

**A Phenomenological Study Exploring Pastors' Experiences Counseling  
Younger Congregants with Changing Lifestyles**

by

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education School of Behavioral Sciences  
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## ABSTRACT

Societal norms are changing, and more young adults are cohabitating with partners before marriage, engaging in premarital intercourse, and embarking on second marriages. All these activities are contrary to historical interpretations of pastoral teachings. The problem is that pastors are challenged in adapting to provide family and marriage counseling for younger congregants. With societal changes occurring rapidly, the majority of the young generation feels that there is less relevance in pastoral teachings. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe Covenant Connections International's mature pastors' experiences counseling younger congregants in the Northeastern United States. Eight pastors living and working in the Northeast states participated in semi-structured interviews where their responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results showed that the lack of shared belief contributes to a great challenge in pastors' counseling younger congregants in churches. This study was important because it offers new information regarding the perspectives of pastors on how family and marriage counseling has adapted to serve the needs of younger couples with ever-changing lifestyles. The Word of God, biblical teachings, mentorship, and visiting young congregants by pastors were some of the strategies participants recommended for pastors to use in guiding younger congregants. Pastors and other religious leaders can adopt this study result to counsel younger generation congregants about marriage and marital lifestyle. Further research should be conducted to examine how to use mentorship and biblical teaching to counsel younger congregants on marriage.

*Keywords:* Cohabitation, Couples Counselling, Generation, Millennials, Pastoral Marriage.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Millennials aged 24 to 39 are currently the largest generation in the United States and grew up with high rates of divorce, second marriages, premarital cohabitation, premarital copulation, and childbirth out of wedlock modeled by their parents (Manning et al., 2019; Wilcox & Wang, 2017). The following generation, Generation Z, is just entering an age to start having families and this shift is likely to impact an even larger portion of the local Church congregates. As societal trends change and premarital copulation and cohabitation become a norm, pastors must adapt their counseling practices and strategies to account for the lifestyle changes, challenges, and concerns of their younger congregants (Buby & Dollahite, 2020).

In the present day, cohabitation is a more common occurrence for young adults than living together under the condition of marriage (Manning et al., 2019). While only half of people over the age of 18 in the United States have ever been married, 60% have resided with a romantic partner (Horowitz et al., 2019). Additionally, over half of Millennials between the ages of 28 and 34 have children before they are married compared to only 25 percent of individuals from the Baby Boomer generation. Combined with a greater number of women participating in the workforce, these changes represent substantial departures from the social norms of older adults (Cohen, 2019; Horowitz et al., 2019; Wilcox & Wang, 2017). Meanwhile, pastoral marriage counseling and couple's counseling are geared towards traditional ideals, including non-cohabitation before marriage and birthing children following marriage (Merlos, 2019; Mitchell, 2021; Mwaomah & Dube, 2018). In some instances, deviations from traditionally expected norms create distance between pastors and individuals in the congregation who might otherwise seek counseling (Merlos, 2019; Mwaomah & Dube, 2018). Pastoral counseling is more effective when the individuals being counseled feel able to discuss their lifestyle and



concerns, even if they do not completely adhere to traditional interpretations of biblical values (Mwomah & Dube, 2018).

This study attempts to provide important contributions to the literature by illuminating how pastoral counseling practices have changed giving critical shifts in social structures regarding pre-marital sex, cohabitation, and marriage (Garo Lindner, 2020). This study explores how pastors perceive generational differences to impact pastoral counseling practices. By understanding how pastors perceive generational differences to impact counseling strategies, this research may assist pastors to be better prepared to assist their congregates in need of support and increase the relevancy of pastoral counseling for Millennial and Generation Z congregates. Millennials and Generation Z already represent substantial portions of individuals embarking on new marriages, and that portion will increase as more Generation Z individuals reach prime marriage ages (Morris, 2019). To preserve the relevancy of pastoral teachings and provide support to individuals in need, pastoral counseling practices should consider the lifestyle, norms, and values of their congregates (Bubsy & Dollahite, 2020).

## **Background**

### **Historical**

Pastors have historically played a role in marriage counseling both before and after marriage for individuals in their congregation (Merlos, 2019). Before marriage, pastors counsel young people looking to get married on topics such as compromise, faithfulness, and adaptation to a new way of life. Historically, these counseling sessions were provided to individuals who did not live together before marriage and often practiced abstinence (Morris, 2019). In past decades, young adults lived with their parents until marriage at a greater frequency and did not live with a partner until after marriage.

## **Social**

Currently, there are more Americans who have lived with a partner while being unmarried than those who live with a married partner (Manning et al., 2019). In some cases, these adults live with their partners for years before marriage. Such a condition changes the marriage counseling needs of individuals seeking pastoral guidance, as they have likely already experienced many of the ups and downs associated with individuals who are newly married and living together for the first time (Morris, 2019).

Even individuals who identify as Christians engage in the trend of cohabitating before marriage (Morris, 2019). Busby and Dollahite (2020) found that many individuals ascribe to religious beliefs because they believe a system of faith will contribute to a positive marriage and family life. Despite changes in social structures, Christians still prioritize healthy marriages and families, which suggests a positive role for pastoral marriage counseling (Bubsy & Dollahite, 2020). Research on religiousness and marriage suggests that religion can have positive impacts on marital relationships, fidelity, childrearing, and domestic stability. These benefits can improve the lives of individuals who cohabit before marriage but adapting counseling practices based on the experiences of modern congregates could have a positive impact (Bubsy & Dollahite, 2020).

## **Theoretical**

The theoretical framework for the study is the lifecycle theory (Erikson, 1950; Pendercraft, 2017). The theory was first developed by Erik Erikson (1950) to explain human psychosocial development, and the stages associated with the development process. Erikson's theory holds that development occurs over eight general stages (Erikson, 1950). The first four stages occur in childhood, followed by one adolescent phase and three adult phases. In the first

stage, infants develop trust with their caregivers (Rani, 2019). Then, young children learn autonomy and develop a sense of self. In the third stage, children learn about socialized behavior, morality, and self-control. In the last stage of childhood, individuals learn about perseverance from schoolwork and personal achievement, as well as how they fit into the world (Erikson, 1950).

During adolescence, people refine their understanding of themselves and their place in the world (Erikson, 1950). They consider topics related to their achievement potential and concepts of identity. In the first stage of adulthood, people learn about the importance of intimacy and love (Bebchuk & Kastiel, 2018). In middle adulthood, people learn about to value of life and experiences and struggle against stagnation. Finally, in the last stage, individuals engage in reflection on the wisdom gained throughout their lives (Jenssen, 2020).

The Lifecycle theory (Erikson, 1950) relates to the present study, as embarking on marriage and starting a family relates deeply to the early adult lifecycle stages. In the first stage of adulthood, individuals learn about intimacy and loneliness. Moving from adolescence into adulthood, then getting married and increasing intimacy with a person represents a substantial amount of change. Individuals undergoing such changes may need additional support through marriage counseling and other services (Jenssen, 2020). Additionally, the second stage of adulthood occurs when individuals are often married and while raising children (Bebchuk & Kastiel, 2018). The struggle against stagnation could relate to when some may experience “mid-life crises” and question aspects of their marriage in a way that would benefit from the support of a pastor. Lifecycle theory frames the present study by providing insight into the psychological processes of the individuals receiving counseling (Erikson, 1950).

## **Situation to Self**

I am a strong believer in religion and the values that God wants us to uphold as human beings. In the past few years, I have interacted with several young adults starting their marriage lives. I have also interacted with young people experiencing lifestyle changes. Many of these young marriages have experienced a lot of challenges, therefore, counseling from pastors is important. I have counseled young adults regarding issues such as lack of communication and emotional and or sexual infidelity in the local church. One recent example occurred when a millennial lady came to me for counseling. During our second session, she explained to me that she was in a love triangle and was having a very difficult time trying to decide which person she liked best. It resulted in her not eating or sleeping well. I started by telling her all the signs she should look for when choosing a mate. I asked her what she thought a good potential husband should look like. She affirmed he should be nice and kind and loving and love her like Christ loved the church. Next, I asked which of the two guys in the triangle met those qualifications. She stood up and said, "Pastor the two people in this love triangle with me are not guys they are girls." I had missed something because I did not expect that answer. It caused me to conclude and to question if other Christian counselors are underprepared to meet the demands of counseling those with changing lifestyles.

Young couples experience pressure due to the influence of online platforms and thus require experts in counseling to address their challenges. As someone who holds Christian values in the modern century, I am personally interested in how pastoral advice has evolved based on changing social structures. However, I did not have any personal connection to any participants in the study. Additionally, my values were withheld to avoid bias against any individual included in the study, as I believe that religious convictions are personal to the individual and should not

be questioned or judged by others. To future reduce the likelihood of bias, I engaged in a reflexive journaling process to document my rationale for making specific choices.

Ontological and axiological assumptions affect findings in qualitative studies.

Ontological assumptions were held in this study. This study held to one reality that is defined, fixed, measurable, and observable (Jacobsson & Söderholm, 2022). It is also assumed that the knowledge to be gained in this study will be through an emphatic understanding of the perspective and experiences of the participants regarding the problem under study (Willig, 2019). The axiological assumption for this study is that the research process will be objective and not subjective. Participants' biases may affect the final results of the study (Brzeziński, 2022). Furthermore, I assumed that the participants and potential participants were truthful in their representation of their perceptions and experiences. It was assumed that the participants were accurate when they said they have provided marriage counseling services to individuals in the millennial generation and Generation Z. This is reasonable to assume because the participants have no reason for concealing the truth based on the voluntary nature of the study and confidential considerations undertaken by the researcher. Though the pastors may not be aware of an individual's or couple's exact age, it was realistic to assume they could accurately guess their ages within a decade. There is no way to verify this information ethically based on the privacy rights of individuals undergoing counseling.

Furthermore, it was presumed that pastors want to provide helpful assistance to Millennials and Generation Z to help them succeed in their lives and marriages, even if they have engaged in premarital intercourse, cohabitated outside of marriage, or undertook second marriages. Whether or not pastors agree that such behavior is moral, it was assumed that they wish to help individuals engaging in such behaviors find success in their lives and stay true to

religious ideologies. If such an assumption is incorrect, it may invalidate the pastor's perspectives regarding how to provide useful counseling to young adults. If I became aware that a pastor did not wish to see such individuals succeed in their lives, I removed their data from the study. However, it is not possible to fully understand someone's intentions if they convey such intentions inaccurately.

The research paradigm for this study is constructivism and interpretivism. This paradigm is used in qualitative studies and is based on the existence of different realities rather than a single reality. This format is particularly relevant to the study of religious topics and social constructs because religious values and beliefs are inherently constructed based on human knowledge and understanding. The paradigm is constructivist, as I worked within the understanding that truth was understood as expressed by the participants which may or may not be objective truth. The desired outcome then, is to gain the perspective of participants' understanding. Universal truths can be known through the Bible.

### **Problem Statement**

Societal norms are changing, and more young adults are cohabitating with partners before marriage, engaging in premarital intercourse, and embarking on second marriages (Manning et al., 2019; Wilcox & Wang, 2017). All these activities are contrary to historical interpretations of pastoral teachings. However, many individuals engaging in these activities identify as Christians and could benefit from pastoral marriage counseling (Bussy & Dollahite, 2020). Congregates are more likely to seek pastoral support before marriage and during their marriage if the counseling is relevant to their lifestyle, and therefore pastors may need to adapt traditional counseling methods and topics to accommodate the changing lifestyles of the congregates seeking to counsel (Morris, 2019).

The problem is that pastors are challenged in adapting to provide family and marriage counseling for younger congregants (Garo Lindner, 2020). With societal changes occurring rapidly, the majority of the young generation feels that there is less relevance in pastoral teachings (Asomoah, 2018). Though the teachings of the Bible are fixed in terms of their core tenets, pastors can still play a role in influencing the spiritual lives of younger congregates and providing counseling and support to newly married young people. This study gathered information about how generational differences impact pastoral counseling and how pastors can adapt their counseling to increase its relevancy for younger congregates. By gathering information on the perspectives of pastors providing marriage counseling to younger congregates, this study provided information to pastors looking to counsel individuals from the Millennial generation and Generation Z and hopefully improve counseling practices to improve outcomes for congregates and pastors.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe Covenant Connections International's (ccicovenant.com) mature pastors' experiences counseling younger congregants in the Northeastern United States (Haußmann & Fritz, 2022). Younger congregants include Generation Z individuals who were born in the mid-to-late 1990s and early 2010s. Pastors that participated in this study were between 50 -65 years old. At this stage in the research, the topic has not been explored in literature, and the study examined how pastors perceive their practices have changed and what further steps they perceive should be taken to meet the needs of the next generation of adults approaching peak marriage age. The theory guiding this study is lifecycle theory (Erikson, 1950), as it provides insight into the psychological processes of the individuals receiving counseling.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because it anticipates providing new information on the perspectives of pastors regarding how family and marriage counseling has adapted to serve the needs of younger congregates with changing lifestyles. For many individuals, religious organizations serve as an important source of social, ethical, and moral support (Mitchell, 2021). For religious organizations to continue to support their congregation, consideration should be given to the experiences and lifestyles of the congregates, even if the church teachings do not condone specific behaviors (Merlos, 2019). Without adapting religious doctrine to endorse changing lifestyles, pastors can consider what type of counseling might be most relevant to younger congregates, and how to best support individuals in healthy lifestyles (Mitchell, 2021). By providing information about how pastors perceive marriage counseling for Millennials and Generation Z, this study collects important knowledge that could be useful in developing and adapting best practices for Millennial and Generation Z counseling (Shaw, 2019).

### **Research Question**

The following research questions guided the study. By addressing these research questions, the study accomplished the purpose of understanding the perspective of pastors regarding marriage counseling for Millennials and Generation Z. One main research question and two sub-questions were used.

**RQ1:** How do Covenant Connections International mature pastors describe their experiences counseling younger congregants?

**Sub-Question 1:** How do pastors describe the marital counseling needs of younger congregants?



**Sub-Question 2:** How do pastors describe the steps they take to support individuals in the Millennial Generation and Generation Z as they embark on marriage and family life, given changing lifestyle norms and church doctrines?

The number of millennials seeking out marriage counseling early in their marriages is growing (Clyde, 2022). Out of the three generations studied (millennials, baby boomers, and Gen Xers), Micovic and Micovic (2021) found that millennials have attended marriage counseling the most (51%), and those who have been married for three to five years are more likely to use these counseling services (57 percent).

### **Definitions**

The study defines the following terms according to the information below:

1. *Millennials* - Individuals born between the years 1981 and 1996 (PEW, 2022).
2. *Generation Z* – Individuals born after 1997 to the present (PEW, 2022).
3. *Cohabitation* – Individuals in a romantic or sexual relationship residing together in the same household (Manning et al., 2019).
4. *Pastoral Marriage & Couples Counseling*- Pastors provide counseling services to individuals in a married or non-married romantic relationship regarding their relationship and joint decisions (Merlos, 2019).

### **Summary**

Millennials and Generation Z are the largest generations in the United States and will soon make up the majority of individuals in need of relationship and marriage counseling (Manning et al., 2019). These individuals grew up with different societal norms, such as a higher rate of divorce, second marriages, premarital intercourse, and premarital cohabitation (Horowitz et al., 2019). Despite significant societal shifts regarding family life, there is a gap in the literature

regarding how pastors have adapted to provide family and marriage counseling to younger congregates (Garo Lindner, 2020). The purpose of this phenomenology was to the perspectives of pastors regarding how their family and marriage counseling has adapted to serve the needs of younger congregates with changing lifestyles. The theoretical framework that guided the present study is lifecycle theory (Erikson, 1950). The study used a qualitative phenomenological design. The next chapter, Chapter 2, reviews literature relevant to the study topic.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Pastors hold many responsibilities in the modern-day local Church, which include offering counsel to congregants. Pastors' responsibilities are outlined in the Bible, but generational trends and differences contribute to a change in the situations that pastors and their congregants are exposed to and challenge traditional Christian values supported by the sacred text. The largest generation in the United States today are Millennials, ages 24 to 39 in 2020, which are followed by Generation Z is anticipated to one day become the largest generation, and the most diverse of all (Fry, 2020; Rue, 2018). These generations have statistically been exposed to higher instances of divorce and second or more marriages from their parents, and see non-marital cohabitation, childbirth out of wedlock, and premarital copulation as common behaviors; issues that sharply contrast with the traditional teachings of the Church (Cohen, 2019; Manning et al., 2019; Wilcox & Wang, 2017). For church congregations and pastors providing counselors to married young Christians, namely those of the Millennial or Generation Z generations, pastors may adapt their counsel practices and strategies to take into account the changes in life, common challenges faced, and concerns of their young congregants.

This literature review is an exhaustive investigation of the phenomenon of generational differences that present during pastoral counseling with young, married couples, and earlier related scholarship. The pool of scholarships available for this phenomenon is currently limited. This literature review explores a range of topics relevant to the subject matter to present relevant research about the topic. This chapter begins with the theoretical framework that underpins this study, which is Erik Erikson's lifecycle theory. Next are discussions on patterns in behavior associated with marriage for Millennials and Generation Z, and pastoral leadership and counseling. Following is a discussion on church leaders and young congregants. This chapter

closes with a summary.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that underpins the investigation of the current study is Erik Erikson's (1902-1994) lifecycle theory (Pendercraft, 2017). Erikson developed his lifecycle theory in the 1950s to explain how people develop psychosocially and the stages of life associated with psychosocial development (Erikson, 1950; 1959; Orenstein & Lewis, 2020). Erikson's theory used Freud's theory of psychosocial development as a foundation (Erikson, 1950; 1959; Orenstein & Lewis, 2020). Erikson's lifecycle theory supports that people develop according to eight fundamental stages, and that trust is required as a foundation for their development (Erikson, 1950; 1959; Orenstein & Lewis, 2020; Zock, 2018). Erikson's theory also incorporates the impact of religion and the notion that, when integrated throughout and according to a person's life stages, it can contribute to their formation of thought and identity (Erikson, 1950; 1959; Zock, 2018).

Lifecycle theory supports that a person should be analyzed according to their direct experiences with the world in front of them, and their role as an individual who is relating to this context (Erikson, 1950; 1959; Zock, 2018). Erikson underscored the importance of understanding how people and their surrounding context or environment influence each other, what the results of this influence are, and what responses this influence elicits (Erikson, 1950; 1959; Zock, 2018). In this context, lifecycle theory is not so much concerned with the facts surrounding an individual's life, but with the influences produced by their core interactions and behaviors (Erikson, 1950; 1959; Zock, 2018). The eight stages of Erikson's theory pertain to conflicting influences that are paradigms to the individual's psychosocial identity formation (Erikson, 1950; 1959). Each stage is characterized by conflicting influences, referred to as the

fundamental psychosocial crisis of this stage, and is also characterized by a virtue (Erikson, 1950; 1959). The eight stages according to Erikson's theory are:

**Stage 1 - childhood:** takes place during the infancy years, from birth to less than two years of age, and is characterized by trust versus mistrust with a virtue of hope. During this stage, individuals learn whether they can trust the world around them.

**Stage 2 - childhood:** takes place in early toddlerhood years, from age two to four, and is characterized by autonomy versus shame and doubt with a virtue of will. During this stage, individuals learn whether it is acceptable to be themselves.

**Stage 3 - childhood:** takes place during early childhood years, from age five to eight, and is characterized by initiative versus guilt with a virtue of purpose. During this stage, individuals learn whether it is acceptable for them to behave, act, and perform.

**Stage 4 - childhood:** takes place during the school-age years, or middle childhood, from age nine to 12, and is characterized by industry versus inferiority with a virtue of competence. During this stage, individuals learn whether they can find their place among the world and people.

**Stage 5 - adolescence:** takes place during adolescence, ages 13 to 19, and is characterized by identity versus identity confusion with a virtue of fidelity. During this stage, individuals question and learn about who they are and their potential.

**Stage 6 - adulthood:** takes place during early adulthood, from age 20 to 39, and is characterized by intimacy versus isolation with the virtue of love. During this stage, individuals learn whether they are capable of love.

**Stage 7 - adulthood:** takes place in middle adulthood, from age 40 to 59, and is characterized by generativity versus stagnation and self-absorption, with a virtue of care. During this stage, individuals learn about the development of life value.

**Stage 8 - adulthood:** takes place in late adulthood, age 60 and older, and is characterized by ego integrity versus despair with a virtue of wisdom. During this stage, individuals question the events of their lives and partake in active reflection.

A ninth stage of psychosocial development was added later on by Erikson's wife, Joan Erikson, and it entails the new difficulties that come with continued aging and is characterized by details exhibited in all eight stages of Erikson's original theory (Zock, 2018). Erikson's theory supports that psychosocial development is not a fixed process, but one that is in constant development throughout an individual's lifetime (Kaiser, 2020). The development of an individual's trust, independence, and drive is influenced by their familial unit, including their siblings and parental figures, and an individual's consciousness is influenced by the community around them (Erikson, 1950; 1959; Kaiser, 2020). Erikson (1950; 1959) supports that every aspect of a person's personality, about each respective stage of psychosocial development, must be addressed and explored in congruence with the individual's age and corresponding life stage. If aspects of an individual's personality are neglected or are not addressed when they should be, the other aspects of the individual's personality will be affected, and it will also hinder the individual's overall potential and development (Erikson, 1950; 1959). Individuals are not required to complete one stage to move on to the next stage (Erikson, 1950; 1959). Individuals can return to earlier stages in conscious healing work, and different stages to influence the other (Erikson, 1950; 1959).

Erikson's theory incorporates religion because Erikson characterized life stages according

to virtues, which he also associates with human values and religion (Erikson, 1950; 1959; Kramp, 2014). According to Pendercraft (2017), Erikson's theory offers a deep understanding of how to guide different generations of congregants in a church. Pendercraft (2017) supports that although the Bible remains the foundation from which all religious teachings are referenced and drawn; church congregations will gain value from understanding the work of Erikson. Erikson's research, writes Pendercraft (2017), supports the interactions and developments of people that are present both in the Bible and in modern-day society and can offer deep insight into how church leaders can best serve people in all of life's developmental stages. Erikson's theory supports that an individual's psychosocial development is triggered by conflicting influences, or an internal crisis, which triggers their development of greater awareness and the forward-moving step toward the next stage of life development. Knight (2016) explains that in psychotherapy, individuals are encouraged to reflect on these moments perceived to have triggered internal crises, and for said reflection to offer greater insights and prompt them to move toward the next stage of development (Knight, 2016). The insights of Erikson's life cycle theory can apply to pastors as counselors by providing a deeper understanding of the internal crisis or issues that may be faced by their congregants, namely young congregants, as this study explores, coupled with the individuals' life situations, to provide more effective counsel underscored by religious teachings.

### **Related Literature**

#### **Millennials, Generation Z, and Marriage**

The Millennial generation pertains to people born between 1981 and 1996. In 2020, the oldest Millennials turned 39 years old, and the youngest turned 24, and in 2000, the oldest Millennials first entered college (Barroso et al., 2020; Rue, 2018). The generation that proceeds

Millennials are Generation Z, which pertains to the generation of people born between 1997 and 2010, and the generation that precedes Millennials are Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980 (Katz, 2017). Millennials are characterized as being a very diverse generation, and they are currently the largest generation of adults consisting of 72.1 million people in 2019, when it surpassed Baby Boomers, ages 55-73 (71.6 million) (Fry, 2020). According to the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), Freeman (2019) compared data from 68,315 Millennial respondents in 2017 (then ages 21 to 36) and 16,012 non-Millennials (then aged 37 and older) and found nearly double the percentage of Millennials who identify as Hispanic and/or Latino (21.9) compared with non-Millennials (12.7%). Today, only half the Millennial population (50%) are Caucasian (Kurz et al., 2018).

Generation Z, the youngest generation of future workers and leaders, are described as similar to Millennials, but with their own set of characteristics and distinctions (Rue, 2018). According to Rue (2018), there is little peer-reviewed research available about Gen Z; a generation also referred to as iGen, Generation-Next, Homeland Generation, Founders, Plurals, Pivotal, Post-Millennials, and iGen (Rue, 2018). There are also discrepancies concerning when the age bracket starts and stops, but for this study, the University Professional and Continuing Education Association identifies Generation Z as people born between 1995 and 2005, and who are 14 to 24 years old as of 2020 (Dombrosky et al., 2018). Gen Z is the most ethnically diverse generation of all, and it is also the largest, and as of 2020 accounts for 20% of the U.S. population (Rue, 2018; Talmon, 2019). Gen Z was raised during a time marked by rising divorce rates parents entering into second marriages, and growing numbers of women and mothers entering the workforce (Dombrosky et al., 2018; Rue, 2018). People in this generation are described as fervent social media users and were raised surrounded by technological devices



being implemented in everyday use (Hernandez-de-Menendez et al., 2020; Rue, 2018).

Generational stereotypes about Generation Z are that this generation is egocentric, lazy, rude, and unfaithful (Havlicek et al., 2018). By 2025, Generation Z will be working alongside Millennials (Dombrosky et al., 2018).

Regarding spiritual needs, Bergler drew several conclusions based on earlier scholarship about Gen Z and associated characteristics. Of all generations, Gen Z is anticipated to take the longest to reach life markers, such as marriage and childbirth (Bergler, 2020). The generation is thought to prolong progression to the extent that they are more likely than Millennials to venture out without their parents, obtain a driver's license, go on dates, drive a car, or have a job, and less likely to partake in risk-taking behaviors, such as intimacy, drinking alcohol, or binge drinking (Bergler, 2020). Gen Z have trouble parting with their digital devices, and they struggle with more mental health issues than Millennials (Bergler, 2020). Because of their characteristics, pastoral counseling may have to pivot to specifically be cognizant of the challenges faced by this generation. Gen Z is less likely to partake in risky behaviors, and their dislike of emotional jeopardy may discourage Gen Z congregants from formulating relationships with the church and their fellow congregants for fear of being emotionally hurt (Bergler, 2020). In response, pastors must educate Gen Z members about the church's mission and worth, explaining how relationships made through the church can help congregants overcome personal adversities with stronger support, and encourage them to become more Christlike (Bergler, 2020). Pastors can support Gen Z by guiding them through prayer and bible study, learning how to ask for and give forgiveness, and how to move towards compromise and understanding in their associations (Bergler, 2020). Because Gen Z values financial security and err on the side of materialism, pastors can teach Gen Z to refocus their love for money on God, and away from greed (Bergler,

2020). Bergler (2020) explains that members of Gen Z who struggle particularly with mental health challenges must receive special guidance. Bergler (2020) also explains how these members of Gen Z will relate to and associate with marginalized members of society, and they need to be reminded that, as in Jesus's experience, resurrection, and healing emerge after suffering.

Millennials became the largest generation to make up the American workforce in 2016 when more than one in three American workers (35%) were Millennials (Fry, 2018). Millennials comprise a generation that is focused on career success and financial security, with many Millennials opting to delay marriage and childbearing until either is obtained. A greater percentage of Millennials are employed (79.4%) compared to non-millennials (59.1%) (Freeman, 2019). Sixty-five percent of Millennials hold an associate degree or higher, which is 15 percentage points higher than the Silent Generation (1925-1945) (Ozyigit, 2017). According to Smock and Schwartz (2020), there is a cyclical process that occurs, which is the pursuit of higher education, which is associated with higher degrees of both marriage and cohabitation that lead to marriage, less divorce, lower degrees of familial instability, and lower instances of having children out of wedlock. Drawing from the results of the American Community Survey, a national survey distributed by the U.S. Census Bureau, five-year findings (2012-2016) showed an association between Millennials' marriage rate and workforce characteristics, salary, poverty level, and housing-related costs and living situation (Gurrentz, 2018). Full-time employment was especially associated with marriage rates, while average salaries for all workers, especially men, were significantly and positively linked to marriage rates (Gurrentz, 2018). Women's poverty characteristics were adversely linked to women's rate of marriage, housing costs were adversely linked to marriage rates for both sexes, and homeownership was positively linked to marriage

rates (Gurrentz, 2018). These findings are aligned with that of Trehu (2017), who described Millennials' challenges as chiefly financial based, including rising student loan debt, idling and falling incomes, and the experience of poverty described as full-time employment. Trehu (2017) supported that Millennials are also lagging behind their parents in income and homeownership, and collectively all financial insecurities contribute to Millennials' decision to delay marriage and childbirth (Gurrentz, 2018). Referring to U.S. Census data, Fry (2017) stated that even though Millennials are the largest population of American adults, they are not the forerunner for household ownership; in 2016, there were 43 million households headed by Baby Boomers and 34 million headed by Gen X, followed by Millennials with 28 million, which only outnumbered the Silent Generation and older (19 million). According to data from the American Time Use Survey, Garikapati et al. (2016) reported that Millennials also travel less, own fewer vehicles, use alternative travel methods, and lower percentages of them have car insurance.

Millennials are known for being tech-savvy. Kolnhofer-Derecskei et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study by distributing a survey to 783 college students in Budapest, Hungary, to determine the differences between Generation X students (85 in total), Generation Y or Millennial students (662 in total) and cuspers, or those on the cusp of either generation (36 in total). Compared to Generation X and cuspers, most Millennials (67%) believed themselves to have a social media presence, more than half (58.33%) described themselves as tech-savvy, and nearly four in 10 (38%) said they are trend-followers (Kolnhofer-Derecskei et al., 2017).

Millennials also comprise a generation that is often described as narcissistic (Brailovskaia & Bierhoff, 2020; Trehu, 2017). Brailovskaia and Bierhoff (2020) found that older Millennials are particularly narcissistic from a regression discontinuity analysis study of 254 Millennial Facebook users. Older Millennials scored notably higher than younger Millennials, on sensation-

seeking, narcissism, self-presentation, and social interaction using social networks, indicating that technological and cultural changes affected younger and older Millennials uniquely (Brailovskaia & Bierhoff, 2020). For both young and older Millennials, sensation-seeking, self-esteem, narcissism, and only behaviors were positively linked (Brailovskaia & Bierhoff, 2020).

In the modern day, cohabitation exceeds marriage as the most common relationship living situation for young adults (Manning et al., 2019). According to Horowitz et al. (2019), the percentage of American adults who have ever cohabited with a romantic partner has surpassed the percentage of adults who have ever been married. Between 2013 and 2017, nearly six in 10 (59%) U.S. adults had cohabited with a romantic partner compared to half (50%) of all U.S. adults who have been married (Horowitz et al., 2019). Millennials have the lowest rates of marriage (Kurz et al., 2018). According to Freeman (2019), in 2017 there were fewer married Millennials (39.9%) than married non-Millennials (64.3%) (Freeman, 2019). For this generation, and with the rising commonality of cohabitation without marriage, the meaning of marriage has essentially changed from prior generations (Ozyigit, 2017). It has been found that non-marital cohabitation hurts marriage, with the age of marriage steadily rising while the age of cohabitation has remained relatively consistent; a phenomenon that results in people cohabiting with multiple partners over time without marriage necessarily occurring. Along with the rise in the age of marriage and the continuance of non-marital cohabitation, Wilcox and Wang (2017) reported that more than half (55%) of older Millennial-aged parents, ages 28-34, have children before marriage compared to when the youngest Baby Boomers were 28-34 and became parents, and only one-fourth of them had their first child before being married. Further, only four in 10 (40%) adults, ages 28-34, commenced “married life” before marriage, whether they have children or not, and an additional one-third (33%) had children out of wedlock, while 27% did

not reach either life stage yet (Wilcox & Wang, 2017).

Of Millennials, there is a nearly even split between those who are in a family (55 percent) and those who are not (45%) (Barroso et al., 2020). This generation represents the largest population of individuals who are not in a family compared to Gen X (34%), Baby Boomers (31%), and the Silent Generation (15%) (Barroso et al., 2020). According to Barroso et al., Millennials precede earlier generations in terms of marital and birth rates, and living together in a family unit, which is described by Barroso et al. as “living with a spouse, one’s child (or children) or both a spouse and child” (p. 4). Only 30% of Millennials lived with both a spouse and a child in 2019 (Barroso et al., 2020). Less than half (44%) of Millennials were married in 2019, representing the lowest rate of marriage among all generations (Barroso et al., 2020). The average age of first marriage has also climbed, with the average man marrying at age 30 in 2019, and the average woman marrying at 28; three years later for both men and women of previous generations (Barroso et al., 2020). By 2018, about 19 million Millennial women (55% of all Millennial women) had children, which is lower than earlier generations of women who had children at similar ages (Barroso et al., 2020). Women today are delaying their childbearing years, many waiting until their 40s, but the average amount of children has remained relatively stable at two across all generations (Barroso et al., 2020). Further, nearly one-fifth of all Millennial men who live with their child or children are not married, which is notably higher than earlier generations: 15% for Gen X fathers, 4% of Baby Boomer fathers, and 1% of Silent Generation fathers, at similar ages (Barroso et al., 2020).

Adhikari (2017) studied attitudes toward marriage by conducting face-to-face interviews with 16 participants of marriageable age, ages 18-35, and, after five years, surveyed 35 individuals of marriageable age, between 19 and 24, living in Nepa Valley, Nepal. Findings

indicated that for modern generations, marriage is sought for companionship, support, sex, and social pressure, the latter of which may have been conscious or subconscious (Adhikari, 2017). Modern generations perceived marriage as constructive and essential, though some felt it was not obligatory. Males perceived marriage as legal consent to have sexual relations, a doorway to childrearing and having a family, and the need for future planning to prepare for these life stages (Adhikari, 2017). Women perceived marriage from more of an emotional standpoint, expressing that marriage alone can determine the woman's happiness or dissatisfaction based on how their husband is, and one participant expressed that having any husband is better than being single (Adhikari, 2017). Participants also expressed that the average age of marriage for their parents was 20 and that for them, it is between 25-30, and four participants expressed fear of social stigma about being 30 or older and unmarried (Adhikari, 2017).

In Adhikari's (2017) study, participants were also questioned about their beliefs on why their parents married. The answer given by most participants (five) described marriage as tradition, and felt their parents likely never questioned a life outside of marriage because it was customary. Participants also believed their parents married to listen to their own parents' wishes and to have a family of their own. When considering the differences between the state of marriage today and the state of their parent's marriage, participants expressed that it is generally accepted to opt not to marry, but in their parent's time, it was unheard of (Adhikari, 2017). Participants also expressed their desire to marry but to prolong marriage until reaching financial security, and they felt that their families should not pressure them to marry (Adhikari, 2017). Adhikari concluded that a significant difference found between the way that marriage was perceived in the past and the way it is perceived today is that in the past, people married to adhere to social norms and their parents' instructions, but not necessarily for romantic love. The

modern generation also does not perceive love as the reason for marriage and instead interprets it as a decision to embark on childbearing and family (Adhikari, 2017).

Although the meaning of marriage has changed, Ozyigit (2017) found that young people still perceive marriage in terms of three key phases, which include the decision to marry, the values of marriage, and the dynamics of marriage. Ozyigit (2017) conducted a qualitative, phenomenological study of 14 students, seven males, and seven females, ages 22-32, in their final year of study at the Education Faculty at Ege University in Izmir, Turkey, using semi-structured interviews, and content analysis and coding to identify themes. Ozyigit (2017) found that the students perceived the pre-marital phase as mostly positive, with three main factors including self-knowledge, spousal selection, and marriage readiness. Students described self-knowledge as being characteristic of social relationships, financial standing, relationships with family, communication, and marital roles, with financial standing as the forerunner (Ozyigit, 2017). Ozyigit described spousal selection chiefly as a process of selecting individuals from similar backgrounds, including socioeconomic status, education, age, religion, political outlooks, ethnic and cultural factors, and personality traits. Regarding ceremonies, some of the male participants who were not currently in relationships described the ceremonies surrounding engagement and marriage as “boring,” “intense,” “stressful,” and “tiring,” with apprehension surrounding cost (Ozyigit, 2017).

Over time, divorce has grown more prevalent in the United States and has therefore become more culturally acceptable. Cohen (2019) used data collected from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey from 2008 to 2017, a pool of 6,878,090 respondents, on the incidence of divorce. The rate of divorce increased between 2008 (when 9.8% of respondents divorced) to 2017 (when 10.3% of respondents divorced, indicating that about one in 10 married

couples divorce every year in the U.S. Divorce was present across all generations, and was the highest for those age 55+, which comprised 37.2% of all divorces, followed by ages 45-54 (23.2% of divorces), ages 33-44 (21.6% of divorces), and age 35 and younger (18.1% of divorces) (Cohen, 2019). Most divorced Americans identify as Caucasian, or non-Hispanic (70.1%), and most are divorced from their first marriage (76.8%) (Cohen, 2019). The majority of respondents who divorced did so after 30 or more years of marriage (30.3%); followed by those married between one and nine years (27.1%); those married for between 10 to 19 years (23.9%); and those married between 20 and 29 years (18.7%) (Cohen, 2019).

### **Pastoral Leadership and Counseling**

To become and actively serve as a pastor, Chimoga (2019) writes there are three components. Chimoga (2019), a pastor himself, explains the first component is the individual must receive a calling from God to serve in a pastoral role. After the initial calling, the individual must nurture himself or herself and partake in self-care to establish a healthy relationship with God, which forms the basis for pastoral work (Chimoga, 2019). The individual must also actively partake in daily prayer and study of the Bible (Chimoga, 2019). The second component requires the pastor to nurture his or her own family, offering them ample care, time, and love, and being cognizant not to prioritize the needs of congregants before familial needs (Chimoga, 2019). Having a stable, healthy family unit ensures the pastor is of sound mind and can best offer service and guidance to congregants, placing strong emphasis on the familial unit.

The third component calls for the pastor to nurture congregants through counseling, evangelizing, visiting congregants, praying with them, and teaching them God's word (the Bible) (Chimoga, 2019). The pastor should be patient with congregations and help them experience spiritual growth and development, while also serving as a public leader (Chimoga, 2019);



Manning & Nelson, 2020). According to Chimoga, pastors should treat congregants similarly to employees, as the spiritual fitness of congregants can determine the pastor's success. All three components are crucial, Chimoga explains, and neither should ever be compromised. Being in such a people-facing position, pastors are looked to as an example of faith at work in the church (Manning & Nelson, 2020; van Beek, 2018). Because of this, pastors may be held to a different standard according to congregants, community members, or other individuals than the average person (van Beek, 2018).

The Bible provides many examples of the characteristics a pastor should possess. Titus 1:16 and 1 Timothy 3:2, explain that if a pastor is married, they must be in a monogamous relationship and that a pastor's love for his wife is indicative of his love for the Church. First Peter 5:3 explains that pastors must serve as examples to members of the congregation, family and friends, members of the community, and others. Titus 1:17 states that a pastor must be modest, calm, sober, diplomatic, and must not be greedy. Titus 1:8 states that a pastor must be welcoming, honest, holy, practice self-discipline, and endorse and encourage that which he genuinely believes is just and good. Titus 1:9 states that a pastor must have the ability to teach rather than merely instruct. In a longer description, Timothy 3:1-7 states:

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore, an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his household, how will he care for God's church?

The Bible also provides many examples of the counseling process and its purpose. Proverbs 15:22 states, “Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers, they succeed,” referring to the value of hearing multiple perspectives and opinions as opposed to sole self-will. Similarly, Proverbs 11:14 states, “Where no wise guidance is, the people falleth; But in the multitude of counselors there is safety.” Galatians 6:2 explains, “Bear one’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ,” which refers to servitude.

There is a distinction between pastoral counseling and pastoral therapy (Magezi, 2016). Pastoral counseling is recognized as a single component of a larger role of the ministry, and pastoral therapy is more specific, entailing therapeutic exercises (Magezi, 2016). Modern-day pastors must adapt to generational needs and trends. In American culture, trends include a shift in focus away from the Church and therefore out of people’s awareness (Nelson, 2020). Garo Lindner (2020) explains that the modern era is marked by liquidity and change, with liquidity referring to fast-paced adaptations made to social dynamics, increases in rate of consumption, and ever-evolving personal and communal characteristics (Garo Lindner, 2020). Change in the modern day includes a shift in focus away from the Church, diverting it from people’s consciousness; rising globalization, and the breakdown of institutions (Garo Lindner, 2020; Nelson, 2020). For pastors to serve in a time defined by change, Gano Lindner (2020) explains that pastors must develop various identities, or a collection of selves, to better understand the differences between the people they serve and the world around them. Referred to by Gano Lindner (2020) as multiplicity, the researcher explains that multiplicity is shown when variance is present. As a result of these external differences, faith-based institutions are also characterized by liquidity (Gano Lindner, 2020). The Church acts as a breathable entity, changing and adapting to reflect the greater culture, and if the pastor and church leadership do not change in some

regard, whether that is in perspective, focus, or awareness, then congregants may be likely to go elsewhere where their spiritual needs are better met (Gano Lindner, 2020).

God wants pastors to be shepherds for other people. John 21 describes the restoration of Peter and includes a conversation that took place between the post-resurrection Jesus and Peter, a fisherman from Bethsaida (John 1:44). In this event, Jesus appeared to his disciples after being resurrected and spoke chiefly to Peter. It is a story of forgiveness, but it is also a story about servitude, in which Jesus teaches Peter to be a shepherd for others.

This passage is a lesson of forgiveness, and forgiveness is a pillar of acceptance. Jesus teaches Peter, and readers of the Bible and followers of Christianity, the importance of forgiveness (Adriprasetya, 2018). Pastoral counselors are individuals whose servitude is commonly sought after by congregants and other members of the community in need of counsel, direction, and/or support with challenging life circumstances (Adiprasetya, 2018). Pastoral counseling is a type of therapy that combines spirituality with psychological therapy to best assist clients in addressing their life challenges (Pedhu, 2020; Schuhmann & Darden, 2018). Also known as spiritual care, pastoral counseling can help clients better handle their difficulties, formulate ideas about their personal potential and positive relationships, and enrich their relationship with God (Pedhu, 2020). In the modern era, pastoral counselors provide service to people and institutions that are both religious and non-religious (Schumann & Damon, 2018).

Clients have the option to participate in both individual and group counseling with pastoral leadership (Pedhu, 2020). Pastoral care provides a bridge between the church and its congregants, and without offering pastoral care, the church does not have a direct line of communication between itself and those in the congregation (Asomoah, 2018). The pastoral counselor embodies the Church and is therefore religious-based, and every counseling session

serves as a bridge between the congregant and God (Agilkaya-Sahin, 2016). If pastoral leadership does not offer counseling services, the congregation will remain unaware of congregants' life challenges and therefore unable to assist in identifying solutions (Asomoah, 2018). According to Alva (2017), pastoral leadership should be in regular communication with Christian members and families in their congregation and be available to address their related concerns and needs. By providing congregants with counseling services, pastors are also able to better comprehend the lived.

Life presents a multitude of challenges, and people may seek therapy or counseling to identify workable solutions. The challenges that people commonly face are complex but largely fall under the categories of emotional, physical, spiritual, psychological, financial, social, or material problems (Asomoah, 2018). Spiritual challenges may entail people under demonic possession or spells; emotional problems may be associated with relationships; physical problems entail illness and sickness in the body; material problems may be a lack of material provisions, like food and shelter; social problems may pertain to children or partners displaying abhorrent behaviors, such as infidelity, robbery, or prostitution; psychological problems may include addiction issues; and financial problems may include financial insecurities (Asomoah, 2018). People may commonly experience troubles or difficulties at work or in school, which manifests as stress (Alva, 2017). Unable to cope with the problem at hand, some people may turn to harmful alternatives as an escape, which can result in them becoming addicted to adverse habits or things (Alva, 2017). Stress and unhealthy coping mechanisms can have adverse effects on marriage and family and can result in weakening ties between partners and family members (Alva, 2017). Of pastors, Timothy 4:2 states, "Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction."

To integrate religion into the counseling experience, pastors may begin the very first session with a client by inquiring about their conception of God and, for marital counseling, about the clients' conception of what they believe God's definition of a healthy relationship is (Cheney, 2020). Pastors, chaplains, and other religious leaders can provide pastoral counseling to members of their congregation, and people of all faiths and no faith (Tinsley & Prentice, 2016). In an in-depth study using the responses from semi-structured interviews with two pastoral counselors who were also licensed clinical mental health professionals, one of the respondents described adding a chair to his office that he casually referred to as his "social chair," and congregants and others were aware that they were welcome to sit in this chair when communicating with him (the pastor) (Cheney, 2018). The counseling sessions between pastors and their congregants take place within a limited timeframe and focus chiefly on problem-solving and focusing on thoughts and behaviors (Agilkaya-Sahin, 2016). The sessions can be held in various settings, including the congregant's home, and in institutional environments.

Pastors may be exposed to a wide range of issues from married congregants seeking counsel. In a study conducted by John (2016) in Domboshava, Zimbabwe, a Christian-dominant country, of 111 Christian church members and 104 church leaders, the greatest causes of marital problems leading to conflict and divorce were infidelity, domestic violence, and alcoholism. Very few church members felt personality differences were irrelevant in a sacramental union (John, 2016). Pastoral leaders in John's (2016) study observed that married couples tended to play the "blame game," or blame each other for their differences or problems. In Ozyigit's (2017) phenomenological study of 14 students, seven women, and seven men, ages 22-32, in their final year of higher education, when asked about problems they could potentially experience in their marriages that could lead to separation or divorce, participants mentioned

social, sexual, and financial problems; social problems were associated with partners' family members and outside family members interfering on marital issues. Other potential problems expressed by participants included jealousy, persistent disagreements and arguments, distrust, disrespect, infidelity, domestic violence, disparities in culture and perspective, and comparison to others (Ozyigit, 2017).

### **Church Leaders and Young Congregants**

Christianity has expanded and developed beyond its traditions as they were once outlined long ago. Today, there are countless practicing Christians who practice behaviors that are discouraged and rejected by traditional Christian values, such as cohabitation without marriage, in addition to fleeting, non-lasting relationships and civil unions between homosexual partners (Vorster, 2016). Christianity as a faith emphasizes familial relationships rooted in love but growing influences from non-spiritual and non-religious people have stirred questions on the traditional conception of family and marriage, particularly surrounding perceived significance (Alva, 2017). For instance, the growth in connectivity and the increase in digital devices has resulted in more deception and superficiality in relationships; a phenomenon that correlates with a growing tendency for younger persons to look past stricter social contracts, like marriage, and prefer a more casual lifestyle, such as non-marital cohabitation (Alva, 2017).

In the Bible, a collection of sacred texts revered by Christians, Jews, and other religious groups, the notion of the covenant of marriage is one of the main concepts supported (Vorster, 2016). Marriage is recognized as a sacrament in all three branches of Christianity: Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodoxy. The covenant of marriage is associated with conception and is perceived as the official and holy relationship that exists between God and his people, and between partners and each other in a marital union (Vorster, 2016). Carnal relations are

imperative for creation to occur, and these relations are supported only in a holy, sacramental union (Vorster, 2016). Christianity supports those partners in a union, namely adults, essentially becoming a single entity with the sacramental marriage, and there are many instances in the Bible where this is expressed. Genesis 2:24 states, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” Other mentions of marriage in the Bible include Ephesians 5:25: “For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her.” In Mark 10:9, it states, “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

The practice of Christian religious values is associated with traditional marriage practices (Rijken & Liefbroer, 2019). As a result, all circumstances that conflict with the idea of marriage, such as divorce and cohabitating without being married, are problematic and conflicting in the eyes of the religion (Rijken & Liefbroer, 2019). According to Rijken and Liefbroer (2019), individuals who are not religious are less likely to support Christian ideals surrounding marriage and therefore are less likely to perceive marriage as strongly and strictly (Rijken & Liefbroer, 2019). In Christianity, marriage is highly esteemed because family is seen as the mainstay of humankind (Alva, 2017). Christians believe that familial relationships that are rooted in love establish the foundation for a healthy civilization, and familial relationships that are not rooted in love will be riddled with conflict and, consequently, result in a society of corruption and disorder (Alva, 2017).

A study by Mullin (2016) found that religion contributes positively to longevity in marital unions. Mullin’s (2016) study looked at the effect of religion on enduring marriage through a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with 43 married, Christian couples. Couples attributed four factors that established a sense of holiness in their marriage: attendance of

worship services and church sermons, communication, first-rite rituals, and prayer. Older couples expressed that these social contexts allowed them to feel a greater sense of holiness about their marital union by allowing them to be seen publicly in a long-lasting marriage, which is received by others as God's work in action, and the type of union to strive for, generating positive feelings around the outcomes of sacramental marriages (Mullin, 2016). Older couples also expressed their beliefs that religion hurt their marriage when their cultural expectations and religious experiences clashed (Mullins, 2016).

Traditional Christianity outlines traditional marriage roles; something that may not be aligned with today's generation. Snow (2019) describes the notion of a Christian home, which is characterized by women assuming matronly duties, such as cooking, cleaning, and raising children. Christian marriages are monogamous, between a male and a female (Snow, 2019). There have also been changes in socially acceptable intimacies before marriage versus traditional practices supported by the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church supports complete abstinence from sex until marriage and prohibits the use of birth control (Kavakli, 2018). Among the most controversial issues are birth control, premarital sex, cohabitation, and homosexuality (Kavakli, 2018).

The church also supports the experience of one marriage and encourages couples to partake in preemptive practices to ensure their marriage is strong and does not culminate in divorce (Kavakli, 2018). In a study on the impact of Catholicism on the intimate relationships of young adult Latinos, Kavakli (2018) investigated the responses of 16 participants (eight males and eight females), ages 23-35, mostly Mexican (nine participants) and El Salvadorian (four participants) background, who partook in marriage preparation classes at a church in downtown Los Angeles, California, between March 2003 and November 2004. Results indicated that the



power of the Catholic Church to influence congregants to remain disciplined about heterosexual intimacy is decreasing. The Catholic Church remains resistant to social trends and changes, with firm principles surrounding sexuality, divorce, abortion, and birth control; a sharp disparity to that of modern-day America, which encourages individuality and self-reliance (Kavakli, 2018). In Kavakli's (2018) study, marriage preparation class participants were not fully convinced of the teachings of the Catholic Church. Kavakli (2018) justifies the radicalism surrounding sexuality in young Latina Christians by explaining that one of the church's fundamental methods of control over congregants is the restriction of sexuality; a traditional principle that is now resisted by even some of the most religious followers. Participants did not distinguish themselves differently as practicing Christians for deciding to partake in premarital sex, birth control methods, and other areas that are not supported by the Catholic Church, but rather, they saw it as their right to practice personal choice (Kavakli, 2018). Further, in a survey conducted by Pew Research Study, when U.S. adults were asked whether they believed couples who are living together but not married can raise children as well as married couples, or that married couples could do a better job raising children than cohabiting couples who are not married, 59% of U.S. adults felt that cohabiting couples could raise children just as well as married couples; this same belief was echoed by nearly half (48%) of White Catholics and nearly three-fourths (73%) of Hispanic Catholics (Horowitz et al., 2019).

Religious people worldwide are influenced by the traditional and conservative philosophies of their respective religions, coupled with progressive modern-day trends and social norms (Santos, 2018). In a qualitative study by Santos (2018) of 84 young Catholics, ages 18-24, who responded to a free speech evocation test and an open-ended interview question via Facebook concerning their perceptions on HIV prevention and sexuality, the majority of women

supported that individuals should be permitted to partake in sexual relations freely and without discrimination and shame, but they should do so responsibly and with the use of protection via condoms (Santos, 2018). In further demonstrating the diversity of young practicing Catholics today, most respondents were single (72.6%), more than one-fifth identified as homosexual (21.4%), and nearly one in 10 (9.5%) identified as bisexual. Of all respondents, 44.8% said they have had unprotected sex, and, of this percentage, nearly half (45.2%) said they did not use condoms (Santos, 2018). Nearly three-fourths (73.8%) of respondents said they attended church between two and three times a week, and 26.2% said they attended church four to five times a week (Santos, 2018). As stated, these findings are in sharp contrast to the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church, which supports that non-marital sex is a sin, but the perspectives of the participants reflect that of the more progressive views of young generations (Santos, 2018).

The third wave of the European Society Survey (2006-2007) of 43,242 respondents across 25 countries, age 15 and older, using face-to-face interviews, is the first and only ESS wave that collected information from respondents on their perceptions about factors that may challenge the notion of marriage, such as divorce, cohabitation without marriage, and having children out of wedlock (Rikjen & Liefbroer, 2019). Of the participants, most (39.78%) had no religious denomination, 30.84% identified as Catholic, 15.31% as Protestant, and 14.07% as Eastern Orthodox. Results indicated differences in perception concerning marriage, with Eastern European countries having the most traditional marital practices, including Ukraine, Romania, Russia, and Slovakia, and other countries, like Denmark, Norway, The Netherlands, and Finland having the least traditional marital attitudes (Rikjen & Liefbroer, 2019). The findings from this study show that a couple's familial background, which entails both partners' backgrounds, coupled with how religious the couple is, can impact how traditional they perceive marriage.

According to the study, the more religious the average population of a country is, the more likely people's traditional marriage attitudes are in that country (Rikjen & Liefbroer, 2019).

Along with familial traditions and personal choice, another area noteworthy of mention about marriage and the Catholic Church is the legalization of homosexual marriage in many American states and countries worldwide. According to Kirby et al. (2017), and Kettell (2019), the issue of homosexual marriage is a highly controversial and debated topic within the Catholic Church. Many people of minority sexual orientations are rejected by their church (Sutton, 2016). Rather than be recognized as homosexuality, bisexuality, or other, sexual or romantic feelings toward the same sex are upheld by Christianity as a sin (Sutton, 2016). Socially, in the United States, homosexual marriage is becoming increasingly accepted and supported (Rosenfeld, 2016). Public opinion surrounding homosexual marriage has changed more dramatically and quickly than any other measured public opinion attitude and has increased positively over the past 20 years (Lee & Mutz, 2018; Rosenfeld, 2016).

Twenty-eight countries worldwide have legalized same-sex marriage, with more than half of these legalizations happening in Western Europe, where the rate of Christianity is particularly high (Felter & Renwick, 2020). The first Western European country to legalize gay marriage was the Netherlands in 2001, followed by Belgium in 2003, Spain in 2005, Norway and Sweden in 2009, Portugal and Iceland in 2010, Denmark in 2012, France and the UK in 2013, Luxembourg and Ireland in 2015, Finland and Malta in 2017, and most recently Germany in 2019 (Felter & Renwick, 2020). In the U.S., the Supreme Court ruled on June 26, 2015, that homosexual couples had the constitutional right to marry, therefore declaring gay marriage legal across the nation (Felter & Renwick, 2020). According to Lee and Mutz (2018), factors that contributed to increasing support of homosexual marriage include increased social exposure and relationships

with people identifying as homosexual (gay or lesbian), increasing levels of education, and decreasing religiosity.

With so many influences affecting how Christianity is practiced today by followers on a personal level, it is likely for pastors to become increasingly exposed to people, circumstances, and events that may have been unheard of or forbidden in traditional Christianity years ago. To better connect with younger generations, pastors may have to familiarize themselves with social trends and relevant issues, particularly those impacting the demographic served by his or her respective congregation, or the greater community. According to Docu (2018), Millennials represent the generation with levels of anxiety that are unprecedented; a phenomenon associated with social media use and feelings of social isolation associated with social media. Many Millennials become addicted to their technologies and accompanying social media platforms, and experience a cycle of social media addiction, behaviors, reactions, and responses (Grau et al., 2019). Also of note is the prevalence of drug use and abuse in the Millennial generation, particularly that involving non-medical opioid abuse (Perron et al., 2017). The rise in the abuse of opioid prescriptions is magnified by a steeply rising drug abuse problem in the United States (Knopf, 2020). In a study about Millennial Health, a laboratory and urine testing facility, between 2013 and 2019, the rate of urine tests that tested positive for illicit fentanyl, also an opioid, increased by 798% nationwide (Knopf, 2020).

One of the major concerns of Generation Z is safety at school and associated gun violence, such as mass shootings. According to the American Psychological Association (2018), more than two in 10 students (21%) say the possibility of a shooting taking place at their school is a often or constant source of stress to them. Nearly three in 10 people (27%) in this generation also report mental health issues, describing their mental health as “fair” or “poor” and less than

half (45%) describing their mental health as “excellent” or “very good”; a statistic that is nearly double that of Millennials (15%) (American Psychological Association, 2018). Among Gen Z ages 18 to 21, nearly six in 10 (58%) report feelings of depression or sadness; more than half (55%) report a lack of interest, energy, or motivation, or feelings of anxiety or nervousness (54%) (American Psychological Association, 2018). Generation Z has a wide-sweeping range of sources of stressors, with the major sources including money (81% of all Gen Z), work (77%), and health-related concerns (75%) (American Psychological Association, 2018). Other sources of stress included the economy (46%), bullying/not getting along with others (35%), personal debt (33%), housing instability (31%), hunger/getting enough to eat (28%), drug and alcohol use or addiction in their family (21%) and dealing with gender issues relating to their sexual orientation/gender identity (21%) (American Psychological Association, 2018). With such a myriad of new challenges and influencers that were not present when the Christian traditions were first formulated, knowledge of congregants and their experiences could prove advantageous in a pastor’s ability to provide efficient counseling and guidance to congregants, including young marital couples.

Along with their difference in trends and challenges, pastors may also encounter congregants or clients who practice or interpret religion differently than they do. Prout et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study to compare and contrast the traits of Christian clients seeking psychotherapy and the Christian psychotherapists treating them. The study involved 22 therapists and 142 clients who were recruited from a Christian counseling center in an urban environment most of the patients were women (75.4%) between the ages of 18 and 17, and the majority were Caucasian (55.6%) or Asian-American (26.1%), and more than half were married (52.8%). Nearly eight in 10 (78.9%) described their religion as Protestant. Prout et al.’s (2020)

study was one of the first to describe individuals who proactively sought Christian counseling in terms of psychological and interpersonal distress, and their spiritual/religious practices and beliefs. Results indicated the clients pursued more negative religious coping strategies, such as pleading with God or blaming God for their life tribulations, than their religious therapists, who partook in positive religious coping strategies, such as Bible-reading, meditating, praying, engaging in community support, and interpreting adverse experiences as opportunities for spiritual growth (Prout et al., 2020). Although the religious psychotherapists in Prout et al.'s study were not pastors, the disparities that existed between them and their clients may provide insight into the relationship between pastoral leaders and couples seeking counsel from their congregation. According to Prout et al. (2020), there is a limited body of research about Christian therapists and their clients. Prout et al.'s (2020) study was one of the first to describe individuals who have proactively sought Christian counseling in terms of their psychological and interpersonal distress and their spiritual/religious practices and beliefs.

To meet the ever-evolving needs of congregants in the modern day, Magezi (2016) developed a series of suggestions for pastoral counseling by analyzing traditional pastoral practices in Africa and how they have evolved. Magezi's (2016) study offers insight into how pastors can adapt to the emerging needs of congregants and those seeking service, while also supporting the traditional teachings of the Church. Magezi (2016) supports that pastoral care should involve an amalgamation of traditional practices in the respective culture and pastoral care practices associated with the traditional Christian Church. This aspect calls for pastors to recognize the customs, social norms, and context of the present culture in which the ministry is located, and how this influences the experiences and life of congregants. In this perspective, pastors do not recognize the church as a standalone entity independent of the surrounding world

and developing contexts, but as an entity that coexists within a larger cultural context. Magezi (2016) also explains how there are differences associated with the religious practices and behaviors of congregants. Some behaviors follow Christian practices and values when their lives are void of difficulties or pressures, but when they experience challenging periods, they turn to the church in the form of prayer and Bible reading and may also seek assistance and guidance from church leadership (Magezi, 2016). These are individuals who actively practice the Christian faith but may only pursue additional counseling when issues arise. As pastors, they must guide and direct congregants to address their challenges through means of an underlying and greater trust in God and his power to provide solutions to all problems (Magezi, 2016). In circumstances where pastors may be unconvincing in their message, this can provide a sense of distrust in congregants and a lack of faith in the church's ability to practically address the spiritual problems they are undergoing (Magezi, 2016). Magezi also explains that there is another group of practicing congregants with unwavering faith in God and his message that they commit fully to their faith in the Catholic Church. Because of their unwavering faith, these individuals could experience alienation from their family members and friends and even other members of the community; if this is the circumstance, pastors in the modern day must empower these congregants by providing them with firm support (Magezi, 2016). When this situation is the case, it becomes the pastor's responsibility to encourage and direct congregants to pursue familial and friendship support from other communities and networks that are more aligned with their belief systems and their needs, to function as an emotional safety net (Magezi, 2016).

Pastors must also take steps to better understand and awareness of common challenges faced by members of their congregation. This is possible through the formation of groups of family, male, and female, and youth congregants to further inquire about the adversities in their

lives (Magezi, 2016). By formulating these groups and providing congregants with a further avenue by which to express their questions, concerns, and situations, pastors are better able to grasp modern-day issues that reflect current and ongoing problems and apprehensions encountered by their congregants (Magezi, 2016). In cases where congregants may contemplate leaving the church or leaving the church while experiencing serious challenges in their lives, pastors must turn to Christian values by reminding these congregants about the importance of trusting in God during these difficult times (Magezi, 2016). Brendenkamp and Shoeman (2015) found that a conclusionary reason for congregants' decision to come and go from their congregations can be explained by two inclinations: "push" dynamics that trigger the desire to leave a congregation, and a drawing or "pulling" dynamic that promotes the features that draw people to a congregation. In more extreme circumstances, and one that is aligned with more traditional values of the Catholic Church, Magezi (2016) explains that pastors may guide congregants through healing experiences and exorcism if it is believed that their life adversities and problems are attributed to spells or demonic possession. If such a situation is to arise, pastors are to pray using items of protection, such as oils, water, armbands, and cloth to ensure the congregant is shielded from the threat of evil spirits at all times (Magezi, 2016).

### **Summary**

In the Church today, pastors' responsibilities are supported by that of the Bible. But outside influences and the experiences of congregants have developed over time. Pastors offer counsel to young, married congregants offer them spiritual advice and counsel, but these young congregants are far more progressive than the traditional Church, with many of them having been exposed to circumstances such as divorce, second or more marriages from their parents, and have seen or partaken in non-marital cohabitation, childbirth out of wedlock, and premarital



copulation (Cohen, 2019; Manning et al., 2019; Wilcox & Wang, 2017). These factors are in opposition to the teachings of the traditional Church but are issues that affect congregants and may call for pastors' counsel. For church congregations and pastors providing counselors to married young Christians, namely those of the Millennial or Generation Z generations, pastors may adapt their counsel practices and strategies to consider the changes in life, common challenges faced, and concerns of their young congregants. This literature review explored topics including Erik Erikson's theoretical framework of lifecycle theory, which underpins this study; patterns in behavior associated with marriage for Millennials and Generation Z, and pastoral leadership and counseling. Following is a discussion on church leaders and young congregants. Chapter 3 is the methodology of the study:

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHOD**

This study considered the experiences of pastors providing marriage and relationship counseling to Millennials and Generation Z, given societal changes related to high rates of divorce, second marriages, premarital cohabitation, premarital copulation, and childbirth out of wedlock (Manning et al., 2019; Wilcox & Wang, 2017). Pastors provide relationship and marriage counseling to congregates, but changes to societal norms require their adaptation to keep the counseling relevant to the experiences of younger congregates (Merlos, 2019). Despite significant societal shifts regarding family life, there is a gap in the literature regarding how pastors have adapted to provide family and marriage counseling to younger congregates (Garo Lindner, 2020). The purpose of this phenomenological research was to understand the perspectives of pastors at the international ministry, Covenant Connections International (CCI) within the Northeast United States, regarding how their family and marriage counseling have adapted to serve the needs of younger congregates considering changing lifestyles.

Chapter Two discusses the role of the researcher, and Chapter Three discusses the methodology. The study utilized a qualitative phenomenological design. The central concept under exploration in the present study was the experiences of pastors with marriage counseling. The instrumentation used to gather data on this topic was semi-structured interviews. Next, the chapter will review procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke et al.'s (2014) thematic analysis process. Finally, the chapter closed with a review of ethical procedures and a summary.

### **Design**

The study was a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design. A qualitative methodology is more appropriate for the present study because it allows the researcher to explore

phenomena that are not easily quantifiable, such as the experiences with pastors regarding marriage and relationship counseling (Fossey et al., 2002). The transcendental phenomenological design was developed by Edmund Husserl in the 20th century (Groenewald, 2004). According to Phillips-Pula (2011), transcendental phenomenological design allows the researcher to obtain an unbiased description of the research data. A transcendental phenomenological design is most appropriate for the present study as it deeply explores the nature of specific phenomena (Flood, 2010). The present study considers the transcendental phenomenon of pastors providing marriage and relationship counseling to younger congregates. Other designs, such as a case study, could have been appropriate for the present study. However, the primary purpose of a case study was to closely investigate a single instance of a phenomenon, like marriage counseling provided through a single church (Fossey et al., 2002). That was less appropriate for the present study, as a case study would focus on a single instance of marriage counseling, rather than the entire phenomenon (Flood, 2010).

### **Research Question**

The following research questions guided the study. By addressing these research questions, the study accomplished the purpose of understanding the perspective of pastors regarding marriage counseling for Millennials and Generation Z. One main research question and two sub-questions were used.

**RQ1:** How do Covenant Connections International mature pastors describe their experiences counseling younger congregants?

**Sub-Question 1:** How do pastors describe the marital counseling needs of younger congregants?

**Sub-Question 2:** How do pastors describe the steps they take to support individuals in the Millennial Generation and Generation Z as they embark on marriage and family life, given changing lifestyle norms and church doctrines?

### **Setting**

The setting for this study was medium-sized cities in the Northeast states of the United States of America. There are over 450,000 pastors in the United States (Data USA, 2022). The specific population of this study was pastors from the Covenant Connections International ministries, which provide marriage and family counseling services to Millennials and Generation Z. There are approximately 700 working pastors from the Covenant Connections International ministry (Chen, 2019). The participants in the present study were selected using a purposeful strategy. A purposeful strategy was most appropriate for the present study as the population is comparatively small and it was impossible to recruit a representative sample from among the population. The pastors must have experience of at least five years of providing counseling to young adults in marriages. The age of selected pastors was between 50 -65 years old.

### **Participants**

Eight pastors were recruited to participate in a study using publicly available contact information obtained through the Covenant Connections International (CCI) church directory. CCI is a non-denominational fellowship of ministries. The participants were selected from non-denominational churches. The researcher sent emails to pastors in the church directory and posted informational flyers at pastoral residences with permission obtained from the church authorities. The researcher included information about the purpose of the study, the time commitment expected, and how to contact the researcher. The flyers and emails included information about the eligibility criteria. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the

participants. This sampling method is non-probability and allows the researcher to choose the participants depending on their experience.

Participants were eligible for the study if they were working pastors who have provided marriage or relationship counseling services to individuals they identify as Millennials or Generation Z. Participant eligibility was confirmed by ensuring that the individuals were pastors based on pastoral directories. Eligibility regarding providing marriage and counseling services was confirmed by the pastors, as it is impossible to ethically verify if they have provided marriage and counseling services to specific individuals of a specific age. In addition to the eligibility criteria, the researcher asked potential participants how often they provided marriage counseling services to young adults. Their responses were not used as an exclusion criterion but were used to select participants should more than the minimum required number contact the researcher regarding participation. Once the participants were selected, the researcher scheduled interviews in person or through web-conferencing software.

### **Procedures**

In the Procedures section, the steps necessary to conduct the study are outlined. This includes, but is not limited to, information about securing Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, eliciting participants for the study, gathering the data, and recording procedures.

### **The Researcher's Role**

The primary role of the researcher is that of an observer. The researcher participated in the study by developing the interview protocols and conducting the interviews. The researcher strove to develop an interview protocol that is appropriate for addressing research questions, thereby ensuring that the study achieved its primary purpose. While the researcher participated by asking the questions and drawing out additional information with follow-up questions, if

necessary, the researcher strove to be objective and did not influence participant responses. The researcher also participated by conducting the data analysis and identifying themes in the data. The researcher has no personal experience with pastors providing marriage counseling or acting as a pastor to a congregation. To manage these personal experiences and beliefs, the researcher closely reviewed the protocol to ensure that questions were not asked in such a way as to imply judgment of any kind. To future ensure objectivity and result validity, the researcher engaged in a reflexive journaling process to document decision-making and rationale.

The researcher did not recruit any participants with whom they have a personal relationship. Additionally, the researcher did not recruit from congregations where the researcher has known personal relationships. This step is to avoid pastors sharing any information about their counseling practices which might reveal personal information to the recruiter about individuals they know personally. The researcher asked that pastors not refer to any individual congregates by name, and the questions were phrased in such a way as to solicit general information, rather than any specific information about individuals seeking counseling.

By discussing pastor experiences generally, the researcher avoided soliciting information that might be considered private or confidential. These lessened ethical considerations related to the privacy of congregates. The researcher did not press for any information that pastors feel uncomfortable sharing and asked that the pastors talk about their experiences generally.

### **Data Collection**

The research question was addressed using the semi-structured interview protocol, qualitative questionnaires, and focus groups. Data triangulation was achieved by using these three methods of data collection. The data was collected from pastors living and working in Northeast states. The data were collected either through web-conferencing software or in person

at a mutually agreed-upon location. The interviews did not have a specific time requirement or limit but were designed to last approximately one hour in length.

The researcher requested permission from the participants to voice and video record the interviews. The interviews were recorded using a digital camera or the recording function of the web conferencing software. Once data collection was complete, the researcher transcribed the interviews using transcription software. The accuracy of the transcription was verified by the researcher following transcription. The researcher made changes to the automatically generated transcription, as necessary.

Once the transcripts were complete, the researcher sent them to the participants as part of the member-checking process. Member checking is when participants have an opportunity to verify that their responses are accurate to their communication and properly reflect the experiences they are meant to convey (Cadela, 2019). Member checking helped to improve the validity of the study conclusions (Cadela, 2019).

## **Interviews**

The instrumentation for the study was a qualitative interview protocol (Appendix A). The interview protocol was used to interview pastors in person or through web conferencing software. The interview protocol was developed by the researcher using the guidelines provided by Castillo-Montoya (2016). The four phases of interview protocol development are as follows: 1) develop questions that align with the research questions, 2) develop the questions to flow like a conversation based on inquiry, 3) solicit and receive feedback on the protocol, and 4) test the interview protocol. The guidelines developed by Castillo-Montoya (2016) are well-tested and utilized in research, having been referenced by approximately 2000 articles on Google Scholar.

Interview protocols generally are well-established as a valid research tool for collecting qualitative data and conducting thematic analyses (Fossey et al., 2002).

The following interview questions were used to collect data. According to Thunberg and Arnell (2022), researchers use semi-structured interviews in qualitative studies to understand phenomena that cannot be expressed in numbers. Researchers need to be flexible and with good communication skills to get the best out of the participants.

***Standardized Open-Ended Semi-Structured Interview Questions***

1. Tell me more about yourself.
2. How many years have been providing counseling to young couples?
3. Describe the experience of providing support and counseling to young couples.
4. How do lifestyle changes affect young couples?
5. How have you adapted to these changes to ensure you still provide quality counseling?
6. What challenges do you experience during this process?
7. What do you think should be done to help young couples today?
8. What are the causes of marital struggles among Millennials and Generation Z couples?
9. What do you think the government can do to reduce these struggles?
10. What is the role of the church in handling these challenges?
11. What is needed to support these young couples?
12. What do these couples need to cope with changing lifestyles?
13. As compared to older couples, what challenges do you experience when providing support to young couples?
14. What are the reasons why Millennial and Generation Z couples cohabitate?
15. Does premarital sex increase problems for young couples?



16. Why do these young couples remarry immediately after they divorce?

17. As a pastor, what are you going to do to reduce marriage problems among millennial and Generation Z couples?

### **Multiple Focus Group**

A focus group discussion was conducted to collect qualitative data. Focus group is a qualitative method that collects descriptive answers from the sample. Experiences, perceptions, opinions, and attitudes of participants regarding the research problem will be captured. Focus groups allow the researcher to collect in-depth data. I asked permission from the participants to use an audio recorder because it helps to collect and keep data accurately. According to Hennink et al. (2019), note-keeping also helped to identify the behaviors of the participants during the group discussions. I made an appointment with the participants. The focus group discussion was then conducted at the agreed location, which was a place easily accessed by the participants. The actual group discussion was conducted with an audio recorder while taking note of participants' behaviors (Wiot et al., 2019). The resulting data were analyzed using the thematic data analysis method. The group discussion lasted for approximately an hour.

### **Qualitative Questionnaire**

The third method of collecting data was a qualitative questionnaire (Appendix B). Open-ended questions were used to collect in-depth data. The materials provided by the respondents are very informative regarding the experiences and perspectives of the participants with the research phenomenon. To conduct this questionnaire, I began by developing open-ended questions. The questionnaire was sent to participants via their emails and was completed electronically (Daniels et al., 2020). The resulting data were analyzed using the thematic data analysis method.

## **Data Analysis**

The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, qualitative questionnaires, and focus groups were analyzed using Braun et al.'s (2014) thematic analysis protocols. The purpose of thematic analysis was to uncover overarching themes in the dataset that characterize the phenomenon. There are six steps associated with Braun et al.'s (2014) thematic analysis process. These steps were applied to all data collected.

The first step of the thematic analysis process includes closely reading the data to become familiar with the contents. The researcher reviewed the data until they were familiar with all the information contained within the data. In the second step, the researcher began the process of coding meaningful portions of the data with initial codes. These codes represent meaning in short phrases or single words. Once the data is coded, in the third step, the researcher refines the codes and groups them into related bundles. These bundles of codes form the building blocks of study themes.

In the fourth step, the researcher reviewed the themes for accuracy and completeness (Braun et al., 2014). The researcher considered if the codes included within the themes were too specific or too broad and made changes if necessary. The researcher ensured that all codes were related. In the fifth step, the researcher named and defined the theme. The names should be short and descriptive while accurately reflecting the included codes. The sixth step involved writing up the results of the data analysis in a study report (Braun et al., 2014).

## **Trustworthiness**

To ensure that the data results were trustworthy, the researcher worked to limit instances of personal bias that might impact the findings. The researcher had no personal connection to any of the participants or the sites where data collection takes place. To maintain data

trustworthiness, the researcher engaged in member checking (Cadela, 2019) and reflexive journaling processes (Tetnowski, 2015). During the reflexive journaling process, the researcher justified each study decision made and examined the decision for logical biases that did not originate from personal opinion or bias not represented by the participants. Triangulation in this study was achieved using different methods to collect data, which include interviews, qualitative questionnaires, and focus groups. When multiple methods are used, triangulation is achieved.

### **Credibility**

To ensure credibility, the researcher engaged in member checking and ensured that data saturation was reached. Member checking ensures validity by confirming that the data accurately reflects the perspective of the participant (Candela, 2019). Additionally, the researcher collected data until data saturation was reached. Saturation occurs in the dataset when there is no substantially new information collected by conducting additional interviews. In qualitative research, data saturation was believed to be achieved after conducting interviews with all the participants (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The credibility of the study was also increased through triangulation. This study used multiple data sources (semi-structured interviews, qualitative questionnaires, and focus groups) to develop a comprehensive understanding of the problem under study.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability and confirmability were ensured in the present study by using reflexive journaling practices which document all of the steps taken by the researcher to obtain the study results. Additionally, reflexive journaling allows the researcher to reflect on their decision-making and consider if decisions were made based on bias (Tetnowski, 2015). After the individual interviews, I sent each interviewee a transcript for their review, which enhanced

dependability and confirmability.

### **Transferability**

As the present study was a qualitative phenomenology, the results may not be transferable to other populations (Tetnowski, 2015). The results deeply explored the perspectives of participants in real-world conditions, but they will not be transferable to all locations. Some level of transferability can be achieved through peer review.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher gained access to participant data by contacting participants through publicly available contact information. The researcher obtained IRB approval to conduct data collection efforts and asked permission from pastoral authorities before posting any information about the study in churches or residences. The researcher maintained strict confidentiality by assigning anonymous identities to each participant. The researcher did not include any identifiable information in the study.

Participants were given an anonymous identifier, and no information related to their identity was included in the study. All materials for the study were kept on a password-protected computer, and stored in a locked home or office. The researcher was the only person to have access to the raw data. The materials will be stored for five years and then destroyed.

The researcher had no conflict of interest related to the study topic. The researcher did not recruit any participants with whom there was a previous relationship. Additionally, the researcher avoided recruiting from any churches where the researcher has known personal relationships with the congregates who may have received counseling related to the topic. During the interviews, the researcher ensured that all participants knew they could withdraw from the study at any time and their data would not be utilized. However, no one withdrew from the study.

## Summary

This chapter reviewed the study methodology. It began with a summary of the topic and then outlined the role of the researcher as an observer. Then, the study discussed the method for selecting participants from among the population of pastors. The study included 8 participants who have experience providing marriage counseling to Millennials and Generation Z. The primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview protocol that the researcher developed. The data was analyzed using Braun et al.'s (2014) thematic analysis process. The study maintained strict confidentiality, and all data were saved on password-protected computers. This concludes Chapter 3. Chapter 4 includes a summary of the study findings.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

The purpose of this chapter was to present the findings that emerged from executing the data collection and data analysis procedures described in Chapter Three. The findings presented in this chapter serve as the basis for the conclusions and recommendations presented in Chapter Five. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe Covenant Connections International's mature pastors' experiences counseling younger congregants in the Northeast United States. Younger congregants included Generation Z individuals who were born in the mid-to-late 1990s through the early 2010s. Pastors who participated in this study were between 50-65 years old. The following section of this chapter is a description of the participants' demographics. This chapter then includes a presentation of the study results, followed by a chapter summary.

### **Participants**

The participants were a sample of eight pastors recruited using publicly available contact information obtained through the Covenant Connections International (CCI) church directory. CCI is a non-denominational fellowship of ministries. Participants were eligible for the study if they were working pastors who had provided marriage or relationship counseling services to individuals they identified as Millennials or Generation Z. Table 1 indicates the demographic characteristics of the individual study participants. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

#### **Katherine**

Katherine has served in pastoral ministry for over 29 years in the Northeast. Her ministry has been a member of CCI for 11 years. She is a former banker. She answered the call of God to full-time ministry in 2012. She caters to women and families who are broken. She is a part of Covenant Connections International.

**Ray**

Ray has served in pastoral ministry for about 32 years. He is a part of Covenant Connections International. He has many years of counseling experience. He loves the Lord and accepted his call at a very early age. He has four sons who are also in ministry. Two of his sons are pastors. Ray loves to minister to millennials and Generation Z couples.

**James**

James is a minister in South Carolina and has been for about 14 years. Before pastoring he was a deacon serving in different ministries within the church such as a teaching ministry. He loves teaching the Word of God and seeing lives changed. His gift is to take some of the most complex things in life and try to make them into something applicable and adjustable to life.

**Margaret**

Margaret is a mother of two. She has been married for 30 years. She is a part of Covenant Connections International. She pastors in the Northeastern United States. She is a pastor of a non-denominational church. She is a business owner and an artist. She has been providing counseling for young couples for at least 18 years. She loves seeing young couples' lives change their lives for the better. Margaret has been a member of CCI for 18 years.

**Michael**

Michael has been pastoring for the past 17 years. He is married with three wonderful children. He travels around the country. He has been providing counseling to young couples for 22 years.

**Wallace**

Wallace loves doing ministry out in the community in the Northeastern US. He has an online ministry for people around the world. He has been providing counseling to young couples

for over 19 years.

### **Riley**

Riley has been pastoring since 2004. He has worked with children, youth, and adults. He has worked with people of all ages. Riley currently connects with all those ages in ministry. He was just a part of a young adult retreat. He and his wife have been serving in this ministry since 2004. He and his wife Loraine have been in full-time ministry since 1999. He has been involved with young adult counseling since 1999.

### **Marcus**

Marcus has been married for over 30 years. He has been pastoring for 25 years. He loves working with millennials and Generation Z couples. He also functions as an Elder in CCI.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

	Gender	Marital status	Years of experience counseling younger congregants
Katherine	Female	Married	30
Roy	Male	Married	32
James	Male	Married	19
Margaret	Female	Married	24
Michael	Male	Married	22
Wallace	Male	Married	11
Riley	Male	Married	18
Marcus	Male	Married	20

## **Results**

### **Theme Development**

Data from the interviews with the eight participants was analyzed using the inductive, thematic procedure recommended by Braun et al. (2014). The procedure had six steps: (a)



familiarization with the data, (b) initial coding, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing the themes, (e) naming the themes, and (f) presenting the findings (Braun et al., 2014). The following sections indicate how these steps were applied to the data.

### ***Step 1: Familiarization with the Data***

To gain familiarity with the data, the transcripts were read and reread multiple times. The purpose of this step was to comprehend the data as a whole so that patterns of meaning could begin to be identified within and across the transcripts. Handwritten notes were made during this step regarding repeated words, phrases, and ideas to serve as a basis for code formation.

### ***Step 2: Initial Coding***

Initial coding began with dividing the data into meaning units, which were phrases or groups of consecutive phrases that each expressed a single idea relevant to addressing one of the research questions in this study. An example of a meaningful unit was the following statement from Katherine: “Look for a mentor that can mentor them [young couples] in this journey of marriage.” A total of 91 meaning units were identified across the eight transcripts.

The meaning units were then assigned to initial codes. Each meaning unit was assigned to a code. Each code was labeled with a brief, descriptive phrase that indicated the relevant meaning of the data assigned to it. The meaning unit just quoted from Katherine was assigned to a code labeled, ‘mentorship through the church.’ When different meaning units had similar meanings, they were assigned to the same code. As an example, the following statement from Margaret had a similar meaning to the statement quoted above from Katherine: “There just needs to be much more after-school programs, men, young men getting mentored, young ladies as well.” The statement from Margaret was therefore assigned to the same code as the statement

from Katherine. Overall, the 91 meaning units were assigned to 15 initial codes. Table 2 indicates the initial codes and the number of meaning units assigned to each of them.

**Table 2**

*Data Analysis Initial Codes*

Initial code (alphabetized)	<i>n</i> of participants contributing ( <i>N</i> =8)	<i>n</i> of meaning units assigned to code
Biblical counseling on marriage	5	5
Challenging but rewarding	5	5
Cultural sensitivity as a challenge	1	1
Finances as a cause of marital struggles	5	5
Guidance through the word of God	6	10
Lack of shared beliefs	5	6
Lower level of commitment than older generations	6	10
Meeting them where they are	4	4
Mentorship through the church	5	8
Modeling healthy marriage	3	3
Premarital sex increases problems	7	7
Resistance to help-seeking	1	2
Staying informed	7	7
Tendency of unmarried couples to cohabit	8	9
Younger generations are different	8	9

***Step 3: Searching for Themes***

To identify themes in the data, related codes were grouped into a smaller number of broader patterns of meaning (Braun et al., 2014). For example, the code “mentorship through the church was grouped with two other codes, including, ‘guidance through the word of God’ and, ‘meeting them where they are.’” These three initial codes were identified as related and grouped to form a theme because they all indicated participants’ perceptions of the marital counseling

needs of younger congregants. A second preliminary theme was formed of three initial codes that were identified as related because they all indicated steps the participants reported they had taken to support younger congregants. Nine initial codes were grouped to form a third preliminary theme because they all indicated participants' reported experiences of counseling younger congregants. Table 3 indicates how the codes were grouped to form the finalized themes.

#### ***Step 4: Reviewing the Themes***

The preliminary themes were reviewed first by comparing them to the data in the original transcripts to confirm that they each reflected a pattern of meaning in the participants' responses. All three of the preliminary themes passed this test. The three preliminary themes were then checked against one another to confirm that they represented sufficiently distinct concepts to justify their presentation as separate themes, and to confirm that it would not be more appropriate to merge two or more of them into a single, larger theme. The preliminary themes also passed this test. Each of the three preliminary themes was then reviewed singly to ensure that it represented a sufficiently cohesive concept to justify its presentation as a single theme and to confirm that it would not be more appropriately presented broken up into two or more smaller themes. Two of the preliminary themes passed this test, but the third preliminary theme, which was formed of nine initial codes that indicated participants' reported experiences of counseling younger congregants, did not pass this test. The third preliminary theme was accordingly broken up into two smaller themes, one of which included three initial codes related to general experiences of counseling younger congregants, and the second of which included six initial codes related specifically to challenges associated with counseling younger congregants.

### *Step 5: Naming the Themes*

The themes were named by comparing them to the research questions to assess which question each theme was most relevant to address. Once the themes were matched to the research questions, the data assigned to each theme was reviewed to identify the significance of the data in addressing the research question. Each theme was then named to indicate its significance as an answer addressing the research question. Table 3 indicates how the initial codes were grouped to form the named, finalized themes.

### **Research Question Responses**

This presentation of the research question responses is organized under headings corresponding to the research questions. Under those headings, the themes that emerged during data analysis to address the research questions are presented. Table 4 is a preliminary overview of how the themes were presented to address the research questions. A detailed discussion of each theme is provided below.

**Table 3***Grouping of Initial Codes into Finalized Themes*

<b>Theme</b>	<i>n</i> of participants contributing ( <i>N</i> =8)	<i>n</i> of meaning units assigned to code
Initial code grouped to form theme		
<b>Theme 1: Counseling younger generations is challenging but rewarding</b>	8	19
Challenging but rewarding		
Finances as a cause of marital struggles		
Younger generations are different		
<b>Theme 2: The primary challenge in counseling younger generations is a lack of shared beliefs</b>	8	35
Cultural sensitivity as a challenge		
Lack of shared beliefs		
Lower level of commitment than older generations		
Premarital sex increases problems		
Resistance to help-seeking		
Tendency of unmarried couples to cohabit		
<b>Theme 3: Younger congregants need guidance through the Word of God, to be met where they are, and mentorship through the church</b>	8	22
Guidance through the word of God		
Meeting them where they are		
Mentorship through the church		
<b>Theme 4: Steps taken to support younger congregants included staying informed, providing biblical counseling on marriage, and modeling healthy marriage</b>	8	15
Biblical counseling on marriage		
Modeling healthy marriage		
Staying informed		

**Table 4***Themes Presented to Address the Research Questions*

Research question	Theme(s) presented to address question
<b>RQ1:</b> How do Covenant Connections International mature pastors describe their experiences counseling younger congregants?	<b>Theme 1:</b> Counseling younger generations is challenging but rewarding <b>Theme 2:</b> The primary challenge in counseling younger generations is a lack of shared beliefs
<b>SQ1:</b> How do pastors describe the marital counseling needs of younger congregants?	<b>Theme 3:</b> Younger congregants need guidance through the Word of God, to be met where they are, and mentorship through the church
<b>SQ2:</b> How do pastors describe the steps they take to support individuals in the Millennial Generation and Generation Z as they embark on marriage and family life, given changing lifestyle norms and church doctrines?	<b>Theme 4:</b> Steps taken to support younger congregants included staying informed, providing biblical counseling on marriage, and modeling healthy marriage

*Primary Research Question*

RQ1 was: How do Covenant Connections International mature pastors describe their experiences counseling younger congregants? Two themes emerged during data analysis to address this question. The themes were: (Theme 1) counseling younger generations is challenging but rewarding, and (Theme 2) the primary challenge in counseling younger generations is a lack of shared beliefs. The following sections are more detailed presentations of these themes.

**Theme 1: Counseling Younger Generations Is Challenging but Rewarding.** All eight participants contributed data to this theme. The participants indicated that counseling younger generations was challenging but rewarding. Members of younger generations presented themselves for marital counseling primarily because of disputes concerning finances, most

participants said. All of the participants expressed the perception that members of younger generations were different from members of their generation.

In expressing the perception that members of the younger generations (Millennials and Generation Z) were different from their generation, all eight participants cited differences in values and beliefs. Katherine described an example of different values related to premarital cohabitation:

This particular couple that I am currently counseling to get married, I'm grateful for them thinking about getting married, but they actually live together. And that is so much against the word of God. But that's their truth. That's how they got to this point. And I'm glad that they made a decision that they want to get married. But this generation that we're dealing with is so much different from the previous generations than I've dealt with before.

James discussed how perceptions had changed across generations: "We have a view of things, and they have a view, they got a view of how they think things ought to be and the way that things need to be." Margaret attributed generational differences to the differing circumstances in which the respective generations had come of age: "The way things are is so different. So it can be a very stressful time that they need support and guidance through it, or it's hard for them to handle on their own." Riley described moral values on a societal scale as having undergone pervasive changes that caused younger generations' worldviews to differ substantially from those of older generations: "The time that they grew up in was obviously far different from the time that I grew up in. Society has changed, as far as moral values. Changed considerably." Michael perceived younger generations as granting themselves more license than previous generations had done in terms of lifestyle choices: "They're embracing a more liberal lifestyle

than my generation, and with a lifestyle change, I think that they adapt to make it work, and they become tolerant or embracing of things that we would not have.” Thus, in the aggregate, the participants perceived the members of the younger generations they counseled as embracing more liberal lifestyle choices than members of their generations, possibly because of changes in societal norms and morals.

Five participants reported that the cause of marital struggle that most often caused younger couples to present themselves for counseling was financial disputes. James said of the causes of marital discord in younger couples, “I will say number one is finances.” Margaret agreed, adding the perception that the younger couples he counseled did not know how to manage their money: “Finances seem to be quite a deal with quite a few [younger couples] that I’ve talked to. There’s no concept of how to manage finances, so that’s always a big disruption.” Wallace agreed with Margaret, saying that finances were the most frequent cause of marital struggles among the younger couples he counseled because, “They were not trained or taught financial literacy, financial management.” Michael provided further corroboration, stating, “Finances are probably the number one” cause of disruption in younger couples’ marriages. It may therefore be seen that the participants perceived younger couples as presenting themselves for counseling most often because of financial disputes and that some participants perceived younger couples as potentially differing from older generations in their lack of preparation to manage their finances.

Given the differences between the norms among the younger generations the participants counseled and the norms of the participants themselves, counseling younger people was challenging. However, the participants also reported that they found it rewarding. James said of counseling members of younger generations, “Number one, it is challenging. Number two, it’s



very rewarding.” As an example of how counseling younger couples could be both challenging and rewarding, James recalled a young couple who were cohabiting before their marriage:

I remember we had a couple that wanted to get married, and they were [already] living together. And we had to challenge this. And they both had given their life to Christ. You know, and the question came up, and it was, I had worked my way to ask them to separate themselves out, when the young man came to the counseling session and said, “Pastor, I want to live right for Jesus.” So, he moved himself into another room in the house there until they got married . . . So that, to me, that’s the great, rewarding part of counseling with young couples.

Michael described counseling younger couples as “tricky,” because young people often did not want to follow instructions, but as often successful when he tailored his counseling to meet the couples’ individual needs:

Every case is different. I wish it was cookie-cutter, but it just doesn’t work that way.

Providing counseling to younger couples is a little tricky, because they are in a very, what I call impressionable part of life. And they’ve also been impressed by life for their little time of being around. And so, getting them to follow instructions more than what they want to do, it becomes a little challenging at times. But in my counseling, I have a track record of success, that they have stuck with the program, and it worked out.

Riley described counseling younger couples as enriching: “It’s been very fulfilling, it’s been very educational, just loving the impact of seeing young couples grow and develop into healthy relationships with one another. So, it’s been very, very fulfilling.” Wallace said that counseling younger couples could be challenging if either spouse perceived the counselor as taking sides: “You can have couples that would lash out thinking that you’re preferring one side

to the other. And so sometimes, I would say one of the key things for me is not to take it personally.” For Wallace, the reward came when counseling was successful and marriage was saved: “More important is seeing resolutions, especially when you feel or see the results of effective counseling.” Thus, intergenerational differences in values could make counseling younger couples challenging, but the participants found the effort rewarding. The following theme is a closer look at the differences in values and beliefs between the participants and the younger couples they counseled that made counseling challenging.

**Theme 2: The Primary Challenge in Counseling Younger Generations is a Lack of Shared Beliefs.** All eight participants contributed data to this theme. The finding indicated that the primary challenge participants reported in counseling younger generations was a lack of shared beliefs between the younger couples they counseled and the participants themselves. One domain in which participants often perceived an absence of shared belief was in younger couples’ perceived lack of belief in commitment to marriage. A second domain was in younger couples’ perceived permissiveness regarding premarital sex, which permissiveness the participants did not share. Relatedly, the participants reported that the young couples they counseled often cohabitated before marriage, a practice that the participants believed was wrong.

Seven participants reported that one significant belief they appeared not to share with many of the younger couples they counseled was that premarital sex was sinful, morally wrong, or in any way problematic. Katherine said of sexual activity between couples,

I think that it’s something that is God-given. It should be activated [only] in married couples. But I believe with all of my heart that we’re not taught right and shown where those boundaries are. There are a lot of times that those boundaries have been exceeded with couples.

Roy pointed out that from a purely practical standpoint, “Premarital sex produces children. And when children come, there’s more problems. You’re not married, that creates problems. When you have sex before you get married, you’re not committed.” James corroborated Roy’s response:

There’s a 99.9% you may end up pregnant. And here you have a child, and you’re not married? And that’s a problem . . . Is your mom willing to raise the child, or his mother to raise your child, while you go try to get a degree or go to college or meet your dreams?

Margaret pursued a different line of argument, saying that premarital sex depreciated marriage: “The biggest thing that we that we can give to each other is our bodies fully. And so when that’s already been given, then, you know what? What’s the big deal about marriage? That lessens the beauty of marriage.” Riley discussed the psychological damage that premarital sex could do to those who practiced it:

When you have premarital sex, you become—I don’t know if we’ll use the term soul-tied—but you become bound to the person in so many different ways. And the problem with that is that if that relationship doesn’t work, then the negative things that happen in that relationship are carried over to our next one. And so, having premarital sex damages a person emotionally, mentally, you begin to believe that longevity is impossible to attain in a marriage or in a relationship, that there are no good relationships out there. So, the person becomes very, very closed off to others, and they begin to live a lifestyle of continual fornication.

Marcus said that when people had sexual intercourse without the commitment of marriage, it could create physically and psychologically damaging stress: “If you’re not committed, well,

what can happen, it causes a lot of stress in multiple areas, not only in people's bodies, in their mental health.”

The younger couples that the participants counseled often did not share their belief in the sinfulness, moral wrongness, and practically problematic nature of premarital sex, all eight participants reported, as evidenced by many of those couples' practice of cohabitating before marriage. Marcus reported that some younger couples told him they cohabitated as a kind of probationary period in their relationship before making the full commitment of marriage: “They feel like they are testing the waters, so-called, and trying to make the decision or choice whether or not they're going to make a cup of full, true commitment.” Roy agreed with Marcus and said why some of the younger couples he counseled chose to cohabit— and how their relationships devolved— “They want to see if they're compatible, so they live together five or six years. Three and four children. Then the fathers have no commitment, and they leave the mother with the children and go and find somebody else.” Wallace expressed an insight into the “try-before-you-buy” view of cohabitation in suggesting that it signified unawareness of the spiritual dimension of marriage: “[Many younger couples] don't have a spiritual concept of marriage. They feel that if they can live together, they need to test out the waters. And they don't want to make a lifetime commitment in case it doesn't work.” James said of young couples who cohabitated, “Some of them, especially the young ladies, they just want to get out of their parents' house.” Margaret attributed young couples' high cohabitation rate to rising divorce rates among older generations:

Definitely see a lot of young couples living together, not getting married. It takes a lot for them to actually decide to get married . . . The result of rapid growth of divorce for the last quite a few generations has caused people to be reluctant to marry and rather just

settle with living together, and if things don't go well, they can just pack up their stuff and leave. That's the result of generational sin.

Riley agreed with Margaret that cohabitation among younger couples had something to do with broken marriages among older age cohorts: "I think number one, those couples who cohabitate rather than being married may have come from broken homes or may have come from abusive homes, where they have seen a negative aspect of marriage." Michael believed that young couples who cohabitated did not marry because "They don't think it's necessary." Michael believed that young couples often thought marriage was unnecessary because of bad examples set for them in society and the media:

[Younger couples tell me:] "Someone told us that it's not necessary to be married, married is [just] a piece of paper," [or,] "If you're married in your heart, you're married." And then somebody else did this for that reason back in "old times." So they have their reasons, and they watch people, watch the secular stars, and television, they've been married or not married.

Riley also cited negative examples from the media as influences on younger couples: "We see a lot of cohabitation in movies, where they teach you that you go into a relationship, and then you cohabit, and if it works, then we get engaged. So, it's the negative teaching that comes from society." Thus, the participants felt strongly that cohabitation before marriage was sinful and not in the spiritual, moral, or practical interests of couples, but many of the younger couples they counseled did not share this belief, as evidenced by their engagement in the practice.

A third domain in which participants felt that their beliefs diverged from those of the younger couples they counseled was the amount of commitment they believed was owing to marriage. The participants believed that a high level of commitment should be shown to a

marriage, but they perceived many of the younger couples they counseled as not sharing this belief. Katherine said of the lack of commitment to marriage he perceived in younger couples,

Younger couples are so fragile because they walk into it [marriage], most of them are the mentality of, I can get out if this happened, I could get out if that happens. If she does this, well, I'm getting out. And I think that how you support younger couples is to tell them, before you get in, you're getting in for life. And you're not getting in just for a short period of time.

Roy contrasted younger couples with couples of his generation: "Older couples have what they call stickability, even though they have problems. And young folks have problems today, but young folks don't have the commitment." Michael made a similar comparison: "The young couples, five minutes and they just give up, they walk away, they get a struggle if they're married, they didn't want to struggle, and they just pack up and leave . . . older couples stick around." Riley attributed younger couples' lack of commitment to a societal preoccupation with rapid gratification: "In today's society, everything is quick, you know, jump from one person to the next. And so longevity is not something that is discussed or thought of concerning relationships." It may be seen, then, that another area in which the participants perceived their beliefs as diverging from the views of the younger couples they counseled was in the level of commitment owed to a marriage, with participants believing that a high level of commitment was owed, and with younger couples being perceived as only offering a low or transitory level of commitment.

In summary, the primary challenge that the participants experienced in counseling couples from younger generations was a lack of shared beliefs between themselves and the younger couples they counseled. The lack of shared moral axioms or a shared frame of reference

for values made it difficult to provide authoritative moral guidance. Katherine described how it could be disorienting to realize how much his values and beliefs—and even his definitions of common words—differed from those accepted by the younger couples he counseled:

One of the things that we presented was: What is your definition of infidelity? What is your definition of somebody's cheating? And the answers were so outside of the spectrum of what I expected it to be. It was actually amazing to see how human beings think. For example, one of the individuals said, "I can go out with somebody, I can text them all times of the night, and that should not be an issue. I can have a close, close, personal female friend, and they can come over." And it's amazing how people have moved way outside of the norm. So I find it to be alarming. But again, that's their truth. And my job is to help them identify where the boundary line is.

Roy said that the lack of shared beliefs between generations, and the new lifestyle choices facing younger generations, were the primary challenges facing more mature counselors:

The challenges are trying to keep up with the times and the actions that young people are encountering. Some don't believe in marriage. Some are having problems identifying who they are as a person. They don't know whether they're he or she . . . We have to try to counsel them to the best of our ability, but sometimes what you believe, they don't believe. That could be a challenge.

Riley described a lack of shared beliefs about marriage as her biggest challenge as a counselor of younger couples: "That mindset that marriage is all fashion is one of the biggest obstacles I've faced . . . because society through entertainment media has been pushing the agenda of freedom of sexual expression, you don't have to be committed." Marcus spoke of the need to acknowledge the different ways of thinking in the younger generations, to meet them where they

are, and then to present the word of God to them: “Their relationship with God becomes a different way of thinking. And so a challenge there is finding out what that concept looks like in their lives and then communicating, here’s some other things also to think about.” The following themes indicate the participants’ experiences of how they successfully counseled members of younger generations, and what they found the counseling needs of younger couples to be.

***Sub-Question One***

SQL was: How do pastors describe the marital counseling needs of younger congregants?

The following theme emerged during data analysis to address this question:

**Theme 3: Younger Congregants Need Guidance Through the Word of God, to Be Met Where They Are, and Mentorship Through the Church.** All eight participants contributed data to this theme. The finding indicated in part that most participants perceived younger couples’ counseling needs to include guidance through the word of God, which they believed should be provided through biblical teachings and instruction through the church. Participants also perceived young couples’ counseling needs as including being met where they are, and using impartial questioning to assess their mindset and beliefs to approach them with spiritual, moral, and practical guidance without alienating them through premature judgment. A third counseling needs that some participants perceived was mentorship through the church, either from peers or from older members of the church community.

Six participants reported that in their experience, they had found the counseling needs of younger couples to include guidance through the word of God. Katherine believed that younger couples needed this guidance because many of them had so conspicuously lacked it in their previous upbringing:



It is obvious that they do not have enough of God's word on the inside of them, it is obvious, it is overwhelmingly obvious that because a lot of couples have not really been raised in the church, and gone to Sunday school, young people need to get that word into them to really guide them morally. That guidance is now done by something outside of God's word.

Roy believed that younger couples needed, "Christian education," so that they could, "Be doers of the Word," and, "erase the things that are detrimental to your life and your lifestyle and your marriage. Let them things go." James believed that younger couples needed to be taught God's plan for them:

We have to provide them with spiritual counsel and show them that this is what God has pledged. This is God's plan . . . They need to have a great relationship with God . . . they got to understand what God is saying to them, and his love.

Riley believed that the church should prepare young people for marriage by teaching them God's word and love through Christ: "I think the role of the church is to educate young people, first, individually, on the Word, on who they are in Christ, how to find that true love by being in a committed relationship with the Lord." Part of preparing young couples for marriage, Riley added, should involve, "Plentiful teaching on how to individually love themselves through God, how to love each other with God in the middle."

Four participants indicated that one of the counseling needs of younger couples was for more mature counselors to meet them where they were, or to assess their beliefs and worldviews nonjudgmentally and approach them with teachings rather than alienating them with premature judgments. Marcus provided insight into how counselors can meet younger couples where they are and then teach the word of God by,

Having a conversation with questions to find out what their view is, and then from there, if you understand what their view is, then you can begin to ask questions related to their views and also provide additional advice or additional information that will help in communicating specifically from the word of God and saying, “Here’s how this is applicable,” very similar to what Jesus did with parables, being able to take what they are going through today, and associate that to biblical principles.

Katherine emphasized the importance of not being judgmental, on the one hand, while not compromising the word of God, on the other hand: “I try not to be judgmental. And I try to always present the word of God to them. And don’t ever compromise the word, but present that this is what the Bible says, this is what God’s word said.” Katherine said that one way in which he met couples where they were while preparing them to receive God’s word was by asking them, “What kind of couple are you going to be? Are you going to be a Christian couple? And I think a lot of times that are there a lot of couples not sure exactly what they want to be.” Michael said of the need to meet younger couples where they were by being nonjudgmental, without compromising Christian values,

I just think we need to be a little open, not relaxed in our morals, or compromising our godly standards, but be a little more open and receptive to be able to love and not be so hell-bent on sending people to hell.

Marcus summarized this open, nonjudgmental approach that did not compromise Christian values as, “Meeting them where they are and loving them.”

Five participants expressed the view that the counseling needs of younger couples included providing or facilitating mentorship through the church. Katherine stated that counselors of younger couples should, “Look for a mentor that can mentor them in this journey

of marriage. Because if you don't have one, the likelihood of you falling along the wayside is very high, [and] it has to be in the church." Margaret agreed, saying, "There just needs to be much more young men getting mentored, young ladies as well . . . So that's one of the main things we [as counselors] can do is provide [mentors]." Michael also suggested that pastors should help younger couples find mentors within the church: "I believe in the premise of accountability partners or mentors. As pastors, we can do a portion, but if we have mentors that will be able to mentor them part of a week, I think it'd be very good." Michael also believed that the mentor should be within the church: "I think if we as a church, counsel them, we also give them an accountability partner or mentor." Thus, participants believed that the counseling needs of younger couples included guidance through the word of God, being met where they are, and mentorship through the church.

### *Sub-Question Two*

SQ2 was: How do pastors describe the steps they take to support individuals in the Millennial Generation and Generation Z as they embark on marriage and family life, given changing lifestyle norms and church doctrines? The following theme emerged during data analysis to address this question:

**Theme 4: Steps Taken to Support Younger Congregants Included Staying Informed, Providing Biblical Counseling on Marriage, and Modeling Healthy Marriage.** All eight participants contributed data to this theme. The finding indicated in part that one of the steps participants took to support younger congregants was staying informed about changing lifestyle norms and other circumstances affecting younger generations. An additional step that some participants took was providing biblical counseling on marriage. Lastly, some participants reported that they modeled healthy marriages for younger congregants in their marriages.

Seven participants reported that a step that they took to support younger congregants was to stay informed about changing lifestyle norms and other circumstances affecting the younger generations. Roy, for example, described himself as, “trying to keep up with the lifestyles that they are encountering. Being educated as much as possible, keeping up with the times and the changes that are going forward.” James spoke of staying informed by listening to younger congregants:

We have to be willing to hear this young generation, you have to be willing to listen to them. And not just hearing them, but then we have to look at what it is that they’re saying to us, and see how we can help them to navigate through that.

Riley provided a similar response to James’s, stating, “I always listen to what they have to say, their concerns.” Michael spoke of staying up to date on developments in the news:

We try to stay up with the latest news, the trends that are going on. As we all say, we would love for this to be a godly nation, but we know it’s not. We adapt ourselves to the changes.

Wallace also said, “I make sure that I stay briefed on new things that are happening.” Thus, most participants perceived staying up to date on news, trends, and cultural developments, either through the media or through listening to younger congregants, to be an important part of supporting the younger couples in their care.

Five participants indicated that a step they had taken to support younger congregants was providing biblical counseling on marriage. Katherine reported that he attempted to, “Constantly reinforce what the Bible says about marriage. constantly reinforce how they’re supposed to approach marriage, how they are to not be angry, and how to forgive, and how-to walk-in love.” James said of marital problems among younger couples, “The only way to reduce that is to

biblical counseling,” which he provided to couples on a weekly basis. Michael reported providing biblical counseling at retreats where “We can help them [younger couples] and just teach the gospel and teach them what it means to have successful marriages.” Marcus said that he provided biblical counseling, “pointing in a direction that not only has them focused only on the spiritual aspects, but that they are focused on their souls.”

Three participants indicated that they supported younger congregants by modeling healthy marriages in their marriages. Margaret stated, “I try to display my intimacy with my wife and our connection very publicly, so that it’s a good example.” Margaret explained the reasoning behind the decision to present his marriage as a model:

I think the biggest thing is modeling because there’s been such a poor model that they have to see that there is hope that you can have a good marriage, there can be bliss in marriage, it can be wonderful, can be beautiful. So, it just needs more couples modeling it in a good, positive way.

Riley also presented her marriage as a model, and she said, “You need to learn from people who will have the fruit on the tree that you’re looking for. And that’s how I will help, teaching them and then showing the example.” Marcus stated that he supported younger couples by, “Showing through lifestyle what marriages should look like, how healthy marriages are and what they look like, and preaching according to those types of relationships.”

### **Summary**

One primary research question and two sub-questions were used to guide this study. The primary research question was: How do Covenant Connections International mature pastors describe their experiences counseling younger congregants? Two themes emerged during data analysis to address this question. The first RQ1 theme was: that counseling younger generations

is challenging but rewarding. All eight participants contributed data to this theme. The participants indicated that counseling younger generations was challenging but rewarding. Members of younger generations presented themselves for marital counseling primarily because of disputes concerning finances, most participants said. All participants expressed the perception that members of younger generations were different from members of their generation.

The second theme presented to address the primary research question was: that the primary challenge in counseling younger generations is a lack of shared beliefs. All eight participants contributed data to this theme. The finding indicated that the primary challenge participants reported in counseling younger generations was a lack of shared beliefs between the younger couples they counseled and the participants themselves. One domain in which participants often perceived an absence of shared belief was in younger couples' perceived lack of belief in commitment to marriage. A second domain was in younger couples' perceived permissiveness regarding premarital sex, which permissiveness the participants did not share. Relatedly, the participants reported that the young couples they counseled often cohabitated before marriage, a practice that the participants believed was wrong.

Sub-Question One was: How do pastors describe the marital counseling needs of younger congregants? The following theme emerged during data analysis to address this question: younger congregants need guidance through the Word of God, to be met where they are, and mentorship through the church. All eight participants contributed data to this theme. The finding indicated in part that most participants perceived younger couples' counseling needs to include guidance through the Word of God, which they believed should be provided through Biblical teachings and instruction through the church. Participants also perceived young couples' counseling needs as including being met where they are, using impartial questioning to assess

their mindset and beliefs to approach them with spiritual, moral, and practical guidance without alienating them through premature judgment. A third counseling needs that some participants perceived was mentorship through the church, either from peers or from older members of the church community.

Sub-Question Two was: How do pastors describe the steps they take to support individuals in the Millennial Generation and Generation Z as they embark on marriage and family life, given changing lifestyle norms and church doctrines? The following theme emerged during data analysis to address this question: steps taken to support younger congregants included staying informed, providing biblical counseling on marriage, and modeling healthy marriage. All eight participants contributed data to this theme. The finding indicated in part that one of the steps participants took to support younger congregants was staying informed about changing lifestyle norms and other circumstances affecting younger generations. An additional step that some participants took was providing biblical counseling on marriage. Lastly, some participants reported that they modeled healthy marriages for younger congregants in their marriages. Chapter Five includes interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations derived from these findings.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

This study described the Covenant Connections International mature pastors' experiences counseling younger congregants in the NE U.S. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, qualitative questionnaires, and focus groups. Data triangulation was achieved by using these three methods of data collection. The data was collected from pastors living and working in Northeast states. The qualitative data collected through the semi-structured interviews, qualitative questionnaires, and focus groups was analyzed using Braun et al.'s (2014) thematic analysis protocols. The purpose of thematic analysis was to uncover overarching themes in the dataset that characterize the phenomenon. Chapter Five presents a summary of the findings, a discussion of the findings and the implications in light of the relevant literature and theory, implications, delimitations and limitations, and recommendations for future research, as well as the conclusion.

### Summary of Findings

Eight pastors recruited using publicly available contact information obtained through the Covenant Connections International (CCI) church directory shared their experiences through semi-structured interviews. The summary of the findings was presented for each research question as described below.

#### ***RQ1: How do Covenant Connections International Mature Pastors Describe Their Experiences Counseling Younger Congregants?***

The counseling of younger generations was reported to be challenging but rewarding at the same time for the younger generations and the pastors themselves. The majority of the younger generation church members presented themselves for marital counseling primarily because of disputes concerning finances. The findings indicated that these younger generation



members are different from the members of the older generation. The main challenge encountered by most pastors is a lack of shared beliefs between the pastors themselves and the younger couples they counseled, including a lack of belief in commitment to their marriage and permissiveness concerning sex before marriage. According to the participants' responses, younger generation couples mostly cohabit before marriage, which is a wrong practice.

***Sub-Question One: How do Pastors Describe the Marital Counseling Needs of Younger Congregants?***

Pastors believe that younger church members need to be guided through God's Word. This guidance through the Word of God could be provided at any place where they are and become members of the church to be guided through the church. The guidance through the Word of God can be provided through biblical teachings via the local church. In their provision of guidance about marriage, pastors indicated that young couples' counseling needs could include the use of impartial questioning to assess their mindset and beliefs as well as being met where they are. Such processes can help in approaching them with spiritual, moral, and practical guidance, which would prevent their alienation through premature judgment of their beliefs about life, especially marriage life. Mentorship through the church could be a marital counseling need among the members of the young generation. This can happen through mentorship from peers and older church members with experience in marital life.

***Sub-Question Two: How do Pastors Describe the Steps They Take to Support Individuals in the Millennial Generation and Generation Z as They Embark on Marriage and Family Life, Given Changing Lifestyle Norms and Church Doctrines?***

Pastors take various steps to support younger church members, including providing biblical counseling on marriage, staying informed, and modeling healthy marriage. Pastors who

counsel should stay informed of the new life trends, changing norms, and other situations that could impact younger congregants' way of life in marriage. The provision of biblical counseling on marriage can also help counsel younger church members on marriage in the pastors of those churches. Pastors also need role modeling in marriage. The participants indicated that they modeled healthy marriage for the younger congregants in the pastors' marriage, upon which the younger church members would follow their examples and live a healthy marriage lifestyle.

### **Discussion**

This section includes the interpretation and discussion of findings from emerging themes that were discussed in Chapter Four. The four themes that developed include counseling younger generations, which is challenging but rewarding, and the primary challenge in counseling younger generations is a lack of shared beliefs. Other themes included younger congregants needing guidance through the Word of God to be met where they are, mentorship through the church, and steps taken to support younger congregants, including staying informed, providing Biblical counseling on marriage, and modeling healthy marriage, as discussed below.

#### ***Counseling Younger Generations is Challenging but Rewarding***

The findings demonstrated that counseling younger generations could be challenging but rewarding at the same time for pastors and young couples. Disputes concerning finances were some of the challenges that made young couples seek marital counseling. The findings are consistent with previous literature, which indicated that millennials' challenges are majorly financial-based disputes that contribute to adverse effects on their marital status and life, including rising student loan debt, idling and falling incomes, and the experience of poverty due to lack of employment (Trehu, 2017). Although counseling younger generations could be challenging, there are rewards associated with counseling younger couples, including a

commitment to marriage and financial management, which contributed to a positive marital life as indicated by Mullin (2016) that religion contributes positively to longevity in marital unions due to counseling from the religious leaders.

There are also rewards of pastoral counseling for the younger generation of church members, which include an established sense of holiness in their marriage through attendance of worship services and church sermons, communication, first-rite rituals, and prayer (Mullin, 2016). Pastors in this study also expressed that these social contexts allowed them to feel a greater sense of holiness about their marital union by allowing them to be seen publicly in a long-lasting marriage, which is received by others as God's work in action, and the type of union to strive for, generating positive feelings around the outcomes of sacramental marriages (Mullin, 2016).

This study offers excellent insight that while pastors or church leaders may find counseling younger congregants much more challenging, such counseling is more rewarding to the younger generation couples and those expecting to get into marriage, including the need for marriage commitment and proper management of finances for those with financial disputes. Other studies have demonstrated that younger generation congregants live with a partner while being unmarried than those who live with a married partner, a practice that is against traditions of the church, which becomes a challenge for the pastors when counseling such congregants with different views about marriage (Manning et al., 2019).

The study findings have demonstrated that pastors face challenges when counseling younger generation congregants regarding marriage, including most of these young adults having been with their partners for years before getting married. These changes increase the marriage counseling needs of the younger couples seeking pastoral guidance as they have likely already

experienced many of the ups and downs associated with individuals who are newly married and living together for the first time (Morris, 2019). The findings have contributed to the previous literature by establishing that although marital counseling of the younger generation is challenging for the pastors providing guidance, it has rewards for younger couples, including a commitment to marriage and a strong marital relationship.

***The Primary Challenge in Counseling Younger Generations Is a Lack of Shared Beliefs***

Participants discussed a lack of shared beliefs between the younger couples they counseled and the participants themselves as a challenge in counseling younger generations in the church regarding the marriage lifestyle. A lack of belief in commitment to marriage was a great challenge among young couples. These findings are consistent with past research by Adhikari (2017), who revealed that the modern generation does not perceive love as the reason for committing to marriage and instead interprets it as a decision to embark on childbearing and family. The majority of the younger generation couples do not believe in commitment to marriage for a strong and permanent marriage lifestyle. Similar to current study findings, past research indicated the disparities that existed between pastors and young couple clients, showing a lack of shared beliefs about marriage between pastoral leaders and younger generation couples seeking counsel from their congregation (Prout et al., 2020).

Christian counseling in terms of the psychological and interpersonal distress of younger generation couples and the spiritual practices and beliefs, such as a lack of belief in commitment to marriage, was a challenge when counseling these young couples (Prout et al., 2020). Whereas church leaders believe in commitment to marriage, the younger generation of couples believes that marriage is meant mainly for cohabitation and bearing children and not committing to it among couples (Kavakli, 2018). Lack of shared belief between pastors and younger generation

church members was challenging for pastors to counsel them regarding marital life. According to participants, sex before marriage is a sin before God; however, younger generation members have different beliefs concerning sex before marriage.

These findings concur with the previous literature, which indicates that through marital counseling, the church supports the experience of one marriage and encourages couples to partake in preemptive practices to ensure their marriage is strong and does not culminate in divorce (Kavakli, 2018). In contrast, some challenges of marital counseling emanate from the influence of the church, such as the Catholic Church, which influences congregants to remain disciplined about heterosexual intimacy or celibacy, contributing to limited marital commitment among the younger generation of church members who decide to remain celibate than getting married (Kavakli, 2018). Lack of shared belief was also echoed in previous research, which revealed that adults felt that cohabiting couples could raise children just as well as married couples; this belief was not shared among the church leaders or pastors who believed that cohabiting before marriage is wrong and sinful before God (Horowitz et al., 2019). The research findings have contributed to the past literature by revealing that a lack of shared belief in commitment to marriage among younger generation couples in the church was a great challenge to marital counseling by the pastors.

***Younger Congregants Need Guidance through the Word of God to Be Met Where They Are and Mentorship through the Church***

From the study's findings, it can be established that younger congregants require guidance from pastors using the Word of God that is provided through biblical teachings about marriage and the sanctity of marriage for married couples. Confirming current study findings, previous research indicates that pastors should guide their younger congregants through the word

of God by establishing a healthy relationship with God, which forms the basis for pastoral work to guide and counsel congregants through biblical teachings and daily prayer concerning the sanctity of marriage (Chimoga, 2019). The current study shows that the church should prepare young congregants for marriage by teaching them the word of God and love through Christ for the sanctity of marriage and living holy and unadulterated without premarital sex. This is consistent with previous research, which indicates that pastors need to guide younger congregants by nurturing their congregants, offering them ample care, time, and love, and being cognizant not to prioritize the needs of congregants before familial needs (Chimoga, 2019). Pastors should be able to offer service and guidance to young generation congregants, placing a strong emphasis on the familial unit and marital life (Chimoga, 2019).

Research findings demonstrated that young couples' counseling needs can be met by being met where they are. This can be done through independent questioning to evaluate their mindset and beliefs to approach them with spiritual, moral, and practical guidance without estranging them through untimely judgment. Past research indicates that pastors need to nurture and guide younger congregants through counseling, evangelizing, visiting congregants where they are, praying with them, and teaching them God's word (Chimoga, 2019). The pastor should be patient with congregations and help them experience spiritual growth and development while also serving as a public leader (Chimoga, 2019; Manning & Nelson, 2020). Pastors should treat congregants similarly to employees through guidance and counseling by visiting them at their locations to offer spiritual advice, as the spiritual fitness of congregants can determine the pastor's success (van Beek, 2018).

Mentorship through the church, including peers or older congregants of the church community, can provide guidance and counseling to younger generation congregants.

Consistently, previous research has revealed that pastoral counselors can guide younger congregations through mentorship programs by offering direction and support in challenging life circumstances (Adiprasetya, 2018). These findings were also reported in other studies, which indicated that pastoral care provides a bridge between the church and its congregants through mentorship, and without offering pastoral care, the church does not have a direct line of communication between itself and those in the congregation (Asomoah, 2018). The current study findings have contributed to the body of empirical knowledge by establishing that younger generation church members need guidance through Biblical teachings, visiting them at their locations, and mentorship programs through the Church meetings.

***Steps Taken to Support Younger Congregants Included Staying Informed, Providing Biblical Counseling on Marriage, and Modeling Healthy Marriage***

Staying informed about lifestyle changes, trends, norms, and other circumstances affecting younger generations can be one of the steps to support younger congregants. As societal trends change and premarital copulation and cohabitation become a new norm over time, pastors need to adapt their counseling practices and strategies to account for the lifestyle changes, challenges, and concerns of their younger couple congregants (Buby & Dollahite, 2020). To support younger generations in marital counseling, pastors should also take steps to understand better and become aware of common challenges, such as changes in practices faced by members of their congregation (Magezi, 2016). This is possible through the formation of groups of family, male and female, and youth congregants to further inquire about the adversities in their lives concerning the changes in their lifestyles to provide effective marital counseling and support (Magezi, 2016). Pastors are better able to grasp modern-day issues that reflect

current and ongoing problems and apprehensions encountered by their congregants (Magezi, 2016).

Another step to support younger congregants would be to provide biblical teachings and counseling about marriage. Pastoral counseling and support can be more effective when the younger congregants being counseled feel able to discuss their lifestyle and concerns and are ready to be taught biblical values required in marriage, even if they do not adhere to the traditional interpretations of biblical values on marriage (Mwomah & Dube, 2018). Biblical teachings and counseling offer spiritual guidance to younger congregants about the need for sanctity and commitment to marriage, as well as the importance of avoiding premarital sex, which is sinful before God.

Where congregants may anticipate leaving the church or leaving the church during difficulties in their lives, pastors must turn to biblical teachings, counseling, and biblical values by reminding the congregants about the importance of trusting in God during their difficult times in marriage (Magezi, 2016). Role modeling of healthy marriage for younger congregants in pastors' marriages would help younger generation congregants learn how to handle marriage life and how to enter into marriage. The findings imply that showing through lifestyle what marriages should look like and preaching according to those types of relationships can be a good step in supporting younger generation congregants in church.

### **Implications**

This section comprises the theoretical implications, empirical implications, and practical implications, which discuss how various stakeholders may utilize the research outcome.



## **Theoretical Implications**

This study utilized lifecycle theory (Erikson, 1950; Pender craft, 2017) as a framework to investigate the Covenant Connections International matures pastors' experiences counseling younger congregants in the NE U.S. Lifecycle theory (Erikson, 1950) related to this present study, as embarking on marriage and starting a family relates deeply to the early-adult lifecycle stages. Moving from adolescence into adulthood, then getting married and increasing intimacy with a person represents a substantial amount of change. Individuals undergoing such changes may require additional support through marriage counseling and other services (Jenssen, 2020). One significant finding that emerged in this study was the theme that younger congregants need guidance through the Word of God to be met where they are and mentorship through the Church, which directly correlates with Erikson's (1950) Lifecycle theory that individuals undergoing specific changes including marriage may require additional support through marriage counseling and other services such as biblical teaching of the Word of God as well as mentorship programs on marriage and the need for the sanctity of marriage.

Participants of the study felt strongly about mentorship through the church, including older congregants of the church who can provide guidance to younger generation congregants about marriage and how to commit to marriage. The findings correlate with Erikson's (1950) Lifecycle theory, which indicates in the second stage that adulthood occurs when individuals are often married and while raising children, which requires more support on how to handle marriage and how to commit to the marriage without divorce (Bebchuk & Kastiel, 2018). This study is consistent with the Lifecycle theory (Erikson, 1950), indicating that moving from adolescence into adulthood, then getting married and increasing intimacy with a person

represents a substantial amount of change, such as marriage counseling and mentorship to younger generation congregants.

### **Empirical Implications**

This research provides information that can be useful to church leaders, pastors, congregants, and key stakeholders who work to ensure younger church members adhere to biblical moral guidance towards marriage. Empirically, this study adds depth to the unremittingly growing amount of research on pastors' experiences counseling younger congregants. This study reveals various challenges facing pastors who counsel younger congregants about marriage, including a lack of belief in commitment to marriage and disputes concerning finances, which negatively affect their intention to marry or commitment to the marriage. The research helps to show how staying informed about changes in lifestyle, trends, and other circumstances affecting younger generations can be used to support younger congregants who have yet to get into marriage.

Previous research has shown that pastors should also take steps to address common challenges, such as changes in practices faced by members of their congregation and trends in thinking and belief about marriage, to counsel younger congregants appropriately about marriage (Magezi, 2016). The study has also revealed that through mentorship programs, church leaders or pastors can support younger congregants by guiding them towards marriage with biblical sanctification of marriage as a commitment to God's blessings. Past research has emphasized that pastors can guide younger couples through mentorship programs by offering direction and support in challenging life circumstances (Adiprasetya, 2018). The findings of this study suggest that mentorship programs, guiding through the Word of God, as well as visiting younger congregants, can help them stay focused and ensure they get into marriage with commitment and

sanctity. The findings from this research add to the literature on pastoral counseling of younger generation congregants about marriage.

### **Practical Implications**

The participants hold a strong belief that a lack of shared belief contributes to a significant challenge in counseling younger congregants in churches by pastors. Pastors can use these findings to find appropriate strategies, such as biblical teaching and mentorship, to guide younger church members about the sanctity of marriage. This study was significant because it provides new information on the perspectives of pastors regarding how family and marriage counseling has adapted to serve the needs of younger congregates with changing lifestyles.

For many individuals, religious organizations serve as an essential source of social, ethical, and moral support (Mitchell, 2021). For religious organizations to continue to support their congregation, consideration should be given to the experiences and lifestyles of the congregants, including their belief about marriage, to ensure they correlate with biblical teachings about marriage, even if the church teachings do not condone specific behaviors (Merlos, 2019). Church leaders may use the study findings to ensure effective mentorship programs for the younger congregants about marriage.

Without adapting religious doctrine to endorse changing lifestyles, pastors can use this study's findings to consider what type of counseling might be most relevant to younger congregations and how to support individuals in healthy lifestyles best (Mitchell, 2021). By providing information about how pastors perceive marriage counseling for Millennials and Generation Z, this study collects necessary knowledge that could be helpful for pastors in developing and adapting best practices for Millennial and Generation Z counseling (Shaw, 2019). Pastors and other religious leaders may also use this study outcome to use biblical

teaching of the Word of God, mentorship, and visiting younger congregants to counsel them about marriage and marital lifestyle.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations are specific boundaries of the study, including the scope of the research. Merriam and Grenier (2019) described delimitations as the boundaries and scope of a study. The setting for this study was delimited to medium-sized cities in the Northeast states of the United States of America. Further, the delimitation of this study was the specific population of pastors from the Covenant Connections International ministries, which provide marriage and family counseling services to Millennials and Generation Z. There are approximately 700 working pastors from the Covenant Connections International ministry (Chen, 2019).

The study was delimited to a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design. A qualitative methodology was more appropriate for the present study because it allows the researcher to deeply explore phenomena that are not easily quantifiable, such as the experiences with pastors regarding marriage and relationship counseling (Fossey et al., 2002).

One of the limitations of this study was the use of a non-probabilistic purposive sampling technique. This sampling method is non-probability and allows the researcher to choose the participants depending on their experience, thus resulting in researcher bias. The researcher's bias limitation affects the validity of the study findings.

The second limitation was that the study focused on pastors as participants to gather information concerning counseling younger generation congregants about marriage. The limitation is that the study findings may not be applied to other populations outside religion or other church leaders and congregants as they may have different perceptions concerning counseling younger couples.

The third limitation was concerning participant selection criteria. The pastors must have had the experience of at least five years providing counseling to young adults in marriages, and the selected pastors must have been between 50 and 65 years old. This selection criteria limited pastors with counseling experience of fewer than five years from expressing the perception regarding counseling younger church members about marriage.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The need to mentor younger congregants to have successful marriages remains an issue that religious leaders and researchers continue to examine. While there is an extensive amount of research that centers on these marriage issues, there are gaps in the literature that require further research to identify strategies to ensure a shared belief between church leaders and younger church members about marriage and how to approach marriage. The information from this study can be used to aid church leaders in counseling their younger congregants concerning marriage and the sanctity of marriage.

The results of this study may offer further insight into the significance of the role that mentorship and biblical teachings have on guiding younger generation congregants on marriage. Therefore, it would be beneficial to determine how mentorship and biblical teachings may help to encourage younger generation congregants to approach marriage with holiness and sanctity of the Word of God.

Further research should be conducted using random sampling techniques to reduce researcher bias and enhance the validity of the study findings. One of the limitations of this study was the use of a non-probabilistic purposive sampling technique, which allows the researcher to choose the participants depending on their experience, thus resulting in researcher bias. As a result, I recommend that future researchers adopt random sampling methods that would enhance

validity by reducing researcher bias, as such techniques are dependent on the probability of being selected from a target sampling of potential participants.

The setting for this study was delimited to medium-sized cities in the Northeast states of the United States of America. Based on this delimitation, further study should be conducted in different geographical locations other than the Northeast states of the United States of America to enhance the transferability of the study findings. More research should be conducted on the same topic but in different settings to expand the transferability and generalizability of the research outcomes.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to examine the Covenant Connections International mature pastors' experiences counseling younger congregants in the NE U.S. Semi-structured interviews, qualitative questionnaires, and focus groups were used for data collection. The data was collected from pastors living and working in Northeast states. The qualitative data collected was analyzed using Braun et al.'s (2014) thematic analysis protocols. A lack of shared belief contributes to a great challenge in pastors' counseling younger congregants in churches, as confirmed by the participant responses. This study was important because it offers new information regarding the perspectives of pastors on how family and marriage counseling has adapted to serve the needs of younger couples with ever-changing lifestyles. The Word of God, Biblical teachings, mentorship, and visiting young congregants by pastors were some of the strategies participants recommended for pastors to use in guiding younger congregants. Pastors and other religious leaders can adopt this study result to counsel younger generation congregants about marriage and marital lifestyle. Further research should be conducted to examine how to use mentorship and biblical teaching to counsel younger congregants on marriage.

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### **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

1. Tell me more about yourself.
2. How many years have been providing counselling to young couples?
3. Describe the experience of providing support and counselling to young couples?
4. How do lifestyle changes affect young couples?
5. How have you adapted to these changes to ensure you still provide quality counselling?
6. What challenges do you experience during this process?
7. What do you think should be done to help young couples today?
8. What are the causes of marital struggles among Millennials and Generation Z couples?
9. What do you think the government can do to reduce these struggles?
10. What is the role of the church in handling these challenges?
11. What is needed to support these young couples?
12. What do these couples need to cope up with changing lifestyle?
13. As compared to older couples, what challenges do you experience when providing support to young couples?
14. What are the reasons why Millennial and Generation Z couples cohabitate?
15. Does premarital sex increase problem for young couples?
16. Why does these young couples remarry immediately after they divorce?
17. As a pastor, what are you going to do to reduce marriage problems among millennial and Generation Z couples?

**Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter**

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**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 12, 2023

Terry Skepple  
Rodney Phillips

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-1404 A Phenomenological Study Exploring Pastors' Experiences Counseling Younger Congregants with Changing Lifestyles

Dear Terry Skepple, Rodney Phillips,

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

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

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

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

**Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB.** Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP**

*Administrative Chair*

**Research Ethics Office**

## Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

### Consent Form

**Title of the Project:** A Phenomenological Study Exploring Pastors' Experiences Counseling Younger Congregants with Changing Lifestyles

**Principal Investigator:** Terry L. Skepple, Doctoral Candidate, School of Behavioral Sciences, Liberty University.

### Invitation to be part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be:

1. Current pastors listed in the pastor directory of the Covenant Connections International (CCI) church, a non-denominational fellowship of ministries
2. Who has provided marriage- or relationship- counseling services to young adults born after the year 1981.

Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

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

The purpose of this study is to understand the perspectives of pastors at the international ministry, Covenant Connections International (CCI) within the Northeast United States,

regarding how their family and marriage counseling have adapted to serve the needs of Millennials and Generation Z congregants in light of changing lifestyles.

### **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:

1. Complete an in-person, one-to-one interview that will take no more than 1 hour.
2. Complete an in-person focus group discussion with other pastor participants that will take no more than 1 hour.
3. Complete a questionnaire by email that will take no more than 1 hour.
4. Review my summary of your responses by email for no more than 15 minutes.

### **How could you or others benefit from this study?**

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

Benefits to society include providing new information on the perspectives of pastors regarding how family and marriage counseling has adapted to serve the needs of younger congregates with changing lifestyles.

### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. All materials for the study will be kept on a password protected computer, stored in a locked home or office. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with people outside of the group.
- Data will be stored on a password-protected computer, stored in a locked home or office. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then deleted. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

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

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study

## **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting 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. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

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

The researcher conducting this study is Terry L. Skepple. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged to** contact him at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Rodney Phillips, 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 IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

## **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 you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

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

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

### **Appendix D: Focus Group Questions**

1. Tell me about your experience as a pastor?
2. For how long have you provided counseling to younger couples?
3. Why do Millennials and Generation Z couples struggle in marriages?
4. What do you think Millennials and Generation Z couples need to do to cope up with challenges in marriages?
5. What challenges do you experience when supporting young couples?
6. What is your role in addressing these challenges?
7. What kind of support does the church need to address these challenges?
8. How is the church addressing marriage challenges among Millennials and Generation Z couples?
9. Does life pressure increase the likelihood of marriage challenges among Millennials and Generation Z couples?
10. What do these couples need to cope with changing lifestyles?

### **Appendix E: Questionnaire Questions**

1. What is your experience as a pastor providing marriage counseling to Millennials and Generation Z couples?
2. How would you improve your experience?
3. What marriage challenges do Millennials and Generation Z couples experience?
4. Do you consider changing your lifestyle as the main cause of marriage challenges?
5. Does the church have certain criteria for counseling?
6. What do you expect from our counseling sessions?
7. Are the couples willing to make the changes that are needed?