates divorce
- 14% - Hate to see families torn apart and hurt
- 14% - All people are equal before God; being divorced does not matter
- 14% - Grace needs to be extended to divorcees
- 7% - Nothing is wrong with it
- 7% - Divorce happens

8. Personal grounds for acceptable divorce (multiple answers)

- 37% - Adultery/infidelity
- 30% - Safety concerns due to abuse
- 11% - Abandonment
- 4% - Unbiblical beliefs
- 4% - Whatever the Bible says
- 4% - Drug use
- 4% - Driven by personal experience
- 4% - Perpetual unrepentant sin
- 4% - Varies on a case by case basis

9. Church member filing for divorce affair Guidance (multiple answers)

- 39% - Determine if there can be forgiveness and reconciliation
- 17% - Offer counseling
- 11% - Tell them to salvage the marriage and work it out

11% - Pray with them

11% Confront the offending party

6% - Recommend separation

6% - Counsel to divorce

10. Non-ordained leader filing affair (multiple answers)

59% - Ask the leader to step away from position for some time

18% - Determine if there can be forgiveness and reconciliation

12% - Tell them to salvage the marriage and work it out

6% - Offer counseling

6% - Confront the offending party

11. Ordained leader filing affair (multiple answers)

47% - Ask the leader to step away from position for some time

12% - Determine if there can be forgiveness and reconciliation

12% - Tell them to salvage the marriage and work it out

12% - Offer counseling

12% - Ask them to leave the church entirely

6% Confront the guilty party

12. Should ordained relinquish because of divorce

42% - Depends on the circumstances

17% - No

17% - Yes

17% - No, but should step away for a while

8% - Depends on the denomination

13. Husband porn addicted envisions someone else when intimate, acceptable reason

58% - Unacceptable reason

42% - Acceptable reason

14. Roles reversed

100% - Does not matter if roles are reversed

15. Guidance for betrayed spouse (multiple answers)

33% - Offer counseling

19% - Determine if there can be forgiveness and reconciliation

14% - Tell them to salvage the marriage and work it out

10% - Tell them they must be answerable to church leadership

5% - Investigate the problem

5% - Pray with them

5% - Recommend separation

5% - Confront the offending party

16. Guidance for addicted spouse (multiple answers)

24% - Recommend professional counseling

24% - Help them find some form of accountability

- 14% - Tell them to stop sinning and change
- 10% - Investigate the underlying problem
- 10% - Ensure they are saved
- 10% - Help them find something to replace the habit
- 5% - Tell them to work it out
- 5% - Offer family counseling

17. Alcoholic verbally abusive, acceptable reason

- 33% - No
- 25% - No, but separation
- 17% - Yes, if unwilling to change
- 8% - Yes, if it is extreme
- 8% - Yes, if it escalates
- 8% - No, need to address the issue of alcoholism

18. Alcoholic physically abusive, acceptable reason

- 25% - Yes, but separation is the first step
- 17% - Yes
- 17% Yes, if unwilling to change
- 17% - Unsure, but file criminal charges and separate
- 8% Yes, but make sure the authorities are involved
- 8% - Unsure
- 8% - No, but file criminal charges

19. Guidance for non-alcoholic spouse (multiple answers)

- 35% - Separate from the abuser
- 13% - Try to investigate why the abuse is happening
- 13% - Make sure that you are safe and at a place not easily findable
- 13% - Seek professional help
- 6% - Extend grace to them
- 6% - Ask to seek God's will
- 6% - Determine if there can be forgiveness and reconciliation
- 6% - Tell them to salvage the marriage and work it out

20. Guidance for alcoholic spouse (multiple answers)

- 53% - Tell them to stop drinking and seek help
- 27% - Explain what their addiction is doing to others
- 20% - Help them find a support group

21. Permanently injured and unable to work, acceptable reason

- 100% - Unacceptable reason

22. Attempted murder, an acceptable reason

- 75% - Yes
- 8% - No, File criminal charges
- 8% - No, need to investigate why it happened
- 8% - Unsure without knowing all the circumstances

23. Is divorce a hard topic to speak about in church

42% - No

33% - Yes

17% - Maybe

8% - It is uncomfortable

24. Why or why not

24% - Shame involved with divorce

24% - Many are effected/Part of life

18% - Divorce is in the Bible; either you believe the Bible or you don't

18% - Divorces are too easy to get

18% - Fear of alienating church members or potential members

25. Anything else to offer for study (multiple answers)

17% - Nothing to add

17% - Christians must see that attacks on marriage are from the enemy

17% - In marriage, our enemy is not our spouse

17% - The church needs to extend grace

11% - Marriage is important and must be protected

11% Divorcees need to think of the big picture (children and future problems), not just about themselves

6% - Have never had to counsel someone going through a divorce. I need to study more

6% Those not affected by divorce can never know the impact of divorce

APPENDIX F

Divorce Follow-Up Questionnaire

1. Did you complete the initial questionnaire?
- Yes
 - No

The phrase “a member of church leadership” means anybody who is a pastor, deacon, or small group teacher/leader.

2. Are you comfortable speaking with a member of church leadership about issues directly relating to divorce? Please rate your comfort by circling the most accurate response, and then in the blank provided, explain your rating.

Completely uncomfortable

Somewhat uncomfortable

Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable

Somewhat comfortable

Completely comfortable

Please explain why you gave the rating that you provided.

3. Do you trust the guidance of members of church leadership when speaking to them about issues directly related to divorce? Please rate your trust by circling the most accurate response, and then in the blank provided, explain your rating.

Complete lack of trust

Somewhat lack of trust

Neither trustworthy nor lack of trust

Somewhat trustworthy

Completely trustworthy

Please explain why you gave the rating that you provided.

4. Do you feel that awareness about divorce has increased?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

5. What, if anything, have you noticed from the church leadership that shows that they desire to see divorced lives impacted and changed in the future?

- Speak more openly about divorce
- Talk more with divorcees
- Allow divorcees to be in leadership positions
- Other: _____

6. What would you like to see in the future to help reincorporate divorcees back into the church?

7. If you participated in the focus group do you feel that your suggestions and recommendations have begun to be incorporated within the church??

- Yes
- No
- Not Applicable

APPENDIX G

Follow-up Questionnaire Results

N=6

1. Did you complete the initial questionnaire?

100% - Yes

2. Comfort level speaking to a church leader

67% - Some level of discomfort

33% - Completely comfortable

3. The explanation for comfort level

Completely comfortable

50% - My past does not define me, so it does not bother me

50% - They are my co-workers

Some level of discomfort

50% - Leaders are becoming more willing to listen, so I will talk if asked

25% - Leaders only want to push for reconciliation

25% - Leaders do not know how to answer the difficult questions divorcees have

4. Trust level speaking to church leaders

50% - Completely trustworthy

50% - Some level of distrust

5. Explanation of trust level

Completely trust

67% - Leaders would not breach confidentiality/personal friends

33% - Leaders are intelligent and biblically strong

Some level of distrust

33% - I do not fully trust anyone after the divorce

33% - Leaders have no understanding

33% - Leaders appear as though they care more

6. Has awareness about divorce increased?

50% - Yes

50% - No

7. Observed church leaders desire to see divorcees changed for the future (multiple answers)

38% - Speak more openly about divorce

38% - Talk more with divorcees

13% - Allow divorcees to be in leadership positions

13% - Nothing, churches are more open to LGBTQ than they are to divorcees

8. Future suggestions

38% - Be more accepting and make divorcees more a part of the church

13% - Create a Bible study for divorcees

13% Let divorcees serve in ministry

13% - Create a mentorship program for divorcees

13% - Encourage divorcees to share their story

13% - Stop teaching that a 2-parent home is better. Two parents in an unstable home is not healthy

9. Focus Group recommendations being incorporated

50% - Did not participate in the focus group

33% - Yes

17% - No

APPENDIX H

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
3/6/2020 to --
Protocol # 4154.030620

CONSENT FORM

Surviving a Divorce with an Intact Faith: A Strategy for Ministering to Those Experiencing
Divorce in the Church
Brandon Wells
Liberty University
Rawlings School of Divinity

You are invited to be in a research study about discovering strategies for how the church can better serve divorcees during their time of need. You were selected as a possible participant because you are over the age of 18, a member of a church, and previously divorced. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Brandon Wells, a doctoral candidate in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this Doctor of Ministry project is to discover the similarities within divorces and analyze them in order to develop a training program designed to equip church leaders in their efforts to better offer grace-filled, empathetic guidance to divorcees.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete the following anonymous questionnaire openly and honestly. From beginning to end the questionnaire should take you approximately 30-45 minutes.
2. Optional: Participate in a focus group. If you desire to partake in this focus group the required time will be approximately 2-3 hours.
3. Approximately 3-4 months after the initial questionnaire, there will be a follow-up questionnaire that you will be asked to complete. From beginning to end the questionnaire should take you approximately 15-30 minutes.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.”

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- The questionnaires will be completed anonymously, the only time that an identification will be ascertained is if/when you, the participant, send the researcher a separate email desiring to be part of the follow-up focus group.
- Focus group participants will be assigned a pseudonym for the purpose of data recording.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. In the event that a hard-copy questionnaire is used, the questionnaire will

be stored in a locked filing cabinet. After three years, all electronic and paper records will be deleted and destroyed.

- The focus group will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting these relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, please note, due to the anonymous nature of the questionnaires, the researcher will be unable to destroy questionnaire data after your questionnaire has been submitted. If you decide to participate in the focus group, that data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Brandon Wells. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Dan Burrell, [REDACTED].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2815, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX I

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
3/6/2020 to --
Protocol # 4154.030620

CONSENT FORM

Surviving a Divorce with an Intact Faith: A Strategy for Ministering to Those Experiencing
Divorce in the Church
Brandon Wells
Liberty University
Rawlings School of Divinity

You are invited to be in a research study about discovering strategies for how the church can better serve divorcees during their time of need. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a member of church leadership. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Brandon Wells, a doctoral candidate in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this Doctor of Ministry project is to discover the similarities within divorces and analyze them in order to develop a training program designed to equip church leaders in their efforts to better offer grace-filled, empathetic guidance to divorcees.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete the attached questionnaire about positions and stances regarding divorce within your denomination and church. The questionnaire should take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete.
2. Schedule a face-to-face interview with the researcher in order to answer questions related to divorce from a personal perspective. The interview will be audio-recorded and should take approximately 1-2 hours to complete.
3. Within a week of the interview it will be completely transcribed, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy, if you so decide. If you decide to review the transcript, you will have 1 week to complete the review and return it to the researcher with any corrections.
4. Attend a 4-part workshop wherein the results of the research will be shared with you and questions will be answered. The workshop will take approximately 4-5 hours to complete.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should expect to receive new knowledge and information about ministering to divorcees, as well as ideas for future divorced ministry from taking part in this study.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others cannot easily overhear.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Brandon Wells. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are **encouraged** to contact him [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Dan Burrell, [REDACTED].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are **encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX J

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 6, 2020

Brandon Wells

IRB Exemption 4154.030620: Surviving a Divorce with an Intact Faith: A Strategy for Ministering to Those Experiencing Divorce in the Church

Dear Brandon Wells,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

(iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

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