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Multiple counseling organizations, including the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016), the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014), and the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) competencies endorsed by the American Counseling Association, emphasize the importance of religion/spirituality in the worldview of many clients. The counseling literature has reflected a "burgeoning groundswell of interest in spiritually sensitive counseling" (Cashwell & Watts, 2010, p. 3). Although the literature continues to evolve to guide counselors when a client's religious involvement is positive and supportive, very little information is found in the scholarly literature to inform counselors when clients present with negative religious experiences, particularly on the end of the spectrum that may be considered religious abuse (Ward, 2011; Wood & Conley, 2014).

The purpose of this study was to address the existing gap in the current research literature on the lived experiences of those who have experienced religious abuse in order to provide empirical grounding to this phenomenon and to aid counselors in working with clients with a history of religious abuse. Seven participants who self-identified as experiencing abuse with a Christian religious setting in the United States shared their lived experiences via semi-structured interviews. The research team summarized common themes and experiences using the methodology of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The ten common themes that emerged across the

interviews were: *Emotional Trauma, Betrayal, Rules Prioritized Over People/Devalued, Abuse of Power/Use of the Sacred to Control or Manipulate, Spiritual Transformation, Isolation, Healing, Gender Bias/Discrimination, Stigma, and Victim-Blaming*. After developing the themes through the IPA process, the Traumagenic Dynamics Model (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985) was used to provide a lens to examine this phenomenon, in an effort to begin to build a conceptual framework for the experience of religious abuse to inform counselors, supervisors, and counselor educators.

A TWISTING OF THE SACRED: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

OF RELIGIOUS ABUSE

by

Paula J. Swindle

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1 Thessalonians 5:11: Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Religion and spirituality play an important role in the worldview of many Americans. Eighty percent of U.S. adults report some type of religious affiliation (Bunge, 2014; Funk & Smith, 2012) and 90% of Americans "report engaging in various acts of personal faith" (Super & Jacobson, 2011, p. 180). For many of these people, their religious/spiritual lives are vital aids in coping with difficult circumstances and decreasing stress (Cares & Cusick, 2012; Ellison, Bradshaw, Kuyel, & Marcum, 2012). For others, their religious/spiritual lives are an important aspect of their culture and social outlets (Ellison et al., 2012).

In recognition of the importance of religion/spirituality in the worldview of many clients who seek counseling services, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016), the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014), and the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) Spiritual Competencies (2009) endorsed by ACA all address issues of religion and spirituality in counseling. In addressing Social and Cultural Diversity, the 2016 CACREP standards require that the counseling curriculum address "the impact of spiritual beliefs on clients' and counselors' worldviews" (Section 2.F.2.g, p. 10). This inclusion demonstrates strong support that counselors must be

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trained to understand the spiritual/religious worldview of clients, as well as themselves, and how these worldviews might impact psychological, emotional, and social functioning. As a part of this training, many counselor education programs intentionally include aspects of religion and spirituality in their curriculum (Cashwell & Young, 2004; Parker, 2009).

Similarly, the ASERVIC spiritual competencies outline an expectation that professional counselors have an understanding of basic beliefs regarding spirituality and religion (Competency 1) and that, as stated in Competency 2, "The professional counselor recognizes that the client's beliefs (or absence of beliefs) about spirituality and/or religion are central to his or her worldview and can influence psychosocial functioning" (Cashwell & Watts, 2010, p. 5). These competencies underscore the importance of professional counselors being intentional in understanding the religious/spiritual worldview of their clients and how this might impact their functioning and coping mechanisms.

Understanding how religion and spirituality may impact client functioning suggests the need to assess for this early in the counseling process. The ASERVIC spiritual competencies addresses this in Competency 10 by stating "During the intake and assessment processes, the professional counselor strives to understand a client's spiritual and/or religious perspective by gathering information from the client and/or other sources" (Cashwell & Watts, 2010, p. 5). Counselors should broach the subject of religion/spirituality rather than waiting for a client to bring it up and, as with all aspects of culture and worldview, "respond to client communications about spirituality and/or

religion with acceptance and sensitivity" (ASERVIC Competency 7; Cashwell & Watts, 2010, p. 5). In other words, it is vital for a counselor to honor the client's relationship with the sacred and understand how that relationship informs worldview and life experience. Further, it seems imperative to broach this subject with clients to understand how their religious system or community may have informed the client's unique understanding of the sacred (Johnson, 1992).

When counselors gather religious/spiritual information as part of the counseling process, many clients will disclose positive and supportive experiences. When a client discloses a supportive religious experience, this may be used as a strength or source of support in the therapeutic process, and may be very helpful for the client. If this relationship with the sacred has been positive and nurturing for their client, it can drive healing and be a grounding force (Simonic, Mandelj, & Novsak, 2013).

Unfortunately, however, clients also may disclose different experiences that reveal a shadow side to organized religion. The potential for both positive and negative influences of a religious worldview are apparent in ASERVIC Competency 11, which states, "When making a diagnosis, the professional counselor recognizes that the client's spiritual and/or religious perspectives can a) enhance well-being; b) contribute to client problems; and/or c) exacerbate symptoms" (Cashwell & Watts, 2010, p. 5). For some clients, negative religious experiences may contribute to their problems or exacerbate symptoms in a way that suggest that the religious experience is detrimental to the individual. For a subset of these individuals, the negative religious/spiritual experience may be so severe as to be considered *religious abuse*. It is important for counselors to

feel competent in addressing religious experiences across this positive/negative spectrum. This includes understanding how to use a client's positive experiences as a source of support and coping as well as knowing how to address negative religious experiences that may present or emerge as a presenting issue or stressor.

Although the counseling literature has reflected a "burgeoning groundswell of interest in spiritually sensitive counseling" (Cashwell & Watts, 2010, p. 3) and there is guidance available to counselors when a client's religious involvement is supportive, very little information is available in the scholarly literature to inform counselors when clients present with negative religious experiences, particularly on the end of the spectrum that may be considered religious abuse. There has been a substantial amount of writing on the subject of religious experiences that fall into the extreme category of cults, but very little data is available on religious abuse experiences in the context of mainstream religion (Ward, 2011). In this study, I will address the lived experiences of those who categorize some or all of their experience within the mainstream Christian religion as abusive. Although religious abuse likely is not isolated to Christianity, Christians compose 70.6 of the U.S population (Pew, 2014), so this seems a logical initial focus for research.

The small pool of literature that addresses religious abuse is comprised mostly of conceptual pieces that are anecdotal. That is, to date there is little empirical research on the topic. Further, even this conceptual literature is almost exclusively in religion, theology, social work, and sociology journals, with virtually no literature in the counseling field. Accordingly, counselors must draw from other disciplines to understand more about the potential experiences of their clients who have experienced

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religious abuse. Often, however, these other disciplines are more interested in understanding the phenomenon of religious abuse with little attention to the clinical needs of these individuals, leaving counselors with little direction about how to proceed with these clients. The interdisciplinary literature is helpful, however, in conceptualizing three broad categories of abuse.

Categories of Abuse

A review of the interdisciplinary religious abuse literature suggests three broad categories or types of religious abuse, particularly those that occur within mainstream Christian churches. The categories are not mutually exclusive and may co-exist or overlap each other. Broadly speaking, however, it appears that religious abuse can be categorized as a) abuse perpetrated by religious leadership, typically an individual leader; b) abuse perpetrated by a religious group, directed either towards an individual or towards a group of people; and c) abuse in which the abuse itself has a religious component to it. These categories have some overlap with the three categories reported by Bottoms, Goodman, Tolou-Shams, Diviak, and Shaver (2015) of religion-related child abuse perpetrated by those in religious authority; religion related medical neglect; and physical abuse of children due to religious beliefs, but are much broader and applicable to all ages and a wider variety of types of abuse.

Abuse Perpetrated by Religious Leadership

Abuse perpetrated by religious leadership includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse perpetrated by a person who holds a position of religious authority or leadership, typically a member of the clergy, although it also may include other

authorities in the church, such as deacons or elders. The vast majority of literature in this category addresses the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic church (Doyle, 2003; Doyle, 2006; Farrell, 2004; Goldner, 2004; Hogan, 2011; Rossetti, 1995; Saradjian & Nobus, 2003), although sexual abuse perpetrated by a clergy member is certainly not limited to Catholicism (Farrell, 2004). Another example of this type of abuse is when a member of the clergy knowingly manipulates someone financially to contribute beyond their means to the church. In the instances in this category, the perpetrator is typically seen as representative of God and victims may conflate the perpetrator with God (Doyle, 2006; Farrell, 2004; Redmond, 1996; Rossetti, 1995).

Abuse Perpetrated by Religious Group

Typically, abuse perpetrated by a religious group centers around social issues where the abuser(s) may target a marginalized population and use religious teachings selectively in order to oppress. This type of abuse creates a "legitimized inequality" (Greene, 2013, p. 41), as the religious abuser seeks to *other* a marginalized group or member of a marginalized group. Several authors have discussed the impact of religious abuse on the LGTBQ population (Foster, Bowland & Vosler, 2015; Greene, 2013; Lucies & Yick, 2007; Super & Jacobson, 2011; Wood & Conley, 2014). There are also several historical examples of churches supporting systemic racial discrimination such as apartheid in South Africa or working against the civil rights movements in the United States (Berkley Center, 2011). For example, in a recent interview (Lee, 2014), a Ku Klux Klan leader proclaimed, "We are a Christian group," and proceeded to then defend the

KKK's stated agenda of white supremacy. Other examples could include a church who refuses to perform an interracial marriage or allow a person of color to officially join their church.

Abuse with a Religious Component

Finally, some forms of religious abuse involve a direct connection to something spiritual or religious. In other words, the abuse itself is a result of religious belief or has a religious element tied to the actual abuse. For example, Bottoms et al. (2015) described "physical abuse perpetrated by adults because of their literal interpretations of religion-related writings, such as ridding children of evil by beating them" (p. 562). Other examples include domestic violence situations where the husband justifies beating his wife because of religious beliefs (Simonic, Mandelj, & Novsak, 2013).

To reiterate, these three categories are not mutually exclusive. In fact, overlap between these categories is common. For example, a member of the clergy who is sexually abusing a youth in the church may connect the abuse to a spiritual element by saying "God has chosen you for this," or, as another example, racial discrimination may be encouraged directly by a church leader. Some may argue that categories one and two inherently contain a spiritual element. A religious leader typically is perceived to be closely tied to a spiritual identity, therefore any abuse from such a person could be considered spiritual in nature, and the same could be said of abuse coming from a religious group or member representing that group.

To better understand the phenomenon of religious abuse, it is important to consider the lived experiences of individuals within some conceptual framework. To

date, however, no models of religious abuse have been established in the scholarly literature. Because religious abuse inherently involves an abuse of power or privilege, however, it seems appropriate to draw from the Traumagenic Dynamics Model (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985), which has been used to study sexual abuse of children by people in authority.

Traumagenic Dynamics Model

To better understand the lived experience of those who self-identify as having experienced religious abuse with the hope of providing transferable data which counselors can use to help clients who may disclose similar experiences, this study will be grounded in Finkelhor and Browne's (1985) Traumagenic Dynamics Model, which breaks down the impact of sexual abuse into four traumagenic dynamics: betrayal, stigmatization, powerlessness, and traumatic sexualization. Finkelhor (1987) described a traumagenic dynamic as "an experience that alters a child's cognitive or emotional orientation to the world and causes trauma by distorting the child's self-concept, worldview, or affective capacities" (p. 354). Although it is anticipated that multiple types of abuses, many non-sexual, will be conveyed by participants and that those reporting in this study will be adults, it is the elements of betrayal, stigmatization, powerlessness, and trauma that lend applicability to the focus of this study.

Betrayal

The betrayal dynamic was described by Finkelhor and Browne (1985) as the realization of the victim that they have been harmed by someone they had depended on and deeply trusted. This same sense of betrayal emerged as a theme in a literature review

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on the topic of religious abuse, as many writers described the betrayal felt by the victims

through the recognition that someone they trusted and depended on for spiritual guidance

or support had caused them harm (Bottoms et al., 2015; Doyle, 2006; Farrell, 2004;

Gavrielides, 2012; Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Mahoney, 2008). A unique component

of the betrayal dynamic when applied to religious abuse is the potential for the abuser to

be conflated with God, and for the victim to experience the ultimate spiritual betrayal, to

feel betrayed by God. When the perpetrator is a member of the clergy, often the

perpetrator is one who many people, including the victim, may see as a representative of

God on earth (Farrell, 2004; Rossetti, 1995), or at least empowered by God (Doyle,

2003). This elevation of the clergy by both the congregational group and individuals may

result in the clergy member becoming conflated with God, and lead to the victim feeling

doubly betrayed not only by the religious leader, but also by God himself (Redmond,

1996). Added to all the other questions and confusion created by any type of abuse, a

victim of abuse perpetrated by a clergy member might also ask, "Why would God do this

to me? Why would God let this happen to me in his house?" It is likely that the element

of betrayal could have especially strong meaning in a religious setting. Doyle (2006) felt

so strongly about this that he went so far as to label abuse in religious settings as "soul

murder" (p. 208).

Additionally, a victim of religious abuse may feel betrayed by the religious group

or church family when the group fails to denounce harm experienced by the victim, or as

the victim realizes that the group has failed to protect him or her and is instead protecting

(and even elevating) the perpetrator or the image of the church (Greene, 2013). Just as it

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is common for victims of family incest to feel betrayal towards the non-offending parent when they perceive he or she did not protect them (Celano, Hazzard, Webb, & McCall, 1996), so too may the individual feel betrayed by the church family who failed to protect one of its members from the abuse of its leader.

Finkelhor (1987) also listed the manipulation of trust and vulnerability as a characteristic of this betrayal. Church is a place where the word *trust* is highly valued, requested, and expected, and where members often are asked to present their most vulnerable selves in aspects of confession, accountability, and spiritual growth. Misusing and abusing this trust and vulnerability elicits particularly strong feelings of betrayal, and also feeds feelings of powerlessness, another traumagenic dynamic discussed below. In religious abuse, the betrayal may be felt on a sacred as well as personal level.

Stigmatization

Finkelhor and Browne (1985) reported that stigmatization refers to the "negative connotations—e.g., badness, shame, and guilt—that are communicated to the…[individual] around the experiences and that then become incorporated into the….self-image" (p. 532). This definition of stigmatization also can be applied broadly to multiple types of religious abuse. In some cases, the intentional stigmatization or *othering* of a group or member of a marginalized group *is* the abuse.

Additionally, stigmatization is seen in all other categories of religious abuse. In cases of clergy perpetrated sexual abuse, for example, the offender may accuse the victim of "sinning" or causing him to sin, so blaming the victim not just for the abuser's behavior, but also for a spiritual failing on a sacred level. The pressure for secrecy which

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most victims of sexual abuse experience may come with the added pressure of protecting the church family from losing a beloved leader or protecting the very public image of a church leader.

If the abuse is revealed to the religious community, the community may stigmatize the victim in a variety of ways. For example, they may react with shock to the disclosure, blame the victim, or stereotype the victim as damaged or problematic (Bailie, 2004; Finkelhor, 1987). The revelation of abuse is a disturbance to any system, and when it occurs within a system such as a church, it often becomes very public and requires attention (e.g., legal issues, personnel issues, moral issues, church meetings) where everyone has an opinion, resulting in great potential for stigmatization and scapegoating of the victim. This stigmatizing and scapegoating can re-victimize the victim in many ways, including an exclusion from the church community, resulting in the loss of what may have been an important support system for the person.

Powerlessness

Misuse of power is at play in any abuse situation. When the element of the sacred is involved in an abuse situation, the feelings of powerlessness felt by the victim may be experienced on a sacred level. If the offender is a member of the clergy, for example, the feelings of powerlessness may be heightened by the previously discussed conflation of the offender with God. The victim may view the clergy member as God-like or at least God's representative and, as Farrell (2004) said, "What is more powerful than God?" (p. 46). For those who believe in God, God is the ultimate power, and a victim of abuse by "God" may feel the ultimate powerlessness.

If the other traumagenic dynamics of stigmatization and betrayal from the church have occurred, this might add to the feelings of powerlessness against a system that betrayed and then abandoned the victim. Other systemic contributions to powerlessness are seen in some churches or denominations that discourage questioning or any perceived display of unbelief, perpetuating the silence of a victim and stifling attempts at empowerment to stand up to the abuse. This disempowering loss of one's own voice may leave the victim unwilling or unable to protect her or himself and stop the abuse. To a person of faith who sees God as all-powerful, who can protect themselves against God? Who can stop God?

Closely related to the betrayal dynamic, there is also a powerlessness that comes from experiencing abuse in a place that is supposed to protect, that is supposed to be *good* and where the people are supposed to be *moral*. The victim may feel powerless to find relief anywhere and may think, "If I can't be safe in a church, I can't be safe anywhere."

Trauma

When religious abuse occurs in the form of sexual abuse, the traumagenic dynamic of traumatic sexualization can be directly applied. This dynamic may also be indirectly applied as a broader experience of trauma when the abuse occurs in other forms. Finkelhor (1987) described the dynamic of traumatic sexualization as the "conditions in sexual abuse under which a child's sexuality is shaped in developmentally inappropriate and interpersonally dysfunctional ways" (p. 355). Several characteristics of traumatic sexualization listed by Finkelhor (1987) could be amplified when viewed

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through the lens of sexual abuse in a religious setting, especially the dynamic of the "child rewarded for sexual behavior inappropriate to developmental level" and "confusion about sexual norms" (p. 359). Church is often a place with very specific teachings about the importance of sex occurring only within marriage, and where, in some denominations, it is well known that clergy have taken a vow of celibacy. The mixed messages sent when one of these clergy who have been preaching one thing then engages a follower in sexual abuse can result in intense confusion and potential existential crisis as one struggles to reconcile the teachings heard in church with the abuse he or she has experienced. The "misconceptions about sexual behavior and sexual morality" (Finkelhor, 1987, p. 359) have potential to skyrocket, especially when one considers that the offender is one who is often considered to be the moral compass of the church community.

Another component of traumatic sexualization is the idea that sex is exchanged for attention and affection or the confusion of sex with love and care getting/care giving (Finkelhor, 1987). A victim may feel special receiving extra attention of a church leader, but when that attention is in the form of sexual abuse, it can create extreme confusion in one's development of attitudes towards sex, especially when the extra attention or love is dependent upon a sexual act in a place where the opposite idea of unconditional love and acceptance has been preached.

When the religious abuse occurs in a form other than sexual abuse, the victim may still experience trauma in a more broad sense. Victims may present with symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, including distressing memories or dreams,

dissociative reactions, psychological distress when exposed to cues, avoidance of triggers or reminders, negative emotional states, and hypervigilance (American Psychological Association, 2013). For example, some victims may avoid any religious activities or experience flashbacks or nightmares related to the abuse.

Although the four dynamics outlined in Finkelhor and Browne's (1985) Traumagenic Dynamics Model are themes that are written about across much of the literature on religious abuse, more research is needed to see if they are indeed themes that will emerge as data are collected on the lived experience of religious abuse. It seems likely, then, that those who encounter religious abuse experience betrayal, stigma, powerlessness, and trauma. Unfortunately, however, there is limited empirical evidence to date and virtually no counseling research on religious abuse. More empirical data are needed to better understand this phenomenon and inform counseling practice with those who have experienced religious abuse.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to address the existing gap in the current research literature on the lived experiences of those who experience religious abuse. Participants who self-identify as experiencing abuse with Christian religious settings in the United States will share their lived experiences and the researcher will summarize common themes and experiences. Further, these themes will be examined for "fit" with the Traumagenic Dynamics Model (Finkelhor, 1987). To date, such experiences have not been systematically examined empirically. It is believed that findings of this study have

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potential to provide foundational data on the topic of religious abuse to inform counseling

practice, counselor preparation, and guide future research.

Statement of the Problem

Harm that occurs within a religious system or as a result of religious belief often

is referred to as *religious abuse*, sometimes also called *spiritual abuse*. Although

religious abuse has received some conceptual interest and speculation in the literature,

there is little empirical understanding of this phenomenon (Wood & Conley, 2014).

Although many articles contain a definition of religious abuse (Childers, 2012; Gubi &

Jacobs, 2009; Kvarfordt 2010; Novsak et al., 2012; Oluwole 2010; Super & Jacobson,

2011; Ward, 2011; Warford, 2014; Wood & Conley, 2014), the glaring gap in the

literature regarding religious abuse extends so far as to include no consistently agreed

upon definition of what religious abuse actually entails.

The limited scholarly writing on religious abuse is provided almost entirely by

theologians, religious scholars, and social workers, with very little attention paid to this

phenomenon by counseling scholars and researchers. Accordingly, counselors must

borrow heavily from other disciplines to consider this phenomenon. Many scholars

discuss religious abuse conceptually (Doyle, 2003; Doyle, 2006; Farrell, 2004;

Gavrieledies, 2012; Goldner, 2004; Hogan, 2011; Rauch, 2004; Simonic et. al., 2013),

which provides essential and valuable information, but still leaves a gap in empirical

evidence of the experiences and counseling needs of victims of religious abuse. This

study will provide data collected from people who self-identify as victims of Christian

religious abuse in the United States to establish foundational information for counselors when working with clients who present with a history of religious abuse.

Research Question

In order to address the gap in existing literature regarding religious abuse and to provide data to counselors that may be transferable in their work with clients who experience religious abuse, this study will address the following research question: RQ1: What are the lived experiences of people in the United States who self-identify as having an abusive experience in a Christian religious setting?

Need for the Study

The ACA Code of Ethics (2014) provides a clear directive to counselors to "consider their client's religious or spiritual values and experiences as part of their multicultural or diversity components during any assessment" (Section E.8, p. 12). Similarly, the most current Standards of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016, p. 10) state that students must be trained about "the impact of spiritual beliefs on clients' and counselors' worldviews" (Section 2.F.2.g). Further, the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) competencies state, in part, that "the professional counselor strives to understand a client's spiritual and/or religious perspective by gathering information from the client and/or other sources," and that "The professional counselor recognizes that the client's beliefs (or absence of beliefs) about spirituality and/or religion are central to his or her worldview and can influence psychosocial functioning" (Cashwell & Watts, 2010, p. 5). Accordingly, counselors assess the role of spirituality

and religion in the lives of clients as part of an intake or initial assessment and strive to understand how their religious beliefs and experience influence their presenting issues. For many clients, their experiences of spiritual faith, religious community, and religious practices are an important source of support and comfort (Bunge, 2014; Simonic, Mandelj, & Novsak, 2013), and can be used as a strength and support in the counseling process.

Unfortunately, however, other clients will present with a history of harm in religious settings that negatively impact presenting issues and psychosocial functioning. There is a paucity of empirical literature to help counselors work effectively with these clients. More information needs to be known about the experience of religious abuse and the healing process to provide counselors with the tools and interventions to better serve these clients. Further, clearer research findings will help counselors examine and understand their own biases. Finally, such information will provide clinical supervisors and counselor educators with information that potentially will inform counselor preparation.

Definition of Terms

In the limited amount of research available on the topic of religious abuse, there have been multiple definitions of several constructs, contributing to the confusion around this topic and how it applies to counselors. Therefore, it is important to provide clear definitions for the constructs included in this particular study.

Religious Abuse: Although there is no single agreed upon definition of this term in the current literature, for the purposes of this study, Religious Abuse will be considered anyone's experience with a religious setting that they would classify as abusive.

Spiritual Abuse: This term often is used interchangeably with *Religious Abuse*. In this study, the term Religious Abuse will be used unless quoting an author who has chosen to use the term *Spiritual Abuse*.

Religious setting: Any institution or organized gathering in which someone participates for the purposes of religious or spiritual development. In this study, there will be particular focus on mainstream religious settings as opposed to cult environments.

Mainstream religion: Refers to the major religions (including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism) which practice common views characteristic of the principal, dominant, or widely accepted theology of that group as opposed to religious cults (defined below).

Betrayal: An emotional state that may result when the victim realizes that someone the victim had depended on and deeply trusted has harmed them. Specific to religious abuse, this involves the recognition that someone they trusted and depended on for spiritual guidance or support has caused harm.

Stigmatization: Negative associations such as shame, blame, guilt, evil, and being problematic to the system that are ascribed to the victim regarding the abusive experience and may be incorporated into the victim's own view of self.

Powerlessness: Feelings of helplessness, no ability to influence or control one's situation, devoid of power

Religious Cults: extreme religious systems outside of societal norms that seek to isolate group members from non-group members.

Traumatic sexualization: "conditions in sexual abuse under which a child's sexuality is shaped in developmentally inappropriate and interpersonally dysfunctional ways" (Finkelhor, 1987, p. 355).

Trauma: Psychological effects of a deeply distressing experience.

Brief Overview

This dissertation study will be presented in five chapters. The purpose of Chapter One has been to introduce the topic and provide the purpose of the study, the statement of the problem including the gap in the literature, the rationale, the need for the study, the research question, and the operational definition of key terms to be used in the study. In the second chapter, the researcher will synthesize, integrate, and critique the existing literature to provide relevant background content about the experience of religious abuse, as well as provide a review of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that will ground the study. Chapter III will provide an explanation and overview of the qualitative methodology chosen for this study, including the research question and a description of the selection of participants, procedures, data analysis methods to be utilized, and pilot study. In Chapter IV, the researcher will present the results of the study. In the final chapter, Chapter V, the author will provide a conclusion and discuss how the results can build upon previous literature and impact the practice of counseling. Chapter V also will include a discussion of the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In Chapter One, a summary of the current research on religious abuse was provided and a study was proposed to explore this phenomenon more fully. In this chapter, the relevant literature will be summarized, critiqued, and synthesized to describe the construct and types of religious abuse, the importance of this construct in the counseling field, the theoretical framework of the Traumagenic Dynamics Model, and the continuum of harm that may occur in Christian religious settings. The methodology of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis also will be summarized as a bridge to the in-depth description of the procedures for the study described in Chapter Three.

Review of Religion/Spirituality in Counseling

The role of religion and spirituality has long been recognized in counseling (Miller, 1999). Even before the 1995 *Summit on Spirituality* where leaders met to formalize ways to incorporate religion and spirituality in counseling, there was much discussion about the value in recognizing the potential importance of a client's religious/spiritual worldview on the counseling process (Miller, 1999). This recognition continued to evolve in a more formalized way, and led to several counseling organizations creating standards and guidelines regarding religion/spirituality in counseling.

The American Counseling Association (ACA) recognized religion and spirituality as an aspect of a client's culture, and included this in the Multicultural Issues/ Diversity in Assessment section (Section E.8) of the 2014 Code of Ethics, stating "Counselors recognize the effects of age, color, culture, disability, ethnic group, gender, race, language preference, religion, spirituality, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status on test administration and interpretation, and they place test results in proper perspective with other relevant factors" (ACA, 2004, p. 12).

Similarly, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016) also has recognized and addressed the importance of spirituality in counseling. In addressing Social and Cultural Diversity, the 2016 CACREP standards require that the counseling curriculum address "the impact of spiritual beliefs on clients' and counselors' worldviews" (Section 2.F.2.g, p. 10). This requirement demonstrates the commitment of CACREP to ensure counselors are taught to value and assess the potential impact that a religious or spiritual worldview may have on a client's psychological, emotional, and social functioning. Accordingly, counselor education programs that want to pursue or maintain accreditation must demonstrate how they are meeting this Standard.

Additional direction and guidance for counselors to integrate religion and spirituality into their practice is available in the standards set by the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC), a division of the American Counseling Association. The complete list of these standards is found in Appendix A, and they include competencies such as "The professional counselor

recognizes that the client's beliefs (or absence of beliefs) about spirituality and/or religion are central to his or her worldview and can influence psychosocial functioning" and "The professional counselor can recognize spiritual and/or religious themes in client communication and is able to address these with the client when they are therapeutically relevant" (Cashwell & Watts, 2010, p. 5). Several of the ASERVIC competencies also emphasize the importance of counselors performing self-evaluations on their own spiritual/religious identity and how that may impact the counseling process, something that is especially important for those clients who have experienced religious abuse.

The Construct of Religious Abuse

The importance of counselors and counselor educators to continually remember the potential religious/spiritual aspect of a client's worldview has been emphasized and guided by the ACA Ethical Code, ASERVIC competencies, and CACREP standards. These organizations, along with a large and growing body of counseling literature addressing religion and spirituality, have helped to establish norms in the field around assessment of religion and spirituality. As training in assessing religion and spirituality has become more pervasive, however, there remains a knowledge and training gap around how counselors can serve clients who have had negative religious/spiritual experiences, and who feel they have been harmed in a religious system. Although the different types of potential harm experienced in religious systems may lie upon a continuum, near one end of this continuum is a phenomenon known as religious abuse (Ward, 2011), a critical phenomenon that remains difficult to study because of a lack of a clear definition.

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Lack of Clear Definition

One glaring gap in the literature regarding religious harm is the lack of clear definitions and constructs. Often, the terms *religious abuse* and *spiritual abuse* are used interchangeably and in multiple ways. For the purpose of the current study, the researcher will use the term *religious abuse* throughout to focus on abuse within a religious institution, but in many instances, this may also include spiritual abuse as will be discussed more fully throughout this chapter.

Unfortunately, there is not one consistently agreed upon definition in the existing literature of what religious abuse actually means. Scholars provide definitions (Childers, 2012; Gubi & Jacobs, 2009; Kvarfordt 2010; Novsak et al., 2012; Oluwole 2010; Super & Jacobson, 2011; Ward, 2011; Warford, 2014; Wood & Conley, 2014) but these definitions range from very broad generalizations of problematic religion (Warford, 2014) to presenting very specific definitions solicited from research participants (Gubi & Jacobs, 2009). These descriptions include a variety of forms of religious abuse including misuse of scripture (Warford, 2014), manipulative solicitation for money, withholding medical treatment, theological bullying of the LGTBQ population (Childers, 2012; Foster, Bowland, & Vosler, 2015; Greene, 2013; Lucies & Yick, 2007; Super & Jacobson), justification for domestic abuse (Cares & Cusick, 2012; Simonic et al., 2011), and physical or sexual abuse perpetrated by a member of the clergy (Bottoms, Nielsen, Murray, & Filipas, 2003; Disch & Avery, 2001; Doyle, 2003; Doyle, 2006; Evinger,

2001; Farrell, 2004; Goldner, 2004; Hogan, 2011). This lack of a clear-cut definition of religious abuse contributes to the difficulty of creating consistent research around the concept and is a rather glaring gap in the literature.

Emphasis on Clergy Perpetrated Sexual Abuse

The gap in the literature of religious abuse is further widened by the disproportionate amount of literature focused on sexual abuse perpetrated by clergy with particular emphasis on the sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church (Gavrielides, 2012; Noll & Harvey, 2008; Pargament, Murray-Swank & Mahoney, 2008; Rossetti, 1995). This disproportionate amount of attention is prevalent in the literature despite recognition that perpetrators of sexual abuse can be found in every denomination (Farrell, 2004; Saradjian & Nobus, 2003) and the broader view proposed in this dissertation that, although sexual abuse by clergy is most certainly a form of religious abuse, there are many additional categories and types of religious abuse. Some examples of other types of religious abuse that have garnered less attention include the marginalization and othering of groups such as women or those in the LGBTQ community, and intimate partner violence that is justified through theology. In addition, no other specific denomination has garnered anywhere near the attention of the sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic church on the topic of religious abuse, and although the work done around Catholic clergy is important groundwork and is very useful for that population, there still continues a significant gap in knowing how other Christian denominations and/or world religions participate in religious abuse, both sexual and other types, and the effects.

Additional study needs to be done to examine if the findings and concepts are generalizable outside the Catholic Church and to other types of religious abuse.

Overview of Conceptual Literature

Much of this emphasis on the sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic church is found in conceptual literature, where the authors provided overviews of this type of religious abuse, but do not provide empirical research to ground these overviews. Many of these conceptual pieces are critical of the Catholic church, as is the case in Doyle's (2006) critique of the clericalism structure in the Catholic church. Doyle placed much blame for widespread sexual abuse by Catholic clergy on this hierarchical system which places priests on a higher level than laity and encourages a conflation of the priest with God.

Farrell (2004) provided a similar critique of the hierarchical system as he provided a historical lens of the Catholic church. He laid blame for the widespread sexual abuse and re-traumatization of victims within the system on this hierarchical system and history of secrecy. Despite this critique, Farrell asserted that other religious denominations have similar issues with sexual abuse by clergy.

Hogan (2011) also offered a critique of the Catholic church and suggested reform in the areas of: 1.) the body and sexuality; 2.) patriarchy and the abuse of power; and 3.) church, ministry, and leadership (p. 170). While helpful for researchers to consider what characteristics of a religious system might contribute to abuse, these suggestions would be made stronger if grounded in empirical research.

Although many of the conceptual pieces have been focused on the Catholic church, there are other authors who explored the concept of religious abuse and provided opportunities and suggestions for further research. For example, Greene (2013) provided an assertion of the ways religious theologies "have and continue to be selectively used to support destructive social pathologies, such as heterosexism, racism, and sexism" (p. 43). Blanchard (1991) compared characteristics of clergy perpetrated sexual abuse with characteristics of father/daughter incest and provided tips for confronting a pastor suspected of sexual abuse such as rehearsing what to say and expecting anger.

Conceptual articles such as these have helped create dialogue and awareness of religious abuse, and provided ideas and opportunities for further research. Although they may aid counselors in gaining insight, additional research is needed to ground the assertions in empirical research and provide specific guidance to counselors who may counsel victims of religious abuse.

Lack of and Limitations of Empirical Research

Although there are many opportunities, there continues to be a lack of empirical literature on the subject of religious abuse. The literature is dominated by conceptual or expositive approaches to understanding religious abuse, and little data exist to back up anecdotal evidence (Bottoms, Goodman, Tolou-Shams, Diviak, and Shaver, 2015; Kvarfordt, 2010; Oakley & Kinmond, 2014; Ward, 2011). Although these scholarly writings that provide overviews on the topic of religious abuse without data collection (e.g., Doyle, 2003; Doyle, 2006; Farrell, 2004; Gavrieledies, 2012; Goldner, 2004; Hogan, 2011; Rauch, 2004; Simonic et. al., 2013) provide valuable information, there

continues to be a gap in empirical data to provide more concrete direction for counselors who may work with victims of religious abuse. Further, what little research is available emerges primarily from the fields of theology, religion, and social work, so counselors continue to be left with little specific guidance and must borrow heavily from these and other disciplines for a thorough review.

The small amount of empirical research that has been done suffers from substantive threats to external validity. For example, Bottoms, Goodman, Tolou-Shams, Diviak, and Shaver (2015) provided a profile of cases by legal and social service agencies that involved religion-related child maltreatment. Their findings included three forms of religion-related maltreatment: Abuse perpetrated by those in religious authority; Religion related medical neglect; and physical abuse of children due to religious beliefs. The specific types of maltreatment towards children reported were sexual abuse, physical abuse, psychological abuse, and neglect (p. 567). The settings where the abuse occurred as reported by participants were a religious setting (church, religious school, or religious camp), the home, or day-care setting, with the majority of abuse perpetrated by religious leadership happening in a religious setting and most abuse justified by religious belief happening in a private home. The sample for this study was derived from post cards sent to social service agencies, and all data collected were from the perspective of employees in these agencies, which did not give a direct voice to the experience of the abused. Therefore, although the information collected from social service agencies contributes to the picture of religious abuse, the focus on children and the limited perspective of the participants leaves the generalizability of the study to the broader experience of religious

abuse unclear. Similarly, Kvarfordt (2010) interviewed social workers investigating spiritual abuse and neglect of youth, and reported that "participants in this study reported a somewhat frequent identification of and encounters with spiritual abuse and neglect of children and adolescents" (p. 154). She similarly focused on children and adolescents, did not include the voice or experience of those who actually experienced the abuse and the presentation of the significance of the findings was unclear.

Also experiencing threats to external validity is the study of Rossetti (1995), who studied the effect of child sexual abuse on victim's trust in the Catholic Church, clergy, and God. Rossetti found that those who have experienced sexual abuse by someone other than a priest reported less trust in the Catholic Church, clergy, and God than those who had never experience childhood sexual abuse, and those who had experienced sexual abuse from a Catholic priest had even lower levels of trust than those who did not experience childhood sexual abuse. Although Rosetti did give voice to the victims in his study who were his sample, it was published over 20 years ago, with much publicity focused on this issue in the time since then. In addition, Rosetti's sample was solely comprised of adult Catholics, so it is unclear if his findings are still relevant and generalizable to other Christian denominations. Similarly, Cares and Cusick (2012) focused narrowly on abused Jewish women and Jewish culture, so their findings may not be generalizable outside of Jewish culture to other religions or cultures, or to other types of religious abuse.

Evinger (2001) provided a different perspective by gathering data on how sexual abuse complaints were addressed within the Presbyterian Church. Again, the data did not

include the voice of the abused, but rather another informant, this time being a clerk or other member of the "ecclesiastical office" (p. 13). Again, the focus was on one denomination and one type of religious abuse, the category of sexual abuse, so generalizability to other denominations and other categories of religious abuse remains unclear.

All of the above studies provided limited direction for professional counselors as none of them included the perspective of a counselor, none provided a client perspective, and most did not include the perspective of a potential client (i.e., the individual who experienced the abuse). Although there are a few studies that relate more directly to counselors, these also have limitations. For example, Disch and Avery (2001) researched how sexual abuse by clergy compared with sexual abuse by medical professionals and mental health professionals and reported findings that victims of sexual abuse by medical professionals reported the most negative impact. In this study, the researchers did give voice to those who had experienced the abuse, and provided counselors with a perspective of how this might be similar to abuse that occurs within their own field of counseling. However, again, the only type of abuse studied was that of sexual abuse, and the researchers did not provide any specific information on the type of religious setting in which the abuse occurred other than describing it as a member of the clergy.

Gubi and Jacobs (2009) provided a different perspective on religious abuse for counselors as they explored the impact on counselors who work with clients who have experienced religious abuse and found reports of negative reactions such anger, sadness, and secondary trauma as well as positive reactions that strengthened the faith of the

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participants. So, although some secondary voices of the victims of religious abuse may be gleaned from the data and some vicarious experiences of religious abuse for the counselor were described, the focus of the study was on the experience of the counselor and not the client, continuing to leave a gap in understanding the lived experience of religious abuse for the actual victim.

One study that does provide the voices of the victims is the grounded theory study of Lucies and Yick (2007), who reported surprise when spiritual abuse emerged as a common experience of gay men's experience with anti-gay abuse. The participants reported forms of spiritual abuse including experience of homophobia, oppression, and anti-gay teachings with the church. This study was not focused specifically on religious abuse, but rather sought to examine "how gay men's experiences with anti-gay experiences or incidents of hate crimes could be re-defined from an object relations paradigm" (p. 55). The researchers in this study provide important groundwork for one category of religious abuse, that of abuse perpetrated by a religious group towards a marginalized population or member of a marginalized group. Although many authors refer to the LGBTQ population (Alison, 2001; Alison, 2013; Greene, 2013; Super& Jacobson; Wood & Conley, 2014) in the literature on religious abuse, most of it is conceptual in nature, so the work of Lucies and Yick (2007) has provided some empirical grounding for the potential experiences of this population.

Perhaps the most broadly focused empirical study to date is the work of Oakley and Kinmond (2014), who surveyed "people's experiences in the church and spiritual abuse" (p. 87). The participants included a broad range of denominations representive of

all major denominations in the United Kingdom. Further, in contrast to the majority of studies reviewed above, Oakley and Kinmond did work to synthesize the collective voices of abuse survivors. The researchers in this study also provided a very broad definition of spiritual abuse, so their work was not limited by the inclusion of only one category of religious abuse as is true in many other studies. The reported purpose of this study was to survey people's experiences specifically to contribute to implementing safeguarding policy. The researchers reported findings that respondents did have some awareness of the concept of religious abuse, but the researchers described this awareness and understanding as limited to abuse perpetrated by church leaders. They also found the need to provide safeguarding policies not only from a top-down perspective involving church leadership as perpetrators, but also to implement safeguards from spiritual abuse perpetrated by laity as well. The researchers also included a break-down of percentages of respondents who felt they could raise questions in church' who had experienced shame, blame, manipulation, and distrust; and how many felt damaged by the church, but they failed to include whether these findings were statistically significant as results were purely descriptive percentages. Results are also somewhat limited in that the survey was distributed through social networking and church organizations, so the voices of those who are no longer involved in a church organized may not have been included. Additionally, this study was carried out in the United Kingdom and it is unknown how these findings would generalize beyond the UK.

Perhaps the previous study most relevant to the current study and a seminal piece in understanding the construct of religious abuse is Ward's (2011) phenomenological

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study on the lived experience of spiritual abuse. Similar to the study proposed here, Ward explored the phenomenon of religious abuse by using the methodology of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to conduct interviews with six adults who had left their respective religious groups. As a result of his analysis, he provided six core themes of religious abuse. The first theme, "leadership representing God" which Ward described a "cornerstone" (p 908) for the other themes included examples such as not questioning religious leaders as they speak for God. The second theme of spiritual bullying (manipulative behavior of the leadership) was named by two participants and interpreted to be implied by all other participants, and included an example of a threat to separate the participant from family members. The third category, acceptance via performance (approval of leadership/group through obedience) was reported as part of all the experiences of the participants, with the example of love and acceptance in the group being conditional on performance. The type of performance was not specified. The forth category, spiritual neglect (detrimental acts of omission by the leadership) included examples of mental health issues not being treated, or marital issues ignored by religious leadership. The description of the fifth category, expanding of external/internal tension (dissonance between one's inner and outer worlds) addresses the dissonance of one's individuality with the external expectations of the group, such as the pressure to appear positive despite emotional struggles. The last category, manifestation of internal states (the bio/psycho/spiritual repercussions of the abuse) includes examples of physical and psychological manifestations of the abuse, such as anxiety attacks or decreased immunity to sickness. (Ward, 2011, p. 903).

These themes provide foundation for additional studies on religious abuse, but Ward provided no clear application for counselors regarding how these themes described the experience of religious abuse. In addition, these themes may not capture the full spectrum of possible harm and potential categories of abuse in a religious setting. Other limitations include no explanation of how participants were recruited other than a reference to "snowball sampling" (p. 902) or what information they were given to determine criteria for participation. In addition, Ward's research was conducted in Australia and how these results might generalize to the United States is unknown.

It seems evident, then, that there are multiple gaps in the literature on the topic of religious abuse, especially in the counseling literature, including a lack of a clearly agreed upon definition of religious abuse. Most of the writing published on the topic of religious abuse is conceptual in nature, and seeks to explain the phenomenon without an empirical foundation for understanding it. In addition to a disproportionate amount of conceptual literature, there is also a disproportionate focus on sexual abuse by clergy, particularly in the Catholic church, so that a broader understanding of religious abuse and other denominations is lacking. The evidence regarding the experience of those who have experienced religious abuse is very weak, and more concrete data and understanding of those experiences is needed to provide guidance for counselors who are working with victims of religious abuse. Although counselors can extrapolate some from other disciplines, the data available specifically for counselors are lacking. Only two direct studies of the experiences of religious abuse were found in the literature (Oakley & Kinmond, 2014; Ward, 2011). Neither covered the full spectrum of abuse experiences

and both were conducted in countries outside the United States, leaving it unclear how the findings might transfer to experiences in the United States. It is anticipated that this study will help to define the construct more clearly.

Categories of Religious Abuse

Following a thorough review of the interdisciplinary religious abuse literature, three broad categories or types of religious abuse emerged, particularly those that occur within mainstream Christian churches. The categories are not mutually exclusive and experiences of religious abuse may co-exist in multiple categories or overlap into multiple categories. The three broad categories of religious abuse described to this point in the scholarly literature can be categorized as a) abuse perpetrated by religious leadership, typically an individual leader; b) abuse perpetrated by a religious group, directed either towards an individual or towards a group of people; and c) abuse in which the abuse itself has a religious component to it.

Abuse Perpetrated by Religious Leadership

Abuse perpetrated by religious leadership includes physical (such as a Sunday School teacher who physically harms students), sexual (such as youth minister who sexually abuses a member of the youth group), and emotional abuse (such as a minister who refuses to marry an interracial couple) where the perpetrator is a person in an official position of religious authority or leadership. This is typically a pastor or member of the clergy, although it also may include other religious authority figures in the church, such as deacons, elders, or small group or Sunday School teachers. The vast majority of literature in this category addresses the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church (Doyle,

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2003; Doyle, 2006; Farrell, 2004; Goldner, 2004; Hogan, 2011; Rossetti, 1995; Saradjian & Nobus, 2003), although sexual abuse perpetrated by a clergy member is certainly not limited to Catholicism (Farrell, 2004).

A significant issue that may arise in religious abuse that is perpetrated by Christian religious leadership is the potential for the victim to conflate the abuser with God, as often the perpetrator is seen as representative of God on earth (Doyle, 2006; Farrell, 2004; Redmond, 1996; Rossetti, 1995). Some writers have even explicitly stated that victims feel as though they were abused directly by God (Alison, 2001; Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Mahoney, 2008). The potential for this conflation is especially true when the religious abuse occurs in childhood, before the child is capable of abstract thought (Redmond, 1996), but can occur at any age. When the abuser is conflated with God, the damage and trauma can occur at a very sacred level, and disrupt the relationship the victim has with the sacred (Pargament et al., 2008; Redmond, 1996). This may also result in a spiritual mistrust of all religious leaders and religious systems, and separate the victims from their spiritual community of support (Doyle, 2003; Redmond, 1996; Rossetti, 1995).

This conflation of the abuser with God also may create challenges for the counselor, especially if the counselor is religious. In these instances, it is extremely important for the counselor to adhere to ASERVIC Competency # 4: "The professional counselor continuously evaluates the influence of his or her own spiritual and/or religious beliefs and values on the client and the counseling process" (ASERVIC, 2016). This self-awareness and reflection could help to head off the tendency of helping professionals

who are religious to defend God, or to try to convince the client that "God isn't really like that" (Redmond, 1996, p. 41).

Abuse Perpetrated by a Religious Group

A second type of abuse is perpetrated more broadly by a religious group or community. Abuse perpetrated by a religious group often centers around social issues where the abuser(s) may target a marginalized population, and use religious teachings selectively in order to oppress. The abuser(s) may be one person representing an entire group, or it may be an actual group of people or religious system that is oppressing either an individual or a population of people. This type of abuse creates a "legitimized inequality" (Greene, 2013, p. 41) as the religious abuser(s) seeks to *other* a marginalized group or member of a marginalized group. For example, multiple authors have discussed the impact of religious abuse on the LGTBQ population (Foster, Bowland & Vosler, 2015; Greene, 2013; Lucies & Yick, 2007; Super & Jacobson, 2011; Wood & Conley, 2014). Foster et al. (2015) found that "the homonegativity perpetuated in many Christian churches makes it difficult for LG Christians to retain their religion/spirituality while embracing their sexual orientation" (p. 191). The religious othering experienced by members of the LGBTQ population often sends messages that convey that this population is evil or less loved by God, a message that may be internalized by an individual in this group (Alison, 2001; Super & Jacobson, 2011). Some lesbian and gay Christians describe difficulty in finding a safe spiritual community, or choose to separate from their spiritual community (Foster et al., 2015; Super & Jacobson, 2011). It is proposed here that such othering or spiritual bullying may be experienced as a form of religious abuse.

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This type of abuse perpetrated by a religious group also has been seen as some religious systems have promoted racism in both macro (e.g., a governmental structure of apartheid) and micro (e.g., a pastor who refuses to marriage an interracial couple) contexts. For example, there are several historical examples of churches overtly supporting systemic racial discrimination such as apartheid in South Africa or working against the civil rights movements and promoting segregation in the United States (Berkley Center, 2011). Indeed, Martin Luther King, Jr., proclaimed 11 a.m. on Sunday morning "the most segregated hour in America" (Lipka, 2014). Although perhaps not as overt as it once was, the degree of racial segregation in American churches continues at a high rate, with 80% of American churchgoers attending a church where 80% of the attendees are from the same racial or ethnic group (Lipka, 2014).

Greene (2013) reported that, although "Christian theology has been an important source of liberation theology for African Americans in their struggle against racism. It is problematic but not unusual for religious teachings and doctrine to be selectively used to support behavior that maintains rather than challenges oppressive social hierarchies at different points in our history" (p. 42). These selective teachings have been used to promote or justify slavery, opposition to interracial marriage, and violence towards people of color. Similarly, some Christian churches or church members also have used selective theology or teachings to perpetuate oppression and/or violence towards women, sexism, the holocaust, genocide towards Native Americans, and other possible forms of

oppression (Greene, 2013; Johnson, 1992). Specific examples could include a minister who refuses to perform an interracial marriage or allow a person of color to officially join the church.

Abuse with a Religious Component

Finally, some forms of religious abuse appear to involve a direct connection to something spiritual or religious. In other words, the abuse itself is a result of religious belief or has a religious element tied to the actual abuse. Although it can be argued that the other two types of religious abuse (abuse perpetrated by religious leadership or abuse perpetrated by a religious group) have an inherent religious component as they are originating from a person or people connected to a religious group, this third type of religious abuse involves an overt tie to religious belief.

For example, Bottoms et al. (2015) provided an example of parents who physically abuse their children and justify it by telling the child he or she must have the devil or evil beaten out of them. The action of the physical abuse itself, while horrific, would not be categorized as religious abuse without the stated motivation of beating the evil out of the child due to the parents' interpretation of their religious teachings. The message sent to the child is that this abuse is part of their religion, and has an overt connection to God.

Other examples include domestic violence situations in which the husband justifies beating his wife because of religious beliefs (Simonic, Mandelj, & Novsak, 2013). Some Christians may interpret the biblical concept of submission to mean that women should not seek help if they experience intimate partner violence, and that they

are not allowed to question their husbands' authority. In cases such as these, this theological interpretation may drive both the actions of the abuser to abuse, and the actions of the victim to remain in an unsafe relationship.

Other forms of religious abuse that include a religious or sacred element include a sexual abuser, clergy or otherwise, who uses a spiritual element to perpetrate the abuse. For example, the predator might tell a child that "God wants you to do this," or "You will go to Hell if you tell anyone about this." The sacred element has the potential to amplify the power differential or perpetuate the secrecy and shame of the abuse. Another example is a clergy who financially abuses a congregant by promising favor with God if the person will make a substantial financial contribution to the church, where the abuser manipulates someone's desire for a spiritual connection for the abuser's own gain.

When conceptualizing the three broad categories of religious abuse: [a] abuse perpetrated by religious leadership, typically an individual leader, b) abuse perpetrated by a religious group, directed either towards an individual or towards a group of people, and c) abuse in which the abuse itself has a religious component to it], it is important to keep in mind that these three categories are not mutually exclusive and often overlap each other. It is possible for a specific experience of religious abuse to fall into one, two, or even all three categories. One framework to better understand these categories of abuse is the Truamagenic Dynamics Model.

Traumagenic Dynamics Model

To date, there does not appear to be an existing theoretical framework or model designed to specifically address religious abuse. Oakley and Kinmond (2013) proposed a

process map detailing what they described as the process of spiritual abuse, which details

stages of 1.) Initial positive experience, although it is unclear if this experience occurs in

the church or perhaps another religious setting; 2.) Increased involvement—beginning of

abuse, where the person becomes more involved in the church, with no detail of what is

meant by the beginning of abuse; 3.) Personal Impact, which is described as the emotions

and response to abusive situations, yet neither the abusive situations or examples of the

kind of personal impacts are defined; 4.) Catalysts, which they describe as experiences

that contribute to the decision to exit the system; 5.) Exiting the church or system and 6.)

Long-term impact of the abuse.

There are distinct aspects of their model that do not align with the purpose of the

study of religious abuse presented here. Specifically, despite an entire chapter titled

"What is Spiritual Abuse?," there is no clear definition of spiritual abuse given, but vague

references to "coercion and control" (p. 21) and "deeply emotional attacks" (p. 21).

There is no attention given to physical or sexual abuse in a religious setting, as they

maintained a focus specifically on people who experienced emotional spiritual harm

rather than other types of abuse in a religious setting. Their model also appears to make

sweeping assumptions and broad generalizations that spiritual abuse can only occur to

someone who is a part of a church, that everyone starts out with a positive experience,

and that everyone exits the system, with no empirical research to back up these claims or

this model.

Therefore, because a current model that thoroughly addresses religious abuse does

not yet exist, this study will be grounded in the theory of the Traumagenic Dynamics

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Model (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). Although designed to be a framework applied to understanding the effects of childhood sexual abuse, this theory was chosen because all the components of the model are ongoing themes seen throughout the literature on religious abuse, and provide a useful lens through which to consider the data that will be collected in this study.

In the Traumagenic Dynamics Model of Child Sexual Abuse (TDMCSA), Finkelhor and Browne (1985) break down the impact of sexual abuse into four traumagenic dynamics: traumatic sexualization, betrayal, stigmatization, and powerlessness. Finkelhor (1987) described a traumagenic dynamic as "an experience that alters…cognitive or emotional orientation to the world and causes trauma by distorting…self-concept, worldview, or affective capacities" (p. 354). Although the model was originally developed to explain the experience of childhood sexual abuse, these four categories also appear to capture, at least in part, the emotional, spiritual, and mental experiences of a victim of religious abuse.

Historical Use of the Model

TDMCSA (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985) has naturally been applied mainly and most directly to the trauma experienced by those who were victims of childhood sexual abuse. It is a highly regarded model that has had a significant impact on the research of childhood sexual abuse (Canton-Cortes, Cortes & Canton, 2012), including a treatment intervention program based on the four dynamics (Celano, Hazzard, Webb, & McCall, 1996).

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Although the Traumagenic Dynamics Model of Childhood Sexual Abuse has been applied broadly and to multiple populations regarding childhood sexual abuse, there is at least one other example of its application to a different type of abuse. Wyatt (1990) considered how the four dynamics apply to the experiences of victims of institutional racism, asserting "Ethnic minority children need to be assessed for the presence of multiple forms of victimization because they are likely to experience institutional racism throughout life as children of color" (p. 338). Wyatt concluded that clinicians could be helped by considering and assessing for the four dynamics of traumatic sexualization, betrayal, stigmatization, and powerlessness when working with children of color. Although Wyatt's argument was conceptual rather than empirical, it still opened the door to consider the Traumagenic Dynamics Model in areas other than childhood sexual abuse.

The four dynamics of betrayal, stigmatization, powerlessness, and trauma (sexual or other types of trauma) are recurring themes throughout the limited literature available on abuse that occurs in religious settings. Therefore, this model seems an appropriate lens with which to consider this study. The following is critique and synthesis of how these themes have emerged in the religious abuse literature.

Betrayal

The betrayal dynamic was described by Finkelhor and Browne (1985) as the realization of the victim that he or she has been harmed by someone on whom they had depended and deeply trusted, which seems quite similar to what happens in instances of religious abuse. It is quite typical for people who choose to be involved in a religious

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practice to grow dependent and trust others in the religious system, especially those who

are in elevated positions of leadership. In fact, the theme of betrayal emerged as one

clear theme in the scholarly literature on religious abuse. Numerous writers have

described the betrayal felt by the victims through the recognition that an individual or

system they trusted and depended on for spiritual guidance or support had caused them

harm (Bottoms et al., 2015; Doyle, 2006; Farrell, 2006; Gavrielides, 2012; Pargament et

al., 2008). Some examples of situations where religious abuse might result in feelings of

betrayal are the following:

- A person who has given money to the church after extensive pressure and encouragement and realized this money was being used for personal gain by the church treasurer

- A woman who seeks advice from her pastor about the intimate partner violence she is experiencing only to be told she must be to blame and is not praying hard enough

- An adolescent discloses a sexual relationship with the youth minister to an elder who encourages her to remain silent to avoid embarrassing the church.

A unique component of the betrayal dynamic when applied to religious abuse is

the potential for the abuser to be conflated with God, and for the victim to experience the

ultimate spiritual betrayal, to feel betrayed by God. For many people in the Christian

church, the word *trust* carries a deep, sacred meaning, and is the basis not only for their

participation in the church system, but also potentially for eternal life, as many believe

trust is what leads to God and eternal life. This trust happens on an extremely deep and

sacred level. Accordingly, when this trust is broken, the potential exists for the betrayal

to also be deep and experienced as a sacred betrayal. Guido (2008) provided this quote from an interview he did with a victim of clergy sexual abuse who stated, "Tell them…what he took away from me. Not just my innocence but my faith. I'm like a spiritual orphan, betrayed by what I loved, and I feel lost and alone" (p. 257). The term *spiritual orphan* implies a betrayal on a multitude of levels that victims of religious abuse may experience, the loss and betrayal of family, the loss and betrayal of parental/authority figures, the loss and betrayal of people to guide them, the loss and betrayal of a connection to both the sacred and a sacred community and, ultimately, the loss and betrayal of the spirit.

When the perpetrator is a member of the clergy (Category 1 in the types of religious abuse: Abuse perpetrated by religious leadership), the victim may see her or him as a representative of God on earth (Farrell, 2004; Rossetti, 1995) or at least empowered by God (Doyle, 2003). This elevation of the clergy by both the congregational group and individuals may result in the clergy member becoming conflated with God, and lead to the victim feeling betrayed not only by the religious leader, but by God (Redmond, 1996). For those who believe in God, there is nothing bigger than God and, accordingly, there is no larger betrayal than to be betrayed by God. This conflation can create overlap with Category 3 in the types of religious abuse: Abuse which has a religious component. Added to all the other questions and confusion created by any type of abuse, a victim of abuse perpetrated by a clergy member also might ask, "Why would God allow this to happen to me? Why would God let this happen to me in his house?" It is likely that the element of betrayal could have especially strong meaning in a religious setting. Doyle

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(2006) felt so strongly about this, he went so far as to label abuse in religious settings as "soul murder" (p. 208), implying this betrayal is so strong it could result in the ultimate death of the most sacred part of us, the soul.

Additionally, a victim of religious abuse may feel betrayed in a very systemic manner by the religious group or church family (Category 2 in the types of religious abuse: Abuse perpetrated by a religious group). A group may fail to recognize or denounce the harm experienced by the victim or the victim may realize that the group has failed to protect him or her and is instead protecting (and even elevating) the perpetrator or the image of the church (Greene, 2013). Just as it is common for victims of family incest to feel betrayal towards the non-offending parent when they perceive he or she did not protect them (Celano et al., 1996), so too may the individual feel betrayed by the church family who fails to protect one of its members from the abuse of its leader. The dynamic of stigmatization (discussed below) can also result in feelings of betrayal when the victim realizes that not only were they not protected, but that they are actually being blamed for the abuse that occurred.

Another area where a victim of religious abuse may experience the dynamic of betrayal is around the religious concept of forgiveness. Forgiveness plays a fundamental role in the belief system of many Christians who may feel pressured to forgive the abuser in a way that dismisses their own experience of harm (Pargament et al., 2008). When the idea of forgiveness is interpreted as implying the abuse was no big deal, or that the victim should completely accept that it happened, hearing a message from the system that they must forgive could be experienced as abandonment and betrayal.

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Further, Finkelhor (1987) listed the manipulation of trust and vulnerability as a characteristic of this betrayal. Church is a place where the word *trust* is highly valued, requested, and expected, and where members often are asked to present their most vulnerable selves in aspects of confession, accountability, and spiritual growth. Misusing and abusing this trust and vulnerability may elicit particularly strong feelings of betrayal, and also feed feelings of powerlessness, another traumagenic dynamic discussed below.

Stigmatization

In the TDMCSA, Finkelhor and Browne (1985) reported that stigmatization refers to the "negative connotations—e.g., badness, shame, and guilt—that are communicated to the…[individual] around the experiences and that then become incorporated into the….self-image" (p. 532). This definition of stigmatization from the model can also be applied broadly to multiple types of religious abuse. The broad areas of stigmatization that are described more fully below and that may occur in connection to religious abuse are the following:

- the victim-blaming or scapegoating a victim may experience within the religious system, possibly resulting in re-victimization;

- a pressure for secrecy or to remain silent about the abuse; and

- an experience of *othering* from the religious community, religious leadership, or from both.

When anyone experiences any type of abuse, there is potential for the victim to experience blame, both from self and others, for causing the abuse to happen (Babcock & DePrince, 2012; Crowe & Murray, 2015; Muller, Caldwell, & Hunter, 1994; Murray,

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Crowe, & Akers, 2016; Ullman, Peter-Hagene, & Relyea, 2014). This may be especially

true when abuse occurs in a religious system (Category 2: Abuse from a religious

system), and even more especially true when the perpetrator is a pastor or member of the

clergy (Category 1: Abuse perpetrated by religious leadership. As previously discussed,

it is not unusual for church leaders to be elevated or put on a proverbial pedestal by

people in the congregation (Blanchard, 1991)). If the abuse is revealed, the inherent

power and authority of this elevation may make it more difficult for those in the church

setting to recognize a church leader as an abuser, and may influence those in the

community to project this accountability onto the victim.

For example, if the type of abuse is sexual abuse by a pastor, members of the

congregation may react with shock to the disclosure, blame the victim, or stereotype the

victim as damaged or problematic (Finkelhor, 1987). The revelation of abuse is a

disturbance to any system, and when it occurs within a system such as a church, it often

becomes very public and requires attention (e.g., legal issues, personnel issues, moral

issues, church meetings) where everyone has an opinion, resulting in great potential for

stigmatization and scapegoating of the victim. Often, failings of a church leader result in

very public scandals, and some churches are structured to address personnel issues in a

public forum, which can amplify the potential for stigmatization of the victim. An

abusive church leader may encourage and participate in victim-blaming as a form of self-

protection and to avoid church discipline or loss of employment (Bottan & Perez-Truglia,

2015).

Gossip and disbelief that the abuse even occurred may add additional stigma to the victim, who cannot influence members of the church in the same manner as someone in a position of established leadership. This stigmatizing and scapegoating can re-victimize the victim in many ways, including additional emotional turmoil or exclusion from the church community, which can result in the loss of what may have been an important support system for the person. In some instances, the pain of the abuse may be compounded by the continued elevation and adoration of the abuser by those the victim once considered "family."

This type of stigmatization also may come directly from the perpetrator. In cases of clergy perpetrated sexual abuse, for example, the offender may accuse the victim of "sinning," so blaming the victim not only for the abuser's behavior, but also for a spiritual failing on a sacred level. Another example would be if a wife leaves her abusive husband, additional abuse and stigmatization may be experienced if church members rally around the husband as a paragon of virtue for his commitment to his marriage rather than supporting the abused spouse (Jankowski, 2015). Members of the faith community may ostracize and blame the wife as the one causing the problem and for abandoning her marriage, rather than holding the husband accountable for perpetrating the abuse.

This potential for victim blaming also may contribute to a pressure for the victim to keep the abuse secret. There may be added pressure to protect the church family from losing a beloved leader or protecting the very public image of a church leader when the leader is the abuser. Knowing the scandal it could cause and the scrutiny the victim is

likely to experience may act as a deterrent to exposing the abuse. The fear of ostracism

from an important community also may contribute to the secrecy.

The third way stigmatization may occur in religious abuse is when the

stigmatization actually becomes the abuse. This can be seen when an individual or

religious group engaging in the *othering* of a group or member of a marginalized group.

Linares (2016) provided a summary of othering as follows: "The 'Other' as an

epistemological concept intertwines with the notion of Othering, denoting the ways in

which an individual or a particular group of people is objectified, differentiated,

simplified, exotified, or created in position to the Self. A binary of 'Us' and 'Them'

socially constructed on the perceptions (typically negative) of any social identity (e.g.,

racial, geographic, language, ethnic, economic, ideological, etc.) may cause alienation

and perpetuation of group stereotyping, discrimination, prejudice, and injustice" (p. 131).

From a religious perspective, women, people of color, and members of the

LGBTQ population have reported experiencing this type of othering or discrimination in

a Christian church (Foster et al., 2015; Greene, 2013; Johnson, 1992; Lucies & Yick,

2007; Oleske Jr., 2015; Perry, 2013; Perry, 2014; Super & Jacobson, 2011; Trible, 1984;

Wood & Conley, 2014). The LGBTQ population has received the majority of attention

in the literature that uses the terms religious or spiritual abuse in this category. A

common report of many members of the LGBTQ community is that of not feeling safe to

identify as LGBTQ in their religious communities, in large part due to hearing a message

that their lifestyle makes them sinful, evil, and unlovable in the eyes of their church

family, church leaders, and God (Foster et al., 2015; Super & Jacobson, 2011; Wood &

Conley, 2014). This message can create a strong sense of isolation and disconnection from one's spiritual community. The negative messages may become internalized and create more secrecy or internal conflict, or they may result in the individual leaving a religious community completely (Super & Jacobson, 2011; Wood & Conley, 2014.)

This type of religious abuse can encompass all three of the broad categories of religious abuse proposed in this study. These messages may come from a religious leader as the perpetrator of abuse, and they may also come from the members of the religious community towards an LGBTQ individual or the LGBTQ community. The interpretation of Christian theology plays a key role in the abuse itself, as these doctrines are selectively used to oppress this population, creating a legitimized inequality (Greene, 2013).

This same form of oppression that occurs when doctrines and religious teachings are selectively used is also seen in the way some Christian churches *other* people of color. Although the church has provided a place of healing for many, and much of the civil rights movement was organized through religious channels, churches also have historically contributed to the oppression of people of color and racial segregation in the United States (Greene, 2013). The Bible has been used to justify slavery, and it was typical for church property to be the location for slave auctions (Greene, 2013). Othering of people of color continues in some religious settings, and could include oppression such as a pastor who refuses to perform an interracial marriage or an unwelcome environment for any non-white person who visits a predominantly white church. Although this type of discrimination could happen in any number of settings, when the sacred is used as the

motivation to legitimize this inequality, the message may become that God is on "our side" to justify the othering. In such cases, the power associated with God can be used as a weapon rather than a healing force.

Powerlessness

The traumagenic dynamic of powerlessness is also seen as a significant component in the experience of religious abuse. Misuse and abuse of power is present in any abuse situation, and when the offender is a member of the clergy (Category 1: Abuse from religious leadership), the feelings of powerlessness may be heightened by the sacred element involved in religious abuse (Category 3: Abuse with a spiritual component). When the sacred is involved, whether through a person who represents the sacred, or a sacred system, or someone using sacred beliefs, the extreme power differential must be acknowledged (Noll & Harvey, 2008).

A key component of this powerlessness is the previously discussed conflation of the abuse with God. If the offender is a member of church leadership, the victim may view the leader as God- like or at least God's representative, and as Farrell (2004) noted, "What is more powerful than God?" (p. 46). For those who believe in God, God is the ultimate power, and a victim of abuse by "God" may feel like the ultimate powerlessness (Pargament et al., 2008). One victim of religious sexual abuse described the powerlessness amplified by the sacred level as "This guy had my soul in his hand. It was devastating to know that someone would step out of the powers of spiritual liberty to take over someone else's soul" (Fater & Mullaney, 2000, p. 290).

If the other traumagenic dynamics of stigmatization and betrayal from the church system have occurred, this can add to the feelings of powerlessness against a system that betrayed and then abandoned the victim. Other systemic contributions to powerlessness are seen in some churches or denominations that discourage questioning or any perceived display of unbelief, perpetuating the silence of a victim and stifling attempts at empowerment to stand up to the abuse. If the system has a top-down power structure, a victim may feel powerless to have any voice to resist or expose the abuse (Doyle, 2003; Hogan, 2011; Oakley & Kinmond, 2014).

Closely related to the betrayal dynamic, there is also a powerlessness that comes from experiencing abuse in a place that is supposed to protect, that is supposed to be good, to promote human welfare and morality. The victim may feel powerless to find relief anywhere and experience feelings of helplessness that, if they cannot be safe in church, there must be nowhere that is safe (Bottoms et al., 1995).

Trauma

The fourth traumagenic dynamic, traumatic sexualization (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985), will be applied to this study more broadly to all experiences of trauma, not exclusively to traumatic sexualization from sexual abuse. When the religious abuse does occur in the form of sexual abuse in a religious setting, Finkelhor and Browne's (1985) definition of traumatic sexualization of "conditions in sexual abuse under which a child's sexuality is shaped in developmentally inappropriate and interpersonally dysfunctional ways" (p. 531) can be directly applied.

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Finkelhor (1987) also provided several characteristics of traumatic sexualization that may be heightened when viewed through the lens of sexual abuse in a religious setting, especially the dynamic of the "child rewarded for sexual behavior inappropriate to developmental level" and "confusion about sexual norms" (p. 359). This confusion can occur within any type of sexual abuse, and when it occurs in a religious setting, there may be an extra layer of confusion due to the contradiction of the sexual abuse experience with the sexual norms that may be taught or preached in the church.

If a religious leader perpetrates the abuse (Category 1: Abuse from religious leadership), the "misconceptions about sexual behavior and sexual morality" (Finkelhor, 1987, p. 359) have potential to skyrocket, especially when one considers that the abuser is one who is often considered to be the moral compass of the church community. Another component of traumatic sexualization is the idea that sex is exchanged for attention and affection or the confusion of sex with love and care getting/care giving (Finkelhor, 1987). The extra attention of a church leader may feel special to a victim, but becomes confusing when that attention is in the form of sexual abuse. This can create extreme confusion in one's development of attitudes towards sex. This confusion may have another layer when the perpetrator uses the power of the sacred to manipulate a victim, perhaps sending the message that God chose them for this or that the sexual abuse makes them special (Doyle, 2003).

This dynamic also may be indirectly applied as a broader experience of trauma when the abuse occurs in other forms. Victims may present with symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, including distressing memories or dreams, dissociative

reactions, psychological distress when exposed to cues, avoidance of triggers or reminders, negative emotional states, and hypervigilance (American Psychological Association, 2013). For example, some victims may avoid any religious activities or experience flashbacks or nightmares related to the abuse.

Relatedly, some victims may experience trauma at being separated from their religious community, their personal religious beliefs, or both. The experiences of betrayal and stigma may lead victims of religious abuse to discontinue their involvement in a specific religious community or in any religious community (Redmond, 1996). Abuse that involves the sacred may disrupt a person's search for the sacred, or the connection to the sacred, so they may experience trauma at an existential or sacred level (Pargament et al., 2008; Rossetti, 1995). In their report on restorative mediation following religious abuse, Noll and Harvey (2008) reported that "Many victim-survivors are traumatized because their faith has been stolen from them" (p. 393).

Therefore, although Finkelhor and Browne (1985) developed the Traumagenic Dynamic Model to be applied specifically to victims of childhood sexual abuse, this model also provides an appropriate lens through which to view the various types of religious abuse. Although the pool of literature on the topic of religious abuse is limited, the themes of betrayal, stigmatization, powerlessness, and trauma are present throughout the literature. Questions regarding these themes are included in the semi-structured interview questions and have informed the conceptualization of this study, but this model will be set aside during the interpretation and analysis of data as is appropriate in Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Once the data analysis is complete, the data

will then be viewed through the lens of The Traumagenic Dynamics Model to see if it does actually apply to the results.

Religious Abuse Versus Religious Cults

For the purposes of this study, it is important to differentiate the concepts of religious abuse that occurs in mainstream religion and the more extreme conceptualization of religious cults. It is proposed that harm in religious settings may lie along a continuum of religious settings, with religious cults being the most extreme system of harm. Rhodes (2001) described the sociological characteristics of cults being the most extreme end of authoritarian leadership, exclusivism, isolationism, opposition to independent thought, and a fear of expulsion from the group. Other researchers have described cults as involving mind control or unethical and manipulative techniques to recruit and maintain members (Davis, 1996; Ward, 2011). Although some of these characteristics may certainly be seen in mainstream religions such as Christianity, and some may argue that all religious systems have characteristics of cults, making cults extremely difficult to define (Rhodes, 2001), for the purposes of this study, cults are conceptualized as extreme religious systems outside of societal norms that seek to isolate group members from non-group members. Religious groups such as these and harm that occurs within a religious cult have received considerably more attention in the research literature than religious harm and abuse within more mainstream Christian religions (Ward, 2011). Therefore, the focus of this study is not on the extreme end of the

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religious harm continuum where the isolating culture of cults appear to lie, but rather on the religious abuse that happens within the broader mainstream Christian churches in the United States.

Overall Summary

The purpose of this chapter has been to provide an overall review of the literature surrounding religious abuse, as well as the theoretical framework that informs this study. As evidenced by the shallow pool of literature on the topic of religious abuse, counselors have received little guidance in understanding the experiences of their clients with a history of religious abuse. In order to more fully understand the phenomenon of religious abuse, counselors must take a cross-discipline approach and pull from the existing literature in the areas of religion, theology, sociology, social work, and restorative justice. This study will address the gap of knowledge for counselors in this area.

In a thorough review of the cross-discipline literature regarding religious abuse, three significant types or categories of religious abuse emerged. These are: a) abuse perpetrated by religious leadership, typically an individual leader; b) abuse perpetrated by a religious group, directed either towards an individual or towards a group of people; and c) abuse in which the abuse itself has a religious component to it. As described above, these are not mutually exclusive and individual experiences of religious abuse may fit into one or more categories.

This chapter also provided an overview of the theoretical framework of The Traumagenic Dynamics Model (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985) that has provided a lens through which to view religious abuse. The dynamics of Betrayal, Stigmatization,

Powerlessness, and Trauma have informed the understanding of religious abuse and the creation of interview questions used in the study, but were set aside during the date analysis using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to allow the participants complete freedom to describe their experiences in their own way. Complete details of the study follow in the next chapter, Chapter Three.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Chapter One provided an introduction to the concept of religious abuse and provided a rationale for why it is important for counselors to understand this phenomenon, as well as a introduction to the grounding theory of the traumagenic dynamics model (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). Chapter Two provided a thorough review of the literature currently available on the topic of religious abuse. In this chapter, I describe the steps of the qualitative study which was performed to gather data on the phenomenon of religious abuse.

Research Design

This qualitative study of the lived experience of religious/spiritual abuse used a phenomenological methodology. Analysis was conducted using the method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as constructed and described by Smith (1996, 2003, 2004). This method is appropriate for this study as it allowed participants to focus on the meaning-making aspects of their experiences with religious abuse and provided a rich and in-depth exploration and analysis of an area in which the current research is shallow. When using the method of IPA, the researcher has the freedom to focus on the lived experience of the participants and to allow the participant to interpret one's own experiences. As Eatough and Smith (2008) stated, "IPA attends to all aspects of this lived experience, from the individuals' wishes, desires, feelings, motivations,

belief systems through to how these manifest themselves or not in behavior and action. Whatever phenomenon is being studied, the emphasis is on what it is like to be experiencing this or that for this particular person" (p. 188). Given the dearth of knowledge and understanding of the lived experience of religious abuse in religious settings, IPA is an appropriate approach to begin to lay the foundation for counselors to understand what their clients who present with a history of religious abuse may have experienced. IPA is also considered an appropriate approach when the experience or phenomenon being studied has potential to be highly existential in nature (Smith, 2011), making IPA a strong fit for the potential existential and sacred issues explored in a discussion of experiences of religious abuse.

IPA allowed the researcher to take an active role in the process while still emphasizing the participants' experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The current state of the literature is based largely on speculation and conceptual interest in religious abuse, so IPA was an appropriate step to begin grounding the knowledge empirically.

Research Question

In keeping with phenomenological methodology, there was only one research question for this study:

What are the lived experiences of people in the United States who self-identify as having an abusive experience in a Christian religious setting?

There is no predetermined hypothesis when using IPA, but rather an exploratory approach and freedom for the participants to allow the data to emerge with as little influence as possible (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

Participants

The sample for this study was 7 adults (18 years or older) in the United States who self-identified as having experienced religious abuse. This sample size was chosen because IPA is typically done with small sample sizes to allow for very detailed and in-depth analysis of each individual interview (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Smith and Osborn (2007) reported there is no one standard number of participants in IPA, that sample sizes have included anywhere from 1-15 or more participants, and that "five or six has sometimes been recommended as a reasonable sample size for a student project using IPA" (pp. 56-57). In a systematic literature review of 52 articles using IPA, the sample sizes ranged from 1-30 (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

Potential participants were provided the statement, "I have had an experience with a Christian religious setting that I would classify as abusive." Those who responded affirmatively to this question and who agreed to participate in an audio or video recorded interview regarding this experience were included in the study. For those participants where geography dictates that technology be used, he or she must also have had access to a computer for videoconferencing or have a telephone for a telephone interview. Further, to participate, an individual must have had a personal experience or experiences that he or she considered abusive. In other words, individuals who wanted to discuss religious abuse at a theoretical level or describe their witness of religious abuse happening to someone else were not eligible for participation.

No definition of religious or spiritual abuse was provided to potential participants, as there is no one single agreed upon definition of religious/spiritual abuse available in

the literature. In fact, it was hoped this study would help to clarify a definition so that providing an a priori definition might have limited participant responses. Therefore, participants were asked to self-select using the statement, "I have had an experience with a Christian religious setting that I would classify as abusive."

Participants were invited to join through a variety of ways. Invitations were extended through social media such as Facebook and Instagram, and online message boards. As participants were identified, a snowball sampling approach was utilized by inviting participation and simultaneously inviting potential participants to forward the invitation to anyone they know who they think might meet the criteria for participation.

Procedures

Interviews were scheduled as soon as possible after a participant was identified and consented to an audio or video recorded interview, as well as the IRB consent form. Where possible, interviews were conducted face to face. Where this was not feasible, however, participants were invited to participate in a recorded videoconference. Any participants not comfortable using a videoconference platform were invited to participate in a telephone interview. Participants were recruited until a sufficient number of interviews had been completed.

Because of the potential for interviews to activate traumatic memories, the researcher identified three licensed professional counselors in the participant's area prior to the interview and provided this referral list to the participant at the conclusion of each interview, except in the case where the participant declined. This ensured access to

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supportive counseling if participation in the study created emotional difficulty for a participant.

The researcher also had an ethics consultation with Odis Mckinzie at the American Counseling Association and Katrina Brent at the North Carolina Board of Licensed Professional Counselors regarding the ethics of mandated reporting if a participant reported an experience of abuse and named someone as their abuser. On the advisement of these consultations, stronger wording was included on the consent form to inform participants that confidentiality might be broken if an abuser was named.

Interview Protocol

The measure for data collection was a semi-structured interview (see interview schedule in Appendix B). Although the questions were not necessarily asked in exactly the order listed, in accord with the semi-structured process, the interview schedule provided a template for the types of information that were collected from all participants. Participants were informed that the interview was open to reflect beyond the questions if they desired. Included were questions such as, "What made you decide to participate in this study?" "Please describe your experience with religious abuse." and "How would you describe your support systems during this experience?" Interviews lasted from 45-120 minutes, and could have been stopped by the participant at any time.

Data Analysis

Bracketing

As the primary researcher and one of the data analyzers in this study, it was very important to bracket and recognize any potential biases I might have brought into my

analysis, and to make every attempt to set aside this bias to allow the data and findings to emerge without direction from me. I disclosed an overview of my potential biases listed prior to data collection in this section, and continued to monitor myself for additional biases and bracketed them as the data collection and analysis progressed. A second coder, a doctoral student in counseling and educational development, analyzed data as well, and she followed the same bracketing procedures. The following is what was provided to the auditor:

I am a White southern Christian female who has had generally overall positive experiences with religion. I consider myself a person of deep faith and gain comfort from my spiritual beliefs and disciplines. My interest in this research topic is driven in part by my pain and anger at seeing a system that has been very positive for me twisted and used in a negative way to harm other people. I will need to be especially aware of my natural desire to defend God or to share with victims of Christian religious abuse that not all Christians are this way.

I also recognize that most of my experiences have been in progressive churches, and that I have a bias against churches that tend to adhere to a strict hierarchy or what I perceive to be a legalistic approach to spirituality. I expect that these characteristics set up a religious environment that lends itself to being a breeding ground for religious abuse and would be more likely to marginalize other groups who have different beliefs. I will need to set this aside and recognize the potential for religious abuse to happen in any religious setting, and that I am not to have an agenda of focusing on certain theologies or belief systems.

I also recognize that it might be difficult to stay in the role of a researcher and not

fall into the counselor role in the interviews. I will address this by providing the

participants the names of three counselors in their areas so that they each have resources

if the interviews do become emotionally difficult. I will monitor myself during the

interview and redirect myself if I find myself falling into the counselor role. I will also

keep field notes after every interview to record my personal reactions and areas I realize

I might have a reaction to so I can keep the auditor informed of my potential biases.

I continued to bracket and document additional biases as they emerged,

documented field notes after each interview, and asked the auditor (described below) to

monitor if my biases affected the data analysis. Analysis of the data collected from the

interviews followed the typical IPA process (Smith & Osborn, 2007), beginning with a

verbatim transcription of each interview. The researcher and second coder then engaged

in several read-throughs of the data, and began to make notes and observations on the

transcripts of what seemed most important to the participant and what patterns were

emerging. During a subsequent read-through, the researchers listed emerging themes,

while making every effort to maintain the voice of the participant. As Smith and Osborn

(2007) said, "So the skill at this stage is finding expressions which are high level enough

to allow theoretical connections within and across cases but which are still grounded in

the particularity of the specific thing said" (p. 68). Therefore, the process was to identify

the main points within each individual interview, both in what seemed to recur and what

seemed to be the most important to the participant, to make sure it maintained his or her

perspective, and to ensure that the researchers continued to bracket any assumptions

(Hays & Wood, 2011). After each coder identified themes within each individual interview, a list was compiled of overlapping themes from both coders. After all interviews were coded and audited, the two coders then examined the data to create a list of commons themes that emerged across the interviews. These common themes still maintained the individual and collective voice(s) of the participants, and every effort was made to not include the biases of the researchers.

A list of these emergent themes was compiled, followed by a clustering together of the themes that seemed most connected, followed by the creation of a table of the themes. Throughout the process, themes were checked with the primary transcripts to ensure the words of the participants were fully voiced. This process was repeated for each participant, resulting in a master table of themes, and a write-up of the findings (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

Member Checking and Auditing

In order to increase trustworthiness, the primary researcher also engaged in member checking. The researcher sent a list of the emerging themes to each of the participants and asked them to respond both to their individual list of themes and to the master list of emerging themes, and provide feedback on whether the lists were an accurate representation of their experience. Participants were informed that anything that an individual participant reported as inaccurate for their individual interview or that the participant felt was too identifiable would be eliminated from the data analysis, and any comments regarding the collective themes were considered and addressed in the discussion of the data.

Additionally, an auditor was used who is a counselor educator and is familiar both with IPA and religion/spirituality. The auditor also bracketed his assumptions by creating a list of personal biases. He was given a list of the potential biases and the documentation made throughout the bracketing process by both coders. The auditor reviewed each interview transcript and the lists of individual and collective themes. The auditor provided feedback to both coders including any concerns of bias or misinterpretation during the data analysis process.

A Priori Limitations

As with all research, there are limitations to this study that were chronicled *a priori*. One limitation was the possibility for wide-ranging experiences because the researcher did not provide an operational definition of religious abuse to identify participants, but allowed participants to self-identify experiences they consider abusive. This openness was viewed as necessary, however, as one of the issues addressed in this study is the lack of a consistent definition of religious abuse in the scholarly literature. It was hoped that by drawing on the experiences of participants, a more consistent definition will emerge to inform future research on this topic. A second *a priori* limitation was that only two researchers analyzed all of the data, which could call into question the trustworthiness of findings. The researchers addressed this by engaging in bracketing at the outset of the study and member checking and auditing as described above. Third, while generalizability was not a goal of this study, it was hoped that the data will provide some transferability for counselors to explore possible experiences of clients who present with negative religious experiences and empirical grounding for

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future research. Despite these potential limitations, the potential gain from this study was

tremendous given the gap in empirical knowledge on the topic and the need for a better

foundational understanding of religious/spiritual abuse.

Interview Schedule (Semi-Structured)

- Please verify your date of birth (month/day/year).
- Please also provide the following information:
    - Gender identity
    - Age
    - Race/ethnic identity
    - Sexual Orientation
    - Level of education
    - Religious Affiliation

- How did you learn about this study?
    - What led you to choose to participate in this study?
    - Do you have any questions before we proceed?

- Please tell me a little about your religious history.
    - How did you become involved in organized religion?
    - How often did/do you attend religious services?
    - What do you remember about your earliest religious experiences?

- Please describe your experience with religious abuse.
    - What about this experience prompts you to label it "abuse"?
    - Who was involved in the abuse?
    - How often did the abuse occur? (one-time or on-going?)
    - Was your experience impacted by the sacred or spiritual elements related to the abuse?
    - How would you describe the emotions related to the abuse?
        - Experience of betrayal?
        - Experience of trauma?
        - Experience of powerlessness?

- How would you describe your support systems during this experience?
    - Who was supportive for you? How were they supportive?
    - Did you share your experiences with anyone? Why or why not? Looking back, is there anything you would change about this? (either who you told or who you wish you had told?

- o Were there any reactions or types of support you wish you had gotten or reactions that were not helpful or even harmful?
  - o How (or not) did you experience stigma around the abuse?

- How much does the abuse affect your daily life now? How would you describe your healing process?
  - o What has been most helpful in the healing process?
  - o What has hindered the healing process?

- Please describe your current level of involvement in religious activities.
  - o How did you come to this decision of how to be involved?

- What are your current spiritual beliefs?
  - o Did the abuse change these beliefs?

- How did the imbalance of power impact this experience?
  - o Did you experience a feeling of powerlessness?
  - o Did the sacred element impact the power dynamic?

- What would you say to someone else who had suffered similar abuse?
  - o What would be important for them to hear?
  - o What would be helpful for them?

- Did you seek any professional help (such as with a counselor or therapist) after the abuse occurred?
  - o (If no), were there any barriers to seeking professional help?
  - o (if yes), was/how was this helpful to you?
  - o (either response) What did you need psychologically to heal from the abuse?

- What else would you like to share about your experience?

Pilot Study

Purpose

The purpose of the pilot study was to test the procedures of the proposed study and the clarity and flow of the semi-structured interview questions. Specifically, the purpose was to: a.) trial the clarity of the invitation to the study and the clarity of the

instructions prior to and during the semi-structured interview process, b.) trial the clarity

and flow of the questions in the semi-structured interview, c.) receive and implement

feedback from the pilot study participants to improve the full study, d.) gather

information on the average amount of time the semi-structured interview required for the

participant. The researcher obtained IRB approval from The University of North

Carolina at Greensboro to proceed with the pilot study. The researcher then invited two

acquaintances who had previously expressed interest in the topic to participate in the pilot

study, with the goal to test the process and then use the feedback from the participants to

modify the process as needed and improve the full study.

Research Questions

The pilot study addressed the following research questions to collect feedback to

inform the full study:

Research Question 1: Are the verbal procedures and written communication provided for

participating in the proposed study before and during the semi-structured interview clear

and understandable for participants?

Research Question 2: Are the semi-structured interview questions readily understood by

the participants?

Research Question 2a: Are there any additional questions that should be added to

the semi-structured interview?

Research Question 3: What is the average length of time to conduct the semi-structured

interview?

Participants

After obtaining IRB approval to proceed with the proposed study, the researcher used convenience sampling to recruit two participants who had previously expressed interest in the topic of the study. One participant identified as female and the other as male. Both identified as Caucasian, Christian, and heterosexual, and both were adults in their mid-40s. One had completed a master's degree and one had completed a bachelor's degree and taken some additional graduate level coursework. Both expressed they had experiences they would classify as religious harm. Because the purpose of the study was to test the process, procedures, and semi-structured interview questions, the participants were not required to meet the full requirements in order to participate in the pilot study.

Procedures

Upon accepting the invitation to participate in the pilot study, a time was set to meet for the semi-structured interview. One interview was conducted in person, in the researcher's home at the request of the participant, and one was conducted through an online videoconference in order for both approaches to data collection to be trialed. Prior to the interview, both participants read the invitation to participate in the study, the email follow-up script, and the IRB-approved consent form. Both made notes of feedback they wished to provide.

The in-person interview then proceeded to the semi-structured interview process with a short pause for the participant to take a work-related phone call. The time for the phone call was not included in the results of average time for the interview. The videoconference interviewee was sent an email invitation to join the video conference,

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and after a delay to download the software required to join the videoconference, the semi-structured interview commenced. At the conclusion of the semi-structured interviews, both participants were asked to give feedback regarding their experience. This feedback occurred directly after the interviews, and was done individually and independently of each other, not together in a group format.

Feedback Informing the Full Study

In providing feedback of their experience, both participants reported that the written communication prior to the semi-structured interview was overall clear and readily understood, but they did both make some suggestions. In regards to the email/social media invitation (see Appendix C for complete wording), one participant suggested changing the wording of "the objective of a better understanding of this phenomenon" to something other than the word "phenomenon." The participant reported, "I don't want to be a phenomenon. I don't like being thought of that way, it feels weird." The same participant also reported a negative reaction to seeing "60-120 minute" interview, and stated "that is a turn-off, I'm not sure I can stand the thought of discussing abuse for that long," and suggested changing this to "around 60 minutes."

Neither participant suggested any changes in the follow up script/text to initial contact (see Appendix D for complete wording), and both thought this was clear and easily understood. Both participants made some suggestions to the IRB Consent Form (see Appendix E for complete wording). One participant questioned the phrase "without penalty," which appears near the beginning of the consent form in the sentence "You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason,

without penalty." This participant stated that made them feel a bit uneasy, as this person had not considered any potential penalties prior to reading that, and wanted more information on what this meant. This same participant also suggested that that phrase "described below" be added to the early statement "There also may be risks to being in research studies" as this person was unclear what that meant as well, but realized the risks were described in greater detail further into the document.

The participant participating in a face-to-face interview reported that she was agreeable to an audio recording of the interview, but seeing the possibility of a video recorded interview in the consent made them feel somewhat anxious and she would not agree to this, but would continue with an audio recording. One of the participants pointed out the repetition of the word "experiences" in the section on "What is the study about?"

Regarding the wording and flow of the semi-structured interview in the post-interview feedback session, both participants reported that the questions were easily understood and that questions flowed well. The researcher noticed, however, that both asked clarifying questions during the interview to make sure they understood some of the questions. One participant asked for clarification when asked if there was an imbalance of power in their experience, and one participant asked for clarification when asked about any experience with trauma. This need for clarification did not appear to bother the participants or to impede the process of the interview. Neither participant had any suggestions of questions that should be added to the semi-structured interview, although

the researcher became aware that there was no formal way to collect demographic information in place, and will add basic demographic questions to the semi-structured interview.

When asked directly by the researcher, both participants agreed that it would have been helpful to have more guidance in what is meant by the term "religious abuse" in the initial invitation. Both participants shared similar thoughts that while they had both had experiences of religious harm, upon receiving more clarification on what is meant by religious abuse, they would not choose to self-select as qualifying for the full study due to having an experience of religious abuse. When presented with the three categories of religious abuse as fully described in this paper [a) abuse perpetrated by religious leadership, typically an individual leader; b) abuse perpetrated by a religious group, directed either towards an individual or towards a group of people; and c) abuse in which the abuse itself has a religious component to it], both thought that providing this in the social media/email invitation would be helpful to those considering if they would like to participate in the study.

The participant who was interviewed via videoconference did report a delay after receiving the email invitation to the conference due to having to download software specific to the platform used for the videoconference. The participant described this as "no big deal" but it should be noted that this caused a delay in beginning the interview at the appointed time and was unexpected to the participant. This participant also gave feedback that some participants may not like having to download software to their computer, although it was not an issue for this person.

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The average length of time for the semi-structured interviews was 43.5 minutes, with the face-to-face interview lasting 41 minutes and the online videoconference lasting 46 minutes, not including the delay to download the software.

Adjustments to the Full Study

The feedback of the participants was incorporated in some minor changes to the written documents, semi-structured interview questions, and procedures. These included the following:

- Changed the word "phenomenon" to "experience."

- Changed "60-120 minutes" to "approximately 45-60 minutes" in the email/social media invitation.

- Provided a broad definition of religious abuse in the email/social media invitation. This definition included the description of the three broad categories of religious abuse, "a) abuse perpetrated by religious leadership; typically an individual leader; b) abuse perpetrated by a religious group, directed either towards an individual or towards a group of people, and c) abuse in which the abuse itself has a religious component to it." It is believed that this aided participants in more appropriately self-selecting to participate in the study.

- Added the words "described below" to the initial introduction after "There also may be risks to being in research studies" in the IRB consent form.

- Added the phrase "or any negative consequences to you" to the term "without penalty" in the IRB consent form to emphasize that the participant can leave the study at any point with no repercussions.

- Informed those participating via videoconference that they will need to download software to use for the videoconference, and gave them the option for other platforms if they did not wish to download the software.

- Basic demographic questions were added to semi-structured interview questions. These included gender identity, age, race/ethic identity, sexual orientation, level of education, and religious affiliation.

- At the beginning of the interview, each participant was encouraged to ask clarifying questions throughout the interview process.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

In Chapter One, the researcher provided an introduction to the concept of religious abuse and provided a rationale for why it is important for counselors to understand this phenomenon, as well as an introduction to the grounding theory of the Traumagenic Dynamics model (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). In Chapter Two, the researcher provided a thorough review of the current literature on the topic of religious abuse. In Chapter Three, the researcher described the steps of the qualitative study to gather data on the phenomenon of religious abuse. The results of this study are presented in this chapter.

Research Question

This study was guided by the following research question:

What are the lived experiences of people in the United States who self-identify as having an abusive experience in a Christian religious setting?

Participants

To recruit participants, the researcher posted the invitation to the study (See Appendix C) on several social media platforms and message boards, and also engaged in snowball sampling by asking anyone who read the invitation or inquired about the study to invite others they believe may be interested in participating. A total of eight people contacted the researcher to express interest in participating, with a total of seven

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completing the semi-structured interview. The person who did not move on to the interview scheduled the interview two separate times and did not respond to a follow-up email after not calling at the designated interview time for the second time. Beyond this, it is unknown why she chose not to participate.

All seven participants met the inclusion criteria of being 18 years of age or older, willing to participate in a recorded interview, and self-identifying as having experienced abuse with a Christian religious context. All reported demographic information of being white/Caucasian, heterosexual, and female. Ages ranged from 28-58 years old (Mean = 40, SD = 11.2). In reporting education level, two reported having a Master's degree, three reported having a Bachelor's degree, one reported having an Associate's degree, and one reported having "some college."

When asked about religious affiliation, two participants reported they were non-denominational Christians, one reported she was Baptist, one reported "Christian, Baptist, but mostly just Christian," one reported she was an atheist but was raised "screwed up Catholic" and still had some cultural connections to Catholicism, one reported she was raised Christian and is unsure how she currently identifies, and one was raised Catholic and now attends a Unity Church. Although important to the study to have homogeneity of self-identifying with a history of religious abuse, the researcher did seek diversity among participants by posting the study invitations on message boards designated as topics for women of color, asking friends and acquaintances who are people of color to pass along the study invitation in their communities, and by asking friends and acquaintances in the LGTBQIA community to invite people they thought might be

interested. However, no people of color nor anyone identifying a sexual orientation other than heterosexual accepted the invitation to participate.

Procedures and Results

To conduct this research study on the lived experience of religious abuse, the researcher utilized a qualitative phenomenological methodology and analysis was conducted using the method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as constructed and described by Smith (1996, 2003, 2004).

Preparation for Semi-Structured Interviews

In preparation for conducting the study interviews, the researcher conducted a review of literature on the topic of religious and spiritual abuse, identified a gap in understanding the lived experience of religious abuse and the need for the study, identified a theoretical framework of the Traumagenics Dynamics Model (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985), and generated ten semi-structured interview questions (See Appendix B). After gaining approval by the IRB, the researcher proceeded with recruitment for the study and conducted 7 semi-structured interviews. One interview was conducted in person, and six interviews were conducted over the telephone at the participants' request. Interviewee #1 agreed to an online video interview, but had technical difficulties and requested to change to a telephone call.

Analysis

Each semi-structured interview was transcribed, and the researcher and a second coder followed standard IPA protocol of several read-throughs of each interview, made notes about observations, and each coder created a list of observed themes for each

interview. After each coder independently completed a list of themes for an interview, the primary researcher analyzed both lists and created a list of overlaps in the themes of the two coders. At this point, the transcript, both individual lists of themes, and a list of the overlaps was sent to the auditor, who reviewed all and provided feedback to the two coders. This process continued for each of the seven interviews. The two coders then worked together to create a master list of emerging themes. This master list also was reviewed by the auditor and adjusted based on feedback. Feedback from auditor included encouragement to consider if the coders had missed a theme of anger in one participant's transcripts, and an instance of considering if the primary researcher was using language for one participant's themes that was more favorable towards religion than was reflected in the transcript. The primary researcher then engaged in member checking by individually emailing each participant a list of themes from their interview, as well as the master list of themes, and asking for feedback on whether or not they believed the themes were accurate and to ensure the voices of the participants are primary in the study. Participants were asked to respond within five days if they desired to provide feedback. Four participants did respond and all confirmed that they felt like the list of themes reflected their experience and that their voice was heard. No changes were suggested by participants through member checking.

Results

The themes described below were common across the various types of religious abuse described by participants. The types of abuse described by the participants were:

- Three participants reported abusive marriages where they were encouraged to remain in the marriage by religious leaders and were shunned or stigmatized for leaving the abusive marriage.

- One participant reported being shunned/asked to leave her church after leaving a marriage in which her husband had been unfaithful.

- One participant reported emotional abuse in the way the Catholic Church handled her annulment, as well as financial abuse around the annulment process.

- Two participants reported experiencing gender bias while working in ministry/Christian religious settings.

- In addition to experiencing abuse while leaving an abusive marriage, one participant also reported another earlier instance of abuse as a teenager where her youth minister kicked her out of youth group due to her diagnosis of depression and use of antidepressants.

Those identified as the abusers by the participants in this study were: Priest, pastor, church members, youth group, husband, parents/family, the rules, and the religious system.

Ten common themes of the experience of religious abuse emerged from an analysis of all seven interviews: *Emotional Trauma, Betrayal, Rules Prioritized Over People/Devalued, Abuse of Power/Use of the Sacred to Control or Manipulate, Spiritual Transformation, Isolation, Healing, Gender Bias/Discrimination, Stigma, and Victim-Blaming*.

Table 1. Common Themes of the Experience of Religious Abuse

Common Themes	Sub-themes from Individual Interviews	Seen in Participants:
Emotional Trauma	Emotional Regulation Difficulties (Anger, Fear)	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
	Depression	
	Feeling Stuck/Cannot Move On	
	Confusion	
	Decreased Self-Worth	
	Questioning Place in World	
Betrayal	Betrayal	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
	Hypocrisy	
	Deceit	
	Trust/Avoidance Issues	
	Misrepresented to System	
	Anger Towards God/Betrayed by God	
	Conflation of Abuse with God	
	Failed Help from Leadership	
	Sought Support from Church in Time of Need (pre-trauma)	

Common Themes	Sub-themes from Individual Interviews	Seen in Participants:
Rules Prioritized Over People/Devalued	Rigidity/Rules More Important than the Person Church Turning Blind Eye Towards Marital Abuse/Adultery Message of Performance Based Spirituality Importance of External Appearances Rule Follower	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7
Abuse of Power/Use of the Sacred to Control or Manipulate	Abuse of Power/Manipulation Justification of spousal abuse (from spouse and church) Trying to please (direct result of abuse of power) Power and Control/Social Order Using Religion as Tool to Justify Abuse Spiritual Manipulation/Using Theology to Justify Abuse/Control Spouse Using Religion to Control/Abuse Imposing Threat of Damnation Threats/Scare Tactics Group Think Financial Manipulation	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7

Common Themes	Sub-themes from Individual Interviews	Seen in Participants:
Spiritual Transformation	Continues to Seek Spirituality/God Spirituality/Faith/Religion Post-Trauma Change in Beliefs/Belief Systems Leaving Religion Post-Trauma Faith Post-Abuse Faith post-trauma Church Involvement Pre-trauma Separating Experience from all Church Systems/God Comfort in Rituals	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
Isolation	Lack of Support/Loneliness (isolated by abuser) Loss of Community/Lack of Support Abuse Secret/Protecting Abuser	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7

Common Themes	Sub-themes from Individual Interviews	Seen in Participants:
Healing	Let Go/ Acceptance (self and others) Counseling Validation Resiliency Healing Social Support Faith (seeing different image of God) Standing Up for Self	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
Gender Bias/Discrimination	Gender bias/discrimination Negative View of Women in Ministry Normalization of Abuse Towards Women	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
Stigma	Shame/Shunned/Stigma Viewed as Threat to Others Pressure to "Other" or Stigmatize Others Racism	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
Victim-Blaming	Depression is Evil/A Choice Self-Blame Placing Blame Onto Individual/Family for Mental Health Issues (citing religion as source) Blamed for Being Abused	3, 5, 7

Emotional Trauma

All seven participants reported some type of emotional trauma connected to their experiences of religious abuse. Additionally, participants reported a range of psychological consequences from the trauma, including depression, anger, fear, feeling stuck, confusion, and feelings of decreased self-worth.

In speaking of their overall experiences, several participants noted emotional abuse, trauma, or feeling *damaged*. For example, participant 2 described her overall experiences with religious abuse as "*I think it was very damaging, very damaging mentally, very damaging emotionally.*" Several participants described their experiences as *emotional abuse*, including participant 3 who said, "*I think I was emotionally abused because I was a woman who didn't fit the stereotype of what the system felt like I should fit at that time.*" Participant 3 also described the comfort of her counselor describing her experiences as *traumatic* by saying:

> That whole experience, I've talked with my counselor a lot so I have words around it now. When I was saying it she was saying, 'This is traumatic' and she was the first person to help me. 'You had a traumatic experience and in some senses you are having a PTSD response to this traumatic experience.'

Several participants described anger as part of their emotional trauma connected to their experience of religious abuse. Often, this anger was directed in one or more ways depending on who the participant understood to be their abuser. Some were angry at God, some at their priest or pastor, some at the church or religious system, some at individuals within that system, and many at more than one perceived abuser. Participant 2

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stated, "*I was angry at the ones who allowed it and I was extremely angry at my pastor and his wife,*" and described "*the anger and the bitterness and the frustration towards all of that, had such a grip on me.*"

Participants who directed their anger at God described possible conflation of God with their abuser. Participant 3 reported "*I was so mad and hurt by him (supervisor in religious workplace) and so mad at God,*" and "*There are still moments when I talk about it and I get angry. There's moments when I have a lot of anger toward God.*" Participant 3 also described fear as a part of her emotional trauma in describing abuse she endured as an employee in a ministry/religious setting: "*A lot of fear, and I think that for the next two years all our interactions were fear.*"

Issues of self-worth as a result of the religious abuse were implied in all seven interviews, with participant 1 describing it more overtly: "*I know another word: feeling not worthy. I think that that is something I'm struggling with terribly right now in my life is feeling not worthy.*" Several participants also reported various incarnations of grief and loss issues, often around the loss of their religious community, or at least the support from their community. All the participants exited the particular religious system in which the abuse occurred, which is described below in the section on Spiritual Transformation. Participant 6 describes this as, "*It was a huge loss. It was one that I don't think I'll ever accept.*"

While the theme of Emotional Trauma was often described as a result of the abuse, in the case of participant 5, her experiences with depression were an overt part of the abuse and appeared to trigger the abuse she endured. She described the abuse in this way:

> The youth pastor also called my parents in and sat them down and told them that they were going to hell; that they were raising me wrong and that I was possessed by demons and that I was possessed by the devil if I was diagnosed with depression, that depression was a choice and it was actually really someone just letting the devil inside of them. He asked their permission to speak with me and he told me the same exact thing. So at around 15 or 16, I thought that I was possessed by the devil, that my parents were going to hell by putting me on depression medication and, and that I was going to go to hell because depression was a choice and I couldn't figure out how to stop it.
>
> I started having a lot more negative views of myself, more so than I had with depression. My self-esteem dropped big time with that. I really thought I was literally evil. I thought I was psychotic. I thought I was so sick that I didn't know what I was thinking because I couldn't figure out how I was letting the devil into my life and how I was choosing depression. It wasn't like I decided that I wanted to be depressed.

Betrayal

All seven participants also reported experiences of betrayal connected to their religious abuse, including reports of hypocrisy, deceit, trust issues, feeling misrepresented to the system, anger towards God, feeling betrayed by God, conflation of the abuse with God, and failed help from church leadership when seeking support. For example, some participants specifically identified the impact of realizing the religious system was no longer the support to them they expected it to be or thought it was. Participant 2 described losing this support as follows:

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It was so hurtful because I had considered these people friends. I really believed that they did love me and cared for me. For it to go from that to that kind of treatment was just, it was really hard. It was very, very hard.

Participants 4 and 7 described similar reactions, respectively:

Because that crushed part of my spirit. That was supposed to be a safe place. It was supposed to be your refuge you could go to in time of crisis. It was supposed to be sanctuary. It was supposed to be all of these things and it wasn't.

…so it was really hard for me because they had known me my whole life and they were taking the side of him, who I'm pretty sure only attended the church because he wanted to be with me.

The anger of several participants toward God described in the above section on Emotional Trauma also was described as stemming from feeling betrayed by God in the abusive experiences. Participant 3 emphatically described these feelings as: "*I also feel that if God exists he is a big jackass. I did everything right. I followed all the rules,*" and "*Yeah, I think I strongly feel that about God. He betrayed me. I thought he was gonna come through.*"

Participant 7 described the betrayal she felt when she received the message that God would want her to remain in as abusive relationship by stating *"…and angry because I felt like what kind of God would want me to stay in this sort of relationship that I was in. I was kind of like a whirlwind of emotions. Mostly anger and frustration I would say."*

Rules Prioritized Over People/Devalued

A theme that emerged as prevalent in five out of the seven interviews was the interpretation by participants that adhering to the religious rules was more important than they were as a person, which was often accompanied by a message that they were not as valuable as the rules. This was demonstrated in multiple participants' reports that they were encouraged to stay in an abusive marriage and received the message that the rule of no divorce took priority over their personal safety. Participant 4 reported several instances of this experience:

> So the institutional organization of the Catholic Church and the diocese put me in a position of you can lose your religion or you can lose your life… Literally if I had followed their rules I would be dead. No question about it.

> I have a restraining order that literally says 'you two can't be in the same place.' I called the church and I said I need to talk to you and they refer me to the bishop or somebody or another. So I'm talking to this priest or a bishop; I do believe it was the bishop. And he said, 'Look, you'd have to go through the tribunal court. You can submit your stuff, but you and he both have to be there at the same time.' I told him that wasn't possible and he asked what I meant. I told him I had a restraining order because he tried to kill me and we can't be in the same place at the same time. And he said, 'Well, you're not going to be able to get through this process.'

> …you are supposed to follow the rules of the institution to the nth regardless of what it costs you as a person.

> I was tired of getting emotionally and psychologically browbeat about how poor Jesus is so disappointed.

Participant 4 also received the message that the church's rules on divorce were more important than she was as an individual from her parents' adherence to these rules:

This all escalated to physical and sexual abuse in addition to the psychological abuse and feeling completely trapped because I couldn't talk to my parents because you're supposed to work through whatever challenges are in marriage.

Participant 4 described a specific instance of seeking support from the church and feeling as though the priest did not value her as an individual. Rather than giving her the help and support she was seeking, she was directed to adhere to church rules:

So I go into church in crisis and the priest keeps looking at me throughout the entire Ash Wednesday service because I can't stop crying. Not loudly bawling; just tears wouldn't stop running down my face. So I wait until after mass and go to talk to him. His response was roughly a lecture on how I needed to be more forgiving because Lent was a season of forgiveness. I told him he didn't understand and I tried to show him the bruises. He would not talk to me about it. He would not have a conversation about annulment. After his whole lecture, I showed him the bruises and told him I really needed help. He said, 'If you really think you need help you can go look up catholic charities online.' And I'm like, 'Can't you give me their number; don't you have any paperwork in the back?' And he said, 'I can't have the conversation with you right now; I've got to go do other stuff.' I get completely blown off by the pastor. That is religious abuse.

Participant 1 described feeling devalued and treated in a similar way when receiving news that the Catholic Church had annulled her marriage without her input and placed the blame on her, essentially devaluing her as person and sending an impersonal letter with little explanation.

…And so to be charged with a 'grave defect' and the Catholic Church sent me my baptism certificate which I had never seen before in my life. So that was just surreal and bizarre. They sent a copy of that almost like they were just voiding me, like wiping me off their shoe, like you are defective.

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Participant 7 reported a clear message from her religious leaders that the rule of staying in her abusive marriage was more important than her safety as she answered the question "*Did you ever at any point get the impression from them that they were concerned for your safety? Was there ever a 'how are you doing' moment?"* with an emphatic "*No, not once.*"

Participant 6 described feeling "*disposable,*" and Participant 3 also reported several experiences of feeling devalued by others as the men in her religious workplace refused to be alone with her or even sit at a table with her while at a group lunch due to their moral standard of not being alone with any woman other than their wife, even for purely work related conversations.

> So I'm not human. You can't sit with me and have lunch with me when our coworkers are not even a foot away, because I'm a woman who is not your wife, and yet you're saying you represent Jesus.
>
> (I was told) 'You understand he can't meet with you alone, he values his marriage.'

Abuse of Power/Use of the Sacred to Control or Manipulate

Six of seven participants described ways that their abuse involved the power of the sacred being used in an abusive manner to control or manipulate them. This theme was prevalent in the experiences of Participant 1 who reported viewing her former marriage as a sacrament and the ways this sacred element was used to harm her in receiving an annulment letter with the information and blame placed on her. She described the way the sacred element intensified her abusive experience as:

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…because with religion if you take it seriously and they charge you with a grave defect; I mean, you're defected…the fact that they enclosed that baptism certificate with it is so significant to me. Baptism is kind of your ticket to heaven right?...not only are you defective, we're giving you back your ticket.

Participant 1 also reported feeling that the sacred element was being used to financially manipulate her, as she could not find out what "*grave defect*" she had committed without paying money for the information: "*They sent me a letter saying I could pay money to find out what he said about me.*"

Participant 3, who reported gender discrimination when she worked in a ministry position for a Christian organization, described the way the sacred was used by her supervisor to manipulate her and gaslight her throughout the abuse. She stated,

> Probably the most hurtful thing that he said, and he said it a few different ways, but I remember specifically one time he was 'I just think you lack a heart of contrition and I doubt your relationship with Jesus.' This is my whole life. This is everything, you know?..I think the pressure of 'you should do it this way. If you say you're a Christian you should be going to church. You should always turn the other cheek, forgive everything. I'm sorry that I berated you.' The leader on the staff team was famous for that, saying horribly mean things, berating you and making you feel this big (and then say) 'I'm sorry, you're supposed to forgive me because you're a Christian, that's what Christianity is, you forgive me.'

Participant 4 described the way the sacred was used in her abusive marriage to manipulate or control as a "*tool*," stating "*That's really my biggest thing is when it comes to abuse, religion is a great tool. Because you think you are damned to hell for all eternity and you will be excommunicated from your religion and so on and so forth if you don't.*" and "*he got a tool and he was not afraid to use it. That's really my biggest thing is when it comes to abuse, religion is a great tool.*"

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Participant 5 also described how her religious beliefs were used against her and as part of the physical and emotional abuse from her husband:

> Again, it turns back to more like kind of biblical abuse; trying to find any piece of evidence in the Bible that would justify his behavior, saying that the Bible does not say anything about pornography, that it's not wrong and I am the one who is not fulfilling my wifely duties that God created me to do so therefore he has to find it elsewhere. So I started beating myself up about that and just sucking it up and doing whatever he wanted. Literally he would come home, sit on the couch, throw garbage on the floor and if I didn't pick it up; if I wasn't doing what he thought I should be doing he would basically tell me that I wasn't being pleasing to God; that God was angry with me…He knows that that scares me. He knows that I'm very cautious about that kind of stuff and that I know that God hates divorce, but he really exercises it to make me doublethink that to see if I'll back out because he can't lose that control…I think that he knew how precious my faith was to me and he knew that I….I grew up obeying, obeying. I follow the rules; I don't mess with the rules. He knows that; he knows that I'm a good girl.

Also in an abusive marriage, Participant 7 described the multiple ways the religious system used elements of the sacred to try to control and manipulate her into staying in the marriage.

> I wanted to leave him, but they were very insistent that I had to stay. They made a lot of threats and scare tactics to get me to stay with him because they didn't think that I should leave…I would have to stay single for the rest of my life if I left him; I'd never be able to have kids—just a lot of manipulation and I guess I'd call it emotional abuse to get me to do what they wanted me to…and basically they scared me into staying…if I left (and I was only 21) that I would have to stay single for my whole life, that if I got married I would burn in hell. It was scary and I didn't want any of that to happen. And they told me I could leave, but if I left then these were the requirements. I didn't want to be single and I'd always wanted to have kids, so I just kind of hoped that things would get better.
>
> "They knew that they were my support system, so they really tried to use that as a manipulation tactic. If you don't agree to stay single and to try and work things out, then you can't stay in the church. But they had a lot of weight there because

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although I was feeling strong enough to leave, am I really strong enough to stay away with no support system?

I think that they twisted God into what they wanted him to be. They looked on him as very judgmental and this is how things are and if you don't follow through then you suffer the wrath of God.

Spiritual Transformation

All the participants described some type of spiritual transformation, including changes in beliefs, moving to a different religious system, and/or exiting religious systems altogether. All participants did, at some point, leave the particular system in which the abuse occurred. For example, Participant 4, who was raised as a Catholic, now identifies as an atheist and describes part of her journey as questioning:

Why do I want to make myself continue to struggle when if there is a God that made me as I am and then faults me for being as I was made, the intellectual curiosity and the inability to have blind faith, then it was an unfair, rigged system and I don't need to honor that.

Five other participants remain involved in various levels with some religious systems. Many described part of their journey as being able to separate the religious abuse they experienced from God and/or all churches. For example, Participant 1 stated:

I don't feel like my faith has dimmed; I'm just going through a horrible depressive episode. This has brought me to my knees and I'm having a hard time getting back up, but it feels more like a wound by the church than by God.

and

The God that I want to know wouldn't have a trial and witnesses and open wounds.

Participants 2 and 5, respectively, were similarly able to separate their experience of

abuse from God and organized religion in general:

> Honestly in seeing that not every church is like that, that was helpful too… So I
> know that it's not everywhere. That is not all there is out there. Just because I've
> been a part of some messed up religious organization doesn't mean that represents
> everyone.

> People are really encouraging me and helping me see the loving side of God…
> I think if anything it (faith) has grown. It has gotten stronger and it has gotten a
> lot healthier…I've just been on a healthier road just being in a church that is
> healthier.

Participants 3 and 7 reported continued struggles around whether they desire to be part of

a religious system and how their faith, if there at all, is today. Participant 3 reported "*I've*

always identified as Christian. I kind of hesitate with that now, like I haven't completely

de-identified from that, but it doesn't mean the same thing that it used to mean."

Participant 7 described her spiritual journey/transformation as an ongoing struggle in the

following way:

> But I still have a hard time with churches where I don't feel comfortable getting
> too involved. We attended one church for a while and I just couldn't get beyond
> what's hiding behind the scenes in this church. That's something I still struggle
> with…I didn't go back to church for quite a while; it was about a year before I
> was willing to go into another church even…I still struggle sometimes with what
> is the balance—was the church completely wrong, is there a part of God who is
> very wrathful. I think I'm still trying to figure that out, but I don't have any…I
> still go to church, some of my faith still exists; it's just trying to figure out what is
> right and what is not. So yeah, I would say that is still a work in progress too.

Healing

All the participants identified factors that were helpful in healing from the religious abuse they experienced. Participants 3, 4, 5, and 7 all identified counseling as an integral piece of helping them to heal. Participant 3 specifically mentioned "Cognitive Behavioral Therapy." Participant 7, while recognizing the positive impact of her counseling experiences, also named the limitation of her counselor to understand the church/religious aspect of the abuse as being a piece of her interest in this study.

> She did have a hard time with the church aspect of it, which is kind of like I was intrigued by your study because she was really like, 'I can't imagine a church having this position.' So it was something that we really couldn't work through because she just didn't know how to handle that. So really it was just a lot of focus on me and healing myself. I guess in a way that helped with the church aspect as well even though we didn't really focus on that.

While this limitation was present, Participant 7 also identified how the counselor was helpful, especially in facilitating self-forgiveness and reduction of self-blame:

> I still blamed myself a lot for the things that happened, but she really helped me to figure out how to forgive myself because you can't move past something that you blame yourself for. We spent a lot of time talking about how it wasn't my fault even though I felt like maybe it was and working on forgiving myself for finding myself in that relationship in the first place because I had a lot of doubts and I obviously still followed through.

Participant 3 described the help of her counselor to understand the trauma she had experienced:

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I think, especially with my counselor, it was really powerful for her to use the word trauma. It validated it. Yes, you did go through something hard and there is a reason that you are having these reactions.

In addition to seeking counseling, Participant 5 identified other forms of support as helpful in the healing process:

So the more I sat down and talked with her, I realized just that I wasn't crazy. Along the way I had met more and more people that struggled with depression and they were all in church. And I'm like, well they all have clinical and they're all in church and not being excommunicated; they're being included and being allowed to talk about it; they're not being treated any different. So then I kind of just got to thinking that it was probably pretty much based on just that pastor or that church's beliefs which was not right and it was abusive… I have a good support system which I know is very important.

Participants 6 and 7 reported the role of their faith and perception of God as being integral to their healing, *"…so I think that that was really helpful to me to hear a different version of who God is,"* (Participant 6) and "*He's bigger than ever. I really don't think I would have made it without Him. I refuse, and I guess this is the stubborn woman they hate, I refuse to let the devil take away the only real Father I ever had.*" (Participant 7).

Participant 6 also described the ongoing journey of healing, and the challenge of sometimes isolating from others:

I guess the healing factor is a step at a time, a day at a time, a verse at a time. It happens every day. Every time you heal, sometimes you go to a store and you see somebody and the scab comes off. You don't talk to people that you loved. You don't want anybody to see, and you have perceived from me by now that if I feel it, you're going to see it. It's easier for me to stay away from people as much as I can, which is totally against my whole nature.

Gender Bias/Discrimination

Five of the seven participants specifically mentioned themes of gender

bias/discrimination in their experiences of religious abuse, with the implication of gender

bias/discrimination present in all seven interviews. In some cases, the gender

discrimination was the actual abuse, and in some cases, it contributed to the abuse.

Participants 3 and 6 reported feeling as though the gender discrimination was the abuse,

and that they were not valued in their ministry work because they were women.

Participant 3 reported *"I meet with them and at the end of the meeting they basically tell*

me 'We don't really think that women have a place in ministry and so we can't support.'

I was 'What?'" and *"I was not valuable because I was a single woman*." Her frustration

with her experiences of discrimination are seen in the following statement:

> The church always talks about finding your gift and using it. I know my giftings
> and I'm not allowed to use any of them in the church. My top gifting is always
> teaching and I'm not allowed to use that in the church because I'm a woman,
> unless I want to teach little babies, which I don't.

Similarly, Participant 6 described her experiences of gender discrimination in the

ministry in the following statement:

> From that it was a battle because I was outspoken and I was also a woman that
> believed you told the truth. I don't believe I have to be weaker because of my
> gender…I looked at them and I said 'So what you're telling me is that if I was a
> man you would be hiring me…There was gender prejudice…I do think that being
> a woman had a huge impact on it. Had I been a man doing what I was doing…I
> think they were threatened by the fact that I saw it as a ministry.

Other participants described gender bias as a piece of other types of abuse such as a part of their abusive marriages. For example, Participant 4 stated:

> If I am unconscious and it's two in the morning, coming in and taking what you want is rape. I was woken up that way more than once. And religion was used as the rationale behind it. Because I 'owed' him that as a wife. And you can look at the teachings of the Catholic Church. Wives are to please their husbands and be submissive.

Similarly, Participant 5 stated:

> He would tell me that we were married and that God expected me to be submissive to him 100%. That meant whenever he wanted to have sex we'd have sex and however he wanted to have sex, I'd have to submit to him to do that…He told me that I was being a bad wife and was being displeasing to God because I wasn't being submissive and was not pursuing my wifely duties of having sex with him the way that he wanted because I wasn't willing to try things that he wanted to try.

Similarly, Participant 7 stated:

> It was always very…women are lesser and if there is a problem, it is something you're doing…They told me that I wasn't being submissive enough… They told me that to try being more submissive.

Stigma

As with the theme of *Gender Bias/Discrimination*, sometimes the stigma the participants experienced was a result of the abuse, and sometimes it was a form of the abuse. Descriptions of experiences of stigma included feeling shamed, shunned, or scapegoated. In the case of Participant 5, the stigma of mental illness due to her depression as a teenager perpetuated by the youth pastor and the resulting

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shunning/ousting of her from the youth group was identified by the participant as the

abuse.

> My youth pastor at the church caught wind that I was being treated with
> depression medication, that my parents were taking me to counseling, and that I
> was seeing a psychologist/psychiatrist. When he found that out, he told me that I
> could no longer be a part of any youth activities because I was a threat and a
> danger to all those around me. So I was banned from being able to be involved
> with these activities at church because I had depression… After the youth pastor
> speaks, his words kinda circle down the system, so a lot of the youths started
> finding out about this kind of stuff and I started getting harassed by peers saying
> that I was crazy and psycho, that I wasn't trustworthy.

Participant 3 described trying to talk to a group of men at a Bible study because

she was more interested in their discussion than what the group of women were

discussing and reported that "*They moved, they visibly shifted and moved their group*."

Several other participants reported being discussed in a church meeting or being singled

out as needing extra help. Participant 3 described being on a list: "*…there was a list of*

people that they needed to intervene with and I was on the list." Similarly, Participant 7

was told that "*They had a lot of conversations after I left about me*." Additionally,

Participant 2 reported:

> I was told by somebody else that still went to that church they actually had a
> meeting after I went there at service to discuss my situation. The church was told
> that they would give me X-number of days to change my ways, to ask for
> forgiveness, to go back to my husband, and if I neglected to do that they were to
> break fellowship with me.

Participants also described the shunning they experienced as a result of leaving

their marriages. For example, Participant 2 stated:

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Yeah, yeah, I was shunned. I mean it was embarrassing. It was because I didn't conform to what they believed I should be. I literally would have people who would walk away from me in public and refused to speak to me when I said 'hello', looked disgusted when they looked at me.

Similarly, Participant 7 stated:

She really pushed for us to have counseling with them and then the rest of the church ended up being involved as well because they call it 'sin in the camp' and so everybody needs to be aware of it because my sin could bring down the church basically; that people needed to be aware to be cautious of interactions with me because I could cause them to stumble. So pretty much the entire church was kind of aware, but most of our interactions were with two pastors…But they made an announcement after that final meeting at the church that if there was anybody there who supported my decision they either needed to check themselves for sin or leave the church. Nobody left; everybody agreed that they had made the right decision and that I was in the wrong. And that was that. I have not heard from anybody in the church besides the pastor and his wife since I left.

Isolation

In some cases, the stigma and resulting shunning contributed to experiences of isolation, where the participant described losing their religious community and the resulting lack of support, or experiences of isolation within the abuse. For example, Participant 3 reported feeling very isolated and alone when experiencing gender discrimination in the ministry: "*I wish that I had had someone that was on my side, even if I wasn't always right*." Participants 4 and 5 described feeling cut off from support systems either as a part of the abuse or due to the religious beliefs of their support systems. Participant 4 reported "*I couldn't talk to my parents because you're supposed to work through whatever challenges are in marriage*" and Participant 5 reported that "*So*

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we got married and shortly after that, probably within the first month, I started having all

these restrictions. I was not to talk to any men anymore."

Participants 5 and 7 described the isolation they experienced because of the

shunning from the religious system, as Participate 5 stated *"I was banned from being*

able to be involved with these activities at church because I had depression," and

Participant 7 described the isolation of group rejection that *"Everybody agreed with the*

decisions that were made." Participant 7 also described the fear of isolation that kept her

in the abusive system longer than she might have otherwise stayed:

> I was fearful, but I was also…at that point I wanted to stop going to the church,
> but then they were really my entire support system because I had been going there
> for so long. All of my friendships were there and all of the support that I would
> need was in that church, so I kind of felt stuck as well.

Victim Blaming

Three of the 7 participants reported overt experiences with feeling blamed for the

abuse they were receiving. Participants 4 and 7 heard clear messages that they were the

cause for the abuse, with 4 stating she was told, "*Well, if you had been a better wife he*

wouldn't have been abusive…he wouldn't have had to be," and Participant 7 reported a

similar message that "*They told me that I wasn't being submissive enough; if I had been*

more submissive he wouldn't be abusive." Participant 7 described this in further detail by

stating:

> So in their minds it was excusable because I was provoking him and making him
> angry, so my punishment was his wrath, I guess. Most of it was I would say he
> did this or that, he hit me or he threw something at me or threatened to do

> something to me, and they would always go back to him and say, why would you do that, and because he always had an excuse it very quickly became I needed to deal with my problems in order for our marriage to get better…And everything was my fault.

Participant 5 experienced a different type of victim-blaming, with hers related to her diagnosis of depression.

> So at around 15 or 16, I thought that I was possessed by the devil, that my parents were going to hell by putting me on depression medication and, and that I was going to go to hell because depression was a choice and I couldn't figure out how to stop it.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter Four was to present the results of the semi-structured interviews and data analysis in order to answer the research question. The researcher presented the types of abuse and abusers present in the study, and provided an overview and examples of the ten common themes that emerged when analyzing all seven interviews. In the following chapter, the researcher will discuss the results in light of the current literature on religious abuse and the theoretical framework of the Traumagenic Dynamics Model (Finkelhor and Browne, 1985), will report the limitations of the study, and offer suggestions and implications for counselor educators, supervisors, clinicians, and opportunities for further research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

In Chapter One, the researcher provided an overview of the literature available on the topic of religious abuse and proposed a study on understanding the lived experience of religious abuse. In Chapter Two, the researcher provided an in-depth review of current literature on religious abuse and described the theoretical framework of the Traumagenic Dynamics Model (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). The researcher outlined the methodology of the phenomenological study in Chapter Three and presented the results of the study in Chapter Four. In this chapter, the researcher presents conclusions, discussion, and implications of the results, including a discussion that compares and contrasts results with previous literature, an examination of how the results "fit" with the theoretical framework of the Traumagenic Dynamics Model (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985), limitations of the study, implications for counselors, and suggestions for future research.

Discussion of Results

The results will be discussed first with respect to the research question, then in the context of existing research and scholarly literature, which was reviewed in Chapter Two. Finally, the results will be examined for a "fit" with the Traumagenic Dynamics Model (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985).

Research Question

In keeping with phenomenological methodology, there was only one research question for this study: What are the lived experiences of people in the United States who self-identify as having an abusive experience with a Christian religious setting? To answer this research question, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 7 participants who self-identified as having an experience with a Christian religious setting in the United States that they considered abusive. The researcher and a second coder used the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis approach (Smith, 1996, 2003, 2004) to generate a list of themes to describe the experiences of each individual participant (see Appendix H) as well as a master list of themes. The transcripts and results also were reviewed by a separate auditor.

The following themes emerged in the creation of the final master list to describe potential experiences of religious abuse: *Emotional Trauma, Betrayal, Rules Prioritized Over People, Abuse of Power/Use of the Sacred to Control or Manipulate, Spiritual Transformation, Isolation, Healing, Gender Bias/Discrimination, Stigma, and Victim-Blaming*. The abusers identified by the participants included: Priest, pastor, church members, youth group, husband, parents/family, the rules, and the religious system.

Comparison to Existing Knowledge

Although existing empirical literature on religious abuse is limited, it is useful to compare the results of this study to the existing knowledge base formulated from both empirical and scholarly expositive work. To that end, the types of abuse and the themes that emerged are examined below in the context of existing knowledge.

Abusers/Types of Abuse

In the review of literature, the researcher identified three broad categories of abuse/abusers: a) abuse perpetrated by religious leadership, typically an individual leader, b) abuse perpetrated by a religious group, directed either towards an individual or towards a group of people, and c) abuse in which the abuse itself has a religious component to it. The abusers and types of abuse described by all seven participants fit into one or more of these three broad categories. Abuse from religious leadership (priests, pastors, supervisor in religious workplace, and Deacons) was identified by all seven participants. Additionally, all participants also reported feeling abused by the religious system or church members representing the group, and all reported a spiritual component inherent in the abuse itself.

Although the experiences of all seven participants in this study fit into all three broad categories of religious abuse, this was not the case across all the current literature on religious abuse, where some more separation in the categories was noted. For example, much of the literature on the topic of childhood sexual abuse perpetrated by a member of the clergy included victims where the sexual abuse was not revealed to the broader congregation (Doyle, 2006; Guido, 2008). In these instances, the victims would not have overtly experienced abuse of the church members, although some might endorse a feeling of betrayal that the broader church community failed to protect them. In instances where the abuse was revealed to the broader religious community, it is possible

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that the victim would have experienced the shame or blame experienced by the participants of this study, or it is possible that they may have received support from the broader community.

Another instance of more separation in the categories was seen in an example provided by Bottoms et al. (2015) in their report of a parent physically abusing their child to beat the "evil" out them. This would be an example of category three, abuse with an overt religious component driving the abuse, but would not necessarily be the type of abuse in category one, abuse from religious leadership, or category 2, abuse from a religious group. Further study is needed to understand if these categories should remain three separate categories with potential overlap, or if a different way of categorizing the types of religious abuse and abusers is more appropriate.

Emotional Trauma

The theme of emotional trauma emerged as a theme in all seven interviews, presenting in a wide variety of ways including depression, anger, fear, and feeling stuck. This theme is similar to the category of "manifestation of internal states (the bio/psycho/spiritual repercussions of the abuse)" described by Ward (2011, p. 903) in his seminal study on spiritual abuse. Doyle (2006) also described the emotional trauma of victims of clergy perpetrated sexual abuse, going so far as to use the term "soul murder" (p. 208). Other authors (Doyle, 2003; Farrell, 2004) allude to emotional trauma as a result of religious abuse and this result from this study is an important step to ground the experience of emotional trauma empirically.

Betrayal

The theme of betrayal also emerged in the experiences of all seven participants. This strengthens the argument asserted by multiple authors (Bottoms et al., 2015; Doyle, 2006; Farrell, 2006; Gavrielides, 2012; Pargament et al., 2008) that betrayal is a common experience of religious abuse. According to the participants of this study, the betrayal was experienced as emanating from multiple sources. Some participants described feeling betrayed by God, similar to the experiences described by Doyle (2003), Farrell (2004), Redmond (1996), and Rossetti (1995) of the abuser becoming conflated with God, leaving the victim feeling abused and betrayed by God. Participant 3 named this specifically as she explained her experience with gender discrimination while working in the ministry: "*I also feel that if God exists he is a big jackass. I did everything right. I followed all the rules,*" and "*Yeah, I think I strongly feel that about God. He betrayed me. I thought he was gonna come through.*" It is important to note, though, that other participants appeared to separate the source of the abuse from God, avoiding the problems of conflation discussed throughout this dissertation. It is unknown, however, what processes or mechanisms distinguish those who conflate the abuse with God from those who do not.

Others described feeling betrayed by the religious system and/or church members who shamed or shunned them because the participant got a divorce, similar to Greene's (2013) observation that a victim may feel betrayed when they realize the system or group is protecting the perpetrator or image of the church rather than protecting and supporting

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them. This type of betrayal is reflected in the words of Participant 7, who was speaking about her abusive husband when she stated,

> …so it was really hard for me because they had known me my whole life and they were taking the side of him who I'm pretty sure only attended the church because he wanted to be with me.

Similarly, in speaking about her church, Participant 4 stated,

> Because that crushed part of my spirit. That was supposed to be a safe place. It was supposed to be your refuge you could go to in time of crisis. It was supposed to be sanctuary. It was supposed to be all of these things and it wasn't.

These participants imply a once held belief that God and the church were supposed to be places of spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical protection. The realization that this protection was not present and that, in fact, the opposite experience of harm was present, contributed to experiences of betrayal on a sacred level for some participants.

Rules Prioritized Over People/Devalued

The theme of the religious system valuing its own rules and prioritizing those rules over the needs of the person emerged in five of the seven interviews. Participants voiced feeling devalued as they received the message that their painful experiences and, at times, personal safety, were less important than the rigid enforcement of the legalistic rules of the system. Participant 4 reported feeling forced to literally choose between her life and following the rules to remain in the system.

So the institutional organization of the Catholic Church and the diocese put me in a position of you can lose your religion or you can lose your life… Literally if I had followed their rules I would be dead. No question about it.

Participant 7 reported a similar experience when she was encouraged to stay in an abusive marriage. When asked in the interview if anyone connected to the church ever expressed concern for her personal safety, she replied "*No, not once*," but reported that multiple pastors and church members expressed concern about her leaving the marriage to protect herself. Although the theme of rules being prioritized over people has not been overtly addressed in the current literature on religious abuse, it is consistent with several descriptions of religious abuse. Bottoms et al. (2015) studied religion-related child maltreatment, including cases of medical neglect due to the rules of the religion. In these cases, the religious rules prohibiting medical care were valued over the health and, sometimes, the life of the victim. Simonic et al. (2013) described how rigid religious beliefs might be used to justify abuse within the family, sending a similar message that the rules of the belief are more important than the safety of the victim. In this study, the researchers identified overcoming this rigidity in religious beliefs as a key in reducing this type of abuse.

Abuse of Power/Use of the Sacred to Control or Manipulate

Six of the seven participants reported an experience in which they felt that the sacred was used as a tool to control or manipulate them, or that the power of the sacred and/or the religious institution was abused. This supports the assertions of Farrell (2004), who described the extreme power differential when the abuse is being done in the name

of God or by a representative of God. As Farrell (2004) asked, for those who believe in

God, "What is more powerful than God?" (p. 46).

Participant 3 described the impact of her abuser questioning her personal faith:

> Probably the most hurtful thing that he said, and he said it a few different ways, but I remember specifically one time he was 'I just think you lack a heart of contrition and I doubt your relationship with Jesus.' This is my whole life. This is everything, you know?

Similarly, Participant 5 described her abusive husband using the importance of her faith

to manipulate her:

> …if I wasn't doing what he thought I should be doing he would basically tell me that I wasn't being pleasing to God; that God was angry with me…He knows that that scares me. He knows that I'm very cautious about that kind of stuff and that I know that God hates divorce, but he really exercises it to make me doublethink that to see if I'll back out because he can't lose that control…I think that he knew how precious my faith was to me…

Participant 7 shared very similar experiences, with the sacred manipulation coming from

the church leaders and church members:

> I wanted to leave him, but they were very insistent that I had to stay. They made a lot of threats and scare tactics to get me to stay with him because they didn't think that I should leave…I would have to stay single for the rest of my life if I left him; I'd never be able to have kids—just a lot of manipulation and I guess I'd call it emotional abuse to get me to do what they wanted me to…and basically they scared me into staying
>
> …if I left (and I was only 21) that I would have to stay single for my whole life, that if I got married I would burn in hell. It was scary and I didn't want any of that to happen. And they told me I could leave, but if I left then these were the requirements. I didn't want to be single and I'd always wanted to have kids, so I just kind of hoped that things would get better.

The finding of this theme lends strength the findings of Oakley and Kinmond (2014), whose participants reported feeling manipulated by the church. This theme underscores the power of the sacred, and how dangerous it can be when used in a non-altruistic manner. Power and control issues are a part of any abuse situation, and when the sacred element is used to exert power and control, much damage can result, as seen by the experiences of the seven participants.

Spiritual Transformation

All seven participants described some type of spiritual transformation during or as a result of their experience of religious abuse. All seven did leave their abusive situation or church, with some exiting all religious practices and beliefs altogether, and some moving to religious communities they reported as healthier systems for them. Many reported a transformation of their beliefs as well. For example, Participant 4 described her transformation from a practicing Catholic to an atheist.

> Why do I want to make myself continue to struggle when if there is a God that made me as I am and then faults me for being as I was made, the intellectual curiosity and the inability to have blind faith, then it was an unfair, rigged system and I don't need to honor that.

Other participants continue to wrestle with how they identify their spirituality or religious involvement after exiting the abusive system. Participant 3 described this as follows:

I've always identified as Christian. I kind of hesitate with that now, like I haven't completely de-identified from that, but it doesn't mean the same thing that it used to mean.

Other participants described a strengthening of their faith, or at least a continued interest in remaining involved in a Christian community that is healthier for them. It seems particularly important that the participants who remained involved in a Christian community also reported a lack of conflation of God with the abuse or abusers. Examples of this include the following:

Participant 1: I don't feel like my faith has dimmed; I'm just going through a horrible depressive episode. This has brought me to my knees and I'm having a hard time getting back up, but it feels more like a wound by the church than by God.

Participant 2: Honestly in seeing that not every church is like that, that was helpful too… So I know that it's not everywhere. That is not all there is out there. Just because I've been a part of some messed up religious organization doesn't mean that represents everyone.

Participant 5: People are really encouraging me and helping me see the loving side of God.

Although this was a small sample, the experiences regarding spiritual transformation varied widely. This highlights the need for counselors and others to make no assumptions about the current spiritual or religious beliefs of someone who reports and experience of religious abuse. This variety is also consistent with the wide variety of transformation seen in the current literature on religious abuse (Doyle, 2006; Gavrielides, 2012; Guido, 2008; Simonic et al., 2013.

Healing

       All seven participants were able to identify factors that helped them in the healing

process, and many described healing as an on-going process. Sub-themes that emerged

in the analysis were the importance of support, validation, acceptance, and counseling.

This is a particularly important theme as the factors in healing from religious abuse have

not been examined to date by scholars or researchers.

Gender Bias/Discrimination

       All seven participants were women, and six of the seven participants reported an

overt theme of gender bias or discrimination. Although the role of women in the ministry

has garnered attention in recent years, and although gender bias and discrimination has

been alluded to by some authors (Cares & Cusick, 2012; Greene, 2013; Jankowski,

2015), the literature on religious abuse has largely ignored the theme of gender bias or

discrimination up to this point. The participants described the potential for gender

discrimination to be a factor in the abuse, such as the three participants who reported the

pressure to be more submissive as a factor in their abusive marriage and the potential for

the gender discrimination to be the abuse itself, as in the cases of Participants 3 and 6

who reported they were discriminated against for being a woman in a ministerial role.

       The role of gender as a factor in the abuse is evidenced by the following

statements from participants:

> Participant 4: If I am unconscious and it's two in the morning, coming in and
> taking what you want is rape. I was woken up that way more than once. And
> religion was used as the rationale behind it. Because I 'owed' him that as a wife.

And you can look at the teachings of the Catholic Church. Wives are to please their husbands and be submissive.

Participant 5: He would tell me that we were married and that God expected me to be submissive to him 100%. That meant whenever he wanted to have sex we'd have sex and however he wanted to have sex, I'd have to submit to him to do that…He told me that I was being a bad wife and was being displeasing to God because I wasn't being submissive and was not pursuing my wifely duties of having sex with him the way that he wanted because I wasn't willing to try things that he wanted to try.

Participant 7: It was always very…women are lesser and if there is a problem, it is something you're doing…They told me that I wasn't being submissive enough… They told me that to try being more submissive.

Stigma

All seven participants reported experiencing some type of stigma during or after their religious abuse. Similar to the description of gender discrimination, in some cases the experience of stigma was a result of the abuse, and sometimes the stigma was the abuse itself. Participants reported experiencing stigma in the forms of shame, blame, and shunning.

An example of the stigma and shunning being the abuse itself was seen in Participant 5, who was asked to leave her youth group due to the stigma and misunderstanding of her diagnosis and treatment for depression.

My youth pastor at the church caught wind that I was being treated with depression medication, that my parents were taking me to counseling, and that I was seeing a psychologist/psychiatrist. When he found that out, he told me that I could no longer be a part of any youth activities because I was a threat and a danger to all those around me. So I was banned from being able to be involved with these activities at church because I had depression… After the youth pastor

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speaks his words kinda circle down the system, so a lot of the youths started finding out about this kind of stuff and I started getting harassed by peers saying that I was crazy and psycho, that I wasn't trustworthy.

Participants 2 and 7 reported feeling stigmatized and shunned due to their divorce and leaving their marriage:

Participant 2: Yeah, yeah, I was shunned. I mean it was embarrassing. It was because I didn't conform to what they believed I should be. I literally would have people who would walk away from me in public and refused to speak to me when I said 'hello', looked disgusted when they looked at me.

Participant 7: But they made an announcement after that final meeting at the church that if there was anybody there who supported my decision they either needed to check themselves for sin or leave the church. Nobody left; everybody agreed that they had made the right decision and that I was in the wrong. And that was that. I have not heard from anybody in the church besides the pastor and his wife since I left.

The experiences of stigma described by participants are closely related to the theme of "Rules Prioritized Over People/Devalued," as the stigma and shunning occurred as a result of the rules being valued by the group and leadership more than the person was being valued as a member of their community.

In the current literature on religious abuse, the role of stigma, particularly in the sense of othering a group of people, is seen primarily in regards to the LGBTQ community (Foster et al., 2015; Greene, 2013; Johnson, 1992; Lucies & Yick, 2007; Oleske Jr., 2015; Perry, 2013; Perry, 2014; Super & Jacobson, 2011; Trible, 1984; Wood & Conley, 2014). Although no participants in this study identified as LGBTQ, there are overlaps among the descriptions of the participants here with the descriptions of religious

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abuse experienced by members of the LGTBQ community, including being shunned or banned from a religious community and being shamed and labeled as immoral. Although scholars should continue to examine stigma as religious abuse within the LGBTQ, more attention seems warranted as to how women may be stigmatized and marginalized within some religious communities.

Isolation

All seven participants also described experiences of feeling isolated. Some described it as a component of the abuse, as Participant 5 reported, "*So we got married and shortly after that, probably within the first month, I started having all these restrictions. I was not to talk to any men anymore.*" Some others described it as resulting from the shunning they experienced from the religious system, as in the case of Participant 5 who reported *"I was banned from being able to be involved with these activities at church because I had depression."* Isolation is not a dominant theme in the current literature on religious abuse. As with the theme of stigma, however, there is much overlap in the descriptions of the participants for this study and the isolation and loss of community felt by members of the LGBTQ community described by scholars (Foster et al., 2015; Super and Jacobson, 2011; Wood and Conley, 2014).

Victim-Blaming

A clear theme of victim-blaming was noted by the researchers in three of the seven interviews, with implied experiences of victim-blaming seen in others. Participant 4 was told, "*Well, if you had been a better wife he wouldn't have been abusive; he*

wouldn't have had to be," and Participant 7 reported, "*They told me that I wasn't being submissive enough; if I had been more submissive he wouldn't be abusive.*"

Although it is common for victims of many types of abuse to experience blame for the abuse (Babcock & DePrince, 2012; Crowe & Murray, 2015; Muller, Caldwell, & Hunter, 1994; Murray, Crowe, & Akers, 2016; Ullman, Peter-Hagene, & Relyea, 2014), this topic does not emerge from existing literature on the topic of religious abuse, so this finding adds to the current knowledge available.

In sum, several of the themes that emerged were consistent with the existing literature on religious abuse. Some of the themes that emerged, such as victim-blaming, isolation, and gender bias/discrimination, have not received attention in the religious abuse literature. This suggests that more extensive examination of these themes may be warranted.

Finally, one significant contrast in the results of this study and the majority of the existing literature on religious abuse is the type of abuse that was described by the participants. In an overview of the current literature on religious abuse, the researcher noted a disproportionate amount of literature focused on the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic church. Although this literature is certainly important to the broader understanding of religious abuse, the researcher noted a large gap of very little attention to other types of religious abuse. Although recruitment for this study was open to all types of religious abuse, no participants came forward who had experienced overt and explicit sexual abuse at the hands of a clergy member, although it can certainly be argued that some of the conversations reported by participants would qualify as covert sexual

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abuse (e.g., victim-blaming for marital rape). Accordingly, the experiences of the participants in this study provides information about religious abuse other than overt sexual abuse from a clergy member. The researcher hopes the results of this study will provide a beginning to fill in this gap and equip counselors to address multiple types of religious abuse.

"Fit" with Traumagenic Dynamics Model

Because no models of religious abuse have been established in the scholarly literature, the conceptual framework for this project was drawn from literature on a different type of abuse, the Traumagenic Dynamics Model (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985), originally designed to explain the experiences of childhood sexual abuse. This model consists of four traumagenic dynamics: betrayal, stigmatization, powerlessness, and traumatic sexualization, with traumatic sexualization being broadened to overall trauma for the purposes of this study. Although this model helped to inform the formation of the study and the lens through which the current literature was reviewed, in keeping with the standards of phenomenological research and IPA analysis (Smith, 1996, 2003, 2004), the model was set aside during the data collection and analysis phases to allow the data to emerge with as little influence as possible and to keep the possible themes very open.

After the data analysis was complete and the themes determined, only then did the researcher return to the lens of the Traumagenic Dynamics Model as a context for the themes that emerged. In general, the Traumagenic Dynamics Model provides some fit for the data and the topic of religious abuse. The dynamic of betrayal was a theme that emerged in all of the participant's interviews, including feeling betrayed by God,

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betrayed by the church group and members, betrayed by family members, and betrayed by the system which they had expected to provide a safe place.

The dynamic of stigmatization also was a theme that emerged in all the participant's interviews and was experienced by participants as shame, blame, and shunning, either because of the religious abuse or as a part of the abuse itself. Stigma may also be a factor in the theme of *Victim-Blaming* that emerged as an overall theme.

Although the third dynamic, *powerlessness*, did not emerge as a theme by itself, the experience of powerlessness seems prevalent in the themes of *Abuse of Power/Use of the Sacred to Control or Manipulate* and *Rules Prioritized Over People/Devalued*. Thus, while powerlessness was not explicitly identified as a theme, it does seem implicit in other themes that emerged from the data.

For the purposes of this study, the fourth dynamic (traumatic sexualization) was broadened to experiences of overall trauma to include the possibility of trauma in types of abuse other than sexual abuse, and types of trauma beyond traumatic sexualization. With this more open definition of trauma, this dynamic is reflected in the theme of *Emotional Trauma*. Participant 3 identified the process of labeling her experience of religious abuse as trauma to be a critical part of the healing process for her as she stated:

> That whole experience, I've talked with my counselor a lot so I have words around it now. When I was saying it she was saying "This is traumatic" and she was the first person to help me "You had a traumatic experience and in some senses you are having a PTSD response to this traumatic experience.

Other participants described different types of emotional trauma as part of their experience of religious abuse, including descriptions of depression, anger, pain, confusion, suicidal ideation, and decreased self-worth. Therefore, although not a good fit for the original narrow dynamic of traumatic sexualization as a result of childhood sexual abuse (as none of the participants in this study reported childhood sexual abuse in relation to their religious abuse), with a broadened definition of the dynamic to include all trauma, there is much overlap with the common theme of *Emotional Trauma,* and this dynamic also appears to be a good fit with the results of this study.

Although all four traumagenic dynamics can be found among the ten common themes which emerged in the analysis for this study, there are other themes that emerged which are not included in the Traumagenic Dynamics model, such as *Gender Bias/Discrimination, Healing Factors, Isolation*, and *Spiritual Transformation*. Accordingly, it seems that the Traumagenic Dynamics Model may be somewhat of a good fit for religious abuse, but because the original model was developed specifically for sexual abuse, it may not fully capture the broad range of experiences of religious abuse survivors, suggesting that additional research and model development may be needed.

Limitations of the Study

As with all research, there are limitations to this study. Similar to most qualitative studies, generalizability was not the goal. However, it is hoped that the experiences described by the participants could provide some transferability to equip counselors to explore possible experiences of religious abuse with their clients.

Another limitation was the lack of diversity among the sample. Although a broad net was cast to recruit participants, ultimately all participants identified as White/Caucasian, heterosexual females. Although it is necessary that the participants exhibit homogeneity in that they all self-identified as having experienced religious abuse with a Christian religious setting, the researcher hoped that there would be more diversity in regards to racial/ethnic background and sexual orientation. Despite efforts to recruit on message boards with a large participation by people of color, and specific recruitment in the African American communities and LGTBQIA communities, no people of color, no men, nor anyone identifying their sexual orientation as anything other than heterosexual chose to participate in the study. There was some geographic diversity, with participants from the northeast United States, the southern United States, and the western United States, and some diversity of age, as participants ranged from 28-58 years of age.

The lack of diversity among the research team should also be noted. Both coders and the auditor are Caucasian, and all are in heterosexual partnerships. Two members of the team are female, and one male. The primary researcher and auditor identify as religious and the second coder does not identify as religious.

Implications for Counselors and Counselor Supervisors

One unique aspect of the current study, in contrast to the existing body of research on spiritual abuse, is that efforts were made to hear participants' experiences of their healing process. For several of these women, this included professional counseling. Perhaps the words of Participant 7 sums up the importance of this topic in the implication for counselors as she said,

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I think that counselors really have to take someone's spiritual view into consideration through the counseling process, but a lot of counselors are just not equipped when something like this comes up…

This study highlights the importance that counselors follow the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016), the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014), and the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) competencies endorsed by the American Counseling Association to assess if their client is coming from a spiritual or religious worldview. Specifically, CACREP (2016) standards require that the counseling curriculum address "the impact of spiritual beliefs on clients' and counselors' worldviews" (Section 2.F.2.g, p. 10). Similarly, the American Counseling Association (ACA) recognized religion and spirituality as an aspect of a client's culture, and included this in the Multicultural Issues/Diversity in Assessment section (Section E.8) of the 2014 Code of Ethics as they stated "Counselors recognize the effects of age, color, culture, disability, ethnic group, gender, race, language preference, religion, spirituality, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status on test administration and interpretation, and they place test results in proper perspective with other relevant factors" (ACA, 2004, p. 12). Supervisors can also encourage counseling supervisees to be sure they are including spirituality and religion as a piece of assessments with clients, and can model broaching this subject early on in the supervision process.

With both CACREP and ACA guiding counselors to assess clients for a spiritual or religious worldview, it is likely that many counselors will encounter a client who has

had experiences of religious abuse. Up to this point, there has been little guidance for

counselors around what might be helpful in working with such clients. The information

from this study could be helpful for counselors and clients to see if there is transferability

of the ten common themes of *Emotional Trauma, Betrayal, Rules Prioritized Over*

People, Abuse of Power/Use of the Sacred to Control or Manipulate, Spiritual

Transformation, Isolation, Healing, Gender Bias/Discrimination, Stigma, and Victim-

Blaming. Counselors could use the results of this study to assess for these themes in the

experiences of clients who report a history of religious abuse, as well as to normalize

these experiences for their clients. Supervisors could educate supervisees on these

themes and encourage reflection of this themes and experiences in a counseling situation

where a client presents with the topic of religious abuse.

The topic of religious abuse and the results of this study also lend support to the

importance of ASERVIC competency eleven which reminds counselors,

> When making a diagnosis, the professional counselor recognizes that the client's
> spiritual and/or religious perspectives can a) enhance well-being; b) contribute to
> client problems; and/or c) exacerbate symptoms. (Cashwell & Watts, 2010, p. 5)

This competency and this study are both reminders that a client's experiences with

religion can be helpful, and they may also be harmful, and it is important to assess for

both possibilities. A greater understanding of the experience of religious abuse could

help counselors to have increased confidence in incorporating spiritual or religious

considerations in their assessments and broaching the topic of religious abuse so that

clients receive the message that they can address those issues in counseling if they desire.

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In addition, the information provided by participants describing what was helpful for them in the healing process so far could be useful for counselors. Participants endorsed support of many kinds (family, friends, healthier church environments), validation that they did experience abuse and emotional trauma, and the need for acceptance, particularly for those who experienced stigma and shunning as a part of their religious abuse as particularly helpful in the healing process. Counselors would be well served to discuss support networks with clients who have experienced religious abuse.

Additionally, counselors should pay attention to the variety of experiences in the theme of *Spiritual Transformation*. This variety of experiences is a reminder that the journey after an experience of religious abuse may take many forms, and that counselors should not assume the best pathway for their client. Religion is a topic that often elicits passion and strong emotion in people (including counselors) on all ends of the spiritual continuum, so especially around the topic of religious abuse, counselors should continue to engage in self-reflection as suggested in ASERVIC competencies three and four:

> 3. The professional counselor actively explores his or her own attitudes, beliefs, and values about spirituality and/or religion.

> 4. The professional counselor continuously evaluates the influence of his or her own spiritual and/or religious beliefs and values on the client and the counseling process. (Cashwell and Watts, 2010, p. 5)

This self-reflection could help reduce potential bias in counselors all along the continuum of religious culture, from helping a counselor who is highly religious to refrain from reacting in an inappropriately defensive manner when a client discloses a religiously

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abusive experience, to helping a counselor who is anti-religious to refrain from bashing all religion and inappropriately imposing an opinion that a client should cut all religious ties when they hear an experience of religious abuse from their client. Supervisors could also model and encourage this self-examination and reflection in supervisees, and should address bias on either end of the continuum when they note it occurring in the counseling process.

Suggestions for Future Research

It is hoped that this study will provide a grounding for future studies on the topic of religious abuse. There is very little research available on the topic of religious abuse, so this study provides some preliminary foundations on which to build future research projects. For example, in the current study, all participants identified as female, heterosexual, and White. It is unknown how this transfers to a more diverse group of people. In the future, researchers could more closely examine issues of religious abuse among men, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ community, to more closely consider a range of experiences that might include racism and homophobia. Additionally, all participants in this study had left the community in which they were experiencing abuse. It seems likely, however, that many victims of religious abuse choose not to leave their religious community for a myriad of reasons. Perhaps some do not identify the issues as abusive; in other cases, they may simply fear losing their community. At any rate, additional research is warranted to better understand that process. Finally, some participants seem to conflate the abuse with God, while others did

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not. What distinguishes the experiences such that one individual becomes a self-avowed atheist while another changes religious communities but maintains a close connection to God?

There also may be many opportunities to help religious systems examine themselves and what makes a healthy church system versus a toxic or abusive church system. Although some systems likely would resist this self-examination, particularly those who promote the experiences evident in this study, there may be other religious systems that would engage in such self-examination and make efforts to avoid imposing the abusive experiences described in this study. In line with this, future research on this topic could include identifying characteristics of churches where instances of religious abuse occur more often. This presents challenges as it is likely that abusers and abusive systems may not identify as such or may continue to defend and protect the rules and system over the victims, as seen in the *Rules Prioritized Over People, Abuse of Power/Use of the Sacred to Control or Manipulate, and Isolation* themes described by participants in this study.

Another approach to broaden this research is to assess for religious abuse in other world religions. As this study focused exclusively on experiences of religious abuse with Christian settings in the United States, future researchers could explore the possibility of religious abuse in other mainstream religions such as Islam and Judaism, and what common themes might overlap or differ from the ones identified in this study.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to address the gap in the research and answer the research question: What are the lived experiences of those who self-identify as having an abusive experience with a Christian religious setting? It is hoped that providing counselors with the ten common themes that emerged across all seven interviews (*Emotional Trauma, Betrayal, Rules Prioritized Over People, Abuse of Power/Use of the Sacred to Control or Manipulate, Spiritual Transformation, Isolation, Healing, Gender Bias/Discrimination, Stigma, and Victim-Blaming*) will help counselors to feel more confident to assess for their client's spiritual and religious worldview and to address issues of religious abuse when they present in counseling.

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APPENDIX A

ASERVIC COMPETENCIES

Competencies for Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling Preamble

The Competencies for Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling are guidelines that complement, not supersede, the values and standards espoused in the ACA Code of Ethics. Consistent with the ACA Code of Ethics (2014), the purpose of the ASERVIC Competencies is to "recognize diversity and embrace a cross-cultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts" (p. 3). These Competencies are intended to be used in conjunction with counseling approaches that are evidence-based and that align with best practices in counseling.

This Preamble must accompany any publication or dissemination, in whole or in part, of the ASERVIC Competencies.

Culture and Worldview

1. The professional counselor can describe the similarities and differences between spirituality and religion, including the basic beliefs of various spiritual systems, major world religions, agnosticism, and atheism.

2. The professional counselor recognizes that the client's beliefs (or absence of beliefs) about spirituality and/or religion are central to his or her worldview and can influence psychosocial functioning.

3. The professional counselor actively explores his or her own attitudes, beliefs, and values about spirituality and/or religion.

4. The professional counselor continuously evaluates the influence of his or her own spiritual and/or religious beliefs and values on the client and the counseling process.

5. The professional counselor can identify the limits of his or her understanding of the client's spiritual and/or religious perspective and is acquainted with religious and

spiritual resources and leaders who can be avenues for consultation and to whom the counselor can refer.

6. The professional counselor can describe and apply various models of spiritual and/or religious development and their relationship to human development.

7. The professional counselor responds to client communications about spirituality and/or religion with acceptance and sensitivity.

8. The professional counselor uses spiritual and/or religious concepts that are consistent with the client's spiritual and/or religious perspectives and are acceptable to the client. The professional counselor can recognize spiritual and/or religious themes in client communication and is able to address these with the client when they are therapeutically relevant.

9. During the intake and assessment processes, the professional counselor strives to understand a client's spiritual and/or religious perspective by gathering information from the client and/or other sources.

10. When making a diagnosis, the professional counselor recognizes that the client's spiritual and/or religious perspectives can a) enhance well-being; b) contribute to client problems; and/or c) exacerbate symptoms

11. The professional counselor sets goals with the client that are consistent with the client's spiritual and/or religious perspectives.

12. The professional counselor is able to a) modify therapeutic techniques to include a client's spiritual and/or religious perspectives, and b) utilize spiritual and/or religious practices as techniques when appropriate and acceptable to a client's viewpoint.

13. The professional counselor can therapeutically apply theory and current research supporting the inclusion of a client's spiritual and/or religious perspectives and practices.

In the spirit of professional collaboration, ASERVIC endorses the counseling competencies that have been established by the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) and the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and

Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC). In so doing, these three divisions seek to enhance the counseling of clients and the training of students by intentionally focusing on honoring the many facets of diversity.

(ASERVIC, 2016)

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Schedule (Semi-Structured)
The Lived Experience of Religious Abuse
Paula J. Swindle

- Please verify your date of birth (month/day/year).
- Please also provide the following information:
    o Gender identity
    o Age
    o Race/ethnic identity
    o Sexual Orientation
    o Level of education
    o Religious Affiliation

- How did you learn about this study?
    o What led you to choose to participate in this study?
    o Do you have any questions before we proceed?

- Please tell me a little about your religious history.
    o How did you become involved in organized religion?
    o How often did/do you attend religious services?
    o What do you remember about your earliest religious experiences?

- Please describe your experience with religious abuse.
    o What about this experience prompts you to label it "abuse"?
    o Who was involved in the abuse?
    o How often did the abuse occur? (one-time or on-going?)
    o Was your experience impacted by the sacred or spiritual elements related to the abuse?
    o How would you describe the emotions related to the abuse?
        ▪ Experience of betrayal?
        ▪ Experience of trauma?
        ▪ Experience of powerlessness?

- How would you describe your support systems during this experience?
    o Who was supportive for you? How were they supportive?

- Did you share your experiences with anyone? Why or why not? Looking back, is there anything you would change about this? (either who you told or who you wish you had told?
- Were there any reactions or types of support you wish you had gotten or reactions that were not helpful or even harmful?
- How (or not) did you experience stigma around the abuse?

- How much does the abuse affect your daily life now? How would you describe your healing process?
  - What has been most helpful in the healing process?
  - What has hindered the healing process?

- Please describe your current level of involvement in religious activities.
  - How did you come to this decision of how to be involved?

- What are your current spiritual beliefs?
  - Did the abuse affect this?

- How did the imbalance of power impact this experience?
  - Did you experience a feeling of powerlessness?
  - Did the sacred element affect this?

- What would you say to someone else who had suffered similar abuse?
  - What would be important for them to hear?
  - What would be helpful for them?

- Did you seek any professional help (such as with a counselor or therapist) after the abuse occurred?
  - (If no), were there any barriers to seeking professional help?
  - (if yes), was/how was this helpful to you?
  - (either response) What did you need psychologically to heal from the abuse?

- What else would you like to share about your experience?

APPENDIX C

EMAIL/SOCIAL MEDIA INVITATION

Email/Social Media Invitation
Paula J. Swindle
The Lived Experience of Religious Abuse

My name is Paula Swindle. I am conducting a qualitative study to explore the lived experience of religious abuse with the objective of a better understanding of this phenomenon and to provide counselors with information to better serve clients who present with an experience of religious abuse. To that end, I am interested in speaking with adults (age 18 or older) in the United States who have had experience(s) in a Christian setting they would classify as "religious abuse."

If you feel you have had an experience of religious abuse in a Christian setting, I invite your participation in this study. Participation will include a 60-120 minute audio-recorded phone, on-line, or face-to-face interview with myself as the principal investigator.

All information shared during interviews will be treated as private and confidential. This includes any follow up e-mails and phone conversations. I will be the only person who will have knowledge of the participants' identities and I will be the only person who will have access to audio-recorded interviews. There is no cost to participate in this study nor will compensation be offered.

If you are interested in participating, please email me at pjswindl@uncg.edu. If you are not able to participate in the study but know of someone who would be interested, please feel free to forward this information.

APPENDIX D

FOLLOW UP SCRIPT/TEXT TO INITIAL CONTACT

Paula J. Swindle
The Lived Experience of Religious Abuse

Follow up script/text to initial contact (email, letter, or phone/video/face-to-face)

Thank you for your interest in my study on the lived experience of religious abuse. Please read the attached consent form and let me know if you have any questions. If, after reading the consent form, you decide to participate in the study, please sign the consent form and return it to me. We will then schedule a time to complete our interview. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Paula J. Swindle

IRB CONSENT FORM

IRB Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

Project Title: The Lived Experience of Religious Abuse

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor: Paula J. Swindle (PI) and Dr. Craig Cashwell (Faculty Advisor)

Participant's Name: _____

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future.   There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researcher named in this consent form. Her contact information is below.

What is the study about?
This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. The purpose of study is to understand the lived experiences of people who have had experiences they identify as abusive in a religious setting. It is hoped that gaining a greater understanding of these experiences and identifying common themes of those experiences will help counselors provide better services to clients who have had similar experiences.

Why are you asking me?
To be included in this study, participants must be 18 years of age or older, live in the United States, and must self-identify as having experienced religious abuse after hearing the statement "I have had an experience in a Christian religious setting which I would classify as abusive." Participants must also agree to participate in an audio or video recorded interview regarding this experience.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?
If you agree to be in this study, I will meet with you either in person, over the phone, or over the internet to conduct an interview on the topic of your experience with religious abuse. I expect this interview will last about 1-2 hours, and you may choose to end or cancel the interview at any time. I will ask interview questions from a pre-made list I have created, however, you may add any additional comments you wish, even if it is not specifically asked. There may be other questions asked than what is on the interview sheet depending on where our discussion leads us.

After I analyze the data from all the interviews I am conducting, I will send you a summary of the themes that emerged from your interview and all the interviews as a whole. I will do this to make sure I understand your experiences correctly, and to allow you to provide feedback to me regarding how I analyze the data. You may choose not to provide this feedback, but it is very important to me that your voice is the one that is heard in my analysis, so I do hope you will take the time to provide this feedback. This will be done via email or any other method you prefer, and should take about 30 minutes or less of your time.

Religious abuse is a difficult subject, and discussing your experiences may create some difficulty for you emotionally or psychologically. At the conclusion of our interview, if you indicate that you would like to see counseling services, I will work with you to identify potential service providers in your area.

If you have any questions about this study at any time, you may email me at pjswindl@uncg.edu or call 336-406-0340.

Is there any audio/video recording?
Our interview will be recorded by audio or video taping. This will ensure I remember our interview correctly. Because you may be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears/views the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will limit access to the tape as described below.

What are the risks to me?
The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

As discussed above, religious abuse is a difficult subject, and discussing your experiences may create some difficulty for you emotionally or psychologically. Prior to our interview, I will identify 3 licensed counselors in your area if you desire this as a way

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to address any emotional or psychological difficulty. If you utilize this service, you will be financially responsible for these counseling services, but every effort will be made to connect you will someone on your healthcare plan if you have one, or someone who offers sliding fee services if you do not.

If you find yourself in crisis at any point, you may also call 1 (800) 273-8255, 24 hours a day.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact me, Paula J. Swindle at pjswindl@uncg.edu or 336-406-0340, or my faculty advisor, Dr. Craig Cashwell, at cscashwe@uncg.edu.

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study, please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?
As a result of your participation in this survey, the counseling community may have a better understanding of what happens to people who experience religious abuse and gain more information about how to help with this issue. So, it is possible that your participation will be helpful to both counselors and their clients in the healing process from religious abuse.

Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?
There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study, although people often find it therapeutic to discuss difficult emotional experiences, so it is possible that this may be a therapeutic experience for you.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?
There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study other than your cost involved in travelling to our meeting location, which will be determined by you and may not involve travel, or the costs involved with using the telephone or internet on your end.

How will you keep my information confidential?
I will make every effort to keep your information confidential. However, as stated above, I will be recording our interviews and because you may be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears/views the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed. Your name will not be attached to the recording directly. If I use a quote from you for the data analysis or when publishing the results, your real name will not be used.

There may be some information that I would not be able to keep in confidence, including any known danger to you or others, any child or elder abuse, or if I were required to disclose information by a court order.

As you know, the internet also has limitations with confidentiality, so if we are conducting our interview online, I cannot guarantee our interview will be completely confidential due to the possibility of hacking, or of other people accidently overhearing our interview on my end or your end. On my end, I will be alone when conducting the interview so that no one will hear our conversation.

All hard copies of information and recordings will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my home. The recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study. Any electronic versions of the information such as the written transcripts will be kept on my personal computer which is password protected.

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

What if I want to leave the study?
You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data that has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

What about new information/changes in the study?
If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:
By participating in the study activities, you are agreeing that you read this consent form, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By participating in the study activities, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate in this study described to you by Paula J. Swindle.

APPENDIX F

SCRIPT FOR IN-PERSON INVITATION TO STUDY

Script for in-person invitation to study
Paula J. Swindle
The Lived Experience of Religious Abuse

My name is Paula Swindle. I am conducting a qualitative study to explore the lived experience of religious abuse with the objective of a better understanding of this phenomenon and to provide counselors with information to better serve clients who present with an experience of religious abuse. To that end, I am interested in speaking with adults (age 18 or older) in the United States who have had experience(s) in a Christian setting they would classify as "religious abuse."

If you feel you have had an experience of religious abuse in a Christian setting, I invite your participation in this study. Participation will include a 60-120 minute audio-recorded phone, on-line, or face-to-face interview with myself as the principal investigator.

All information shared during interviews will be treated as private and confidential. This includes any follow up e-mails and phone conversations. I will be the only person who will have knowledge of the participants' identities and I will be the only person who will have access to audio-recorded interviews. There is no cost to participate in this study nor will compensation be offered.

If you are interested in participating, please email me at pjswindl@uncg.edu. If you are not able to participate in the study but know of someone who would be interested, please feel free to forward this information.

APPENDIX G

SCRIPT FOR WEBSITE RECRUIMENT

Website Invitation
Paula J. Swindle
The Lived Experience of Religious Abuse

My name is Paula Swindle. I am conducting a qualitative study to explore the lived
experience of religious abuse with the objective of a better understanding of this
phenomenon and to provide counselors with information to better serve clients who
present with an experience of religious abuse. To that end, I am interested in speaking
with adults (age 18 or older) in the United States who have had experience(s) in a
Christian setting they would classify as "religious abuse."

If you feel you have had an experience of religious abuse in a Christian setting, I invite
your participation in this study. Participation will include a 60-120 minute audio-
recorded phone, on-line, or face-to-face interview with myself as the principal
investigator.

All information shared during interviews will be treated as private and confidential. This
includes any follow up e-mails and phone conversations. I will be the only person who
will have knowledge of the participants' identities and I will be the only person who will
have access to recorded interviews. There is no cost to participate in this study nor will
compensation be offered.

If you are interested in participating, please email me at pjswindl@uncg.edu. If you are
not able to participate in the study but know of someone who would be interested, please
feel free to forward this information.

APPENDIX H

SUMMARY OF ALL THEMES BY INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANTS

Participant 1

Emotional Difficulty/Depression
56 "it has created an emotional speedbump for me that has been really difficult, that I'm not have a good time getting over. It has just been huge the way that it all happened and the way that the church did it. It's been damaging on a very deep level"

82 "I became very, horribly depressed and I went to speak with a priest. I was very suicidal at the time"

228" and I'm already hurting and this is already terrible."

261 "And honestly, I almost went inpatient. It really broke me."

263 "this has really devastated me and that I just keep trying to rebuild."

386 "That really was a sacrament; it was just gut-wrenching to have that taken away or denigrated."

417 "I'm just going through a horrible depressive episode. This has brought me to my knees and I'm having a hard time getting back up."

694 – "it hurts every time I talk about it"

Betrayal
84 "That felt like a huge betrayal and abusive at that time..."

193 "My family refused to give him up regardless of the fact it was his fault or any abuses that had happened. It's just a sick family system. He is actually very close to my father and my two sisters."

234 "It was pretty much you're out and he's in."

258 "And then in the next week or so I found out he had gone to my family home with my two older sisters and my dad (my mother had passed) the night before Thanksgiving to celebrate Thanksgiving after doing all that—and was welcomed there."

651 "I don't know how much you understand the Catholic Church, but the fact that they enclosed that baptism certificate with it was so significant to me. Baptism is kind of your ticket to heaven, right?"

662 "Not only are you defective, we're giving you back your ticket."

59 – "damaging on a very deep level"

83 – "I was very suicidal at the time and he actually patted me on the head and handed me a catechism book, and that was it."

386 – "it was gut-wrenching to have it taken away or denigrated"

420 – "it feels more like a wound by the church than by God"

Failed Help from Leadership/Rules More Important than Relationship
82 "I became very, horribly depressed and I went to speak with a priest. I was very suicidal at the time and he actually patted me on the head and handed me a catechism book, and that was it. That felt like a huge betrayal and abusive at that time and I just let go. You talk about being a clinician; when a person says they are suicidal you do something about it. But he didn't…"

127 "Honestly when I went and I was so grieving and falling apart, I think that was probably the last church I darkened the doorway when he sent me out with the Sunday school book or whatever the…"

Decreased Self-Worth/ Feeling "Defective"
243 "So a year later in the mail I get this embossed fancy thing from the Catholic Church telling me, "You have been charged with the grave defect of marital irresponsibility.""

254 "And so to be charged with a grave defect and the Catholic Church sent me my baptism certificate which I had never seen before in my life. So that was just surreal and bizarre. They sent a copy of that almost like they were just voiding me, like wiping me off their shoe like you are defective."

272 "To me, how come my spirituality and my sacrament matters less than the new wife?"

277 "They charge you with a grave defect."

306 "And that doesn't add up with me being charged with a grave defect of martial irresponsibility either, you know?"

324 "That is what is abusive to me that they could make that decision…the defect thing, the verbiage…it's not just…oh, you know, this wasn't a good marriage or something or the marriage dissolved or any kind of thing like that that would be truthful, but the defect part was what especially made it abusive."

348 "I think feeling shunned by both the church and being found to be defective."

394 "I think this has really done a number on my conscience; just your validity as a human, as a person, and as a wife; identity-wise and just shame-wise."

435 "I know another word: feeling not worthy. I think that that is something I'm struggling with terribly right now in my life is feeling not worthy."

600 "I honestly don't think I'll be truly healed until I get into a successful relationship. I think that is what it is going to take to feel like I'm not defective."

609 "feeling like I was not good enough to stick around for"

632 "So yeah, I know all that; it was just ridiculous and it was just a piece of paper with absolutely archaic language—great defect—just insanity."

696 "you were the problem, you're the reason this marriage wasn't real and he has gone on and gotten married and you're not finding someone."

257 – "wiping me off their shoe like you are defective"

Financial Manipulation
285 "They sent me a letter saying I could pay money to find out what he said about me."

294 "But yeah, I had to pay money to find out."

309 "But they told me if I paid money which, of course, is another layer of just…sickening."

678 "If I could have had a conversation with the tribunal priest and they would have acknowledged this, that would help, and it sounds like I might could for $2,000."

Shame/Shunned/Stigma
348 "I think shame. I think feeling shunned by both the church…"

394 "I think this has really done a number on my conscience; just your validity as a human, as a person, and as a wife; identity-wise and just shame-wise."

399 "you just feel tainted"

444 "Shunned by my family"

Spirituality/Faith/Religion Post Trauma
417 "I don't feel like my faith has dimmed; I'm just going through a horrible depressive episode. This has brought me to my knees and I'm having a hard time getting back up, but it feels more like a wound by the church than by God, if that is what you're talking about."

426 "I experience God as loving"

127 – "I started being a spiritual gypsy at that point"

128 – "that was probably the last church I darkened the doorway when he sent me away"

142 – "they love you and you don't have to believe anything in a particular way, so when I go to church that is where I go"

152 – "I'm actually a member. I'm actually an official member. I did that this year"

384 – "spirituality is very important to me"

478 – "I officially joined the church"

Importance of validation post-trauma
86 – "when a person says they are suicidal you do something about it"

511 – "she has been very validating"

556 – "you know how people will say exactly the wrong thing? I don't need that right now"

562 – "one of the most validating things for me was that she talked to her therapist about it"

564 – "she was very validating and affirming"

Multiple layers of trauma
96 – "I have lots of layers with the Catholic Church"

103 – "there were so many different things; there were several things in the church where it was kind of abusive and strange"

169 – "certainly the way he handled the divorce has been abusive as well"

193 – "my family refused to give him up regardless of the fact it was his fault or any abuses that had happened"

194 – "some of the layers of this that are abusive don't have anything to do with the church"

706 – "when I start thinking about religious abuse how many different examples I could come up with"

Abuse of power
95 – "the Sunday school teacher would be locking the kids in the closet"

197 –"What happened with the church was…very abusive, but kind of abuse as a weapon"

222 – "the Catholic Church sends you an eight-page document for you to fill out that unearths all of the ugliest affects"

224 – "if you wanted to take a wound and reopen it…it is a real good tool"

257 – "they were voiding me"

275 – "here's you're a-Okay from Christ; we're taking it back"

157

276 – "because with religion if you take it seriously and they charge you with a grave defect; I mean, you're defected"

314 – "it's like being held hostage"

324 – "that is what is abusive to me that they could make that decision"

325 – "the 'defect' thing, the verbiage...made it abusive"

406 – "they are a vehicle, the figurehead on earth…that is why it hurts so badly"

425 – "the God that I want to know wouldn't have a trial and witnesses and open wounds"

623 – "I don't understand how it could be a sacrament with God and then you just decide it's not"

652 – "the fact that they enclosed that baptism certificate with it is so significant to me. Baptism is kind of your ticket to heaven right?...not only are you defective, we're giving you back your ticket"

Confusion
246 – "there are 6 criteria for an annulment and not one molecule applies to my marriage under anyone's stretch of the imagination"

256 – "surreal and bizarre"

307 – "that doesn't add up"

623 – "I don't understand how it could be a sacrament with God and then you just decide it's not. I would just say it is very confusing"

Lake of support
193 – "my family refused to give him up"

234- "it was pretty much, you're out and he's in"

349 – dating has been hard

549 – when asked about support – "not many"

584 – "I don't have anybody front and center that is in my life day to day"

599 – "I honestly don't think I'll be truly healed until I get into a successful relationship"

Participant 2

Change in Beliefs/Belief Systems
22 "first of all I don't believe in denomination. I have in the past but I don't now."

42 "After the experiences that I've had, a lot of the things that were taught, went against what I believed the Bible to say."

173 "I think my faith and my relationship is stronger from it."

122 – "I don't go regularly, but I'm still a member there"

179-181 – "ability to separate God from church members and system"

229 – "what has helped? "I honestly think prayer and just leaning on God for that""

268 "Honestly in seeing that not every church is like that, that was helpful too. My pastor now, I have so much respect for him, because he's not afraid."

275 "So I know that it's not everywhere. That is not all there is out there. Just because I've been a part of some messed up religious organization doesn't mean that represents everyone."

426 "I would tell them to leave and pray and seek the answers for yourself, and really listen to God speaking to your heart instead of people. You have to shut out people and I think that goes, I've learned, personally is with any major life decisions or beliefs. You have to shut out the people around you and really listen to your own heart and what God's telling you."

Shaming/Shunning/Stigma
46 "There was a lot of shaming that went on in it that I don't agree with."

56 "if you do something wrong that you were not only to ask God for forgiveness for it but you were supposed to go before the church and ask their forgiveness. That was shaming that I referred to."

70 "your life was under a microscope"

83 "I was told by somebody else that still went to that church they actually had a meeting after I went there at service to discuss my situation. The church was told that they would give me X-number of days to change my ways, to ask for forgiveness, to go back to my husband, and if I neglected to do that they were to break fellowship with me."

128 "Yeah, yeah, I was shunned. I mean it was embarrassing. It was because I didn't conform to what they believed I should be. I literally would have people who would walk away from me in public and refused to speak to me when I said "hello", looked disgusted when they looked at me."

152 "it's as if their decisions and their lives don't want to do what this group of people, and it is very group oriented, to what this group of people think you should be or you should think or you should feel or you should be. Then you're an outcast because of this. It created huge trust issues for me."

199 "I don't believe that God chose us to shame one another."

316 "Yeah, when they held meetings and they said either she comes back, I think they just told me 60 days."

392 "It just made me feel like everybody that was important to me, outside of my children, wouldn't support me and were looking down on me so it was really difficult."

417 "We make jokes about it. We're like "Here they go again". Someone will call me and say "Oh, they've had another meeting". She'll call me up and say "They had another meeting. So and so did such and such and they're demanding they go in front of the church". It's not funny that we almost have to laugh at it to deal with it, I guess, it's just sad."

483 "I mean, like I said, the biggest thing with them was that just excommunicating you."

80 – "after counseling "left there feeling like I didn't fight hard enough for this marriage""

82 – "if I didn't I was the guilty party for walking away"

90 – "without your knowledge you were discussed kind of publicly in the system"

483 – "the biggest thing with them was that just excommunicating you"

Control Measure/Rules More Important than Relationships
67 "It almost felt to me like a control measure"

362 "Yeah, in Daddy's eyes, and I remember him saying, that in God's eyes I was already married to him because I slept with him. He told me that and that was what he believed. That's why he said he did what he did. Then when I divorced [husband's name], when I left, they were furious. They were absolutely furious that day. I was the one in the wrong, period. It didn't matter. I would try to tell them issues that I was dealing with in the marriage and they did not want to hear it."

46 – "impose manmade regulation on the church members"

50 – "claiming one person's opinion or a group of peoples opinion down on their members"

70 – "your life was under a microscope of people"

85 – "they would give me X number of days to change my ways, to ask for forgiveness, to go back to my husband, and if neglected to do that they were to break fellowship with me"

91 – "they were told how to treat you based on if you returned to your marriage or not"

128 – "it was because I didn't conform to what they believed I should be"

154 – "this group of people think you should be or you should think or you should feel or you should be"

180 – "this is just people with their own thoughts and their own will creating these circumstances for others"

255 – "if you have a group of people telling you something long enough you start to believe it, even if it's not right"

301 – "they were pushing into personal portions of our lives they shouldn't have been"

Lines 355-366 (father forcing marriage after discovering she had sex)

447 – "I had no control over what was going on"

Betrayal
131 "It was so hurtful because I had considered these people friends. I really believed that they did love me and cared for me. For it to go from that to that kind of treatment was just, it was really hard. It was very, very hard."

148 "I think it's mentally abusive, emotionally abusive, because the way this organization, as far as I'm concerned, are there to show us support. They are there because it's a group of people who believe in the same things. They come together, they have this purpose about them to create good."

443 "It took away all my support because you expect the church to be part of you. You expect people to support you so it took all those things away all at once."

213 – "a lot of the gossip and all that seemed to stem from there. A lot of it could be traced right back to them"

369 – "they would invite him over for Easter and other family events and not me"

Let Go/Forgive
239 "Its mean I let go of the anger for a minute. It means I'm not holding it against them. I honestly at this point feel sorry for them, more than anything else."

243 "If I were to see any of them, and actually I have run into some of them since that, and some of the ones who wouldn't speak to me at the time, and I've been able to smile and say "hello" as opposed to, before I would just walk away, because I didn't want to say anything that I would regret. It's changed a lot. I think it's just a relief. It has such a hold on you, for me personally the anger and the bitterness and the frustration towards all of that, had such a grip on me that it was holding me back. Luckily I was able to let that go and really look at things and be rational and go "yeah they did this" and they wouldn't talk."

189 – "they don't define who I am"

190 – "I'm not going to feel ashamed of myself just because they say I should"

230 – "I had to forgive the people"

233 – "that was freeing for me. I was able to look at it differently or more clear. A clear perspective"

460 – "it is so difficult for me to have a judgmental attitude towards people. I think I'm a lot more accepting of people now because of it"

464 – "I try hard not to judge other people"

Group Think
153 "and it is very group oriented, to what this group of people think you should be or you should think or you should feel or you should be."

254 "If you have a group of people telling you something long enough you start to believe it, even if it's not right."

Trust/avoidance issues
156 – "It created huge trust issues for me"

156 – "I don't trust"

157 – "I intentionally avoid involvement and that's why"

158 – "I don't trust and I don't want to be hurt again in that way"

160 – "I don't involve myself in the group process anymore"

168 – "It's made me a bit of a loner"

Emotional Pain
134 – "It was very, very hard"

136 – "I think it hurt more than anything"

137 – "It was very painful"

142 – "to be treated that way was really tough"

215 – "rumors are painful"

148 – "I think it's mentally abusive, emotionally abusive"

161 – "I think it was very damaging, very damaging mentally, very damaging emotionally"

442 – "it made me question who I was anymore"

443 – "It really hurt my self-esteem"

489 – "there was never physical abuse, it was more mental and emotional"

186 – "I mean I was angry"

186 – "there was a lot of anger"

212 – "I was angry at the ones who allowed it and I was extremely angry at my pastor and his wife"

230 – "that took me awhile because I was so angry"

247 – "the anger and the bitterness and the frustration towards all of that, had such a grip on me"

Lack of Support
168 – "It's made me a bit of a loner"

344 – "I had to break ties with them because they were toxic to me"

369 – "they would invite him over for Easter and other family events and not me"

390 – In response to what wishes she would have had during that time – "probably family support. I think that was the hardest"

443 – "It took away all my support because you expect the church to be part of you"

Participant 3

Rule Follower
42-45 "I'm the kind of person that when I decide I'm going to do something I'm totally committed to it. I was "This is what good Christians do". You read your Bible and you go to church and you follow the rules, whatever you think the rules might be"

50 "Oh yeah, big time rule follower."

123-125 "Yes, it all got tied up together and having rules that you had to follow. Not only do you feel that you have to personally follow but if I don't follow this rule and someone finds out I could lose my job"

1044-1048 "I would say I was "good girl following the rules" and then I'd still being told that I'm not following them good enough."

Gender Discrimination
132-135 "I meet with them and at the end of the meeting they basically tell me "We don't really think that women have a place in ministry and so we can't support". I was "What?""

151-152 "There is no women's ministry because there haven't been any female staff."

166-169 "One of his things was that he doesn't feel that women should ever be on an equal playing field with men in leadership and ministry. If he was going to be a leader there would not be a female co-leader"

186 – "there were no females to train us"

198-200 "They said "No, he told the regional office that the only way he would be a leader was if there was no coleader". He believes very firmly in male leadership. Women can't have leadership roles in ministry."

778-780 "Because I said it really bothers me that the only thing that women can do in that church are be a part of the band, they can't speak ever upfront, but they can sing. Or take care of babies"

138-140 "I didn't realize the almost negative view of women that a lot of conservative churches seem to have. I'm acutely aware of it now so I see it everywhere."

865-871 "I think the underlying theme of the abuse is the view of women that created an atmosphere where this was okay. It is a man in power talking to a women not in power. That adds to the…hierarchy of men are already a little bit above women so you have that and there is a man in power and a woman not in power. So it's even a bigger hierarchy there."

187-189 "The men on our staff team could never meet with us. They would never do this. We can't have a conversation."

202-205 "The guys would say things, not exactly this harshly, but basically "Well the male students don't want to listen to a woman. What does a woman have to tell us?""

452-453 "I know for a fact I'm the only person on our staff team that was doing it, because I asked, and they all thought it was stupid"

237 – "Once you're married the woman's job is to have children and stay home with them."

369 – "I was not valuable because I was a single woman."

538 – "Our region is very, very patriarchal"

Devalued/Not Heard
237-241 "Once you're married the woman's job is to have children and stay home with them. I was the only female who was working fulltime on campus. They would have meetings and plan stuff and our biggest campus is [redacted], which is heavily female, and I'm a female, could I be part of this? They would just come and say "We're going to do so and so.""

275-278 "I felt a lot of that and a lot of "You are the single person on our team. That must mean you have no other life so you can do whatever. There's an event at 11:00 p.m. and you should be there and we're going to have a meeting at 9:00 a.m.; you should also be there.""

249-252 "A lot of it was female stuff. You are not filling the "appropriate role" at your age. I especially started feeling it after 30. At your age you should be married and having babies and you're not doing that so we really don't know what to do with you"

270-273 "So I'm not human. You can't sit with me and have lunch with me when our coworkers are not even a foot away, because I'm a woman who is not your wife, and yet you're saying you represent Jesus."

296-299 "I have realized that this is something that happens to me with men, when he would come at me with criticism I would go into "I'm a little girl and you're an adult and I have to please you. What do I need to do to please you?""

357 – "The whole meeting he is just berating me and I'm crying."

369-372 "I was not valuable because I was a single woman.   You are not valuable. What purpose are you serving? Really, at this point in your life, you should be having babies and serving your man, so what purpose are you serving?"

595-596 "you're supposed to be my brothers in Christ but you can't communicate with me."

782-785 "The church always talks about finding your gift and using it. I know my giftings and I'm not allowed to use any of them in the church. My top gifting is always teaching and I'm not allowed to use that in the church because I'm a woman, unless I want to teach little babies, which I don't."

789-791 "Yeah, it's not okay, I'm not okay…Yeah, unless I get married and have kids, then I might be okay."

806 - "I think I keep coming back because I want community and I want to feel valued and cared for and this is the only place that I know to look, because it's been such a big part of my life, and I need to stop doing that because it's not working".

Rules More Important than Person/Control
627-629 "He replied and said that was exactly what he meant. He thought it was very important to honor your marriage above all. If you want to connect with other people in the church join a small group."

640-641 "They moved, they visibly shifted and moved their group."

698-703 "So I said I was really at a point where I was trying to figure a lot of things out and I need that "Jesus with skin on" thing, that I need to feel like you care about me as a person, and what's going on in my life more than you care about whether I'm sitting in a seat on Sunday. Her response was, the very next thing she said, "Why don't you come to church with me and my husband? It'll be great.""

728-729 "When I think about that this group obviously wasn't super healthy or attentive to what's going on because there is obviously a problem."

733 – "Yes, it all got tied up together and having rules that you had to follow. Not only do you feel that you have to personally follow but if I don't follow this rule and someone finds out I could lose my job, which wouldn't be the case in a lot; if what you're doing is not affecting your job then I don't care who you go home to or what you do; those kinds of things."

735 – "I think the pressure of you should do it this way. If you say you're a Christian you should be going to church. You should always turn the other cheek, forgive everything. I'm sorry that I berated you. The leader on the staff team was famous for that, saying horribly mean things, berating you and making you feel this big. I'm sorry, you're supposed to forgive me because you're a Christian, that's what Christianity is, you forgive me."

762 – "The one thing I kept saying to myself "They control nothing over you". That was always scary because he was my boss. These people control nothing. The worst thing they could say is that I wasn't allowed back to this group."

1038 – "She said we can't have that, we need to avoid the appearance of all evil."

365 - "You understand he can't meet with you alone, he values his marriage."

Alone/Outsider
311-315 "That was the setup for all the meetings to follow and I could never get him to understand that doesn't feel good. I'm on your turf, and even if she's not on your side, she's on your side, she's your spouse. That's her job. Even if she is saying nothing she's on your side so it's two against one on your turf."

332-333 "I just felt left behind"

566-569 "They didn't seem to be open to somebody else's experience not being theirs. My experience as a single woman coming into this church is probably different than your experience as a married man who is the pastor."

640-641 "They moved, they visibly shifted and moved their group."

835 "I really didn't have any support."

844-845 "I wish that I had had someone that was on my side, even if I wasn't always right."

Abuse of Power/Sacred Manipulation
343- 348 "he said "If you leave right now then you're being insubordinate" and I felt trapped. Now, looking back, I wish I had just left and said "Well I'm sorry, I just need to leave". But I was in that place of "I'm a little girl, I need to please you, and you are now also my boss so you really legitimately could cause me not to have a job and I don't have somebody else's income to fall back on""

459-462 "Probably the most hurtful thing that he said, and he said it a few different ways, but I remember specifically one time he was "I just think you lack a heart of contrition and I doubt your relationship with Jesus". This is my whole life. This is everything, you know?"

166

743-748 "I feel it was manipulated the most with him. I just spent an hour or two berating you and telling you how your Christian walk is not right and you're not doing it right. Now I want you to trust me with the most intimate details of your life and we're gonna pray together. That mix of me telling him things and we're supposed to pray and he can't treat me like a human and I can't forgive that quickly."

45 – "susceptible to people putting rules on me, especially if they put them on me with a religious bent."

59 – "Well the man in that couple, that had been the role models for us, was having an affair with the pastor's wife."

66 – "Everyone in any kind of leadership in church is just lying"

198 - "No, he told the regional office that the only way he would be a leader was if there was no coleader."

343 – "he said "If you leave right now then you're being insubordinate" and I felt trapped"

349 – "It got to the point that at least once a week he was calling me in for a meeting and he would have a list of things that I was not doing correctly, that he didn't like how I was handling them."

357 – "The whole meeting he is just berating me and I'm crying."

440 – "That was just complete lack of integrity to me."

459 – "Probably the most hurtful thing that he said, and he said it a few different ways, but I remember specifically one time he was "I just think you lack a heart of contrition and I doubt your relationship with Jesus."

735 – "I think the pressure of you should do it this way. If you say you're a Christian you should be going to church. You should always turn the other cheek, forgive everything. I'm sorry that I berated you. The leader on the staff team was famous for that, saying horribly mean things, berating you and making you feel this big. I'm sorry, you're supposed to forgive me because you're a Christian, that's what Christianity is, you forgive me."

860 – "there was complete lack of integrity all the way up"

861 – "Now I'm able to see it's all just a screwed up system."

865 – "I think the underlying theme of the abuse is the view of women that created an atmosphere where this was okay. It is a man in power talking to a women not in power."

Emotional Trauma
348-349 "A lot of fear, and I think that for the next two years all our interactions were fear."

357-358 "The whole meeting he is just berating me and I'm crying."

462-466 "That whole experience, I've talked with my counselor a lot so I have words around it now. When I was saying it she was saying "This is traumatic" and she was the first person to help me "You had a traumatic experience and in some senses you are having a PTSD response to this traumatic experience.""

470 "I was so mad and hurt by him and so mad at God."

475-477 "So I am not together at all, I am crying, my life is falling apart, and I am having to start telling students. I would say I'm leaving staff and I couldn't say it without crying at that point."

513 "I was really depressed that summer."

517-518 "I was definitely suicidal that summer. Then I was afraid to let anyone know how bad it was.
"
692-693 "I said "I'm hurt, I'm hurt.""

874-875 "I think I was emotionally abused because I was a woman who didn't fit the stereotype of what the system felt like I should fit at that time."

886-887 "I just got tired. I feel like I always have to fight and I get tired of it."

897-898 "There are still moments when I talk about it and I get angry. There's moments when I have a lot of anger toward God."

947-949 "I think, especially with my counselor, it was really powerful for her to use the word trauma. It validated it. Yes, you did go through something hard and there is a reason that you are having these reactions."

1006 "Emotionally you are completely overwhelmed."

Abuse Secret/Protecting Abuser
393-400 "When I walked by everyone waiting they saw me, they could tell I was upset, and somebody asked me "What's going on?" and I was "I don't know. I have these meetings every week and they're bad every week. I don't know what's going on". That person talked to the leader and then the next meeting he said "How dare you tell somebody that we're having meetings and I'm trying to get rid of you". They could tell we were having meetings. We walked out of here and I was sobbing."

485 "Talking about this would just be gossipy."

Betrayal
470 "I was so mad and hurt by him and so mad at God."

897-898 "There are still moments when I talk about it and I get angry. There's moments when I have a lot of anger toward God."

916-917 "I also feel that if God exists he is a big jackass. I did everything right. I followed all the rules."

1027-1028 "Yeah, I think I strongly feel that about God. He betrayed me. I thought he was gonna come through."

63 – "People that I looked up to, respected, they're some of the people giving me the "rules" and they're hypocrites, big hypocrites. So that was the first thing that kind of rocked my world."

Lines 687-693

707 – "People gossip and I know that people in the conservative section found out, that there was a list of people that they needed to intervene with and I was on the list."

914 – "One time I was talking about it, and I was really angry at God, and I guess this gets into the deidentifying piece, as it feels weird to say I'm not a Christian."

Stigma
640-641 "They moved, they visibly shifted and moved their group."

708-709 "that there was a list of people that they needed to intervene with and I was on the list."

1021-1024 "Again, it felt like I was on this team leaders short list, I was the list, of people intervening with, and the leaders of small groups at the church are having a meeting and creating a list and I'm on that list too. How come no one is just talking to me? Why are we all talking about me?"

Healing/Acceptance
898 – "I think a big piece of it has been counseling."

941-942 "I just need you to be okay with where I am and wherever that happens to be."

947-949 "I think, especially with my counselor, it was really powerful for her to use the word trauma. It validated it. Yes, you did go through something hard and there is a reason that you are having these reactions."

951-952 "Yeah and we can work through this. We have actually done some EMDR stuff around it."

961-963 "That I have removed myself enough from it to see it for what it was and accept that it was, I mean it had an influence on my life, and it will always influence me, and I can even see some positive things now."

982-986 "I think a big thing would be to validate their experience, however they're experiencing it. If they are experiencing the power dynamic that I was trying to validate, that is a real thing, you are not crazy but you feel this way. It doesn't make you a bad person or it doesn't mean you hate somebody that you feel this way. It makes sense that you would feel that."

Spiritual Transformation
20 – "I've always identified as Christian. I kind of hesitate with that now, like I haven't completely de-identified from that, but it doesn't mean the same thing that it used to mean."

1099 – "I just don't know where I am. It is interesting because people ask me how I feel about things and I say "I really don't know.""

Participant 4

Message of Performance Based Spirituality/Appearances
149-152 "And this was all about my mom being able to get the family to come visit us in the St. Louis area rather than about anything whatsoever to do with where I was at on my theoretical spiritual journey or anything of the sort. It was mom wanted to be the shiny center of attention."

205-210 "the religion was willing to be hypocritical because they were going to do what my mom wanted and my mom was willing to put me in a position where my preparation for the willingness to do this for spirituality wasn't at all the focus. I didn't matter. She wanted her party."

267-272 "I struggled because when you're laying what is supposed to be the foundations of your spiritual understanding of the world and going through your first communion and you know the rules don't really apply and you know there's all this hypocrisy already involved and this is barely scratching the surface, then how are you supposed to have deeply grounded faith."

350-351 "So I go through with it because what am I supposed to do standing in front of 400 people."

349 – "but I will absolutely not let you wait and do it next year."

595 – "He was good at acting and he had her convinced for quite a while because he put on the same façade around her."

605 ""Yeah, I was well trained to maintain that façade." And some of that was Catholicism and some of that was my parents."
754 – "about how me being divorced was such a shameful thing for you."

787 – "They always have to have been perfect and right."

Rules More Important than the Person
218-219 "you are supposed to follow the rules of the institution to the nth regardless of what it costs you as a person."

442-445 "This all escalated to physical and sexual abuse in addition to the psychological abuse and feeling completely trapped because I couldn't talk to my parents because you're supposed to work through whatever challenges are in marriage."

515-528 "So I go into church in crisis and the priest keeps looking at me throughout the entire Ash Wednesday service because I can't stop crying. Not loudly bawling; just tears wouldn't stop running down my face. So I wait until after mass and go to talk to him. His response was roughly a lecture on how I needed to be more forgiving because Lent was a season of forgiveness. I told him he didn't understand and I tried to show him the bruises. He would not talk to me about it. He would not have a conversation about annulment. After his whole lecture, I showed him the bruises and told him I really needed help. He said, "If you really think you need help you can go look up catholic charities online." And I'm like, "Can't you give me their number; don't you have any paperwork in the back?" And he said, "I can't have the conversation with you right now; I've got to go do other stuff." I get completely blown off by the pastor. That is religious abuse."

613-622 "When I finally told my parents that I was getting a divorce (because I couldn't talk to them about any of the struggles that were going on; that would have just gotten me a lecture about why it was my fault), my mother's response verbatim (which she defended as recently as June when I basically stopped talking to her, and that was seven years of defending that) was, "Well, if you had been a better wife he wouldn't have been abusive… he wouldn't have had to be." She still continues to defend it: "I thought you wanted to save your marriage. I thought I was just encouraging you to go through and get what you needed to do to not break your vows" and so on and so forth."

640-649 "So I have a restraining order that literally says "you two can't be in the same place." I called the church and I said I need to talk to you and they refer me to the bishop or somebody or another. So I'm talking to this priest or a bishop; I do believe it was the bishop. And he said, "Look, you'd have to go through the tribunal court. You can submit your stuff, but you and he both have to be there at the same time." I told him that wasn't possible and he asked what I meant. I told him I had a restraining order because he tried to kill me and we can't be in the same place at the same time. And he said, "Well, you're not going to be able to get through this process.""

693 – "Does the Catholic Church not believe physical abuse or violence or even attempted murder is a good enough reason for divorce?"

713-720 "So the institutional organization of the Catholic Church and the diocese put me in a position of you can lose your religion or you can lose your life… Literally if I had followed their rules I would be dead. No question about it."

Devalued/Shame
244-249 "some of the fundamental teachings about you were the product of original sin, so you are the product of sin. You are fundamentally flawed, fundamentally evil. You must confess. You must repent. You must…an innocent baby newborn is not baptized to remove that stain of original sin, you're dammed to purgatory at best. That's going to screw with a kid."

387-389 "if somebody cut you down and told you that you were undeserving and unworthy, and gave you some sort of penance to do to try to make up for it—this was all normal."

754-755 "about how me being divorced was such a shameful thing for you."

246 – "You are fundamentally flawed, fundamentally evil."
314 – "confessing that you are merely a flawed mortal, etc.,"

318 – "Why do I have to be awful and flawed if I'm doing the best I can?"

455 – "I was a horribly, viciously, evil child because I was not a good subordinate Marine at four."

470 – "And this was all my fault."

Sacred Manipulation/Abuse of Power
174 – "You just put a seven-year-old responsible for figuring out to how manipulate the Catholic Church into doing what mommy wants so mommy can have what mommy wants."

218 – "you are supposed to follow the rules of the institution to the nth regardless of what it costs you as a person that gets established at that point."

247 – "You must confess. You must repent."

236 – "But that was the foundation for questioning a lot of things when these things that are supposed to be really important, powerful sacrament that are supposed to be sacrosanct and not messed with are manipulated for other people's benefit."

256 – "you're damned for eternity."

261-263 "Yeah, there are absolutely things about the fundamental teachings of the Catholic Church that I think are manipulative and abusive and toxic."

281 – "I'm going to be damned because I didn't accept somebody who theoretically lived 2,000 years ago."

321-322 "And confession is a lot about the priest has the power to absolve your sins."

409-412 "That's really my biggest thing is when it comes to abuse, religion is a great tool. Because you think you are damned to hell for all eternity and you will be excommunicated from your religion and so on and so forth if you don't."

482-486 "If I am unconscious and it's two in the morning, coming in a taking what you want is rape. I was woken up that way more than once. And religion was used as the rationale behind it. Because I "owed" him that as a wife. And you can look at the teachings of the Catholic Church. Wives are to please their husbands and be submissive."

567 – "I couldn't tell my parents because they had already manipulation and browbeaten so much else."

759-760 "I was tired of getting emotionally and psychologically browbeat about how poor Jesus is so disappointed."

907 – "Humans are the ones that wrote all the rules of the institution."

1004 – "religion was really good at was giving order and structure to things. I can get off on the whole religion as the opiate of the masses thing because it is really easy to get a lot of people addicted to opiates and control them if you don't have other social structures in place."

1010 – "And the church was how you made people behave and how you indoctrinated people into how to function as a society, and how you got donations to be able to feed the poor, and how you did all of these other things."

1105-1111 "That's a big issue I have with religion is that a lot of it is about who holds those keys to power and control. If you have priests who are gatekeepers to God…you're supposed to pray and all of that, but only your priest can absolve you of sin and confession. You can't get absolved just by praying and trying to do better and trying to make amends—all of the things that you would do as a human in normal life."

1119 – "You're not damned to purgatory or limbo or hell. You can work off some stuff in purgatory and limbo. It's like penance in the afterlife. It's a great power tool. It's a great social control tool."

224 "I was effectively punished for the rest of the year."

465 "I remember being browbeaten with that story my entire life."

567 "I couldn't tell my parents because they had already manipulation and browbeaten so much else."

618 - "Well, if you had been a better wife he wouldn't have been abusive…he wouldn't have had to be."

387 – "So the answer was if somebody cut you down and told you that you were undeserving and unworthy, and gave you some sort of penance to do to try to make up for it—this was all normal."

403 – "My ex learned to utilize that and use the catholic teachings against me on more than one occasion."

408 – "he got a tool and he was not afraid to use it. That's really my biggest thing is when it comes to abuse, religion is a great tool."

553 – "You can look at some of the pretty bible passages that talk about how the wife maintains the hearth and home. They are really beautiful, positive, respectful things if used in the right

context. But if taken out of context can be used to absolutely shame and obliterate somebody for not being able to keep up with the 1950s housewife image plus working full-time and paying all the bills."

Spiritual Transformation
85 – "No. And I don't intend to ever have a religious official affiliation again. But I was raised "screwed-up Catholic.""

275 - "no, dammit, I'm an atheist, get over it."

306-309 "And I kept going and going and finally just went, "okay this is mentally exhausting, I have other things I need to do," but I basically proved to myself that this is not necessarily all entirely divinely inspiredly correct. And I'll keep curious and I'll look at it more later."

317-322 "And I'm like, "why do I have to be undeserving? Why do I have to be terrible? Why do I have to be awful and flawed if I'm doing the best I can? It was never a "do the best you can and that's a good thing;" it was always "you have to go through these rituals where other people hold the power. And confession is a lot about the priest has the power to absolve your sins."

160 – "I'm that kind of hungry for knowledge."

236 – "But that was the foundation for questioning a lot of things."

Lines 282-309

880 – "Why do I want to make myself continue to struggle when if there is a God that made me as I am and then faults me for being as I was made, the intellectual curiosity and the inability to have blind faith, then it was an unfair, rigged system and I don't need to honor that."

981 – "There are things about rituals that can be very comforting."

993 – "I know logically I completely understand, but there is nothing in this other than the fact that it is ritual that makes it comforting."

1000 – "it was comforting to have so rituals exist."

Gender Discrimination
486-488 "Wives are to please their husbands and be submissive. Also there was a bunch of stuff that he pulled out of Mormonism about how the man is the head of the household and the woman is supposed to be submissive."

385 – "I needed to respect him and if I would just do what he wanted then he would stop hurting me."

618 - "Well, if you had been a better wife he wouldn't have been abusive; he wouldn't have had to be."

725 – "All men, all clergy."

760 – "Oh, and it didn't matter that my brother cheated on his now ex-wife or was being abusive to her. He is the poor victim because she cheated on him according to him. He might have cheated too, I don't know. But I know he admitted to being verbally and psychologically and physically abusive. He would never say that it was abusive, but the things he described doing to her were. So the whole family is like, "Oh poor guy, oh poor brother, oh poor him.""

Betrayal
541-544 "Because that crushed part of my spirit. That was supposed to be a safe place. It was supposed to be your refuge you could go to in time of crisis. It was supposed to be sanctuary. It was supposed to be all of these things and it wasn't."

Lack of Support
444 – "I couldn't talk to my parents because you're supposed to work through whatever challenges are in marriage."

567 "I couldn't tell my parents because they had already manipulation and browbeaten so much else."

750 – "Almost nonexistent. Nonexistent would be better than what it is."

Parallel abuse
382 – "I didn't realize that the things that he was doing and the way that he was treating me because they were so much like how I was raised where it didn't matter that my brother was doing me physical harm."

394 – "My brother was physically, emotionally, and psychologically abusive. My parents were both emotionally and psychologically abusive."

442 – "This all escalated to physical and sexual abuse in addition to the psychological abuse and feeling completely trapped."

475 – "it has escalated to my ex physically beating me black and blue."

481 – "Spousal rape is a real thing."

703 – "Family—both of my parents, my brother. My ex, who was psychology, emotionally, etc., abuse. And the church, more specifically the original pastor who gave me the lecture about how I needed to be more forgiving that kept me there for several months longer than I would have stayed had I not gotten that. And the institutional organization that…the guy I was talking to when I was going through how do I follow the rules to get an annulment and already legally filed for divorce and here's everything that is going on."

Hypocrisy
205 – "the religion was willing to be hypocritical."

223 – "facing this hypocrisy."

269 – "you know the rules don't really apply and you know there's all this hypocrisy already involved."

286 – "follow the rules, but only some of the rule."

324 – "Why doesn't it matter if I'm a good person and I'm out feeding the homeless, but I don't go to church. I think feeding the homeless is doing the stuff Jesus was talking about more so than going to church and then being a jackass the rest of the week."

375 – "I'm hearing from my mother that she never believed any it, but the music is great so rather than pay to sing…"

379 – "and I'm just going, "hypocrite."

Turned to church for support
513 "I had been going to church trying to figure this out because I needed some respite."

515 – "So I go into church in crisis and the priest keeps looking at me throughout the entire Ash Wednesday service because I can't stop crying."

Healing
508 "I signed us up for counseling."

540 "She was actually brilliant."

886 "I'm trying to be a role model for survivors; I'm trying to advocate for the minorities in my office who look at me and go, "How the heck do you, privileged white girl, understand this?" And I've had some of those conversations with my colleagues where they just go, "How do you get this and other people don't?" And I'm like, (a) it opened my eyes and (b) I've been through more than you would ever believe. And then we have a real human conversation."

966 – "Cognitive behavioral therapy. Real counseling in the moderate therapeutic sense has been helpful."

1059-1060 "I have said so many times in so many ways over the years that you start by validating that the person themselves is valuable."

1059 – "you start by validating that the person themselves is valuable. You demonstrate that you genuinely believe they are smart and can make the best decisions for themselves and their own lives by respecting them."

1070 – "Then you are supporting and validating the person as a valued person for who they are."

1073 – "one of the women brought in her little girl who couldn't have been more than eight weeks old, and everybody was cooing over how precious this little baby was. And the other class

leader pointed out that we all agree that the baby is valuable and precious. Nobody is questioning her worth or value at all. We all are in 100% agreement with that. We all know that for this baby, but we stop believing it for ourselves."

Resiliency (noteworthy throughout)
1057 – "I was going to be dead or I was going to be alive, and I chose alive. "

Participant 5

Depression
91-93 "As a teenager, I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety. I had some trouble on and off with being really depressed and going through different stages of that."

101 – "Myself I struggled sometimes with cutting and that kind of stuff from time to time, but at the time that I was kicked out of youth group for having depression, it wasn't a problem at that point, the cutting. It actually started after that."

249 – "I started having a lot more negative views of myself more so than I had with depression. My self-esteem dropped big time with that. I really thought I was literally evil. I thought I was psychotic. I thought I was so sick that I didn't know what I was thinking because I couldn't figure out how I was letting the devil into my life and how I was choosing depression. It wasn't like I decided that I wanted to be depressed."

515 – "I'm having to actually work through, my teenage days and the depression and stuff."

Stigma/Shunned/Shame
93-100 "My youth pastor at the church caught wind that I was being treated with depression medication, that my parents were taking me to counseling, and that I was seeing a psychologist/psychiatrist. When he found that out, he told me that I could no longer be a part of any youth activities because I was a threat and a danger to all those around me. So I was banned from being able to be involved with these activities at church because I had depression."

115-119 "After the youth pastor speaks his words kinda circle down the system, so a lot of the youths started finding out about this kind of stuff and I started getting harassed by peers saying that I was crazy and psycho, that I wasn't trustworthy because I had depression and all this kind of stuff, everyone stopped talking to me."

267-269 "I did go to church there one time when I came back, actually with my daughter. We walked in and everyone ignored me. Everyone turned their heads and not a single person said anything."

275-277 "She said she always thought it was really weird that they singled me out and used to talk about me and my depression."

Message that Depression is Evil/A Choice
105-115 "The youth pastor also called my parents in and sat them down and told them that they were going to hell; that they were raising me wrong and that I was possessed by demons and that I was possessed by the devil if I was diagnosed with depression, that depression was a choice and it was actually really someone just letting the devil inside of them. He asked their permission to speak with me and he told me the same exact thing. So at around 15 or 16, I thought that I was possessed by the devil, that my parents were going to hell by putting me on depression medication and, and that I was going to go to hell because depression was a choice and I couldn't figure out how to stop it."

130-134 "it scares people. That church just time and time again would drill into people's heads that depression was only a choice and there was no such thing as clinical depression and all that kind of stuff. I lived with that thought and that view for a very long time that it was my fault."

243-245 "I started having doubts of who I was at that point. The way he said that I was allowing the devil in…I didn't feel that I was letting the devil in and I couldn't see how I was."

251-255 "I really thought I was literally evil. I thought I was psychotic. I thought I was so sick that I didn't know what I was thinking because I couldn't figure out how I was letting the devil into my life and how I was choosing depression. It wasn't like I decided that I wanted to be depressed."

261 – "Yes, and basically telling me that I had control over it when I didn't."

277-281 "She said that her mother has depression and they stuffed it down her throat all the time that it was a choice and that it was her fault, and so she just takes it on herself all the time thinking that she just needs to strive and do better."

Healing Process (primarily Support)
172-175 "I started going to a different church out there. When I was there I made some pretty good friendships. Actually one of the girls that I developed a really strong friendship with was from my old home church."

179-187 "What made me realize just regarding the depression was after talking with her, really, and learning…as a youth I never knew that she had been diagnosed with depression and that she struggled with depression and her son had done that too. She just really reached out and made sure that I understood that as Christians we believe in sin and that sin early on, like in biblical times, was what caused sickness and all that kind of stuff and just because I was diagnosed with depression doesn't mean it was a result of anything that I did."

197-205 "So the more I sat down and talked with her, I realized just that I wasn't crazy. Along the way I had met more and more people that struggled with depression and they were all in church. And I'm like, well they all have clinical and they're all in church and not being excommunicated; they're being included and being allowed to talk about it; they're not being treated any different. So then I kind of just got to thinking that it was probably pretty much based on just that pastor or that church's beliefs which was not right and it was abusive."

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500-502 "it took someone else to point it out for me because I just couldn't see it because I was so caught up in it."

512-513 "I have a good support system which I know is very important."

519-521 "So being here is good because we have our support system and I'm familiar with the place. I'm familiar with the people and the people are familiar with me."

536-537 "my mom and dad are here and I can talk to someone about it. I can be open; I don't have to hold it in. "

582- 583 "People are really encouraging me and helping me see the loving side of God."

587-588 "just kind of learning that and being in a healthier church that is life giving; that is encouraging."

613-622 –*Parent's support*

216 – "I continued with my meds and I continued with counseling until I was 18."

223 – "I resumed counseling at that point, and I've been doing that ever since."

461 – "Also, the more that I've been going through the years of counseling from the damage that he has done…"

581

593 – "by having a Christian counselor that I can really go through some of the stuff with that who is really good. She knows the Bible and she can really help me understand what it really means."

629-634 "When I came back home I got connected with a women's shelter that provided…I see a Christian counselor, but I was seeing a counselor that specialized in…she was kind of like a…she specialized in domestic violence and people who have been abused in general by anyone. They had a program that they did such as group sessions and that kind of stuff which was really helpful."

647-648 "I probably would have made sure that they clearly understood that it is not their fault at all."

Summary of healing themes: Support, hearing other narratives of God and church, counseling

Rigidity/Rules more Important than Relationships and People
359-364 "Yes, bad as in they are very strict, very set in their ways. They believe that the King James Version is the only version of the Bible. The first time I met them they saw that I read the New International version of the Bible and they told me that I was going to hell. They are very set in what they believe; it's their way or the highway type thing."

380 – "I started having all these restrictions. I was not to talk to any men anymore."

402 – "Yes, and that was the way it was to be. I was told that I could not continue my education; that I was supposed to stay home and cook him dinner and clean the house and take care of everything and do all the grocery shopping."

Isolated by Abuser
99 – "I was banned from being able to be involved with these activities at church because I had depression."

117 – "I started getting harassed by peers saying that I was crazy and psycho, that I wasn't trustworthy because I had depression and all this kind of stuff, everyone stopped talking to me."

268 – "We walked in and everyone ignored me. Everyone turned their heads and not a single person said anything."

379-384 "So we got married and shortly after that, probably within the first month, I started having all these restrictions. I was not to talk to any men anymore. I had some friends that were guys. One was actually gay. I had to cut every man out of my life except for my husband which I thought was okay. I had no interest in talking to other guys; it was just that…"

517-519 "My parents live here and that is what I need because I know that is what my husband was also good at doing was isolating us from all of my friends and my family."

Gender Roles/Women Less Than
402-405 "I was told that I could not continue my education; that I was supposed to stay home and cook him dinner and clean the house and take care of everything and do all the grocery shopping. There was no…I had to take care of the garbage, everything."

418-421 "He would tell me that we were married and that God expected me to be submissive to him 100%. That meant whenever he wanted to have sex we'd have sex and however he wanted to have sex, I'd have to submit to him to do that."

427-430 "He told me that I was being a bad wife and was being displeasing to God because I wasn't being submissive and was not pursuing my wifely duties of having sex with him the way that he wanted because I wasn't willing to try things that he wanted to try."

Spiritual Manipulation/Using Theology to Justify Abuse/Control
69 – "I also had experienced some religious abuse within my marriage."

105 – "The youth pastor also called my parents in and sat them down and told them that they were going to hell."

111- "So at around 15 or 16, I thought that I was possessed by the devil, that my parents were going to hell by putting me on depression medication and, and that I was going to go to hell because depression was a choice and I couldn't figure out how to stop it."

361 – "The first time I met them they saw that I read the New International version of the Bible and they told me that I was going to hell."

418-421 "He would tell me that we were married and that God expected me to be submissive to him 100%. That meant whenever he wanted to have sex we'd have sex and however he wanted to have sex, I'd have to submit to him to do that."

427-430 "He told me that I was being a bad wife and was being displeasing to God because I wasn't being submissive and was not pursuing my wifely duties of having sex with him the way that he wanted because I wasn't willing to try things that he wanted to try."

433-442 "Again, it turns back to more like kind of biblical abuse; trying to find any piece of evidence in the Bible that would justify his behavior, saying that the Bible does not say anything about pornography, that it's not wrong and I am the one who is not fulfilling my wifely duties that God created me to do so therefore he has to find it elsewhere. So I started beating myself up about that and just sucking it up and doing whatever he wanted. Literally he would come home, sit on the couch, throw garbage on the floor and if I didn't pick it up; if I wasn't doing what he thought I should be doing he would basically tell me that I wasn't being pleasing to God; that God was angry with me."

469-470 "And I think the other part was that he knew how much my faith meant to me as well."

540 "and that's another thing he has been really good at is saying that God hates divorce, so you don't want to get divorced. That's what I've been struggling with recently is getting over that hump of realizing that I'm not going to hell if I get divorced."

547-550 "He knows that that scares me. He knows that I'm very cautious about that kind of stuff and that I know that God hates divorce, but he really exercises it to make me doublethink that to see if I'll back out because he can't lose that control."

Betrayal
115 – "After the youth pastor speaks his words kinda circle down the system, so a lot of the youths started finding out about this kind of stuff and I started getting harassed by peers saying that I was crazy and psycho, that I wasn't trustworthy because I had depression and all this kind of stuff, everyone stopped talking to me."

Self-blame
111 – "So at around 15 or 16, I thought that I was possessed by the devil, that my parents were going to hell by putting me on depression medication and, and that I was going to go to hell because depression was a choice and I couldn't figure out how to stop it."

437 – "So I started beating myself up about that and just sucking it up and doing whatever he wanted."

475 – "I kind of got caught in that rut of thinking I have been a horrible wife and…"

Layers of abuse (multiple instances of abuse)
412 – "I also had been sexually assaulted when living in Mississippi by a complete stranger."

423 – "The problem was that when we started having sex, I started having flashbacks of my sexual assault and he was not understanding, not sympathetic towards that at all. He told me to suck it up and get over it because that was back in Mississippi and I should leave it there."

493 – "It was more than religious; there was physical and emotional stuff as well, constant torment."

526 – "I think the hardest part has been that the abuse doesn't stop just because I've left."

531 – "I'm where I need to be and even though the abuse has continued in different ways like financially when I got here he took all my money out of my bank account and that kind of stuff. It has continued, but at least I have someone here, if something happened and he said something nasty to me or tried to play with my mind a little bit (because he still tries)…"

Rule-Follower
245-249 "Because I was living my life the exact way that I was taught—you read your bible, you go to church, you take care of others, you love others, you love yourself. I mean, I didn't really love myself, but I couldn't really understand at that point why."

456-459 "I think that he knew how precious my faith was to me and he knew that I….I grew up obeying, obeying. I follow the rules; I don't mess with the rules. He knows that; he knows that I'm a good girl."

Spiritual Transformation
38 – "I'm Christian."

42 – "Right now I go to a nondenominational church."

575 – "I think if anything it has grown. It has gotten stronger and it has gotten a lot healthier."

592 – "I've just been on a healthier road just being in a church that is healthier."

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Participant 6

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Gender bias/Discrimination
58-60 "From that it was a battle because I was outspoken and I was also a woman that believed you told the truth. I don't believe I have to be weaker because of my gender."

62-65 "There was one man who was on the man who was on the interview team who was definitely against a woman. You could tell from his treatment of other females that were involved in the church, such as the church office."

86-87 Q: "Was gender an issue there or was that the education piece?" A: "I think it was both."

540-542 , "I looked at them and I said "So what you're telling me is that if I was a man you would be hiring me.""

544-548 "They took out, from my position, an associate pastor position, that does youth, which has to be a man. They want him to be married so his wife can assist him. They come back in and pay him more than they were paying me. The new pastor comes in. They redid the whole office."

569-571 "I said "What? Is the truth of the matter that they want a man, an associate pastor?" He says "Yeah.""

600-601 "There was gender prejudice."

643-656 "I do feel that if I had been, two things, someone who had a lot of family there, it would have been different. And I do think that being a woman had a huge impact on it. Had I been a man I was doing, I think they were threatened by the fact that I saw it as a ministry. I didn't see it as a position."

Q: "To see if I follow what you have heard, or pieced together that happened, is that you were in the role, in the church for 30+ years, you were in this role as the youth worker, as you described it, for more than 20 years, and at some point this men's Sunday school class, and particularly the head of the deacons, decided they wanted an associate minister who was a man. Instead of having this conversation with you they started pushing you out. Is that fair to say?"
A: "That is fair to say. The only thing I would say is I think there were five to six people, instead of the whole class. A lot of them did not know what was going on."

754 "I think it was an agenda to #1 bring a man in."

Pressure to "Other" or Stigmatize Others
215-222 "Yeah. During this time _____ gets real upset because I won't be mean to _____, and I have no intention. That's not my call. I have to be good to everybody. I was not going to tell him that he needed to leave the church."

Q: "So they wanted you, as a minister, to tell this man that he had to leave the church because he left his marriage?"
A: "It was insinuated several times that he needed to leave the church. I just said "I will not be mean to him, that is not my call.""

453-458 "I guess the breaking point came when they asked me how much money I was spending on kids that was not from the church. For me that was it, because it was no longer the mission it was babysitting. If we're only supposed to take care of our own then that's not my mission."

600 "There was gender prejudice. There was racial prejudice."

Systemic Racism
338-341 "I had a deacon come to me and sit down and say "I have a problem with him being black and I couldn't stand for my daughter to bring home somebody that was that color. Do you not think it's wrong for him to be within the church?""

Feeling Pushed Out
292-304 "One day _____ came to my office and he said "I think the new preacher would like your office so we're going to move you back into the preacher's office and we're going to move _____ over to downstairs. Well, _____ had just had a baby. The bottom of the building over there was cold and it was in the basement basically. So I said "I'll just share my office with her, it's not a big deal." My office I had painted and fixed up and it wasn't fancy by any means but it was my office, for 20-some years. We moved into the other one. They tore a petition down in the middle so it would be one big room. They left holes in the carpet. They didn't redo the phones to where the wires weren't showing. There were vents laying out of the ceiling. I mean I can't tell you, but we moved in and I made the remark to _____ "Do you think we can get somebody to fix this stuff and paint?" He said "You can paint if you want to, if you want it painted". That's never been the whole process."

414-418 "Then what I would call the harassment began, miserable. _____ would come in my office and he would say "You know you're going to have to do this" and I would say "No, I'm not. That is not what the Lord has called me to do." This is not about the work. This is about my convictions."

599-602 "That there was deceit. There were lies. There was harassment. There was gender prejudice. There was radial prejudice. There was so many things that I feel came together to create abuse."

611-616 "There is broken heart syndrome. It's the one thing that fits the bill. It's been discussed but of course there is no way to even prove that. For me, I can remember at one point crying and thinking that my heart is broken. I gave up that day 60 kids that I loved, a job that I had been at 27 years, and there was not even a goodbye. I think it was something that, to really know what true abuse is, mentally, it can become physical. They made up things. I was doing everything that was in my job description. The only thing I was doing wrong was doing more and there was nobody else there to do it."

700-703 "It was so much of a relief not to have to wonder who was talking about me or what a deacon was going to say, or what was going to happen if God forbide something else would happen and I would need to be there for somebody."

719 "I guess you always feel disposable."

662 – "They made up things. I was doing everything that was in my job description. The only thing I was doing wrong was doing more and there was nobody else there to do it."

Misrepresented to System
"This continued on and it only got worse. They wrote all this stuff and took it before the church. The church, a lot of the older people were only told that I would not help. They even said I

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wouldn't help with Bible School. I never discussed that with them. When Bible School fell I had been gone for one to two weeks to camp, which I might have slept 20 hours in a week, from Monday to Friday. They took it before the church and the church did not vote it through."

412-413 "By this time they're still wondering what's going on, the congregation is."

599-600 "That there was deceit. There were lies."

662-664 "They made up things. I was doing everything that was in my job description. The only thing I was doing wrong was doing more and there was nobody else there to do it."

Betrayal
675-685 "Well, I don't have any family really left. My Mom is gone. My Dad is gone. I have one brother that I don't get to see often that lives in _____. I don't have a huge family and when mother died, she died at 55, I was working with the kids at the church some then. It was like the church truly for me was my family. _____ was my family. _____ is my family. _____ is my family. These were not somebody that I could go visit so I could write down mileage or somebody that I could go visit so that I could say "I've done this". It was taking care of my brothers and sisters in Christ. When the implications of everything that happened came along it was overwhelming. For me to find out that many people did not even get the concept of loving or putting Gods work first was more important than a throne. I have no concept of that."

Grief/Loss
675-685 "Well, I don't have any family really left. My Mom is gone. My Dad is gone. I have one brother that I don't get to see often that lives in _____. I don't have a huge family and when mother died, she died at 55, I was working with the kids at the church some then. It was like the church truly for me was my family. _____ was my family. _____ is my family. _____ is my family. These were not somebody that I could go visit so I could write down mileage or somebody that I could go visit so that I could say "I've done this". It was taking care of my brothers and sisters in Christ. When the implications of everything that happened came along it was overwhelming. For me to find out that many people did not even get the concept of loving or putting Gods work first was more important than a throne. I have no concept of that."

690 "It was a huge loss. It was one that I don't think I'll ever accept."

830-831 "When we begin to take people and take away their relationship with brothers and sisters in Christ it will always be abuse."

Coping/Healing Process
713-715 "He's bigger than ever. I really don't think I would have made it without him. I refuse, and I guess this is the stubborn woman they hate, I refuse to let the devil take away the only real father I ever had."

781-789 "_____ and _____, _____ has been an amazing friend. I have _____. I have _____. God has sent me friends. He has answered prays in my life in the last year that have been long ones. He's never left. I think for me it's still a journey that I have to realize two things. Number one, God has something better or he is

protecting me from something that would have been worse than what happened. Number two is sometimes the only way we truly grow is to get outside of our comfort zone. Maybe it was just time for me to be able to enjoy these last years. I adore my husband."

796-802 "I guess the healing factor is a step at a time, a day at a time, a verse at a time. It happens every day. Every time you heal sometimes you go to a store and you see somebody and the scab comes off. You don't talk to people that you loved. You don't want anybody to see, and you have perceived from me by now that if I feel it you're going to see it. It's easier for me to stay away from people as much as I can, which is totally against my whole nature."

102 – "I had an amazing pastor, _____, who was very supportive and who really helped."

478 – "I mean I had a phenomenal youth team that you never had to worry about and the kids trusted completely and entirely."

Spiritual Transformation
28 – "I'm a Christian or a Baptist at this point, but I'm more Christian."

704 – "I was not going to change my convictions, that I really didn't want to go back to church, and that feels terrible. That's something that I don't admit a lot. I go pretty regularly now but have I stepped over that line for, am I there on Wednesday nights? No."

710 – "I never got mad at God, which was a blessing."

713 – "He's bigger than ever. I really don't think I would have made it without him. I refuse, and I guess this is the stubborn woman they hate, I refuse to let the devil take away the only real father I ever had."

783 – "He has answered prays in my life in the last year that have been long ones. He's never left."

Standing up for self/advocate for children-
383 – "I just looked at them and I said "I will not do it". I said "Not because I'm being ugly. I cannot do it. I have nothing else to give.""

469 – "The only thing I told the kids was that there are going to be times in your life when you're going to have to stand for what you believe and your convictions. No matter how bad it hurts sometimes it's better to not compromise your beliefs, even though it's painful."

474 – "But I also decide that it's very important that I protect myself."

489 – "What I done I felt was what I was supposed to do. I was not ashamed of what I had done for those kids."

551 – "I just looked straight at him and I said "Don't come in here and say that stuff to me because I know what you've been saying behind my back and I don't need for you to tell me this. That's not of God so don't come in here acting one way and treating me a different way.""

Health issues/Broken Heart as result of abuse –
603 – "Maybe it was mental, it was spiritual, but last year, after I finally got out, I hadn't felt good in awhile. I went to get life insurance and the left side of my heart, what they called me back and said was that I had 20-25% use of the heart. They did a catheterization which showed I have excellent arteries. There's nothing wrong with them. They cannot find a reason for this to have happened to my heart."

611 – "There is broken heart syndrome. It's the one thing that fits the bill. It's been discussed but of course there is no way to even prove that. For me, I can remember at one point crying and thinking that my heart is broken."

615 – "I think it was something that, to really know what true abuse is, mentally, it can become physical."

Participant 7

Abuse of Power/Spiritual Manipulation/Threats/Scare Tactics
76-79 "I wanted to leave him, but they were very insistent that I had to stay. They made a lot of threats and scare tactics to get me to stay with him because they didn't think that I should leave."

80-83 "That I would have to stay single for the rest of my life if I left him; I'd never be able to have kids—just a lot of manipulation and I guess I'd call it emotional abuse to get me to do what they wanted me to."

101 – "I told them that he was abusive and that I wanted to leave and they responded very negatively to that."

108-109 "But we went and basically they scared me into staying. If I left (and I was only 21) that I would have to stay single for my whole life, that if I got married I would burn in hell. It was scary and I didn't want any of that to happen. And they told me I could leave, but if I left then these were the requirements. I didn't want to be single and I'd always wanted to have kids, so I just kind of hoped that things would get better."

312-319 "I got a lot of phone calls and I did go and meet with them one final time. And they basically told me the same thing; you can't leave, you will have to remain single for your whole life. They knew that they were my support system, so they really tried to use that as a manipulation tactic. If you don't agree to stay single and to try and work things out, then you can't stay in the church. But they had a lot of weight there because although I was feeling strong enough to leave, am I really strong enough to stay away with no support system?"

330-336 "I got a lot of emails from them. And then when they heard that I was seeing somebody else, I got another email saying that anybody who was supporting my decision they would be willing to talk to them and get them to change their ways so that they don't burn in hell with me.

It lasted a long time and even today I will sometimes get…not necessarily from them, but an article about my situation basically chastising me."

Blame for Abuse
79-80 "They told me that I wasn't being submissive enough; if I had been more submissive he wouldn't be abusive."

250-256 "So in their minds it was excusable because I was provoking him and making him angry, so my punishment was his wrath, I guess. Most of it was I would say he did this or that, he hit me or he threw something at me or threatened to do something to me, and they would always go back to him and say, why would you do that, and because he always had an excuse it very quickly became I needed to deal with my problems in order for our marriage to get better."

349-357 "And everything was my fault. Like I got pregnant and I had a miscarriage, so there was a reason for that; I must have been doing something wrong, there must be some sort of sin in my life that I'm hiding. If there isn't then something like that wouldn't have happened. So everything was really my fault regardless of the situation and so I never felt any sort of support at all even though I say they were my support system; in reality they were my support system to keep me in a situation that they felt I should stay in."

440 – "I think that they twisted God into what they wanted him to be. They looked on him as very judgmental and this is how things are and if you don't follow through then you suffer the wrath of God."

472-473 "I still blamed myself a lot for the things that happened."

Gender bias
79-80 "They told me that I wasn't being submissive enough."

109-110 "They told me that to try being more submissive."

348-349 "It was always very…women are lesser and if there is a problem, it is something you're doing."

Sought Support from Religious System
100-103 "Because it had been such a big part of my life because I had been going there for so long, I told them that…I didn't think they would respond the way they did, but I told them that he was abusive and that I wanted to leave and they responded very negatively to that."

127-128 "I went to the pastor's wife first and it became a bigger deal than I thought it would."

Fear of Losing Support System/Isolated
145-149 "I was fearful, but I was also…at that point I wanted to stop going to the church, but then they were really my entire support system because I had been going there for so long. All of my friendships were there and all of the support that I would need was in that church, so I kind of felt stuck as well."

290-293 "They were really pushing me to press charges and I was so torn between…I knew that if I pressed charges and moved forward with finally leaving that I would lose my entire support system of the church because they were going to be on his side."

316-317 "If you don't agree to stay single and to try and work things out, then you can't stay in the church."

363 "Everybody agreed with the decisions that were made."

418 – "It's easier to have one or two friends that are close than to lose an entire support system. I can manage life without one or two people, but more than that could be devastating again."

539-544 "I think that knowing that you can support yourself and get yourself where you need to be is important because feeling tied to the support system that is causing you all these problems really makes it hard to leave and you really need to find it within yourself, that you are strong enough to do this by yourself."

Stigma
128-135 "She really pushed for us to have counseling with them and then the rest of the church ended up being involved as well because they call it "sin in the camp" and so everybody needs to be aware of it because my sin could bring down the church basically; that people needed to be aware to be cautious of interactions with me because I could cause them to stumble. So pretty much the entire church was kind of aware, but most of our interactions were with two pastors."

197 – "They had a lot of conversations after I left about me."

368-374 "But they made an announcement after that final meeting at the church that if there was anybody there who supported my decision they either needed to check themselves for sin or leave the church. Nobody left; everybody agreed that they had made the right decision and that I was in the wrong. And that was that. I have not heard from anybody in the church besides the pastor and his wife since I left."

Conflation of Abuse with God
149-152 "And angry because I felt like what kind of God would want me to stay in this sort of relationship that I was in. I was kind of like a whirlwind of emotions. Mostly anger and frustration I would say."

Betrayal
92 – "He was, yes, which made it an even bigger deal for them because he was a member. In the end they told him he could stay in the church, but I had to leave."

159-162 "…so it was really hard for me because they had known me my whole life and they were taking the side of him who I'm pretty sure only attended the church because he wanted to be with me."

170-172 "I've gotten over a lot of what happened, but I still feel very betrayed by that church and how they handled things."

421-422 " it is still a work in process because it was so long, like 23 years and losing all of that makes it hard to trust a church, I think."

Stuck
147 – **"**All of my friendships were there and all of the support that I would need was in that church, so I kind of felt stuck as well."

258 – **"**So I kind of just became complacent; the abuse didn't stop even though I was quiet and didn't ever disagree. Basically I just tried to keep the peace because if I'm going to be stuck here, I might as well prevent myself from being hurt."

264-267 "It went on for about two more years; I was still with him and still in the church and really it was just a lot of checking in and still nothing changed on our end; he was still abusive. But because I felt stuck, everything was "just fine.""

More concern for church rules than the person/Rigidity
74 – "They were a pretty strict church

344-348 QUESTION: "Did you ever at any point get the impression from them that they were concerned for your safety? Was there ever a how are you doing moment?"
ANSWER: "No, not once."

363-364 "Everybody agreed with the decisions that were made."

Group Think
363-364 "Everybody agreed with the decisions that were made."

368-374 "But they made an announcement after that final meeting at the church that if there was anybody there who supported my decision they either needed to check themselves for sin or leave the church. Nobody left; everybody agreed that they had made the right decision and that I was in the wrong. And that was that. I have not heard from anybody in the church besides the pastor and his wife since I left."

Trust Issues
414-422 "But I still have a hard time with churches where I don't feel comfortable getting too involved. We attended one church for a while and I just couldn't get beyond what's hiding behind the scenes in this church. That's something I still struggle with. I also have been very selective in my friendships. It's easier to have one or two friends that are close than to lose an entire support system. I can manage life without one or two people, but more than that could be devastating again. I think it is still a work in process because it was so long, like 23 years and losing all of that makes it hard to trust a church, I think."

442-444 "I didn't go back to church for quite a while; it was about a year before I was willing to go into another church even."

Anger/Frustration–

149 – "And angry because I felt like what kind of God would want me to stay in this sort of relationship that I was in. I was kind of like a whirlwind of emotions. Mostly anger and frustration."

257 – "I didn't want to listen to them anymore because it was so frustrating for me."

302 – "I remember feeling angry because did I really come across that I'm not strong enough to leave?"

Healing

307 – "I checked out and went home, and I talked to my dad. And I left. I went and stayed with one of my sisters. That was it. It gave me drive to take control of my life. I didn't want to be a person who came across as this weak person who couldn't leave somebody who was being horrible to them. So I filed for divorce the next week."

410 – "I would say that I have recovered not fully, obviously, but I've recovered a lot from the abuse that I experienced."

426 – "I have kids now and I have more or less what I wanted my future to look like. I feel like it is giving me validation that I made the right decision because they were always telling me I wouldn't have kids because God wouldn't let me have kids if I were living in sin. But now I feel at peace with my decision; I no longer question whether I made the right one and it's very freeing."

450-451 "And so I think that that was really helpful to me to hear a different version of who God is."

401-403 "I got a better job and I started joining other community things where I could make friends outside of what I had."

472-478 "I still blamed myself a lot for the things that happened, but she really helped me to figure out how to forgive myself because you can't move past something that you blame yourself for. We spent a lot of time talking about how it wasn't my fault even though I felt like maybe it was and working on forgiving myself for finding myself in that relationship in the first place because I had a lot of doubts and I obviously still followed through."

536 – "That it's not your fault and that you can leave and you can still have the life that you want even with all of the stuff that happened, and that you can find it within yourself to choose the life that you want even without the support that you think you need. I think that knowing that you can support yourself and get yourself where you need to be is important because feeling tied to the support system that is causing you all these problems really makes it hard to leave and you really need to find it within yourself, that you are strong enough to do this by yourself."

Counseling/Therapy –

410 – "I had a lot of therapy."

466 – "I started seeing a therapist when I became involved with my current husband."

469 – "I went there to try and find a way to move past that."

470 – **"**It's always going to be a part of who I am, but I needed to know that not all men are going to beat you up when you choose not to follow their rules. I still blamed myself a lot for the things that happened, but she really helped me to figure out how to forgive myself because you can't move past something that you blame yourself for. We spent a lot of time talking about how it wasn't my fault even though I felt like maybe it was and working on forgiving myself for finding myself in that relationship in the first place because I had a lot of doubts and I obviously still followed through, I still married him."

482 – "It was just a lot of moving past that and realizing when people make bad decisions it doesn't mean that you should suffer abuse because of it. That was a major focal part of my therapy with her was recovering from that marriage so that I could move on into a healthy relationship without having that impact."

488 – "She did have a hard time with the church aspect of it, which is kind of like I was intrigued by your study because she was really like, I can't imagine a church having this position. So it was something that we really couldn't work through because she just didn't know how to handle that. So really it was just a lot of focus on me and healing myself. I guess in a way that helped with the church aspect as well even though we didn't really focus on that. So that's kind of where we went with therapy was just moving forward."

505 "I think that counselors really have to take someone's spiritual view into consideration through the counseling process, but a lot of counselors are just not equipped when something like this comes up to help with."

516 – "I need to find somebody else to see because I think that it would be beneficial for me to have somebody to talk to about it because I do think that even though I've made a lot of progress, there are still parts of my life that are impacted by the stuff that I went through."

Spiritual Transformation
38 – "I go to a Baptist church."

44 – **"**I did, I went to the church from the time I was a baby. I was there for 22 years."

59 – **"**I was pretty involved. As a teenager I was on their worship team. It was a pretty small church, but they still did quite a bit of stuff and I was pretty involved, yeah. I helped lead Sunday school for kids, so yeah."

414 – "But I still have a hard time with churches where I don't feel comfortable getting too involved."

415 – "We attended one church for a while and I just couldn't get beyond what's hiding behind the scenes in this church. That's something I still struggle with."

421 – "I think it is still a work in process because it was so long, like 23 years and losing all of that makes it hard to trust a church, I think."

442 – "I didn't go back to church for quite a while; it was about a year before I was willing to go into another church even."

444 – "I kind of attended the services, but they preached of a very different God, a God who is forgiving and had mercy."

446 – "People make mistakes; that's part of being human and He is not going to condemn you for making mistakes as long as you are willing to admit to your mistakes and say, this is not a decision I should have made, and He is going to have mercy on you; you're not going to be condemned for one decision. And so I think that that was really helpful to me to hear a different version of who God is."

455 – "I still struggle sometimes with what is the balance—was the church completely wrong, is there a part of God who is very wrathful. I think I'm still trying to figure that out, but I don't have any…I still go to church, some of my faith still exists; it's just trying to figure out what is right and what is not. So yeah, I would say that is still a work in progress too."