A Phenomenology of Spiritual and Religious Supports for Female Victims of Intimate Partner Violence

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Department of Community Care and Counseling, Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of Christian female victims of intimate partner violence as they engaged with their religious and spiritual supports through online interviews, journal entries, and focus groups. In this study, existential theory assisted in shaping an understanding of how victims of intimate partner violence interact with spiritual and religious supports to find meaning in their suffering and to identify what Christian women victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) describe as building their resilience and posttraumatic growth. Semi-structured interviews of 9 Christian women over 18 who experienced intimate partner violence were conducted. Secondly, journal entries were collected from the interviewees who were willing to respond to a journal prompt. Lastly, a focus group of 5 of the women who were previously interviewed was conducted in order to gain deeper insights from the participants. Responses from the interviews were coded and a list of significant statements by the participants was developed. Insights from the participants were summarized to offer greater understanding to helpers of intimate partner violence victims.

Keywords: Intimate partner violence, resilience, spiritual supports, posttraumatic growth

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List of Abbreviations

Conservation of Resources Theory (COR)

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Posttraumatic Growth (PTG)

Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of Christian female victims of intimate partner violence as they engaged with their religious and spiritual supports to identify what they describe as the spiritual and religious factors contributing to their resilience and posttraumatic growth (PTG). This opening chapter addresses the background of this study, including the historical, social, and theoretical context of the research problem. Next is a discussion concerning situation to self, followed by the philosophical assumptions in this study. Then a discussion of the problem and purpose statements are covered. Following these sections is a coverage of the significance of this study, followed by a list of the research questions, and a list of important terms to this study and their definitions. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary.

Background

Historical Context

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a widespread problem, which historically has and continues to pose a significant threat to women's physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual health (National Partnership for Women & Families, 2021). Women are the victims of IPV 76% of the time (Smith et al., 2018). A national survey revealed that lifetime prevalence rates of psychological aggression toward women are 50%, with 33% experiencing stalking, physical violence, or contact sexual violence (Smith et al., 2018). Fifty percent of female murder victims are killed by intimate partners (Ertl et al., 2019). In 2018, partner violence accounted for 20% of all violent crimes (Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019) and was the leading cause of nonfatal injury to women (Bradley et al., 2020). Homicide is a leading cause of traumatic death for

pregnant and postpartum women, accounting for 31% of maternal injury deaths; 63% of female homicide victims were killed by an intimate partner, in cases where the victims knew the offender (National Partnership for Women & Families, 2021). Nearly one in every five (23.2%) women have experienced severe physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime (Smith et al., 2018). Sadly, women are at great risk of harm and even death in their own homes (National Partnership for Women & Families, 2021). Living in this state of threat impacts their present and future well-being significantly (Bacchus, 2018; Bloom, 2021; FitzPatrick et al., 2022; National Partnership for Women and Families, 2021).

Greater awareness of violence against women arose as an international social issue in the early 1900s (Stark, 2007). With the rise of the feminist movement, activists became more attentive to the importance of advocating for the rights of women, particularly the right to be safe in one's home (Stark, 2007). This has resulted in a legal shift in the United States, culminating in the birth of the Violence Against Women Act passed in 1994 (VAWA, 2019). Thus, this act was a response to the growing concerns of activists who sought to increase services for victims and justice for perpetrators (Stark, 2007). In response to the need to offer a safe place to battered women, feminist activists and groups started shelters for the victims (Stark, 2007). Subsequently, more attention emerged and services for the victims have been formulated through social programs, justice systems, and legislation (Fowler et al., 2011; Postmus et al., 2009). Increased research has centered on chronicling the various harmful effects of IPV (Bradley et al., 2020; FitzPatrick et al., 2022; National Partnership for Women and Families, 2021) and investigating effective interventions for victims (Estrellado & Loh, 2019; Poleshuck et al., 2018; Sani & Pereira, 2020).

Social Context

Women of faith often turn towards their faith community in an attempt to respond to the pain they experience as a result of the violence and abuse in their homes (Drumm et al., 2014; Holtman, n.d.). Faith leaders are highly influential in the IPV victim's decision-making process (Holtman, n.d.). Christian women report that religious factors play an integral role in whether they leave an abusive relationship or receive sufficient support to transition from the abusive relationship (Wang et al., 2009). Faith leaders, therefore, serve as an enormous resource as a first line of response to women in desperate need of practical help, counsel, and spiritual guidance (Wang et al., 2009). Religious teaching on this topic is a powerful resource, as religion has the power to shape views and value systems, thus influencing societal and marriage norms (le Roux & Bowers-Du Toit, 2017).

While the Violence Against Women Act has raised social awareness of IPV in society, Christian communities often experience confusion about how to address violence in the family (Walker & Aten, 2012). Since secular feminist ideology is at the heart of the movement toward awareness of IPV (Stark, 2007), conservative Christian leaders are often suspicious of this movement's views and ideas (Moles, 2015). Equally, feminist activists often attribute the perpetration of IPV to the patriarchal system or church teachings (Mahomva et al., 2020). As a result, a rift has developed between mental health and Christian communities in their conception of and response to IPV (Moles, 2015). In response, mental health providers have increasingly avoided using spiritual or religious supports for IPV victims (El-Khoury et al., 2004) and church leaders have sidestepped engaging with the IPV issue (Moon & Shim, 2010).

Theoretical Context

This study addressed the Christian response to IPV, with a particular focus on whether spiritual or religious supports for victims encourage their growth in meaningful ways. Salutugenesis, a concept first introduced in 1979 by Aaron Antonovsky, focused on how individuals exposed to stress stay healthy and overcome traumatic events (Antonovsky, 1979). The existential theorists Victor Frankl (1963) and Irvin Yalom (1980) further explored how personal growth could emerge from great suffering and loss. Victor Frankl (1963) developed his theories on thriving during and after the trauma he endured as a prisoner during World War II. One of the tenets of his theory, logotherapy, posits that one must seek meaning in life as well as in one's physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering (Frankl, 1963). He postulated that one's cognitive response to suffering was the integral ingredient in growing after trauma (Frankl, 1963). This was the beginning of the development of an important theoretical and experiential underpinning of the PTG concept.

Christian pastoral work is typically focused on the development of spiritual maturity as an important goal for Christians (Fortosis, 1992). Developing spiritual maturity is a continual challenge in the life of any Christian, but the introduction of trauma, in particular violence in the family, can present an enormous challenge, creating a hindrance toward growth in believers as noted by Drumm et al. (2014). Francis (2019) states that the construction of resilience to cope with adversity would therefore be an important vision for pastors to adopt as they conceive of the goal of discipleship. In particular, women in abusive relationships should be adequately resourced to cope with the impact of the trauma on their minds and bodies (Drumm et al., 2014). Furthermore, they need substantial understanding and wise teaching about how to respond to the spiritual and practical issues at hand (Walker & Aten, 2012).

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory states that psychological distress following traumatic or highly stressful life events is strongly influenced by resource loss; trauma often results in individuals losing economic, social, and interpersonal resources central to their well-being (Hobfoll, 2001). Accordingly, Hobfoll (2001) theorized that if the traumatized person's loss was met with a meaningful experience of resource gain, their psychological distress would be lessened, and their sense of well-being would increase. For example, if victims of trauma were offered a space to feel safe or if their skills were enhanced, these resource gains would therefore counteract the resource losses, thus reducing the negative impact of the trauma (Hobfoll et al., 2003). The COR theory guides helpers of IPV victims by showing how offering practical aid to survivors is an important factor in developing resilience (Wang et al., 2009). If victims are offered options that contribute towards the prioritization of their safety, they have a greater chance of thriving (Wang et al., 2009). Similarly, if victims are supported with legal help to attain justice, their sense of agency might increase (Wang et al., 2009).

Lastly, the foundation of this study was the research conducted by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2013) on the development of PTG. They identified five distinct areas of growth that survivors of trauma report. The five areas are a belief that new possibilities exist, development of relationships, greater spiritual connectedness, increased appreciation of life, and recognition of personal strength (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). People who employ an expert companion develop PTG at higher rates (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). Expert companions, either friends, family, clergy, or professional helpers, offer long-term listening, support, and acceptance to survivors of trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). This study assessed whether victims of IPV accessed expert companions and how they reported their experience of growth after trauma.

Situation to Self

My motivation for pursuing this research was rooted in my experience as a biblical counselor working in private practice with Christian clients for 24 years. I have sought to help many female Christians experiencing controlling and abusive husbands to make sense of their emotions, choices, beliefs, and faith. This involved exploring biblical passages on marriage, helping clients voice their questions, and bringing clarity regarding how to seek help in their faith contexts. I hoped to give women like these a voice in the research literature, allowing them to inform how practitioners and faith leaders could assist future victims of IPV.

My axiological assumption was that every person is made in the image of God and therefore deserves to be treated with dignity. This core belief informed the study, as women are the focus of this research. Since women are made in the image of God, I believe that they should be treated with dignity, especially in their homes. Violence in the home is destructive, traumatizing for the victims, and sinful (Anderson et al., 2012). My biblical worldview also informed this research study. I believe the Bible is the authority for all human behavior and dictates how marriages and families should operate. Pastors are shepherds of God's people, called to protect, love, teach, and serve. Christian community is an important principle expressed in the Bible. Believers are encouraged to care for one another, weep with one another, and support each other in times of joy and crisis (*New International Bible,* 2021, Romans 12:10-15). My approach aligns with an existential methodology in that it incorporates the belief that people who suffer search for meaning and purpose in their pain. This pursuit is an important part of the development of resilience and self-efficacy (Frankl, 1985).

Problem Statement

The problem is a lack of research on the relationship between intimate partner violence and the influence of religious and spiritual supports on the development of resiliency and PTG (Bakaitytė et al., 2020; Drumm et al., 2014; Moon & Shim, 2010; Schubert et al., 2015). This phenomenological study addressed that gap, as I sought to understand the lived experiences of Christian female victims of intimate partner violence as they engaged with their religious and spiritual supports. When IPV victims seek out help, they are in vulnerable situations, often anxious and confused by the patterns of control at home and unsure how to proceed in their pursuit of securing safety for themselves and their children (Bloom, 2021; FitzPatrick et al., 2022). When they seek out faith leaders in an attempt to address their pain and confusion, they often experience greater misperception and mixed messages (Hurless & Cottone, 2018; Sojourners & IMA World Health, 2014; Walker & Aten, 2012). This study assisted in the future development of spiritual and religious interventions for women who experience violent traumatic events in their homes by identifying what they describe as spiritual and religious factors contributing to their resilience and PTG.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of Christian female victims of intimate partner violence as they engaged with their religious and spiritual supports in the United States. This study sought to identify what Christian IPV victims describe as the spiritual and religious factors contributing to their resilience and posttraumatic growth (PTG). In this study, existential theory, conservation of resources theory, logotherapy, self-efficacy, and posttraumatic growth provided an understanding of how victims of IPV interact with spiritual and religious supports to make meaning of their suffering. The concepts allowed

the researcher to identify what Christian women victims of IPV described as building their resilience and PTG.

Significance of the Study

This study addressed the gap in the literature regarding spiritual and religious supports for Christian female domestic violence victims (Bakaitytė, et al., 2020; Moon & Shim, 2010; Schubert et al., 2015). Understanding the processes that contribute to the experience of PTG or resilience assists faith leaders and mental health professionals in the development of interventions and supports to assist IPV victims, an area that other researchers have revealed as a need in the arenas of mental health services and faith systems (Bloom, 2021; Drumm et al., 2014; Shaw et al., 2022). Research was required to learn from the victims of IPV and develop better social and spiritual supports that could increase the likelihood of thriving after trauma.

The practical implications related to this research include the potential of increased understanding, skill, and ability for Christian clergy and congregations in their response to IPV victims, a need that various researchers have previously revealed (Choi et al., 2021; Flasch et al., 2017; Gonzalez-Mendez & Hamby, 2021). This study offered an understanding into how women have been practically encouraged and helped by their attunement with God, His Word, spiritual practices, and relationships in their communities. This notion lends more specificity to the research done by de la Rosa et al. (2016), Flasch et al. (2017), Gonzalez-Mendez and Hamby (2021), and Hamby et al., (2020) who all indicated positive outcomes for IPV victims as they connected with spiritual resources. This study added to the prior research evidence indicating that spiritual and religious interventions are instrumental in the healing and thriving of female Christian IPV survivors (Anderson et al., 2012; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2016). The research will assist future mental health interventionists to be better prepared to integrate spiritual

supports for Christian survivors, as well as address the need for critical feedback and education for pastors as was revealed by studies done by Bloom (2021) and Francis (2019). As faith leaders are offered the opportunity to grow in understanding of concepts like coercive control, IPV, trauma, resiliency, and PTG, they will be better equipped to serve families in their congregations.

Research Questions

Question 1: What is the lived experience of Christian women who face intimate partner violence as they engaged with their religious and spiritual supports?

This research question was meant to elucidate how Christian female IPV victims experienced their suffering and integrated religious and spiritual supports into their process of survival. It was necessary to investigate the lived experience of Christian women who faced intimate partner violence, as this topic is not well documented in the literature according to Moon & Shim (2010). Christian women reported that they look to their faith systems and engage faith leaders to help them respond to the meaningful issues of life, including marriage and family matters (Francis, 2019), but faith leaders report a lack of training and a tendency to avoid engaging with IPV issues (Moon & Shim, 2010). Therefore, pursuing this research question offered vital information regarding how these women report their interactions with both kinds of supports, which was indicated as a gap in the research on victims of IPV by D'Amore et al. (2021).

Question 2: How do Christian women who have experienced intimate partner violence describe their personal growth after seeking help as they engaged in their spiritual or religious supports?

This question was meant to reveal how growth occurs in the lives of IPV victims and how spiritual and religious supports contributed to this process. The faith of Christian women is an important factor in their emotional and psychological recovery from IPV and required greater

study as indicated by Braganza et al. (2022). The recovery and growth of Christian women who suffer from IPV are not well understood (Bakaitytė et al., 2020: Flash et al., 2017), leading to this important research question. Likewise, Davis et al. (2021) revealed the need for further study on the religious and spiritual domain of PTG for trauma survivors. Additionally, research on the general process of PTG in victims of IPV is sparse, as reported by Brosi et al. (2020). This research question addressed these gaps in the literature by investigating the relationship between religious and spiritual supports and the development of PTG and offered greater insight into how those support systems can be more effective in the development of growth in IPV victims.

Question 3: What do Christian women who have experienced intimate partner violence describe as spiritual or religious factors that contributed toward building their resilience?

This question was meant to reveal how resiliency develops in the lives of IPV victims and how spiritual and religious supports contributed to this process. Resilience is another important aspect of research for Christian women suffering with IPV since their ability to regain functionality in their lives is essential for themselves and their children. Since resilience refers to the ability to bounce back from stress or trauma (Estrellado & Loh, 2019), it required a different research question than the investigation of the development of posttraumatic growth, which refers to the experience of increased functionality after trauma and was addressed through research question 2. Additionally, there was a need for a more thorough discussion of spiritual and religious supports for those suffering from IPV, as these are not often addressed in the literature (Braganza et al., 2022). Also, until recently, the concept of resiliency has not been a topic of research for victims of IPV (Drumm et al., 2014; Fernández Álvarez, 2022). This research question explored this gap in the literature by offering insight into the relationship

between IPV, resilience, and the influence of spiritual and religious supports in the development of resilience.

Definitions

1. *Coercive control*- Non-violent tactics and methods used to mistreat the partner or maintain dominance, including close monitoring, isolation, and exploiting the female's emotional dependence on their partner (Crossman & Hardesty, 2018; Stark, 2007).
2. *Digital coercive control* or *technology-facilitated coercive control*- Using technological devices or digital media as a part of a pattern of control involving the acts of stalking, harassing, threatening, or abusing an intimate partner (Harris & Woodlock, 2019).
3. *Economic abuse*- A pattern of control over finances in which the perpetrator interferes with their partner's ability to access economic resources (Krigel & Benjamin, 2021).
4. *Emotional and psychological abuse*- Destruction of the victim's emotional or psychological well-being, which involves humiliating the victim, controlling the victim's choices, withholding important information, refusing to allow the victim to sleep, or isolating the victim from friends and family, threatening physical harm to the partner, children, partner's friends or family, destruction of pets and property, or forcing isolation from family, friends, employment, or education (Domestic Abuse, 2022; Krigel &Benjamin, 2021; National Institute of Justice, 2007).
5. *Intimate partner violence (IPV)*- An abuse of power and control involving the willful intimidation, physical or sexual violence, or the verbal, emotional, or psychological abuse committed by one intimate partner against another (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, n.d.).
6. *Posttraumatic growth (PTG)*- An increase in psychological functionality after a traumatic experience (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996).

7. *Religious support*- An organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to God, as Christians define Him (King & Koenig, 2009).
8. *Resilience*- A salutogenic concept describing the ability to bounce back from stress and trauma and return to normal pre-trauma functionality (Estrellado & Loh, 2019).
9. *Sexual abuse*- Pressuring the victim to have sex unwillingly or to do things sexually they are not comfortable with, forcing sex with others, refusing to use protection when having sex, or sabotaging birth control (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2020).
10. *Spiritual support*- The personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning, and about relationship to God, as Christians define Him. (King & Koenig, 2009).

Summary

This study intended to address the gap in the research regarding PTG, the development of resiliency, and the role of spiritual and religious supports for Christian female victims of IPV. Since Christian victims of domestic violence seek out spiritual and religious supports in their attempt to address their challenging marriages, this study explored their lived experiences when they pursued these solutions (Drumm et al., 2014; Holtman, n.d.). The study also sought to discover themes of spiritual support that contributed towards the resiliency needed by victims of IPV to survive, heal, and thrive after their exposure to traumatic situations in their homes, an area that is often unaddressed in the literature (Braganza et al., 2022). Furthermore, this study offered victims an opportunity to explain their systems of thought and their experiences as they sought out faith systems and leaders in their attempt to respond to their abusive environments. It offers practical strategies for faith leaders, mental health practitioners, and victims.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

Past research on intimate partner violence (IPV) has centered on the traumatic nature of the experience and the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as an outcome (Cobb et al., 2006). Intimate partner violence is also known as domestic violence, domestic abuse, or family violence (Estrellado & Loh, 2019; le Roux & Bowers-Du Toit, 2017). For this study, the term IPV was used to describe an abuse of power and control involving the willful intimidation, physical or sexual violence, or the verbal, emotional, or psychological abuse committed by one intimate partner against another (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, n.d.).

The most basic definition of a trauma is a wound caused by events or circumstances that are experienced as harmful or life-threatening, which result in strong emotional pain and lasting adverse effects on one's well-being and ability to function (SAMSHA, 2014). The stressful experience, in this case IPV, overwhelms the person's coping mechanisms and produces a wide range of symptoms. Victims of trauma often face multifaceted and painful symptoms including intense fear, anxiety, sleep disruptions, sadness, and depression (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Bloom, 2021; FitzPatrick et al., 2022; Heru et al., 2006). Trauma victims often find it very challenging to return to life as it was before the trauma, having their belief systems and sense of normalcy greatly disrupted (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013).

If the trauma was accompanied by a loss, a painful grieving process may ensue (Djelantik et al., 2019). IPV survivors may experience guilt, anger, or greater irritability after the trauma (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; McAllister & Roberts-Lewis, 2010). Intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, and nightmares are a common experience, as is the experience of hypervigilance, the feeling of

constantly needing to be on guard to protect oneself from a threat (Bryant, 2019; Scott-Tilley, 2010; US Department of Veteran Affairs, 2019). The IPV survivor's ability to work or relate normally with family and friends is often impacted as well (Katerndahl et al., 2013). In essence, many people emerge from trauma with significant disruption to their ability to function in many aspects of their lives.

The kind of stress that produces trauma involves the experience of terror and disconnection, where the victim is overwhelmed and rendered helpless by an event or a person (Herman, 1992b). This defines trauma as a potential experience for those who do not fit neatly into the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5-TR* (DSM-5-TR) definition in which a person needs to be exposed to actual or threatened death, violence, or serious injury (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). This is important, as trauma is experienced differently based on each individual's perspective, background factors, and history of trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). Therefore, IPV victims may not have been exposed to physical violence, injury, or threatened death in order to be considered trauma survivors. Traumatic stress often leads to the shattering of interpersonal trust or the person's worldview (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Levers, 2012). The destructive impact of trauma is difficult to quantify, but it is a comprehensive experience, affecting all aspects of the person including body, soul, and mind.

In general, women are at a higher risk of developing PTSD in their lifetime: 13-20% versus 6-8% of men (Bryant, 2019) for reasons not entirely clear to researchers, but may be related to their exposure to interpersonal violence. The kind of trauma that victims are exposed to is associated with a higher risk of developing PTSD. Those exposed to sexual or interpersonal violence experience more trauma symptoms than other kinds of trauma, for instance, natural disaster (Brewin et al., 2000; Bryant, 2019). Prolonged exposure to trauma is also a risk factor

for the development of PTSD and comorbid disorders like depression, anxiety, or substance use (Bryant, 2019). Lack of social support plays a role in increasing the risk of development of PTSD as well (Olff, 2012). Female victims of IPV are therefore at a greater risk of developing PTSD due to the multiple risk factors: their gender, having experienced interpersonal or sexual violence, the experience of isolation, and the likelihood of continual exposure to trauma (Brewin et al., 2000).

Olff (2012) asserts that the symptoms of PTSD are continually experienced by trauma victims due to the continual exposure to the cortisol stress response. Sufferers live in a continual state of stress response as the brain continues to stay on high alert long after the trauma experience has ended (Van der Kolk, 2015). Also, the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal gland axis is more sensitive in PTSD sufferers, which results in a dysregulated cortisol pattern (Van der Kolk, 2015). The normal regulation of the stress response is interrupted, leaving the trauma victim more susceptible to immune dysfunction and the development of cardiovascular disease and cancer (Olff, 2012; Sapolsky, 2004).

Lenore Terr (2013) describes several subtypes of trauma. She describes Type 1 as a single event/blow trauma like a car accident, natural disaster, or an event involving violence or sudden death. She uses the term Type 2, or complex trauma, to describe more complicated, multiple blow trauma resulting from repeated events across time. Complex trauma often arises as a result of severe, interpersonal, prolonged exposure to trauma (Herman, 1992a, Langberg, 2019). Since IPV is typically experienced as a severe, interpersonal, prolonged exposure to trauma, IPV victims are at a greater risk of developing complex trauma (Terr, 2013).

Complex Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD) was recently included in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD)-11 (World Health Organization, 2018). It can

develop after exposure to an event or series of events of an extremely threatening or horrific nature, most commonly prolonged or repetitive events from which escape is difficult or impossible, one example being prolonged domestic violence (Moreir, 2022). CPTSD includes the diagnostic criteria of the six core PTSD symptoms (which grouped into three categories includes re-experiencing the trauma in the here and now, deliberate avoidance of traumatic reminders, and experiencing a sense of current threat) but adds three clusters: affective dysregulation, negative self-concept, and disturbed relationships, reflecting a tendency to avoid interpersonal relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Barbieri, 2019). Complex PTSD is associated with higher levels of dissociation, depression, and borderline personality disorder than PTSD (Hyland, et al., 2018).

Victims of complex trauma tend to interpret negative events as something they earned, believing they are to blame for all the bad things that happen to them (Sanderson, 2013). They may exaggerate the threat that other people represent, believing that all people are untrustworthy, rejecting, or potentially abusive (Barbieri, 2019). They also may develop the belief that the world is hostile and full of danger. This can lead to a general sense of lack of safety and trust and towards developing a defensive posture, leading to disconnection from self, others and the world (Barbieri, 2019; Sanderson, 2013). In addition, negative beliefs about the future are common. For instance, some victims believe that they will be haunted by the abuse forever (Sanderson, 2013). A victim living with this unrelenting script of negativity can easily develop a sense of hopelessness (Sanderson, 2013). When their thoughts are reinforced by rejection from others and their posture of isolation, life can look dark and bleak (Sanderson, 2013). If these thoughts are not challenged, the negative beliefs can lead to person to experience pervasive anguish, despondency, and suicidal ideation (Sanderson, 2013). Female IPV victims are at greater risk for

experiencing all of these cognitive, physical, and emotional outcomes, including the experience of complex trauma (Brewin et al., 2000; Bryant, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

The outlook for traumatized individuals, therefore, particularly female IPV victims, can often be viewed as bleak (Bryant, 2019). However, more recently theorists have begun to become curious about another aspect of posttraumatic experience, the growth that some individuals report after they experience trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Victor Frankl (1963) wrote about the power of looking at traumatic experiences through a different lens. As a psychiatrist facing overwhelming evil as a prisoner in a death camp, he began to observe how suffering people survived and how the best aspects of humanity could be seen in contrast to the worst (Frankl, 1963). He noted that those who assigned meaning to their suffering were more likely to retain hope and even grow despite their circumstances. Frankl (1963) stated: "Suffering ceases to be suffering in some way at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of sacrifice" (p. 179). He observed firsthand that the kind of person a prisoner became was a result of inner decisions they had made, not merely the amount of trauma they experienced or how poorly they were treated. He further noted that these inner decisions were of a spiritual nature and that they involved the individual's freedom to make choices about their thoughts, actions, behaviors, and feelings. He concluded that one integral part of the development of meaning for the individual is the awareness of their freedom to make decisions regarding how they would respond to the suffering they faced.

Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory also reveals that post-trauma experiences can be reshaped and influenced in positive ways (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis, & Jackson, 2003). Hobfoll (2001) presented the theory that the loss of resources experienced in a traumatic

situation is a major driver of the experience of distress in survivors. In addition, if survivors are met with opportunities to regain resources that were lost in the trauma, they are able to regain a sense of psychological equilibrium and feel reduced distress (Hobfoll, 2001). Based on the COR theory, many IPV interventions focus on the promotion of self-efficacy, hope, safety, advocacy, and the provision of resources (Sullivan, 2012). The successful fulfillment of these goals has been shown to be a predictor of well-being and therefore is typically targeted by domestic violence programs (Sullivan, 2012).

Subjective well-being has been defined as the overall evaluation of one's quality of life (Deiner, 2009). It has been conceptualized as including three components: (1) a cognitive appraisal that life is good (i.e. life satisfaction); (2) the experience of positive levels of pleasant emotions; and (3) relatively low levels of negative moods. Whether the goal is defined as the pursuit of well-being, resiliency, or posttraumatic growth (PTG), this theory supports the notion that victims of IPV and other trauma may be able to move from surviving to thriving based on the support they receive (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2003). This support involves helping the victim notice and assess the choices they have before them, leading them to a greater sense of power over their own lives (Sullivan, 2012).

Similarly, Alfred Bandura (1977) presented self-efficacy; defined as the belief that one is competent and able to perform the actions needed to achieve a goal. This is similar to the concept of internal locus of control presented by Rotter (1966). When one possesses an internal locus of control, they believe that they, not external forces, have control of the outcomes of their lives (Türk-Kurtça & Kocatürk, 2020). This is a helpful context with which to view victims of coercive control and IPV, since the pattern of their lives may have been dominated by the

opposite notion, as their choices became subject to their partners in the context of experiencing coercive control (Stark, 2007).

In keeping with these hopeful developments regarding traumatized individuals, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1990) noticed trends in their research that led them to coin the phrase "posttraumatic growth" (PTG). In their pursuit of the study of wisdom, they observed that those who had suffered, namely widows and those experiencing long-term physical ailments, reported surprising stories of growth in certain areas of their lives (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1990). For instance, the widows they interviewed reported growing closer to their children and gaining a greater sense of independence and self-efficacy. Those experiencing painful conditions reported that they had learned valuable lessons that they would not trade for returned health. This was the beginning of the formation of the definition of PTG: "the positive psychological change experienced as a result of a struggle with highly challenging life circumstances" (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 1999, p. 1). The term PTG describes both the process of growth and the outcome of the growth process.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) do not view negative post-traumatic effects through the lens of a disorder (PTSD). Rather, they hold the perspective that trauma victims are responding to catastrophic life circumstances that threaten their deeply held core beliefs (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). As victims of trauma struggle with the aftermath of their suffering, some of them examine and eventually rebuild their belief systems, leading to transformation (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) teach that trauma victims are typically not focused on growth in the immediate aftermath of the stressful event. Rather, during the initial time following a trauma, all of their resources are harnessed in order to merely survive. They stress

that trauma victims need time to feel their pain and therefore not to rush toward a process of growth prematurely (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

After a person emerges from that immediate stage of suffering, they often report that they notice ways that they are growing since their experience with the trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). There are five main areas in which this occurs. First, people begin to notice the development of their own personal strength (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). In their research, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) often heard statements like "I didn't know that I was this strong. I never thought I would be able to handle something like this. If I got through this, I could get through anything." Secondly, survivors reported their experience of noticing new possibilities in their lives (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). This involves the idea that life can go in a new direction, including new goals and missions in their future lives. This new direction is often connected to lessons learned in the trauma. Third, growth can include relational changes (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), as victims report the development of a greater appreciation for the relationships in their lives, as well as increased compassion or empathy for others. Fourthly, often people share that they have experienced a greater appreciation of their lives post-trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). This includes a sense of gratefulness that they have survived and a desire to use their lives in more purposeful ways. Lastly, some survivors report a greater connection to their spiritual lives after the traumatic event (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). This may involve a closer relationship with God or a greater integration of beliefs that had previously been experienced only intellectually. These five themes are not reported by every survivor of trauma but rather are a representation of the kinds of growth that can be experienced post-trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). In addition, this means that PTG may look very different in diverse individuals (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2013) recognized that victims of trauma tend to develop these five areas of growth particularly when they can disclose their story of trauma or the subsequent growth in the context of greater social support. They have coined the term “expert companion” to describe what this ideally entails (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013, p. 23). The expert companion could be a family member, friend, clergy, or professional counselor (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). Their role is to listen to the worst of the survivor’s stories, learn from them, and support them for as long as it takes for them to process their story (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). It is essential that this person is humble, compassionate, nonjudgmental, and refrains from offering platitudes. They must be patient since the process of healing is gradual and should be experienced without time constraints (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). It is helpful if they listen for themes of growth and help the trauma victim identify these themes in their life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013).

PTG results as survivors seek to construct benefits out of the trauma for themselves and others (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). It also results as survivors develop and maintain a future orientation with new goals and priorities (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). It can also involve the survivor of trauma constructing meaning or a narrative around the circumstances as a result of considering the lessons from the trauma (Drumm et al., 2014; Gaskin-Wasson et al., 2018). Often this new meaning develops into the pursuit of a new purpose with new activities or missions, thus transforming the traumatized person into an inspired person, looking for ways to do good to others (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013).

Calhoun and Tedeschi (1990) acknowledge that their theory of growth is not new, but rather can be observed in several major faith systems. Buddhism, for instance, presents a picture of suffering that aligns with PTG, in that suffering is meant to be understood, accepted, and embraced rather than merely survived (Tedeschi et al., 2018). They also note that in Islamic

thought, trials and afflictions are viewed as a preparation for the journey to heaven. In the Christian worldview, they note that suffering is seen as a means to promote growth as followers of Jesus observe their Savior, who suffered greatly through the crucifixion, which brought great reward after His resurrection. They suggest that in Christianity posttraumatic growth will emphasize the development of humility and Christlikeness rather than greater personal strength, self-reliance, and self-confidence (Tedeschi et al., 2018).

This study sought to extend and advance the theory of Frankl (1963) by applying his concept of making meaning in the midst of trauma and tragedy as a means of developing resiliency. This was investigated through a qualitative approach as I sought out how Christian female IPV victims interacted with this concept of meaning related to their trauma. I studied how spiritual concepts and practices like prayer, Bible study, and openness with their clergy or congregation contributed to their understanding of suffering, pain, and their meaning-making process. As growth was observed, I sought to ascertain if this greater understanding impacted their decision-making process as they navigated the challenges of life with the abusive partner.

This current study sought to extend and advance Hobfall's theory of Conservation of Resources (2001) by investigating how IPV survivors interacted with the loss of resources as their marriages were interrupted by violence and coercive control. As these women sought to navigate their choices, this study focused on how the addition of religious or spiritual resources impacted their ability to make wise decisions, prioritize their safety, and receive social or practical support for themselves and their children. In addition, I sought to observe whether the experience of being resourced in this way contributed to their ability to bounce back from adversity (resiliency) or grow to a new level after the trauma (PTG).

This study sought to extend and advance Bandura's concept of the importance of self-efficacy (1977) and Rotter's (1966) concept of internal locus of control. This research study investigated how these women intersected with spiritual and religious supports and whether these supports helped the women gain a stronger sense of internal locus of control or self-efficacy. I was interested in how these women were helped by their personal interaction with spiritual texts (i.e., the Bible), and how their experience with God offered them a new perspective on the choices offered to them. Also, I was interested in investigating whether their use of prayer or the Bible offered them strength or gave them the courage to make different choices in their relationship to their abuser.

This research also extended and advanced the theory of Tedeschi and Calhoun (1990) regarding IPV victims. I sought to identify the process of formation of PTG by examining their spiritual and religious practices. This confirmed Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2013) concept of the "expert companion" which they have investigated and integrated into the context of healing for soldiers experiencing post-traumatic stress. This study focused on the potential use of "expert companions" in the church. I ascertained how these women experienced their social support in the church and how they experienced individuals who were able to fulfill the roles of an expert companion. In particular, I offered insight into how clergy can develop into these kinds of supports or offer other kinds of support in their congregations through education, training, or modeling.

Each of the five areas of PTG was assessed in the interview process. Survivors were asked to comment on whether they grew in recognition of their strength, their relational health, or their view of new possibilities in life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). They were asked to reflect on any spiritual growth or change in their view of God as a result of the traumatic event. Also, I

sought to find out whether these survivors gained a new perspective on or appreciation of life. I focused on how the Christian worldview and PTG are connected, thus informing and extending the research about how both faith-based and non-faith-based practitioners can better serve Christian female domestic violence victims.

Related Literature

IPV presents life-threatening, stress-inducing, traumatizing, and relationship-devastating challenges to victims (Bradley et al., 2020; FitzPatrick et al., 2022). However, victims struggle with the choice to stay in the abusive relationship or to leave (Estrellado & Loh, 2019). Reasons that battered women often stay in abusive relationships include fear of escalation of violence, the possibility of the threats of the intimate partner realized, and feelings of shame and embarrassment about the situation in their homes (Fugate et al., 2005; Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; McAllister & Roberts-Lewis, 2010). Some Christian women report that religious teachings encouraging submission and forbidding divorce have influenced them to stay in abusive relationships (Knickmeyer, 2010; Nash, 2006; Westenberg, 2107). Other concerns include the fear of losing custody of children and the lack of means to support themselves financially (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, n.d.). For victims, the choice can feel impossible, since they are unable to completely assess whether leaving the relationship will result in greater safety for themselves and their children (Sani & Pereira, 2020).

Women who decide to stay in abusive relationships experience long-term consequences of their decision. They often report losing a sense of self, opportunities for a better life, peace of mind, psychological well-being, and love for their partners (Estrellado & Loh, 2019; McAllister & Roberts-Lewis, 2010). However, women who choose to stay report they have experienced positive effects like having a complete family and a partner to help raise their children (Adomako

& Darkwa Baffour, 2021). Leaving the relationship often takes several attempts, beginning with a cognitive struggle involving the recognition that the abusive relationship exists, and accepting the fact that they are being victimized (Estrellado & Loh, 2019). When women experience an escalation in the frequency and intensity of the violence or see the effects on their children, they often find greater motivation to exit the relationship (Estrellado & Loh, 2109). Women caught in abusive cycles are often desperate for help but are also unsure about when and how to respond as they become more aware that they are actually experiencing abuse.

Psychological, physical, spiritual, and economic outcomes for this population are an enormous problem (Bloom, 2021; FitzPatrick et al., 2022; National Partnership for Women and Families, 2021; Tura & Licoze, 2019). Female victims of IPV develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at a rate of 74-92%, compared to 6-13% in non-abused women (Scott-Tilley, 2010). IPV victims experience an increased risk of depression and anxiety (Bloom, 2021; FitzPatrick et al., 2022), low self-esteem, suicidality, and sexual dysfunction (Bloom, 2021; Tura & Licoze, 2019). Physical damage to victims includes increased rates of gastrointestinal disorders, chronic pain, and cardiovascular problems (Olff, 2012; Sapolsky, 2004). Sexual violence can lead to vaginal and anal tearing, sexually transmitted diseases, or pelvic inflammation (Tura & Licoze, 2019).

Victims of IPV also experience a higher risk of developing addictions to alcohol, tobacco, or drugs (Bacchus, 2018). IPV survivors experience greater housing instability and homelessness, unemployment, loss or delay of educational opportunities, food insecurity, financial instability, and unwanted entanglement in civil and criminal legal systems (National Partnership for Women and Families, 2021). Victims can be reeling from these financial, physical, sexual, and psychological outcomes in isolation (Drumm et al., 2014; McAllister &

Roberts-Lewis, 2010). The cascade of these effects can leave them greatly disoriented and unsure of how to escape or move forward (Estrellado & Loh, 2019).

The problem exists that victims of IPV face a very difficult decision that will greatly impact themselves, their families, their financial futures, and their faith communities (Estrellado & Loh, 2019). This difficult decision-making process is further complicated by the outcomes that women who leave abusive relationships often face: escalation of violence, child custody fights, loss of housing, single parenthood, hostility, guilt, depression, PTSD, and other trauma symptoms, often at a higher level than those women who choose to remain (Estrellado & Loh, 2019; Johnson & Hotton, 2003). If a woman chooses to leave a violent relationship, she is 75% more likely to be killed than if she stays (McAllister & Roberts-Lewis, 2010). Since these victims often wrestle with these decisions in isolation, their decisions can feel overwhelming (Crossman & Hardesty, 2018; Stark, 2007). When the victim chooses to disclose their situation, it can reveal they she has taken an important step in her process.

The Church and IPV

The problem exists that in churches IPV can be viewed as a taboo topic, and mental health professionals or clergy are often not prepared to address religious and spiritual issues of intimate partner violence from the perspective of victims (Walker & Aten, 2012). There is little information available about what happens when a faith leader is sought for help for IPV (Moon & Shim, 2010). The small amount of information that does exist indicates that women often receive mixed messages from clergy when they are advised on how to respond to their abusive marriages (Walker & Aten, 2012). Women also are advised to remain in these situations because it is their biblical duty to fulfill their vows in this way (Walker & Aten, 2012). Female victims of IPV are often counseled by faith leaders to persevere in their marriages while their safety is often

not prioritized. (McAllister & Roberts-Lewis, 2010; Sojourners & IMA World Health, 2014; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2016; Truong, 2022). Faith leaders may even promote philosophies that may be understood by perpetrators or victims as condoning systems of control or violence (Truong, 2022). Victims face multifaceted responses from clergy, leaving them confused and unsupported in their pursuit of how to respond to coercive control or outright violence in their homes (Hurless & Cottone, 2018; McAllister & Roberts-Lewis, 2010).

Additionally, the problem exists that faith leaders report being poorly trained and ill-equipped to handle domestic violence in counseling situations (Moon & Shim, 2010; Shaw et al., 2022; Tedder & Smith, 2018; Truong, 2022). Pastors report a tendency to avoid IPV issues among their congregants due to their lack of training and access to resources (Moon & Shim, 2010). Evidence shows that faith leaders underestimate the amount of domestic violence occurring in the church, minimize the severity of the abuse, or offer controversial solutions like marriage counseling when sought for advice (Hurless & Cottone, 2018; McAllister & Roberts-Lewis, 2010; Sojourners & IMA World Health, 2014). There is evidence that faith leaders tend to be overly optimistic about the willingness of perpetrators to stop their violent actions (Pyles, 2007). In addition, women of faith often struggle with disclosure about the violence at home due to shame, embarrassment, and social stigma (Truong, 2022). Women report experiences of feeling blamed, stigmatized, and misunderstood when they have disclosed the abuse to their faith leaders, in addition to a lack of practical help (Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2016). Overall, the picture is not a positive one for women seeking help from faith leaders.

Some studies identify factors within religion and faith communities that may put families at risk for developing abusive systems, even though Christian men are not more likely to be abusers than the general population (Westenberg, 2017). These factors include an imbalanced

focus on the concept of patriarchy and male dominance (Adjei & Mpiani, 2020; Westenberg, 2017). Some male religious perpetrators of IPV have justified their behavior through the use of patriarchal religious ideologies and interpretations of scripture like the concept of male headship and female submission (Knickmeyer et al., 2010; Le Roux & Bowers-Du Toit, 2017). This research points to a need that may exist in some Christian families and faith communities. They may require greater help or explanation than other communities in order to navigate and define healthy relational dynamics (McAllister, & Roberts-Lewis, 2010). The help may include elucidating the Bible's teachings about submission and headship so that men and women hear, absorb, clearly understand, and assimilate accurate teachings into their worldview of what is expected in Christian marriage (Walker & Aten, 2012).

International research also shows that religious language is often used by female victims of IPV to explain or tolerate family violence, particularly the idea that male headship means that the husband is meant to control aspects of the relationship (Knickmeyer, 2010; Westenberg, 2017). Abused women from Christian backgrounds are more likely to remain in or return to abusive relationships (Drumm et al., 2014). One reason that Christian women cite for this is their religious beliefs that emphasize the importance of keeping the family together despite abuse (Westenberg, 2017). Some report that their abuse was perpetuated by the message that being a victim of abuse and being divorced was incongruent with the image of living as a good Christian woman and contributed towards their decision to stay in the abusive relationship longer than other women (Knickmeyer et al., 2010).

One reason that Christian women report staying longer in the abusive relationship is the experience of feeling that their belief systems are not understood or misunderstood by professional counselors and helpers (Drumm et al., 2014). It is clear that IPV presents

complicated challenges to families and churches, which require well-researched interventions (Drumm et al., 2014). In order to truly help victims, spiritual leaders, and mental health professionals need to understand what contributes towards the safety, growth, and flourishing of victims of IPV, particularly as they navigate the spiritual values and concerns of Christian women (Bakaitytė et al., 2022; Gonzalez-Mendez & Hamby, 2021; McAllister & Roberts-Lewis, 2010).

Resiliency

The development of resiliency is an important topic for faith leaders to address, particularly as it relates to trauma victims. Resilience can be defined as the ability to bounce back from stress and trauma and return to normal pre-trauma functionality (Estrellado & Loh, 2019). Resilience is based on a person's attitudes and beliefs. Resilient individuals are more likely to possess an internal locus of control (Türk-Kurtça & Kocatürk, 2020). Another ingredient essential to resiliency is the ability to make conscious choices: greater resiliency is seen in individuals who choose healthy thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and choose to take responsibility for their own emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual well-being (Stebnicki, 2016). These concepts are important for victims and helpers to incorporate into discussions on how to respond to trauma (Estrellado & Loh, 2019).

While traumatized individuals often feel overwhelmed by intrusive thoughts and painful emotions which lead to the development of negative coping strategies, more resilient victims seek to overcome these self-defeating and destructive lifestyle choices by engaging in healthy habits (Stebnicki, 2016). Another quality that has been observed in resilient individuals is the ability to think positively. This involves the development of purpose, belief in one's abilities, and a high level of confidence that one can create a positive outcome with oneself and others. In

essence, bouncing back from adversity is correlated with living life with a positive attitude and a focus on gratitude (Stebnicki, 2016). Greater connection to one's spirituality is also correlated with greater resiliency (de la Rosa et al., 2016; Howell et al., 2018). For victims of trauma, resiliency is also correlated with the development of purpose and a connection with something larger than themselves (Flasch et al., 2017; Gonzalez-Mendez & Hamby, 2021; Hamby et al., 2020).

It has been observed that people become more resilient by intentionally building positive emotions (Stebnicki, 2016). These positive emotions allow people to develop novel and broad-ranging thoughts and actions. When these are developed, they can become accessible resources that change people's lives by increasing their ability to respond to disasters and adversity (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Cohn, et al., 2009). These concepts can be important for victims of IPV, as they will need to focus on the choices that they can make despite the overwhelming situations in their homes.

Victims of IPV can be taught resiliency (Estrellado & Loh, 2019) and resilience can be acquired at any time from childhood to late adulthood (Francis, 2019). A willingness to continue to learn and grow in every stage of life reflects a mindset leading to greater resiliency (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). This mindset also allows people to make sense of the difficulties and times of struggle. A sense of agency in the world is restored when people ask, "What can I learn from this experience?" (de la Fuente et al., 2017; Seibert, 2005). When a person observes themselves solving problems, they develop confidence in their resiliency and sustain better health (Li et al., 2018). Therapeutic interventions that help traumatized individuals build resiliency include acupuncture, animal and equine-assisted therapy, biofeedback, behavioral therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, storytelling, mindfulness, stress inoculation training, and eye movement

rapid desensitization (Stebnicki, 2016). While faith leaders may not have the training to offer these kinds of interventions to IPV victims, it is possible that some of the principles presented in these therapies can be accessed or explored for integration into pastoral work (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Cooper-White, 2011).

Why help victims of trauma develop resiliency? Victims can be assisted by counselors and faith leaders to experience greater thriving (Sanchez & Lopez-Zafra, 2019). Victims can cultivate the development of greater skills, knowledge, confidence, and interpersonal connections (Estrellado & Loh, 2019). Trauma survivors can be helped to strengthen their future abilities in coping with difficulties (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). Spiritual and mental health counselors can help shape survivors' self-image in positive ways (Gerson & Fernandez, 2013). The impact on survivors may include the prevention of the development of greater levels of anxiety and depression (Gerson & Fernandez, 2013). As IPV victims experience greater emotional regulation, they will have greater capacity to observe and assess the choices they have before them. This can lead to the development of a well-thought-out plan that they can use to address the complicated decisions they must face.

Posttraumatic Growth

While resilience is defined as the ability to return to a normal level of functioning after a traumatic event, posttraumatic growth (PTG) is defined as an increase in psychological functionality after a traumatic experience (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Resiliency can be defined as the ability to bounce back after trauma while PTG is the ability to bounce forward (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). PTG has been formally researched through the use of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI), which was developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) to assess growth in individuals exposed to traumatic events. This 21-item questionnaire identifies five dimensions of

growth: a greater appreciation of life, improved interpersonal relationships, a better sense of personal strengths, spiritual development, and the recognition of new possibilities in life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). It has been the most commonly used metric of PTG in recent years (Jozefiaková et al., 2022).

Research has shown that victims can engage in certain choices and behaviors that may promote PTG (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). One literature review exploring PTG in the aftermath of sexual violence found that victims who disclosed their assault and engaged in what researchers refer to as acceptance coping were more likely to experience PTG (Ulloa, et al., 2016). In addition, individuals who were more hopeful and believed that things could get better after trauma showed higher scores on the PTGI (Ulloa, et al., 2016). Victims of trauma often experience a negative schema change related to their assumptions about the world, particularly as violence is introduced into their homes (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). PTG was correlated with survivors of trauma who developed a sense of meaning and value and whose assumption of the world became more positive (Valdez & Lilly, 2015). These studies reveal the importance of focusing on what survivors can control, i.e., their thoughts, their actions (disclosure), and their worldviews (Arandia et al., 2018; Ulloa, et al., 2016). Cognitive behavioral therapies can be useful in the development of PTG (Arandia et al., 2018). Those interventions that offer IPV victims skills in the areas of cognitive restructuring, development of personal strengths, involvement in spiritual practices, and a focus on possibilities in the future are correlated with greater PTG (Arandia et al., 2018).

Early research in the field of PTG was often done with the military. Prisoners of war were surveyed regarding their views of imprisonment, with 61% reporting that they perceived their Vietnam experience as beneficial (Sledge et al., 1980). The POWs who suffered the greatest

mentally and physically reported that their attitudes and behavior became more beneficial and desirable. They shared that they became more patient, more able to define what was truly important, and more able to manage their anger or pessimism (Sledge et al., 1980). When wives of soldiers have been researched, the women whose husbands experienced the greatest levels of PTSD experienced more distress than non-POW combat wives. However, these women also showed the greatest levels of PTG as well (Dekel, 2007).

When Persian Gulf War Veterans were surveyed regarding their experiences, those who faced a perceived threat of death while serving reported more appreciation of life after returning home (Maguen, 2006). Those who experienced greater levels of social support grew the most in PTG, particularly in the areas of relating to others and the development of their perceived personal strength (Maguen, 2006). In addition, PTG has proven to serve as a protection against suicidal ideation for soldiers who have served in a war zone or combat experience (Bush et al., 2011).

Particular areas of growth are important to observe in IPV survivors. Senter and Caldwell (2002) conducted a qualitative study of 22 women who had left abusive relationships. Their study revealed that women grew after their trauma in their ability to develop stronger interpersonal relationships and to receive support from others. They showed greater self-awareness, stronger faith and religious beliefs, increased likelihood of helping others in similar situations, and increased perceived control over their lives following the end of the abusive relationship (Senter & Caldwell, 2002). For women who leave their abusive relationships, PTG occurs at greater rates than those who stay in the abusive relationship (Cobb et al., 2006). The study of posttraumatic growth is still in its infancy, requiring more research into PTG, particularly for survivors of IPV (Bakaitytė, et al., 2020; Schubert et al., 2015). As researchers

continue to study IPV survivors and observe how they thrive and grow post-trauma, valuable information can be offered to the field to inform future interventions.

The Role of Religious and Spiritual Supports

While growth after trauma is essential for IPV victims, minimal research has been conducted on the recovery process for this population (Allen & Wozniak, 2011; Brosi et al., 2020; Fernández Álvarez et al., 2020; Flasch et al., 2017). In particular, the role of spiritual and religious supports is often overlooked by researchers and social services (Braganza et al., 2022; Drumm et al., 2014). Religious support is defined as an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to God, as Christians define Him (King & Koenig, 2009). Religious support would include seeking out a conversation with one's faith community or faith leader regarding the difficulties experienced in the home. It would also include any corporate worship experience, such as attending a service or mass or engaging in worship, service, or study in an organized setting.

Spiritual support is defined as the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, meaning, and relationship to God, as Christians define Him. (King & Koenig, 2009). This would include the pursuit of closeness to God through individual means like study, prayer, meditation, or reflection. Women of faith experience their spiritual connection to God as a major driver of support, healing, and resiliency (de la Rosa, et al., 2016; Drumm et al., 2014; Postmus et al., 2009; Shaw et al., 2022; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2016). Postmus (2009) showed that female IPV victims reported that among the 10 most helpful services in their process of growth were religious and spiritual counseling.

Wang et al. (2009) found that 70% of Christian women who left an abusive relationship reported their faith provided them the strength to leave. When asked how their faith helped them

to leave, 66% of Christian women stated that God gave them strength in the leaving process (Wang et al., 2009). More than half of the women said that God gave them faith that they would survive if they left, and that God helped them realize that they needed to protect themselves. Also, 52% of the women said that their relationship with God convinced them that they did not deserve the abuse (Wang et al., 2009). Women of faith report that prayer and faith texts are important sources of comfort and support (Westenberg, 2017). It is essential to understand how women experience their spiritual supports, and how spiritual and religious supports can be integrated into interventions for Christian IPV victims.

Spirituality has been identified as playing a central role in assisting IPV victims in their process of survival, healing, and development of resilient self-efficacy (De la Rosa, 2016; Drumm et al., 2014). Often a faith struggle will occur as Christian women face the trauma of IPV (Drumm et al., 2014). The struggle often involves the violation, threat, or loss of their spiritual understanding and connection to God. This may lead to a sense of spiritual disillusionment or disorientation. Women may question and wrestle with spiritual concepts, eventually leading some to transformed spiritual understanding. Some victims may experience the desire to distance themselves from spiritual influences, but many find purpose, meaning, and significance in their striving to understand their suffering through a new lens (Drumm et al., 2014). How women process their relationship with God and their management of their emotions, their choices, and relationships is important for clergy and professional helpers to understand if they are to become "expert companions" (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013, p. 23).

Female IPV survivors have reported that they have experienced a great amount of encouragement and support in their spiritual practices, which caused them to feel very connected to God, a positive identity, and hope (De la Rosa, 2016; Shaw et al., 2022). Christian IPV victims

have reported that their connection to God enabled them to engage in forgiveness of the perpetrator (Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2016). Women who have developed resilience strategies have reported that they have viewed God as a lifeline for survival, relying on Bible reading and prayer as essential coping practices (Allen & Wozniak, 2011; Bernardi & Steyn, 2021; El-Khoury et al., 2004; Truong, 2022). They have attributed their ability to develop resilient resources to God and have reported that their spirituality has led them to develop greater self-efficacy (Drumm et al., 2014). Victims of IPV report that their spiritual support gave them strength to prevail over the abuse, find the ways they benefited from their trauma, and gave them a sense of purpose (Anderson et al., 2012). The connection between spirituality and emerging resiliency and growth is an important research topic to pursue. In particular, further research in this area revealed the kinds of spiritual texts, Bible passages, or practices that have connected these survivors with the insight, inspiration, and direction they needed to develop the strength to grow and heal after trauma. As pastors and clergy understand these connections, they can incorporate this salient material into their counsel for these traumatized women, thus promoting resiliency and PTG.

Some women report a dichotomy between how they experience organized religious supports (church teaching or clergy consultation) and their own individual spirituality (personal Bible reading and prayer) (Drumm et al., 2014). One crucial aspect of this dichotomy seems to be the lack of information that clergy possess about IPV, leading to confusion about how to determine if the relationship is abusive or harmful (Jones & Fowler, 2009). While women may experience religious systems as normalizing the abusive tendencies or strengthening mind frames that would be congruent with victimization, their personal experience with God seems to strengthen their ability to name the abuse accurately (Drumm et al., 2014).

Hearing from female Christian victims of IPV enabled a greater understanding of this question. In particular, it is important for victims that the clergy they consult have a clear working definition of domestic abuse from a legal, moral, and spiritual standpoint (Walker & Aten, 2012). It is difficult to imagine how a faith leader could assess whether the woman seeking their counsel is a victim of abuse if he or she does not have knowledge of the many ways abuse can manifest. Often domestic violence is more easily recognized when severe physical abuse is occurring, but not as easily identified when the abuse is financial, emotional, social, or spiritual (Domestic Abuse, 2022; Ringel & Park, 2008; Truong, 2022). It is important that clergy are made aware of the importance of asking women directly about physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, psychological, economic, and technological kinds of abuse (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, n.d.).

Faith Systems and Social Support

One aspect of religious support is the social aspect of relationships within congregations. Social support can mitigate the impact of IPV, namely the damage to psychological well-being, quality of life, and depressive symptoms (Choi et al., 2021; Flasch et al., 2017; Gonzalez-Mendez & Hamby, 2021). Social support is described as information from others that one is loved, esteemed, and valued (Choi et al., 2021). Reciprocal relationships provide the atmosphere where individuals learn to respond to adversity within a social community through modeling and mentorship (Francis, 2019).

For Christians, participation in a faith community is vital to learning, formation of thoughts and values, progression of resilience, and development of spiritual maturity (Francis, 2019). For trauma victims, trust in these support systems has been shown to be both a predictor and consequence of growth (Ulloa et al., 2016). Churches therefore are a potential resource as

they develop into these kinds of support structures for victims of IPV, offering a space for healing and the development of resilience. Women who have experienced IPV and have gone through a process of change are an important resource and support for women living with an abusive partner or leaving an abusive relationship (Matheson et al., 2015). Women struggling with an abusive relationship report higher levels of growth if they personally know a woman who reported growth after their experience with IPV (Cobb et al., 2006). Clergy could be an integral part of connecting these victims to a greater community of support in the congregation outside of themselves.

Importantly, developing a strong faith and social support system are protective factors for suicidal ideation (American Association of Christian Counselors, 2017). Social supports help victims of trauma remember that they are not alone in their suffering, while those who experience isolation, break-ups, divorce, and separation are at a higher risk for suicidal ideation (American Association of Christin Counselors, 2017). A relationship with God is also a protective factor, as it assists the woman in gaining a broader perspective on suffering and can help them reframe the problem, as well as find hope and meaning regarding the painful circumstances they are facing (Drumm et al., 2014).

Researchers have observed that patients with greater social support recover faster if they do develop PTSD. This may be due to the experience of bonding (Olff, 2012). Since the hormone oxytocin is released during many types of pleasant social contact, it can be a powerful agent to counteract and interrupt the physiological stress response. Physical touch, pleasant conversations, or meals enjoyed in a community can stimulate oxytocin (Olff, 2012). The church community can become a resource to sensitively offer this physiological benefit for IPV victims.

Biblical Texts on Social Support and IPV

Faith communities could potentially become an enormous healing resource for these trauma victims. For Christians, the Bible is considered a sacred text that reveals God's character and gives commands to the followers of Jesus, particularly in the area of human relationships. The Bible consistently proclaims the refrain, "Love one another" (*New International Bible,* 2021, John 13:34, Rom 12:10, Rom 13:8). Throughout the Bible, believers are informed about how to love: with genuine affection (*New International Bible,* 2021, Rom 12:10), earnestly (*New International Bible,* 2021, 1 Peter 4:8), and by bearing one another's burdens (*New International Bible,* 2021, Gal 6:2). The text states that each part of the body (representing God's church) "belongs" to all of the others (*New International Bible,* 2021, Rom 12:15). The commands from the Bible to "weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice" (*New International Bible,* 2021, Romans 12:15, NLT) reveal the need to rely on others in our highest and deepest moments of emotion and struggle. These passages reveal a central principle of the Christian worldview, that meaningful engagement with other believers is an important aspect of life at all times, but especially at times of crisis or trauma. These passages serve to bring light to the commands of Scripture that compel faith leaders to respond with care and attention rather than avoidance when Christian IPV victims share their traumatic experiences (Moon & Shim, 2010). In order for Christian women to address the trauma in their homes, it would be ideal if they were greatly resourced and supported in their community of faith, beginning with the experience of feeling safe enough to disclose their difficulties, as suggested by authors and researchers in this field (Moles, 2015; Walker & Aten, 2012; Wang et al., 2009).

The Bible also speaks to the kinds of regular actions and practices that the church should engage in, many of which are consistent with healing from trauma (Olff, 2012) like physical

touch and social support. Christians are commanded to physically touch each other when greeting each other (*New International Bible,* 2021, 2 Cor 13:12). The Israelites were commanded to join, gather, and eat regularly in order to celebrate or mourn different spiritual holy days (*New International Bible,* 2021, Lev 23:4-22), and Christian believers are also taught to consistently gather as well (*New International Bible,* 2021, Heb 10:25). Love from God, the development of the belief of one's place in God's economy, and the concept of meaning outside of oneself have shown to be essential to the development of spiritual resiliency in Christians (Balswick et al., 2016). Therefore, clergy may be encouraged to use these principles to influence victims of IPV as they consider how to offer meaningful support.

Victims of IPV can be assisted by clergy in the growth of their understanding of healthy relationships by receiving the clear message that physical abuse is not justified in Scripture, nor is it a part of a loving Christian marriage (Moles, 2015; Walker & Aten, 2012). It is important that the Christian community better understands the religious thinking behind acts of abuse committed by male congregants against their wives (Walker & Aten, 2012). Congregations must learn how to actively confront concepts like IPV and coercive control as being in direct conflict with the Biblical commands for husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church (Ephesians 5:25, NLT), to love their wives as one loves their own body (Ephesians 5:28, NLT), and to love their neighbor as they love themself (Matthew 22:39, NLT) (Walker & Aten, 2012). These commands reveal the protective nature of husbanding and a more authentic representation of the sacrificial nature of the role of husbands as they are instructed to give their bodies the way Jesus offered his body for his people (Ephesians 5:25, NLT). Further research is necessary to better understand the ways in which Christian leaders understand IPV as a theological issue and their thought processes involved in applying Scripture as they respond to survivors of abuse

(Walker & Aten, 2012). As faith leaders grow in understanding of concepts like coercive control, IPV, trauma, resiliency, and PTG, they will be much better equipped to serve the families in their congregations.

Churches have the ability to offer IPV survivors valuable skills in the areas of cognitive restructuring, development of personal strengths, involvement in spiritual practices, and a focus on possibilities in the future, which are correlated with greater PTG (Arandia et al., 2018). Clergy or social supporters from the congregation can offer trauma victims the means and space to express their cognitions regarding themselves, beliefs about God, or thoughts about the abusive relationship. Then, cognitive restructuring can occur as more biblical and truthful notions are offered in response to cognitive distortions. In addition, the regular teaching from the Bible that occurs in many congregations can offer the IPV victim a greater understanding of how a loving God and the experience of suffering can co-exist, which is one existential problem that many survivors face (Drumm et al., 2014). This is an example of a spiritual practice that can contribute to the growth of survivors of IPV.

PTG and the Bible

For Christian victims of trauma, the development of mental processes that lead to resilience and posttraumatic growth (PTG) correlate well with concepts in Scripture that speak to believers facing considerable trials: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." (*New International Bible,* 2021, James 1:2-3). And "Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been

poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us" (*New International Bible,* 2021, Rom 5:3-5). These passages point to PTG concepts like the development of new possibilities and a deeper spiritual connection with God post-trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). It is important that these concepts are presented to abused women in the context of helping them respond to their trauma, not as an admonishment to endure suffering in all of its forms, including tolerating abusive situations (Moles, 2015).

Another salient passage to help victims reframe suffering is Romans 8:18-21, "Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day…when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay." (*New International Bible,* 2021). This passage overtly draws attention to future possibilities for the trauma survivor, and all who suffer, as they are encouraged to focus their attention on the relief that will be experienced when all suffering ends. These are only a small sample of Biblical examples that address the meaning of suffering, the experience of hope, and the process of transformation that occurs for the Christian who experiences traumatic events. There is considerable overlap between PTG and a Christian worldview (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013).

Summary

Understanding the negative outcomes of IPV is an important course of research; however, understanding what processes contribute to the development of PTG and resilience can assist faith leaders and mental health professionals in developing spiritual and religious interventions and supports that promote the process of healing in Christian IPV victims. Since IPV victims experience a greater risk of developing PTSD and CPTSD, focus on this population was essential (Bryant, 2019). In addition, 1/3 to 1/2 of all women will experience psychological, sexual, or

physical abuse from their partner (Smith et al., 2018). This level of exposure to trauma leaves many female victims in need of intervention (Smith et al., 2018). Therefore, further research was required in order to learn from the victims of IPV so that better social and spiritual supports can be developed to increase the likelihood of their thriving after trauma.

The practical implications related to this research include the potential for increased understanding, skill, and ability for Christian clergy and congregations in their response to IPV victims. This study offered an understanding into how women have been practically encouraged and helped by their attunement with God, engagement in spiritual texts, spiritual practices, and their faith community. This study also serves to inform future mental health interventionists to be better prepared to integrate spiritual supports for Christian survivors, thus reducing their resistance to seeking mental health helpers. It also offers critical feedback for pastors who are reporting their need for more education about IPV and who are interested in identifying the signs of abused women, thus empowering them to respond with wise counsel (Shaw et al., 2022; Tedder & Smith, 2018; Truong, 2022). In addition, faith leaders can be better equipped to identify abuse patterns in marriages, particularly those of a non-physical nature.

This in turn may offer clergy the confidence to teach important relational principles more skillfully to their congregations, thus bringing greater awareness to Christian communities of the important social issue of IPV. These conversations in faith communities may serve as preventative measures for IPV by offering better preparation for couples moving towards marriage as well as educating congregations, in general, to better understand and apply familiar concepts like submission and headship. Ideally, churches could begin to lead the way towards educating their communities about what constitutes healthy, safe, and loving marriages and end the misinterpretation of scriptural principles.

Chapter Three: Methods

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of Christian female victims of intimate partner violence as they engaged with their religious and spiritual supports to identify what they describe as the spiritual and religious factors contributing to their resilience and posttraumatic growth (PTG). Hence, the study explored how these spiritual and religious supports for female Christian intimate partner victims might have contributed to the development of PTG and resiliency in these women. This chapter describes the design of this study, the research questions that were pursued, the setting in which the study took place, and how participants were recruited for the study. It outlines the procedure, the researcher's role in the study, the interview questions, the data collection process, and the data analysis as well. Lastly, it covers trustworthiness in the research study by addressing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. The chapter closes with a section on ethical considerations and a summary.

Design

This qualitative study used the hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) survivors. Phenomenological research seeks to foster an understanding of the lived human experience (van Manen, 1990). The qualitative approach was necessary for the participants to offer data regarding their unique experiences as Christian women who used spiritual and religious resources to manage their traumatic experiences. The study involved interviewing female Christian IPV victims to understand their lived experiences as they sought to navigate their choices as well as the influences of their

spiritual and religious support systems on the development of their resiliency and growth. This phenomenological approach is described by Creswell & Poth (2018) and van Manen (1990).

The hermeneutic process allows the researcher and study participants to collaborate, engaging in conversations that focus purely on understanding the substance of the topic in question (van Manen, 1990). As a hermeneutic phenomenology, the researchers' opinions help inform the interpretations of the data and aid in the construction of themes and meaning (van Manen, 1990). The participants offered information about their struggles, questions, emotions, decision-making processes, and areas of personal, relational, and spiritual growth as they explored whether to stay or leave the abusive situation. They shared about their formation process as they developed resiliency or grew throughout the experience of the trauma. An intentional set of specific questions was used during the interview process to allow each woman to express her lived experience in a systematic way.

After the interviews, the participants were asked to complete a journal entry. These journal entries offered personal insight into the study phenomenon, extending explanations and descriptions of experiences in a written format (Morrell-Scott, 2018). Lastly, through the focus group, the concepts of resilience and posttraumatic growth were further explored. Member checking was used to allow the participants to confirm, extend, or reject any data findings regarding the themes that arose from the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research approach met the goal of capturing the essence of their lived experiences. The number of participants (8 to 12) allowed a greater understanding of the topic by offering different perspectives to identify themes that could be applied in future work with IPV victims. Attaining a level of saturation of data was also a consideration (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Questions

Question 1: What is the lived experience of Christian women who face intimate partner violence as they engaged with their religious and spiritual supports?

Question 2: How do Christian women who have experienced intimate partner violence describe their personal growth after seeking help as they engaged in their spiritual or religious supports?

Question 3: What do Christian women who have experienced intimate partner violence describe as spiritual or religious factors that contributed toward building their resilience?

Setting

Interviews and focus groups were conducted through the online video conferencing forum WebEx (Iyar & Zhu, 2023). This approach expanded the number of potential participants available for the study from a small radius around New Jersey to throughout the United States. It also increased the possibility of finding a sample of women willing to discuss their trauma history, as well as who fit the demographic criteria: adult female IPV victims who identify as Christian and who used spiritual and religious supports to manage their trauma, experienced growth or resiliency, and who were married to the abuser.

Participants

The researcher sought approval from the Institutional Review Board from Liberty University. Once the approval was given, criteria sampling was employed to recruit 9 females over age 18 who identified as Christian victims of intimate partner violence and who engaged in spiritual or religious supports as they sought to navigate their experiences. Victims were delimited to heterosexual marriage relationships with a male aggressor and a female victim. These women served as a representative sample of their population, a sampling process described by Durdella (2019). The researcher used connections from online sites offering help to

female victims of IPV to recruit participants. These sites included: Leslie Vernick & Co. (Vernick, 2022), Give Her Wings (Give Her Wings, n.d.), and Julie Owens (Owens, 2023). This involved contacting the leaders of these organizations and asking for permission to advertise the study to the women connected to their online platforms. Advertising on Facebook was used, as well as connecting with church pastors in Mercer County, New Jersey and Bucks County, Pennsylvania through email. Snowball sampling as recommended by Chambers et al. (2020) was also used. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy (Durdella, 2019).

Procedures

After the researcher pursued and received the Institutional Review Board's approval, the women were invited to participate through Christian online support groups for victims of intimate partner violence, church recruiting, Facebook, or snowball sampling, as was necessary to reach the full number of participants. The demographics questionnaire was used to assess the participant's self-identified faith, exposure to IPV, and experience of resiliency and posttraumatic growth. Christian women who reported exposure to IPV, use of religious or spiritual supports, and the development of resilience or PTG were included in the study. The researcher obtained consent from the study participants who met the criteria for the study (Appendix A). Online semi-structured interviews of 9 Christian women over 18 who have all experienced IPV and the development of resiliency or posttraumatic growth were conducted through the forum WebEx. Interviews were recorded, and transcripts were created through WebEx. MaxQDA (VERBI software, 2023) was used to assist in coding the interviews, journal entries, and focus group content.

Next, journal entries were collected from the interviewees responding to a journal prompt. The interviewees were asked at the end of the interview if they would be willing to

respond to a journal prompt. The women willing to do so were included in this step of the research. Furthermore, participants were asked to respond to the following prompts: “Please describe the ways you interacted with spiritual and religious supports when you endured intimate partner violence. Please describe what aspects of your spiritual and religious supports were most meaningful and helpful and why.” Journal entries were collected through email attachments.

Lastly, a focus group was conducted to observe responses to the themes arising from the data and to receive further clarification from the interviewees. The focus group consisted of 5 of the previously interviewed participants. Convenience sampling was used to select participants who would provide the best information during the focus group. This was determined by observing the participants during the interview process and assessing which women were most comfortable with sharing their stories. At the end of the interview, participants were asked if they were comfortable with sharing their thoughts on IPV, spiritual and religious supports, resiliency, and posttraumatic growth with a small focus group of 3 to 6 other IPV survivors. Those who were willing were contacted through email to determine a date when all of the willing participants were available. WebEx (Iyar & Zhu, 2023) was used to facilitate, record, and create a transcript for the focus group. All of the data and transcripts were stored safely in a computer only accessible to the researcher.

The Researcher's Role

My role in this hermeneutical phenomenological design was to operate as an active instrument in the research as I brought my viewpoint and interviewing process to the study. My role as an interviewer was to conduct interviews and ask salient questions to seek out the lived experiences of the participants. The process of conducting interviews for qualitative research is described by van Manen (1990). I interviewed women with whom I had no previous relationship.

Since I had no actual physical site, I did not have any role in the setting of the research site. In addition, I needed to continue to orient the conversation and questions towards the substance of the topic of study. As a hermeneutic phenomenology, my opinions helped inform the interpretations of the data and aid in the construction of themes and meaning. The bias I brought to this study was that I believe that the Christian community should be a source of trauma healing for victims of IPV in their communities. I believe that pastors should be better trained for their work with these women. This bias may cause me to experience frustration with church leaders who do not offer support to victims of IPV. During the interviews and focus groups, I was aware of this possibility and was careful to guard against any verbal or non-verbal expressions of this frustration. Since I am very interested in the spiritual aspects of posttraumatic growth, I was aware that I may experience bias toward focusing on those aspects of the data. I addressed this by recording all five aspects of posttraumatic growth in each interview, seeking to report the non-spiritual aspects of growth as well.

I am a biblical counselor working in private practice in New Jersey for 24 years. I am married, Christian, female, and the wife of a pastor. I was educated at Biblical Theological Seminary where I received a master's degree in biblical counseling. I have also served as a master facilitator for the American Bible Society's Trauma Healing program. I have experience working with victims of IPV and teaching on the church's response to trauma, including domestic abuse. My role in the research was to help provide information to this group of women and to the church in an attempt to offer a bridge toward healing for IPV victims. As I collected and analyzed the data, I acknowledged that the goal of offering spiritual and practical healing tools was the focus of this research.

Data Collection

For this qualitative study, the hermeneutic phenomenological research method was employed to describe the lived experiences of Christian female IPV victims. Data collection for this study began once the Liberty University Institutional Review Board granted approval. Data was obtained through four methods: demographic questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, journal entries, and a focus group. The demographic questionnaire was essential as the first in the sequence of data collection to ensure that participants met the criteria for inclusion in the study. Next, semi-structured interviews were used as they are the most common form of data collection technique in qualitative research (Merriam & Merriam, 2009). Interviews offer the richest amount of information to formulate an understanding of the participants' lived experiences (van Manen, 1990). Following the interviews, journal entries were important to offer interviewees an opportunity to add more information to their responses after having time to reflect on the prompts (Morrell-Scott, 2018). Lastly, the focus group was asked to participate in order to receive feedback from the participants regarding the themes that were formulated after reviewing the data from the interviews and journal entries, a research strategy described by Durdella (2019) and van Manen (1990). By using these methods, triangulation was accomplished, and trustworthiness was added to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 1990).

Demographics Questionnaire

Any woman who contacted me received a demographics questionnaire through email to complete before the interview. It was used to collect data to confirm the necessary conditions were met for the women to enter the study. Therefore, the questionnaire was used as a vetting tool to gain information to include participants in the interview, journal, and focus group aspects of the study.

Demographics Questions

1. Are you a biological female? Yes or No?
2. Religious affiliation
3. Age
4. Have you experienced intimate partner violence, which is an abuse of power involving the willful intimidation, physical or sexual violence, or verbal, emotional, or psychological abuse committed by one intimate partner against another (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, n.d.)?
5. Did you engage in any kind of religious support during or after the abusive relationship? Religious support is defined as an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to God, as Christians define Him (King & Koenig, 2009).
6. Did you engage in any kind of spiritual support during or after the abusive relationship? Spiritual support is defined as the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, meaning, and relationship to God, as Christians define Him (King & Koenig, 2009).
7. Were you able to return to the level of functionality you had experienced before you entered the abusive relationship?
8. Were you able to experience any kind of personal growth or increase in functionality during or after the abusive relationship?

Interviews

Interviewing Christian women who have experienced IPV was the best way to investigate the lived experience of this population and understand their experience with spiritual and

religious supports (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 1990). Therefore, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used to engage in conversations with study participants via WebEx. Interviews were conducted using the exact wording and order of the questions below (Merriam & Merriam, 2009), but participants were offered the opportunity to discuss other topics as they arose. Follow-up questions were asked when necessary to make sense of the lived experience of the participant, which is the goal of the semi-structured interview process (van Manen, 1990). Interviews were recorded to ensure accuracy and WebEx was used to transcribe them.

Interviews assisted in answering the three central research questions of this study: (1) What is the lived experience of Christian women who face intimate partner violence as they engaged with their religious and spiritual supports? (2) How do Christian women who have experienced intimate partner violence perceive their personal growth after seeking help as they engaged in spiritual or religious supports? (3) What do Christian women who have experienced intimate partner violence perceive as spiritual or religious factors that contributed toward building their resilience? The following questions were created to address the research questions:

Questions for Interviews

1. Please describe how and when your relationship with your partner began.
2. Please describe your family and upbringing.
3. Please describe your relationship with God and your spiritual journey.
4. Please describe how the abuse began and your experience as a victim of intimate partner violence.
5. What aspects of the abuse were the most difficult to cope with?
6. What strategies did you develop and use to cope with the abuse?

7. What kinds of abuse did you experience- emotional, physical, sexual, economic, verbal, and/or psychological?
8. Please describe any spiritual supports you used during the time of the relationship with the abuser.
9. Please describe any religious supports you sought out during the time of the relationship with the abuser.
10. Resiliency is defined as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress" (Stebnicki, 2016, p. 278). Please describe your process of adapting in the face of the abusive relationship.
11. Please describe any areas of personal growth you experienced during or after the abusive relationship.
12. Please describe your view of your personal strength, your interpersonal relationships, your appreciation for life, and your view of possibilities in the future after your abusive relationship.
13. Please describe any influences that you found to be helpful or harmful to your growth in the face of the violent relationship.
14. Please describe your present lived experience with spiritual and religious supports.
15. Please share how your experience as a victim of intimate partner violence has impacted your view on God, yourself, religious supports, or intimate relationships.
16. What advice would you offer to a woman in an abusive relationship?
17. What advice would you offer pastors and church leaders as they help victims of intimate partner violence?

Questions 1 and 2 helped build rapport with the interviewee and gain an understanding of their background. They provided a good foundation for understanding the context of how the relationship with the abuser partner began and how the person's family background intersected with their views of a healthy family relationship.

Question 3 gave a spiritual background on the participant. This allowed understanding into how they began a relationship with God, when it began, and how their relationship with God had progressed since that point. The researcher sought to gain insight into how the person thinks about God and relates to Him on a regular basis, as these points are salient to research question 1 regarding the participant's spiritual life, an area that researchers have suggested for further study (de la Rosa, et al., 2016; Drumm et al., 2014; Postmus et al., 2009; Shaw et al., 2022; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2016; Westenberg, 2017).

Questions 4 and 5 offered the woman the opportunity to share her lived experience as a victim of intimate partner violence. These questions allowed a greater understanding of the pain she experienced, the severity of the abuse, and her cognitive struggles in response to it. Additionally, the questions offered an understanding of what the woman considered the most challenging and difficult aspects of the abuse she suffered (Estrellado & Loh, 2019; Johnson & Hotton, 2003; National Partnership for Women and Families, 2021). These questions addressed research question 1: "What is the lived experience of Christian women who face intimate partner violence as they engaged with their religious and spiritual supports?"

Question 6 was meant to allow the participant to reflect on how she survived the abuse by asking her to remember and identify the strategies she used. This offered some insight into research question 1, as the participants identified spiritual or religious strategies. As they provided other strategies, it offered insights into her lived experience as a survivor, which also

addressed research question 1. Question 7 allowed participants to extend their discussion about their lived experience by asking for specific experiences of different kinds of abuse- emotional, physical, sexual, economic, verbal, or psychological. A definition of each kind of abuse was offered to the participants if needed, as defined by Crossman & Hardesty (2018), Harris & Woodlock (2019), Krigel & Benjamin (2021), the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (2020), the National Institute of Justice (2007), and Stark (2007).

Question 8 was meant to allow the survivor to share how she used her spiritual relationship with God to address the violence and control in the home. Spiritual support is the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, meaning, and relationship to God, as Christians define Him (King & Koenig, 2009). It involves using spiritual disciplines like prayer, meditation, reading the Bible, fasting, contemplation, journaling, and reading spiritual material (Postmus, 2009; Wang, 2009; Westenberg, 2017). This question assisted in addressing research question 1.

Question 9 was meant to allow the survivor to share how she engaged in religious supports in her processing. Religious supports are described as organized systems of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to God, as Christians define Him (King & Koenig, 2009). This allowed participants to share how they intersected with their churches, pastors, and other ministry leaders as they navigated their suffering, an area that researchers have suggested for further study (Moon & Shim, 2010; Sojourners & IMA World Health, 2014; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2016; Truong, 2022; Walker & Aten, 2012). This question helped to address research question 1.

Question 10 was meant to offer data to answer research question 3 “What do Christian women who have experienced intimate partner violence perceive as spiritual or religious factors

that contributed toward building their resilience"? Women were offered the definition of resiliency (Stebnicki, 2016) and were asked to share how they adapted and responded to the abusive situation.

Questions 11, 12, and 13 offered insight into the personal growth that women experienced as well as the influences that they identified as helpful or harmful to that growth. All five aspects of posttraumatic growth as observed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) were addressed. These questions will answer research question 2 "How do Christian women who have experienced intimate partner violence perceive their personal growth after seeking help as they engaged in spiritual or religious supports?"

Questions 14 and 15 offered insight into how the survivor oriented herself toward spiritual and religious supports in her post-abuse life. These questions generated data regarding how her view of her spiritual life and connections to the church were impacted by her abuse experience (Francis, 2019; Ulloa et al., 2016). In addition, participants were asked to share about the impact of the abuse on herself and others. Particular attention was paid to assess for spiritual and religious themes as they related to her view of herself and others, as has been suggested by other researchers (Anderson et al., 2012; Drumm et al., 2014; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2016).

Questions 16 and 17 were meant to give opportunity for the abused woman to offer her expertise on how to help intimate partner violence victims still suffering in their homes. This data served to offer insight into how to offer practical and spiritual support to victims of IPV. In addition, the participants provided insight into how pastors and churches could best serve and care for women in their congregations as has been suggested by past researchers (Francis, 2019; Ulloa, et al., 2016; Walker & Aten, 2012). These questions addressed all three research questions.

Journal Entries

The journal entries were collected after the interviews. van Manen (1990) stated that journal entries are significant and helpful sources of insight, offering reflective accounts of human experiences, which are valuable in phenomenological research. The journal entries were focused on answering all three research questions. The women initially interviewed were asked to respond to the following prompts: "Please describe the ways you interacted with spiritual and religious supports when you endured intimate partner violence. Please describe what aspects of your spiritual and religious supports were most meaningful and helpful and why. Please describe any growth you experienced during or after the intimate partner violence." The journal entries were collected through email attachments. The researcher used the same process in observing this data as used in the interview process. The statements and themes that emerged from the interviews and journal entries were summarized (Creswell and Poth, 2018) for use in the focus group.

Focus Groups

After conducting the interviews and collecting and analyzing the journal entries and interviews, clarifying questions were developed for use in the focus group. While introducing the goals of the focus group, the researcher shared with the women the themes from the data and asked for their input on the interpretation and formation of the themes. van Manen (1990) suggested that the interview participants have the opportunity to weigh in on whether the researcher has captured the essence of their lived experience through member checking. He stated that deeper and richer themes often emerge from these follow-up conversations (van Manen, 1990). Each theme coded from interview transcripts and journal entries was explored, as participants were asked for reflections from each focus group member on the themes that

emerged from the interviews. Clarifying questions regarding the development of resiliency and posttraumatic growth areas were used in the group to explore the areas that required further explanation. As the focus group offered input, their conversation was also recorded for use as a transcript. This transcript was used to confirm, extend, or correct the themes compiled. The intent of the focus group was to address all three of the main research questions.

Data Analysis

According to van Manen (1990), analysis of phenomenological data begins with the researcher reflecting on the meaning of the texts. In this study, the text refers to the transcripts of the interviews, journals, and focus group. The text offers the opportunity for the researcher to note the lived experience of the participants as they observe the phenomena from their perspective and in their own words. The meaning of the phenomena is not simple, but multilayered and therefore requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the data, rereading, thinking, note-taking, and formulating the themes that emerge (van Manen, 1990). Only after this rich and prolonged experience with the data can the researcher begin to identify the codes that need to be focused on.

According to Gademer (2013), a hermeneutical approach to gaining meaning from a text originated in the Christian reformer's approach to the Bible. Martin Luther, in particular, showed that the meaning of the text was evident, but only as the whole and the parts helped to continually define the themes found in each (Gadamer, 2013). This hermeneutical approach to the Bible gave birth to using the approach in the modern human sciences (Gadamer, 2013). Hermeneutical phenomenology is considered an art and a science, as the interviewer and interviewee collaborate to seek meaning, leading them to truth (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). Truth is the goal of the conversation, as the two parties seek to uncover the facts, or the lived experience

of the subject, leading to a greater knowledge of the phenomenon at hand (Gadamer, 2013). As the researcher engages with the text, they should be aware of their preconceptions (Gadamer, 2013). The researcher does not seek neutrality, but awareness of their own bias, so that when the text presents a similar or different meaning than the concepts embedded in the research, it is evident to them (Gadamer, 2013).

To engage in this process, the researcher reflected on the following questions before engaging with the transcriptions from the interviews: What do I already know about this topic and how has my personal and professional background and experiences helped to shape this knowledge? What assumptions and biases do I have about IPV, spiritual and religious supports, and the concepts of resiliency and personal growth? Writing out responses served to promote awareness of my personal belief system and allowed me to understand how they compared or contrasted with the perspectives shared during the interviews. In addition, the researcher wrote field notes after interviews with each participant, noting her own experience with them and their story, as well as her impression of their emotions and responses to the interview.

MaxQDA (VERBI Software, 2023) was used to assist with the process of coding the semi-structured interviews, journal entries, and focus group transcript. Interviews, journal entries, and the focus group transcripts were coded and lists were created regarding what the participants reported both in their own words and related to the general themes to which they referred (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An audit trail was created, noting the decisions made by the researcher and the reasoning associated with these decisions in the pursuit of finding important themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Themes were formulated by compiling a list of significant statements made by the participants. In addition, themes regarding the lived experience of IPV victims were sought through reading the transcripts carefully and looking for repeated words,

statements, and experiences of the participants. This process of immersion in the data allowed focus on how the participants experienced IPV as well as their interaction with religious and spiritual supports (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). In addition, themes regarding resiliency and growth were sought with a focus on the five areas of growth developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996): a greater appreciation of life, improved interpersonal relationships, a better sense of personal strengths, spiritual development, and the recognition of new possibilities in life.

Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility refers to the level of confidence placed in the veracity of the research findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To establish credibility for this study, triangulation was achieved by incorporating interviews, focus groups, and journal entries into the data pool, as described by Creswell & Poth (2018). Persistent observation and prolonged engagement with the data further promoted credibility. This was accomplished through a focus on spending significant time with the three sources of data and seeking to assess the repeated statements and themes voiced by the participants. This dissertation was submitted to committee members and reviewers at Liberty University, who are all doctoral-level professors. In this way, I was able to make appropriate revisions regarding the study.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability refers to the reliability of a study's findings and how likely the results are to be repeated by other researchers (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). As dependability involves participants' evaluation of the findings, care was taken to involve participants in the interpretation of the data. Participants in the focus group were asked to review and respond to the themes that the researcher was developing. This process increased the reliability of the study

because it allowed participants to correct any false interpretations from the interviews or journal entries and solidified the direction of the themes being formed.

Confirmability is the degree to which the findings of the research study reflect the views of the respondents and not the opinions of the researcher (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To establish confirmability, an audit trail was created. This document detailed key decision-making including rationale (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This allowed the reader to observe and understand the analytical process used (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Reflexivity was demonstrated as the researcher disclosed personal biases, values, and background. This approach allowed the reader to understand how these biases, values, or experiences shaped and influenced the interpretations of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It also allowed the reader to understand the analytical leaps and pursuit of certain themes that were important to the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of a research study could be applied to other contexts, settings, or populations (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To increase the likelihood of transferability, the researcher provided a rich, thick description of the phenomenon and procedures used to allow the reader to decide on the applicability of the study in other contexts.

Ethical Considerations

To offer participants protection from harm, confidentiality was achieved by using pseudonyms for all participants, a principle presented by Durdella (2019). Furthermore, to address the concept of respect for persons and reduce the potential for emotional distress for victims of trauma, participants were offered the option to pause or withdraw from the study at

any time as suggested by Durdella (2019) and Merriam & Merriam (2009). To meet the ethical principle of reciprocity described by Merriam & Merriam (2009), participants were given a book on healing from IPV, *The Emotionally Destructive Relationship* (Vernick, 2007). In addition, to meet the principle of beneficence, as needed participants were offered a list of therapists to address any emotional distress as outlined by Durdella (2019). Finally, to reduce the potential for data breach and to maintain confidentiality, the data was stored in a computer accessed only by the researcher.

Summary

This qualitative study used a hermeneutical phenomenological design to investigate the lived experiences of adult female Christian IPV survivors as they sought to access spiritual and religious supports, as well as their experience with the development of resiliency or growth. After Institutional Review Board approval was given, recruiting 9 study participants was accomplished through contacts from online support groups for Christian female IPV victims, Facebook, and area churches. Semi-structured interviews were conducted through WebEx, transcribed, and analyzed for themes. Journal entries were collected from the interviewees who were willing to do so to offer participants more time to reflect on and communicate their experiences with spiritual and religious supports, as well as the outcomes in their lives. A focus group was conducted to share the themes identified in the interviews and journals, which offered the group the opportunity to extend, confirm, or correct the interpretation of the data. Credibility was established through triangulation and prolonged engagement with the data. Dependability was established through participant feedback regarding the meaning and themes developed. Confirmability was demonstrated through an audit trail. Reflexivity was shown by disclosing the researcher's belief systems and biases. Finally, the transferability of the study was achieved

through the thick description of the study procedures. Professional ethical standards were met through computers accessible only to the researcher, pseudonyms for confidentiality, and protection from and addressing of emotional distress for the participants.

Chapter Four: Findings

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of Christian female victims of intimate partner violence as they engaged with their religious and spiritual supports to identify what they describe as the spiritual and religious factors contributing to their resilience and posttraumatic growth. The following were the research questions that guided this study: What is the lived experience of Christian women who face intimate partner violence as they engaged with their religious and spiritual supports? How do Christian women who have experienced intimate partner violence describe their personal growth after seeking help as they engaged in their spiritual or religious supports? What do Christian women who have experienced intimate partner violence describe as spiritual or religious factors that contributed toward building their resilience?

This chapter begins with a description of the nine participants included in the study. Then the results of the semi-structured interviews, journal entries, and focus group are presented through theme development. The six themes that were developed through saturation with the data are then provided. Next, there is a discussion of how these themes answer the research questions. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary.

Participants

The first participant was given a pseudonym that began with the letter A; the second was given a pseudonym that started with the letter B, etc. The participants were recruited through advertisements on Facebook and through snowball sampling. The first participant responded to a post on a Facebook group. The other participants were made aware of the study through connections with administrators of support groups for women experiencing domestic abuse. All

the participants responded to a demographic questionnaire which confirmed their eligibility for the study. All self-reported exposure to IPV, use of spiritual or religious supports, and the development of resiliency or posttraumatic growth in the aftermath of the abuse.

Pseudonym	**Age**	**Marital Status**	**Ethnicity**	**Type of Abuse** **Physical- P** **Sexual-S** **Psychological -PS** **Verbal- V** **Financial-F** **Emotional- E**
Ava	**49**	**Divorced**	**Caucasian**	**P, E, F, PS**
Beth	**60**	**Divorced**	**Caucasian**	**P, S, E, F**
Chris	**46**	**Divorced**	**Caucasian**	**P, S, PS, E**
Deb	**52**	**Divorced, Remarried**	**Caucasian**	**P, PS, F, E**
Eve	**75**	**Divorced**	**Caucasian**	**E, V, S, F**
Faith	**65**	**Divorced**	**Caucasian**	**P, E, V**
Gail	**61**	**Married**	**Caucasian**	**E, F, V, PS**
Hope	**60**	**Divorced**	**Caucasian**	**S, E, V, PS, F, P**
Ivy	**51**	**Divorced**	**Caucasian**	**P, S, V, PS, F**

Ava

Ava was a victim of physical, emotional, financial, and psychological abuse in her marriage. She reported that her husband began to attempt to control her very early in the marriage, though this was not his demeanor while they were dating. Ava spoke of coming to faith at a young age, walking away from her faith, and reengaging with her faith in her adult years. She and her husband attended church, so she sought help from her pastors when she began to

experience difficulties in her marriage. She experienced her pastors as “just as dismissive as my husband.” She was told that if she submitted to her husband, “everything would be fine.” She and her husband engaged in many attempts at marriage counseling with several therapists. Ava described the emotional abuse as “crushing and devastating” and “worse than the physical abuse”.

About 4 years into the marriage, Ava disclosed the issues of her marriage to a friend who attended a bible college. This friend became a spiritual and emotional support to Ava and eventually advocated for her by meeting with the pastors of her church. Ava reported that she heard Biblical passages like “God hates divorce” but it wasn’t until much later that she read about God’s hatred of oppression as well by talking with her friend and reading material from author Leslie Vernick. Through engagement with Vernick’s material, Ava reported “It was amazing to see that someone understood, I wasn’t alone, and that I was validated in what I was going through.” Ava joined an online support group and experienced only “love and support, no making me feel condemned or crazy, like everyone else.”

After engaging with Vernick’s information about abuse, Ava reported feeling less angry, because it helped her to understand the patterns of abuse. She was able to disengage from arguments and defensiveness. She reported that she grew in personal strength since she realized she did not need validation from her husband. She realized that she had become dependent on him and instead began to turn to God for this: “I’m a child of God, I don’t need him to verify that for me.” During her marriage, Ava reported that she wasn’t “allowed to have any friends,” but after her personal growth began, her interpersonal relationships were strengthened with friends and also her children.

Ava reported that during the abuse, she had no appreciation of life but that "I thought he was going to kill me and I just had to submit to that." She said "He convinced me that I was worthless, but now life is awesome. I enjoy being alive, serving others in the church, and just being here watching my kids grow up." Ava reported that her view of God was impacted by her conversations with her pastors,

> I started to get a view of God that God was evil. If God is supportive of this, he wants me to go through this treatment, that was his will for me, his desire, it was doing good for me.

Through her process of learning, Ava found that God hates abuse, and "it is ok for us to escape it." She learned that God is good, that he did not want her to experience devastation in her marriage, that God can use all things for good but that the abuse was not good. Ava has changed churches but still attends a church and is seeking to develop trust with people there.

Ava shared a message for women in abusive situations, "You are not alone and the abuse is not God's plan for you." Her advice to church leaders is to read about abuse in order to understand what it is and the impact it has on women. She advised that they believe these women, "because it a lot of courage for women to come and ask for help."

Beth

Beth is a mother of four in her late 50s who was married to her abuser for 38 years. She experienced sexual, physical, verbal, emotional, economic, and spiritual abuse throughout the course of her marriage. Her church became involved in confronting her husband due to his infidelity about 30 years into the marriage. Her experience with her conservative church was primarily a positive one, as they sought to hold her husband accountable for his choice to be unfaithful. They began to meet with her husband regularly to begin to restore the marriage. A

couple of years later, Beth's daughter gave her a book about abuse in marriage. Beth reports that this was an "Aha" moment for her, as what she read accurately described what she had been living with her whole marriage. When she shared this newfound knowledge with her team at church (her pastor, an elder, and the pastor's wife) they were very open to understanding these concepts in relationship to her marriage. The pastor and elder met weekly with her husband, seeking to help him understand how his behavior was injuring his wife. They began using Chris Moles' *Men of Peace* curriculum with her husband, a curriculum developed for abusive men and they supported Beth in her choice to not engage in marriage counseling at this point.

Beth's journey included receiving support from her children, her sisters, a small group of Christian women (some who had experienced abuse in marriage), and her coworkers at a Christian pregnancy center. She noted that several of these women had identified her marriage as abusive and validated her when Beth came to that realization as well. One woman in this inner circle also recommended that Beth pack a bag and keep it at her home for any moments that she felt she needed to leave her home. This woman gave Beth a key to her home for easy access whenever she needed it. Beth said that looking back, she can see that "God sent these women at the perfect times." Beth also began meeting with a trauma-informed therapist. Beth also was greatly helped by reading books like *Is It Abuse* by Darby Strickland and *Healing from Hidden Abuse* by Shannon Thomas.

Beth also engaged in studying the Bible consistently, writing out verses and carrying them around to help her stay focused on truth. She reported that the lies her husband told her about herself- that she was worthless, stupid, and a whore- were not internalized by her. The truths from the Bible became a lifeline for her to experience freedom inside of herself, even though she remained in the home with her husband. She said,

> For the last couple of years at home, I had Bible verses on index cards that I kept in my pocket. I would read them almost constantly throughout the day. My brain was so traumatized that I couldn't keep the words in my head very long, but I would meditate on little snippets of God's word, and it changed the way I thought. I learned that I didn't have to be anxious based on what a man says to me and that I could counter the lies with God's truth about how valuable I am to my Heavenly Father.

She began to apply passages like Psalm 18:19, "He brought me out into a broad place." Previously she felt constricted, like she couldn't breathe, and shared that this passage showed her that she "could be in a broad place in my heart" before any of the dynamics of the abuse changed. She also realized that she did not need to be drawn into the "vortex," which she described as endless accusations from her husband, her defensiveness, her accusations back, and seeking to reason with him. When she began to resist engagement in these arguments, she began to feel free.

After several years, Beth made the difficult decision to leave her husband. She shared this with her elders, who encouraged her to obtain a legal separation for her protection. They also supported her choice to obtain a protective order. "I was able to get a Protective Order from the courts for a 2-year period during which my pastor primarily kept my husband accountable and compliant. That is, without doubt, the greatest service he provided for me." When she moved out into the home of her friend, her pastor and elders were aware of the day so they could help her husband respond to the abrupt change. She stated,

> The reason why this was so helpful was because I was reeling from fleeing my house. I was scared of being stalked by my husband. And I had continuous anxiety that he would reach out to me and try to pull me back into his web. After three sheriffs came to tell him

> that he must not have his guns in the house, one of my elders came over to our house where my husband was living, gathered up all his guns, and took them back to the elder's house to lock them all up in his safe. Things like that made me feel safe.

Her elders

> supported me in having a GoFundMe initiative suggested to me by my son and daughter to raise money for me to go to a trauma-informed therapist. By that time, they were already counseling my husband alone because they knew that it was abuse and not a marriage counseling issue. So the fact that they knew that he needed to be counseled alone and supported me in procuring my own trauma-informed counselor was very validating to me.

Beth received advocacy training with a Christian organization that serves women who have been abused domestically named *Called to Peace*. She now serves as a domestic violence advocate. She shared that "God has given me tons of opportunities to help other women and I feel passionate about it. I love it." She is now attending seminary and living in a different state. She said,

> The Lord is teaching me to replace what used to be twisted and traumatizing with simple pleasures of life. I tell friends sometimes that I walk around my apartment and realize that I am grinning, and I don't know how long I've been grinning. Interestingly, I felt even closer to the Lord while I was still living in my house for the last two years because I think that he really presses into a person when they are in a crisis. But in my life now, I can't explain the joy and the deep peace I have of being safe and free in Christ for the first time in my adult life.

Chris

Chris grew up in a legalistic Christian home. She met her husband through a family member and experienced him as charismatic and agreeable before they were married. She reported that the abuse began on the wedding night. Chris experienced physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional abuse throughout her years of marriage. Chris reported that she coped with the painful marriage situation by living in denial for most of the marriage. She also placated her husband and sought to keep changing herself in hopes that the abusive behavior would end. Chris started seeking answers as she observed her husband's abusive behavior towards her children. She found the definition of abuse through reading Leslie Vernick's books, which began her journey of being able to understand the unhealthy dynamics in her marriage. She separated from her husband soon after.

Chris used prayer as one way of coping. She would journal and ask God "Why? What can I do? Help!" In addition, when physical abuse of the children was seen by a friend, Chris wrote a letter to the elders of her church to reveal what was happening in her home. The elders began to meet with her husband weekly and check in with Chris from time to time to find out if his behavior had changed. Chris did not feel cared for by her elders during this time. She reported being thankful for their intervention when she was going to file for divorce since the church stepped in and came up with a plan for her protection. It began a year where her husband was not allowed back in the home but was held accountable for his abusive behavior. Eventually the elders "saw" the abusive behavior and the lack of repentance and granted Chris a biblical divorce.

This period was difficult for her since her life was "exposed" before the church. Despite the many difficulties Chris experienced with people in her church, she did report that one woman

was assigned to her to care for her for a year. That woman prayed for her, advocated for her, and checked on her regularly. It was particularly meaningful to her that after a year this woman "didn't go anywhere. She became my friend." Chris reported that this woman helped to explain her husband's behavior to the elders, which increased their ability to understand the situation. Chris also had "a handful of older women who would come alongside me and check in on me. They have cared for me." She reported that after the abuse ended her appreciation for life increased saying, "I love my life now, I love making mistakes because there is nobody there attacking me for making a mistake. I feel safe."

Chris shared that her main advice for other abused women would be to get educated regarding the dynamics of abuse. Chris' advice for pastors involved offering love, helping with physical needs, helping with the children, and offering financial and emotional support. She did not feel that the pastors involved in her situation were equipped to deal with such a complex situation. She also felt that pastors need to speak about abuse in marriage from the pulpit in order to raise awareness about these dynamics and mentioned that seeing divorce as a blessing in these instances would be an important message for people to hear.

Deb

Deb is a 52-year-old raised in a Christian home who met her husband at a Christian college. She reported that the abuse began when she was dating her husband. Soon after they were married she experienced her first incident of physical abuse when her husband punched her in the stomach. In her early marriage years, her husband decided to stop attending church. Deb decided to keep the peace by staying home with him. Her relationship included physical, psychological, economic, and emotional abuse. Deb shared that her husband did not rape her in the traditional sense but that she had learned that one cannot truly have consensual sex with your

partner if you “live in fear of your life or your own safety.” Deb coped with the abuse by trying to keep the peace and get through the day by keeping her partner from blowing up. She did not disclose the abuse to her support system for fear that they would pressure her to leave. She feared that her husband would receive 50/50 custody of their children.

Deb decided to create a plan to leave her husband when her 6-year-old son endured a harsh beating from him after making a mistake. She learned that she could seek a protective order, which made her aware that she could “get away and get safe.” She emailed her pastor and a lawyer who attended her church to disclose that she needed help leaving her abusive husband. She received a great amount of support when she met with them, reporting that the attorney happened to practice family law and was very familiar with abusive men. She obtained a protective order from the court, found help from a domestic abuse shelter, and was pleased that the church stayed involved by supporting her. A woman from church watched her children when she needed to go to court, the women’s Bible study collected a whole box of groceries for her, and the church provided a meal during Thanksgiving and gifts during Christmas.

Her pastor helped to set up a supervised visitation schedule at the church building to fulfill the court’s decision to allow her husband to see her daughters. This involved the pastor asking different men from the church to be present in the building and supervise these visits. After the divorce was final, her church hired a new pastor. Having been a victim of abuse, he was very understanding about the pain that Deb was experiencing. He began to meet with Deb to help her address her broken self-image and rebuild her understanding of her identity. He shared scriptural principles, especially the love of God for her and his adoption of her as his child. Deb notes that she could not even look him in the eye when they first began meeting but that over time she began to grow in strength and trust that she is

worthy and a strong woman. I survived this and I am still here. I have friends who love me and care about me and I am not alone. I am a very different person than who I was 5 years ago.

Deb's church began a support group for women experiencing abuse as well. Now she serves as a mentor in that ministry. Deb expresses a positive outlook on her future and an appreciation of life now. Her view of God has been impacted through her experience as a victim of IPV, "God loves his children and I understand he feels about people who have been oppressed-God hates oppression and is on the side of the oppressed."

Deb struggled with the idea of entering another intimate relationship, but after many years started to feel ready to date. While in the dating process, she experienced more healing and began to build trust again, eventually marrying a couple of years later. Deb would like abused women to know that "God does love her and hasn't abandoned her. Try to find a place to plug in with other Christians who can support you." Deb would like pastors to respond to women experiencing abuse by believing them, not making excuses for what their husband has done, and not to be fooled if he seems like a "nice guy." She shared that it is important to trust the woman about when it is best for her to leave and not be another controlling person in her life by pushing her towards decisions.

Eve

Eve is a 75-year-old woman who was married for 25 years to a man who abused her emotionally, verbally, sexually, and economically. She began to develop a committed relationship with God in her late 20s. Married at 19 to escape a dysfunctional family, Eve realized much later that she had married into an abusive situation, which was marked mostly by neglect, coldness, and using her for sexual relations. She reported that often she would feel "worse than a whore,

because at least they got paid." She began to ask herself, "Am I worth more than just a sexual partner for somebody?" Eve used her time in the Bible and in prayer to cope with the pain she felt in her marriage. "I just clung to God," she reported. She wrestled with God and asked him, "Is this the way it is supposed to be?" She experienced comfort from her time with God and was often reminded of his presence with her in every season.

Eve became much more involved in fellowship groups for women and while she did not disclose her marriage pain to these women, she did experience a greater connection to God and the comfort of his presence there too. She began to change and experienced that God was "taking up more space" in her mind and heart. Eventually, she sought help from a Christian counselor who helped her to understand that what she was experiencing in her marriage was not normal, but dysfunctional. She reported that at this time she began to realize that she could not survive the marriage because she was "emotionally starving" and felt that eventually she would die. Her counselor and Bible study group helped her to see that she was not "dead inside," but that in God's eyes she had worth. This strengthened her to move out of her home and start a new life. Eve's view of herself changed from her past perspective of herself as being dependent and unworthy to seeing herself as strong, able to support herself, and worthy of being treated well. Eve now experiences a great deal of freedom to make her own decisions and express her emotions openly, a stark contrast to her past self.

She reported that her interpersonal relationships have not been fully healed and that she struggles with trusting others. Her relationship with women at church suffered when she chose to pursue a divorce. She did have two other women, both of whom had been victims of abuse, who became a support system to her, one in which she called a "spiritual partner." She said,

> The most meaningful support at that time was a woman a little older than me who had gone through most of the same things I had or was still involved in. I don't remember how much I shared with her, but we prayed regularly for any and everything. There was also another lady going through some of the same things, and there would be three of us at those meetings. This leader lived in the local area, so access was readily available if an emergency arose.

Eve recalled that one man from her church, a police officer who was familiar with domestic violence cases, told her that he understood why she had divorced her husband which was very meaningful to her at the time. Eve experienced relief and the ability to grow after the abuse ended, stating:

> Not having to tiptoe around the elephant in the middle of the room or walk on eggshells was mentally and emotionally freeing, like someone had opened the door for fresh air. Liberating. I could now focus on myself and make strides toward a healthy outlook. I started school again to obtain my bachelor's degree and leave town to fulfill a lifelong dream of serving our country in the armed forces. I depended on God and His direction in my life; He has opened the doors for schooling and recruitment by the Air Force. That is when the next phase of my life began.

When Eve found a new church, she began to grow as she experienced unconditional love from the Christians around her. She reported that she still walks with God and that while she struggled about whether her decision to divorce was right before him, her view of God did not suffer as a result of her abuse. Eve believes that when a woman discloses abuse to her pastor or church family, the most important way they can respond is by listening. "Listen to what they are telling you and understand with compassion that this person left for a reason. Don't judge them."

In addition, she recommended that church leaders address these situations with humility and awareness that they may not know the symptoms of abuse and codependency.

Faith

Faith is a 65-year-old Christian woman who met her husband at a Bible college. She experienced physical, emotional, and verbal abuse from her husband throughout the course of their 40-year marriage. Faith was very focused on being a submissive wife, keeping the children under control, and pleasing her husband at any personal cost to herself. She began to see some of her husband's unhealthy and controlling dynamics when her children became teenagers, and her husband would not allow them freedom in decision-making. She remarked that she began to think, "Oh wow, I am willing to be controlled, but this is not healthy for our children."

The incident that was most deeply painful for Faith involved her husband accusing her of contributing to sexual abuse that she had suffered in childhood. Deeply heartbroken, Faith turned to a friend for help.

Faith recalled that earlier in her marriage she shared her concerns about her husband and their marriage with her church leadership. She felt that she could not verbalize what was happening, but asked if someone could do a Bible study with him. Since her husband was active in serving widows at church, Faith sensed that the church did not take her concerns seriously. Faith's daughter helped her to realize that she was beginning to show signs of depression, which caused her to seek help. Faith began to seek out counseling for herself and started to develop spiritual disciplines like prayer, fasting, Bible study, and memorization of Scripture. She began to recognize how much pain and bitterness she had experienced as a result of the abuse, and she began to pray and seek God to relieve her from the negative emotions. She found healing, realizing that the bitterness was gone and she was drawing near to God in new ways.

Faith remarked that this was the first time she was not living in a dependent way on other people, particularly her husband. She said, “My Christianity was always important to me, but it was wrapped around my marriage.” Her husband was no longer the source of her contentment. Unfortunately, Faith’s husband chose to be unfaithful towards the end of their marriage. While she did not experience support from her elders when she shared about the abuse in her marriage, they did excommunicate her husband for his choice to commit adultery and divorce Faith. Faith’s disappointment with her church leadership led her to leave and find a new church. She has felt embraced and loved in her new church. She referenced a Bible study she began to attend about Jesus and how he treated women which helped her to see how Jesus raised women to a place of equality. She shared, “It gave an empowerment that what I have to say is important.” When considering the future, Faith said, “I am asking the Lord to help me be mindful of how I can help other people in their pain.”

Gail

Gail is a 61-year-old Christian woman who grew up in a conservative and legalistic Christian home. In her first marriage, Gail experienced coercive control from the beginning. She experienced emotional, verbal, and economic abuse. Due to the abuse and neglect she experienced Gail stated that she felt worthless and without value. After 25 years of marriage, her husband served her with divorce papers. Gail shared that she coped with the pain of her first marriage by developing a closer relationship with the Lord during the last 10 years of her marriage. While her friends supported her, some encouraged her to seek a divorce, which Gail did not believe in. Instead, she “prayed and sought to walk closely with God.” Gail shared that she did not fear her husband but was greatly influenced by her church’s teaching on the importance of submission to one’s husband. Fear of God motivated her complete obedience to

her husband. In addition, her fear of not honoring the family name motivated her to make the marriage work.

A few years later, Gail began dating a man from church. When their relationship became physical, Gail believed that she had to marry him, based on teachings she had heard in her legalistic upbringing. She reported that she felt he was coercing her to have sex before marriage. After they were married Gail observed that her husband became even more controlling. She found herself very confused about his version of reality and realized it was impossible to resolve conflicts with him. Her husband often lied or manipulated her in conversations leading her to lose "her ability to think about things objectively and be analytical, or do homework and learn because I was told how I couldn't or I wasn't." She pulled out of serving at church because she was told she was a hypocrite. She believed she was an awful person. After she and her husband engaged in counseling with their third marriage counselor, Gail began to search for information about the definition of a healthy relationship. She found Leslie Vernick's book, *The Emotionally Destructive Relationship* (2007), which helped her to see that what she was experiencing was abuse. Until that point, Gail believed that the relationship problems were her fault and that if she tried harder, she could fix the problems in her marriage.

Gail shared the Vernick book with a former pastor and counselor that she had been seeing. He was open to reading it and called her 2 weeks later to apologize that he had mishandled her case. He sought to engage in one more counseling session in order to help her husband understand the unhealthy dynamics, which led to her husband admitting some behaviors. Her counselor believed that joint marriage counseling would not be helpful at that point, and eventually realized that he did not have the expertise to handle her case. He asked if Gail could share her situation with her pastor, but she said, "I know I can't go to my church or

my family." He offered to meet with her pastor his wife, Gail, and her husband, to explain the situation and hand the case over to the church. After he spent an hour explaining the problem, he left and allowed the pastor to handle it. Gail recalled that the first words her pastor spoke were "Shame on you. You are in your 50s, and you have been in this church all of your life. You should be helping others, not receiving help." Gail was reeling from this statement. When the meeting was over, the pastor presented the problem to the elder board who gave her and her husband a Bible study and mentors to work with. The women who mentored Gail did not have experience with abusive marriages, but one of them was willing to read some material on abuse and listen to Gail's needs. Gail reported that this woman "stuck with me for 3 years."

Gail's husband did not follow through on the work that the elder board had given him, and Gail observed that things at home were getting worse. She wrote another letter to the board revealing the painful incidents she was experiencing in her home. After an extremely disappointing meeting with her elders, Gail was physically shaken and never went back to that church again. "I will state that the three biblical counselors, my church pastor, and leadership did more damage than good. I feel that I incurred even more trauma from my church." Gail began to explore Christian supports like Peaceworks, Called to Peace, and Leslie Vernick's online classes. She shared, "I found Dr Debra Wingfield's advocacy training course and joined. With the lockdowns, I had days, weeks, and months of saturating myself with scripture and all the knowledge offered on these online courses." Over the years, she gleaned knowledge and eventually went through advocacy training. Now she serves as a domestic violence advocate.

Gail's spiritual life was greatly changed during this time, as she "pressed into times of

prayer and Bible study." She began to study about what it means to be a woman before the Lord and experienced a complete transformation. She shared that in the earlier years of her life, she was self-willed, but not humble or dependent on God. She stated:

> I realized how valued I was and that I was a daughter of the Lord. This is totally different than thinking you are talented, capable, or smart. I have a totally different mindset; I look at myself totally differently now. Most of all, God rescued me with miraculous healing in my heart and mind so that I feared 'man' no more.

Gail has shared what she has learned with several family members, some of whom have attended trainings with her. She reported that her family has been very helped and affected by what they are learning as well.

Gail would recommend that those seeking to help abused women listen 90% of the time. She advised that some women take an assessment to determine if their relationship is marked by power and control dynamics. She seeks to help women assess their need to seek safety and plan for safety. She also shares Scripture with women to bring encouragement. For pastors, Gail advised that they understand that abused women are sometimes angry, excitable, or look dysfunctional. She shared that this does not necessarily mean that she is the guilty party. In addition, the pastor should not assume that if the husband is "smooth and put together that he is the innocent party." Also, Gail advised that marriage counseling is not the solution, since the issue of abuse is a heart issue, not a marriage issue.

Hope

Hope is a 60-year-old Christian female who grew up in a Christian home. Hope met her husband through a Christian school where she was employed. She did not recognize any warning signs before marriage but now has been able to realize that her husband was manipulative and

controlling from the beginning of the relationship. Hope experienced sexual, economic, verbal, psychological, emotional, and physical abuse in her marriage. Her perspective on a wife's responsibilities in marriage was defined by her ability to make her husband happy. She reported that she believed that submitting to everything that he wanted was how she was to honor God in her marriage. This perspective was presented and reinforced through "ultra-fundamentalist teaching." Hope referenced a book she had read on the role of a wife which taught that women need to submit to their husbands even if they are making morally wrong choices. As a result, Hope became a participant in viewing pornography with her husband in order to submit to his sexual desires.

Hope reported that she coped with the abuse by staying busy, responding to all of her husband's desires and wishes, drinking excessively, and watching television in excess. Hope's compliance with her husband's desires was also motivated by fear of things "going downhill," which she defined as more outbursts of anger or a potential divorce. Towards the end of the relationship, Hope's husband threatened to kill her if she ever tried to leave him. The turning point came for Hope when she disclosed the issues of her marriage to her sister and brother-in-law. The couple introduced her to Lundy Bancroft's book *Why Does He Do That?* (2003), which Hope hid in her home and read when her husband was not home. This began a process of pursuing podcasts and books which helped her to define her relationship as abusive. She said:

> It all kind of brought me to my knees. That is when I realized that I was not really honoring God, I have put a man in place of God. It changed my spiritual focus. I began reading my Bible again and praying.

She chose to disclose the abuse to her pastor and his wife who were "completely shocked." When the couple asked her why she had not disclosed this information before, Hope

replied, “I thought I was doing the right thing as a Christian seeking to submit.” The pastor’s wife remarked, “Well we are going to change that right now, that is not ok.” Hope’s pastor and his wife counseled her and her husband for a year with no progress. After that, they sought counseling with another pastor and his wife which was more helpful because they seemed to understand the dynamics of abuse. Unfortunately, her husband’s anger escalated during these 2 years. The elders in Hope’s church supported her by asking her husband to leave four times due to angry outbursts. The elders were focused on reconciliation which led to Hope feeling pressured to allow her husband back into the home since he expressed sorrow for his behavior each time.

Hope shared that she turned to spiritual supports as well. She referenced her upbringing in the faith and the role of her prayerful grandmother as being her model for how to develop resiliency. She noted,

> Because of that anchor, I reached out to God. I knew that God was it, He was going to be the way forward. Looking back, He is the one who gave me strength, I couldn’t do it without Him. I began to learn who I was in Christ, and that I wasn’t what my husband was saying I was. Recognizing how Christ saw me gave me the confidence to start speaking out and saying no to things.

Hope’s sister and brother-in-law also helped her to develop strategies to develop boundaries with her husband. As she enacted these strategies, she found that her husband did not know how to respond. Eventually Hope divorced her husband with endorsement from her church leaders who noted his pornography use as the reason she was permitted to divorce. Hope has moved to a new faith community that is very supportive of victims of IPV. She noted that the church has paid for her and another woman to attend a retreat for victims of domestic abuse and has supported their

desire to start of non-profit organization in her area to support women experiencing IPV. Hope has been trained to become a domestic violence advocate and reports that she is "very thankful that God is taking this terrible time and I can use it to minister and bless others. I feel really fortunate and honored. I am thankful that I was able to get out."

Ivy

Ivy grew up in a nominal Christian home and began a personal relationship with God in her college years. She met her husband through mutual friends and married him 2 years later. She experienced physical, sexual, verbal, psychological, and economic abuse throughout her marriage. She coped with the controlling dynamics of the marriage by seeking to placate him as much as possible. Eight years into the marriage, she decided to seek legal help after her husband threatened to kill her while pointing his gun at her. He was arrested and sent to a psychiatric hospital.

Ivy contacted a woman from her church who ran a local women's shelter for help. She did not understand that what she had experienced was considered domestic abuse but knew that she did not value her life anymore and did not know what to do. The women from the shelter connected Ivy with mental health resources because she was having a "nervous breakdown." She was also resourced with legal help and gained an order of protection from her husband. She was able to obtain a divorce from her husband and began to be able to function again. "I was functioning, but I hadn't healed. I was living in this state of being on guard with everybody." Ivy retained her relationship with God, but shared that she often questioned him, "What more do I have to give up? What more do I need to suffer through?"

Several years later, Ivy was introduced to the ministry Called to Peace. She joined a small support group for women who had experienced domestic abuse. She credits her healing to this

period of time when she began to read the Bible more, experienced encouragement from a friend, and grew in her understanding of Jesus. She reported that God "could understand the aloneness and isolation, being rejected by people. I realized that Christ felt that pain for everyone. I gained even more awareness of what the cross and his sacrifice entailed."

Ivy also completed a support group leader training and became a support group leader with Called to Peace. She stated that she feels it is important for her to be involved in this ministry because it is one of the easiest ways of "focusing not on the problem, but on what people can fix." It also provides Ivy with support and fellowship from other women who understand what it is like to be divorced and sometimes rejected by others in her church. Ivy has completed training to become a domestic violence advocate as well, a role that would allow her to serve women who are navigating the process of responding to abuse in their marriages. In addition, she meets with a biblical counselor who listens, asks good questions, and is willing to learn more about trauma and domestic abuse. All of these supports have helped Ivy move from feeling she had no value to knowing that there is a purpose for her life.

Ivy shared some advice for women experiencing domestic abuse, "Be prepared to leave in order to protect your life. Plan to have all of your documentation and financial information." She believes that pastors and church leaders should believe the women who come and disclose abuse because

> women are not going to come to you with fabrications that are going to destroy their marriages just for fun. They really are beaten down to the point that they don't know what to do or how to get out. We are taught to take those vows seriously. When I went to pre-marital counseling, I was taught that the word divorce does not exist. The only way out is death.

Instead, she believes pre-marital counseling should involve a focus on teaching about red flags that indicate an unhealthy power dynamic.

Results

This phenomenological study aimed to describe the lived experiences of Christian female victims of intimate partner violence as they engaged with their religious and spiritual supports to identify what they described as the spiritual and religious factors contributing to their resilience and posttraumatic growth. The results were collected from the participant's responses to a demographics questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, journal entries, and a focus group.

Theme Development

As outlined in Chapters Three and Four, participants were recruited through contacting online sites offering help to female victims of IPV. In addition, participants were recruited through advertisements on Facebook and snowball sampling. Each participant was emailed by the researcher to confirm eligibility through the use of the demographics questionnaire. Once eligibility was confirmed, a consent form was emailed for them to complete. Once the researcher received the completed consent form, the semi-structured interview was scheduled. The semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher using the teleconferencing platform, WebEx. After each interview was conducted, the automatic transcription was downloaded and reviewed. After the interview, the participant was invited to share a journal entry in response to two prompts. Three participants shared journal entries through email. In addition, the participants were invited to join a focus group through WebEx. Five interviewees attended the focus group. At the conclusion of the focus group, the automatic transcription was downloaded and reviewed.

The researcher read through the transcripts and journal entries many times, highlighting keywords and themes. The researcher used MAXQDA and a personal coding process to observe

the data and compile and develop themes. The following codes were used to engage with the data: PTG: Posttraumatic growth, PS: Personal strength, NP: New possibilities, RC: Relational changes, GA: Greater appreciation for life, SL: Greater connection to spiritual life, EC: Expert companion, R: Resiliency, SS: Spiritual supports, RS: Religious supports, P: protection from abuse, IT: Identity transformation. The following six themes were observed through saturation with the data from the interview transcripts, journal entries, and focus group transcript.

Theme One: Experiences in the Abusive Marriage

The interviewees were asked about what aspects of the abuse were the most difficult to cope with. The overarching response was that the emotional abuse was the hardest to cope with, even for those women who had been punched, pushed, almost shot, or threatened with death. One woman stated it succinctly:

> Yeah, I definitely went through the phase of feeling absolutely worthless and unwanted because, you know, the one person, the only person in my life who has made a vow to love and protect me- and that's the only person that was trying actively to destroy me and undermine me and so if the one person that has vowed to love me can't or won't, why would anyone else? Yeah, I was on the verge of suicide.

Another participant shared “I felt like every breath I took was a waste of air, you know, the space I took up was a waste of space because he had me feeling, so, so worthless.”

Ava stated that the hardest part was “the emotional abuse because I never knew about it, I thought women just were not tough enough. But it was worse than the physical abuse, so crushing and devastating.” Beth shared,

> the emotional abuse and verbal abuse were the hardest- a death by 1,000 cuts- so confusing. He put the burden on me to make him happy. If for some reason, he wasn't happy he would look for a way to put it on me.

Deb stated "never knowing how he would react, the uncertainty, what kind of mood he would be in. The emotional and financial abuse was worse than the physical abuse." The emotional abuse was delivered through the silent treatment for one participant, and for another, it was the isolation she experienced from others due to the control over her life.

For Faith, the worst part of the emotional abuse was being accused of being complicit with the most painful experience of her life- a relative molesting her. This repeated accusation broke her heart. For Hope, the hardest experience was the sexual abuse, as she experienced her husband "making me 'pay him back' for coming into marriage and not being a virgin. He made me do things in the bedroom I was uncomfortable with in order to make it up to him." When the focus group was asked about why the emotional abuse was hardest to cope with they responded,

> I mean if you really think about the nature of relationships, they are mostly not physical, although we relate to each other in the physical body. So, I only know you, according to what you look like I can recognize you if I see you walking down the street but most of our relationships with people are not physical. They are emotional and they are verbal. In our bodies, we use nonverbal communication, which can be quite wonderful and quite devastating. Of course, the most damaging part of abuse is not physical. Plus, men are smart, they don't want to get arrested. And so, if they can keep their wife in fear through coercive control, then that is what they will go for.

Theme Two: Biblical Messages Preceding` Growth

Every one of the women in the study turned to spiritual resources to cope with or navigate the experience of abuse in their marriage. The majority of the participants used the Bible as a resource. The biblical messages and themes that were meaningful to the women are compiled here.

The most common Biblical theme that the participants referenced was the message that they are children of God. Many stated that their feelings of worthlessness were countered and healed by recognizing their place in God's kingdom, "I'm a child of God," "God's truth about how valuable I am to my Heavenly Father," "in God's eyes I have worth," "I realized how valued I was and that I was a daughter of the Lord," "I began to learn who I was in Christ, and that I wasn't what my husband was saying I was. Recognizing how Christ saw me gave me the confidence." The women indicated that this was a powerful influence on their core beliefs which led to new ways of understanding themselves.

The second most common theme was the biblical teaching that God hates oppression. One woman shared that she learned: "God can use all things for good but that the abuse was not good." She said, "I understand how he feels about people who have been oppressed- God hates oppression and is on the side of the oppressed." And,

> Most of the scripture on oppression is not has nothing to do with physical force but it has to do with verbal or emotional (oppression): deception, whether honesty, integrity, but all of this violence and oppression as God described it.

"Jeremiah 22:16-17 says is not this what it means to know me? It is to do righteousness and justice. And that is pleading for the afflicted and the vulnerable and the oppressed in society."

The women began to believe that God was not endorsing the oppression they were experiencing in their homes but helping them to see that it was not His will.

Another theme that emerged was how the women found help to begin to view relationships from God's perspective. Several women realized that they were "fearing men" and depending on their husbands more than God. "It all kind of brought me to my knees. That is when I realized that I was not really honoring God, I have put a man in place of God. It changed my spiritual focus." This principle brought many of these women to a new understanding of their role as wives. Previously they had believed that to be a godly woman they needed to please their husband at all times, which led to a deadening of their thoughts, pursuits, or desires. One woman stated, "It gave me empowerment to believe that what I had to say was important."

Another woman shared Proverbs 4:23 which says,

> Above all things guard your heart. This is not talking about the physical guarding. It's not asking you to wear a bulletproof vest or a metal shield in front of you, so, it all has to do with our emotional and our mental state in the state of our soul.

This principle allowed several of the participants to recognize the damaging and unhealthy patterns of behavior and conversations that had existed in their relationships. In addition, one woman stated that the verse "Don't throw your pearls before swine" reinforced this new process of disengagement. These women began to disengage from arguments and defensiveness and in this way guarded their hearts from more verbal abuse.

One woman studied the concept of victimization from the scripture. She realized that many marriage interventions included a "mutualization" of blame. She learned that the Bible displays many relationships and situations where there is a "righteous man" and an "evil man,"

particularly in the book of Proverbs. By looking objectively at the behaviors that the Proverbs define as righteous, she realized,

> I am in the right here, I am okay before the Lord, my conscience is clean and that just began to elevate how my standing, you know, 'who could dwell on his holy mountain.' It just affirmed it inside. It's something I can't explain, but internally when I knew my heart was right before the Lord, then all of the curses that Proverbs declares (against the unrighteous person) wouldn't stick. When I was standing right before him and doing the right thing, and I didn't have to accept any of the accusations coming at me.

Theme Three: Education Regarding Abuse Dynamics as Necessary for Change

Every one of the participants was significantly impacted by learning about the dynamics of healthy and abusive relationships through a variety of resources. Most of the women (seven out of nine) credited their ability to recognize the abusive nature of their marriage to engagement with spiritual books, podcasts, or domestic violence advocacy groups. Two of the nine found the information about abuse through non-religious sources. Four of the nine women have now received training to serve as domestic violence advocates.

One woman shared that reading a book on abuse was an "Aha" moment for her, as what she read accurately described what she had been living with her whole marriage. After reading a book on destructive marriages another woman said, "It was amazing to see that someone understood, I wasn't alone, and that I was validated in what I was going through." Several women were greatly helped by understanding that their marriages were not normal, but dysfunctional, abusive, not honoring to God, or dominated by fear and control. The women noted that the confusion that they felt about what was wrong with them or their marriages was

resolved, which empowered them to begin to emotionally detach from their abusers or to see the importance of finding safety through legal means.

Theme Four: Expert Companions and Social Supports Preceding Growth

Every one of the interviewees reported that they received help and support from an "expert companion," a term coined by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2014) defined as either friends, family, clergy, or professional helpers who offer long-term listening, support, and acceptance to survivors of trauma. Several of the women noted that the most helpful expert companions were women who had been victims of IPV themselves. One participant shared,

> I met a woman at church, and I learned that she had been in an abusive marriage, her husband was all into drugs, and he was physically abusive. She was the first person I shared my experiences with because she was incredibly safe because she had been through all of that stuff too. We totally ministered to each other. It was a beautiful thing, and we were meeting for probably a couple of years every week or so- being understood and feeling safe with her and having a reciprocal thing I mean, it's just the God thing, He just set it up that way, you know.

Other women spoke of being helped by hearing from friends who were in non-abusive marriages by saying,

> Community was important in my journey. This friend, I told her something about us, just disclosing more and more over the weeks. And her eyes would just get as big as saucers, so to see somebody else's reaction to something that's totally normal in my home. Whatever I just said- they're just appalled at it.

Another said,

> I happened to share with a friend, and they'd be like, I would never let my husband get away with that. I thought, 'That's like, really like it's normal in my house.' It never even occurred to me to think of these things as wrong. Like, it was just like our individual marriage like, something's weird, but, you know, it's what it is.

One stated,

> I didn't realize how destructive the marriage was for a while, but it took friends mentioning stuff like that and just kind of comments here and there and finally, a friend of a friend who was in an abusive marriage introduced me to Leslie Vernick's information. So, I joined up with one of her free webcast things where she explained the difference between a disappointing marriage and a destructive one and that was my big Aha- this is not just weird or dysfunctional, this is destructive.

The feedback from these friends helped the abused women to understand how healthy marriages operated.

Four of the participants sought a professional therapist who became their main expert companion. However, the other five women found this support from good friends, pastors who had experience working with abuse, family members, or female mentors from church. Having a safe place to share what they were experiencing in their homes proved to be essential for these women to find validation and eventually courage to find safety or grow. The women shared that a very important aspect of this role was mainly listening. Another important aspect was the expert companion's willingness to grow in their knowledge of abuse.

Theme Five: Supports Preceding the Development of Resiliency and Posttraumatic Growth

For most of the participants, the process of realization, contemplation, communication, and eventually taking action in response to their abusive experiences was not simple, easy, or

fast. For women to respond in a functional way to their circumstances, they needed several kinds of support. One said,

> I realized that this is what I was living in, it took me a year with constant prayer and the prayer group I was in, and then reading the scriptures to try and say it's, I guess to justify it to myself, it's okay, this is not what God determined a relationship between a man and a woman should be, and that you can leave because you're physical and your mental and emotional survival depends on. Otherwise, I was going to die, but it took me a while to develop the emotional strength to finally say with the word and with prayer that it's okay to do this, you have to live healthy. You cannot live like this.

Another participant said "I mean, we've done all of the reading. We've done the small Bible groups, the counseling, and all of a sudden, the 'Aha' moment -this is not the kind of marriage God wants us to be in."

As the women began to apply what they were learning through books, the Bible, or counseling, they began to believe that they had the ability to make different choices in response to their abusers. One said,

> The verse that helped me out a lot was don't throw your pearls before swine. This helped me to realize that arguing anymore is not helping, because he's not trying to communicate, he is trying to destroy me and I'm no longer going to let him have this conversation.

Another stated,

> I've read tons of books. So, at one point in time, when I read something about that abuser has an ethic that they're operating off of. They actually think they are entitled. They actually believe they own their wife. So, it made it all kind of came into my mind.

> Because I thought, it actually made more sense to me. And it helped me to distance myself, because I think we develop the strength to say this is not normal.

One participant shared how her exposure to truth gave her the ability to function, saying, "Understanding that the truth of God's word defines your personhood as worthwhile, important, valuable. That got that got me through. I don't know how people get through if you don't. The Holy Spirit is actually in your heart." Only one of the participants was able to make changes almost immediately. She said:

> When I got 17 years into my marriage, I realized that I was the only one working, and he was destroying. And I think for me, part of my, you know, I had a very quick awakening I went from complete denial. Nobody knew about our marriage troubles, not even me. You know, because I just was trained to keep everybody happy and to not look at the problems. It was Leslie Vernick for me as well, I read her book in a period of 24 hours. I couldn't put it down because it finally gave me language for my reality. And then once I saw it I couldn't unsee it and a month later we were separated.

Two of the participants shared that while they had at least one person who truly sought to understand and support them, they did not experience that with their church community. One shared,

> The person that's helped me the most is a woman about 10 years ahead of me. She had a very similar marriage, and she stays in touch with me at least once a week. I call her my big sister, she's about probably 20 years older than me. But, I don't have a lot of support. I feel like the church didn't know what to do with me. I've lost everything-pretty much all my friends, my family, I'm realizing how there's a lot of dysfunction there, and they're

not, you know, they're supportive in name, but they don't actually help, you know, they're not emotionally supportive. They don't provide physical support, so I'm really alone.

These two participants both shared that they experienced significant hurts from their church communities and therefore had a very difficult time trusting people of faith in their present lives as well. This unsupportive experience with the church community seemed to contribute towards isolation and stunted the process of healing.

Women who experienced physical protection from their church communities fared the best in their process of growing in resiliency. Beth shared that her pastor and elders responded with immediacy and fervency to her needs. She said her pastor sought to hold her husband accountable to the order of protection and "That is, without doubt, the greatest service he provided for me." Her elders were involved in keeping weapons out of her husband's possession which she said, "made me feel safe." Another participant mentioned that a friend from church offered her a key to her home, which became her place of escape if she felt threatened by her husband. Another participant noted that obtaining an order of protection and eventually a divorce led to her ability to function again. She noted that she had returned to functionality but had not truly healed internally until she incorporated two more aspects of healing: a support group for IPV victims and increased growth in her understanding of the Bible.

Several participants noted the importance of the practical help they received in many forms. Practical help came through one church creating a *GoFundMe* account for one woman to pay for trauma-informed counseling. For others, practical help involved watching her children while she went to court, offering gifts during the holidays, or buying groceries for her family.

Women shared that they experienced all five aspects of posttraumatic growth described by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996): A belief that new possibilities exist, development of

relationships, greater spiritual connectedness, increased appreciation of life, and recognition of personal strength. All of the participants shared that they developed a recognition of their personal strength. This occurred through identity transformation, as was noted above when women began to view themselves as worthwhile, important, or valuable, in opposition to the message they received from their abusers. This recognition of strength also came as they observed themselves making choices to protect themselves and their children from their abuser. The personal strength these women spoke about was often connected to their experience of greater spiritual connectedness. Many participants shared that time in prayer and personal study of the Bible allowed them to experience closeness with God, support, and strengthening.

For many women, the development of relationships came through their disclosure of their abuse to a trusted source. One woman commented that her relationship with her therapist became a source of strength, as he would help her make sense of her abusive situation and remind her of the truth about her identity, which would "get me through the next week." As noted above in the discussion on expert companions, every woman in the study had a connection with someone who believed them, listened, prayed, supported, or learned with them. The most profound relational growth was observed by women who engaged in relationships with other women who had been abused, through friendship, advocacy, or support groups.

Every one of the participants noted that they had an increased appreciation for life as they began to address the abusive dynamics in their homes. Eight of the nine participants found a more free and more fulfilled life after they escaped the abusive marriage. One participant found freedom and joy while remaining married, although her experience in her present marriage is distant. Many of the participants remarked that they are living in or looking forward to the new possibilities that exist in this phase of their lives. Several women are engaging in opportunities to

support other women experiencing IPV. They are becoming domestic violence advocates, speaking out to pastors, or becoming leaders of support groups. One participant shared that she is "very thankful that God is taking this terrible time and I can use it to minister and bless others. I feel really fortunate and honored. I am thankful that I was able to get out."

Theme Six: The Church as a Powerful Agent of Support or Harm

Every one of the participants accessed the support of her church in her pursuit of how to manage her abusive marriage. The women experienced the church in both positive and negative ways. A couple of women shared that they felt "retraumatized" or "dismissed" by the church. One woman was directly blamed for her abuse by an elder. One woman was shamed for bringing the issue to the church at all. Several of the women shared that they did not feel like they were listened to very well, or that the support offered was helpful. One woman shared,

> The church has a responsibility and in a lot of ways I don't think they're doing a very good job. They actually did a pretty good job with my situation. But in the denomination that I'm in, I'm not too pleased. And so that's the retraumatization - whenever you say I'm gonna jump this ship. I hope there's somebody out there to catch me.

However, several of the leaders from these churches were powerful agents of support. Some remarkable displays of support involved women being protected from abuse through direct intervention from leadership. This included elders walking women through the process of obtaining a protection from abuse order, elders urging the husband to leave due to threatening behavior, and an elder holding the abuser's guns in his home in order to help the abuse victim obtain safety and security.

Several churches developed a team of people to disciple, train, and provide accountability for the abusive husbands. Several participants shared that this process lasted for more than a year

for their husbands. One church oversaw the state-required visitation for a participant's husband so that her child could have a safe place with supervision to see her father.

Many of the participants shared that the pastors or elders to whom they disclosed the abuse did not have much education or experience working with abusive marriages. This led to pain, frustration, and mishandling of the cases at times. However, a few of the leaders were open to receiving information on destructive or abusive marriages when the participants shared what they were learning. This led to these women receiving validation and support from their church leaders when they decided to end their marriages or move towards separation. Unfortunately, no significant repentance was observed in the husbands represented in the study due to the interventions from the church leaders, and eight of the nine participants eventually were divorced.

The participants spoke passionately about how church leaders can assist victims of IPV. One theme was the need for pastors and elders to pursue education about abuse. They asked that leaders get training, read, and be open to hearing from experts on abuse in marriage. In addition, they asked that male leaders seek to understand the impact of abuse on women with humility and teachability. One aspect of the abusive dynamic the women wished male leaders would understand was that a man can be very winsome, charming, and convincing when in public. The persona that the abused woman experiences at home is very different, which makes it difficult for her to disclose the abusive dynamics since she does not think she will be believed. Secondly, many women asked that pastors believe women when they disclose abuse "because it a lot of courage for women to come and ask for help." In addition, they asked that pastors really listen to the concerns of the women, particularly if she seems like she is overwhelmed, confused, excitable, dysfunctional, or angry.

Several participants addressed the need for more teaching from the church on abusive relationships. One woman suggested that premarital counseling involve information about power, control, and abuse. Another asked that pastors speak from the pulpit about concepts like oppression, the sinfulness of abuse, and even the blessing that divorce can be in certain circumstances, as God allows the damaged party the opportunity to be released from the harmful partner. Other needs that women mentioned are help with practical needs like finances, support for children, or for help with affording a trauma-informed therapist. Several women experienced marriage counseling with their pastors, which often worsened the issues they experienced at home, so they advised that the husband meet with someone who can help him address his heart and behaviors, and not address the issue through marriage counseling. Finally, one woman asked that church leaders respect the woman's timing and choice about when it is safest to leave.

Research Question Responses

This study sought to answer three main research questions: What is the lived experience of Christian women who face intimate partner violence as they engaged with their religious and spiritual supports? How do Christian women who have experienced intimate partner violence describe their personal growth after seeking help as they engaged in their spiritual or religious supports? What do Christian women who have experienced intimate partner violence describe as spiritual or religious factors that contributed toward building their resilience?

Research Question 1: How do Female Christian IPV Victims Describe Their Experience as They Engaged With Spiritual and Religious Supports?

Every participant shared rich data regarding their experience with spiritual and religious supports. In this study, spiritual support was defined as the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, meaning, and relationship to God, as Christians define

Him (King & Koenig, 2009). Every woman interviewed reported engagement with spiritual supports as critical to their understanding of themselves, their role in the abusive relationship, and their process of developing a response to it. As theme number two outlined, the biblical passages that the women engaged with were powerful in the process of identity transformation. These passages gave the women the ability to refute the falsehoods that their abusers used to manipulate and control them. As theme number five described, women who connected with God through the study of the Bible and prayer found personal strength to disconnect from their abusers, first emotionally and eventually physically for most.

In this study, religious support was defined as an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to God, as Christians define Him (King & Koenig, 2009). Themes three, four, five, and six offer understanding into the question of how victims of IPV described their experience with religious supports. As those themes described, the churches in the lives of the participants had varied responses to the abuse in their homes. As theme three revealed, the expert companions that the women engaged with were primarily found in their Christian communities, and most often in their churches. Therefore, the practice of community as a religious support was a very important experience for these women.

Parachurch organizations can be defined as an extension of the church, and therefore under the category of religious support. Christian organizations and authors were extremely meaningful and essential influences in the lived experience of these abuse victims. Women exposed to these supports finally found language to describe the pain, fear, and control they were living in. One woman shared how she was impacted by the material she was reading by stating, “It was amazing to see that someone understood, I wasn’t alone, and that I was validated in what I was going through.” The victims of IPV were empowered by these support groups, advocates,

and books. They were enabled to understand that the demeaning, controlling, and abusive behavior of their husbands was not in alignment with the definition of healthy or biblically defined relationships. Through these supports the women were able to recognize how they were being controlled by their husbands through intimidation and a misunderstanding of biblical roles in marriage.

In their churches, the women described experiencing two extremes. Some women were maligned, blamed, verbally attacked, and dismissed when they raised the churches' awareness of the abuse they were suffering. This "retraumatization," as described by one victim, was a deeply painful disappointment. Some of the women have become disillusioned by the church, as they had previously believed that they could trust their leaders. However, most of the participants with negative experiences with their churches found support through joining a different fellowship or through engagement with parachurch organizations.

Some participants gave glowing reports of how loved, supported, and protected they felt by their churches, as was stated in theme six. The women who were believed and heard reported the best experiences with their churches. In addition, a few women had pastors and elders intervene in proactive and protective ways, which allowed the women to feel safe. The women who felt supported by other women in their churches through friendship and practical help reported how meaningful this experience was for them.

Research Question 2: How Do Female Christian IPV Victims Describe Their Personal Growth After Seeking Help as They Engaged With Spiritual And Religious Supports?

Themes two, three, four, five, and six explained the kinds of posttraumatic growth that the women described. Notably, every woman's belief system about herself underwent significant change through engagement with spiritual supports. This led to the development of personal

strength in every participant. As stated in theme five, many participants connected the increase in personal strength to growth in their relationship to God through engagement with prayer and study of the Bible. As was shared in Eve's interview, her counselor and Bible study group were critical in the development of her ability to respond to the feeling that she was "dead inside" by educating her that in God's eyes she had worth. She connected this knowledge with her increase in strength, which led her to move out of her home and start a new life. One victim shared that the influence of her prayerful grandmother led her to a new life of prayer with staggering effects by saying,

> Because of that anchor, I reached out to God. I knew that God was it, He was going to be the way forward. Looking back, He is the one who gave me strength, I couldn't do it without Him. I began to learn who I was in Christ, and that I wasn't what my husband was saying I was. Recognizing how Christ saw me gave me the confidence to start speaking out and saying no to things.

As was stated in theme five, the posttraumatic growth component defined as spiritual connectedness was prominent in these trauma victims. As Faith shared in her interview, she developed spiritual disciplines like prayer, fasting, Bible study, and memorization of Scripture. The result was her increased ability to recognize the pain and bitterness she was bearing in her heart. Her engagement with prayer relieved her from powerful negative emotions, including bitterness, which allowed her to draw near to God in new ways. One woman remarked that her love for and appreciation of the Bible increased significantly in her process, quoting this verse, "Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I obey your word" (Psalm 119:67, NIV). One participant shared that her understanding of the cross was deeply impacted, as she learned about how Jesus willingly entered into suffering and mistreatment for his people.

Through engagement with religious and spiritual supports, the majority of these women began to thrive, as they expressed a greater appreciation for being alive and a desire to use their experiences to serve others, which can be seen as the posttraumatic growth category of seeing new possibilities. They reported having an increased desire to impact others by educating them about abuse. They shared great joy when they considered the possibility or lived reality that they could assist other women by listening, advocating, encouraging, and praying. They have operated as change agents in their churches by bringing materials, trainings, and education to abuse victims, family members, and church leaders, which they report as very meaningful to them.

Research Question 3: What Religious and Spiritual Factors Influence Female Christian IPV Victims to Build Resiliency?

For the purposes of this study, resilience was defined as a salutogenic concept describing the ability to bounce back from stress and trauma and return to normal pre-trauma functionality (Estrellado & Loh, 2019). All of the women in the study were able to return to a level of pre-trauma functionality. An essential component of this process was their recognition of the problem of abuse. Every woman in the study reported her confusion and lack of understanding regarding the nature of the difficulties she was experiencing in her marriage. For the women to "bounce back" from the trauma, they first needed to understand that what they were experiencing was trauma in their homes. This was essential since each participant had been convinced by her abuser that she was the problem, leading her to work harder to continually please him in order to protect herself from all aspects of abuse. Once the women saw the patterns of coercive control, defined as the non-violent tactics and methods used to mistreat the partner or maintain dominance (Crossman & Hardesty, 2018; Stark, 2007), they were able to identify their spouses

as abusive. This enabled them to disengage from the abuser emotionally and eventually physically.

The next important concept this study revealed regarding the development of resiliency was the necessity of community in finding a pathway out of the abusive relationship. As themes four and five revealed, every victim needed to develop a support system in order to learn to respond to the abuse with cognitive and emotional strength. Beginning with an "expert companion" but often extending out to a team or community of supporters, this was essential in her development of resiliency. In addition, the women needed practical support to survive. For some, this included a safe place to go and stay, like the home of a friend or a women's shelter. They also needed legal help and protection from their abuser to live in safety. Without these basic components of protection and provision, some of the women would not have had options to build new lives away from their abusers.

One participant shared that once her basic needs for safety and provision for herself and her children were met, she was able to function. However, she shared, "I was functioning, but I hadn't healed. I was living in this state of being on guard with everybody." Supports like education, awareness of abusive dynamics, protection, and basic provisions are essential to the development of resiliency but are not enough to promote the kind of growth that victims need to overcome trauma.

Summary

This chapter detailed the research findings from Christian female victims of IPV regarding their lived experiences as they engaged with religious and spiritual supports. This chapter provided a summary of the lived experiences of the nine participants. Information was gathered through demographic questionnaires, individual interviews, journal entries, and a focus

group. The detailed findings of this study were presented through theme development and responses to the research questions. The six themes from the data analysis were discussed in detail using participant's narratives from the data. The answers to the three research questions provide a greater understanding of the lived experience of the participants in relation to the development of resiliency and posttraumatic growth.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative study was to use a hermeneutical phenomenological design to investigate the lived experiences of adult female Christian IPV survivors as they accessed spiritual and religious supports, as well as their experience with the development of resiliency or posttraumatic growth. This chapter begins with the findings of this study. This is followed by the discussion section, which will connect the study's findings to the theoretical and research literature presented in Chapter Two. Then the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study will be addressed followed by the limitations and delimitations of the study. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of recommendations for future research in this arena of study and the conclusion.

Summary of Findings

This study sought to understand the lived experiences of Christian female IPV victims in the United States as they navigated religious and spiritual supports. A description of this phenomenon was captured through the transcripts of interviews, the focus group, and journal entries.

Research Questions Addressed

This study sought to answer three main research questions: What is the lived experience of Christian women who face intimate partner violence as they engaged with their religious and spiritual supports? How do Christian women who have experienced intimate partner violence describe their personal growth after seeking help as they engaged in their spiritual or religious supports? What do Christian women who have experienced intimate partner violence describe as spiritual or religious factors that contributed toward building their resilience?

Themes two through six from the study addressed research question number one. These themes were “Biblical Messages Preceding Growth,” “Education Regarding Abuse Dynamics as Necessary for Change,” “Expert Companions and Social Supports Preceding Growth,” “Supports Preceding the Development of Resiliency and Posttraumatic Growth,” and “The Church as a Powerful Agent of Support or Harm.” Theme two revealed the biblical messages that were most meaningful to growth in the participants, including understanding of one’s worth, God’s hatred of oppression, new perspectives on healthy relationships, guarding one’s heart, and how God defines righteousness. Theme three revealed the importance of education regarding abuse for every participant to grow in understanding and to develop a response to the abuse they experienced. Theme four showed how social supports and expert companions were essential for each woman in their process of finding the strength to identify their relationship as abusive and to respond with strength and wisdom. Theme five revealed that women who were believed, protected, and had both spiritual and religious supports experienced greater growth than those who did not have these supports. Theme six showed the powerful impact of a church community identifying abuse as wrong and coming to the protection of victims.

Research question two, “How do Christian women who have experienced intimate partner violence describe their personal growth after seeking help as they engaged in their spiritual or religious supports?” was answered through themes two, three, four, five, and six. Most of the participants experienced posttraumatic growth in all five areas identified by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2013): A belief that new possibilities exist, development of relationships, greater spiritual connectedness, increased appreciation of life, and recognition of personal strength. All of the women shared their recognition of personal strength as connected to a newfound

understanding of their identity, which was informed by their experiences with spiritual or religious supports, or both.

Research question three, "What do Christian women who have experienced intimate partner violence describe as spiritual or religious factors that contributed toward building their resilience?" was addressed through themes three, four, five, and six. Women who were able to bounce back to functionality had several factors in common. They were educated about abuse dynamics, were resourced by expert companions and social supports, and experienced protection or provision of practical needs. Religious and spiritual supports, like engagement with churches, parachurch organizations, shelters, books, trainings, and caring people, enabled these women to function in healthy ways while they responded to the dynamics of their abusive relationships.

Discussion

The purpose of this section is to discuss the study findings in relationship to the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The following section will elaborate on how this study extends the current body of literature concerning female Christian married IPV victims, their experience with religious and spiritual supports, and their development of resiliency and posttraumatic growth.

Empirical Literature

Female IPV victims are at a greater risk than other trauma victims of developing symptoms of PTSD and CPTSD due to the convergence of many risk factors: their gender, the experience of isolation, prolonged exposure to trauma, and the interpersonal nature of the trauma (Brewin et al., 2000). The women in this study exhibited all these risk factors. In addition, victims of complex trauma tend to interpret these stressful events as something they earned, believing they are to blame for the pain that occurred in their lives (Sanderson, 2013). As was

noted in Chapter 4, the women in this study repeatedly reported experiencing a sense of worthlessness due to the unrelenting verbal abuse they endured.

Female IPV victims may therefore become highly defensive in their responses, leading to disconnection from self, others, and the world (Barbieri, 2019; Sanderson, 2013). In addition, these victims often form negative beliefs about the future. For instance, some victims believe that the abusive situation will torment them forever (Sanderson, 2013). This study affirmed the profound damage that victims experience. Every one of the participants experienced symptoms of complex trauma, most frequently a sense that they were to blame for the abuse they endured. The negative self-concept, which is one of the diagnostic criteria for CPTSD, was pervasive among the participants in this research study (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Barbieri, 2019). For several participants, the nature of their abuse led to disconnection from others and the world. Several participants shared that while they were in the abusive situation, they did not see any possibility for a positive future, as the research describes (Sanderson, 2013).

This study also affirmed the notion that women of faith often struggle with disclosure about the abuse they are experiencing (Truong, 2022) but that they often seek help first from their faith system (Moon & Shim, 2010). The participants in this study confirmed their experiences as similar to past research on responses from clergy when disclosures were made as victims face multifaceted responses from clergy, leaving them confused and unsupported in their pursuit of how to respond (Hurless & Cottone, 2018; McAllister & Roberts-Lewis, 2010). Since previous literature revealed little about what happens when a faith leader is sought for help for IPV (Moon & Shim, 2010), this study extended the data available. Indeed, several of the participants in this study were advised by their faith leaders to stay in their situation, which correlates with the empirical data (McAllister & Roberts-Lewis, 2010; Sojourners & IMA World

Health, 2014; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2016; Truong, 2022). Prior research showed that Christian women are advised to remain in abusive situations because it is their biblical duty to do so, or to submit, which was confirmed by two of the women in this study (Walker & Aten, 2012). In addition, this study confirmed that pastors and church leaders need more education in abuse dynamics and interventions (Shaw et al., 2022; Tedder & Smith, 2018; Truong, 2022)

This study confirmed the empirical research showing that Christian women report that religious teaching submission and forbidding divorce have influenced them to stay in abusive relationships (Knickmeyer, 2010; Nash, 2006; Westenberg, 2107). Several of the women in this study were convinced that they were pleasing God by submitting their lives to the purpose of giving in to their husband's demands, even if those demands were immoral. As the previous research suggested, each of the women's processes began with a cognitive struggle involving the recognition of the relationship as abusive and accepting the fact that they were victims of IPV (Estrellado & Loh, 2019). Three of the participants in this study shared that the effects of abuse on their children were the motivating factor in seeking a solution, as the research shows to be a common motivation for change in IPV victims (Estrellado & Loh, 2109).

This study also confirmed and elaborated on the research that has shown that a greater connection to one's spirituality is also correlated with greater resiliency (de la Rosa et al., 2016; Howell et al., 2018). The development of resiliency has been correlated with the person developing purpose and connection to something larger than themselves (Flasch et al., 2017; Gonzalez-Mendez & Hamby, 2021; Hamby et al., 2020), and this study revealed several pathways that women sought to do so, including the purpose of serving other survivors of IPV. Similarly, PTG has been correlated with survivors of trauma who developed a sense of meaning

and value (Valdez & Lilly, 2015). Several of the participants found a new sense of meaning in their service to others after the abusive relationship ended.

In addition, interventions that offer victims involvement in spiritual practices also are correlated with greater PTG (Arandia et al., 2018), which was observed in the participants in this study who engaged with church attendance, parachurch supports, Bible reading, and prayer. This study confirmed what many prior studies have shown about how women of faith experience their spiritual connection to God as a major driver of support, healing, and resiliency (de la Rosa, et al., 2016; Drumm et al., 2014; Postmus et al., 2009; Shaw et al., 2022; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2016). The study by Postmus (2009), which showed that IPV victims reported religious and spiritual counseling to be among the most useful to them in their process of growth, was confirmed by the majority of the women in this study. Wang et al., (2009) reported that more than two-thirds of women who found the strength to leave their abusive partner were resourced by their faith to do so. The participants in this study confirmed that God gave them a newfound strength, the recognition that they did not deserve the abuse, and the awareness that they needed to protect themselves.

Social support has been correlated with greater PTG in other populations (Maguen, 2006), which was confirmed in this study. This study confirmed the prior finding that IPV victims who have come out of abusive relationships are an important resource and support for women living with an abusive partner or leaving an abusive relationship (Matheson et al., 2015). This study confirmed the findings that women resourced in this way report higher levels of growth (Cobb et al., 2006). The participants found these supports through expert companions, IPV support groups, and trained advocates.

Theoretical Literature

This study was based on theories developed by Frankl (1963), Hobfoll (2001), and Tedeschi and Calhoun (2013). Frankl (1963) showed that victims of trauma were able to thrive as they realized their abilities to make choices about their thoughts, actions, and responses in the midst of oppressive situations. He stated that those trauma victims who developed a sense of meaning connected to their suffering showed the greatest growth and resiliency. Furthermore, he postulated that these responses were of a spiritual nature. The participants in this study thrived as they realized that God offered them a new way to see themselves and to respond to the oppressive figures in their lives. The women grew as they accessed spiritual truths which gave them the ability to make practical choices. These choices included disclosing the abuse, changing their responses to their abusers, accessing legal support, and protecting themselves from their abusers.

Hobfoll (2001) stated that it is the loss of resources that trauma victims experience that overwhelms them with distress. As he said, if survivors can regain resources that were lost in the trauma, they can regain a sense of equilibrium and feel reduced distress (Hobfoll, 2001). This study proved this to be true for IPV survivors, as they were able to move from surviving to thriving as they accessed many different kinds of support (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2003). In this study, the support included practical help with children, financial gifts, legal help, IPV support groups, shelters, advocacy, physical protection, and counseling.

In their formation of post-trauma impacts, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) contend trauma threatens the deeply held core beliefs of victims (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Therefore, those victims of trauma who examine and eventually rebuild their belief systems are most likely to grow and transform as individuals (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). The participants in this study

confirmed this notion as they reported their internal struggles with their belief systems about their own identities, the nature of healthy and unhealthy relationships, their views of God, and their understanding of his will for marriage. The women emerged from this time of rebuilding with a sense of worth and began to operate differently in their marriages. This view of themselves offered a new perspective on the opportunities presented to them in their marriages to overcome their fears and confront wrongdoing. Their new beliefs about God led them to understand God's hatred of oppression and his ability to strengthen them to disclose and confront abuse.

The results indicate that the five areas of PTG that Tedeschi and Calhoun (2013) observed were also reported by the participants in this study. The most notable of the five areas of PTG experienced by the women was the spiritual connectedness they experienced throughout their process of overcoming the abusive relationship. This study also confirmed Tedeschi and Calhoun's conception of the important role an expert companion can play in the development of PTG (2013). They conceived of the role as one who listens to the worst of the trauma victim's stories, learns from them, and supports them long-term as they make sense of their narrative (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). These components were of great importance to the women in this study, as every one of the women shared about the meaningful impact of these friends, pastors, and counselors. Finally, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) also conceived of the survivor of trauma as one who can potentially develop a sense of meaning and purpose from their experience. Half of the women in this study reported finding purpose in helping other IPV victims through gaining more education on IPV and becoming advocates or support group leaders for this population. PTG is a very real potential experience for trauma victims, and this study confirmed

the hope that female Christian IPV victims can have for their growth as they process their beliefs in conjunction with loving and consistent support.

Implications

The results of this study present theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. This section will address these, as well as recommendations for various stakeholders such as domestic violence victims, IPV advocates and organizations, pastors, churches, and counselors.

Theoretical Implications

This study was based on several theoretical thinkers and writers. The evidence from this study reinforces the theories presented by Frankl (1963), Hobfoll (2001), and Tedeschi and Calhoun (2013). The participants revealed that growth after trauma is possible for IPV victims, and that there are ways that a victim and her community can increase the likelihood of this PTG. As Frank noted, the way a person thinks about their choices in the midst of trauma and the capacity to make meaning out of those experiences are integral factors. As Hobfoll (2001) theorized, the resources offered to a victim post-trauma are also a strong determining factor in their future growth. Merging the ideas within these theories would bring a more complete picture of how PTG is more likely to occur in IPV survivors.

This fuller theory is in alignment with biblical thinking as well. The Christian worldview presents a picture of human thriving that emphasizes the human being as an active agent in response to their environment, not just as a victim of their circumstances. The biblical examples of Joseph, Daniel, David, and Paul reveal how people who seek meaning and help from God in the midst of unjust circumstances can beautifully thrive despite their traumatic circumstances. The increase of resources that victims experience is both spiritual and practical, as they experience the cognitive reframing from God and the tangible resources He offers.

One of the ways God offers tangible resources is through His people, the church. This study showed that when the church community offers protection, financial support, healthy teaching about identity and relationships, and emotional support to victims, they show greater growth after trauma. As Tedeschi and Calhoun (2013) theorized, a faithful, consistent expert companion who listens and supports a victim is essential to the inner work of healing. From a Christian perspective, this affirms the view of human beings as needful of relational connection, as presented in many passages in the Bible (*New International Bible,* 2021, John 13:34, Romans 12:10-15, 1 Peter 4:8, Gal 6:2). As women are resourced with others who care for her, weep with her, and tangibly support her in times of crisis, it is more likely that she will view herself and her emotions as important, which is the antithesis of what she experienced with her abusive partner. This may be a formative experience accounting for the identity healing that was so prevalent in this study as well.

Empirical Implications

This study affirms and extends several themes in the empirical literature. The theme presented in Chapter 4, "The Church as a Power Agent of Support or Harm," orients researchers to observe carefully how church teachings and involvement specifically impact IPV victims. Measures may need to be developed to assess how women view their role in marriage as a result of church teachings. In this study, the women reported a tendency to respond to abusive behavior primarily through submission, which has been revealed in past research and is often reinforced through Christian teachings or literature.

Alternatively, the former research has revealed that female Christian IPV victims report being greatly strengthened by their connection with God (de la Rosa, et al., 2016; Drumm et al., 2014; Postmus et al., 2009; Shaw et al., 2022; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2016). In this study,

the women reported the same and pointed to individual spiritual practices, but also corporate and religious ones as major catalysts of this process. This implies that there is an internal change that women undergo as a result of engagement with spiritual supports, revealing that belief systems and identity schema can be deeply impacted during times of connection with God individually or corporately.

This would explain the connection between spiritual and religious supports and the development of resiliency and PTG. The multifaceted interventions that these supports can present reveal a potential snowball effect on victims. When women are taught that they are valued by God through engagement with the Bible, their view of themselves changes from worthless to worthwhile, loved, and valuable. Then, when an expert companion treats them as if they are important through the process of offering time, sacrificial listening, and support, this message is reinforced. When church leadership responds to abuse allegations with belief and support for her protection, she further experiences the message that her personhood is important and worth protecting. When practical help is offered through the provision of childcare, finances, shelter, or gifts, the woman is offered tangible ways to assess her value, offering an endorsement of the importance of her well-being. The empirical literature has confirmed aspects of these influences on victims of trauma, but this study can be a means of understanding why these interventions are effective, as well as crucial in the development of more successful interventions.

Practical Implications

Stakeholders can glean a great deal of practical information from this study. For IPV victims, the implications are vast. Primarily, these victims can observe the potential for their personal growth after trauma through accessing essential supports. This can serve as a road map

for women who are reeling from the confusing messages received from their partners. Women can begin to assess the ways the abuse has damaged and polluted their view of themselves through pursuing education and engaging in reflection. When they are able to identify the false messages they have been programmed to believe, they can break a powerful means of control that the abuser has instituted. Furthermore, women can take the next step towards truth formation through engagement with the Bible. This process of cognitive reframing can empower women to detach from verbal combat with their abuser since they are less attached to his definition of their identity and more connected to their understanding of themselves, which was informed by their engagement with God and the Bible. Understanding the importance of the impact of this kind of trauma on a victim's identity can inform counselors or pastors to focus on this area as they seek to help a woman rebuild her belief system about herself.

This practical implication can also be applied to expert companions, pastors, and church supporters. They can be of great assistance in the formation of a woman's sense of worth by simply treating her opinions and emotions as important and worth hearing. The women in this study echoed the refrain, "Please listen to us. Please believe us." Church leaders can greatly help these women by seeking to listen to their stories, as well as their emotions. Pastors can develop skillful processes of asking questions such as, "Do you feel afraid of your husband? Can you tell me why you feel afraid? What happens when you disagree with your husband? Do you feel free to share your thoughts or hurts with him? Have you felt demeaned or controlled by your husband? How does your husband manage his anger? Have you been physically harmed by your husband? Has anyone in your home been physically harmed by him? Have you been restrained by him, unable to freely move from a room or space? Does your husband break or damage items when he is angry? Are there any ways your husband controls you through finances? Are there

words he has said that are particularly damaging to you? Have you been threatened by him? Tell me about how you have sought to manage the stress in your home. Does the environment in the home ever feel chaotic or out of control? Have you experienced marital rape or non-consensual sex?" This set of questions can serve as a diagnostic tool for pastors and church leaders and inform their interventions for women in their churches.

Another practical implication for church leaders involves training and offering expert companions to women experiencing IPV. Due to the prevalence of IPV, leaders would be wise to expect abused women to access support from their churches and therefore, train expert companions or advocates before they are needed. This may involve incorporating trainings from parachurch organizations for themselves, their staff, and members of their churches. The organization Called to Peace offers trainings for churches, advocates, and support for victims. The organization Men of Peace offers training and support for perpetrators, which would be helpful for church leaders to access as well. Church leaders who are well informed about how coercive control operates in Christian marriages will be much more prepared to minister to married couples. Pre-marital counseling programs in churches could also incorporate information about abusive dynamics and how to avoid them so that couples are better prepared to identify and respond to these unhealthy and destructive patterns. Also, pastors can help promote messages about healthy and abusive relationships in their preaching and teaching. A finding from this study was that men can often misuse or abuse the biblical teaching about their authority in the home. Women in this study believed that they were submitting to God by submitting to the immoral and damaging choices of their husbands. Clarification from church leaders about this subject is crucial.

Another practical implication of this research is the finding that abused women who are educated regarding abusive dynamics in marriage are much more able to understand and address the complicated and overwhelming situations they are facing at home. This impacts stakeholders such as women's ministry leaders and church leaders, as well as concerned friends and family. In effect, the more that the general population is informed about how abusive relationships operate, the greater the likelihood that an IPV victim will be able to find resources that will help her to identify her marriage as abusive, since the people around her will be able to direct her to information and resources.

Stakeholders such as domestic violence social workers, advocates, and counselors can be informed by this study regarding the importance of spiritual and religious supports, particularly for their Christian clients. Since Christian women are greatly resourced by their engagement with the Bible and prayer, secular mental health workers can ask them about how their faith may be assisting them, particularly in the development of their identity. In addition, these professionals can assist women in accessing Christian support systems like trauma-informed Christian therapists, Christian domestic violence programs, or books by Christian authors. It would be a great benefit to these secular supporters to access these supports as well, as it will assist them in helping their clients navigate the difficult decisions they need to face regarding how to communicate with their church leadership, how to think about legal action, and how to pursue separation or divorce. Ethically, non-Christian domestic violence supporters are tasked with helping Christian women incorporate their faith system into decision-making, which can be a confusing process. Stakeholders such as church leaders can assist this process by developing relationships with local domestic violence organizations, thus building a bridge of trust and partnership, which may lead to the resourcing of women from their churches.

Delimitations and Limitations

The delimitations of this study were created by the researcher to define the goals of this study. This included the participants' lived experiences with the phenomenon and were incorporated into the study's eligibility. Delimitations included the inclusion of only female victims of IPV. The rationale for this decision was influenced by the greater prevalence of IPV among women. In addition, female victims uniquely struggle with the Christian teachings on submission, which exacerbates their confusion about their role in marriage. This also explains the delimitation of including only Christian married IPV victims. These women typically wrestle more profoundly with the decision to separate or divorce since their faith communities reinforce the importance of marriage as a covenant before God. The delimitations also included women aged 18 or older. The women who responded to the invitation to participate were 49 years of age and older. The researcher observed that one of the reasons for this could be that the women in this study lived in their abusive marriages for many years without realizing the nature of the destruction in their relationship. This may explain why there were no participants aged 18 to 48 who responded to the study.

The study was delimited to women who accessed spiritual and religious supports while they were navigating their abusive relationships. The rationale was in alignment with the goals of this study to assess how the incorporation of these supports impacted their growth. Finally, all participants had to report that they developed resiliency or posttraumatic growth to be included. The rationale was also to answer the research questions in this study regarding how women report the development of their growth in the midst of IPV trauma.

The limitations of this study include the non-transferability to female IPV victims of other faith systems, as well as those Christian women who did not access spiritual or religious

supports in their process of addressing their abusive marriages. The study results may be less applicable to women between 18 and 49 since none of the participants represented this age group. In addition, the study may not transfer equally to male Christian victims of IPV. All of the women in this study were Caucasian, which may limit the application of the results to Christian women from other ethnicities. Another limitation of this study was the geographical focus on American women. This limits the transferability of the results to women living in the American Christian culture. All of the participants attended Protestant churches, which may limit the results of the study to this population of Christian women.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research may incorporate a similar study design for women of other faith systems, Catholic women, Christian women from outside of the United States, or Christian women aged 18 to 49. Also, future research may focus on the impact of systematic interventions that may be developed to address the process of identity repair and formation for Christian women. It would be helpful to investigate the impact of IPV training for churches by researching the lived experiences of women whose churches have pursued domestic violence education in comparison with churches that do not. Long-term research may be required to investigate the potential impact of premarital programs which include information about concepts like coercive control and IPV. Research in the church can assess how men and women are able to understand and fulfill their roles in marriage as they are informed about the misuses of biblical authority as a means of control. For the church to present a model of safe, loving, secure marriages, the elimination of IPV in Christian marriages is important. Therefore, further research is required to assess how church cultures and teachings can influence future generations toward healthier marriages and families.

In the effort to define treatments and protocols for female Christian IPV victims, future research can focus on qualitative and quantitative studies regarding the efficacy of parachurch organizations and support groups that exist to serve this population. In light of this study, further research on the development and importance of expert companions is also suggested. This may extend to research on the impact of supportive communities or expert companions on other populations of trauma victims outside of the Christian female IPV population.

Summary

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to identify the factors involved that assist Christian women in their development of resiliency and growth after IPV. Through the collection of data from nine participants, the results indicate that Christian women can experience significant growth as they engage with spiritual and religious resources. The women reported personal experiences with God that were primarily experienced through engagement with the Bible and prayer. Transformation of identity was the most profound common experience reported through spiritual engagement. Additionally, the participants reported the development of clarity about the nature of healthy relationships and the strength to take steps of change as important outcomes of their spiritual pursuits.

Education that came through primarily Christian authors and support systems was incredibly meaningful in the life of every participant as well. Each woman grew in understanding about abusive dynamics which enabled them to identify the kinds of abuse they were experiencing and develop healthier responses. This was the first step for women to stop the IPV in their lives. Religious support that offered belief, care, help with practical needs, protection from abuse, and teaching on identity and healing was most integral in the healing of the victims. Expert companions were crucial in the lives of each participant as they offered advocacy,

friendship, willingness to learn, listening, and practical support. Women who were supported by former IPV survivors reported feeling greatly understood and helped.

The role of spiritual and religious supports for Christian domestic violence victims cannot be overstated, as these participant's lives clearly show. The role of a church and support system that defines abuse, believes victims, and supports women throughout the complicated and confusing process of coming out of IPV is profound. When women are well-resourced, they can bounce back and truly thrive in their future lives, with the effect that their communities are supported and strengthened by them.

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Appendices

Appendix A
Consent

Title of the Project: A Phenomenology of Spiritual and Religious Supports for Female Victims of Intimate Partner Violence

Principal Investigator: Robin Downs, MA, Liberty University EdD Program (Doctoral Candidate)

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a female 18 or over, a victim of intimate partner violence, identify as a Christian, and have sought religious or spiritual supports. 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 phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of Christian female victims of intimate partner violence as they engaged with their religious and spiritual supports. In addition, the purpose will be to identify what Christian women victims of intimate partner violence describe as building their resilience.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Participate in a 15-question recorded interview, approximately 1 hour.
2. May participate in a recorded focus group discussion, approximately 1 hour.
3. May answer journal prompts and submit to researcher.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study are to receive a book on healing for victims of intimate partner violence, *The Emotionally Destructive Relationship* by Leslie Vernick.

Benefits to society: This study will help shape an understanding of how victims of intimate partner violence interact with spiritual and religious supports to find meaning in their suffering. This study will assist victims and faith leaders in understanding the process of building resiliency after trauma.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study include possible emotional distress as a result of telling the traumatic story of their history. If there is a disclosure of child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse,

or intent to harm self or others the researcher will be required to report these to government agencies.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be anonymous. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

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

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study by receiving a copy of a book on healing from intimate partner violence.

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 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 Robin Downs. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Sarno at [redacted]

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

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

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 are agreeing 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 with 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.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix B

Demographics Questions

1. Are you a biological female? Yes or no?
2. Religious affiliation
3. Age
4. Have you experienced intimate partner violence in your marriage, that is, a pattern of the willful intimidation, physical assault, sexual assault, and/or other abusive behavior as part of a system of power and control committed by one intimate partner against another (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, n.d.)?
5. Did you engage in any kind of religious support during or after the abusive relationship? Religious support is defined as an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to God, as Christians define Him (King & Koenig, 2009).
6. Did you engage in any kind of spiritual support during or after the abusive relationship? Spiritual support is defined as the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, meaning and relationship to God, as Christians define him. (King & Koenig, 2009).
7. Were you able to return to the level of functionality you had experienced before you entered the abusive relationship?
8. Were you able to experience any kind of personal growth or increase in functionality during or after the abusive relationship?

Appendix C

Questions for Interviews

1. Please describe how and when your relationship with your partner began.
2. Please describe your family and upbringing.
3. Please describe your relationship with God and your spiritual journey.
4. Please describe how the abuse began and your experience as a victim of intimate partner violence.
5. What aspects of the abuse were the most difficult to cope with?
6. What strategies did you develop and use to cope with the abuse?
7. What kinds of abuse did you experience- emotional, physical, sexual, economic, verbal, or psychological?
8. Please describe any spiritual supports you used during the time of the relationship with the abuser.
9. Please describe any religious supports you sought out during the time of the relationship with the abuser.
10. Resiliency is defined as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress” (Stebnicki, 2016, p. 278). Please describe your process of adapting in the face of the abusive relationship.
11. Please describe any areas of personal growth you experienced during or after the abusive relationship.
12. Please describe how you would describe your view of your personal strength, your interpersonal relationships, your appreciation for life, and your view of possibilities in the future.

13. Please describe any influences that you found to be helpful or harmful to your growth in the face of the violent relationship.
14. Please describe your present lived experience with spiritual and religious supports.
15. Please share how your experience as a victim of intimate partner violence has impacted your view on God, yourself, religious supports, or intimate relationships.
16. What advice would you offer to a woman in an abusive relationship?
17. What advice would you offer pastors and church leaders as they help victims of intimate partner violence?

Appendix D

Journal Prompt

"Please describe the ways you interacted with spiritual supports when you endured intimate partner violence. Please describe the ways you interacted with religious supports when you endured intimate partner violence. Please describe what aspects of your spiritual and religious supports were most meaningful and helpful and why. Please describe any growth you experienced during or after the intimate partner violence."

Appendix E

Focus Group Questions

1. Please describe your interactions with your Christian community as you sought to navigate your experience as a victim of intimate partner violence.
2. What aspects of your faith were most helpful to you in shaping your view of yourself as a victim of intimate partner violence?
3. What passages of the Bible (if any) did you use to find comfort or direction during that time? How did your connection with the Bible impact your views and decisions?
4. Who was the most helpful person in your life when you were going through intimate partner violence? What was it about them that helped you the most?
5. How have you grown in your faith in the aftermath of your experience with intimate partner violence? How has it impacted your view of others and the world?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add about the topic?