

Liberty University
John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Childhood Trauma: Nobody Told Me It Would Impact My Marriage Too

A Thesis Project Submitted to
the Faculty of Liberty University School of Divinity
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

by
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Lynchburg, Virginia

Month 2022

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Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

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THE DOCTOR of MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

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Childhood Trauma: No One Told Me It Would Affect My Marriage Too

Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, 2022

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This thesis project addressed the couple's ministry life group class at Ridgeville Church of God, as it intends to address how childhood trauma affects married couples. The purpose was to provide proper tools and resources through an education process such as a marriage conference. Chapter One introduces the church's historical context, mission statement, vision statement, the possible limitations of implementing such a class, and the pastor's professional background. The literature review in Chapter Two highlights the powerful effects of childhood trauma, especially in individuals' marriages, more specifically, couples' intimacy. Survey-style data was the selected method used in this research due to the sensitive nature of the topics covered. Chapter Three demonstrates the plan of action for the marriage conference. Chapter Four analysis of the pre-conference surveys and the post-conference surveys chart the data from the 13 individuals in attendance. Finally, chapter Five concludes by highlighting the importance of educating more congregations than just Ridgeville Church of God on the impacts of childhood trauma and early exposure to pornography. The conclusion indicates further areas to research, even raising new questions that possibly contribute additional factors to the conflicts in marriage and intimacy.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this entire project to the survivors of childhood trauma. The events that have altered your lives no doubt have been challenging, affecting many areas of your lives, as they have mine. A survivor myself and the spouse of a survivor, our hearts go out to each of you. This project is dedicated to all of us, and hopefully, the topics covered will bring you healing to provide hope and restoration while helping you move from the belief that the incidents were your fault to these life-altering events were heinous acts committed against an innocent person.

These topics were carefully selected (i.e., abandonment, childhood sexual abuse, and early exposure to pornography) because these are the primary areas that have challenged my wife and me and continue to do so almost 18 years into our marriage. If we can continue to recover, you can too. I dedicate this project to you because I believe in you, in your recovery, and in your ability to make a difference in this world despite whatever may have wounded you.

I leave you these words from a famous quote by an unknown author:

*“Your **trauma** is not your fault, but **healing** is your responsibility.”*

Acknowledgements

I want to begin by thanking everyone who has offered up encouragement and helped me overcome the obstacles this journey has produced, but a special thanks is offered up to my project mentor, Dr. Jonathan Sullivan. Your patience with me over the last year has been priceless. The many hours conversing back and forth challenged me in ways that can never be fully expressed or appreciated.

In addition to the academic team, I want to thank my mother and father (deceased) for believing in me. The reminders over the years of what I said I wanted to become are now a reality. Although in a different field than originally thought, the passion for helping others was always on display before us. Dad, thank you for every sacrifice made to this great nation that you served honorably for 23 years and for always providing for the family. Your work ethic will forever be embedded in me. Although life took you too soon from my life, resulting in you being unable to see any of my accomplishments, your ability to achieve your dreams while raising three new adopted sons was amazing.

I want to thank my ministerial colleagues for your support through each semester as you engage the journey with me. From the calls you made to me, opening your church for me to speak, or even coming up privately and sharing how my work has helped you, to the wonderful and supportive people of Ridgeville Church of God, thank you for believing in me and making a way for me to fulfill my lifelong dream. Your heart for the Lord has and will continue to be seen for generations to come.

In conclusion, to my wife, Betsy, and children; Isaac, Malachi (deceased), and Izzy; your support, sacrifice, and excitement each time I finished a semester was encouraging. To know this chapter of our lives comes to an end cannot have been any better, except for Malachi not being

here with us. Betsy, you have always been my number one fan, my motivator, and my sail during rough waters. I love you with all my heart.

Finally, and most of all, I would like to thank my Lord and Savior. None of this would have been made possible, and all glory goes to You. May my heart always beat in sync with Yours as I fulfill the assignment You have given me.

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Abbreviations

CM	<i>Childhood maltreatment</i>
DMIN	<i>Doctor of Ministry</i>
FGDQ	<i>Focus Group Discussion Questionnaire</i>
LUSOD	<i>Liberty University School of Divinity</i>
SC	<i>South Carolina</i>
SEM	<i>Sexually explicit media</i>

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The circle of life is continual, and marriage is often the next natural step in life after graduation. Marriage has been a part of society from its humble beginnings, and scripture even instructs in Ephesians 5:31, “For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh.¹” Young girls dream of their perfect wedding day, flipping through countless magazines and scouring numerous websites to find ideas for that perfect day. The imagination runs wild by the elaborate wedding visuals displayed before our very eyes on television, social media, and glamorous magazines. Romance novels paint a fairy tale idea of marriage that few achieve, but so many still chase it. When that image crumbles, turns upside down, gets taken away, becomes compromised, challenged, or at best is a struggle you never thought you would have, then what?

The greatest dreams, goals, and ambitions can quickly become shattered by others. Childhood trauma (sexual abuse or abandonment) and even early exposure to sexually explicit media (SEM) can diminish all those hopes instantly and, at the very least, begin to paint an image that the individual is not even worthy of such special days in their life.² The emotional, mental, physical, and even sexual damage these traumas do early on erase the innocence and rewrite the mental blueprints that take years for both boys and girls to overcome.

This project addressed the impacts of early sexual trauma and early exposure to pornography on marriage, including intimacy. Everyone’s trauma is different; however, the

¹ Ephesians 5:31. King James Version (KJV). All scriptures will be from the King James Version until otherwise stated.

² Darius Cikanavicius, “5 Ways Childhood Neglect and Trauma Skews Our Self-Esteem,” May 14, 2018, <https://psychcentral.com/blog/psychology-self/2018/05/childhood-self-esteem#1>.

effective baseline establishes that all three areas of impact: abandonment, childhood sexual abuse, and early exposure to SEM, one can successfully be healed from it.

Ministry Context

Ridgeville Church of God, established March 21, 1980, recently celebrated 42 years of ministry; its humble beginning would be classified as a small rural country church. Organized under the name “Pilgrim Way Church of God,” Forty-six days later, the local body approved and submitted a name change request. With the denomination’s approval, the church became known as Ridgeville Church of God. The new name did not stop the current ministry that flowed in and out of the church. Men’s and women’s ministries seemed to be excelling with excitement with each new person coming to their meetings and into the services. The nursery began to expand, as did the youth, juniors, and children’s church department. Another great ministry birthed out of the church is Hope ministry. This ministry is fueled by the passion from someone who lives in the local community and who knows firsthand the needs of the community. This ministry feeds the homeless and supplies the less fortunate needs, giving school supplies and backpacks to needful children. These vital ministries helped build the church’s foundation in more ways than just the physical foundation. It was their passion to see God do in others what He has already done for them.

However, that does not mean the church was without challenges. The church saw a 50% increase in attendance from when the current pastor arrived. The church broke records for single-day attendance, average monthly attendance, and yearly attendance. The church has also seen numeric growth, even breaking monthly tithe records on three different occasions. It would seem there are no issues here, so where are the problems? Near his third anniversary, the pastor made a decision that resulted in the departure of over 50 people leaving the church. As a result, the

church lost over \$50,000.00 in annual tithe contributions. The pastor has stated the only thing that keeps him rooted is about four months after the exodus; while attending a camp meeting service, God gave him a promise: “Just as I did for Job in multiplying his losses, I will do the same for you.” True to His word, God is slowly restoring back to the ministry.

Ridgeville’s identity has been a rural church; however, population and cultural changes are challenging that thought process and expanding the effectiveness of the ministry. As the changes continue to occur, it produces more areas of ministry. The identity of being in a rural area where the church ministers become challenging as the world grows, and so does the population it ministers to. The campus is 30 miles outside of Charleston, South Carolina (U-Haul’s 2020 top 20 for growth listed the area at #17; it also proudly resides in the City of Summerville, the home of sweet tea).³ Summerville governs many small towns, with Ridgeville being one of them. Do not let the word small mislead you, as the population of Ridgeville, along with its neighboring towns and city within a 20-minute drive, swells to over 175,000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.⁴ The three largest ethnic groups the church ministers to in its town are Black or African American (non-Hispanic) that makes up 54.6%, White (non-Hispanic) makes up another 30.7%, and the third group is multiracial (non-Hispanic), which is 10.4%.

Someone once said, “There are two types of churches: a destination church (a church where most of the attendees come from outside the area the location of the church) and a community church (most of the attendees come from the community the church is in). If this statement is true, Ridgeville Church of God will fall under the destination church’s umbrella.

³ “2020 Migration Trends: U-Haul Names Top 25 U.S. Growth Cities,” January 4, 2021, <https://www.uhaul.com/Articles/About/22745/2020-Migration-Trends-U-Haul-Names-Top-25-U-S-Growth-Cities/#:~:text=Thirteen%20of%20the%20top%2025,%2C%20Georgia%2C%20Texas%20and%20Wisconsin.>

⁴ “Quick Facts,” accessed March 27, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/northcharlestoncitysouthcarolina,ladsoncdpsouthcarolina,sangareecdpsouthcarolina,summervilletownsouthcarolina/LND110210>.

The church, which had 13 chartered members 41 years ago, has grown to 138 members and an average Sunday morning attendance of around 70 after the doors open back up from the post-COVID-19 pandemic. However, looking deeper inside the makeup of those 70 attendees, only about 10% come from the town of Ridgeville. The significance of the 90% commuters from outside the area is that many cultures come together with multiple diverse backgrounds learning from one another.

The church's availability within the community and the local area, plus the relationships it has formed, has also made it a place where hurting people can receive healing, broken people can be made whole, and people wanting to grow in their relationships can do just that. In addition, the pastor's passion for broken marriages restored, struggling marriages finding their foundation, and the DNA being instilled within the people with a slogan that "You are more than a number. You are family" is starting to draw people into the church as well. The church has seen an increase of 14 new members in the last year with several more wanting to join.

Commissioned by the Church of God denomination, headquartered in Cleveland, Tennessee, this new church has the backing of a strong foundation that knows all about growing churches. The Church of God started in 1886 with nine people in Monroe County, Tennessee. However, the original name was the Christian Union, as these individuals felt there must be more from God than what they had already experienced. It was not until the 1906 General Assembly (a meeting all credentialed ministers attend to discuss and vote on the church's business) did the name change to Church of God.⁵ Today, the denomination has more than 7 million members in over 185 nations and territories. With over 36,000 congregations worldwide, it has established

⁵ "A Brief History of the Church of God," accessed March 21, 2021, <https://churchofgod.org/about/a-brief-history-of-the-church-of-god/>.

itself as a religious and secular world leader. Its multiple educational institutions, Home for Children Publishing Company, and response teams during natural disasters are first class.

J. D. Greear, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, once wrote, “I want to show you that the real potential for a multiethnic movement lies in the creating of a sending culture at your church.”⁶ Sending from the local church has been the foundation of many churches as they follow the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” For the past 42 years, Ridgeville Church of God has been sending forth many along with the way to plant, water, and reap from its journey. Doing so has brought significant growth and pain to the church, especially as senior leadership changes hands.

Pastoral Leadership

In the short history compared to most churches, Ridgeville Church of God has seen their senior pastor change hands 15 times. It has been stated often at many attended conferences that the average length of tenure for senior pastors is around the 3.5 years. If one were to take the number of pastors Ridgeville Church of God has had and divided it by the number of years established, each senior pastor would average just a little over two-and-a-half-year tenure. Ridgeville Church of God with the equated average would be well below the norm. This average tenured time is odd, especially when considering three of the last five senior pastors have served at least six years. The author of this project is in his sixth year, and the longest tenure as senior pastor was 14 years. One may ask, why does the length of a pastor’s tenure matter? If one wants to be effective in the community through the local ministry context where they pastor, longevity and relationship building will be critical. During His ministry here on earth, Jesus Christ was all

⁶ J. D. Greear, *Gaining by Losing: Why the Future Belongs to Churches that Send* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 162.

about personal connections, building relationships, and impacting lives, so each Christian as they work to become Christ-like should be doing the same.

Each change brought the numerical rollercoaster of attendance; however, it also left some hurting from the difference in leaders and, as always, some excited, some not. The relationship-building part of ministry, primarily between the senior pastor and their members, is key to an effective ministry and continual growth. Sometimes, the change occurs as the senior pastor is on to another assignment, while the opposite sometimes is present; the senior pastor has done something that requires the change. The last three pastoral changes had a mixture of the two as to why the pastoral leadership seemed to be a revolving door.

Pastor Charles, the current pastor, and author of the project arrived excited for the new journey on January 26, 2016. He quickly realized the church's chemistry and its people's personalities were on a course headed for an explosion with no quick fix in sight. He quickly had to utilize his educational background, training in counseling, and biblical preparation, in dealing with the hurtful people and community. The influx of appointments to see the pastor with a degree in counseling had many bottled-up ready-to-tell stories that seemed ready to be released for years. The stories had names; their pain had names; their issues had names; their problems seemed to create more problems with a loss of self-worth, lack of purpose, and a struggling marriage with failed accountability or assurance. These sessions began to build a platform of reoccurring themes, patterns, conflicts, and the counselees looking to the church and its leaders for answers.

At this moment, an accurate reality check had to be done, starting with the senior pastor, and traveling to the newest of attendees. The first step in building a healthy church and ministry is honesty, especially when asking about the church. What is the protocol for a proper response if

the attendees want an appointment with a leader for counseling or advice? What provisions are in place to protect the minister and the ministry? What are current programs to respond to the growing needs within the church setting and the growing population outside the walls? Is the church satisfying the mission statement? Out of these questions, a problem emerged and was identified within the local ministry.

Problem Presented

The problem is Ridgeville Church of God lacks a marital counseling ministry addressing how childhood trauma affects married couples. The ever-expanding population, especially around the church campus, has produced unique challenges while allowing the church to serve its local congregation and the vast increase. Marriage is difficult enough to bring two personalities together; when adding the uninvited childhood trauma to the mix, trying times emerge within the relationship. Sometimes, those appear before marriage and are overlooked, thinking time will fix it, while other times, it reveals itself after the wedding. The lead pastor is often called upon to intervene with guidance, wisdom, direction, and sometimes the cold hard facts. While observing the steady rise in frequency of counselees sharing their childhood trauma survivor stories, a self-evaluation was necessary. The necessary evaluation, not just for them but the church they commissioned to lead, would highlight areas of concern. Cultivating an atmosphere of hope is a true calling, not only for the sinner but also for the lost spouse; these couples needed to overcome the challenges their childhood trauma was causing.

As a minister who has conducted counseling over the past 14 years, the current pastor has dealt with over 150 dating or married couples who have struggled with intimacy because of one of these three areas. For those exposed to pornography at an early age, not only has it been a lifelong struggle, but the false realization of intimacy that it mentally created placed their spouse

at a severe disadvantage. The SEM introduced ideas of how men and women respond to intimacy and other false narratives that became replayed in the marriage that proved problematic. In couples with at least one spouse sexually abused or molested, the emotional struggles continue to be contentious when it comes to intimacy. This is not necessarily always true, but mostly, the battle is present.

Pastor Charles found during the counseling sessions the clients present for several reasons consciously and subconsciously for withholding the secrets; hidden admission (ashamed to admit it, afraid to relive the moment, fearful of what their spouse may say or do), revealed just to the spouse (while there is some freedom from revealing the secret, the spouse has no training to help the loved one overcome the traumatic event) but brought up during arguments with ammunition or phrases like, “Why am I punished for what someone else done?” The other is the damage of the event mentally, physically, and emotionally to the point it required professional help. However, the spouse did not think they should go and reveal they had issues, especially with intimacy, to someone regardless of who it is. Abandonment was one he added because it seems to be one that, while infrequently arising, is tied to one another more often than one cares to admit.

The struggle for someone abandoned is that fear is almost always present, so the fear of getting close again becomes real. Many individuals Pastor Charles counseled were willing to get married. Still, due to earlier experiences in relationships of being intimate and then being left as if they no longer matter, they struggled to experience intimacy again, thinking it would prevent loneliness one more time. Individuals who have been abandoned struggle giving themselves entirely to someone else, resulting in anxiety issues, fear of performance satisfaction, and seeing sexual intimacy more as an obligation than part of connecting with their spouse.

All the struggles stem from the traumas previously listed or combinations of one or more along with so many other formulated mixtures. Unfortunately, the presenter of the project himself has one of the combinations. Not only did he experience the childhood trauma of abandonment from being placed up for adoption, the early exposure to pornography, but add the biological parents' divorce to the equation, and there seem to be many obstacles for him to overcome.

Divorce is a life-changing choice that includes different contemplations before settling on court action. Numerous couples decided to attempt to live separated lives for a designated period before settling on a final choice. When you look at it from the church vantage, the acceptance factor can swing from total rejection to almost a celebratory party depending on the denomination where one worships. Two of the most significant impacts on the church are living what you preach and conflict resolution.

While the first one may seem easy to address, it may be the most difficult since there is not much wavering of opinions, especially when positioned with the church and a member or not a member. The church's integrity must still be intact for future generations; however, if the church leaders, especially the pastor, say one thing but do another, the integrity is gone, and so is respect. The same can and should be told concerning one's walk with God. Individuals coming to the church on Sunday are looking for integrity, honesty, and realness.

Recent research shows that divorced fathers are incredibly influential in whether their children will continue to have a life in the church.⁷ The author of the project personally knows about divorce as he is not only from an adopted home, but his biological parents divorced

⁷ Margaret McCarthy, ed. *Torn Asunder: Children, the Myth of the Good Divorce, and the Recovery of Origins* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2016), ProQuest Ebook Central. 58.

blamed his two brothers and him for the divorce. He states it would have been easy to use the adverse event even as a seventh grader to get out of the church, but through discipline, that did not happen. However, the emotional damage still must be dealt with, as does the continual battle of rejection from the abandonment of the adoption.

The odds seem as if they have stacked again those coming from a divorced home, and we have seen children from homes of divorce often grow up less likely to be involved in the church or serving in any capacity of leadership. The most challenging thing for a child or pre-teen to digest and process, according to the author, is not just rejection and abandonment but going to the church one loves and feeling abandoned and rejected by them too. In addition to the child's stigma as one with divorced parents or even one where individuals talk, a church with many divorced individuals is viewed negatively.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this DMIN action research project was to provide tools and education on a variety of marital subjects through a marriage conference. Unfortunately, Ridgeville Church of God has no formal way of helping those within our local church overcome the earlier traumatic events of their lives who have continued to struggle in areas within their marriage, especially sexual intimacy.

The presenter of the project created a one-day conference-style presentation that oriented those in attendance by addressing critical topics for married couples as a whole; biblically, physically, emotionally, and financially; in addition to highlighting how to overcome the traumatic events listed in this project. During the four-session conference (each session lasting about an hour) presentation, the primary themes (i.e., childhood trauma with emphasis on abandonment, childhood sexual abuse, and early exposure to pornography) and some subtopics

were the key discussion points. During the four-hour enhancement seminar, the projects intended to educate each couple on definitions of abandonment, childhood trauma, especially sexual trauma, and the effects pornography has on an individual and their spouse. It will also help better understand their roles mentally, physically, financially, and even spiritually. Last, the seminar sessions will address the impacts and ways to improve in the areas of the study. Since proper communication is key to any success, knowing how to communicate when the arguments arise will be vital in defusing the next world war while trying to understand where their spouse is emotionally at that moment.

Basic Assumptions

The project intended to discover why there was no marital counseling ministry at Ridgeville Church of God and the structured conference-style approach to educating childhood trauma. The assumption is that the church had not launched a marital counseling ministry because it lacked individuals adequately trained to lead the ministry and someone willing to put in the necessary time to get it started. This ministry's training need would require someone approved by the pastor but only after meeting specific terms such as a college degree or other formal training.

The project's author assumed that another reason for the program not being established was the church's failure to admit there was even a problem or an inability to recognize the problem. To further challenge this assumption, the hope was to send a questionnaire or online response link for an anonymous response to determine if this type of ministry was necessary and, if not, why not. Unfortunately, it seems many assume finding the answer solves the problem, but too often, it only adds to their stress level as more questions present themselves.

A further assumption would be if couples who are a part of Ridgeville Church of God participate in the presented sessions, their marriage counseling sessions would become less frequent. The tools introduced and reemphasized would better prepare the couples for when they did argue. It also assumed that what was learned would deepen the individuals and couples in their struggled areas, reducing their marriage stress.

As a minister for the past 22 years and a lead pastor for the last 14, the author has seen many issues arise needing attention, direction, a voice of reason, or at times being a moderator while the arguing continued in his office. During these office visits, he tested different strategies to determine whether they would work. One such approach that has not proven false is to be careful in telling your parents when your spouse does wrong (e.g., cheats, gambles, watches pornography) unless it is to get help, even if they are your best friend. During the two decades of counseling, the experience has been the parents are not as forgiving as the spouse is. This highlights the problem most times when seeking advice from others, predominantly non-professional people. They are often being asked to form conclusions and give advice from limited information. Because they have not received any formal training, they can be unaware of what questions to ask, how to read body language, or even how to peel the proper layers away to get to the real problem.

Another effective strategy is in communication. The average couple struggle with communication to help improve their marriage, especially in intimacy; this area needed to be addressed during the project. During the counseling session or in the comfort of your own home, you need to ask difficult questions because avoidance never solves anything. Communication is more than yelling, screaming, or talking loudly. With the evidence behind them, the author encouraged both spouses to communicate in what he called “speak the repeat.”

“Speak the repeat” is nothing but having one spouse speak, then the other repeat the statement just as it was spoken to work on listening skills. The same is true for writing notes. This is not taking notes during an argument to use as argumentative points later but writing sweet sayings or love letters building one another up. Another part of this strategy is allowing communication to be free enough to share what the heart is processing without fear of repercussions.

Just as there are successful strategies, there are unsuccessful ones too. Some damage is too far beyond. One such failed strategy the author speaks about is knowing when to call a “time out.” The principle is based on James 1:19, where we are supposed to be slow to speak and slow to wrath and swift to hear. The passage reminds us that we all should work on our communication skills, but many laughed for one reason or another when the strategy was presented. They felt the idea was too simplified but having the ability to call a “time out” gives room for tempers to cool down and level heads to prevail.

For more transparent communication to happen, one needs to know the accurate definition of words used to avoid misunderstanding. Communication with proper words averts damage, instead of throwing around words seeking the appearance of intellect simply because one wishes to impress or exert a level of dominance through their misguided conversation resulting in further harm.

Definitions

Childhood trauma refers to a scary, dangerous, violent, or life-threatening event that happens to a child (0-18 years of age).⁸ Trauma in early childhood can be particularly hurtful.

⁸ “What is Child Trauma?” accessed April 4, 2021, [http://cctasi.northwestern.edu/family_trashed/child-trauma/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CChild%20trauma%E2%80%9D%20refers%20to%20a,%2D18%20years%20of%20age\).&text=When%20these%20types%20of%20experiences,%2C%20and%20For%20feel%20helpless.](http://cctasi.northwestern.edu/family_trashed/child-trauma/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CChild%20trauma%E2%80%9D%20refers%20to%20a,%2D18%20years%20of%20age).&text=When%20these%20types%20of%20experiences,%2C%20and%20For%20feel%20helpless.)

Early childhood trauma, for the most part, implies trauma from birth to age six⁹. A child's mind is still growing and developing rapidly during the first eight years of their young life, so any interruption has enormous implications¹⁰. Children are so dependent on their caregivers for their protection, everyday care, and even their nurturement, making them very vulnerable to childhood trauma. When trauma does occur, it has the potential of affecting their mental stability and their idea of security, among so many other noted effects that have been downplayed for so long.

Abandonment is an act or instance of leaving a person or thing wholly and permanently.¹¹ The fear of abandonment often stems from an early childhood loss (either permanent or temporary) from a traumatic event such as natural disaster, death of a parent, divorce of a parent, or death of a pet. Likewise, it can come from not getting sufficient physical or passionate consideration. These early abandonment encounters can prompt a dread of being deserted by others sometime down the road.

Pornography involves sexually explicit videos, photographs, writings, or the like, the purpose of which is to elicit sexual arousal.¹² Although according to National Center for Biotechnology Information, no satisfactory scientific definition of pornography exists.¹³ The meaning of porn one may choose various kinds of material in multiple settings since what is seen

⁹ Early Childhood Trauma. Accessed March 3, 2022, <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/early-childhood-trauma#:~:text=Early%20childhood%20trauma%20generally%20refers,to%20children%20aged%200%2D6>.

¹⁰ Early Brain Development and Health. Accessed March 7, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/early-brain-development.html>

¹¹ Dictionary.com, "abandonment (n.)," accessed April 4, 2021, <http://wwwwww.dictionary.com>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ B R, Rosser, J A Grey, J M Wilkerson, A Iantaffi, Sonya S Brady, D J Smolenski, and K J Horvath. "A commentary on the role of sexually explicit media (SEM) in the transmission and prevention of HIV among men who have sex with men (MSM)," *AIDS and Behavior* 16, no. 6 (2012): 1373. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-012-0135-z>.

as pornography can fluctuate from one culture to another over time. “Explicitly express” capacities as a sort of indexical term, selecting various highlights relying upon what has specific or breaks certain restrictions in multiple settings and societies. This may, at the time, fall under a giant umbrella called *SEM*.

Childhood maltreatment (CM) is the abuse and neglect of children under the age of 18. It includes all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence, and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development, or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power.¹⁴ In addition, CM creates unwanted burdens such as stress and suffering to the children and the families, resulting in long-term consequences if not quickly addressed.

Child sexual abuse occurs when a perpetrator intentionally harms a minor physically, psychologically, sexually, or by acts of neglect. The crime is known as child abuse.¹⁵ Child sexual abuse is a type of unwanted sexual activity with a minor. A child cannot agree to any sexual activity, period. When the individual crosses the line, a crime has now been committed, and protection for the child must be engaged.

Intimate partner violence describes physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse.¹⁶ Intimate partner violence is misuse or animosity that happens during a relationship. The “intimate partner” can be used to refer either to a current or former romantic partner. The violence can stem from either a one-time incident or more long-term violence.

¹⁴ “Child Maltreatment,” accessed April 4, 2021, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/child-maltreatment>.

¹⁵ “Child Sexual Abuse,” accessed April 4, 2021, <https://www.rainn.org/articles/child-sexual-abuse>.

¹⁶ “Intimate Partner Violence,” accessed April 4, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/index.html>.

Limitations

For this project, Ridgeville Church of God may find several limitations to consider and overcome. First is the number of couples who would participate from the 70 weekly Sunday morning attendees in a session-like approach. While many have said they would be willing to help however they could, and many have been through the pastor's office for counseling sessions already, getting the commitment for the conference is never a guarantee. Second, as one works to promote the marital counseling program, the limitations remain visible as the project author is still gaining proficiency with childhood trauma issues.

Third, the pastor's limited years of teaching in a conference-style setting pose a slight issue in delivering the information. Maybe one of the most significant limitations was in data collection as not all couples were willing to express the personal nature of their past for fear of how the information might be shared, used, or stored. It is a significant victory to get the individuals to express their history to the counselor they see or even a spouse. At times, it is more challenging to express their traumatic history to someone they do not fully trust yet.

Last, church members also pose limitations. Located near several military bases, shipping yards, car plants such as Volvo and Mercedes-Benz Vans, several big technology companies like Google and Amazon, business trips are normal for members of the church who work in these companies. In addition, members relocating jobs or going to another church cause membership fluctuations for various reasons. Other limitations included the number of marriages and types of traumas in their past. Financial backing and information are available on how the three trauma areas profoundly impact marriages, especially intimacy. While these limitations are significant obstacles, the delimitations can be just as great.

Delimitations

The church provides many constants that work in this project's favor. The first is the age of the participants. The project author examined a set range of ages for the married couples to collect data and stretched it to maximize its gathering ability. For this project, the data collecting range was couples married for less than 30 years, in addition to those over 18 years old and under 60 years old. The counseling environment impacts even beyond the church's location as the consistency of mentality for those in the participating group benefits.

Maybe one of the greatest delimitations offered consisted of the boundaries or scope of the research. Knowing that the group of participants was leaning toward the gained knowledge of abandonment, childhood trauma, and early exposure to pornography limited the vast research to these areas instead of broader scopes. The scope or boundaries helped keep the researcher focused on filling in the identified gap area. The range allowed the researcher to decide who they wished to include in the study while also permitting themselves to exclude others.

Thesis Statement

Since Ridgeville Church of God implemented a conference-style counseling ministry by addressing childhood trauma, among other issues, married couples have seen improvement. The purpose of the project was to equip couples to understand and mitigate the effects of past traumatic events in their lives.

By the end of the four sessions, the desire was that each participating couple had the necessary tools to navigate their marriage better. Marriage requires work without bringing previous traumatic events into a marriage but creating a safe atmosphere, caring, a willingness to help heal, and a unity to get through this together was the outcome of the desired achievements of the seminars. There was a very present need for this study, especially as statistics show that

over half the marriages end in divorce. The personal goal was to fortify the local church's marriages to prevent them from being those statistics within the local body.

Chapter 2

Conceptual Framework

Every childhood is impacted by moments that forever change how they see the world, but childhood trauma survivors see the world differently. So how does one overcome or even stabilize themselves from such trauma as childhood sexual abuse or abandonment? Can one erase the preconceived notions early exposure to pornography causes? This literature review helps provide those answers and even creates some questions as everyone looks through the windows of other people's journey to find healing within our own.

Literature Review

The drive behind this literature review was to show how powerful the effects of early traumatic events in someone's life are, in addition to how they can have lasting impacts. Some focus areas to highlight included, as a church pastor for 13 years and 21 years in the ministry, numerous couples with varying issues have come to the office, needing the opportunity to vent, looking for guidance, or a lifeline for their marriage. This venting process has frequently seemed to free the counselee while often burdening the counselor. The three primary sections researched for this project had a more personal significance in deciding their selection, and for good reason: childhood sexual trauma, trauma from early childhood, and abandonment have all been experienced by the researcher directly or indirectly as a survivor's spouse. James 1:5 says, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."¹⁷ The author understates the impact of these areas within his own marriage, has seen the impact on the couples' marriages being counseled, and wanted to become more informed to help those in his office just as much as his own marriage.

¹⁷ James 1:5

Trauma

Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event such as an accident, rape, or natural disaster.¹⁸ As individuals age, the likelihood of going through a traumatic event is surprising, more common than one may think as about 6 of 10 men (60%) and 5 of 10 women (50%) experience at least one trauma in their lives. Women are more likely to experience sexual assault and child sexual abuse. Men are more likely to experience accidents, physical assault, combat, disaster, or witness death or injury.¹⁹ Life experiences, school education, exposure to media, and many other factors provide a baseline for most adults to access to handle themselves through such trauma even from a fragile state, but what about children? When defining childhood trauma, one sees it as “The experience of an event by a child that is emotionally painful or distressful, which often results in lasting mental and physical effects.”²⁰ The survival library is not as complete, if even open yet, for a child to begin to process such events, nevertheless handle them.

Lasting Impacts

During the literature review, several themes emerged, including insecurity or trust. While many individuals imagine that instability comes from something their abuser said or did, most weakness comes from inside oneself. The inclination can begin from the outset, for instance, with an uncertain connection to parents or created after being harmed or dismissed by someone cared about. Weaknesses are kept up and based upon when negatively reflecting oneself against another. Most relationship instabilities depend on unreasonable contemplations and fears—the

¹⁸ American Psychological Association, “Topics: Trauma,” accessed February 24, 2021, <https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma>.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “PTSD: National Center for PTSD. How Common is PTSD in Adults?,” accessed November 22, 2021, https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common_adults.asp#:~:text=About%206%20of%20every%2010,to%20witness%20death%20or%20injury.

²⁰ “Looking Through Their Eyes, What Is Childhood Trauma?,” accessed February 24, 2021, <http://lookthroughtheireyes.org/what-is-childhood-trauma/>.

feeling of being insufficient, struggling with the idea that one is not complete without being in a relationship. Albert Ellis referred to this as irrational beliefs (rational emotive behavior therapy). Even more negative verbiage would be, “You will never amount to anything, and no one will ever love you.” When experiencing lower levels of trust, individuals behave in ways that emphasize protection from hurt and rejection rather than in ways that promote interdependence, which can result in further distancing from the partner.²¹

Trust

Trust is the foundation of all relationships, no matter the depth. International bestselling author Dr. George Simon says, “Trust is not just a prerequisite for a sound therapeutic relationship. It’s an essential ingredient—perhaps the single most important ingredient—in any relationship, especially our more intimate relationships.”²² Once violated, betrayed, damaged, questioned, or even worse, manipulated to get what one wants, emotional highs and lows become the byproducts. Mishandled, the new emotional instability can lead to making irrational decisions that have lasting impacts. “Trust involves a sense of safety, openness, and a willingness to make oneself vulnerable with the belief that one’s partner will behave in a manner beneficial to the relationship.”²³ Broken trust is like the removal of the safety net or equipment that one comes to rely on. However, once broken, second-guessing will be a struggle many will battle, although the length of the battle will depend on the person and the situation that broke the trust. Rebuilding trust is not easy, as the one who felt betrayed will have a healing process, but through hard work,

²¹ L M Rodriguez, A M DiBello, C S Øverup, and C Neighbors. “The Price of Distrust: Trust, Anxious Attachment, Jealousy, and Partner Abuse,” *Partner Abuse*, 6, no. 3 (2015): 5.

²²George Simon, accessed June 22, 2021, <https://www.drgeorgesimon.com/trust-the-foundation-of-any-relationship/>.

²³ Robin A Barry. “Trust, Attachment, and Mindfulness Influence Intimacy and Disengagement During Newlyweds’ Discussions of Relationship Transgressions.” *Journal of Family Psychology* 30, no. 5 (August 2016): 593.

time, and the ability to prove one's actions as much as one's words will be pivotal steps to get there.

When a married couple encounters trust issues, they must realize it did not occur overnight, nor from one event but a series of activities, events, a collection of damaging words, or imagery that seems to repeat like a broken record. When one has gone through a traumatic event, especially childhood trauma, trusting again can be challenging to obtain, and for some, almost impossible. Once this lack of trust reveals itself, the betraying spouse must create an atmosphere conducive to trusting again.

Trust, as mentioned earlier, is the one of the most important aspects all relationships need to be built upon and to maintain that strong, healthy, ever-growing marriage, intentionally makes of truth each day within the relationship²⁴. Each contributing spouse is not giving 50%, but 100% for genuine trust to be perceived, received, and previously broken mistrust barriers to rebuild. A common issue often discovered through counseling is the unknowing spouse finding out previous events from their spouse's past playing lead roles in their current problems. During the construction phase of building a house, footers are pivotal to the structure being stable, sustainable, and long-lasting. Trust is equally if not even more necessary to a relationship than footers are to building houses.

Breaking the silence from the negative effects of broken trust is more than a minor step; it may be the most significant step in becoming free. Like all significant advancements, repercussions are almost a guarantee. Once you allow yourself to go "public" about the events of your past, refusing to allow shame to hold you back any longer, the journey of healing can start,

²⁴ Karen Pace, "Trust is one of the most important aspects of relationships", Michigan State University Extension, November 18, 2016.
https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/trust_is_one_of_the_most_important_aspects_of_relationships

but the fear of someone using it against you can still linger. For some, these steps begin to open painful suppressed memories, hinder relationships, lead to intense feelings, and create issues in one's daily life that one must prepare for.²⁵

Breaking the silence can free the survivor who has been intimidated by someone for so long, refused to allow to move forward or was crippled mentally. It negatively affects their self-esteem by plaguing them with mental games like it was their fault, they had it coming to them, or it was not what it seemed. Power lies in the voice, so when the survivor exercises their voice and reveals the hidden secret, they begin to regain control again. Survivors are reluctant to reveal their secrets if their trust was previously broken, and fear for how their spouse may respond becomes almost an overwhelming barrier to climb. Spouses must always work together to create an atmosphere of trust while maintaining open communication with each other.

Other Health Issues

“Childhood Maltreatment (CM) is a prevalent public health and social welfare concern with well-established long-lasting consequences. CM refers to any act of commission or omission that results in harm, the potential for harm, or threat of harm to a child, such as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, as well as physical or emotional neglect.”²⁶ This wide range can cause a great deal of confusion since many traumas would fall in this category. It is up to the counselor and the counselee to determine which type of trauma will be classified and then identify the appropriate response and course of action.

²⁵ Sharyn Higdon Jones, *Healing Steps: A Gentle Path to Recovery for Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse* (San Jose, CA: Inner Journey Publishing, 2018), 24.

²⁶ Marie Vaillancourt-Morel, Alessandra H. Rellini, Natacha Godbout, Stéphane Sabourin, and Sophie Bergeron. “Intimacy Mediates the Relation between Maltreatment in Childhood and Sexual and Relationship Satisfaction in Adulthood: A Dyadic Longitudinal Analysis.” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 48, no. 3 (April 2019): 803.

Indeed, when “women and men experience higher levels of childhood maltreatment, they also reported that they were less likely to disclose intimate thoughts and feelings, and they also felt less understood, validated, accepted, and cared for by their partner.”²⁷ When individuals struggle with trusting themselves, it often manifests in the inability to trust others adequately. Trauma survivors often fear expressing their thoughts, feelings, emotional struggles, or needs, complicating their communication effectiveness. The lack of trust raises critical issues within a marriage and exposes fragile areas needing addressing if the couple wishes to solidify and protect their relationship.

CM is a relational trauma whereby the betrayal, powerlessness, breach of trust, or disregard experienced early on may disturb future romantic relationships in several ways.²⁸ These childhood traumas can stay hidden consciously or subconsciously while still maintaining the same powerful effects on an individual’s everyday life. The mistrust between people leads to deliberately keeping secrets, the unconscious internalization of divisiveness and secrecy, and limitations on assessing reality.²⁹

Fear

Fear arises from the secret holder, primarily from the unknown and embarrassment, disguise, disappointment, and feeling of failure. Therefore, while evaluating child sexual abuse, it is vital to investigate if any abuse was secretly held back from others. If they did share the event, was proper treatment given or was any treatment given? The faster the acknowledgment of the abuse and proper counseling, the faster the short- and long-term negative consequences

²⁷ Ibid., 810.

²⁸ Ibid., 804.

²⁹ Salman Akhtar, *Silent Virtues: Patience, Curiosity, Privacy, Intimacy, Humility, and Dignity* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 70.

due to the abuse can be controlled or minimized. Unfortunately, sexually abused children frequently choose to keep those traumatic events secret.³⁰

Fear of revealing one's traumatic past is just one of the many mental battles a survivor goes through. Many survivors, especially those who are traumatized from abandonment as the internal fight never seems to cease and even tell their spouse, they will never fully understand unless they have ever experienced it³¹. The spouse needs to understand the importance of the survivor's actions while struggling themselves not to take them personally. Survivors' spouses need to applaud what may seem like small steps to them are enormous victories for their spouse when they are able to share the details of their past. This action of trust should never be downplayed but given high appreciation for the courage it took and for the faith they have in their spouse. As the survivor shares each new piece of information without negative recourse, the one who has hidden the secrets feels more adapt to share, but if negative reactions or even if those events are used against them later, they will stop talking further if not completely³².

Accepting your spouse and everything they bring to the marriage regardless of what is revealed may seem to be someone's natural personality and way of showing support, but it can bring regular moments of conflict and difficulties. For example, many childhood trauma survivors struggle with overcoming the fear of not being believable. Usually, the brain reflects on previous incidents when the survivor's story had been downplayed, ignored, and whose story experienced rejection from someone simply refusing to believe. Most of the time, the story our

³⁰ Ateret Gewirtz-Meydan and Sari Ofir-Lavee, "Addressing Sexual Dysfunction After Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Clinical Approach from an Attachment Perspective," *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* 47, no. 1 (2021): 48.

³¹ A Treatment Improvement Protocol: Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services TIP 57. Accessed March 7, 2022. <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4816.pdf>

³² Seth J. Gillhan. "The Healing Power of Telling Your Trauma Story: Six ways revisiting painful memories can loosen their grip." *Psychology Today*, March 6, 2019. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/think-act-be/201903/the-healing-power-telling-your-trauma-story>

brain generates matches the real, physical world, although not always. Our brains also unconsciously bend our perception of reality to meet our desires and/or expectations. The gaps are filled in using our past experiences.³³

Denial is also an emotional action associated with childhood sexual trauma.³⁴ This reaction can have many driving forces, including protection. The survivor's new mental thought process is already struggling as they work through how this could have happened. So often, survivors and even survivors' spouses battle over accepting the sexual trauma that occurred to them and begin a denial process.³⁵ While denial may not always make sense to someone outside looking in, it is often a defense mechanism against circumstances that were or are painful and very overwhelming.

The story may be brutal to hear, becoming challenging as one gauges how someone could do such a thing based on their own moral compass, and maybe it contradicts their view of someone based on what one knows and does not know about the individual. Unfortunately, far too many survivors' voices are left unheard because so many began to tell their story to their partner and get dismissed or what they have been through is marginalized. In addition, the belief no punishment will come to the perpetrator or anxiety over the incidents forces their mind and body to shut down. This intense and adversarial atmosphere overwhelms children's resources

³³ "Reality Constructed Your Brain Here's What It Means and Why It Matters," Stanford University, June 22, 2020, <https://neuroscience.stanford.edu/news/reality-constructed-your-brain-here-s-what-means-and-why-it-matters>.

³⁴ M Hall, and J Hall. (2011). The long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse: Counseling implications. http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/vistas11/Article_19.pdf. 3.

³⁵ Beverly Engel, "Why Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse Don't Disclose," *Psychology Today*, March 6, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-compassion-chronicles/201903/why-adult-victims-childhood-sexual-abuse-dont-disclose>.

and shuts down their ability to effectively communicate on the stand, leading to repeated experiences of silencing that can ultimately have devastating long-term consequences.³⁶

Being silent and burying the event to the back of the mind are more likely scenarios when the abuser is someone the individual is attached to, such as a family member, coach, or religious leader. In addition, the child often feels obligated to keep the abuse silent for several reasons (e.g., threatened by the abuser, embarrassed, afraid of what will happen to them, the abuser, their marriage).³⁷

Fear from threats is one reason many conceal their past while continuing to battle with their current partner. The revelation is an important step toward a healthier marriage³⁸. Still, the exposure's pain terrifies the survivor so much that some will instead take it to the grave, internally tormented rather than being holistically set free. This fear can manifest itself in more areas than the usual conversation areas, especially with a married couple's intimacy. Freud "proposed that symptoms of female hysteria, including seizures, were related to repressed sexual drives arising from sexual abuse experiences."³⁹ He also believed, "incestuous sexual abuse inevitably associates regular sexual drives to a pattern of negative affectivity pattern including fear, guilt, and shame, and resulting in a painful unconscious conflict between the innate sexual dreams and those aversive feelings with which they have become associated."⁴⁰

³⁶ Sarah Caprioli and David A. Crenshaw, "The Culture of Silencing Child Victims of Sexual Abuse: Implications for Child Witnesses in Court." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 57, no. 2 (March 2017): 190–209. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167815604442>.

³⁷ Gewirtz-Meydan, "Addressing Sexual Dysfunction," 48.

³⁸ Robert Johnson, "The Impact of Unresolved Trauma on Relationships." Colorado Recovery Services. June 22, 2020. <https://coloradorecoveryservices.org/the-impact-of-unresolved-trauma-on-relationships/>

³⁹ Donald Sharpe and Cathy Faye, "Non-epileptic seizures and child sexual abuse: A critical review of the literature," *Clinical Psychology Review* 26, no. 8 (2006): 1020-1040, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2005.11.011>.

⁴⁰ Alberto Siracusano, *Trauma-Related Disorders: Sexual Abuse and Psychiatric Comorbidities. Sexual Dysfunctions in Mentally Ill Patients*. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018).

All three dynamic patterns (i.e., fear of loving, fear of being loved, and loving only internal objects) contribute to a defensive need for excessive privacy.⁴¹ Fear is one of the many emotional reaction's survivors' resorts to in self-protecting from the events. Fear has driven some to either create abandonment or attachment issues.

Abandonment and Attachment Issues

Fear of abandonment or attachment issues driven by fear, distrust, emotions of rejection, and tolerableness are deep emotional wounds. This may occur because suspicion has the potential to be accompanied by a belief or concern that one's partner may leave the relationship for a better alternative.⁴² The emotional trauma at times will create mental images of the perceived reality or nightmares of being left alone, sending someone reverting to early childhood trauma of parental abandonment or even incidents of sexual abuse. The survivor is reminded that the abuser just left them dealing with the traumatic event by themselves.

As children of divorced parents grow up, they regularly struggle with the fear of abandonment and marriage in general, resulting in ending engagements or healthy loving relationships.⁴³ These fears of marriage have created an increase in recent years of cohabitation and the hesitation of marriage. However, when treating someone struggling with fear of abandonment, there may be significant implications for treatment.⁴⁴ This fear can complicate intimacy as the struggle of loss continues to be a driving issue within the marriage. When counseling someone with abandonment issues, expect many to struggle with absent or low sexual desires.

⁴¹ Akhtar, *Silent Virtues*, 73.

⁴² Rodriguez, *The Price of Distrust*, 298–319.

⁴³ McCarthy, *Torn Asunder*, 47.

⁴⁴ Gerald R Weeks, Nancy Gambescia, and Katherine M Hertlein. *A Clinician's Guide to Systemic Sex Therapy*. Second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 187.

An attachment trauma can occur even when a child experiences sexual abuse by a stranger. The child may feel betrayed by family members or other close social networks who did not realize the abuse was occurring or were unwilling to help. After experiencing this feeling of betrayal, the child's image of trusting adults is compromised, and every adult around them can appear dangerous or harmful.⁴⁵ The long-term impact on one's self-esteem from the fear of abandonment or attachment issues can be difficult to ease as the mental message repeats for so long⁴⁶. The sayings (e.g., trust no one, you are worthless, unlovable, damaged goods, and the only way you are loved is if you do what they say or they are gone) are difficult to overcome but not impossible.

Communication

This unaddressed conflict is a minefield for a young married couple, not to mention one that has several years to fall back on. Communication is going to be essential. Effective communication is vital to gain trust, align efforts in the pursuit of goals, and inspire positive change. When communication is lacking, important information can be misinterpreted, causing relationships to suffer, and ultimately, creating barriers that hinder progress⁴⁷. However, clearly speaking one's emotions, fears, hesitation, and even expectations is vital. Too often, ineffective communication skills leave assumptions to guide the relationship's atmosphere, create the volume of their discussion, and lead to further mistrusts or flashbacks to being talked down to, resulting in a retreat. Healthy marriages work to improve strong communication.

⁴⁵ Gewirtz-Meydan A, Ofir-Lavee S. Addressing Sexual Dysfunction After Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Clinical Approach from an Attachment Perspective. *J Sex Marital Ther.* 2021;47(1):43-59. doi: 10.1080/0092623X.2020.1801543. Epub 2020 Aug 12. PMID: 32783606.. (Accessed February 21, 2022)

⁴⁶ Timothy J. Legg. "What to know about abandonment issues." *Medical News Today*, February 26, 2020. <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/abandonment-issues>

⁴⁷ Lauren Landry, Harvard Business School – HBS online "8 Essential Leadership Communication Skills" November 14, 2019 (<https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/leadership-communication>) (Accessed February 21, 2022).

When intentionally engaged, communication increases in marriage; so, does intimacy⁴⁸. Each spouse's active approach toward investing in their marriage and developing their verbal skills creates avenues of growth behind the relationship. Speaking skills are essential when a spouse is a survivor of childhood trauma. Being able to feel safe enough to talk about the situation and the adverse effects surrounding the event, having a safe environment can become tremendously influential in the healing process.

If a couple struggles with communication within their relationship, the emotional disconnect will carry over into their financial life and their sexual life too. Every area of one's life reveals the health of their relationship, and it shows their weaknesses. While these revelations are not always alarming, the issue begins once couples and individuals are aware of those weaknesses. What will they do about it? Every relationship, including marriage, should continually grow to understand themselves, the other person, and them as a couple. Anything that is not increasing is stagnant or dying, neither of which is suitable for a healthy, vibrant, and developing marriage.

A critical path that all couples need to maintain in their relationship is speaking their thoughts and feelings clearly. A wedding is two personalities coming together working to find harmony. Since neither spouse can read their spouse's mind, expressing their feelings or thoughts is the doorway into their partner's world. Hidden emotions produce hidden resentment that will fester into a public explosion. It suggests that internalized shame may result from child sexual abuse incidents following the abuse experience as a personal attack on the self, leaving the individual feeling deeply defective and defeated⁴⁹. Survivors then continue to engage in

⁴⁸ Neda Zakhirehdri, Shokoh Navabinejad, Amin Koraei. "The addictiveness of cognitive-behavioral couple therapy on improving marriage performance and marital intimacy of couples.", *Medical Science*, 2019, 23(97), 290-293. https://www.discoveryjournals.org/medicalseience/current_issue/v23/n97/A5.pdf

activities that reinforce low self-worth. Shame and anger are core emotional responses a survivor of child sexual abuse is dealing with. In addition, the survivor's spouse is often thinking the problem is them when they try to become affectionate. However, because of the secrecy of the events, the spouse continues wondering why they are rejected so often.

Fear of abandonment, attachment issues, child sexual abuse, and CM affect more than just the spouse's mental side but the sexual too. Primarily, each of these issues stems from an unwanted sexual act toward an individual. More than only association, the traumatic events can seem like a mental battle that never seems to end. Intimacy is a battle for many couples as two opposing views work vigorously toward unity. Although passionate for each other, neither willfully compromise because the mindset still questions why the feelings are there in the first place.

It is frequently perplexing, frustrating, and disappointing for many survivors and their spouses that sexual intimacy was not problematic early on within their marriage. This seemingly non-threatening sexual routine is partly due to the "biochemical cocktail" the human brain and body produce in the beginning stages of the marriage. Somewhere between the third and eighteenth months of the relationship, the spouse's genuine sexual desire reveals itself. This is severely problematic for some couples as they begin to struggle or even see their sexual desires diminish after marriage or giving birth.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Matthew Moschella, "The Long-term Effects of Sexual Assault on Romantic Relationships: A Qualitative Study" (2020). University of New Hampshire Scholar's Repository: Master's Theses and Capstones.

⁵⁰ Heather Davediuk Gingrich, and Fred C Gingrich eds. *Treating Trauma in Christian Counseling*. (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2017), ProQuest Ebook Central. 124.

Intimacy

The suppression of such traumatic events can lay dormant long into the relationship. When the protected guard is down, something can be said or done, even for a nanosecond, sending the emotional flood gates bursting open wide. Unaware or aware once the issues are known, the spouse goes into a defense mood instead of working through the situation for a solution. As the internal battle rages, it is not that the husband or wife who is a survivor of abuse uses intimacy as a bargaining chip, but it seems like a big hurdle to get over. “Not all people can develop and sustaining intimate relationships with others. Their efforts to achieve intimacy fail, due to various deficit and defense-based impediments from within.”⁵¹ “It isn’t true that women who have been sexually abused are necessarily more promiscuous than other women, but it is true that women who have been sexually abused are more anxious about sex, experience more sexual guilt, and are thus less sexually satisfied than other women.”⁵²

When an individual looks beyond their values and touches or takes what does not belong to them or has consensually given them, they dramatically alter other areas of their lives, not just one specific area. The severity of the trauma has been linked to lower sexual function and satisfaction and more significant sexual distress.⁵³ For most, a pleasant and enjoyable experience of intimacy with your spouse becomes a hurdle many couples struggle to overcome because of the devastation it has caused. The guilt a survivor feels when someone they love touches them in a non-sexual way can dig up the memories of feeling dirty from the traumatic event⁵⁴. The

⁵¹ Akhtar, *Silent Virtues*, 93.

⁵² Jones, “Healing Steps,” 173.

⁵³ Laurence de Montigny Gauthier, Marie Vaillancourt-Morel, Alessandra Rellini, Natacha Godbout, V. Charbonneau-Lefebvre, Frédérique Desjardins, and Sophie Bergeron, “The Risk of Telling: A Dyadic Perspective on Romantic Partners’ Responses to Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure and Their Associations with Sexual and Relationship Satisfaction.” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 45, no. 3 (July 2019): 481.

⁵⁴ O’Callaghan E, Shepp V, Ullman SE, Kirkner A. Navigating Sex and Sexuality After Sexual Assault: A Qualitative Study of Survivors and Informal Support Providers. *J Sex Res.* 2019;56(8):1045-1057.

indirect emotional response of such trauma is the anger, bitterness, resentment, or flat rejection toward their spouse.

Those indirect emotional response moments are better when the spouse realizes the response is not personally toward them but reflects what is left unhealed on the inside. It is common for survivors of childhood sexual trauma to report sexual difficulties: lack of sexual pleasure, sexual dysfunctions, or dissatisfaction with their sexual relationship.⁵⁵ Sexual intimacy is not what makes a marriage or defines a marriage; however, it is a part of marriage that should not dredge up negative emotions toward someone who has done everything they thought was normal yet begin to question themselves. As this mental and marital struggle plays out frequently throughout more than just one home, city, state, and even nation, for that matter, awareness is given, so attention does not fade away but helps find answers.

Violence

Many trauma victims struggle with their response at the time of the trauma. Instead of fighting back or calling for help, sexual assault victims may find themselves frozen. This freezing, otherwise known as tonic immobility, “is a temporary state of physiological immobility brought on by an overwhelming of the allostatic system.”⁵⁶ The shame survivors battles long after the tonic immobility has lifted can be a weight that almost seems crushing even when paralysis appears to be a natural response to fear. One of humanity’s built-in defense mechanisms is fight, flight, freeze and another lesser known is fawning or appease. Fawning or

⁵⁵ Gingrich, “Treating Trauma in Christian Counseling,” 124.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 70-71.

appeasing involves trying to please the individual who is seen as the threat in hopes of preventing harm.⁵⁷

These moments do not just occur in childhood, but traumatic events often can be the gateway for a repetitive pattern to establish. More than one-third of American women have experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence. Intimate partner violence is associated with a wide range of mental health problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder) and physical health consequences (e.g., physical injury).⁵⁸ Fighting the repetitive events as a child is one thing. However, having to do it throughout one's life, including choosing a person to be in your life and then it still happens, makes blaming oneself almost overwhelming.

Abuse often occurs in a cycle—“building tension, an eruption of abusive behaviors, and contrition (expression of affection and devotion; Walker, 1979). This cycle alternates aversive arousal (punishment) with relief (reinforcement), constituting intermittent reinforcement and fostering traumatic bonding—extremely strong bonds that are challenging to extinguish.”⁵⁹ The cycle can break with a relationship rooted in trust, openness, free of fear, clear communication, time, and a sound support system. However, the process cannot be broken alone. Support is everything.

Pornography

When the cycle is not broken, abusive behavior is often a byproduct. The violent outburst is repulsive, but in the cyber world, it seems glorified in an age when women seek more equality.

⁵⁷ Mary West, “What is the fight, flight, or freeze response?” MedicalNewsToday, July 28, 2021, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/fight-flight-or-freeze-response>

⁵⁸ Noga Zerubavel, Terri L Messman-Moore, David DiLillo and Kim L Gratz, “Childhood Sexual Abuse and Fear of Abandonment Moderate the Relation of Intimate Partner Violence to Severity of Dissociation,” *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 19, no. 1 (2018): 9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

Part of the association between pornography and sexual violence is that pornography encourages men to look at potential sexual partners as objects, not as people.⁶⁰ By the year 2000, 49 experimental studies showed that the use of pornography leads to either worsening attitudes toward sexual violence or an increase in violent behavior.”⁶¹ Female adolescents exposed to violent pornography were over 1.5 times as likely to perpetrate physical and threatening teen dating violence. In contrast, male adolescents who were exposed were over three times as likely to perpetrate sexual teen dating violence.⁶²

The powerful draw that pornography has to the visual mind often feeds into men’s and women’s physical actions. Unfortunately, some try to use it to their benefit. Sexual predators have purposefully exposed young children to pornography for the purpose of grooming the children for sexual exploitation.⁶³ This false impression imagery is repeatedly displayed before the viewers play a real-life situation with mostly fake or dramatic outcomes only for production and money. Pornographic materials often present unnatural or even extreme acts by actresses and actors who adapt to the promoted type of physical appearance, often undergo plastic surgeries, or use pharmaceuticals to sustain the state of erection.⁶⁴

Men are driven by imagery and often impressionable, which builds their desire to be the main star of their intimate moments. This false impression that the SEM has constructed creates

⁶⁰ John D Foubert, *How Pornography Harms: What Today’s Teens, Young Adults, Parents, and Pastors Need to Know* (Bloomington, IN: LifeRich Publishing, 2017), 163.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁶² W L Rostad, D Gittins-Stone, C Huntington, C J Rizzo, D Pearlman, and L Orchowski, “The Association Between Exposure to Violent Pornography and Teen Dating Violence in Grade 10 High School Students,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 48, no. 7 (2019): 2137–2147. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-019-1435-4>.

⁶³ *The Impact of Pornography on Children*, American College of Pediatricians, June 2016, <https://acped.org/assets/The-Impact-of-Pornography-on-Children.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Aleksandra Diana Dwulit and Piotr Rzymyski, “Prevalence, Patterns and Self-Perceived Effects of Pornography Consumption in Polish Students: A Cross-Sectional Study,” *International Journal of Environmental Research in Public Health* 16, no. 10 (2019): 11.

a mindset in many men to think it will work at home, too. The mindset only fuels the damaged relationship hidden by their past secrets. The secret past is challenging to overcome with the help of others but more so when it is not popular to tell someone, thus walking through it privately. Revealing childhood trauma early in a relationship that one sees getting serious or to a certain point cannot be appropriately communicated, resulting in inadequate discussions before marriage. Even if you wait until after marriage, the hidden secret may be more than the spouse can handle, wishing they would have known prior.

Porn addiction does not only have a heavy connection with physically abusive men in their relationship; it affects couples engaging in natural intimacy without a spouse with a history of addiction involvement⁶⁵. The effects can result from a wrong perception of sexual activity. For example, the addicted partner may need to use other means to reach an orgasm or engage in outlandish fantasies or sexual foreplay, all because of the mentality developed in many who view pornography as they desire to play out visually in front of us to physically and sexually come to pass.

Growing up, the dangers of looking at SEM were continuous, but rarely would anyone explain why, or maybe they did not know. SEM include pornography, printed media, photos, paintings, drawings, films, or things accessible through smart devices.⁶⁶ In 2006, worldwide pornography revenues from various sources (e.g., the Internet, sex shops, video rented in hotel rooms) were approximately \$97 billion.⁶⁷ The worldwide revenues of the pornography industry

⁶⁵ Effects of Pornography on Relationships. Utah State University Relationships Extension, accessed March 8, 2022, <https://extension.usu.edu/relationships/research/effects-of-pornography-on-relationships>.

⁶⁶ Brown University, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.brown.edu/campus-life/health/services/promotion/sexual-health-sex-101/sexually-explicit-media#:~:text=Today%20sexually%20explicit%20media%20includes.smart%20devices%20and%20virtual%20reality>.

⁶⁷ Pure Hope, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://purehope.net/resources/statistics/>.

in 2006 equaled more than the revenues of the top technology companies combined—Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo!, Apple, Netflix, and Earthlink⁶⁸. In a 2019 Business Insider article, the writer showed that the industry had pushed over the \$100 billion globally⁶⁹. The other companies previous listed also saw jumps in their annual revenue with Amazon alone going from \$10.71 billion in 2006 to 280.52 billion in 2019⁷⁰.

Some individuals argue that co-watching pornography as a couple benefits the marriage. One study by the Queensland University of Technology published in the Australian Journal of Communication laboratory results of 1023 anonymously surveyed consumers of pornography found that 58.8% of the respondents thought “pornography had a positive or very positive effect on their attitudes towards sexuality.”⁷¹ Some of the benefits listed included sustained sexual interest in long-term relationships, becoming more tolerant of other people’s sexualities, and helping their partner become more open when discussing sex. One researcher found that those who watched pornography found it provided a platform for self-confirmation of their sexual identity or caused them the change their sexual presence.⁷²

The multi-billion-dollar industry does not warn consumers of the negative impacts of viewing pornography. For example, in one study, viewing pornography led to decreased

⁶⁸ PRweb, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.prweb.com/releases/pornography/toptenreviews/prweb511051.htm> March 13, 2007.

⁶⁹ Saikat Pyne. “This is how porn sites make money.” The Business Insider India, <https://www.businessinsider.in/this-is-how-porn-sites-make-money/articleshow/48385361.cms>. August 27, 2019

⁷⁰ Annual net sales revenue of Amazon from 2004 to 2021. Statista Research Department, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/266282/annual-net-revenue-of-amazoncom/>, February 14, 2022.

⁷¹ The Upside of Pornography, Real Clear Science, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.realclearscience.com/blog/2012/01/the-upside-of-pornography.html>.

⁷² M McCormack and L Wignall, “Enjoyment, Exploration and Education: Understanding the Consumption of Pornography among Young Men with Non-Exclusive Sexual Orientations,” *Sociology* 51, no. 5 (2017): 975–991, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038516629909>.

satisfaction in one spouse's performance, increased callousness toward females, distorted perceptions of sexuality, and decreased values related to monogamy and marriage.⁷³ While the trauma is not limited to one specific gender, women seem to suffer more from "betrayal trauma" after finding out their spouse has been viewing pornography simply because statistics show men watch it more than women.⁷⁴

Betrayal Trauma

Betrayal trauma is the sense of being harmed by the thought-out actions of a trusted person.⁷⁵ The term *betrayal trauma* emerged in the literature in the late-1980s and initially referred to the theory that children experience symptoms of amnesia as a coping mechanism for abuse.⁷⁶ However, the real crisis is because of the intense combination of mental and emotional issues. These combinations of mental and emotional issues include but are not limited to: loss of self-esteem, feeling of isolation, re-experiencing of suppressed feelings, obsessive-compulsive thoughts or behaviors, troubling concentrating, depression, oppression, anxiety, trust issues, substance use, thoughts of suicide, and even eating disorders⁷⁷.

⁷³ Mary B Short. "The Effects of Sexually Explicit Material Use on Romantic Relationship Dynamics." *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* 5, no. 4 (2016): 700–707. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1556%2F2006.5.2016.078>

⁷⁴ Nelly Dux, Do you have the habit of visiting pornographic websites? May 7, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1099039/pornographic-websites-access-frequency-gender-france/>.

⁷⁵ S Rachman, "Betrayal: a psychological analysis." *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 48, no. 4 (2010): 304-11. doi:10.1016/j.brat.2009.12.002.

⁷⁶ J J Freyd, "Betrayal trauma: Traumatic amnesia as an adaptive response to childhood abuse," *Ethics & Behavior* 4, no. 4 (1994): 307-329. DOI:10.1207/s15327019eb0404_1

⁷⁷ Noelle M. St. Vil, Takisha Carter, and Susan Johnson. "Betrayal Trauma and Barriers to Forming New Intimate Relationships Among Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325660934_Betrayal_Trauma_and_Barriers_to_Forming_New_Intimate_Relationships_Among_Survivors_of_Intimate_Partner_Violence. 2018 (1-15). DOI: 20.177/0886260518779596.

Researchers have discovered that the symptoms reported by partners of sex addicts are closely those of PTSD and defined in the DSM-IV.⁷⁸ Research suggests that these symptoms seem like war veterans or traumatic survivors.⁷⁹ Betrayal trauma, much like abandonment, represents a traumatic death, not a physical death but a relational one. An intimate spouse or close family member's betrayal and abandonment seem to violate the very core of humanity's desires and needs. It would then be no surprise that individuals who have experienced this deep betrayal would suffer from trust issues, especially in intimate relationships.

Couples can overcome these issues through a series of steps: the continual engagement of honest discussions, avoiding the rebounding relationships, not blaming themselves, seeking success based on their achievements, not on others but more importantly, healing began when the one betrayed truly felt their voice now had volume and was heard. When couples decide to overcome the obstacles of betrayal, they focus on the weaknesses within the relationship while maintaining the strengths. The healing process requires patience from both spouses and open communication throughout the whole process.

Conversely, couples with higher intimacy often communicate better and positively engage with one another.⁸⁰ Unfortunately, sexuality is still a complicated issue to discuss when one has been abused sexually.⁸¹ To truly overcome the complex challenges, especially those with a childhood sexually abused survivor as a spouse, intentional communication is a must. It is

⁷⁸ B A Steffens, and R L Rennie, "The traumatic nature of disclosure for wives of sexual addicts," *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 13, no. 2-3 (2006): 247-267, https://cdn.ymaws.com/iitap.com/resource/resmgr/arie_files/m2-traumatic-disclosure-stef.pdf.

⁷⁹ Laurel Kaylee Williams, "The Experience of Sexual Betrayal Trauma: A Qualitative Analysis of Responses from the Trauma Inventory for Partners of Sex Addicts (TIPSA)" *Theses and Dissertations*. 8557. (2019): 11, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/8557>.

⁸⁰ Barry, *Trust, Attachment, and Mindfulness Influence*, 592.

⁸¹ Jones, *Healing Steps*, 172.

growing closer and more profound as a couple that will require conversations to be more than recaps of the day or things that do not pertain to the relationship. The talks must be emotionally driven, asking difficult questions and even more so, answering them.

Difficult discussions are complex, but so are breakthroughs. However, once a couple has experienced a breakthrough moment and had a challenging conversation on one issue, it feeds their strength to tackle the subsequent difficult discussion. “Healing Steps has taught me that to heal means acknowledging my experiences and growing not as a victim who is afraid to see the truth but as a survivor who is stronger for having come through it all with dignity.”⁸²

No matter the traumatic event, patience with your spouse is necessary. As the relationship grows, some things still have not been revealed, regardless of how long the couple has been together. Remembering the vows often given at weddings, “I take you, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer for poor, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.” Every marriage has issues from time to time. However, healthy marriages can begin to grow when an environment has been fostered for communication to speak without fear of recourse.

A married couple will walk many journeys together, facing many peaks and valleys; understanding these journeys is essential. Talking about the false impressions, early exposure to pornography painted during childhood can significantly impact a relationship with one’s future spouse before marriage, even more so after marriage when sexual intimacy seems to increase. These false expectations can jeopardize the longevity of the relationship. Putting protective measures in place safeguards the marriage from pornography while relying on the communication and trust from both spouses. The emotional protection needed from being

⁸² Ibid., 24.

sexually abused or abandoned will draw the relationship closer without fear if the survivor's spouse can help create a positive environment.

As reflected in the literature review, the long-term impact of childhood trauma, while still being studied, has some resources to back up how abandonment, childhood sexual abuse, and exposure to pornography's continual effects even after the traumatic events are over. It also shows what challenges it adds to marriage, especially in intimacy. Communication plays a significant role in the couple getting past the obstacles. Still, relapse is almost certain to occur if trust ever becomes broken or fear begins to find its way into the marriage. The survivor of the childhood trauma and the spouse will need to be patient with each other through this lengthy process.

Theological Foundations

Scripture has been a guiding force for families and individuals for generations, especially those with a spiritual background. The foundation laid out for them through discipleship training (e.g., small groups, Sunday School, youth groups, kid's church, men's, and women's ministry) expresses to the reader the struggles, perseverance, and destructive impacts of growth spurts throughout history. Every building's strength rest in the material it uses, but the material can be the best and still be unstable or crumble if the material is assembled incorrectly.

Foundations are the very things everything builds on. Individuals build their passion, dreams, hopes, goals, morals, wants, desires, likes, and dislikes from the foundations taught to them, displayed before them, and even some from what they inherit. This does not in any way mean foundations cannot be altered, damaged, or manipulated intentionally and unintentionally. Some foundations are changed, damaged, and even crushed from the three primary childhood trauma areas discussed in this project: abandonment, childhood sexual trauma, and early

exposure to pornography. As this project examined the issues from within the local church setting, scripture also provided guidance. A simple word search in BibleGateway in the King James Version shows the word foundation appears 84 times: 54 times in the Old Testament and 26 times in the New Testament. One verse about foundations in the New Testament is 1 Corinthians 3:10: “According to the grace of God, which is given unto me, as a wise master builder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon.” Foundations even from the biblical scripture here show the importance of continual building and caution in the build. Does scripture address any of the childhood trauma areas?

Even though Paul is expounding on building a Christian community, his words apply to a wide range of work. As we have seen, Paul expects Christian work to incorporate the work adherents do under joint authority, just as in the congregation. Whatever our job, it will be evaluated fairly by God. The last assize will be superior to any performance audit since God decided with excellent equity—in contrast to human supervisors, any way or uncalled for they might be—and he can factor in our expectations, impediments, intentions, and sympathy and his leniency.⁸³

Abandonment

The first primary area of childhood trauma the project examined with a theological foundation was abandonment. Anyone who begins to read the Bible sees it is not long before the first incident of abandonment occurs in the Book of Genesis. The term *abandonment* was defined earlier as the act of someone permanently leaving someone or something behind. In Genesis

⁸³ Do Good Work Bible Commentary, *Theology of Work*, 1 Corinthians 3:10-17, accessed April 11, 2021, <https://www.theologyofwork.org/new-testament/1-corinthians/do-good-work-1-cor-310-17>.

chapter 3, Adam and Eve had to permanently leave the Garden of Eden because they allowed their foundation to become compromised. It was just a chapter later when Cain kills Abel out of jealousy of God blessing Abel's sacrifice and not his, and then punishment is cast upon him to where Cain says in verse 14, "Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth."

These two examples alone proved to have lasting implications for generations after them, and the consequences are still being paid by society today. Abandoning promises can yield devastating results as well that generation after generation continues to suffer for. Genesis 16 tells the story of Sarai abandoning Hagar after Hagar ends up pregnant, something Sarai was promised but grew impatient waiting for. This conflict and even jealousy led Sarai to deal harshly with Hagar resulting in her need to leave. The biblical scripture in the New Testament on abandonment indeed is found in Hebrews 13:5 "Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for God has said, "I will never leave you or abandon you."⁸⁴

The church world struggles with the idea of abandonment, especially marital abandonment. Christians and non-Christians alike quote without hesitation Matthew 5:31-32 "Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.'" It seems that in Jesus' day, this permission for divorce from Deuteronomy 24:1 had become more of a tool to bring hardship to their wives. Scrutiny and cruelty were placed on the woman's shoulders to walk the chalk line of submission, or else was never this scripture's intent. Striking fear in women that they will be abandoned if certain duties are not carried out, the house

⁸⁴ Hebrews 13:5 (Complete Jewish Bible), accessed April 6, 2021.

is not kept up, or they stay home while their husbands are out all the time, all under the umbrella of “If you do not like it, I will get a divorce” or “Who is going to want you?” or “Where you going to go?” raises the level of anxiety of abandonment. This is even more so if the childhood trauma survivor had divorcing parents.

Individuals who have experienced abandonment or watched someone they love to become abandoned can experience a phobia or a fear of being abandoned called athazagoraphobia—defined as the morbid fear of being forgotten or ignored.⁸⁵ Childhood trauma such as abandonment creates fear, worries, and even undue stress as the individual’s concern about being alone, isolated, or even forgotten plays a significant role mentally. Abandonment creates a crisis in one’s life resulting from being left by someone you love is obliterating. The feeling of being deserted leaves one emotionally drained, often feeling as if they are worthless and shattering their self-esteem. The sudden emptiness left behind can destroy even the strongest of foundations.

In one’s walk with Christ, there will be moments they may feel abandoned or even forsaken by God Himself. Jesus, in Matthew 27:46, cries out, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” If he felt abandoned by His own father, it is safe to say others will feel those emotions too. However, at the end of the day, the mind must revert to the foundational scripture of Hebrews 13:5 “Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for God has said, “I will never leave you or abandon you.”

⁸⁵ Medical Dictionary accessed April 6, 2021, <https://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/athazagoraphobia>.

The church's role becomes so vital in the reassurance of more than just the world that they are not alone, but their members as well. The language expressed by the church must exceed beyond the rhetoric of words to show visual meaning with its actions too. If there is one place in this world that should thrive on inclusiveness instead of exclusiveness, it is the church. The programs it offers must have as part of its mission to accept the individuals that come upon their campus regardless of their differences. When it comes to helping those who struggle, the church's purpose should always be the driving force.

That driving force is no different when dealing with every other issue the world faces outside the church and inside. Relationship building is key to a strong foundation, and those who have been affected by childhood trauma need a robust support system. It has been documented well in numerous research studies, documentaries, and governmental press conferences, stressing the importance of a robust support system even as far as to say the number of crimes decreases if a robust support system exists.

Likewise, strong connections can support you genuinely when you're feeling down or overpowered. Companions, friends, and family will tune in to your apprehensions, expectations, and dreams and cause you to feel seen and comprehended. They can help you thoroughly consider options and manage issues, and they can divert from your concerns when that is the thing that is genuinely required. In doing this, they support and lower your pressure and sensations of depression while reducing the fear or feelings of being abandoned.

Childhood Sexual Abuse

Those connections, relationships, and support systems are needed the most for those who have experienced the childhood trauma of having an unwanted sexual encounter forced on them. Unfortunately, within that support system, rules and standards must be followed, or

consequences have a cost to be paid. These rules and standards date back to the beginning of time.

Regrettably, we generally treat each other with love and concern because we live in a fallen world. Children dependent on others seem the most vulnerable. The Bible reveals that God is not happy when a person fails to take care of children in the standards He laid out. Matthew 18:5-6 says, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”⁸⁶

The website *Darkness to Light*'s child sexual abuse statistics page states, “Although survivors of child sexual abuse are negatively impacted as a whole, it is important to realize that many individual survivors do not suffer these consequences. Child sexual abuse does not necessarily sentence a victim to an impaired life.”⁸⁷ Kids may feel something is not right yet regularly do not have the intellectual ability to comprehend or the words to adequately describe what has occurred. Inwardly, youngsters may encounter disgrace, blame, misery, and outrage. Typically, manhandled kids may relapse to the beginning phases of working, become tenacious with grown-ups, or appear touchy and agitated.

Kids may keep the event quiet for fear of embarrassment, shame, or trying to be obedient. However, others may show or engage in sexual conduct that is not age appropriate. Adults and even children can experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because of the abuse. PTSD can occur immediately after a trauma, weeks, months, and even years later⁸⁸.

⁸⁶ Matthew 18:5-6 (ESV).

⁸⁷ Darkness to Light, accessed May 23, 2021, https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/all_statistics_20150619.pdf.

⁸⁸ Matthew Tull. “Delayed-Onset PTSD Symptoms.” VeryWellMind, (Accessed February 23, 2022). <https://www.verywellmind.com/delayed-onset-ptsd-meaning-and-reasons-2797636> , November 13, 2020

The God who cares and responds to His children's mistreatment by the Egyptian slave masters (Exodus 2:20-3:10) is the same God who cares and responds to His children's mistreatment today. The responsibility of parents is to take care of and protect their children. Unfortunately, some have let that responsibility go, resulting in the mistreatment of their kids as they intentionally allowed it to happen. However, even when parents take their responsibility to heart, their children can still be abused. The difference is the responsible parent has demonstrated a support system that can be dependable, whereas the parents who intentionally neglect their responsibility do not. When a child is done wrong, the standards still need to be carried out within the church and come to protect the children. The church's responsibility is always to watch over what God has given them, holding those who violate that duty accountable as so many were throughout the Bible.

While in the Old Testament days, they took the protection very seriously, just like in Genesis 34 when Shechem raped Isaac's granddaughter Dinah, her brothers slaughter Shechem and all the town men for his act. God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for their sinful acts in Genesis 19. One should not allow the negativity of these acts to take away from the beauty God created sexuality to be, which is an expression of love between a husband and wife. However, because of humankind's sinful nature, the expression of love has become distorted, abused, and misused against adults, even more so against children.

A more familiar story found in the Bible may be Amnon and Tamar from 2 Samuel 13:1-22. It is a story of King David's son, Amnon, developing feelings for his half-sister to the point he feels he must have her. After formulating a plan with his friend, he gets Tamar alone then rapes her. After this heinous act on his stepsister, scripture says in verse 15, "He hated her more than he loved her." Sadly, this is not an isolated story as many children suffer such events, being

forced to do things they do not want to do, then often left to be alone, abandoned, feeling worthless, or nothing more than damaged goods like Tamar did.

Without proper protection for children to prevent these cruel acts from being done to them, the potential is there for them to grow up struggling with so many emotional, physical, and spiritual needs. However, the church must be careful the protective cover is never taken advantage of. It is reported that more than 90% of individuals molested, especially children, know their victimizer.⁸⁹ How is this problematic for the church? The church's theological foundation teaches second chances, be kind to everyone, treat people as Christ would trust people, but the truth is that while these are great principles, more teaching needs to be done to educate the church attenders on how to protect themselves too.

The biggest mistake any church can make, not just Ridgeville Church of God, is ignoring or attempting to minimize any abuse being expressed. The size of the church has no bearing on whether it could happen there or not, but it would seem the larger churches may have more ways of protection based on greater financial accessibility. Sexual abuse is not restricted to age, gender, social class, ethnicity, or even the size of the church. Awareness is critical, so the church should conduct background checks to ensure there are no wolves in sheep's clothing, as Matthew 7:15 instructs. Ridgeville Church of God does a new background check on every individual who desires to work in the church. While this does not mean nothing will happen, it does mean that should any individual fail to be forthright, some checks and balances are in place.

⁸⁹ Rape Abuse and Incest National Network, accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.rainn.org/news/rainn-statement-hbo%E2%80%99s-allen-v-farrow-documentary>.

Pornography

Many of these sinful acts are from a lack of keeping the foundation in place found in 2 Corinthians 10:5, where the instructions are to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. Unfortunately, many have allowed those thoughts to escape captivity, thus fulfilling Matthew 15:19 “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.” Some of these thoughts lead individuals into the arena of pornography.

A quick word search reveals the word *pornography* does not appear in scripture, but that does not mean it is not in scripture. *Pornicea*,⁹⁰ the Greek root word, does show up multiple times in the New Testament. More connected to prostitution referencing sexual relations between unmarried individuals in biblical times, today, the connection would be more associated with sexual filth. Regardless of the link to the times, the relationship to the foundation of God’s word has not changed. The writer of 1 Corinthians 6:18-20 gives instructions to “Flee from sexual immorality,” not engage it.

All three of these areas get defined by choices. Some of these choices are from the individuals themselves; others get defined by choices individuals have made, although the impact has already been created. The biblical foundation is the weapon to help defeat these choices but not every defeat is easy or quick. Some have lasting implications and devastating results that cause some to turn away from God or even the church. These individuals’ emotional struggles sometimes daily cannot be dismissed because another individual has never experienced them before.

⁹⁰ *Pornicea*—illicit sexual intercourse, accessed November 25, 2021, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/porneia.html>.

The church needs to stay close to its foundation, Jesus Christ, and love as He loved, forgive as He forgave, and accept as He accepted. Sin may separate us from God, but He paid the price to reconnect that broken relationship so every person can escape the feeling of abandonment and replace it with a feeling of love. The emotional battle needs transformation, but so does each heart that has not accepted Christ. Pastor Charles often tells his congregation everything is about choices, and this is no exception as one must choose to become transformed; it is not automatic.

Theoretical Foundations

As the theoretical foundation begins to reveal the real culprit behind the marital struggles through analysis, surveys, and other studies, especially concerning intimacy, the core footing is honesty, a must in the relationship. The hurdles producing the struggles within the marriage will only grow taller, wider, and deeper the more prolonged the secrets remain. Of course, denial will never accomplish anything or help anyone obtain missing answers to pressing issues. No matter how far one tries to push the memories, suppress the emotions, or bandage the wounds, the healing gets delayed until the denial is over. However, accurate reflections upon the institution with data analysis, in this case, Ridgeville Church of God, will allow them to see if they are in the norm, out of the norm, or on the front line of something.

If one looks at the area of abandonment and the study Harvard Neuroscience Institute published on Dr. Charles Nelson's research with a Romanian orphanage, those left alone struggled with forming relationships with us, lacked good communication skills, and experienced decreased memory functions demonstrating higher levels of behavioral and mental outburst.⁹¹

⁹¹ Debra Bradley Ruder, Abandonment and the Brain, accessed April 11, 2021, <https://neuro.hms.harvard.edu/centers-and-initiatives/harvard-mahoney-neuroscience-institute/about-hmni/archive-brain-4>.

While examining 136 children from the year 2000 up to the age of 21, this study gives us a window into so many other lives that have been affected by abandonment. The issues, no doubt, can be said to be less severe because that is a more developed country but would be a false claim.

A qualitative study conducted in the United Kingdom of 16 adult survivors from infancy to adulthood showed similar results. While tracking abandoned children through adulthood is not commonplace, several studies yielded almost identical results. Some of the 16 survivors battle the emotional ebb and flow better than others. The emotional struggles along with the noted relationship struggles have led to troubled relationships.⁹²

These studies show just how much there is still to learn about the uncharted territory of the emotional damage it takes on someone when someone you love walks out or suddenly dies. The rejection so many feels, along with a surge of newfound guilt, is overwhelming and damaging regardless of when it happens. Still, they often are multiplied depending on the individual who passes away or walks out. One of the many struggles with overcoming guilt is from childhood trauma dealing with unwanted sexual touch. The effects of childhood sexual abuse can have a devastating long-term impact on survivors and their overall quality of life, including an increased risk for mental health and substance use disorders.⁹³ With the sensitivity in this area being so critical and based on the research observed, it would benefit many churches if they could have either a counselor on staff or one, they trust as part of their referral system, should it be needed.

⁹² Lorraine Sherr, Kathryn J Roberts and Natasha Croome, "Emotional distress, resilience, and adaptability: a qualitative study of adults who experienced infant abandonment," *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine* 5, no. 1 (2017): 197-213, doi:10.1080/21642850.2017.1297238, 202.

⁹³ K Basham, Trauma Theories and Disorders. (Ed.) J Berzoff, L. Flanagan and P Hertz *Inside Out and Outside In: Psycho-dynamic Clinical Theory and Psychopathology in Contemporary Multicultural Contexts*, (Rowman & Littlefield: Maryland, 2016): 481-517.

Sexual assault or rape is another form of traumatic experience, “1 in 6 women and 1 in 33 men have experienced an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime.”⁹⁴ However, in a more recent publication, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center states, “Nationwide, 81% of women and 43% of men reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment and/or assault in their lifetime.”⁹⁵ Each trauma raises its unique situations, but the foundations are becoming apparent as a universal impact as more of these research documents become released. This just further solidifies the problem place for me.

The application of this class is built within the Ridgeville Church of God on the premise that brokenness does not need to last forever and that wounds do not need to stay wounds forever. Brokenness can be made whole, and wounds can heal, but only when the individual chooses. This in no way means that once the mental switch happens, the road becomes easy because it becomes more difficult for many as they confront the very issues they have been trying to avoid.

For many churchgoers and even non-churchgoers, religion plays a fundamental part in developing a vibrant and healthy marriage. However, may it be suggested to you that religious influence exceeds far beyond the scope of marriage but into one’s educational and daily activities. We see where religion can become a healing tool for so many rather than another event each week to place on their calendar through these expanding areas.

⁹⁴ Melissa Franckowiak, *Intimacy after Sexual Trauma: Clinical Perspectives*. St. Catherine University MSW Clinical Research Paper: *Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network*. (2016). <https://www.rainn.org/statistics>.

⁹⁴ National Sexual Violence Research Center, accessed November 24, 2021, <https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics>.

⁹⁵ [In U.S. Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace](https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/), *Pew Forum*, accessed November 24, 2022, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

America seems to have become a less religious society.⁹⁶ However, as one looks around, it informs the viewer that many still feel their religious beliefs and essential features for marriage success. Although society drifts more and more away from the church, the emphasis for a successful marriage is less on religion and more on hobbies together or staying home working around the yard. One Pew Research Center religious landscape study found 47% of all married adults surveyed said religious beliefs with one's spouse are "Very Important" for a successful marriage.⁹⁷

What happens when the religious marriage intercepts childhood traumatic events? Does the church accurately know how to respond? Take, for instance, the area of pornography. The church world is quick to call this sinful by calling out the lusting aspect, nakedness, adultery, fornication but largely fails to address the more damaging effects. However, the earlier exposure to pornography may lead to potential desensitization to one's sexual stimulation requiring more prolonged sexual stimulation or the need to view more SEM to reach orgasm or a loss of sexual satisfaction altogether.⁹⁸ Married men and women who entertain themselves through pornography are at greater odds of getting a divorce than men and women who do not.⁹⁹

The sexual education the church provides needs to be greater and more nuanced than do not lust and do not have sex. Instead, instruct those within the congregation about the pitfalls of

⁹⁶ Shared Religious Beliefs in Marriage Important to Some but Not All Married Americans, *Pew Research*, accessed July 2, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/27/shared-religious-beliefs-in-marriage-important-to-some-but-not-all-married-americans/>.

⁹⁷ Dwulit, "Prevalence, Patterns and Self-Perceived Effects," 11.

⁹⁸ Shanka Vedantam, *Hidden Brain: A conversation about Life's Unseen Patterns*. *Researchers Explore Pornography's Effect on Long-Term Relationships*. October 9, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/09/556606108/research-explores-the-effect-pornography-has-on-long-term-relationships>.

⁹⁹ C Sun, A Bridges, J A Johnson, M B Ezzell, "Pornography and the male sexual script: An analysis of consumption and sexual relations," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 45, no. 4 (May 2016): 983–994. 990.

premarital sex, early exposure to pornography, and sexting. The pornography addiction is strong even into adulthood. Men who view pornography, especially at a high rate, must continue to remain sexually excited.¹⁰⁰ In addition to the decreased sexual sensation, early exposure to pornography has allowed mainstream publication of SEM to introduce young children to acts of violence and degrading behavior toward women.¹⁰¹ Children under 12 years old who view pornography are statistically more likely to assault their peers sexually.¹⁰²

No matter the age one is initially exposed, continual exposure is detrimental to one's marriage or even ability to have a healthy intimate relationship because of the false impressions visual SEM has caused. The average young adult (18-25) has sexual intercourse two to four years after seeing pornography for the first time.¹⁰³ Again, there are more educational points the church should teach other than just sexual activity outside of marriage is wrong because it can get you pregnant or get you a sexually transmitted disease. After all, other health impacts can be a direct result of pornography. Research has shown that pornography can increase depression,¹⁰⁴ insecurities,¹⁰⁵ and even anxiety.¹⁰⁶ Each marriage is different and will have its challenges even

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 984.

¹⁰¹ American College of Pediatricians, June 2016, <https://acped.org/assets/The-Impact-of-Pornography-on-Children.pdf>.

¹⁰² Foubert, "How Pornography Harms," 157-158. John D. *How Pornography Harms: What Today's Teens, Young Adults, Parents, and Pastors Need to Know* (Bloomington, IN: LifeRich Publishing, 2017). 157-158; 243

¹⁰³ B J Willoughby, D M Busby, and B Young-Petersen. "Understanding associations between personal definitions of pornography, using pornography, and depression," *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 16, no. 3 (2019): 342-356.

¹⁰⁴ T Kohut, R N Balzarini, W A Fisher, and L Campbell, "Pornography's association 104 with open sexual communication and relationship closeness vary as a function of dyadic patterns of pornography use within heterosexual relationships," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 35, no. 4 (2018): 655-676.

¹⁰⁵ N C Borgogna, J Duncan, and R C McDermott. "Is scrupulosity behind the relationship between problematic pornography viewing and depression, anxiety, and stress?" *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 25, no. 4 (2018): 293-318. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720162.2019.1567410>.

¹⁰⁶ S L Perry, "Is the link between pornography use and relational happiness really more about masturbation? Results from two national surveys." *The Journal of Sex Research*, 57, no. 1 (2019): 64-76.

without having a spouse who is a childhood trauma survivor. Still, the class the Ridgeville Church of God wants to conduct for its congregational members who are survivors is to be able to address those issues.

Again, as the church works to readdress their approach on this topic instead of just calling pornography sin because it breeds lust or it fuels desires for premarital sex, why not also address the reasons individuals become addicted or start watching it to begin with. While for most, the ultimate goal is self-gratification,¹⁰⁷ some justify watching out of loneliness,¹⁰⁸ enhancing their current sexual relationship, or educating themselves on how they are supposed to be intimate when married.¹⁰⁹ The effects pornography has on marriage is just one component the church world, but especially Ridgeville, must address. The other areas needing to be addressed are the feeling of abandonment, rejection, and low self-esteem. The church has a vital role in helping individuals overcome these feelings and couples struggling in their marriage. Yes, so often, Christians themselves feel as if God has abandoned them, but the truth is that the feeling is wrong and not in agreement. In Hebrews 13:5, “For He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ M H Butler, S A Pereyra, T W Draper, N D Leonhardt, and K B Skinner, “Pornography use and loneliness: A bidirectional recursive model and pilot investigation,” *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* 44, no. 2 (2018): 127–137.

¹⁰⁸ C C Brown, J A Durtschi, J S Carroll, and B J Willoughby. “Understanding and predicting classes of college students who use pornography,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 66, (2017): 114–121.

¹⁰⁸ Hebrews 13:5 KJV.

¹⁰⁸ Jayne Leonard, “What to know about abandonment issues,” *Medical News Today*, February 26, 2020, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/abandonment-issues>.

¹⁰⁸ Proverbs 3:5 KJV.

¹⁰⁹ Brown, “Understanding and predicting classes,” 114–121.

¹¹⁰ Hebrews 13:5 KJV.

However, the quoted scripture does not make the issues of those who have suffered abandonment feel much better, especially when life seems to be on a repeat of people walking out of their life. The church has got to be more assuring than just a scripture here and there to help individuals overcome their brokenness. If one looks at the divorce of couples with children, the constant tug of war so often heard seems to weaken the family dynamics more than it strengthens them. The short-term and even long-term effects are very present such as always wanting to please others, lack of trust in others, control issues, the inability to sustain relationships, continually moving from relationship to relationship, sabotaging relationships, and even a lack of emotional intimacy.¹¹¹

Anxiously attached individuals are less likely to trust others in general. Because of their trust issues, they are more sensitive to the rejection signs while also subconsciously sneaking around into their spouse's wallet, pockets, computer, or cellphone. Trust is an essential foundational aspect in one's Christian walk as the church focuses on its trust in God. Proverbs 3:5 says, "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding."¹¹²

Often, it seems one of the most difficult things in a marriage is to trust again once it is broken. However, the church has consistently demonstrated an excellent example of how trust can be gained again as Christian's trust is restored after let downs or perceived let downs by God. Overcoming trust issues begins with forgiveness, which the church specializes in, but it must be intentional, which is the purpose of not just this project but the development of the class.

Trust issues need to be resolved in the marriage, especially for those couples where one spouse has yet to reveal that the reason for their marital struggle is more profound than just

¹¹¹ Leonard, *What to know about abandonment issues*.

¹¹² Proverbs 3:5 KJV.

something all couples go through. To finally open up about their childhood trauma and how they have struggled their whole life, including their marriage, can be overwhelming. The potential revelation can cause issues with intimacy in the marriage or even prevent intimacy from the survivor's spouse as they process this new information creating further struggles in the marriage.

Forgiveness is also essential when helping those who attend the class overcome the hurt of their childhood trauma of sexual abuse. The church nor this class can expect survivors to use simple expressions like "Christ forgave us, so we are to forgive others" to fill the deep emotional wounds. Having the proper understanding of emotional hurt or a minimal base knowledge can help guide each attendee of the class from destruction to victory.

The most significant area it seems forgiveness needs applying at the church is its failure to walk alongside couples struggling because the church has largely been absent. The guilt the sex abused survivors carry can be overwhelming, not to mention the shame among the mental battle of all the myths concerning it. Christian verbiage of just lay it down on the altar is not enough here. The intent of the marital class for struggling couples at Ridgeville Church of God is to hold real conversations even difficult conversations, and to speak freely no matter what as it tries to confront the difficult subjects that often are overlooked within the church world.

Childhood sexual abuse has accounted for survivors, survivors' spouses, and even the perpetrator abusing substances or eating disorders.¹¹³ Deborah Daro, the author of *Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse*, says, "Child sexual abuse cannot be predicted. Neither potential victims nor potential perpetrators can be reliably identified. Furthermore, sexual abusers are not limited to

¹¹³ American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. Childhood Sexual Abuse, accessed July 4, 2021, https://www.aamft.org/Consumer_Updates/Childhood_Sexual_Abuse.aspx.

parents. Offenders can and do represent the broad spectrum of adults who have relationships with children.”¹¹⁴

As Ridgeville Church of God works through the pre-development phase of their marital class, helping those understand things such as Megan’s Law, which states the child is never to blame for the abuse; children cannot prevent abuse, only the offender can.¹¹⁵ As the church walks the couples through the coursework of these major childhood traumas just mentioned, the project presenter realizes a vast list of other traumas that affect the individual and marriages. What the church addresses in terms of the traumatic events must also be met to realize that it is not a cure-all.

The limit to which the church can effectively minister rests on what the leaders will allow. For example, letting medical professionals come in and speak or, unless properly trained, allowing its spiritual teachers to stick to the spiritual aspect of healing. The church needs to show it cares while working with each couple to get more spiritually rooted in Christ. They can do this by helping them know each other better and provide a safe environment where difficult discussions can be done about one’s past. Some steps may seem more straightforward than others like offering the counselees understanding for the temptations of watching pornography instead of being quick to judge, speaking the truth even in areas such as intimacy, guilt, and shame issues before it negatively affects an individual or couple.

There is one basic manner by which the congregation as the Body of Christ can be fundamental accomplices in a survivor’s recuperating venture. Trauma survivors should be seen,

¹¹⁴ Deborah A Daro, “Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse.” *The Future of Children, Sexual Abuse of Children* 4, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 1994): 198-223.

¹¹⁵ State of Connecticut Judicial Branch, accessed July 4, 2021, <https://www.jud.ct.gov/Publications/MegansLaw.pdf>.

esteemed, and associated with a mindful local area. The congregation is called to be the living assortment of Christ, and that is spiritual work. Since childhood trauma survivors need to have a sense of security, the congregation should concede to giving love and thoughtful hospitality as Christ did for us.

Traumatic events change the body in more than just the physical, so often mentally and spiritually. The horrendous experience gets caught inside and an individual can be unsure of how to release it or process it. The congregation can establish a climate that allows the individual body an opportunity to recuperate. The initial phase in recovering and rebuilding is the agile demonstration of listening entirely to the stories individuals need to tell. One way a survivor can start to heal again is by recounting their accounts and having someone honor them by listening.

The journey of overcoming not just for struggling couples, individuals and the church starts at the moment of invitation. Each couple needs to invite Christ into their hearts to slowly become educated in His Grace and Mercy. In the mean education, since the instructions have been to study and show yourself approved upon, we know that the learning curve is never over no matter the obstacles. The functionality of the fivefold ministry is more significant than just in name only, but as each operation in the church and throughout, the strength will come back to prove substantial to all willing to receive.

Chapter 3

Methodology

When dealing with such devastating events that are almost certain to become life-altering, one cannot rely solely on their opinions if they think it will or will not impact them. They should also look at research data field specialist articles concerning the impacts, among other resources to help guide the healing process, including scripture. Some pastors, it seems like most people, voice their opinions from what they have heard others say or seen written on various social media platforms more than researching the topics themselves. The information they are sharing may be their attempt to help with healing with good intentions. However, some individuals take the words of their spiritual leader without second-guessing, which can lead to more damage than healing. If an individual comes in for counseling and their issue, for example, is fear, the pastor should not immediately quote, “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.”¹¹⁶ Fear itself has the potential to affect one’s physical health and even spiritual health, especially chronic fear with mood swings, anxiety, unable to love, eating disorder, headaches, bitterness, and even a loss of trust in God.¹¹⁷

Therefore, the information shared with those receiving counsel should be easily backed up by data. This is for all professions, including pastors. Unsubstantiated information can be harmful not only to this working project but to those who read newspapers too. Verifying the research with accurate data and then disseminating that information to others builds a solid footing for further research and application. Since most pastors the project author knows seem to

¹¹⁶ 2 Timothy 1:7 KJV.

¹¹⁷ Jamie Rosenburg, “The Effects of Chronic Fear on a Person’s Health,” *The American Journal of Managed Care*, accessed January 22, 2022, <https://www.ajmc.com/view/the-effects-of-chronic-fear-on-a-persons-health>.

be good orators, the verified information they give their congregation should be filled with passion, compassion, and a desire to help change their lives. Each week pastors have an opportunity to speak about subjects their members go through daily. However, if they are not well-versed in a subject matter, the delivered data can often mislead individuals, especially those who are struggling but believe the words of a minister.

The challenge for this project was difficult for several reasons. First, the issues addressed have deep psychological impacts that, for some, have been lying in secrecy for years and cannot be fully understood within this project. However, the information gained from this project paper provided additional resources the author could use in his church. This secrecy is present for a multitude of reasons itself, like not wanting to get the abuser in trouble, thinking somehow it was their fault, the cost factor in getting help, and not wanting to be known as someone who has been abused.¹¹⁸ In addition to the reasons listed, the survivor may be embarrassed by what has happened, the cost factor of seeking help, not wanting a label of being one who was sexually abused, or even a pervert for watching pornography. Another reason for the secrecy is being scared if they tell. It may result in splitting their family up, hurting their family, or even losing their job. These barriers are difficult for adults to overcome, nevertheless a child.

Several individuals who have been to the pastor of Ridgeville Church of God have expressed a feeling of guilt in addition to shame because they knew what was happening was wrong but still could not understand why their body was responding in a pleasurable way. The occurrence of sexual arousal during rape is completely normal, and victims should never feel

¹¹⁸ Charlotte Lemaigree, Emily P. Taylor, and Claire Gittoes, 2017. "Barriers and facilitators to disclosing sexual abuse in childhood and adolescence: A systematic review," *Journal of Child Abuse & Neglect* 70, (August 2017): 39-52. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.05.009>.

ashamed of their body's automatic responses because those cannot be controlled.¹¹⁹ This awareness about arousal does not minimize the impact, damage, or long-term effects but may provide some form of relief in removing guilt and shame.

Many have also expressed their reason for not telling anyone is they were simply hoping that if they did not talk about it, it might be as if it never happened. This attempt to mentally block out the event is known as maladaptive behavior. Maladaptive behavior is when someone responds inappropriately to internal or external struggles preventing them from adapting or processing effectively, resulting in more harmful actions than helpful ones. Maladaptation is not relegated to just the mental health field but can be applied to many areas of one's life.

Some of those same secrecy barriers exist with those who have experienced or are currently experiencing the feeling of abandonment and even exposure to pornography as a child. The secrecy is, at times, the abuser's safety net as it allows them to stay with their family¹²⁰ and keep what they have intact. They may feel what happened is normal or have been told by the perpetrator that this is normal, leading to secrecy. The abuser might have threatened the survivor or their family if they spoke out, heightening the fear that if something happens to their family, the fault will be theirs. A survivor may also be waiting for someone whose ability to understand and empathize with their story.¹²¹

For the subjects addressed in this paper, some previous studies show why this is needed. Numerous research studies have examined how childhood trauma, especially child sexual abuse,

¹¹⁹ Laurence Cobbaert, *The Caged Bird Sings*, GlasGow & Clyde Rape Crisis, March 14, 2016, accessed January 22, 2022, <https://www.glasgowclyderapecrisis.org.uk/news/blog/sexual-assault-and-sexual-arousal/>.

¹²⁰ "The 'Secret:' the key to understanding child sex abuse," *Abuse Watch*, accessed November 26, 2021, https://www.abusewatch.net/child_theseecret.php.

¹²¹ Dafna Tener, "The Secret of Intrafamilial Child Sexual Abuse: Who Keeps It and How?" *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* (November 10, 2017): 1-22, doi:10.1080/10538712.2017.1390715.

impacts a survivor and even a survivor's family. Similar studies have been executed to determine the impact early exposure has on adolescents, teenagers, and adults related to their view of women or even how the early exposure can lead to domestic violence and other health issues. Multiple long-term studies have been carried out on how childhood trauma such as abandonment continues to be a recurring issue into adulthood. This project intended to address how each of these traumas can have significant implications in the marriage, especially with intimacy. Equipping couples with this new power, the discovered study provides with proper application can vastly improve one's marriage. To showcase the how, the why, and the implication.

The effects of abandonment, childhood sexual abuse, and early exposure to pornography may seem controllable or even something one could grow out of. However, the tremendous impact can never become overstated. Unfortunately, the limited literature on abandoned children rarely explores their future, their growth and development, and the long-term consequences in terms of psychological adaptation.¹²² The impact of pornography use is terrifying as well. While many of these assumptions and philosophical views fit the pre-Internet era, additional assumptions and information are needed to extend the pornography debate in more current and comprehensive directions.¹²³

The implementation process will constantly be worked on, tweaked, and after times just overhauled as availability increases with society's advancement. Periodic survey conferences where information is collected, among so many additional ways, will continually feed a more accurate assessment. Failure to disconnect from the actual emotions with factual data to back up one's evaluations instead of being driven by those emotions proves helpful.

¹²² Sherr, "Emotional distress, resilience and adaptability," 197-213.

¹²³ Jill C. Manning, "The Impact of Internet Pornography on Marriage and the Family: A Review of the Research," *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 13, no. 2-3 (2006): 131-165.

Intervention Design

Every marriage has its challenges, highs, and lows. However, when marriages come together with already experienced damages, situations the spouse is aware of and others they are not, these are often more than most marriages can work out on their own. Due to the severity of some incidents, the survivor subconsciously and even consciously has suppressed them from memory. Often, these memories are ones that the survivor does not want to live out again, hopes to never need to share, or is even afraid to share. The overwhelming emotions that have sat dormant and continue to be buried without any healing can often rise without warning because of known and unknown triggers.

This project attempted to gain access to those challenges and see what similarities may exist and whether certain triggers exist that caused relapses or even outbursts. As awareness is brought not only to the childhood trauma survivor but to the survivor's spouse, the goal was to increase communication between the two spouses. Additional goals were to have each spouse understand the impact the traumatic events have caused on them in the marriage and with intimacy. It was hoped this process would help the couples establish strong communication skills for processing the trauma impacts and getting past it the best way possible.

The survey examined how bad the married couple has been affected and if the spouse of a childhood trauma survivor acknowledges the impact. The first step was to increase the number of counseling appointments relating to childhood trauma in general, while additional research will identify the scope of that term covered and the medical terminology. It is hoped the study findings will help guide the remaining observations, discoveries, and discussions while opening new thoughts.

The second goal was to understand how specific childhood trauma incidents have continued to affect the author of the project's marriage even 1 years later. Through this research, he wanted to see if there were others within his church setting and, if so, what could each couple learn from other survival stories to help teach in the local church setting and maybe even in his own marriage. Each story shared displayed similarities and differences, but they provided the courage for another couple to tell their story for the first time.

Third, a pre-survey was sent out in advance to serve as the baseline in which progress was gauged. At the conclusion of the marriage conference, a post-survey was given to compare against the pre-survey allowing this data collection process to evaluate the effectiveness of the conference-style educational approach to the designated topics. The marriage enrichment theme was the driving force to get individual couples to share their struggles, find reassurance that their marriage was not the only one going through this, and ultimately to apply new skills to improve their overall marriage.

This was very similar to what many know as group counseling. Group therapy is the of multiple clients at one by one or more healthcare providers. Group therapy provides a solution to a problem by allowing the treatment of multiple individuals simultaneously.¹²⁴ Whether it simulates more of an interpersonal group, psychoeducational group, cognitive behavioral group, or a skills development group largely depends on the participants of the group.

Fourth, a broader survey was carried out to determine if the traumatic incidents were isolated locally to Ridgeville Church of God or if it went beyond the scope of the church. The author, who has been a licensed Church of God minister for the past 22 years and conducting

¹²⁴ Akshay Malhotra and Jeff Baker, *Group Therapy*. (Treasure Island FL: StatPearls Publishing January 2021, updated: July 25, 2021), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK549812/>.

Christian counseling for the past 25 years, knows his denomination credentialing training program do not offer any counseling-specific training. The broader survey was also sent to some ministers to discover if they believed their ministerial training was beneficial enough in equipping them for such counseling sessions topics.

Finally, upon completion of the marriage conference, several couples (three but no more than five) were asked to participate in a one-on-one sit-down session. The purpose of this session was to ask more direct questions about how their marriage struggles and to see if the conference helped in any way. The session lasted between 30 minutes and an hour and was recorded with granted permission.

Research Purpose

The motivation behind this study was to examine how Ridgeville Church of God could further help those they minister to each week. The marital struggles are real and often left unattended. The struggles can become disastrous. Every marriage has its struggles, but if the only help being given is from a statement like God is where your help lies, so turn to Him in time of trouble, or even if you go to church, it will help you. If you are a non-believer, non-churchgoer, or even a person of a different faith than one who believes in God, this statement may not provide much help.

No pastor or marital couple can honestly feel one sit-down session, or even in today's pandemic world, one virtual or telephone session, can bring instant healing, completion, or satisfaction. If the client is only sharing a little about what is going on, the counselor will be unable to provide effective long-term help for the marriage, especially those struggling with deep psychological issues. The project's author hoped that through the holding of the marriage

conference, married couples would feel more relaxed to seek counseling for their individual issues and would also attend the newly found marriage couples life group.

The first step in the data collection was to recruit married couples from Ridgeville Church of God. The emphasis of the study was on those who had been married 30 years or less. Participants were those who fell between 18 and 60 years old. The senior pastor promoted and recruited for this conference utilizing all available tools at his disposal, including using the church's social media platform. Recruitment also took place on the church's private Facebook group pages for its men's ministry, prayer ministry, and even the women's ministry. The hope was to get the word out to as many couples as possible. The men's group and the women's group had spoken on several of the topics that were covered, although not with a medical professional leading the conversation.

In addition, the pastor connected with his congregation in the recruiting process using the church's social media platform and webpage to provide a link for more information on the marriage conference. This link also provided an opportunity for interested couples to register. This link was created from the church's accounting software program called ACS Technologies.

One last tool the pastor used in the recruiting process was from Dial-My-Call. This paid yearly subscription allowed the church to voice record a message or send a text message to individuals within their contact database. The single recorded message or text can then be sent out to everyone at once or at a destined time instead of making individual calls to everyone. The marriage conference announcement provided the date, time, and other pertinent information for registering. The local church saw a recruitment flyer with the registration link at the information booth along with a sign-up sheet for the conference for those who may not have access to a computer.

Research Design

A survey-style data gathering process was seen as the best approach for all those attending the marriage conference and utilizing a questionnaire approach for three to five face-to-face couples after the conference was over. An online survey was placed on several Facebook pages: the pastor's personal page, Ridgeville Church of God's page, and the South Carolina Church of God's Credential Minister's page for ministers to fill out the survey pertaining to them. This approach allowed multiple individuals at one time to take the survey easily and securely from their place of comfort. It was also a fast way to collect, process, and finalize the data received.

Each couple coming to the conference was asked to participate in a pre-conference seminar. This seminar laid out expectations, allowing time for the pre-conference survey to be given. It served as a baseline marker to compare responses against their responses on the post-conference survey. The expectations expressed covered what the couple could hope to obtain from attending the conference, itinerary, and what the presenter wished to achieve.

There are drawbacks to this type of research design as well. While the survey from this project had a high level of privacy, false answers could still occur. There was a risk of having a question overlooked, left unanswered because of confusion over the question or available answers, invalidating part of the data collection. Although highly unlikely, the researcher also was aware those filling out the survey may have a hidden agenda for their responses, sabotaging the data collected. This could also happen with those present for the pre- and post-survey, but again was highly unlikely, and there was certainly no way of knowing unless revealed. Although the potential drawbacks could have a negative impact on the overall data collection, for this

project and conference setting in which the information was disseminated, the survey-style instrument still seemed to be the best data collection method.

Participants and Settings

Participants came from the local congregation of Ridgeville Church of God. While the conference was open to those within the local community and churches in their district, the focus was on the couples within the local ministry. Aside from being a part of the local ministry at Ridgeville Church of God, other criteria where the couples would need to have been married for less than 30 years and within the age range of 18-60. It would have been helpful for the project and survey if any of the couples attending were survivors of childhood trauma or the spouse of a survivor.

Everyone during the pre-conference seminar was asked to fill out the informed consent forms (see Appendix A), giving permission for the project author to record the conference, documented attendees, and keep surveys that were turned in while keeping what was shared and the identity of who said it confidential, only sharing with Liberty University's project mentor if needed as proof of work. The conference speaker asked each person filling out the survey to put their initials on it. The answers of both surveys were placed in a Google Doc form that had the same survey questions on it. Once responses were inputted, pie charts were created to show the responses visually (see Figures 1-25 in Chapter 4).

All initials and responses were stored in a secure file on the author's computer with a secure lock on the file to protect each attendee's name and responses. This computer system was the only place the gathered information was stored with a backup on the author's Goggle Drive cloud account. Once the expiration date arrives based on the signing of the consent form, the backup files will be deleted along with the primary files.

After the survey responses had been collected, the data were entered into the Google form created by the marriage conference speaker. This form mirrored the pre- and post-surveys, allowing entered data to then produce pie charts for all responses. It was vital to collect all surveys prior to the conference attendees leaving, so the statistical data was not skewed by any measure. During the pre-conference meeting, the conference speaker emphasized the great importance of attending the conference and how it would impact the overall project's purpose.

In addition to the stored conference responses, a secondary survey went out using the same Google Docs system to obtain responses from fellow ministers. The project author wanted to also determine if fellow ministers in the Church of God denomination believed their ministerial training was sufficient to handle the project's targeted area. Anyone in the group study's project was subject to termination if they were found to have shared personal information discussed during the conference. The survey would have been terminated if the individual was found to have misrepresented themselves on the information given. Such conduct would have been unhealthy to the study.

The conference-style sessions occurred at Ridgeville Church of God, located at 444 School Street, Ridgeville, South Carolina, 29472, on Saturday, October 30, 2021, from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm. The conference was held in the campus's multi-purpose room (fellowship hall). It was hoped this setting would allow individuals to feel a little more at ease than in the sanctuary. Lunch was provided by the project's author for those attending the conference event.

The problem this conference addressed was: "Does Ridgeville Church of God need to construct a life group class that ministers to married couples that have experienced childhood trauma?" If the answer was found to be yes, the intervention plan would use the feedback gained from the conference even, surveys, and the secondary survey from fellow ministers to craft a

married couple's course structured to produce a cohesive environment where healing could be found, and safety could be experienced in what they share. In addition, the pastor wanted the class to provide confidentiality in what was said was able to stay private, that freedom could be obtained from their past. The class hoped to further provide a setting where each individual or couple felt free to openly express their feelings. Finally, connections with others who share similar experiences or have walked a similar journey could be made.

The time frame for implementation for the startup of this course was six months from the time all data had been collected and processed. The six months prior to launch were used to promote the class to educate the teachers within the designed areas. When the class launch date was a month out, a launch party was held to allow some prior connections to be made. Additionally, this event was used to have those in attendance fill out an anonymous suggestion form listing possible subject areas they would like to see covered.

Recruitment

Depending on the type of event, recruiting individuals to come to a free conference, even a marriages conference that includes food may be an easy recruitment. However, it was a little more complicated when addressing personal issues with deep wounds and with some individuals still harboring hatred or anger toward the person who inflicted those wounds. Some were hesitant to attend for fear they would relive the moment or must process the aftermath again.

There were several ways this research study's recruitment process worked. First, after obtaining permission from the local pastor and pastor's council, the project's author placed a flyer in the church's foyer two months before the conference date. The recruitment flyer (see Appendix B) circulation primarily focused on the area of the church foyer with a listed website for individuals to register for the conference and a sign-up sheet with the website address. In

addition to the foyer sign-up area and signage, a pulpit announcement invitation was also made for the conference each of three weeks.

Next, the project author sought permission from proper authority at Ridgeville Church of God to post the flyer on the church's social media platforms and sought participation while also providing a description of the conference. The recruitment sought married couples within the local congregation who had been married for less than 30 years, were between the ages of 18-60, had experienced at least one form of childhood trauma, or were married to someone who was a childhood trauma survivor. The recruitment flyer also sought couples who were struggling in their marriage.

While the conference was open to any couple or individual who desired to gain the necessary tools to improve their marriage, due to the nature of what was covered, if an individual who struggled with any or all the conference topics should show interest in coming, a one-on-one counseling session was encouraged to maintain the integrity of the conference. Only those who met the research study requirements were allowed to complete the surveys for the study. Emphasizing the requirements at the pre-conference event and conference event and the impact of failing to fill one out or in was vital. Emphasis also was on the impact of submitting a survey if not part of the study group.

Pre-conference Event

The pre-conference event lasted roughly one hour, beginning at 7:00 pm on the designated date. The purpose of the pre-conference event was to ensure the consent forms were signed and to have those attending the conference fill out the pre-conference survey. During this event, the conference speaker explained the conference schedule, including the topics that were discussed. The speaker also emphasized to those taking part in the study the importance of their

commitment and what would happen afterward. There was an opportunity for anyone to ask questions openly for clarification and even privately if necessary.

Another purpose behind the pre-conference event was to allow an opportunity for connections with other couples or for attending couples to see couples they knew. The project author's mindset was that these connections would hold each other accountable about coming while possibly seeing there were others who struggled in their marriage too. Maybe new relationships would form outside of the conference, helping serve as accountability partners or even rekindle old ones lowering the stress or pressure of attending the conference. The overall beneficial outcome was to raise the comfort level in the actual conference for discussion now that couples knew who was coming to the conference.

Conference Event

The conference event started at 10:00 am on the scheduled date with doors opening at 9:00 am for registration. Light refreshments for breakfast, along with some juice or coffee, were available for the conference attendees. At 10:00 am, the conference opened with a greeting from the project's author and lead pastor of the Ridgeville Church of God, followed by prayer. After preliminaries were finished, a safety talk in case of emergency was given and where restrooms were located should they be needed. A quick overview of the itinerary to include breaktimes and lunch was reviewed. Finally, a "Thank You" message was given before a quick break was provided and session one began.

Session One

Session 1 began with a foundational overview of the conference (i.e., *the why, the who, the what, the when, and the where*). *The why*—after many couples had sought marital counseling and many others hesitated to seek help for their struggling marriage, the pastor believed a class

or a setting outside the counseling environment would prove beneficial. Using the conference as more of a trial run, the feedback gained helped further the discussion for a marriage class that would cover the stated topics and more as the class leads. During the conference, the speaker tried to help remove the negative stigma toward counseling, especially marriage counseling. The American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists reports an overall success rate of 98%, and contributes the success of couples therapy, among other factors, contributes to a decreasing divorce rate in the United States.¹²⁵

The who—married couples who were willing to admit they struggled and either knew it was because of the subject areas or they suspected it could be another area causing issues in their marriage. Married couples struggling not directly in these areas may have also found benefit from the conference as steps for improvement in these traumatic areas could sometimes easily be steps to address other troubled areas in the marriage. The same could be said for the marriages that were not currently struggling. Marriage conferences are not just for those trying to save their marriage but for those trying to keep it healthy. When couples have great knowledge of issues or tools that can be applied to their marital conflicts, it gives them an advantage in handling the issues with a greater success rate.

The what—abandonment, child sexual abuse, and early exposure to pornography. These broad topics quickly became narrowed as definitions were given, and the scope of coverage was further explained. The issues to be covered were identified prior to the conference. The author believed the project could produce two effects, but he thought it was worth it from the early presentation. The first was having foreknowledge of covered topics may raise fear, anxiety, or

¹²⁵ Witmer Lopez, “What to Expect from Couples Counseling,” *Therapy Group of NYC*, May 26, 2020, <https://nyctherapy.com/therapists-nyc-blog/what-to-expect-from-couples-counseling/>.

even scare some individuals or couples from attending the conference. This is an acceptable response and one that shows there is still some healing to do. The speaker also would rather individuals and couples deal with the rising issues on their terms and in their own privacy, unless seeking professional help. He believed it would be better to deal with the memories and effects of the incidents that way than in a classroom setting that may bring unnecessary embarrassment upon them in a group setting.

Traumatic experiences, especially in childhood, can be overwhelming. A child might experience the same traumatic event as an adult does, but the child will process the event in a different manner. Children feel the same fear and anxiousness that adults do, but they may not show it.¹²⁶ For survivors, knowing a course is going to be highlighting the very trauma and the feelings associated with them may have the survivors in fear of reliving that trauma. This can be almost traumatic itself.

The second effect was the idea of someone covering such topics may resonate with the survivor or survivor's spouse and give them an urge or curiosity to attend. There is the opportunity to possibly learn something that they have held in secret from their spouse and others. The couple may have held their issue secretly and want to gain any additional knowledge to help them in their current struggles raising a desire to attend.

The when—In an ideal world, one would say before the problems start in your marriage, attend all the helpful conferences you can, but the conference addressed issues that started prior to marriage. However, when the issue goes back as far as one's early childhood, few conferences are geared toward stopping this from affecting one's marriage. The good news is the sooner the

¹²⁶ Scott Floyd, *Crisis Counseling: A Guide for Pastors and Professionals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2008), 1-280, 101.

issues can be addressed, the sooner resolutions can be found. If one knows it is even a current issue prior to marriage, it is vital to seek help in gaining restoration rather than getting retribution. The restoration process helps the survivors see themselves not as the reason it happened but as the survivor they really are. The retribution process is working on a plan for the punishment of the perpetrator. Sometimes, marriage brings those hidden issues to light that have laid dormant for so long and often without any proper warning forcing the couple to develop an answer at that moment. The couple needs to focus less on retribution and more on restoration. The when is also before it destroys what you desperately want, a healthy marriage and family. It is okay to be scared about the when but do not let it prevent the where.

The where—Emotionally, financially, mentally, physically, sexually, and spiritually. Each of these areas is where healing needs to occur. Each of these areas has been damaged by events, actions, unwanted touches, unretractable words, and scars outwardly and inwardly. Understanding the pain, anger, bitterness, resentment, shame, filth, and guilt is often buried, often resulting in unhealthy relationships. Survivors may withhold their own emotions from others, never letting them see when they are afraid, sad, or angry.¹²⁷ The conference intended to slowly bring the emotional responses to the surface while providing ways to handle them when they did happen.

Each of the six “where’s” had its own steps to a better healthy marriage. When looking into developing those steps for the couples at the conference, developing them to show how each where impacts one’s overall health and even self-worth, which will contribute immensely to one’s marriage. Each area of the “where” has different healing times, and all are subject to

¹²⁷ “What Is Child Trauma/Trauma Types/Complex Trauma/Effects,” *National Child Stress Traumatic Network*, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/complex-trauma/effects>.

relapses, highlighting the importance of a strong support system again. The hope for the conference was to educate each couple on how they could play a vital role in healing their spouse's "where's."

After the conference covered the *W's*, a few definitions were given concerning each overall topic area, as well as some other words that were used throughout the event so that each couple attending was aware. Explaining and defining marriage, intimacy, abandonment, childhood sexual abuse, pornography, and childhood trauma may seem basic. However, ensuring the proper foundational groundwork had solid footing was essential moving forward as there may have been some in attendance who may have had a different understanding or definition than what was discussed.

After the baseline definitions were given, the conference began addressing the childhood trauma area, abandonment. This information shared spoke to the visible signs and possible nonvisual signs that one is struggling with abandonment. Information was shared with those attending. This was the first primary childhood trauma topic area covered, and among the discussion material was how abandonment impacts the marriage. This impact may be visible to the spouse or may not, especially if they are unaware of the trauma to begin with. It was hoped that discussing what abandonment is and what it is not would bring clarity to the conversation. The speaker highlighted some of the effects abandonment can have on an individual and how that can play a major role in marital conflicts. Further exposure was given on how abandonment affects relationships while also bringing awareness to the symptoms of abandonment and some possible treatment options that can provide great marital tools in overcoming marital struggles. Once session one information was shared, an opportunity was given for any questions to be

asked. After the discussion concluded, session one ended, and a short 10-minute break followed before session two began.

Session Two

The topic covered in session two was traumatic childhood sexual abuse. In this session, the project's author brought attention to the possible emotional, mental, physical, and sexual impacts on a survivor, both short-term and long-term. The material also covered possible impacts it could have on the survivor's spouse, their marriage, and their intimacy. Before getting into this discussion, a cautionary warning was given that some things covered during this session could cause flashbacks, bring up undealt with emotions, raw emotions, or even trigger other health concerns such as an anxiety or panic attack. What was discussed in this session may cause nightmares or other issues, and should that happen, the speaker would offer his personal cell number should any attendee need to call. He instructed those attending that if they believed a sit-down session was needed, one would be provided free of charge.

This cautionary warning was not necessarily for the individual to be excused from the session so they could dodge dealing with it in their marriage but more as a pre-warning to the attendees. If this session needed to be slowed down so the emotional impacts could be talked out, the speaker was prepared to do that. In addition, some hidden wounds could have been unearthed during this discussion, revealing some of the root causes of some couples' marital issues that also needed to be processed. If a couple was willing to allow their issue to be openly discussed to find possible resolutions, a small allotment of time was available for that too.

In this session, information was disseminated that included the toll-free number (1-800-656-HOPE (4673) for the National Sexual Assault Hotline. This hotline is a safe and confidential service. If they chose to call this number or anyone for that matter, they would be routed to a

local Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network affiliated organization based on their first six digits of their telephone number.¹²⁸ Other information disseminated covered the area of childhood abuse. While the material spoke about the impact it has on the individual (emotionally, mentally, physically, and even spiritually), it also tried to answer some of the other questions the speaker had been asked. Many people may even ask themselves these questions: Who can report child abuse (physically or sexually)? Why should it get reported? How does someone report the abuse? Is there a statute of limitations for reporting abuse? Does South Carolina have a statute of limitations?

While many sexually abused childhood trauma survivors in attendance may have been able to relate to the covered material, the author hoped that the information presented during the conference would help them better understand what the speaker was labeling the why's of childhood trauma. These questions are based on the speaker's own assessment of the number of individuals who have come to his office seeking someone to talk to. The whys of childhood trauma seem to have deep recurring impacts in the survivor's life and in the survivor's spouse's life as they answer the "whys" (e.g., Why me? Why do I think this way? Why do I feel this way? Why do I act this way? Why am I treated this way?).

Many of the why questions go unanswered because survivors, especially sexual abuse trauma survivors, label the incident as a misunderstanding, it was love, or maybe even miscommunication. A 2016 analysis of 28 studies of nearly 6,000 women and girls aged 14 or older who had experienced sexual violence found that 60% of survivors did not label their

¹²⁸ "About the National Sexual Assault Telephone Hotline," *Rape Abuse and Incest National Network*, accessed January 25, 2022, About the National Sexual Assault Telephone Hotline, <https://www.rainn.org/about-national-sexual-assault-telephone-hotline>.

experience as “rape” but “bad sex” or “miscommunication.”¹²⁹ The continuation of questions as these individuals try to process in their head can lead to additional traumas because of this misclassification and reservations or fear of telling someone.

The teaching on childhood trauma that Ridgeville Church of God is looking at among the married couples within their congregation who struggle in their marriage must stress the importance of healthy communication. This communication is not just among the spouses, but if the couple has young children when it is age-appropriate to teach their own children the power of communication. While there may still be hesitation to share such trauma, knowing how the struggles affected them even into marriage, the parents hopefully can create an atmosphere that encourages open communication.

Breakout Session/Lunch

The conference moved into a breakout session where each table was encouraged to engage in conversation over marriage in general. Several topics were located on the table to help guide the discussion, but there was no pressure to share or engage as this was a non-structured happening while lunch was being served. The hope behind this open table discussion was for couples to connect with each other by using the questions as icebreakers in case there was some hesitation among the table to talk. These discussion questions did not ask anyone to share their personal traumatic stories but more casual talk as they became more comfortable with each other.

Some of the icebreaker table discussions were questions like: If you were speaking to a young couple wanting to get married, what advice would you give them? If you were teaching a

¹²⁹ Laura C Wilson, and Katherine E Miller, “Meta-Analysis of the Prevalence of Unacknowledged Rape.” *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 17, no. 2 (April 2016): 149–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838015576391>.

class on effective communication, what steps would you present to the class? Can you describe the perfect vacation? Can you describe your spouse's perfect date? As a couple, you find out your in-laws hired a private investigator to follow you before you got married. Do you confront them? Which spouse is the spender, and which one is the saver? The drawback to kick-start questions was if the couple was having issues. Some of these answers may have created quick opportunities for couples to divulge more than they should as an attempt to embarrass or hurt their spouse. So, each question needed to go through a careful selection process, and if there was even a hint that those things may occur, it was not asked.

In addition, another benefit from each couple getting to know one another better is that when the marriage class at church officially started, they would not be strangers coming into the class. One final hope of the project's author was that the relationships built would foster beyond the walls of the local church and the conference. The friendship built today may very well be the support system leaned on tomorrow.

Session Three

Returning from lunch was the best placement for the topic of discussion of pornography. This was determined by the engagement of the attendees. The foreknowledge was present that eating food could cause some individuals to become tired. Some types of foods and the timing of meals can make people feel tired because of a decrease in energy levels which is called postprandial somnolence.¹³⁰ The subject area was interesting enough to keep individuals engaged instead of falling asleep or losing focus. The information shared showed how addiction to pornographic material is damaging not just at an early age for anyone with young children but

¹³⁰ Alison Fisher, "Why do people feel tired after eating?" *Medical News Today*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/323379>.

why each person should do their part to protect our children. The use of pornography by adolescents is associated with stronger permissive sexual attitudes (premarital sex and casual sex).¹³¹ The glamourizing of the SEM creates a drive with these young adolescents that often leads to other things aside from sexual encounters, like addictions and physical aggressions.

Information shared also showed how exposure to pornography builds false expectations of intimacy detrimental to the marriage. Pornographic videos are often Hollywood-type productions with known actors (in the SEM world). Like Hollywood, the relationships are scripted for the enticement of the audience, often with actors with larger than normal body parts once again portraying unrealistic expectations. The usage seems to be on the rise. In 2016 alone, over 4,599,000,000 hours were spent watching pornography on Pornhub, one of the world's largest online pornography sites.¹³² The SEM often work to heighten or play off individuals' sexual fantasies that are once again Hollywood production-like, with little reality built in. The unrealistic script lines are easily absorbed into the young adolescents' minds by thinking women are constantly waiting on their man to get home to be sexually intimate. The actions the SEM displayed, whether through the mental response from reading erotic stories or visual responses from the pictures or magazines, further feed into the falsely implied normalcy of all relationships and how each partner will or should act.

Session Four

The last session was somewhat of an overview of the previous material covered during the conference. The project's author wanted to close with the importance of communication and

¹³¹ Antonia Quadara, Alissar El-Murr and Joe Latham. "The Effects of Pornography on Children and young people." Australian Government, Australian Institute of Family Studies (December 2017).

¹³² G Anne Vanderlann, Ellie Cinamon Jullian. "The Effects of Pornography on Adult Males' Relationships." *Open Access Journal of Addiction and Psychology*, June 24, 2019, doi:10.33552/OAJAP.2019.02.000530.

how to communicate appropriately. Since many, if not all, of the couples in attendance were there because of marital struggles, it was important to help understand why talking is so important. Communication is powerful, healing, insightful, and uplifting, but it can also be destructive, hurtful, and often spoken from a broken place. Silent treatments are not a form of communication, but so many couples the conference speaker has counseled with identify their arguments have reached this point, including at times the speaker himself. The speaker stressed that words matter, so if one spouse says they forgive their spouse, damage is done if they continue to bring it up in arguments.

Trust between couples is a prerequisite for stable and satisfactory romantic relationships.¹³³ Bringing up the past can create issues with trust more than it can bring resolutions to the issues. As important as communication is in every relationship, it lacks its strength if there is no trust. The lack of trust and communication will end a marriage just as trust and communication can save it. As the speaker brought the conference to a close, he emphasized the importance each couple must continually build trust in the marriage and constantly work on effective communication skills, not just the one the individual is comfortable with but improving in the area where their spouse speaks as well.

Couples Interview

One additional way the author of the project determined not only the conferences impact and effectiveness in addressing the effects of childhood trauma on the marriage, even with intimacy, but to plan for the successfulness of the marriage class, the author of the project wanted to see if any couples were willing to sit down individually for further discussion. This

¹³³ Tobias Kleinert, Bastian Schiller, Urs Fischbacher, Laura-Anne Grigutsch, Nicolas Koranyi, Klaus Rothermund, Markus Heinrichs, “The Trust Game for Couples (TGC): A new standardized paradigm to assess trust in romantic relationships.” *PLoS ONE* 15, no. 3 (2020): e0230776. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0230776>.

meeting did in no way serve as a counseling service but was more like an informative conversation. This face-to-face interview sought to speak to between three and five couples. The selection process was from the pre- and post-conference surveys, although no couple was required to participate in this interview. Before recapping the sessions and doing the dismissal prayer, the conference speaker asked interested couples to see him upon leaving to set up a time to meet.

Conclusion

The author of the project thanked the attending couples for their time and participation. The speaker ended by reminding each couple that past events do not have to cripple an individual, but they can use the events as motivation to help others overcome. He also offered any couple attending that may need additional counseling the opportunity to have free counseling sessions.

For each couple to try to learn how to overcome their marital struggles and engage the issues by coming out to a marriage conference is commending enough. However, to attend a conference that is addressing their possible childhood trauma and collecting data from it is simply amazing, not to mention humbling. A prayer of blessing over each couple was done, and then it was encouraged that each couple prays for one another while looking at their spouse.

Implementation of the Intervention Design

The information gathered from the study proved vital to the health of more than just the marriages within Ridgeville Church of God and extended families. Knowledge is power, and the project author expected to be empowered himself by the knowledge gained from the study to bring possible healing to his church. He saw this class's full potential to enlighten, encourage,

and emphasize their value while reminding the attendees they were not defined by what had happened to them.

Throughout an eight-week course, Ridgeville Church of God hoped this class geared toward specialized issues individuals within the local church ministry would become a footprint for future classes on a rotational basis. Each week a different childhood trauma incident is addressed. Stressing more than just the basic knowledge of the incident, the course will also incorporate building a strong spiritual foundation as they become overcomers. Realizing the depth of the impact no graduation ceremony will be done or preventing a couple who would like to go back through the course for another cycle. The idea is to provide optional means to help couples grow in the connections with each other and allow further healing to be done if necessary.

As previously mentioned in the discussion of abandonment, traumatic childhood sexual abuse, and even early exposure to pornography, individuals enter relationships already wounded. Coupled with the sexual aspects of the last two discussion points, individuals enter sexually wounded or even damaged. The complexities of these topics cannot just be given a simple passive answer like “You need to pray more or go around quoting scripture.” While this is a vital part of one’s recovery foundation, this cannot serve as the only answer. The brain will sometimes hide particularly stressful, traumatic, or fear-related memories that are either short-term or long-term, protecting the survivor by suppressing memories but leading to other health issues.¹³⁴

Full transparency of one’s past early on is essential to early recovery and healing. The negative emotional impact in the marriage, especially in intimacy, can destroy how one sees

¹³⁴ Marla Paul. “How Traumatic Memories Hide in The Brain, and How to Retrieve Them,” *Northwestern Medicine Feinberg School of Medicine*, August 17, 2015, <https://news.feinberg.northwestern.edu/2015/08/how-traumatic-memories-hide-in-the-brain/>.

intimacy. This mental impact is further heightened by the survivor if they perceive they are the only wounded or damaged party. The flashbacks of those events can lead to reservations to even engage in intimacy. This unfairness is often because the spouse is ashamed of what they will have to divulge to their spouse, creating worries over how it may affect their overall marriage too. This prideful moment can have steep implications and come at a considerable expense, all for the willingness to hide the past.

Too often, many individuals have their emotions become the mechanisms for dealing with reality. The battle of fear of missing out causes one to alter their authentic selves. This emotional battle causes the fear of rejection to heighten. In his book *The Seven Levels of Intimacy*, Mathew Kelly said, “We are so afraid of being rejected that we would rather be loved for pretending to be someone we aren’t than rejected for who we really are.”¹³⁵

Without transparency, one can never fully trust. When one cannot fully commit, one cannot fully love. There is healing in full exposure, especially when the other spouse feels he or she has been allowed to walk alongside their significance. Otherwise, abandonment issues can possibly manifest themselves into thinking they were only around to be used, not loved.

¹³⁵ Mathew Kelly, *The Seven Levels of Intimacy: The Art of Loving and the Joy of Being Loved* (North Palm Beach, FL: Blue Sparrow; 2nd ed. Edition, June 19, 2015), 288.

Chapter 4

Results

Looking over the results, the approach to the research was to determine where the couples in Ridgeville Church of God were within their marital relationship, especially those who have experienced childhood trauma. The project author hoped the research would also yield information from the surveys and conferences that could be utilized in structuring the married couple's life group class. In addition to the listed desired results, another result was determining whether more couples within the church struggled in their marriage from childhood trauma, especially in intimacy.

The marriage conference was held on Saturday, October 30, 2021, from 9:00 am with registration and ending at 4:00 pm. The content covered included abandonment, childhood trauma (especially childhood abuse), communication, and early exposure to pornography. Throughout the conference, the speaker engaged with the various couples as they gradually connected with the information shared either because they were personally living it or knew someone who was. The covered marital seemed to be impactful to some as their responses could be seen affecting their body language. However, based on the pre- and post-surveys and the overall participation, each couple seemed open to learning how to become better at managing their marital struggle, even in intimacy. The creation of a safe environment coupled with a desire from each couple to learn new tools for their marriage yielded informative results.

When comparing the results to what was initially presented, it seemed to back up the original assumption—That childhood trauma does, in fact, carry into adulthood and has the possibility of creating additional struggles upon marriage and intimacy too. This assumption presented was based upon multiple counseling sessions the project's author has had over the past

14 years as pastoring but even more so the past 6 years as the pastor of Ridgeville Church of God.

First off, the collected data revealed from the pre-conference surveys and even the post-conference surveys reveal many more individuals have been affected by childhood trauma (abandonment and childhood sexual abuse) and early exposure to pornography than expected. If the previous data quoted earlier where 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men are survivors of being sexually abused, no matter the offense, then the revealed data only helped support the findings above. It is hoped this statistic can be turned around, but it seems more awareness needs to be taught even from the local church.

The conference had 13 individuals in attendance. However, 2 couples exceeded the age range (18 years old to 60 years old), but 1 of the 2 couples did fit the number of years married criteria (under 30 years.) Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2 show the percentage of survey participants and how many fell within the parameter of the data collection range. The age range was selected to gather first from previous couples counseling sessions ranges and to see if the older Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) were more open to discussing their childhood than in their childhood when the protection laws were not as prevalent as they are today.

Thirty years of marriage was selected to correspond mostly with the previous question's age range. However, the author of the project also wanted to show the depth of the impact childhood trauma has on marriages, even as far into it as 30 years. The years could have been higher, given what he now knows, it could have said 50 years and yet still show the damage of this magnitude does not go away after you have been married a certain period but is a lifelong wound one only gets better at carrying than time healing it.

Figure 1.1

1. Are you between the ages of 18 years old and 60 years old?

13 responses

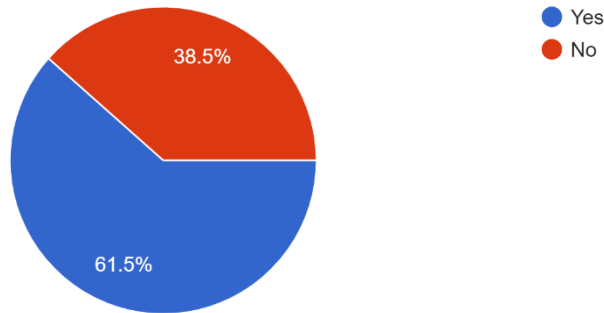
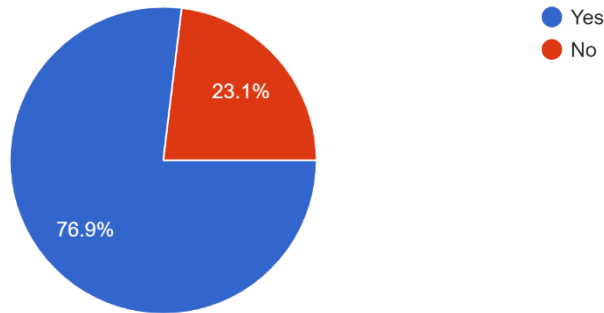


Figure 1.2

2. Have you been married for less than 30 years?

13 responses



Figures 1.3 and 1.4 addressed directly whether their marriage has been affected by childhood trauma, including abandonment, childhood sexual abuse, and early exposure to pornography. Of the 13 in attendance, 7 individuals responded that their marriage had struggled or was currently struggling because of those incidents occurring to them or their spouse. However, it was interesting to see that six attendees responded with a “No,” their marriage has not, nor was it currently struggling. More data would be useful to determine if the three couples consist of individuals in denial, individuals who may not know their spouse has been abused, or if it really is three couples not struggling.

Figure 1.4 raises some interesting curiosity when examining how it was graphed. Of the 13 responses, 2 surveyors said “No,” 5 said “N/A,” and 6 answered “Yes.” With the 6 individuals saying they knew now or did know prior to marriage, was counseling previously explored, or is this conference the first for the couples or individuals seeking help on their issues. Five claimed the question did not even apply to them, but again, with no follow-up question, there was no clear picture about whether they knew their spouse was a survivor or if there was, in fact, trauma in the childhood.

Figure 1.3

3. Is or has your marriage struggling because you or your spouse are survivors of childhood trauma and/or early exposure to pornography? If yes, which one? Circle all that apply.

13 responses

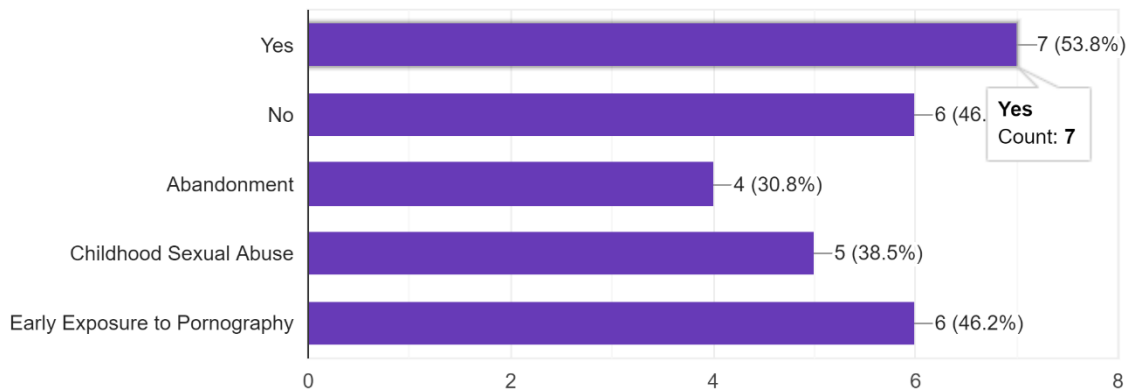


Figure 1.4

4. If you are a survivor of childhood trauma, does or did your spouse know?

13 responses

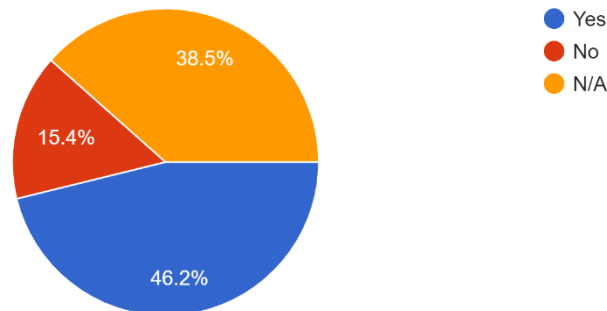


Figure 1.5 addresses whether abandonment still plays a role in their marriage. The largest response was “N/A” with 6, followed by 3 “Yes’s” and coming in with 2 answers each was “No” and “Unsure.” The unsure response often in a counseling session would lead to follow-up questions, while the response of “N/A” indicates many individuals may feel they do not deal with abandonment altogether. Looking at the three who said “Yes,” the area of abandonment can be broad, and the feeling of self-value can lead to negative responses such as lack of trust, loneliness, or even fear.

Figure 1.6 gives us a little insight into the openness of communication within a marriage. The pie chart reveals 38.5% (5 correspondents) answered with “N/A,” leaving seven to say “Yes” and one to say “No.” According to this survey, one spouse said, “they were not understanding.” While the question does not go into detail about what type of trauma, upon further reflection, maybe it should have. Obtaining insight into which trauma the spouse shared may help the reader better understand why the spouse was not understanding. If it was pornography, for instance, and they have previously discussed this issue while receiving denial they have ever watched. Maybe a previous relationship had this issue, or it could boil down to just not being properly educated about the impact’s trauma has on individuals.

Figure 1.5

5. If you were abandoned in childhood, do you feel that still plays a role in your marriage today?
13 responses

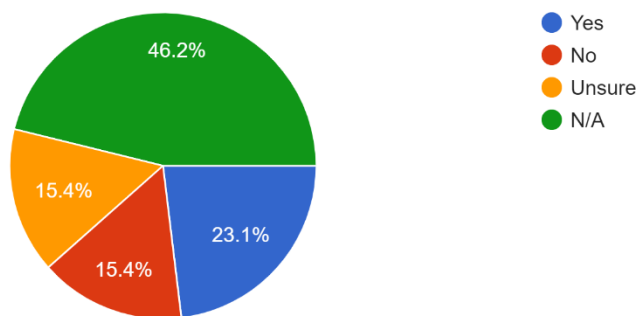
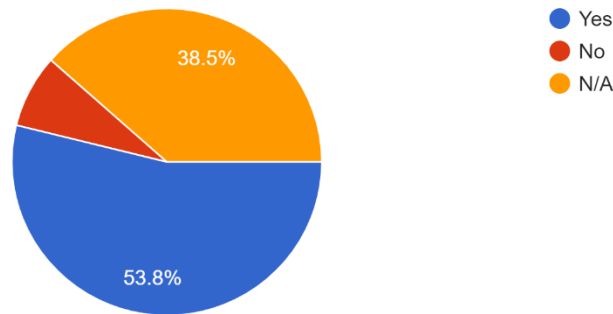


Figure 1.6

6. If you are the spouse of a childhood trauma survivor, were you understanding when they told you?

13 responses



When analyzing Figures 1.7 and 1.8, something intriguing reveals itself. Figure 1.7 asks a straightforward and pointed question in addressing childhood trauma. The question was do you think the events play a role in the marital struggles, and seven responded with a “Yes.” However, when asked a hypothetical question, as was done in Figure 1.8, which asked, “Suppose you struggle in your marriage as a couple, and either one or both spouses are childhood trauma survivors or were exposed to pornography early in life, would you say those events cause issues with intimacy in a marriage?” Asking to assume gave the author an awareness of where the group was possibly in processing all the information since only one additional person voted “Yes” than in Figure 1.7.

Figure 1.7

7. If you struggle as a couple and either one or both spouses are childhood trauma survivors, would you say those events play a role in the marriage's struggle?

13 responses

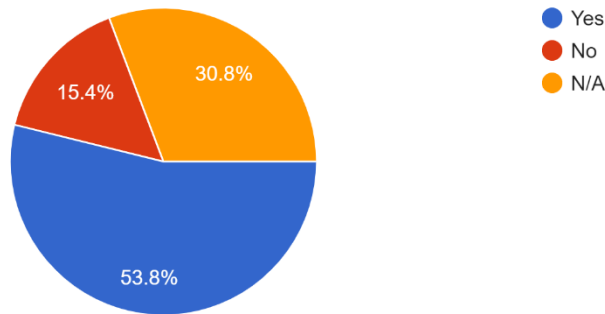
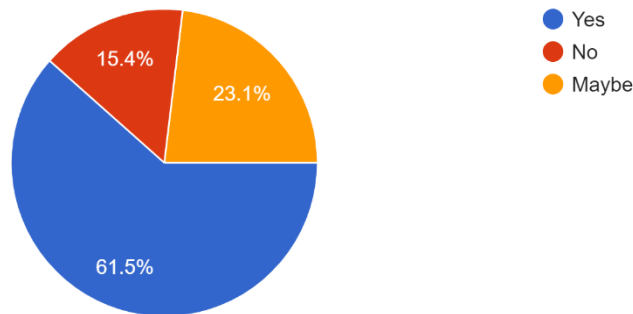


Figure 1.8

8. Suppose you struggle in your marriage as a couple, and either one or both spouses are childhood trauma survivors or were exposed to por... events cause issues with intimacy in a marriage?

13 responses



The marriage conference speaker had a special interest in Figures 1.9, 1.10, 1.11, and 1.12. After examining research data for the project, it seemed to highly favor the response for Figures 1.9 and 1.10 to be a high “Yes.” However, Figure 1.9 did not even record a 50% (46.2% or 6 replies) response, while Figure 1.10 only received a 54.8% (7 responses). Figure 1.9 revealed that five surveyors answering selected the question did not apply to them. Figure 1.10 shows only three corresponding answers reflecting the question as “Not Applicable,” a decrease from Figure 1.9’s responses.

The project author wanted to see if a pattern was forming from the early pornography exposure to currently watching today, and surprisingly, the results from Figure 1.11 revealed only two individuals still watched pornography within their marriage. Figure 1.11 further revealed that 46.2% (6 individuals) were exposed to SEM material at an early age, while 38.2% (5 individuals) responded the question did not apply to them. This finding within the couples at the local church showed where some of the possible marital conflicts were coming from, especially in intimacy. Applying what other research has found concerning the effects of pornography on the men and their perception of women, it is easy to see why intimacy is a conflict area.

Figure 1.9

9. If you were exposed to pornography at an early age, do you think it created false perceptions about what marriage or intimacy would be like?

13 responses

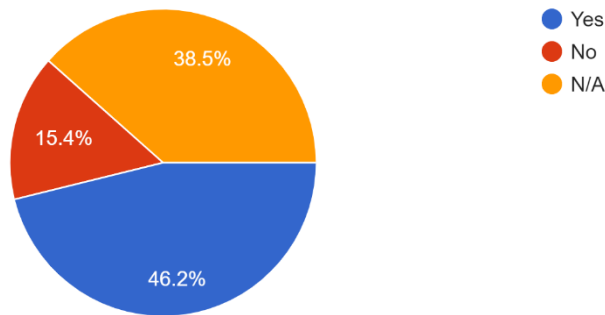


Figure 1.10

10. If you or your spouse were exposed to pornography at an early age, are the false expectations created by these images one area of your marital that struggles?

13 responses

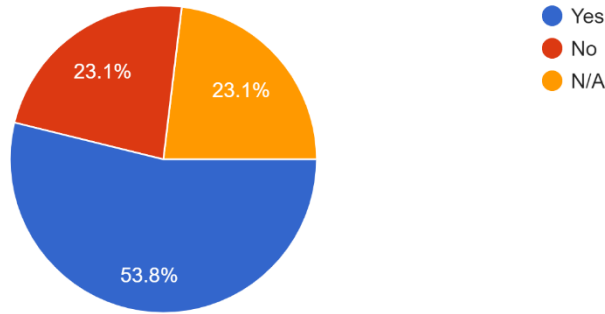


Figure 11.

11. If you were exposed to pornography at an early age, do you still watch it now within your marriage?

13 responses

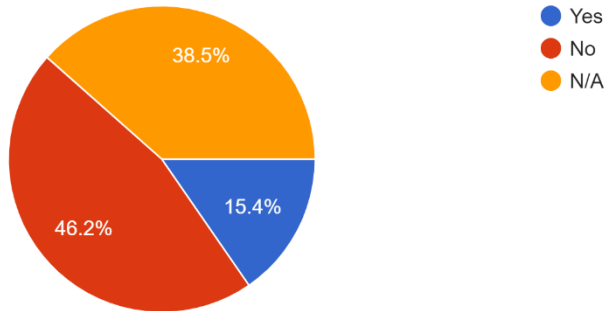
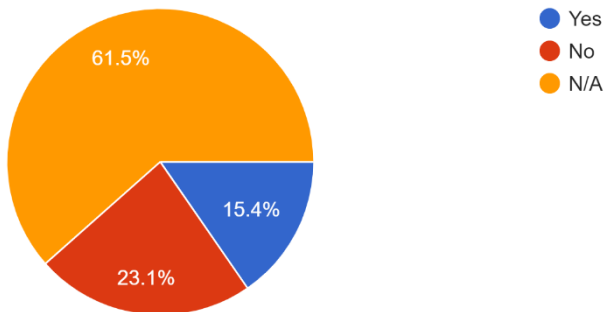


Figure 12.

12. If so, does your spouse know?

13 responses



Throughout the years of science class and even into the real world, support systems have been taught as necessities for a firm foundation. Whether it is support beams for bridges or high rises, footers for a house, or accountability partners to help overcome addictions, support systems can and often do make a difference in the outcome. In Figure 1.13, the question was asked of the conference attendees if they had a current support system to help process issues with and 46.2% (6) responded with a “No” while 15.4% (2) responded with a “N/A.” It was encouraging to see that 38.5% (5) individuals identified themselves as having a support system in place.

Proper physical support systems relied on the same fundamental base a mechanical engineered support system uses, which is trust. The strength, stability, integrity, and longevity rest on trusting the support system will not fail. This is the same hope the author has, that with the proper support system in place, marriages can maintain their strength, increase their stability, never losing their integrity, and preserving the longevity of their marriage.

Figure 1.14 asks a simple question: Have you sought marital counseling for your issues? A little over half, 53.8% (7) said “No.” However, 38.5% (5) said “Yes” they have sought counsel. The remaining vote (7.7%) said they have not sought marital counseling. The results are slightly different from what I thought they would be, although the percentage is not so overwhelming for the nos. It is the project author’s opinion that these results further validate why the marriage class at Ridgeville Church of God is needed. Individuals may not be at a place to tell their story, embrace their past, or even connect childhood trauma to their marital struggles, even through an anonymous survey. Therefore, based on the overall data collected, it would be wise to cover broad topics within the class while slowly narrowing the scope as the classes go on.

If this data was an indicator for the church, the overwhelming result would be the couples, or individuals present for the conference are still struggling in their marriage from their past life. While some may overlook the results, a healthy church that is looking into launching a special class in church would see the revealed information as accurate, needed, and something it seems couples struggling in their marriage should attend.

Figure 1.13

13. Do you and your spouse have a support system currently in place to help you both process the past issues that are presently being dealt with?

13 responses

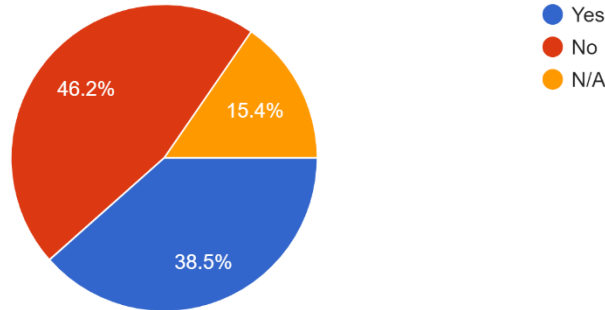
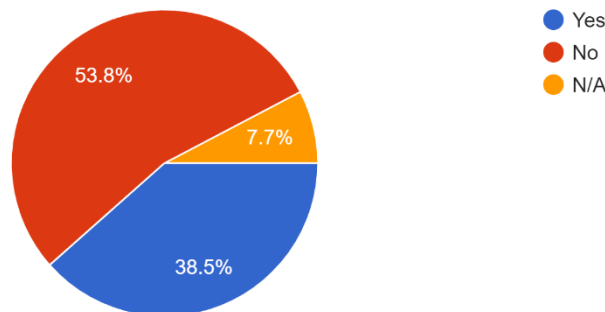


Figure 1.14

14. Have you sought counseling for your marital struggles?

13 responses



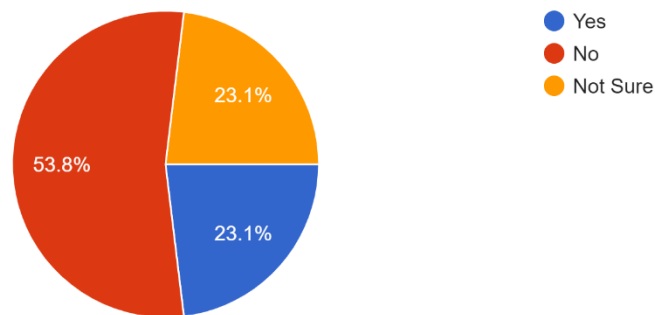
One thing the survey revealed that was ultimately not surprising was the number of couples that said they would not be interested in a face-to-face interview. 53.8% (7) answered “No,” with the remaining answers split a 23.1% (3) each for “Yes” and “N/A.” The three “yeses”

would meet the minimum number of desired couples. It would have been interesting to know if the “No” responders were previous clients of the author, therefore, gave their responses thinking they have already shared, leaving room for others.

Figure 1.15

15. The conference speaker is doing a deeper study into the matters being discussed and is looking for three to five couples willing to particip...ditional study? It should last about an hour or less.

13 responses



As the conference speaker began looking through the post-conference survey, it showed seven individuals struggling with their marriage, which was the same as the pre-conference. It seems the two weeks between the pre-conference and post-conference survey did not result in any new individuals thinking childhood trauma may have a direct or indirect connection to their marital struggles. However, it is worth noting that 76.9% (10 of 13) expressed they could connect with the material and the same percentage felt the material presented helped answer questions they personally had about their marital struggles.

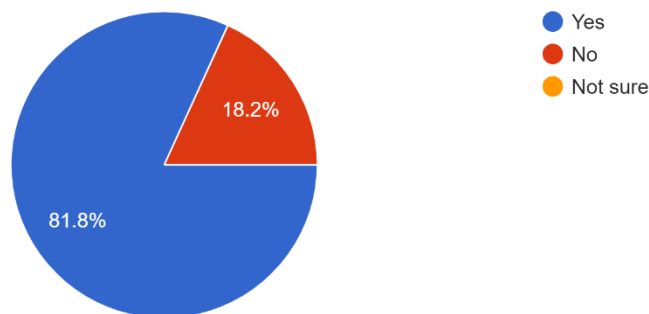
Seven attendees revealed that the information covered would help them overcome their issues of childhood traumas and/or pornographic material. Three stated it was “Not Applicable” to them, while two said “Not sure,” and another one selected no. If open dialogue could be conducted with the attendees after this survey, it would be useful to know why two individuals were still unsure about the material helping, even with the one who said “No,” obviously, not to

change their vote but for informational purposes to help identify if the presentation needs adjusting in any area.

One area that had the conference speaker reviewing the material presented was from the responses to post-conference question 8 (“Did the conference help you feel more comfortable sharing your childhood trauma and early exposure to pornography?”). Five conference attendees said “yes,” three said “no,” but the surprising number was five were not sure. A follow-up response would also be beneficial here to determine exactly where the uncertainty lies and if there were unmet expectations or questions left unanswered.

Figure 1.16

4. During the conference did you find yourself relating to the material presented?
11 responses

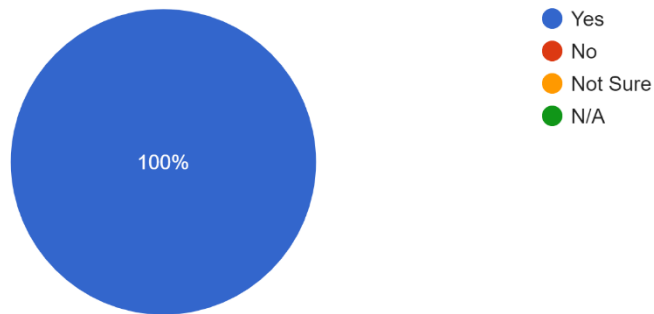


By way of the survey, all conference attendees demonstrated that they would recommend the conference to someone else (Figure 1.17). This result is what the pastor of Ridgeville Church of God was hoping for as he looks to create a class where the married couples that attend the church can find answers to their struggling marriages. From the participation of the couples during the conference, it seems the smaller size conference helped in giving them the opportunity to engage and more confidence in voicing their opinions or their past instead of being quickly overlooked or overshadowed.

Figure 1.17

9. Did the conference highlight enough about your struggles in marriage especially intimacy, that you would recommend the conference to someone else?

13 responses



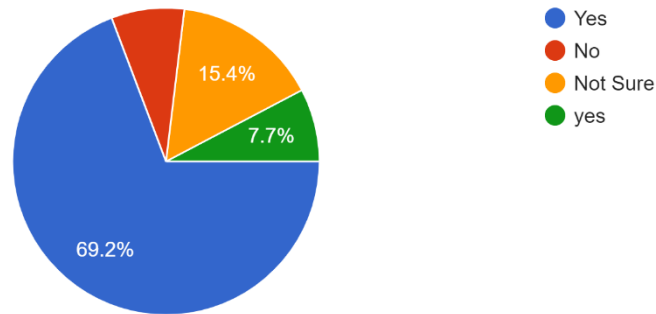
Nine said they would attend a class highlighting their willingness to attend a course specializing in marital struggles if offered in their local church. In reviewing question 12, seen in Figure 1.18, the “yes” option is not in the question twice, but it is in the graph, which is puzzling, giving the “yes” votes a total of 10 (76.9%). Leaving “Not sure” with 2 (15.4%) and “No” with 1 (7.7%). What is not all that puzzling is the 1 “No” vote. So often in counseling sessions, the author hears the spouse say their significant other does not feel like they are the problem and thus refuses to do anything to better the marriage.

However, given the nature of the information covered, it may very well be not that they are not wanting to attend because they feel they are not the problem, but more so, they do not want to confront a past they have buried. No matter what the reason, the overall survey results are refreshing for the pastor to help make a healthy and educated decision moving forward.

Figure 1.18

12. Would you attend a class offered in your local church geared toward helping marriages overcome their struggles?

13 responses



An online survey was sent out to poll two other church groups the pastor of Ridgeville Church of God is a part of that include ministers within the Church of God denomination. The idea was to gain insight to see if those who suffer from childhood trauma and struggle in their marriage was more isolated to the local church or if it seems to be something a multitude of people are facing. The last five questions on the online survey were geared toward ministers. The author of the project wanted to determine if ministers felt they were properly trained to counsel others, prepared to handle those with marital struggles if they had a referral system in place in case those counselors needed help beyond their scope of training, if they felt a marriage class addressing the issues of this paper was needed in their local church, and finally if the minister felt they had a good support system if their marriage was struggling.

The questions for the online survey resembled most of the pre- and post-conference surveys. The online survey ran for 48 hours, starting on Friday, November 26, 2021, until Sunday, November 28, 2021. The survey received 33 responses total and revealed some interesting results. Some answers revealed lined up much like the pre- and post-conference survey did. Yet, some results were completely different.

In the questions of being between the ages of 18-60 years old (Figure 19), a large portion, 90.9% (30 of 33) of responders, fell within that category, but those numbers decreased some (Figure 20) to 76.8% (25 of 33) when asking the responders if they have been married for less than 30 years. Again, the other reasoning behind the age range and marital length was more from what the project author has had attending requested marital counseling sessions pre-conference.

Figure 1.19

1. Are you between 18-60 years old?

33 responses

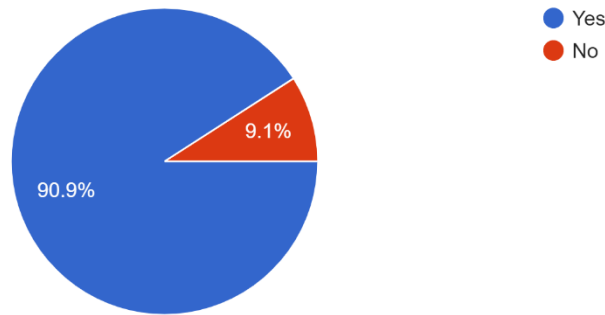


Figure 1.20

2. Have you been married for less than 30 years?

33 responses

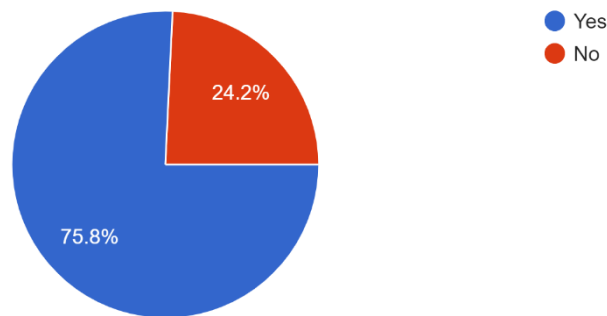


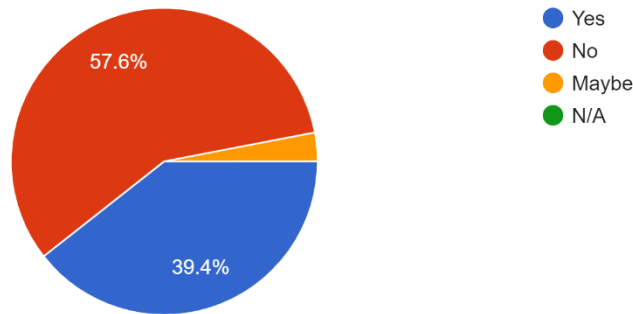
Figure 1.21 revealed very intriguing responses to the question asking ministers if they struggle in their marriage. 57.6% said “no” (19 of 33) they nor their spouse struggle in their marriage while 39.4% said “yes” (13 of 33), leaving one remaining vote of “maybe.” As a minister, it is easy to understand the stress load running and maintaining the facilities in addition

to pastoring the church can be challenging. Of those who identified “Yes” or “Maybe,” it would be worth looking into further about whether the individual struggles with abandonment and when individuals in their congregation leave with an explanation or not if it triggers a relapse.

Figure 1.21

3. Do you or your spouse struggle in your marriage?

33 responses



Responses to questions 5 (Figure 1.22) and 6 (Figure 1.23) seem to raise a few questions. In question 5, 63.6% (21 of 33) of responders stated they nor their spouse struggle with abandonment issues in their marriage, which is awesome knowing how it can affect individuals and even devastate some individuals' people skills. However, Figure 1.23 shows 69.7% (23 of 33) in question 6 stated they did not know they or their spouse had abandonment issues prior to their marriage. One difference may be because 18.2% (6 of 33) in question 6 voted “Not Applicable,” whereas in question 5, “N/A” was not selected.

Figure 1.22

5. Do you or your spouse struggle with abandonment in your marriage? Abandonment is defined as a fear of losing someone close due to death, di...eone close to you suddenly distancing themselves.

33 responses

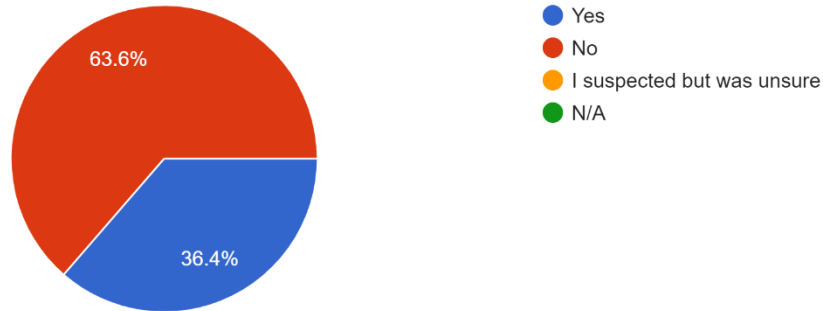
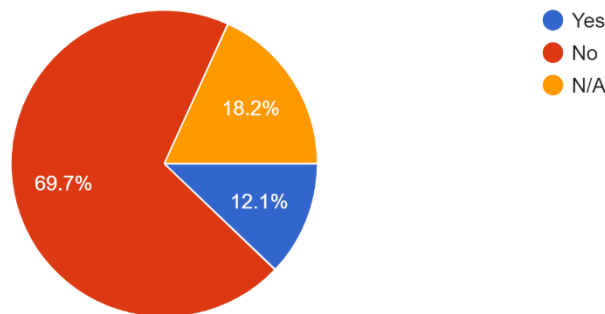


Figure 1.23

6. Did you know you or your spouse have abandonment issues prior to your marriage?

33 responses



Conclusion: The number of couples attending the conference provided a glimpse into the heart of the people Pastor Charles pastors at Ridgeville Church of God. The conference attendees varied in ages, with the youngest being 19 years old and the oldest being 74. The years of marriage the couples represented provided a wide range as well, with the youngest being 2 years and the oldest being 54 years.

The presenter would have liked to have had a few more couples attend, especially those who said they would come but were encouraged to see one spouse come without their spouse. Although they both said we need it upon initially hearing about the conference, the spouse in

attendance stated their spouse has always been quiet when talking about these things, so I wanted to come to learn how to help our marriage as it appears they suffer from some of the topics discussed. With that said, the yield results were mixed from what was initially expected.

The project author expected the results to agree with the hypothesis that childhood trauma and early exposure to pornography impact married. While the results seem to back the assessment up, it is not with overwhelming validation. This leaves the researcher with further questions. Did the fact that one attends church alter how one looks and answered the questions, especially about pornography because it was being seen by the pastor?

The conference could have yielded more attendees but was impacted during the time of the pre-conference and the actual conference by the increase in COVID-19 cases in the local school system, community, and one or two cases in the local church. Even with the already established protocols the church has activated; it often seems its numbers dip when a positive case is identified in the body of the church. Additional improvements could have been to have various speakers to further display a variety of expertise in the areas of discussion instead of one.

Further review needs to be made about whether a pre-conference was necessary and instead utilize the beginning of the conference as an opportunity to conduct the baseline survey. The possibility exists that upon hearing all that would be covered, some elected not to engage in the marital conference, or even worse, refused to come all together. The post-conference survey could have been accessible to filling out online only at the conclusion of the conference to answer any questions relating to question clarification.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

From the beginning of life, if one believes in the creation theory, then they also know the Bible reveals that man and woman were placed together for purpose during the days of creation. Throughout scripture and life, marriage has served a vital purpose in bringing completion, happiness, joy, and stability for some. However, for some, marriage has brought trials, tribulations, disappointments, regrets, and even hatred for some. Marriage has evolved, and so has the selection process. The idea of marriage had the wife's parents selecting who their daughter would marry by means of what the family would give for her. It saw the man fulfilling certain roles while the wife fulfilled her role. In the early days, history depicts the man's role as the breadwinner, the one who provides protection takes care of the upkeep and maintenance of the home. It depicts the role of the wife as one who oversees keeping the inside of the house clean, cooks the meals, has children, and then raises them up until a certain age. Then, the cycle would start again with the children repeating Mama and Daddy's roles.

As time moved on, the idea of marriage changed a little with the selection process of who one marries, but the expectation of both spouses still largely remained the same. Today, the concept of marriage has almost been completely overhauled. Women are no longer expected to get married at such a young age, nor are many expecting their husband to be the breadwinner or fulfill any of the roles often seen in the past. The role of husbands has seen its changes too. Some husbands now are being the cook, staying home tending to the kids while completing the day in day out tasks that are necessary for managing the house. However, what has not changed is the effects trauma has on our lives, especially childhood trauma. No one is exempt from trauma, and while women by and large have been on the negative, men have experienced it too.

Struggles with the marriage are not anything new from Eve offering the forbidden fruit to Adam,¹³⁶ to the role shift of marriage during the war that now saw both working, to the women's rights movement, all the way up to today, where the debate continues as to how it is defined altogether. What has not changed is how damaging abandonment, childhood sexual abuse, and even early exposure to pornography can be on the survivor's mind, body, and soul. The damage is almost always carried into the marriage and has significant implications on the intimacy in the marriage.

As a pastor seeing couples and individuals' openness reveals how one moment can forever change someone's life. However, the damage is not limited to how frequently the incidents occur because trauma is more than enough. However, it seems the greater the frequency, the greater the damage one must work through. Whether the area affected is in how one feels, loves, trusts, or in the type of relationship they enter, one thing is certain, there is brokenness. The brokenness varies in how it cripples some individuals and couples based on the coping skills and their social upbringing.

Addressing where the research regarding these covered issues should go from here seemed like a perplexing question initially after spending so much time researching the current project. When someone has personally lived through each of the topics covered in this paper, personal emotions can so quickly get in the way of expanding the area of research. It would seem obvious that digging deeper into the effects of these topics not only in a marriage but also in relationships, in general, would be an area of exploration. How does this type of traumatic events altar one's drive, passion, desires, and even self-evaluation? What coping mechanisms seem to help individuals that decide against seeking professional counsel but still want to release the

¹³⁶ Ibid.

stronghold the heinous acts can have on individuals? What boundaries, if any, does one put in place as preventive measures?

However, with more reflection and thought put into the original question, a few things occurred. First, allow the research to go more into the direction of relationships in general. Since the original issue was addressing the need for a marriage class that dealt with multiple childhood traumatic issues, especially intimacy, why not look at relationships altogether. Even before marriage occurs, how do the traumatic issues affect the overall desire for dating and even intimacy when that time comes? While many childhood traumas and early exposure to pornography, at least in the scope of this paper, were looked at from early childhood/pre-teen, how is having these traumatic events happen beyond the age scope (i.e., teen, young adult, and even well into adulthood) of this paper different if any? Do the effects of abandonment play a major role in one's approach to relationships and marriage when that time comes?

What is the threshold concerning dating timelines before one reveals their traumatic past? For many, their "fight or flight" may still be activated, resulting in a hindrance to trust, even if it is subconsciously, or to let one's guard down completely.¹³⁷ While those issues are being investigated and even researched, another related question to early intervention may also be worth exploring. Prior to marriage, should a dating couple attend a series of counseling classes to address the potential future conflicts the childhood trauma may cause if they are planning on getting married? As a pastor, this last question from Ridgeville Church of God's standpoint the answer would be "yes." Marriage, in general, is hard work. Adding in the challenges of one's

¹³⁷ "21 Common Reactions to Trauma," *Psychology Today*, accessed January 17, 2022, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/think-act-be/201609/21-common-reactions-trauma>.

embarrassing past often will only make it more difficult, especially if both spouses have a traumatic past.

From a personal standpoint, as one who has dealt with the rising and falling of the efforts on the marriage and even relationships in general, the answer would be yes to all the questions. However, I would caution those seeking counseling to ensure it is from qualified people who have experience dealing with those issues. Most pastors and ministers, for that point, speaking only of the Church of God denomination in South Carolina, are not qualified to handle childhood trauma situations. The ministerial process in South Carolina and the Church of God has no lessons addressing any counseling subjects or counseling individuals. If a pastor or minister is going to become aware of the impact's childhood trauma may cause, it will be because of their own desires.

It would seem from personal observation that the unfortunate events from childhood can and do often play an underlining role in choosing who to date and even who to marry. Addressing the timeline of revealing the revelation of one's traumatic past, there cannot be one definitive timeline for every situation as the depth of the pain, the support system for healing, and the survivor's willingness not to just trust again but reveal the past will vary greatly. In addition to those key markers, the survivor also must process the fear of losing their significant other after the information is shared, knowing the other party in the relationship has the final say to walk away or stay.

Second, the project's author would like to determine if there are commonalities between all three topics this paper addressed and trigger points. Throughout the research to address the original topics, nothing seemed available to help address that issue. When looking into mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, especially with military veterans, normal

noises or imagery can produce triggers. In mental health terms, a trigger refers to something that affects one's emotional state, often significantly, by causing one to become extremely overwhelmed or distressed.¹³⁸

The unintentional actions by one can send another into traumatic flashbacks or nightmares as they replay the connected event. These responses from the trigger can vary in length of the effects, response, and consistency. A further look into what causes triggers for those from abandonment, childhood sexual trauma, and even early exposure to pornography may yield promising results for overcoming the effects of the trauma themselves or helping raise awareness for the survivors and their spouses. These areas would not just benefit from the research of what causes the triggers, but avoidance techniques once they are known, not to mention how to come out of the emotional flashback or memory after it has occurred.

Another interesting direction this research can explore is how traumatic issues in childhood affect one's ability to lead or serve. Or does it? Does the same careful approach one has toward relationships get consequently applied to their ability to lead effectively or serve not out of obligation but a willingness? If the survivor suffers from trust issues, abandonment issues, or communication issues, can they effectively lead or serve? When it comes to trust issues, does a leader who is a trauma survivor lead more with compassion or lack of compassion? It would seem the answer would depend on the type and depth of the trauma. Individuals who are exposed to prolonged childhood trauma experiences can lose their ability to control positive thinking about their current situation and future undertakings.¹³⁹ Childhood trauma survivors can

¹³⁸ Crystal Raypole, "What It Really Means to Be Triggered," *Healthline*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.healthline.com/health/triggered>.

¹³⁹ Dina Weindl, Matthias Knefel, Tobias M. Glück, Ulrich S. Tran, Brigitte Lueger-Schuster, "Motivational capacities after prolonged interpersonal childhood trauma in institutional settings in a sample of Austrian adult survivors," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 76, (2018): 194-203, ISSN 0145-2134, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.11.001>.

experience difficulties successfully reaching personal or professional goals because of the loss of self-worth or desirability from the incident.

When someone is traumatized, they instinctively, though often unconsciously, decide how they need to be to protect themselves from future pain. This reaction may lead to not getting close to others, lack of trust in those around them, becoming clingy to those around them, so they don't leave, to try to be perfect or impressive, even put-up walls of anger or fear.¹⁴⁰ When the fear of abandonment occurs, the survivor may find themselves becoming isolated to try to prevent the pain from being felt, or the opposite can occur in which they find themselves clingy or almost begging for an individual not to leave. Someone who suffers from ____.

This in no way means one cannot overcome their trauma and allow it to be used as motivation to be the best they can to prove their abuser wrong or even themselves. Their desire to prove the perpetrator wrong increases their self-worth while trying to be a great role model for others who may have experienced something similar. This may be used as their driving force to become a great leader in their eyes while gaining the validation of others.

Other factors can help altar the answer can one's trauma affect how they lead, such as the strength of their support system, did they seek counseling for healing, was the trauma reported, how many people know about the trauma, and even if they are aware of their triggers concerning the trauma. However, before research on this subject can really begin, the researcher would need to define the term good, effective leader. This definition can vary greatly depending on who is answering the question and even the location in which it is asked. Kindergarteners would give a different answer than those in high school, college, military, prison, or even in a business setting.

¹³⁹ Robert Taibbl, "4 Key Ways Your Childhood Shapes You," *Psychology Today*, March 8, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/fixing-families/201903/4-key-ways-your-childhood-shapes-you>.

¹⁴⁰ National Child Trauma Stress Network.

The research for the original questions revealed that many children who have complex childhood trauma struggle with dissociation. Dissociation is often seen in children with histories of complex trauma. When children encounter an overwhelming and terrifying experience, they may dissociate or mentally separate themselves from the experience.¹⁴¹ Even though small children will most likely be unable to deliberately separate emotional guilt experiences and work on recovering from the traumatic events, once they figure out how to separate emotional pain issues and how dissociating can be used as a guard system from their feelings or memories, they may naturally separate during other distressing circumstances or when confronted with injury updates.

Separation of feelings or memories can influence a child's capacity to be completely present in day-to-day existence and can altogether disturb a child's sense of time. Thus, it can effectively affect learning, people skills, and social communications. It is not generally obvious to others that a child is "zoning out" or not paying attention at all. The coping mechanism is starring off into space as an escape from the confrontation process. This type of self-abandonment may find benefits of zoning out, but the problems remain once they zone back in. This type of issue can lead to heavy trust issues, which would need to be researched further.

In comparing the statistical data from multiple research sources, including this one titled *Childhood Abuse and Later Marital Outcome: Do Partner Characteristics Moderate the Association*,¹⁴² they support the fact that early childhood trauma does affect the marriage relationship in how one communicates, how the couple makes decisions, and whether childhood

¹⁴¹ Teresa Nguyen, B R Karney, T N Bradbury, "Childhood abuse and later marital outcomes: Do partner characteristics moderate the association?" *Journal of Family Psychology* 31, no. 1 (2017): 82-92. doi:10.1037/fam0000208.

¹⁴² EQUIP, accessed January 20, 2022, <https://www.iequip.org/about-us/our-leadership/>.

trauma survivors can find a healthy relationship. However, no research found during this paper's research seemed to directly address this project's question: Does childhood trauma affect marriages, especially intimacy? Having a case study that follows couples for the first five years to address this question would provide an excellent foundation to take this research further.

Second, if the issues dealt with in this paper affect marriages because of trust issues, fear of failure, fear of loneliness, or even misconstrued ideas of relationships from pornography, do they affect one's ability to lead as well? Leaders in all sectors of the business world, in the military, and in the church are expected to possess the ability to process a situation and act, along with being able to connect with those around them. Named the world's most influential leader,¹⁴³ in his book "*The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*,"¹⁴⁴ John Maxwell names connection as one of the laws of leadership. For individuals who have been abandoned or abused, this may prove to be a little more difficult because certain walls will need to be removed.

Does a survivor's leadership ability become sabotaged from the lasting effects of their past? If the damaging effects go untreated, then one has a greater chance of putting themselves in precarious situations.¹⁴⁵ This is not to say that survivors are unable to be effective leaders but that more challenges may present themselves if they have not sought help in dealing with the trauma associated with the events surrounding their early childhood. Early exposure to pornography can present equal challenges in one's ability to be a leader, but the early exposure distorts views that lead to significant ramifications. Pornography portrays women in many ways

¹⁴³ "Book Summary – The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership by John Maxwell," *NC State Educational Leadership Academy*, accessed on January 20, 2022, <https://nela.ced.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Book-Summary-%E2%80%93-The-21-Irrefutable.pdf>.

¹⁴⁴ Edie Weinstein, "Growing Up Too Fast: Early Exposure to Sex," *PsychCentral*, July 4, 2017, <https://psychcentral.com/blog/growing-up-too-fast-early-exposure-to-sex#3>.

¹⁴⁵ David J. Ley, "Misogyny in Porn: It's Not What You Think," *Psychology Today*, September 4, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/women-who-stray/201909/misogyny-in-porn-it-s-not-what-you-think>.

as property, a sexual object more than a real person, and can even lead to misogyny.¹⁴⁶

Misogyny is defined as a hatred or mistrust of women.¹⁴⁷

If an individual has been exposed early in childhood to pornography, depending on if the viewing continued fostering an addiction, the individual's potential negative view of women can create harsh attitudes toward them, resulting in demeaning them in public and private settings more than their male counterparts. However, the opposite could also happen when they become individuals whose desires get the best of them, and they must have women all around them. No matter the direction one turns from the effects of this inappropriate watching, each person needs to seek help to overcome the impact it has on both men and women.

If Ridgeville Church of God is going to hold marital classes addressing these issues, based on the evidence and research in this paper, it may also benefit them to investigate the need to hold a class for unmarried people to help them heal before committing to marriage. It may be beneficial to address the areas of concern more openly than target specific situations, so the tools shared can be applied to more struggled areas in one's marriage. The advantage the church has is that many come to church looking for answers, whether it be spiritual, marital, or even financial. In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 68% said they choose going to church to make them a better person, and 68% say it was to find comfort from trouble or sorrow.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ *Misogyny* | definition of misogyny by medical dictionary, accessed January 20, 2022, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com>.

¹⁴⁶ "Why Americans Go (and Don't Go) to Religious Services," *Pew Research Center*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/08/01/why-americans-go-to-religious-services/>

¹⁴⁷ "Contextual Therapy," *Contextual Family Services*, accessed December 3, 2021, <https://www.contextualfamilyservices.org/contextualtherapy.php>.

¹⁴⁷ "[Solution-focused Brief Therapy](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapy-types/solution-focused-brief-therapy)," *Psychology Today*, accessed December 3, 2021, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapy-types/solution-focused-brief-therapy>.

¹⁴⁸ *Contextual Family Services*.

¹⁴⁸ *Psychology Today*.

Reflecting on the research, it may be insightful to examine the different counseling approaches for these traumas. The marriage conference approach (more of a large-scale group couple counseling) seems to be the most beneficial for the church based on the unanimous surveys, not to mention the class being offered at Ridgeville Church of God will be a group of couples. However, it would be interesting to determine what the results would yield if one of the following counseling styles were used.

Contextual couples therapy—focuses on the emotional healing that can occur within families. Everyone is considered, yet all family members should benefit from contextual therapy. When a family works on increasing fairness in their relationships, problems or symptoms will decrease.¹⁴⁹

Solution-focused brief therapy—a short-term goal-focused evidence-based therapeutic approach that incorporates positive psychology principles and practices, and helps clients change by constructing solutions rather than focusing on problems¹⁵⁰ and even trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, which focuses on restoring and enhancing relationships, based on its paradigm of relational ethics, presuming a human tendency for reciprocal.¹⁵¹

For Ridgeville Church of God, no matter how far they take the research, the goals of the class or the success need to be clearly defined. This class is not trying to serve as a group therapy session since the one's teaching the class with not be well-versed in therapeutic applications. However, the purpose of the class is to serve as a connecting point for other married couples whose marriages are struggling to see that they are not alone and for the marital enrichment

¹⁴⁹ *Contextual Family Services*.

¹⁵⁰ *Psychology Today*.

¹⁵¹ Jaap Van der Meiden, M Noordegraaf, and Hans Ewijk, "How Is Contextual Therapy Applied Today? An Analysis of the Practice of Current Contextual Therapists," *Contemporary Family Therapy* no. 41 (2019): 1-12.

information shared during the meeting times to serve as foundational tools to help each couple navigate through the challenges their marriage presents. The vision for this recurring life group class was to bring awareness to the struggles and how to enhance communication skills between the spouses.

While assessing the data collected from this project and comparing the data collected from other research, they reached the same conclusions on many of the literature reviews connecting points. Those points were simply childhood trauma affects each other differently, but there are still similarities each survivor carries. The deep-rooted impacts that remain buried for years can come flooding back after an event triggering those memories. However, for others, there is a constant reminder that increases the challenge of just trying to deal with the inner emotional struggles.

Behind the noted references in the project of the emotional progression children are trying to make seems to indicate the newer feelings coming from the triggered memories are overwhelming and crippling when a flashback has occurred. The suppressed emotions or even the buried, forgotten event brings back emotions previously thought to have been dealt with. Children can often identify with feelings of sadness, anger, interrupted sleep, and even the feeling of being powerless. Emotions that children are unable to deal with are those such as “clinginess,” “having to compute” what just happened, and fighting the urge to place the blame on themselves.

As the researcher, implementing the changes will prove to be simple and hard. The most difficult part will be getting the married couples or even a single spouse to commit to the class. Knowing the commitment levels of the regular congregation for the worship services proves work is still needed in that area, not to mention a class addresses issues some may wish to avoid.

If the reports from the marriage conference's post-conference surveys are an indicator of the success the marriage class will have, the class attenders will be grateful they attended. The most difficult part, just like with church, will be getting the couples to attend, especially if they have small children at home. We may need to have this small group on an alternate night than church, although childcare cannot be guaranteed.

The researcher learned from the feedback on the post-conference surveys what the attenders would have liked to have, such as handouts to follow the slides with fill in the blanks to keep them engaged, a prepared recommended book list for which notes were gained, not to mention giving more time for follow-up questions. Another suggestion was a questionnaire box for anonymous questions to be asked at the end of the conference or even in the new marital class. One of the most significant takeaways from the conference was the attendees learning the areas covered came directly from the pastor and first lady's marriage. The transparency of their 17 years of marriage and the struggles those years represent show a couple's willingness to work through the high moments and even the low moments.

Hearing firsthand the impact the pastor associates his abandonment from his early childhood adoption and early exposure of SEM has played at times a devastating role in the struggling of their marriage. One of the greatest lessons on implementing this newfound information was the applications into the researcher's own marriage. As stated earlier in this project, the premise behind the motivation was seeking more knowledge on how to handle their own struggles with abandonment, childhood sexual abuse, and early exposure to pornography. In addition, hearing the hesitation to share the early childhood trauma the pastor's wife went through with even her own husband became an encouraging moment for many who have not shared everything with their spouse.

One of the most obvious questions the author of the project had to address was, can this class be applied to other settings (church and non-church alike). The simplest answer the author reached was that Ridgeville Church of God is not the only church that deals with marriages that struggle and especially those who battle issues such as abandonment, childhood sexual abuse, and early exposure to pornography. Even outside the church setting struggle so offering the community to take part in future classes is a great outreach for the church but provides an element of hope and restoration to the marriages outside the church.

Even in the early stages of the research, there were some areas noted that could use further analysis, such as: What is the percentage of failed marriages resulting from abandonment, childhood sexual abuse, or early exposure to pornography that was either never shared, shared, and ignored, or shared and later used against them? While conducting research for this project, many ideas were analyzed concerning why a marriage fails. The number one many often say is over money, but that seems to be a byproduct of the real issues. The real issue seems to be the inability to communicate properly. Communication can determine the success or failure of marriages because communication is the creation, exchange, and interpretation of meaningful messages.¹⁵²

Another unique question that began to emerge through the research was, what role does multiple marriages play in the healing process, or does it create more issues? While this scenario already has its own issues that need to be addressed, the survivor battling with abandonment may find it difficult to enter a second marriage, or their desire in not wanting to be alone may make new relationships and marriages too easy. Fear may bring forth more hesitation concerning

¹⁵² Oguchi Ajaegbu, Emmanuel Ajike, Fadolapo Lekan, and Chigozirim Ajaegbu, "An Empirical Study on the Causes and Effects of Communication Breakdown in Marriages," *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion*, (2015): 11, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305488851_An_Empirical_Study_on_the_Causes_and_Effects_of_Communication_Breakdown_in_Marriages.

another marriage as the survivor is concerned about their story being told or being labeled something negative in their eyes or the eyes of others.

No matter the traumatic event in an individual's life, research has shown the more couples talk, the greater the chance of having a healthy marriage including the area of intimacy. Marriage is not just about intimacy. It is one important way for couples to connect, but it is about growing together through communication helping each other fulfill their dreams too.

The author found that after implementing finds from the project research, addressing subjects conference attendees which were covered and those they wish to remain undiscussed some couples showed greater strides of improvement then others. Education and the implementation of given tools seemed to be a common denominator for many of the couples. However, some topics remained a hot topic discussion, such as how one overcomes abandonment, how can one have intimacy without thinking about the past, and how do I erase what I have seen so I do not let the imagery be what I am trying to duplicate?

The class at least had individuals more willing to talk even about the small things, so one of the class leaders remarked watching the walls fall within each person's life makes the sacrifices worth it. Each day will always be a challenge, but hopefully, each couple sees their marriage is worth the fight and they are worthy of it. There is a quote by an unknown author that says, "At the end of the day, you can either focus on what's tearing you apart of what's keeping you together."

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Appendix A: Informed Consent

Title of the Project: Childhood Trauma: Nobody Told Me It Would Impact My Marriage Too
Principal Investigator: Charles M. Houston, Doctorate Candidate., Liberty University
[Co-investigator(s): Name(s), credentials, institutional affiliation]

Invitation to be part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be between the ages of 18-60 and married for less than 30 years. If you have experienced childhood trauma or are married to a survivor, your input will provide additional benefits to this study if you are a survivor of abandonment, childhood sexual abuse, or exposure to sexually explicit media at an earlier age (before 12 years old). Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Would you please take time to read this entire form in its entirety and ask questions before deciding whether to participate in this research project?

What is the study about, and why is it being done?

The study aims to provide tools and education on childhood trauma, especially in abandonment, childhood sexual abuse, and early exposure to sexually explicit media (SEM). The motive beyond the project is to better equip the leaders of Ridgeville Church of God, especially the Young Married Life Group class leaders, and for the pastor to increase his knowledge of the ever-increasing situations that are increasingly affecting marriages.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. First, two weeks before the actual conference date, attend the pre-conference that will discuss the program of study. The pre-conference event will allow the presenter to give information about the conference and let attendees ask any questions. The event should last about one hour. A pre-conference survey will be given out at that time also.
2. Secondly, at the conference, the presenter will go over several topics concerning childhood trauma, including the definition of each, how they impact one emotionally, physically, spiritually, and even financially. The presenter will also address how these early events can have lasting impacts even on marriage and how one can overcome them. A post-survey will be passed out for the attendee to fill out at the end of the conference. The free Trauma to Triumph Marriage Enrichment Conference will last about five hours, with lunch provided.
3. Lastly, three to five couples will have the opportunity to do a one-time face-to-face meeting with the presenter to answer five questions. These questions will help the study with a real-time case study of the impact childhood trauma has on marriages. If no couples agree to the face-to-face meeting, randomly selected couples participating in the face-to-face meetings can expect their session to last about 45 minutes to an hour.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study are assurance they are not alone as a survivor to childhood, gain a better understanding of childhood trauma, and the long-term impacts, especially within their marriage, specifically in intimacy.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study include the possibility of increased anxiety, renewed anger, guilt, suppressed emotions unleashed, and several other emotions that come from the events of childhood trauma. In addition, the information shared during the conference, although rare, can have the potential of triggering Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). By signing the content form below, you acknowledge these possibilities and release the presenter and Ridgeville Church of God from all liability.

Furthermore, you understand that by attending the conference, if any information shared to the presenter details a crime against you or another (sexual abuse, child pornography, child neglect, etc.), or an intent to harm yourself or another, that no confidentiality clause will exist. If meeting mandated reporting law requirements, the conference host would forward the information shared to the proper authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the documents.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using codes. Conducted interviews will take the privacy of everyone seriously as the location is determined.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and has the potential for future assessments. Once three years have passed, the conference host deletes all data.
- Interviews/focus groups are 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.
- Confidentiality with any information shared during the conference setting, while encouraged, cannot be guaranteed.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will receive no compensation for efforts or time for this study.

What are the costs to you to be part of the study?

There is no cost to participate in this study except to attend the pre-conference event, conference and fill out the three surveys.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Ridgeville Church of God. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time before submitting the survey without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide 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. In the event you decide to withdraw, the collected data held for 30 days then destroyed.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Charles Houston. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Jonathan Sullivan, at [REDACTED]

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

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

Your Consent

By signing this document, you agree to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy of the study records. If you have any questions about the study after signing this document, you can contact the study team using the above information.

I have read and understood the above information. Furthermore, I have asked questions and have received answers. Therefore, I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to [audio-record/video-record/photograph] me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Legally Authorized Representative Permission

By signing this document, you are agreeing to the person named below participating in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy of the study records. If you have any questions about the study after signing this document, you can contact the study team using the above information.

I have read and understood the above information. Furthermore, I have asked questions and have received answers. Therefore, I agree for the person named below to take part in this study.

The researcher has my permission to [audio-record/video-record/photograph] the person named below as part of their participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Printed LAR Name and Relationship to Subject

LAR Signature

Date

Appendix B: Recruit Flyer

Marriage Struggling Because Of Childhood Trauma

"If you are 18 or older and have been married for less than 30 years, you may be eligible to participate in a research study."

Have you experienced a childhood trauma or exposed to pornography as a preteen and your marriage is impacted by it?

You are invited to join a free one-day marriage enrichment "Trauma to Triumph" conference where these topics will be addressed and tools to help overcome the struggles will be given. Some highlighted topics of discussion will be abandonment, childhood sexual abuse, and even early exposure to pornography as a preteen.

The desire of this conference is to bring awareness to the long-term impacts these traumatic events have on individuals and couples in their financially, mentally, physically, spiritually especially in the area of intimacy within the marriage. The speaker will also provide insight on improving communication between childhood trauma survivors and their spouses.

Participants will receive:

- Tools that will hopefully improvement your marriage and bring healing to your past

Date & Time:

- October 30, 2021
- 10 AM – 3 PM (Lunch provided)

Location:

- Ridgeville Church of God
444 School St
Ridgeville, SC 29472

Are you eligible?

- Individuals over 18 years old and Under 60 years old
- Married couples of less than 30 years
- Married couples with at least one spouse who has experienced childhood trauma or exposed to pornography as a preteen that is now affecting their marriage.

WWW.RIDGEVILLECOG.ORG



To register go to:
<https://bit.ly/RCOGMARRIAGECONFERENCE2021>
or scan QR code



If you're unsure if you meet the requirements for the research study group, please call or email the study team:

Rev. Charles M. Houston, M.Div.
Lead Pastor



RIDGEVILLE CHURCH OF GOD

Appendix C: Pre-conference Survey

Pre-Conference Survey

Thank you for taking part in this “From Trauma to Triumph” Conference and help Pastor Charles M. Houston with the research study portion of his thesis project for his doctorate. The information collected will continue to make conferences like this a success and help Pastor Charles formulate the necessary class material for triumph to occur.

Directions: Please keep an open mind and answer each question honestly and completely. Do not spend a lot of time deciphering or overthinking your answers. Your survey will remain confidential and secure. The post-conference survey will be given after the conference, and the final survey will be done two weeks after the conference.

Pre-Conference Survey

1. Are you between the ages of 18 years old and 60 years old?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No

2. Have you been married for less than 30 years?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No

3. Is your marriage struggling because you or your spouse are survivors of childhood trauma and/or early exposure to pornography? If so, which one? Circle all that apply.
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Abandonment
 - D. Childhood Sexual Abuse
 - E. Early Exposure to Pornography

4. If you are a survivor of childhood trauma, does your spouse know?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. N/A

5. If you were abandoned in childhood, do you feel that still plays a role in your marriage today?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure
 - D. N/A

6. If you are the spouse of a childhood trauma survivor, were you understanding when they told you?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Unsure
 - D. N/A

7. If you struggle in your marriage as a couple and either one or both spouses are childhood trauma survivors, would you say those events play a role in the marriage's struggle?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. N/A

8. Suppose you struggle in your marriage as a couple, and either one or both spouses are childhood trauma survivors or were exposed to pornography early in life. Would you say those events cause issues with intimacy in your marriage?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Maybe

9. If you were exposed to pornography at an early age, do you think it created false perceptions about what marriage or intimacy would be like?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. N/A

10. If you or your spouse were exposed to pornography at an early age, are the false expectations created by these images one area of your marital that struggles?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. N/A

11. If you were exposed to pornography at an early age, do you still watch it now within your marriage?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. N/A

12. If so, does your spouse know?

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. N/A

13. Do you and your spouse have a support system currently in place to help you both process the past issues that are presently being dealt with?

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. Not Sure

14. Have you sought counseling for your marital struggles?

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. N/A

15. The conference speaker is doing a deeper study into the matters being discussed and is looking for three to five couples who would be willing to participate and discuss the conference topics face-to-face. Would you like to be a part of this additional study? It should last about an hour or.

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. Not sure

Appendix D: Post-conference Survey

Post-Conference Survey

Thank you for taking part in this “From Trauma to Triumph” Conference and help Pastor Charles M. Houston with the research study portion of his thesis project for his doctorate. The information collected will continue to make conferences like this a success and help Pastor Charles formulate the necessary class material for triumph to occur.

Directions: Please keep an open mind and answer each question honestly and completely. Do not spend a lot of time deciphering or overthinking your answers. Your survey will remain confidential and secure. The post-conference survey will be given after the conference, and the final survey will be done two weeks after the conference.

Post-Conference Survey

1. Are you between the ages of 18 years old and 60 years old?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No

2. Have you been married for less than 30 years?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No

3. Are your marital struggles because you or your spouse are survivors of childhood trauma or early exposure to pornography? If so, which one? Circle all that apply.
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Abandonment
 - D. Childhood Sexual Abuse
 - E. Early Exposure to Pornography

4. During the conference did you find yourself relating to the marital presented?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Not Sure

5. Did the material presented help answer some of the questions you had about your marital struggles?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. N/A

6. Did the material presented help you see how to help yourself overcome your childhood trauma and/or early exposure to pornography?
- A. Yes
 - B. Not
 - C. Not sure
 - D. N/A
7. Suppose you struggle in your marriage as a couple, and either one or both spouses are childhood trauma survivors or were exposed to pornography early in life. Would you say the marital conference provided some tools to grow your marriage?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Not sure
 - D. N/A
8. If you kept your childhood trauma and or/ early exposure to pornography hidden from your spouse, did the conference help you feel more comfortable sharing?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Not sure
9. Did the conference highlight enough about your struggles in marriage especially intimacy, that you would recommend the conference to someone else?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Not Sure
 - D. N/A
10. Do you feel your marriage benefited from attending the conference?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Not Sure
 - D. N/A
11. If you could highlight one, take away from the conference, what would it be?
-
-

12. Would you attend a class offered in your local church geared toward helping marriages overcome their struggles?

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. Not Sure

13. Did you find the marriage conference length?

- A. Too short
- B. Just right
- C. Too long

14. The conference speaker has delivered a lot of information throughout the conference. Do you feel any of it will help improve your marital situation? If so, what information best helped?

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. Not Sure

15. What information or subject areas would you like to see covered in the next conference that you feel would help your marriage improve?

Appendix E: Focus Group Discussion Questionnaire

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS QUESTIONNAIRE (FGDQ)

You understand that the author of the project’s final paper will use the answers given by those attending this Focus Group Discussion. No names will be published, and all information will remain confidential as regulated by state and federal laws.

Name (s) of surveyor(s) and spouse:	
Date of FGDA:	
Name of FGD location:	
Number of people attending the FGD:	1. Men _____ 2. Women _____ 3. Total _____
Individual filling out FGD and which childhood trauma experience:	1. Survivor 2. Spouse 3. Abandonment 4. Childhood Sexual Abuse 5. Early Exposure to Pornography

→ Conference Impacts

This section evaluates how the attending couple felt concerning: the overall conference, each topic, and if they thought it helped with their marital struggles.

6. What did you think about the conference? What would you add or remove?

7. Do you feel that you had sufficient information about the impacts of childhood traumas on marriages? Explain.

8. Of the covered topics, which impacts your marriage the most and why? Do you feel your spouse understands your struggle? If not, why do you think they have difficulties understanding?

-
- 9. Would you attend a weekly class at Ridgeville Church of God if this were offered?
Why or why not?**
 - 10. Was the expression of your childhood trauma hard to express to your spouse?**
 - 11. Has your childhood trauma or early exposure to pornography affected the intimacy
in your marriage? If so, in what ways?**
 - 12. Would you recommend this conference to another couple?**

Appendix F: Permission Request



April 29, 2021

Pastoral Council Board
Council Members
Ridgeville Church of God



Dear Council Members:

As a graduate student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am researching as part of a Doctor of Ministry Degree requirements. The title of my research project is Childhood Trauma: Nobody Told Me It Would Impact My Marriage Too, and the purpose of my research is to provide tools and education on a variety of marital subjects, especially childhood trauma, that enriches the marriages of those that attend the marriage conference while also guiding the marriages away from a crash course but riding smoothly into the sunset.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research in/at Ridgeville Church of God and contact your church members to invite them to participate in my research study.

Participants will be asked to attend a pre-conference seminar where information about the research study will be given, consent forms, pre-survey, the itinerary for the conference, and please note taking part in this study is entirely voluntary. Participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Charles M. Houston, M.Div.
Lead Pastor

Appendix G: Permission Letter

April 30, 2021

Charles M. Houston
Lead Pastor



Dear Rev. Houston:

First, may we congratulate you on your accomplishment to achieving the major milestone in your life. Our prayers are with you for the finally season of this journey. Ridgeville Church of God counts it an honor to be chosen to help provide the research data you need to complete the remaining data research for your degree.

After careful review of your research proposal entitled *Childhood Trauma: Nobody Told Me It Would Impact My Marriage Too*, we have decided to grant you permission to contact our faculty/staff and invite them to participate in your study and allow you to conduct your research at Ridgeville Church of God.

To grant our facility usage and permission to use our membership information plus access to the faculty/staff at Ridgeville Church of God, we request a copy of the results no less than 30 days upon completion and publication. In addition, we would like any feedback from your university review board if warranted. This will allow us to see how the obtained material has been implemented with the finished work.

May God bless and keep you always.

In His Service,

Wilma Bellomy
Administrative Director

Official IRB Approval

May 29, 2021

John Doe

IRB Approval 120Y.11Z611: Adult Perceptions of Spiritual Gifts: A Phenomenological Study

Dear John,

We are pleased to inform you that the Liberty IRB has approved your above study. This approval is extended to you for one year. If data collection proceeds past one year or changes in the methodology pertaining to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The documents for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

IRB Mentor

Liberty University