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Spiritual Abuse in Augusta, Georgia:

Reconciling the Spiritually Abused to the Local Church

A Thesis Project Report Submitted to

the Faculty of the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Ministry

by

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

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Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, May 2023
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The purpose of this action-based research project was to address the absence of a therapeutic process wherein pastoral counselors at Life Management Group (LMG) can responsibly attempt to reconcile spiritually abused Christians to a local church in Augusta, Georgia. One hundred percent of clients citing spiritual abuse in LMG's pastoral counseling department were abstaining from any religious activity within a community of faith at the outset of this project. Data was researched at the international, national, state, and local levels. The researcher concluded that published research related to the topic of spiritual abuse is theoretical in nature only and not application based. The project intervention utilized interviews, questionnaires, weekly counseling sessions, and observations to gather information from fourteen participating LMG clients and ten partnered local churches to survey the problem of spiritual abuse, discover, and apply spiritual safety best practices. This action-based research project sought to bridge the application gap in spiritual abuse research by monitoring real-time progress, milestones, and results of LMG clients attempting to reintegrate into a local church. The results of this research prove helpful to the pastoral counselors and church leaders in the city of Augusta as they consider implementing the concepts herein. The project revealed that the counselor-church partnership, combined with client-focused therapeutic modalities that address spiritual abuse, is successful in promoting client-church reconciliation. The results indicate that pastoral counselors can positively impact the success of spiritually abused Christians attempting to reintegrate into a local church.

Keywords: abusive religious culture, church safety, church trauma, codependency, reconciliation, spiritual abuse, spiritual safety

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Abbreviations

BCPC *Board Certified Pastoral Counselor*

CEO *Chief Executive Officer*

CMHC *Clinical Mental Health Counselor*

C-PTSD *Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*

CSRA *Central Savannah River Area*

DFCS *Department of Family and Child Services*

DMIN *Doctor of Ministry*

DSM-5 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*

EMS *Emergency Medical Services*

HHEA *Hope and Healing for the Narcissistic and Emotionally Abusive Marriage*

IRB *Institutional Review Board*

LMFT *Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist*

LMG *Life Management Group, LLC*

LMSW *Licensed Master of Social Work*

LMT *Licensed Massage Therapist*

LPC *Licensed Professional Counselor*

NASB95 *New American Standard Bible, 1995 Edition*

NPD *Narcissistic Personality Disorder*

NVS *Narcissistic Victim Syndrome*

PhD *Doctor of Philosophy*

PTSD *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*

Rev. *Reverend*

SOW   *School of Worship in Jerusalem, Israel*

TXAN   *Toxic Anger*

WHO   *World Health Organization*

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

A phenomenon occurs in the local churches in Augusta, Georgia: a silent epidemic of

spiritual abuse at the hands of spiritual leaders, religious organizations, and abusive religious

cultures.[1] Abusive entities within several churches in Augusta and in adjoining municipalities

force victims of spiritual abuse to look outside their home church for safe, professional

counseling centers where victims hope to find help and healing from spiritual abuse. The

professional practice of Life Management Group (LMG) in Augusta, one of the most established

counseling practices in the city, is experiencing a surge of new clientele in the years 2021-2023,

many citing that their church has spiritually abused them in some way. During initial visits, these

clients routinely cite that they feel confused, manipulated, intimidated, "in a fog,"[2] devalued,

discarded, and exploited by the church they attend or in their homes by a Christian intimate

partner, parent, or other close relationship. Clients claiming spiritual abuse tell heartbreaking

stories consistent with narcissistic, psychological, and emotional abuse that typical victims seek

help for at a professional practice. Spiritually abused clients are often clinically diagnosable as

legitimate abuse victims according to the diagnostic criteria for narcissistic and emotional abuse

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[1] Charles A. O'Reilly, and Jennifer A. Chatman, "Transformational Leader or Narcissist: How Grandiose Narcissists Can Create and Destroy Organizations and Institutions" *California Management Review* 62, no. 4 (2020), accessed on August 24, 2022, https://www.sagepub.com/home/cmr/doi/10.1177/0008125620914989.

[2] Anonymous citation from an LMG client. Due to federal, state, and ethical regulations imposed by licensure and certification boards, any quotes from an LMG client in this project are extracted from pastoral counseling sessions and must be presented as anonymous. Going forward, all anonymous citations in this project will be cited as "LMG Client" in the footnotes.

found in the authoritative diagnostic publication, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: Fifth Edition*. Wounded Christians at LMG often state, "I love God, and I have my faith, but I don't like church, and I won't go back right now."[3] Statements like this indicate a church, clergy member, religious group, or a toxic family culture where God and the Bible have been used to achieve power and control over another. As with all forms of abuse, the goal is to exert power and control over another individual. Powering over another person involves the abuser convincing the victim that the abuser's thinking is superior to the victim's; the victim then aligns their worldview, philosophies, and actions with the abuser.[4] Thus, the abuser achieves control over another individual by forcing a person to behave or speak in a certain way they would not otherwise.[5]

Spiritual, emotional, psychological, and physical abuse causes wounds to the soul. In their seminal work *Competent Christian Counseling*, Drs. Clinton and Ohlschlager emphasize that the term for "soul" in the Greek New Testament is *psyche*, which is translated from the Hebrew word *nephesh*; and is used 101 times in biblical literature referring to one's inner life, the self, the living personality.[6] Abuse victims at LMG routinely complain that their inner life is in turmoil after experiencing abuse. If the soul is wounded, then the soul is the place where healing occurs; this requires compassionate therapeutic intervention that validates the victim's experience, processes spiritual distress and trauma, and professionally meets the victim with the empathy of Jesus.

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[3] LMG Client.

[4] Barry Lord, "Toxic Anger 2.0" (lecture, Light University, Forest, VA, 2020). https://aacc.talentlms.com/unit/view/id:3420.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Timothy E. Clinton, and George Ohlschlager, *Competent Christian Counseling: Foundations & Practice of Compassionate Soul Care*, vol. 1 (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2002), 124.

This chapter describes the ministry context in which the holistic healing of wounded Christians occurs and details the problem, purpose, and thesis statements that drive this action research project. The ministry context explores the origin and evolution of Life Management Group in the religiously diverse "Bible Belt" city of Augusta, Georgia, specifically how LMG is uniquely equipped to address spiritual abuse while safely attempting to reintegrate clients into a local church.

The definitions section of this project provides theological and clinically significant explanations and detail to essential terms and language often used in pastoral and professional counseling; this includes the researcher's foundational assumptions regarding the project's implementation and action research. Finally, all foreseen project limitations and delimitations are described, and the project thesis statement is conveyed.

Ministry Context

The local ministry context for this DMIN action research thesis is Life Management Group (LMG), located near the geographical center of Augusta, Georgia. LMG was founded in 2002 as Georgia Parenting Academy, LLC. LMG is a close partner of the Georgia Superior Court to help with parenting education for those who struggle with parenting skills and abusive tendencies such as toxic anger and rage, parental alienation, and physical abuse. In the company's twenty years of operation, LMG has evolved into one of Augusta's largest and most reputable professional counseling centers. Clients of all backgrounds travel hundreds of miles to receive professional, pastoral, and other care as needed. To date, LMG employs twelve licensed professional counselors, including three full-time professional and board-certified pastoral counselors. Due to the recent influx of clients claiming spiritual and religious abuse, in addition to other mental health maladies, the Pastoral Counseling and Care department was formed in

March 2022 to address this need. The researcher for this project is the department chair of the

Pastoral Counseling and Care department and partners closely with the Clinical Director (EdD,

LPC), licensed marriage and family counselors (LMFTs), licensed professional counselors

(LPCs), licensed clinical social workers (LCSWs), licensed clinical mental health counselors

(CMHCs), and additional ordained and board-certified pastoral counselors (BCPCs). The

researcher is the senior minister at a local church and will tap into local relationships with church

leadership and staff to interview, establish baseline church safety scores for each church

interviewed, and ultimately build bridges for the wounded Christians at LMG to integrate into a

safe church home of their choice.

<div align="center">Cultural Setting</div>

Augusta is the second largest city in Georgia, with a population of 203,329.[7] Augusta was

founded as a river city, straddling the Savannah River on the south and west, with North Augusta

overflowing into South Carolina to the north and east. While these are two different

municipalities in separate states, the culture of each city is heavily influenced by the other.

Richmond County is the primary county that comprises the city of Augusta. However, other

counties surround the city and are often lumped into the municipal designation of Augusta,

despite being separate cities and counties (e.g., Columbia County and Burke County; and the

cities of Grovetown, Evans, North Augusta, and Martinez). The conglomerate of smaller cities

and counties inextricably linked to Augusta culture has been given the designation of Greater

Augusta and the Central Savannah River Area, or CSRA.

Sadly, Augusta's history includes deep roots of slavery, which influences this project in

terms of culture and demographics. As of May 31, 2022, Augusta-Richmond County is reported

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[7] World Population Review, "Augusta Georgia Population," accessed August 27, 2022. https://www.worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/augusta-ga-population.

to comprise a populace of 57.23 percent black or African American residents, 36.36 percent

white residents, 2.58 percent Asian residents, and 1.92 percent identifying as "other."[8] The

Richmond County School Board reports that 75 percent of enrolled students identify as Black, 16

percent as White, 5 percent as Hispanic, and 3 percent as multi-racial or other; almost half (49%)

are classified as economically disadvantaged.[9] According to census data, the median income for

Augusta-Richmond County is $55,143, which underperforms the Georgia state median income

of $61,980, and the United States median income of $65,712.[10] The researcher must exhibit

multicultural sensitivity to church leadership, membership, and culture when conducting action

research. The researcher cannot apply prejudice to any interview without first considering the

history and culture of churches that may have been established before 1965 when racial

segregation ended in the city, as some churches in Augusta are upwards of 200 and 250 years

old. There will undoubtedly be instances where cultural differences influence what is and what is

not considered spiritual abuse; and what is to be done about it.

Binding the Wounds

The problem statement presents a desperate need to reconcile wounded Christians with

safe churches and communities of faith while simultaneously alleviating religious guilt and

shame extant in the LMG client participant through pastoral counseling, which will lead to the

holistic healing of the mind, emotions, body, and spirit. More important than the kaleidoscope of

possible cultural variations within the religious institutions in historic Augusta is the importance

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[8] "Was There Slavery in Augusta Ga?" Community Literacy Journal accessed August 27, 2022. https://www.communityliteracy.org/was-there-slavery-in-augusta-ga.

[9] "Georgia School Grades Report (2018-19), Richmond County," Governor's Office of Student Achievement, accessed on August 27, 2022. https://www.schoolgrades.georgia.gov/richmond-county.

[10] "Augusta-Richmond County Georgia Household Income," Department of Numbers, accessed on August 27, 2022. https://www.deptofnumbers.com/income/georgia/augusta.

of the individual seeking healing from spiritual abuse. This project does not attempt to diagnose and heal abusive cultures and establishments in Augusta. However, this may happen organically at some level when the researcher interacts with local churches and their leadership teams. Instead, this project focuses on how to best facilitate healing the wounded sheep that present with spiritual abuse symptoms at LMG, regardless of what organization, individual, or culture inflicted the wound. Data will be compiled on churches and qualifying religious organizations to determine a church's spiritual safety score and to establish a baseline cultural understanding in the church. However, the individual seeking spiritual restoration is the most critical consideration of this project and will be treated as such as they attempt to reintegrate into a safe church home post-spiritual abuse. Church staff interviews by the researcher and the resulting safety scores will precede any church attendance recommendation(s) to clients. Binding up the wounds of the soul, validating one's experience, recovering one's identity, grief processing, and providing a therapeutic trauma processing program will precede a client's visit to any toxic church or religious situation.

Client Safety First

In several instances at LMG, spiritual abuse situations are so damaging to the victim that the Department of Family and Child Services (DFCS), Emergency Medical Services (EMS), the Georgia Mobile Crisis Team, and local law enforcement have been called to the practice to assist a victim of abuse. As client's wounds are addressed, mental and physical safety is paramount. Many spiritually abused victims often simultaneously suffer other types of abuse and are in real danger from their abuser(s); these desperate souls can be in such despair that they become suicidal and threaten self-harm. Many pastors do not have adequate training from seminary or church-internal training programs to address abuse, and many wounds go unaddressed among the

congregation and staff. LMG takes victims of spiritual and religious abuse seriously. All appropriate safety mechanisms are in place at LMG that are necessary to facilitate holistic healing and emergency intervention if needed.

<p style="text-align:center">Identifying Spiritual Abuse Victims: Leading Them to a Safe Church</p>

The purpose statement details how the problem of spiritual abuse is methodically addressed in Augusta, Georgia, while assuring the safety of the volunteer client. The problem that LMG lacks a program to reconcile wounded Christians to local churches is further addressed in five specific phases in this project. First, the process informs the reader on how to recognize the symptoms of spiritual abuse and what the reader should do when one discovers a spiritually abused Christian in their congregation or other religious settings. Second, this project provides the reader with a pastoral counseling-specific method for recovering spiritual abuse survivors, which is usable by local church pastoral staff and lay counseling ministries within a church or parachurch ministry. Third, this project systematically surveys and publishes the summarized confidential results of in-person interviews with several local church's senior pastoral staff to determine the level of safety, intentionality, and effectiveness of the ministry in counseling their members alongside their existing capacity to receive spiritually abused Christians referred to them by LMG.[11] Fourth, this project monitors the success of volunteer clients participating in this program to determine the effectiveness of prescribed methodologies, with the caveat that all clients differ in temperament and severity of abuse; therefore, multiple modalities and approaches may be required for participants to address trauma. No one approach will be suitable for all clients. Volunteer clients are individually monitored as they integrate into a spiritually safe church. Finally, each volunteer client who finds a spiritually safe church (and those who do

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[11] A spiritual safety score will be applied to each ministry, utilizing a proprietary survey, which will be demonstrated and explained in this thesis project.

not) will receive follow-up counseling and care from LMG as needed. Feedback from volunteer clients will be recorded, influencing the spiritual safety scores and final safety summaries of the churches with whom LMG partners during this project.

LMG has given its full support for this action research thesis, including providing material and financial support by allowing the researcher to see pro-bono clients who volunteer for the research study. The three Pastoral Counseling and Care department employees, including the researcher, have agreed to provide qualified volunteers and material aid to support wounded Christians returning home to church if necessary.

Problem Presented

Currently, one hundred percent of self-identified Christian clients that Life Management Group (LMG) receives for pastoral counseling state that they are not active in any local faith community since encountering spiritual abuse. The affected clients cite symptoms consistent with spiritual abuse within their first several sessions as the reason for their abstinence from local church attendance or participation in any faith-based activity, including personal devotion and prayer. This statistic is alarming, given the biblical instruction to gather with other believers. The author of Hebrews states, "And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Heb 10:24-25, New American Standard Bible, 1995). However, in a case where the church abused someone, it is not responsible behavior for a religious leader to demand an abused individual's attendance, sometimes threatening to withhold sacerdotal services or even basic pastoral counseling to the wounded believer until they return and repent of their unbelief. Demands such as these by clergy may easily be perceived as manipulation and power and control abuse, leaving the member

feeling a deep sense of shame for their failure to repent and submit (in the name of God) to more abuse. This is a real example of the dozens of stories of spiritual abuse that clients in the care of LMG's pastoral care department reference, which leaves the victim feeling manipulated, coerced, and confused. The sense of guilt and shame hanging around the neck of these victims is so heavy that they blame themselves for falling away from God but often do not know why. Wounded Christians are wearing the shame of the abuser and internalizing it as their own. It is time to address spiritual abuse in Augusta, Georgia, and begin the process of healing and reconciling wounded Christians to safe local church fellowships. The problem is that Life Management Group lacks a method to responsibly reconcile spiritually abused Christian clients to the local church.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this DMIN action research project is to develop a therapeutic process that provides holistic soul care for spiritually abused Christians and subsequently analyze the success of participants' reintegration with local churches while participating in such a therapeutic process. The problem of spiritual abuse afflicts approximately 60 percent of the hundreds of clients within LMG's pastoral counseling department. During intake and initial counseling, one hundred percent of these clients self-disclose that they abstain from faith-based activities due to a spiritual wound received from a religious leader, organization, culture, or religious family member. This researcher posits that when Christians do not attend church, and when LMG pastoral counseling staff counsels someone who is an unbeliever, they are generally more difficult to counsel, which in turn leads to much longer therapeutic recovery times due to spiritual dissonance from God and the church, lack of social support, and lack of spiritual and personal identity (i.e., low self-esteem or low self-worth). A Christian or unbeliever who does

not know who they are in Christ is generally more difficult to treat because they have a destroyed, weak, or absent spiritual foundation to build upon. Clients who build their metaphorical house (identity) on sand instead of rock (Matt 7:24-27) become long-term clients of LMG and become increasingly codependent on their counselors to prop up their self-esteem week after week from the stressors of the world's floods and winds (Matt 7:27). While it is good to seek out pastoral and professional counselors when needed, the counselor cannot become the client's pastor in a counseling setting; this is ethically forbidden in professional pastoral counseling;[12] this is also not what Jesus and the apostles had in mind for the church. Christians need to be in fellowship with the saints and commune with the Holy Spirit (Matt 18:19-20) regularly (Heb 10:25). When Christians attend a spiritually healthy and safe church, the pastor of the church and the pastoral counselor of the client incur less stress when dealing with the individual, as a therapeutic alliance evolves between pastor and pastoral counselor. Historically, the researcher observes that clients of LMG who integrate into healthy churches terminate the counseling relationship faster than those who are not active in church fellowship.

It is common for spiritual abuse clients suffering at the hands of a narcissistic spiritual abuser to quickly develop codependency on the abuser, much akin to Stockholm Syndrome, whereby the victim copes with the abusive situation and loss of control by developing positive feelings toward their captors or abusers over time.[13] Some coping codependency needs are so severe that these individuals are eligible to be diagnosed with Dependent Personality Disorder, one of ten specific personality disorders wherein the brain has been "rewired" to cope and

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[12] Timothy E Clinton, et al., *American Association of Christian Counselors: AACC Code of Ethics* (2014), 13-20.

[13] "Stockholm Syndrome," The Cleveland Clinic, accessed on August 27, 2022. https://www.my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/22387-stockholm-syndrome.

survive abuse by going along to get along.[14] Most, if not all, dependency issues stem from any

number of forms of abuse, and the abused individuals subsequently experience a systematic

degradation of who they are as a person and who they are in Christ. Abused individuals become

increasingly dependent on someone or something to fill their new identity void as they lose more

and more control in an abusive situation. Victims of abuse often develop codependent addictive

behaviors to drugs, alcohol, sex, people-pleasing, avoidant behaviors, lying, and anger, which

leads to maladaptive biopsychosocial dependencies which conflict with biblical rules for

conduct, obedience, and fellowship. Christians in a codependent state are prone to violate Paul's

command in Romans 6:12-14, wherein the believer is not to allow sin to reign in one's mortal

body so that the individual obeys its lusts. Once someone's identity is shattered, the individual

will look for a coping mechanism or maladaptive behavior to fill the wounded void, hoping that

these behaviors will provide a panacea for the identity crisis they are experiencing. However,

over time as these maladaptive behaviors become habitual, the behaviors will serve to identify

and inform the individual and others who they are and how they will behave (e.g., "he's just a

junkie" or "she's just a drunk").

Clergy and pastoral counselors benefit from Christians being in church, as the temptation

to become codependent on people or things may be gently confronted by the Holy Spirit and the

body of Christ; therefore, the pastoral or professional counselor saves the recovering victim

money, time, and frustration in counseling sessions as the client has already established a moral

and spiritual compass and foundation (the church) to aid in recovery. The Apostle James

reinforces the importance of church fellowship on the road to one's healing: "Therefore confess

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[14] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Arlington: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), 645-6, 675-8.

your sins one to another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective

prayer of the righteous man can accomplish much" (Jas 5:16, NASB95).

Basic Assumptions

This researcher maintains a fundamental assumption that the entire world suffered

spiritual trauma during the Fall of humankind, detailed in Genesis 3. The violent rupture of the

relationship between God and humanity involves shame (Gen 2:25; 3:7), disrupted intimacy and

trust between man and woman (Gen 3:12-13), and divine curses upon mankind and creation,

which have temporal and long-lasting consequences (Gen 3:14-19). Adam and Eve traded

fellowship with God and their place of privilege for homelessness and poverty, destined to scrap

and toil for the remainder of their days (Gen 23-24). The story of the Fall checks the diagnostic

boxes for complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD) with every compounding day that

passes apart from the Garden of Eden and the manifest presence of God, in which they were

created to live.

While there is the opportunity for any church leader to lie to the researcher, to cover for

any personal insecurity or failure in ministry, it is a basic assumption that most, if not all,

participants will be honest about their church culture and a church's preparedness to minister to

wounded sheep. A church leader who presents his or her church as perfectly spiritually safe will

raise suspicion to the researcher. There is no perfect church, and leaders fail at some point in

leadership or followership. Insecure leaders may present a perfect church to avoid feeling a sense

of failure at some level. Secure leaders will likely present shortcomings and be receptive to

confronting their needs and flaws. Moreover, clients are assumed to be honest in therapeutic

sessions and will not mislead or take advantage of the counselors caring for them.[15] However, in

dealing with victims of abuse, the researcher expects to deal with issues of low self-esteem,

which can be a primary driver toward insecure behaviors such as lying and people-pleasing.

Moreover, it is assumed that the clients who voluntarily participate in therapeutic sessions and

the process of reconciling with a local church desire to heal from their spiritual and religious

trauma.

Finally, it is assumed that not all therapeutic interventions or church reconciliation

attempts will be successful. It is, therefore, incumbent upon the researcher to include this

expectation at the beginning of the client-counselor relationships. Second, the researcher is

prepared to conduct additional therapeutic sessions with clients who fail with any church

integration venture. Given the assumption that all participating clients are dealing with spiritual

and religious shame at some level, the last thing that this researcher wants to do is retraumatize

clients in reckless or multiple failed attempts at reintegrating with a local church. Feedback from

clients who struggle to reintegrate with a local church will be documented, and the client will be

validated and encouraged for any reason the client perceives the attempt failed.

Definitions

Different types of abuse have received cursory mentions thus far. It is appropriate to

ensure an understanding of the prevailing types of abuse that are most often addressed in a

professional pastoral counseling setting, as these words and concepts are utilized throughout this

project. Defining the clinical-in-nature types of abuse in specific terms adds an appropriate

urgency to the problem of church abuse. Clear definitions inform the project and the reader on

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[15] This researcher has agreed to provide pro bono services and follow-up for client participants. While unlikely, there is a potential for clients to take advantage of pro bono services and place a counselor, therapist, or researcher in situations where normal and ethical payment arrangements may need to be enforced. There are ethical measures in place that will be communicated to client participants and church leaders to protect against this liability.

how to identify best practices in treating those who have been victimized. Terms that receive added clarity are defined in the subsections that follow.

Abuse. The process whereby an individual or organization asserts and maintains power and control over another in such a way that injures or damages the dignity and God-given worth of the victim.[16] Whether the abuse is physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, narcissistic, or sexual, the body, soul, and spirit are all negatively impacted.[17] Abuse knows no boundaries and does not discriminate in terms of race, gender, age, religion, or economic status; damage from abuse cuts across every culture and can affect anyone.

Codependency. A behavior that is "characterized by an individual participating in a relationship that is one-sided; that has a complete lack of mutual respect; and in which one of the individuals nearly relies completely on the other to meet one hundred percent of their emotional needs."[18]

Complex PTSD. A diagnosis is necessary for "repeated and ongoing (complex) trauma, which can cause more severe psychological harm than the single occurrence types of events that typically lead to PTSD."[19] Ordeals include "domestic violence or abuse, human trafficking, neglect during childhood, extremely chaotic and/or violent environments, such as living in a nation at war, and being a refugee."[20] The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes C-PTSD as its own disorder that includes all symptoms of PTSD plus 1) "Inability to manage or

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[16] June Hunt, "Abuse" in *The Popular Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling*, eds, Tim Clinton and Ron Hawkins (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2011), 176.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Don Barlow, *Recovery from Gaslighting and Narcissistic Abuse, Codependency, and Complex PTSD* (Orlando, FL: Road to Tranquility, 2021), 200.

[19] Ibid., 405-6.

[20] Ibid.

control the duration or intensity of 'negative' emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness (known as affect dysregulation), 2) Negative concept of themselves, and 3) Inability to trust others."[21]

Emotional Abuse. An ongoing pattern of destructive behaviors used to gain and maintain power and control in a relationship for one's own benefit at the victim's expense.[22] Emotional abuse may also be seen as the "unseen fallout from all other forms of abuse – physical, mental, verbal, sexual, and spiritual."[23] Emotional abuse, narcissistic abuse, and psychological mistreatment are terms often utilized as synonymous.

Gaslighting. The sinister and intentional attempt of an abuser to distort reality, often with trivial lies and wrongdoings, to bring about a reaction and then cruelly deny that it ever took place; history has been rewritten.[24] Over time, gaslighting erodes one's confidence, self-worth, sanity, and reality; eventually, the victim questions their identity.[25]

Narcissistic Abuse. A malignant pattern of overt or covert abuse marked by manipulation, exploitation, deceitfulness, and lack of empathy in close interpersonal relationships.[26] Chronic abuse by a narcissistic abuser can lead to symptoms of PTSD, C-PTSD, and Narcissistic Victim Syndrome (NVS). Narcissistic abuse is hallmarked by a three-phase repetitive assault cycle that repeats as often as is necessary to diminish one's personhood to the point where the victim

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[21] Barlow, *Recovery from Gaslighting and Narcissistic Abuse*, 410-11

[22] David Hawkins, and Sharma Kimbrough, "Hope and Healing for the Narcissistic and Emotionally Abusive Marriage (HHEA)." Lecture presented at Light University, Forest, Virginia, 2020. https://aacc.talentlms.com/unit/view/id:5952.

[23] Hunt, "Abuse," 176.

[24] Jackson MacKenzie, *Psychopath Free: Recovering from Emotionally Abusive Relationships with Narcissists, Sociopaths, and Other Toxic People* (New York, NY: Berkley Books, 2015), 51-2.

[25] Barlow, *Recovery from Gaslighting and Narcissistic Abuse*, 39.

[26] Shahida Arabi, *Power: Surviving and Thriving After Narcissistic Abuse* (Brooklyn, NY: Thought Catalog Books, 2017), 7.

becomes co-dependent on the abuser. The three phases of traditional narcissistic abuse are idealization, devaluation, and discard.[27]

Psychosomatic (Trauma Response) Symptoms. The process whereby psychological stress induces a variety of physiological responses, most of which are mediated by the sympathetic nervous system, such as increased body temperature, pulse rate, and blood pressure.[28] Psychological stress induces augmented cardiovascular responses in patients with PTSD, panic disorder, and anxiety disorders.[29] Individuals who have PTSD or C-PTSD often experience somatization or the appearance of physical reactions to their trauma.[30]

Reconciliation. "The work of those who meditate, [like] statesmen who bring together warring nations or counselors who seek to save a marriage."[31] In context, when Paul uses the phrase "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18, NASB95), he applies it not to the reconciliation between people with one another but to their reconciliation with God. Subsequent peace is made between individuals because, for Paul, peace with God will always precede peace with others.[32]

Spiritual Abuse. "The mistreatment of a person by someone in a position of spiritual authority, diminishing that person's spiritual vitality and growth."[33] Akin to the general concept of abuse, the goal to obtain control over another, such as a religious leader who uses manipulation to compel attendance, uses guilt and shame to get people to give more money, or

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[27] Arabi, *Power: Surviving and Thriving After Narcissistic Abuse*, 8.

[28] Kazuhiro Nakamura, and Shaun F. Morrison, "Central Sympathetic Network for Thermoregulatory Responses to Psychological Stress." *Autonomic Neuroscience: Basic and Clinical* 237 (2022), accessed September 2, 2022, https://www.clinicalkey.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/#!/content/journal/1-s2.0-S156607021001148X.

[29] Nakamura, and Morrison, "Central Sympathetic Network for Thermoregulatory Responses to Psychological Stress."

[30] Barlow, *Recovery from Gaslighting and Narcissistic Abuse*, 410.

[31] Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching, eds. James Luther Mays, and Patrick D. Miller, Jr (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 58.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Hunt, "Abuse," 177.

takes sexual advantage of another person in the name of comfort, compassion, or right, and accuses those who disagree with them as the victim being rebellious against God or demanding absolute obedience despite the biblical context.[34]

Trauma. An experience that produces "a semi-permanent change in the person's nervous system due to a psychological or physical injury or event."[35] The effect of trauma is, therefore, strong enough to alter the person's body and psyche and is not just caused by a brief pang of despair, sadness, or emotional distress. Traumatic events include divorce, job loss, family/parental abandonment, abuse, assault, childbirth, surgery complications, incarceration, witnessing a crime, death, or other violence.[36]

Limitations

This DMIN action research project anticipates encountering constraints beyond the researcher's control. During the church interview phase of this project, it is expected that not all churches that are contacted will participate in an interview or partnership. Some staff may be too busy, or they will not see the benefit of partnering with LMG for this project, or they may choose not to have their dirty laundry aired to an outsider. Five churches in the researchable area are known by the researcher for abusing their flock; they are historically resistant to outside counsel, despite unknowingly sending many wounded Christians to LMG for spiritual abuse counseling.[37] This researcher will contact what are seen as abusive and change-resistant churches; however, with these churches, there is an expectation that partnerships will not be achieved.

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[34] Hunt, "Abuse," 177.

[35] Barlow, *Recovery from Gaslighting and Narcissistic Abuse*, 398.

[36] Ibid.

[37] The actual names of all churches that this action research encounters will not be divulged to ensure that the reputation of the local church is safe from injury caused by this research. It is not the goal of this research to injure any church with the analysis presented by this project.

This researcher anticipates that some client participants may leave the study or LMG prematurely for reasons outside the researcher's control. Next, despite church staff interviews that may give the appearance of safety to the researcher, churches and staff may lie during the initial interview process, which may result in good faith client referrals from LMG that attempt to integrate into a disguised or covert toxic church environment. The premise is that if a church leader lies to the researcher, they will lie, gaslight, and otherwise spiritually abuse the client seeking a safe church home. If this happens during this project and is discovered, all ties within this project will be severed with the offending church or church staff member, and care will be rendered to a potentially wounded and retraumatized client.

Other limitations may include initial church interviews with absent church-internal subject matter experts and decision-makers, such as elders, for example, in a congregational governance model where elders are ordained and carry significant authority in the church. Additionally, those deemed by leadership as a liability that may tell hidden truths about the church culture may be excluded from these interviews for the sake of the church saving face in front of the researcher. Initial interviews may not lead to second or third meetings or phone conferences, where trust and rapport may be further established for the good of referred clients. This would be unfortunate if churches do not agree to keep in touch with LMG, as counselors need a place to send spiritually abused individuals. This project aims to reintegrate spiritually abused Christians into safe churches; however, it is an expectation that the researcher and LMG will build long-term relationships with some local churches.

Once a volunteer client begins the integration process into a church, it is optimal for the researcher to have transparent and ongoing contact with leaders in the church that are overseeing the client's integration, knowingly or unknowingly. If a church leader does not want to discuss

the progress of the client after the fact, this would be unfortunate as partnering with cooperative and communicative churches will provide an ideal relationship to ensure clients are being appropriately integrated, especially where church staff counseling knowledge and application may need to be supplemented by the researcher or LMG staff for the good of the client.

A final limitation is the legal, ethical, and moral prohibition to sharing participant-client information revealed to LMG staff with any local church leadership. All information shared with the researcher or any counselor at LMG is protected by state and federal laws, codes of ethics, credentialing board confidentiality regulations, and clergy-confidential limitations under church and counseling ethical and legal practices. Under no circumstances will the researcher or any counselor at LMG share protected and confidential information.[38]

Delimitations

Significant legal challenges present when interacting with minors; therefore, the first of several delimitations is excluding any minor child participating in this program. LMG does employ licensed child psychologists, social workers, and parenting experts; therefore, if these additional resources are required at an individual level, they are available through an LMG-specific adult consent for the minor child. However, for this study, children will not be considered eligible participants, as considerations, resources, and allowances for developmental psychology will overwhelm the scope of this study. As such, any adult participant who decides to incorporate their child in church attendance will do so at their own discretion and risk.

The eligible research area will be limited to the Greater Augusta municipal area, commonly known as the Central Savannah River Area (CSRA). The research footprint will

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[38] Release of information (ROI) requests are commonly used in medical and mental health practices and other medical entities to share information with medical or mental health providers who have a specific need to know for the benefit of medical or psychological care; however, in this study, releases of information and any confidential information sharing with churches, staff, or religious organizations is strictly prohibited.

therefore include any volunteer church within the city limits of Augusta, Evans, Martinez, Grovetown, and North Augusta, corporately known as Augusta or Greater Augusta. Furthermore, the action research will only focus on Christian churches in Augusta, regardless of denomination (e.g., Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal Holiness, Non-Denominational, etc.). There is a swath of synagogues, Hindu and Buddhist temples, Freemason lodges and temples, Jehovah's Witnesses worship centers, Islamic centers, and other religious organizations in the area; however, these lie outside of the scope of this project. Any client requesting reconciliation to a religious faith other than Christianity will be declined participation in this project. However, these individuals will be eligible for any professional counseling services that LMG provides to assist in their desire to reintegrate with their faith tradition.

This researcher retains the right to decline or terminate client participation in LMG's services or participation in this action research if the client lies to the researcher; however, certain personality disorders rooted in trauma may cause a client to lie chronically, and these symptoms and habits related to surviving abuse will be considered prior to client expulsion from the project. Moreover, the researcher retains the right to decline or excuse any client-volunteer based on any unmanageable mental health disorder that may require higher levels of care or prerequisite care. Examples of unmanageable disorders include but are not limited to, untreated schizophrenia, psychopathy, sociopathy, bipolar disorder, overtly abusive narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), and antisocial personality disorder. Other situations that may prohibit client participation in this study are violent outbursts, ongoing significant criminal activities, substance abuse and addiction with no desire to cease, certain legal liabilities or actions, or medically non-compliant individuals that may jeopardize the safety of anyone involved in the project. All

potential disqualifying situations, actions, or medical conditions will be addressed and documented case by case.

Finally, the researcher has imposed a maximum limit of participating clients and churches for this action research. The researcher determines that allowing more than fifteen individual or family participant clients or more than twelve church partners will overwhelm the available resources to conduct quality action research.

Thesis Statement

Like any other institution or individual, the church can wound people. The clergy is often not equipped with the psychological, emotional, and spiritual tools that counselors have to appropriately bind the trauma wounds caused by spiritually abusive leaders, organizations, and cultures. In concert with LMG, this project is committed to taking participants through spiritual abuse recovery while simultaneously monitoring the success of these individuals as they attempt reintegration into a spiritually safe church. It is anticipated that most participants in LMG's therapeutic process will succeed in finding a spiritually safe church when paired with vetted churches and other formalized parachurch ministry organizations that provide regular fellowship for believers (i.e., United States Internal Revenue Service (IRS)-recognized 501(c)3 religious corporations and Georgia state-recognized non-profit corporations).

LMG's pastoral counseling department launched the initiative to reconcile wounded believers back to the church with the understanding that LMG is doing its part to fulfill the law of Christ as Paul spoke to the Galatians: "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:1-2, NASB95). God designed humankind to be in a relationship with Himself and with

believers. Therefore, fellowship with the saints is not optional for the Christian who is

commanded to thrive in love for God, others, and self (Josh 23:11; Deut 11:1, 30:6; Matt 22:37-

40). All believers are to evolve into Christlikeness while in a relationship with God and others; it

is a lifelong journey that requires the fellowship of the saints.[39] If clients participate in Life

Management Group's therapeutic process, then these individuals will be successful in

reintegrating into fellowship with a local church.

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[39] Julie A. Larson, "Community Relational Soul Care: A Transformational Paradigm for Restoring God's People to Spiritual Vitality" (DMin thesis, Liberty University, 2017), 11, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

From the grand entrance of the serpent on Eden's stage (Gen 3:1) to the present-day

religious leader behind the pulpit secretly abusing his family, there is no shortage of tales

concerning spiritual abuse wielded at the hands of wayward clergy, ecclesial organizations, and

toxic religious cultures. From viral media scandals involving the fall of celebrity pastors and

staff; to the abused spouse coerced into staying in an abusive marriage in a pastoral counseling

session, to the bankrupt, yet dutiful, mother of three in the back row of the cathedral being

emotionally manipulated from the pulpit (in the name of God) to give her last dollars to the

church instead of feeding her children or paying the power bill[1] to the slanderous gossiper who

eviscerates his or her pastor's sermon over Sunday lunch with family and other church members.

Spiritual abuse is everywhere and permeates all denominations, religions, and cults.[2]

Spiritual leadership in the church is in crisis and losing credibility in terms of being a safe

place for wounded individuals to go. Dr. Sarah Zylstra concludes in her 2018 survey that clergy

trust has dropped steadily nationwide since 2009, down from a high of 67% in 1985. Pastors are

now seen as less trustworthy than judges (43%), daycare providers (46%), police officers (56%),

pharmacists (62%), medical doctors (65%), grade school teachers (66%), military officers (71%),

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[1] Craig S. Cashwell, and Paula J. Swindle, "When Religion Hurts: Supervising Cases of Religious Abuse," *The Clinical Supervisor* 37, no. 1 (2022): 182-203. Accessed July 4, 2022. https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wcs/u20.

[2] Connie A. Baker, *Traumatized by Religious Abuse: Discover the Cultures and Systems of Religious Abuse and Reclaim Your Personal Power* (Eugene, OR: Luminare Press, 2019), 1.

and nurses (82%).[3] The fact that trust in the clergy is not at the top of this list suggests there is something wrong with how the church administers compassion and skillful healing to those who are desperate, abused, and lost. Fortunately, where the church has not succeeded in addressing abuse or becoming a safe place for the abused, a wealth of valuable research is emerging in professional counseling literature identifying spiritual and religious abuse. The church will benefit from this research as it searches to apply the best analysis and methods to heal and reconcile the wounded and wandering sheep to the congregation of saints.

Literature Review

Spiritual abusers selfishly misuse their ecclesial authority to sinfully manipulate and control others.[4] Sadly, the history of spiritual abuse is a tragic story as old as religion itself.[5] Examples of spiritual abusers abound throughout the Bible and always draw the ire of God, the prophets, religious elders, Jesus, and the Apostles. While the research on spiritual abuse seems adequate in the current literature, it is still an emerging field, most notably in professional clinical counseling, as many clinical psychologists are championing the cause of healing the abused of all kinds, including the spiritual and religiously abused. However, there remains a significant gap in the application when it comes to identifying and treating the full depth and breadth of spiritual abuse. Spiritual abuse (often synonymous with religious abuse) touches every area of our lives, and in turn, these areas all touch one another: mental, spiritual, behavioral,

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[3] Sarah E. Zylstra, "The 8 People Americans Trust More than their Local Pastor," *Christianity Today*, January 5, 2018, https://christianitytoday.com/news/2018/january/8-people-americans-trust-more-than-their-local-pastor.html.

[4] Michael A. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), 28.

[5] Zylstra, "The 8 People Americans Trust More than their Local Pastor."

emotional, relational, and physical.[6] What does one do with a spiritually abused individual, couple, or family once the abuse is identified, knowing that the abuse may touch every aspect of the victim? This author sees opportunities to bridge this application gap, especially in Augusta, Georgia, "the city of one thousand churches,"[7] by partnering with licensed and capable pastoral and professional counselors; LMG is uniquely poised to meet this need, given its complement of qualified professionals. Clinical insights and research from professionals in the field of psychology and theology will be consulted in this literature review to bridge the gap in applying what many clergy members need to know about spiritual abuse to heal the abused victim and responsibly usher abused Christians back into local church fellowship.

The Apostle Paul defines the mission of the Christian in first century Corinth as "the ministry of reconciliation," committed to the church by Jesus himself (2 Cor 5:16-21, NASB95). Some may understand Jesus' and Paul's directive in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 as spiritually reconciling the lost to God through the salvation offered in Christ; that is undoubtedly true; however, this view is incomplete. In the model given to the church, The Good Shepherd leaves the secure ninety-nine sheep to save the one who is wandering in the wilderness (Matt 18:12-14). The Shepherd does not just find the sheep lost and alone in the briars and thickets and lead the bloody and bruised sheep in the thirty-second prayer of salvation and then walk away, leaving the sheep in the same predicament it was found. No, the Good Shepherd finds the sheep and brings them back to green pastures, cleans them up, mends any wounds, nourishes them to health, restores them to fellowship, and prepares them to walk in righteous paths (Ps 23).

It is an admirable task to recognize, identify, and theorize about abuse; it is quite another venture to combine and apply biblical principles with therapeutic methods on behalf of the

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[6] Baker, *Traumatized by Religious Abuse*, 169-70.

[7] Citizens of Augusta, Georgia, often speak this local colloquialism.

abused. In this review, information and application methods are reviewed. The former informs the latter to craft a biblically and professionally sound approach to heal the spiritually abused and responsibly usher them back to Christian fellowship. Compassionate shepherds are a treasure in the body of Christ. Likewise, the narcissistically abusing shepherd is a danger to it.[8] This project aims to identify and synthesize substantive and relevant current literature and establish a non-burdensome approach to help the local church of Augusta become aware of the abuse that may be present in their organization. Second, this project will detail a pastoral counseling approach with practical applications learned from best practices and action research to responsibly lead victims to recovery alongside compassionate leaders of local churches. Third, this review will seek the most current information available regarding spiritual abuse and will fuse this knowledge with best practices from proven professional counseling techniques and methods, subsequently monitoring the rehabilitation of wounded Christians as they reintegrate into vetted, safe, loving, and compassionate churches that Jesus and the early disciples had in mind.[9]

The Anatomy of Spiritual Abuse

Connie Baker, a clinical supervisor and licensed professional counselor (LPC), provides a modern wealth of perspective regarding her experience with clients who present with spiritual and religious abuse. Baker posits that abuse, at its core, consists of a real or perceived imbalance of power and control that favors one person over another, injuring the individual with less power.[10] Baker's position is consistent with DeGroat's in that spiritual abuse is equally as

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[8] Charles DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020), 69.

[9] Matthew 22:36-40 and 1 Corinthians 13 reveal the love motivation the church must follow to accomplish its mission given by Jesus in Matthew 28:18ff, wherein Jesus gives the remaining eleven disciples the "Great Commission."

[10] Baker, *Traumatized by Religious Abuse*, 27.

damaging to the human soul as other forms of abuse, including physical, psychological,

narcissistic, emotional, and social.[11,12] In a religious setting, abusive power is directly connected

to religious belief. It can be held by one clerical leader or a large or small group of religious

people, or it can be implicit in the rules of the whole religious organization.[13,14] In other words,

spiritual abuse may be perpetrated by any spiritual individual, group, or organization and the

products of that organization: like the church-going authoritarian husband and father who

physically, verbally, and emotionally abuses his wife and children behind closed doors in the

name of the godly (spiritual) submission formula found in Ephesians 5:22-6:9. In this example of

domestic abuse, the erroneous application of Ephesians 5:22-6:9 may lead to all manner of abuse

in the name of biblical submission. The end goal of spiritual abuse is to gain control and

compliance over those the spiritual leader is entrusted to serve,[15] which leaves the victim of

spiritual abuse injured to the soul. Soul wounds affect the deepest and most intimate aspects of a

person's being, especially when abuse is perpetrated in the name of God.[16] The victim in these

cases often conflates their view of God with the experience at the hand of their spiritual abuser;[17]

thus, "if dad is an abuser, so is God. Therefore, God is not safe."

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[11] DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 27.

[12] For clarity, modern research and counseling practice often equate *spiritual* and *religious* abuse as synonymous. Similarly, *narcissistic* and *emotional* abuse are often synonymous, with certain variables and symptomatic and diagnostic nuances added to abusers who suffer from narcissistic personality disorder (NPD).

[13] Cashwell, and Swindle, "When Religion Hurts," 184.

[14] DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 69.

[15] Baker, *Traumatized by Religious Abuse*, 31.

[16] Neil Damgarrd, *Wounded Faith: Understanding and Healing from Spiritual Abuse* (Bonita Springs, FL: ICSA, 2021), 26.

[17] Cheryl L. Johnston, "The Predictive Relationship of Religious Trauma and Spiritual Abuse on Meaning-making, Trust, and Depression" (PhD diss., Northcentral University, 2021), i, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Spiritual abuse often results when a human being sets him or herself up as a selfish god in another person or congregation's life, treating that person or group as an object that must be manipulated to serve the god's needs, agendas, and goals.[18] Once abusive clergy, cultures, and organizations inflict abuse on an individual or group, the victim(s) will, at an emotional and spiritual level, identify religious leaders, people, places, or things as a source of trauma and quite naturally develop a trauma response toward said entities. Much like the victim of sexual assault or physical abuse, the victim may physically react to his or her abuser with trauma responses, such as physically shaking, struggling to breathe, unexpected crying spells, unexplainable anger outbursts, and nausea.[19] Psychosomatic responses such as these typically occur when a victim of spiritual abuse has an encounter with the following: church buildings, cathedrals, mosques, and synagogues; religious services, religious music, the Bible or other sacred texts; specific ideas or words that a previous abuser has spoken, public and private prayer, locations, websites, books, or blogs associated with religion; a pastor or priest; and generally anything to do with one's faith.[20]

<center>Spiritual Abusers are Narcissistic Abusers</center>

Chuck DeGroat, a licensed professional counselor and professor of pastoral care and Christian spirituality at Western Theological Seminary, compliments Baker's clinical perspective. DeGroat likens the spiritual abuser to the narcissistic abuser in that narcissistic pastors are anxious and insecure shepherds who become like the corrupt kings of ancient Israel, whose royal conscience is marked by the abuse of power with the purpose of self-protection

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[18] Kenneth J. Garrett, *In the House of Friends: Understanding and Healing from Spiritual Abuse in Christian Churches* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 26.

[19] Baker, *Traumatized by Religious Abuse*, 30.

[20] Ibid., 30-1.

rather than solidarity and service to the sheep.[21] Moreover, the sheep are not the only casualties

of the spiritual abuser, as narcissistic systems exist for themselves; even though their mission and

purpose statements are filled with the language of selflessness, love, care, justice, and service,

subordinate leaders in the abusive system are at risk. Subordinate leaders may also become

casualties of spiritual abuse as they attempt to get close to the epicenter of leadership, only to

realize they need to forfeit their ecclesial integrity to do so or resign.[22]

       What is narcissistic abuse, why is it important to understand it in relation to spiritual

abuse, and why is it so dangerous to a church? In sum, "not all narcissists are abusers, but all

abusers are narcissists,"[23] according to Dr. David Hawkins, a practicing clinical psychologist,

prolific author, and the Director of the Marriage Recovery Center in Seattle, Washington. Thus,

any individual demonstrating narcissistic traits has the potential to be an abuser, especially if this

individual possesses a bully pulpit or ecclesial authority over an individual or group of people.

Due to this potential, it is incumbent upon the shepherds to learn the ways of the wolf in sheep's

clothing. Regardless of the type of abuse an ecclesial authority figure or organization inflicts, the

abuse type will be captured under the clinical definition of narcissistic abuse. According to

Hawkins, the terms narcissistic abuse and emotional abuse are essentially synonymous.[24]

Emotional abuse may be defined as an ongoing pattern of destructive behaviors used to gain and

maintain power and control in a relationship for one's own benefit at the victim's expense.[25]

Emotional abuse is trauma.[26] In a sense, narcissistic abuse may be considered one of the most

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[21] DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 25.

[22] Ibid., 24.

[23] Hawkins, and Kimbrough, "HHEA."

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

dangerous forms of abuse, as it has the potential to damage the emotions, psyche, body, spirit, and soul; it can erode one's very perception of identity and sanity through the narcissist's favorite weapon: gaslighting. Moreover, narcissistic abuse can fully drain a victim's self-esteem to utter hopelessness, often resulting in physical escape attempts up to and including suicide ideation, attempt, and completion. Any attempt by the victim to confront their narcissistic abuser often results in the abuser denying their own hurtful actions and gaslighting the victim, thus rewriting history to the extent where the victim begins to feel crazy and that everything is their fault. Reality itself comes into question. According to Sharmen Kimbrough, licensed counselor and an expert in narcissistic and emotional abuse, the long-term effects of narcissistic abuse result in 1) depression and withdrawal, 2) low self-esteem, 3) feeling trapped and alone, with increased codependency on the abuser, 4) mind fog and confusion, 5) difficulty regulating emotions, psychosomatic illness, 6) Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,[27] and 7) substance abuse.[28]

<div align="center">Narcissistic Personality Disorder</div>

Psychologists characterize narcissists by their grandiose sense of self-importance, a lack of empathy and care for others, a need for endless admiration, and a belief that they possess some special place in the world and should be recognized as beautiful and unique creatures.[29] Not all narcissists meet the criteria to be diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), which lies at the extreme end of the narcissistic personality spectrum and thus renders the disordered individual dysfunctional compared to a normal personality capable of empathy, contentment, peace, and stable interpersonal relationships built on trust, safety, and intimacy.

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[27] Depending on the duration and repetition of abuse, the victim may develop Complex PTSD (C-PTSD), whereby the victim cannot escape their abuser's repetitive (more than one occurrence) psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical assaults.

[28] Hawkins, and Kimbrough, "HHEA."

[29] Barlow, *Recovery from Gaslighting and Narcissistic Abuse*, 18.

Approximately one in two thousand people have NPD, most of whom are men.[30] However,

experts in psychology, including Hawkins and Kimbrough, state that as much as 20 percent of

the American population meets the diagnostic criteria to be diagnosed with NPD.[31] In many

cases, some individuals may possess certain narcissistic traits and come across as selfish or

manipulative, but they are not necessarily the disordered personality of someone with NPD. The

Mayo Clinic offers a helpful definition: "NPD… is a mental condition in which people have an

inflated sense of their own importance, a deep need for excessive attention and admiration,

troubled relationships, and a lack of empathy for others; but behind the mask of extreme

confidence lies a fragile self-esteem that's vulnerable to the slightest criticism."[32] The

authoritative work for diagnosing mental health conditions in psychology and counseling

disciplines, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*, or *DSM-5*,

describes the individual with NPD as one whose essential features are "a pervasive pattern of

grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by

early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts."[33] An individual qualifies for the diagnosis

of NPD if he or she meets five (or more) of the following criteria:

1) Has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements).
2) Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love.
3) Believes that he or she is "special" and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions).
4) Requires excessive admiration.
5) Has a sense of entitlement (i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations).

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[30] Barlow, *Recovery from Gaslighting and Narcissistic Abuse*, 21.

[31] Hawkins, and Kimbrough, "HHEA."

[32] "Narcissistic Personality Disorder," Mayo Clinic.

[33] *American Psychiatric Association*, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual,* 669.

6) Is interpersonally exploitative (i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends).
7) Lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others.
8) Is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her.
9) Shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.[34]

The *DSM-5* criteria for diagnosing NPD are critical for this review, as abuse takes on many forms and is often undetectable by many in the church due to a lack of psychology and human behavior training in seminary or internal training programs. However, ignorance of abuse cannot remain an excuse to wound the sheep intentionally or unintentionally or ignore their need for protection. Just because one can cite Scripture or identify as a Christian does not exclude him or her from being a narcissistic abuser. It is the Christian narcissist who cites Scripture to gain compliance.[35] This researcher posits that a Christian narcissist can become the most dangerous of all abusers, as they sinfully wield the weapon of Scripture and project spiritual shame to manipulate and gain control of their victims. Christian narcissists have access to the God card, which their victims cannot trump; it is absolute in nature, often utilizing misinterpreted and misapplied Scripture, and results in shutting down any attempt by the victim to gain any moral footing to stand up to their abuser. The selfish drive for importance, many times in the form of coercive control of his or her church, compels the narcissist pastor to surround themselves with admirers and break relationships with those who do not give them the honor and esteem they desire.[36] Narcissists will often gravitate toward enablers and sycophants who will pave their way to power and control or at least not stand in the way of it.[37] For example, the contentious Pauline

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[34] *American Psychiatric Association*, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, 669-70.

[35] Hawkins, and Kimbrough, "HHEA."

[36] Lisa Oakley, and Justin Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures* (London: SPCK, 2019), 42.

[37] Scot McKnight, and Laura Barringer, *A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture That Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2020), 27.

statement, "The women are to keep silent in the churches…" (1 Cor 14:34-35, NASB95) is taken out of context by many pastors in Augusta as carte blanche for male clergy and husbands to control and dominate their congregation, wives, and children. The abuse of women in this context has led to a present-day and ongoing split in the Baptist and Southern Baptist Conventions over the question of ordaining females as clergy. The denominational infighting from this issue leads to broader contention between pastors of different churches in Augusta due to a majority of residents in Augusta identifying as Baptist, and Baptist organizations are very active in the community; thus, the denominational infighting spills into the community.

The overwhelming denominational preference in Augusta, Georgia, is Baptist (26.4%), dwarfing Catholicism's second most preferred denominational preference (8.2%) by 18.2 percent.[38] Methodism (6.9%) and non-denominational affiliation (6.4%) are distant third and fourth preferences.[39] For the pastor sensitive to power and control abuse, telling a woman, or any human for that matter, that they have no voice meets the criteria of emotional abuse, as it is the systematic silencing of her personhood."[40] It does not matter if silencing another human is spiritual in nature or narcissistically abusive in a secular setting; the bottom line is that a person created in the image of God has been silenced and is therefore abused and minimized. Rev. Roy Kendall, Dean of the School of Worship (SOW) in Jerusalem for the last twenty-five years and an internationally respected Jewish scholar, teacher, and diplomat, clarifies that women were required to remain silent in the first-century Corinthian church due to 1) their general inability to read, write, or understand *Torah* because traditionally in Hebrew and Jewish culture, up until the time of the Christian church, the average woman was not taught to read, write, and interpret

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[38] Bestplaces.net/religion/city/georgia/augusta-richmond_county.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Hawkins, and Kimbrough, "HHEA"

Torah; and 2) the early churches of the first century overseen by Paul were small and arranged and constructed in such a way that resembled the synagogues of which he was all too familiar, as a former Pharisee.[41] The traditional synagogue layout consisted of women and girls on one side of the sanctuary, the teacher (Rabbi, pastor) in the middle, and men and boys on the other side of the room, opposite the women and girls. The boys and men had likely already participated in religious, writing, and language studies, as was demanded by Jewish tradition. In contrast, the women and girls were not educated to the same degree, if at all. The layout of the early church in Corinth, coupled with the ignorance of language and *Torah* from the female attendees, lent itself to constant interruption whereby women would ask a lot of questions in the assembly, as they were separated from their husbands and naturally curious about the new subject matter that they were hearing, to include new information regarding Jesus the Messiah and the future Kingdom of God. Thus, Paul wanted the congregation to respect the need for order in the church assembly (1 Cor 14:39-40) and seek clarification of their questions first from their learned husbands at home before interrupting a worship gathering.[42] First Corinthians 14:39-40 therefore, has nothing to do with spiritually and emotionally abusing and silencing women; instead, it is, in context, an example of Paul emphasizing the need for orderly worship in the assembly of the saints.

This author posits that spiritual leaders must prioritize the holistic health of individuals over the delivery of any sermon, the execution of any religious programs, and one's own pursuit of promotion and temporal success. Jesus did not call church leaders to erect large churches or temples and judge the success of ministry by the size of a congregation or the weekly offering.

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[41] Roy Kendall, "Blessing of Jerusalem" (sermon, Gracepoint Ministries, Grovetown, GA, July 10, 2022).

[42] Ibid.

Jesus, instead, called the Apostles to "make disciples" (Matt 28:19a, NASB95). The pastor must ask themselves: Am I building Jesus' kingdom, or my own as I shape my ministry?[43]

Suppose one cannot recognize the practices and symptoms of narcissistic abuse in themselves or their flock. In that case, it is impossible to responsibly reconcile an abuse victim to wholeness and subsequently become an emotionally healthy and thriving disciple. This researcher does not ascribe to the "just pray more and come to church more" philosophy spoken by many spiritual leaders; this philosophy, while not incorrect, is also not complete enough to help a traumatized individual receive often complex holistic healing and can also be perceived by the victim as dismissal. If the perspective that prayer and more church attendance will magically heal the victim of deep spiritual, emotional, psychological, and physical wounds, there is a problem. What happens when the church they attend or the clergy members who lead the church are seen as unsafe, or worse, they are seen as abusers? No matter how well-intentioned, if demands such as "just pray more," "just tithe more," and "just come to church more" are enforced upon a spiritual abuse victim, these demands may have serious consequences for the individual's well-being. For example, the simple act of "just going to church more" can equate to re-traumatization when the church or church leader is perceived as the abuser, much like an abused spouse who reluctantly returns to the fists of their abusive husband or wife. The "just go to church more" statements can be the equivalent of a pastor saying in marriage or family counseling: "I know your husband is cheating on you and physically abusing you, but 'God hates divorce' (Mal 2:16, NASB95), so just hang in there, go to church more, and just pray more, and it will all work out." When a victim seeks help from a spiritual leader and is subsequently overlooked or dismissed with spiritual platitudes, ignorance, or both, secondary traumatic abuse

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[43] Kruger, *Bully Pulpit*, 33-4.

is incurred, as they now feel dismissed and trapped (i.e., Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD)).[44] The message the victim takes away from being dismissed by a spiritual leader is loud and clear: they are invisible, unknown, and their experience doesn't matter."[45] The emotions interpret "I don't matter" and "I will *never* matter." Hopelessness and despair ensue as one's self-worth evaporates.

Gaslighting and Codependency

The term "gaslighting" comes from a 1930s hit play adapted into a couple of movies, the most famous being *Gaslight* featuring Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer, where Charles' character, Gregory, meets and romances the beautiful opera singer Paula. After non-stop wooing, Gregory marries Paula; however, Gregory is a secret killer and must ensure that Paula never finds out about his past. To accomplish this, Gregory convinces her that she is going insane by moving her items and other household items, like brooches and pictures, from where they should be and then making her question if she is losing her mind. She becomes convinced that she cannot remember where she placed items or where items should be on the walls. With a very dirty trick, Gregory made the flames of the house's gas lights dim and brighten as if by magic. Whenever Paula would say something about the lights, Gregory insisted he knew nothing while also removing more and more objects, convincing Paula that she has a bizarre tendency to steal and hide precious objects. As a result, Paula starts to wonder if she is crazy.[46] Gaslighting is an emotional and psychological beating that can leave a victim scarred and uncertain of their own reality for years; it can do horrible things to your stress level, fear, anxiety, and sanity.[47]

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[44] Hawkins, and Kimbrough, "HHEA."

[45] Ibid.

[46] Barlow, *Recovery from Gaslighting and Narcissistic Abuse*, 38-9.

[47] Ibid., 39.

Someone who gaslights another person, such as a child, partner, parishioner, or family member, makes that person question their sanity, memories, and perception of reality. Successful gaslighting ends with one person telling the other what is real, what their opinion should be, and what they should remember.[48] Gaslighting is a weapon. Gaslighting is traumatic. Gaslighting is abuse. Gaslighting causes damage and violates the love and trust one gives to a partner, friend, or trusted colleague. Gaslighting sees an opportunity in one's love and affection and exploits the relationship for personal gain.[49] Gaslighting is a hard-to-recognize cloak-and-dagger approach to abusing one's victim, as it is often inflicted by those who are close and trusted. Gaslighting tends to appear in people who are personality disordered, specifically those with NPD; however, it also appears in psychopaths and sociopaths, who are individuals who cannot empathize with others.[50] A practiced gaslighter has a public and private face, as they always have something to hide, much like the murderous character Gregory.[51]

Over time, gaslighting is a means to gain control of another and creates codependency with another individual or group,[52] which naturally fulfills the ravenous, yet never satisfied, self-esteem void of the gaslighting narcissist, wherein others become dependent on him or her, thus providing validation, admiration, and approval to the abuser's low self-esteem and a protective mechanism to protect what the gaslighter is hiding. Notice the abusive nature of gaslighting wherein self-esteem, approval, admiration, love, trust, sanity, safety, and intimacy are leached from the victim for the benefit of the abuser; this leaves the victim less whole from when the abuser began their sinister work. The victim then becomes codependent on the abuser, and the

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[48] Barlow, *Recovery from Gaslighting and Narcissistic Abuse*, 39-40.

[49] Ibid., 40.

[50] Ibid., 41.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid., 43.

abuser becomes their life source and guide, which is exactly what the gaslighter wants.[53]

Successful gaslighting equates to control over another human being. The leap to liken gaslighting

abuse in interpersonal relationships to spiritual gaslighting by a clergy member over an

individual or group is very short indeed.

<div align="center">Recovery from Spiritual and Narcissistic Abuse</div>

Peter Scazzero, the founder and senior pastor of New Life Church in Queens, New York,

now turned teacher and author of *The Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Discipleship Course* used

by churches worldwide, posits that the wounds that are left untreated and unhealed, open an

individual up to habitual sin against God and others.[54] Becoming emotionally and spiritually

healthy after abuse requires a strong dose of reality, not denial. One who has been abused in the

church or interpersonal relationships must resist the temptation to "just move on" and leave

bleeding emotional wounds untreated. Becoming healthy after abuse requires one to live joyfully

in the present; however, living in the present requires the victim to go back and address the

wounds in order to go forward.[55] However, there is a problem; in general, there is a lack of

understanding in extant literature regarding the impact of spiritual trauma and how to practically

heal and reconcile the victim to the church. This is true according to the most recent medical,

psychological, and theological PhD dissertations and DMIN theses attempting to research the

same topic of spiritual and religious abuse.[56] Applying theoretical best practices to instances of

spiritual abuse must be done to effectively address the abused and determine how to lovingly and

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[53] Hawkins, and Kimbrough, "HHEA."

[54] Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: It's Impossible to be Spiritually Mature While Remaining Emotionally Immature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 89.

[55] Ibid., 71.

[56] Johnston "The Predictive Relationship of Religious Trauma and Spiritual Abuse on Meaning-making, Trust, and Depression," i.

responsibly bring them back to church; this is the application gap this project seeks to address in Augusta, Georgia.

Any adult, or child for that matter, reading this may remember their middle school or high school days when memories abound of bullies taking out their own pain on other children and even teachers. The adage, "bullied people, bully people," is an appropriate phrase regarding how abusers spawn more abusers. The deep gouge of self-esteem that abusers violently take from their victims now perpetuates the victim's need to satisfy their new self-esteem void, which makes trauma survivors so frightened and frightening at the same time,[57] much like the schoolyard bully who abuses peers at school during the day while simultaneously being abused by a parent at home at night. Without skillful people noticing and addressing symptoms of abuse, it is possible that an abuse victim can, if left unimpeded, become an abuser themselves, and at best, they become spiritually and emotionally dysregulated, stunted, and immature, with the possibility of exhibiting any number of personality disorders;[58] this is according to licensed forensic psychologist and personality disorder etiology expert, Dr. Shannae Anderson. It is relatively easy to avoid emotional healing because it is hard work that often involves trauma therapy; it is easier to replace the loss of the victim's self-esteem with people, things, addictions, maladaptive behaviors, and by unintentionally (or intentionally) abusing others to maladaptively fulfill one's newfound deep need for validation and esteem. It is easier to ignore and avoid the trauma in the present than to do the hard work of recovery, which takes time, intense vulnerability, and deep self-reflection. The abuse victim must go back in time to move forward. The thought of being vulnerable often invokes fear because the last time the victim was

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[57] Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2014), 83.

[58] Shannae Anderson, "Personality Disorders 2.0" (lecture, Light University, Forest, VA, 2021). https://aacc.talentlms.com/unit/view/id:7543.

vulnerable, they got hurt; yet these very painful violations of our vulnerable past are the wounds

that must be healed.

Pastor, prolific author, and addictions counselor F. Remy Diederich suggests that all

survivors of spiritually abusive people and organizations suffer from PTSD.[59] The *DSM-5*

diagnostic criteria for PTSD are very specific to circumstances, age ranges, duration, and types

of traumas (e.g., sexual trauma, verbal abuse, combat trauma, physical abuse, etc.) that qualify as

PTSD; therefore, detailing all possible diagnostic possibilities, comorbidities, and outcomes here

is unnecessary for this project. Furthermore, suppose an individual does not have a working

understanding of the DSM-5 and how to apply its contents with experience in counseling. In this

case, it is easy to misapply diagnostic criteria and miss potential comorbidities or another correct

diagnosis. Spiritual leaders are wise to refer members of their congregation to trusted

professional licensed counselors and licensed and ordained BCPCs when dealing with trauma-

induced disorders. In some states, BCPCs are not allowed to legally diagnose individuals;

however, a BCPC will likely have a broader network to refer individuals presenting with PTSD

than a clergy member. A synthesized list of common PTSD symptoms that may apply to spiritual

abuse care and recovery are:

1) Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence (or learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend).
2) Presence of one or more of the following intrusion symptoms associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event occurred (memories, dreams, flashbacks (dissociative reactions including loss of awareness of present surroundings).
3) Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred (avoidance of distressing thoughts, memories, or feelings associated with the traumatic event(s); also,

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[59] F. Remy Diederich, *Broken Trust: A Practical Guide to Identify and Recover from Toxic Faith, Toxic Church, and Spiritual Abuse* (Columbia, SC: LifeChange Publishing, 2017), 92.

avoidance of external reminders of the events, such as people, places, conversations, activities, objects, and situations).

4) Negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred (the inability to remember an important aspect of the traumatic events, shame-based reactions to situations, such as "I am bad," "no one can be trusted," "the world is completely dangerous." A persistent negative emotional state; loss of interest in significant activities; feelings of detachment or estrangement from others; inability to experience positive emotions)

5) Marked alterations in arousal and reactivity associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred (Irritable behavior and angry outbursts, verbal or physical is typical; reckless or self-destructive behavior; hypervigilance; exaggerated startle response; problems with concentration; sleep disturbance).

6) Duration of the disturbance is over one month.

7) The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

8) The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., medication, alcohol) or other medical condition.[60]

Understanding PTSD symptoms associated with abuse is essential in identifying potential abuse victims. In cases of narcissistic abuse, victims may begin displaying symptoms of NVS, which is effectively PTSD from narcissistically abusive relationships.[61] Unless clergy members are properly trained and credentialed, they must concede that they are not qualified to treat victims with PTSD, or any other mental health condition for that matter, as attempting to do so is likely unethical and illegal depending on the state in which they attempt an intervention. Therefore, it is incumbent on church leaders to develop a trusted network of compassionate and vetted therapists and counselors who are trained to treat trauma survivors with the compassion of Christ.

Jesse Gill, licensed counselor and contributing author to *Christian Counseling Today*, posits practical steps for those who have been spiritually abused. Gill proposes that the individual, in a clinical relationship with a therapist or pastoral counselor, install healthy and

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[60] American Psychiatric Association*, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, 271-80.

[61] Hawkins, and Kimbrough, "HHEA."

self-affirming boundaries in their life. Boundaries are critical in recovery as they are a protective

wall within the self and between abusive people. Boundaries establish where one individual

ends, and someone else begins.[62] Boundaries also help an abused individual establish what to

take responsibility for in the past and in moving forward.[63] Gill proposes practical steps that are

utilized daily at LMG in several different instances of abuse:

1) The first boundary an individual needs to establish is the ability to define oneself as separate from what happened to them. For example, in a counseling setting, this may come across to the client as "you are not your trauma. You are you. You are special. You are unique." This boundary starts rebuilding individual identity and self-esteem, thus, moving the client away from shame by delivering empathy and perspective.[64]

2) The second boundary one must establish involves taking responsibility for one's own protection and self-care, or in some cases, protecting others, like a child, from further abuse. This step typically includes limiting exposure to one's abuser (this includes clergy, churches, and toxic church culture). Skilled counselors have a vital role in helping clients examine the instinct to return to relationship patterns that are familiar yet harmful.[65]

3) The third boundary is forgiveness – the process of releasing one's right to "get back" at the person who harmed them. This boundary includes the process whereby the victim begins to separate themselves from the unhealthy weight of carrying the anger directed toward the abuser, and the shame is transferred from the abuser to the victim. The abused must lean upon Jesus and those skilled and gifted in healing the soul within the church and in specialty counseling professions.[66]

Dr. Neil Damgaard, prolific author and senior pastor of Dartmouth Bible Church in North

Dartmouth, Massachusetts, posits that there are fourteen features that a spiritually safe church

possesses:

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[62] Jesse W. Gill, "Boundaries and Restoration: Sin, Safety, and Healing." *Christian Counseling Today* 25, no. 4 (2022): 17.

[63] Ibid., 17-19.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.

1) Clear articulation of primary, secondary, and tertiary doctrinal priorities and how leadership and congregation maintain and teach each category; 2) minimization of theological weirdness; 3) ongoing practice of forgiveness; 4) healthy power-sharing among leadership; 5) healthy balance of power and authority between leadership and membership; 6) periodic change of some, if not most, individuals in positions invested with power and influence; 7) openness to questions; 8) healthy communication practices; 9) good balance of formality and informality; 10) allowances for humor; 11) balance of friendliness toward, interest in, and granting space to visitors; 12) expectations governed by graciousness and patience rather than by agenda and productivity; 13) church membership status handle with a light touch; and 14) connection present beyond the local church.[67]

Damgaard offers a practical starting point for those wishing to attempt a meld of practical solutions with pastoral and professional counseling. Theoretically, a notable absence of any of Damgaard's fourteen points of safety will raise questions about the ability of a church to absorb wounded Christians into their congregation. Throughout the discussion of spiritual abuse and recovery, spiritual safety and compassion are bedrock characteristics that Christians, wounded or healthy, seek to find in a church.[68] Damgaard's fourteen points of safety will be relied upon heavily during chapter three to aid churches in Augusta in conceptualizing what a spiritually safe church looks like.

Theological Foundations

Humanity has been plagued by spiritual abuse since the Garden of Eden. Despite receiving a direct command from the Creator to avoid eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3:3), the "crafty" (Gen 3:1, NASB95) serpent infiltrated the Garden and poisoned Eve's psyche with a simple manipulation: "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?" (Gen 3:1b, NASB95). The deceptive re-write of Eve's reality based on God's original command equates to nothing short of malicious gaslighting. Her

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[67] Neil Damgaard, *Wounded Faith: Understanding and Healing from Spiritual Abuse* (Bonita Springs, FL: ICSA, 2021), 214-220.

[68] McKnight, and Barringer, *A Church Called Tov*, 16.

consciousness and view of God are now distorted by the greatest narcissistic abuser ever to exist: the serpent, the masquerading "angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14), Satan.[69] After Eve was gaslit, she doubted herself and her Creator, and she, with eroded confidence in the truth, spread the same doubts and subsequent carnage wrought by sin to Adam and all creation (Gen 3:14-19). In this section, narcissistic abuse, which houses all types of abuse,[70] including spiritual abuse, will be addressed as the anti-God and anti-love infection that it is.

<div align="center">First Things First: God's Nature is the Standard</div>

Like a retail cashier who sees an endless stream of dollar bills and is trained to identify counterfeit money when it is presented, the astute Christian stands poised to recognize when the counterfeit shepherd is passed off as the real thing. The church and individual who "sets [their] minds on the things above, not on the things that are on earth… immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry" (Col 3:2, 5b, NASB95) stand uniquely poised to recognize, gently confront, and restore wayward shepherds who enter the sheepfold with significant character flaws and other liable characteristics that would make them ineligible for ministry (see Titus 1:7-8). By setting one's sight on the Good Shepherd, Jesus, the epitome of *agape* love, and the example by which all shepherds are commanded to emulate, leaders in ministry will be more inclined to love as Jesus loves and to fulfill Jesus' command to "love one another, even as I have loved you" (John 13:34, NASB95); resulting in "all men [knowing] that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35, NASB95). The genuine motivation to love one another, propelled by love for God and His people, is the only acceptable motivation for leading God's sheep, for "God is love" (1 John 4:8b,16a, NASB95), and

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[69] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 48.

[70] Hawkins, and Kimbrough, "HHEA."

shepherds must emulate God's standard of love in leading the flock of God. Any shepherd who does not lead out of a motivation to love God and love others leads in a counterfeit manner and sets oneself up to abuse the flock knowingly or unknowingly according to their selfish and unrefined desires to lead. The nature of God is perfect love (1 John 4:18) and is juxtaposed to abusive behavior in Himself and in His expectation for His ordained shepherds. This is what makes spiritual abuse so disturbing and difficult to identify. It happens at the hands of those who are charged with the care and protection of the flock and leaves no physical bruises.[71]

The Complex Nature of Humanity

Spiritual abuse affects one's entire being. Humanity is created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27, 9:6, Col 1:15) with unique features: a mind (Rom 12:1-2, 1 Cor 2:16, 1 Sam 15:29), emotions (Col 8-9, 12-13; Gal 5:19-23), a physical body (Gen 1:26-27), and spirit (Gen 1:7, Gal 5:18, 25; 8:14). The Bible repeatedly warns against the misuse of spiritual authority (Matt 20:25; 1 Tim 3:3; 1 Pet 5:3) due to the fallen nature of mankind and one's propensity to lead out of selfish desire and abusive application of Hebrews 13:17, wherein church members are clearly called to submit to spiritual authority. Because of God's design for believers to submit to a spiritual leader appointed over them, a wayward shepherd possesses a naturally bully pulpit if the shepherd's heart wanders from God's design for shepherding. According to Kruger, spiritual abuse is not as black-and-white as other forms of abuse, which is why so few pastors are held accountable for it; however, if one is spiritually abused, the holistic features of man, including the mind, emotions, and physical body also experience damage.[72] In the name of God, the spiritual abuser, at his or her core, leverages his or her spiritual authority to manipulate the entire

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[71] Kruger, *Bully Pulpit*, 2.

[72] Ibid., 38.

spectrum of humanity: the mind and its thinking, the emotions and feelings, the mouth and its words, and the body and physical actions. Total narcissistic control of another's thoughts and behaviors is the goal of a spiritual abuser, violating the freedom of will and the dignity of mankind afforded by God's grace and by Jesus' selfless sacrifice (Gal 5:1, Matt 23:10).

<div align="center">The Good Shepherd</div>

The parable of the lost sheep highlights the wide scope of God's reconciliatory grace toward the wandering believer in Matthew's gospel, as well as the lost sinner found in Luke's gospel (Matt 18:12-14; Luke 15:3-7).[73, 74] Several Psalms link the journey that believers (sheep) make on the pilgrimages to the temple year after year (Ps 28:2, 9; 74:1; 79:13; 95:7 100:3-4). Perhaps during the pilgrimage festivals, there was a conception of God as a shepherd gathering his people as sheep into His temple, which acts as a sheepfold.[75] Jesus would have made these same journeys in his lifetime. Furthermore, the temple is designated as an "abode," a term associated with the abode of the shepherd and the sheep (Hebrew *nwh*, related to the same term for pastures in Psalm 23:2).[76]

Psalm 23, written by David, "a man after My heart" (Acts 13:22b, NASB95),[77] is a favorite psalm for many. Psalm 23 depicts an intimate relationship with the Lord, who is metaphorically depicted as a shepherd and His sheep. In this psalm, God, the Good Shepherd, is described as One who provides protection, care, restoration, favor, and providence to the sheep

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[73] Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, 158.

[74] David A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 277.

[75] Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms*. New International Biblical Commentary, ed. Robert L. Hubbard Jr., and Robert K. Johnston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 123.

[76] Ibid., 134.

[77] See also 1 Samuel 13:14.

on their journey on "paths of righteousness for His name's sake" (Ps 23:3). As a result of God's love toward His flock, the Psalter records the only proper response to God as the Good Shepherd: worship and praise from humanity that is beyond the self and is oriented toward God in loving pursuit of His presence.[78] Church leaders who fix God as their priority in worship will be less likely to abuse the sheep, as the sheep are His.

<div align="center">Jesus as Helper</div>

The Apostle John details the lengths to which Jesus goes and will go to ensure the ongoing help and comfort of His sheep after His crucifixion and ascension. Jesus states, "I will ask the Father and he will give you another *Helper*, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth…" (John 14:16a, NASB95). The term *Helper* in John 14:16 comes from the translation of the Greek word *parakletos*, often interpreted as "one called alongside to help" or "righteous advocate," as the latter refers to Jesus specifically in 1 John 2:1.[79] In both instances (John 14:16a and 1 John 2:1), the term *parakletos* is used to describe Jesus. The context of John 14 bespeaks an interim scheme until Jesus comes in glory. The Spirit of truth (Holy Spirit) is the Christian's advocate and counselor, who is often experienced through other believers in Christ's church. Through the power of the *Parakletos*, Paul exclaims the importance of the "ministry of reconciliation" given to the church by Jesus himself (2 Cor 5:18-21) and the role that the believer is to assume in one's reconciliatory ministry to the world.

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[78] Nancy L. deClaisse-Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms: A Song from Ancient Israel* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 3.

[79] Gerard Sloyan, *John*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, ed. James L. Mays (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 182.

Abusive Shepherds

There are too many instances of spiritual and narcissistic abuse in the Bible to cover in this section; however, not many instances in Scripture appear to receive God's rebuke, like Ezekiel's prophecy against the shepherds (rulers) of Israel. In the face of an impending invasion from Babylon, Ezekiel's eyes are focused outward on the political and wartime horizon as Babylon conquers nation after nation on their march to Jerusalem.[80] As a contemporary of Jeremiah, the prophet, and after the fall of Jerusalem (Ezek 33), Ezekiel, at the direction of God, turns his attention inward to the abusive shepherds of Israel, rebuking them for selfishly preying on the sheep by hoarding spiritual and material food and wealth for themselves instead of feeding the flock (Ezek 34:2-3a). The rulers are accused of warming themselves with the sheep's wool of those that they have slaughtered (Ezek 34:3b), neglecting the spiritually sick, broken, and diseased (34:4a), and in the process, scattering and dividing the flock with no desire to search for those who get lost; this opens the door wide for spiritual and idolatrous predators that devour the lost flock (34:4b-6). Due to the shepherd's complete failure to shepherd Israel, the nation suffers judgment at the hands of the Babylonian army (Ezek 33). God subsequently sets himself against the rulers of Israel and strips them of their sacred positions and responsibilities (Ezek 34:9-10).

With Jerusalem captured by the Babylonians, the former shepherds of Israel have no way to minister to the flock of God. Instead, God replaces the shepherds' narcissistic and self-serving efforts with a contrasting plan of His own: "Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out as a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep…" (Ezek 34:11-12a, NASB95). God's new plan is often seen to parallel, feature by feature, Jeremiah's pericope on the new covenant (Jer 31:31ff) and foreshadows the coming of Jesus, the

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[80] Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*. (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1967), 190.

Good Shepherd.[81] Much akin to David's beloved Psalm 23, God states in Ezekiel that he will reassemble the scattered sheep and bring them back to their own land. The sheep will graze in security by the flowing rivers and upon the mountains. In contrast to the narcissistically abusive shepherds, God exhibits the qualities of a true shepherd and pastor: "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment" (Ezek 34:16, NASB95). One thing is clear from Ezekiel's writings: God has no tolerance for abusive shepherds.

All four gospel accounts bear witness to the narcissistic infection plaguing the temple in the first century when Jesus arrives for the Passover feast. Immediately after triumphantly entering the city of Jerusalem, Jesus prioritized entering the temple and driving out the dishonest money changers from their stalls (Matt 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-18; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-22). The predatory financial abuses wrought upon the worshipers in the temple by religious leaders are tantamount to the bad behavior of temple leaders found in Jeremiah 7:9-11, whereby Jeremiah accused the religious leaders of theft, murder, adultery, lying, and offering sacrifices to Baal and other gods, only to walk into the temple, give an offering, and declare "We are delivered!" (Jer 7:10, NASB95).[82] Jesus quotes Jeremiah: "Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?" (Jer 7:11, NASB95) to condemn the cancer of idolatry and predatory abuse that is still present in first-century temple worship. Hare posits that Jesus' actions foretell the temple's destruction as part of God's judgment on Israel and are a

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[81] von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, 203.

[82] Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, ed. James L. Mays (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 240-1.

strong rebuke against the commercialization of God's house.[83] Once again, God's judgment appears to follow instances of abuse from God's appointed leaders.[84]

Narcissism is Anti-Christ

Narcissistic and spiritually abusive behaviors utterly oppose God's nature and the standard of conduct that Jesus prescribes for believers. Jesus' two commands serve as the north star for all believers, especially spiritual leaders: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35, NASB95). Moreover, Deuteronomy 6:4-5 comes to life as Jesus echoes the *Shema*, "'You shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all Your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt 22:37-39, NASB95). The *Shema* plays a key role in Jewish life at the time of Jesus and was recited twice a day by pious Jews. If one loves God with heart, soul, and mind, this individual is less likely to harm another's heart, soul, and mind. The three nouns, *heart, soul,* and *mind,* are not separable parts of man but together form the essential nature of man, his ultimate, fundamental loyalty, and not just a superficial allegiance.[85] Moreover, when an abuser victimizes the psyche, emotions, spirit, or body of another, they have wounded the "essential nature" of the victim.

To love one another as Jesus commands (Matt 22:37-39), one must walk in the Spirit and not the flesh. Paul identifies love as the first of nine fruits of the Spirit in his letter to the church in Galatia (Gal 5:22-23); this is consistent with Jesus' command to love God and others and

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[83] Hare, *Matthew*, 241.

[84] According to Dr. David Hawkins (HHEA), financial abuse is always a component of narcissistic abuse.

[85] R.T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. Canon L. Morris (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 319-20.

infers that God's Spirit (presence) active in the life of a believer is necessary to love others well. To restate an earlier point, when an individual is fixated on God as the object of their worship, they are not likely to act abusively in the flesh. Abuse is not borne out of love for God and therefore violates the *Shema* and the commands of Jesus. Abusive behavior is anti-Christ behavior, the antithesis of how a Christ-follower should act if they are walking in the Spirit. If one walks by the Spirit and not the flesh, the Apostle Paul confirms that "you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please" (Gal 5:22-17). The phrase, "the things that you please" is striking, in that all forms of abuse are a quest to gain and maintain power over another; thus, not only is an individual tempted to do as they please,[86] but an abuser does what he or she pleases *and* seeks power and control over others to force thinking and actions as the abuser pleases. Abuse of others is the violent fallout of walking according to the flesh. Love of God and others is the compassionate fallout of walking according to the Spirit.

Finally, narcissistic attitudes, behavior, and abuse are identified in Proverbs chapter six as things the Lord hates. Naturally, anything that God hates may be considered anti-God and anti-Christ. A number will be assigned in parenthesis beside each verse below; this number corresponds with the nine potential diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder (NPD).[87]

> There are six things the Lord hates,
> Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him:
> Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9]
> And hands that shed innocent blood. [6, 7]

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[86] P. Adam McClendon, *Paul's Spirituality in Galatians: A Critique of Contemporary Christian Spiritualities* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 97.

[87] NPD diagnostic criteria are listed on page 31.

A heart that devises wicked plans, [2, 3, 6, 7, 8]
Feet that run rapidly to evil, [6, 7]
A false witness who utters lies, [6]
And one who spreads strife among brothers.[88] [3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9][89]

The spiritual significance of such bad behavior cannot be understated. Just prior to

Proverbs 6:16-19 appears a verse that details the destiny of the one who has "perversity

in [their] heart continually devising evil, who spreads strife" (Prov 6:14, NASB95). The

punishment for such an individual is as follows: "Therefore his calamity will come

suddenly; instantly he will be broken and there will be no healing" (Prov 6:15, NASB95).

Theoretical Foundations

The Apostle Luke describes Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian church in Acts

chapter 20. In his address to the elders that surrounded him, Paul, in clear terms, describes the

mission that they are to carry on without him: "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock,

among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which he

purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28, NASB95). "Be on guard" is sometimes translated

as "keep watch," "take heed," or "pay attention."[90] This is quite different from "be paranoid" or

"suspect everyone" and "maintain control at all costs," even if it means beating the sheep with

the shepherd's crook to make them submit.[91] DeGroat, who offers some of the most pioneering

research on spiritual abuse and narcissism, suggests that it is the emotionally ashamed shepherd

who cannot connect and cannot become vulnerable; he or she is "immovable, untouchable."[92]

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[88] Proverbs 6:16-19, NASB95.

[89] The assignment of numbers is subjective to the researcher and does not suggest that this assignment is a matter of fact. Numerical assignment, in this case, is an attempt to couple clinically significant NPD behaviors to behaviors consistent with Proverbs 6:16-19.

[90] DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 98.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid., 28.

Furthermore, the root of narcissism is *narc* in Greek, which means numbness – a kind of stupor.[93] Emotionally numb shepherds, who are unable to connect on an emotional level with others, feel the temptation to abuse a flock to assert control and power as the flock naturally disconnects from them at an emotional and spiritual level.

A healthy image-bearer of God longs for freedom (Gal 5:1) and naturally senses when they are being abused; they will naturally resist abuse, at least at first. The narcissistic religious leader needs to create an image or illusion of power and invulnerability that ultimately serves to mask a broken shadow self. The narcissistic shepherd must rely on the false mask and will become addicted to it as a panacea that hides the shame and broken sense of self-worth. No one is allowed to see the shadow self; it must be protected at all costs, as the shame it hides is too great for others to see. The narcissistic shepherd will wrongly place his or her self-worth and esteem into a ministry and God-oriented activities instead of relying on God for esteem, effectively using the things of God to run from God.[94] A ministry can therefore become an abuser's source of esteem and worth instead of God, leading the insecure shepherd to foster idolatry in their heart, thus violating the fundamental ancient commandments of God.[95] The abusive shepherd will do anything to keep that ministry, and thus the mask, under control, including allowing their hidden rage and self-hate to turn outward to the flock, resulting in abuse. The violent overflow of idolatry, therefore, leads the shepherd to wound God's flock, a pattern seen too often in Scripture when the heart of the leader turns astray to idols instead of a loving God. The pull toward self and idolatry is so dangerous to self and others that the Apostle John sings the refrain of idolatrous history in a somewhat disjointed verse that concludes his first

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[93] DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 29.

[94] Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 22-4.

[95] see Exodus 20:3, Deuteronomy 4:30, 5:7, 6:4-5 (*Shema*); Isaiah 45:5, 46:9; Judges 10:13.

epistle: "Little children, guard yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21, NASB95). Conversely, it is the emotionally and spiritually healthy shepherd who cares for, trains, and delegates responsibility to people, much as Paul does in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders. The healthy shepherd keeps watch over the flock of God without selfish ambition or hope of personal gain; they connect with the sheep, care for them, feed them, tend their wounds, and humbly lead them on their journeys. The shepherd, therefore, needs to be emotionally and spiritually healthy before tending to the flock.

Once the Damage is Done

When someone experiences spiritual abuse, the fallout is awful and unpredictable. Spiritual trauma affects personalities, physical health, perceptions of reality, and one's sense of security and identity. The reality of God's love for the wounded individual will be questioned once someone has been touched by spiritual abuse. Baker, who serves as DeGroat's contemporary when it comes to merging spiritual, psychological, and clinical effects of narcissistic abuse in the church, states that people's realities and perspectives of God naturally shift after abuse.[96] Because everyone is created differently, personalities react differently to abuse. Baker posits that those who experience religious abuse exhibit one of six shifts in religious belief and activity. These shifts range from the most extreme shift demonstrating full-blown materialistic leanings and belief that there is no god (atheistic); to a milder shift in religious activity that maintains one's faith but cannot participate in organized religious activity.[97] Baker suggests that people exhibit the following perspective shifts after spiritual abuse: 1) atheist (most extreme), 2) agnostic, 3) spiritual, but not religious, 4) spiritual,

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[96] Baker, *Traumatized by Religious Abuse*, 172.

[97] Ibid., 173-4.

incorporating old and new ideas (syncretism), 5) spiritual, but remains in abuse and experiences changes, and 6) remains in active abuse.[98] So, how does one possibly minister to spiritually abused Christians that may appear on any part of this scale, especially on the extreme end where atheism and agnosticism have embraced the victim? The researcher posits that professional pastoral counseling by skilled individuals specializing in abuse and trauma ("trauma-informed") is a logical first step once a spiritual abuse victim is identified. Moreover, pastoral counselors have unique training and skills that make them the perfect hybrid of professional counseling infused with the compassion of Jesus. It is the researcher's opinion that the compassion of Jesus sees the person before seeing the belief system and worldview of the person; therefore, compassionate counselors minister to the person in *agape* love and kindness (Rom 2:4) regardless of if the victim's new beliefs ever change.

In addition to the professional methods that counselors employ, the ministry provided by pastoral counselors is permeated with the fruits of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control" (Gal 5:22-23a, NASB95). This researcher finds in practice that the fruits of the Spirit are often lost in a victim's life due to abuse. The greatest hope of any pastoral counselor is to replace maladaptive behaviors with the fruits of the Spirit: replacing fear with love, depression with joy, anxiety with peace, impulsivity with patience, judgment and defensiveness with kindness, skepticism with goodness, inconsistency with faithfulness, toxic anger with gentleness, and loss of control with self-control. Achieving these goals represents the pinnacle of success for any leader in a church or pastoral counseling practice when dealing with a wounded believer.

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[98] Baker, *Traumatized by Religious Abuse*, 174.

Finally, for a spiritual abuse victim to yield spiritual fruit again, one must be prepared to undergo compassionate and reality-based counseling that prunes away dead branches (failed self-esteem, toxic anger, fear, victim mentality, etc.) with skilled counseling techniques under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in concert with the Word of God. Jesus informs his followers of the critical need to "abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:4-5, NASB95). "Paul does not use the Johannine idiom, but he expresses the same truth when he says, 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2:20), and 'I can do all things in him who strengthens me (Phil 4:13).'"[99] Becoming a victim is terrible; however, the need to remain in the vine is a goal that even a victim must strive to attain. Pastoral counselors stand uniquely poised to be led by the Holy Spirit with the purpose of pruning away dying branches of any trauma that separates a victim from experiencing the love of God, love of self, and love of others. Much like a vine undergoing pruning, the fruit will regrow and thrive in future growing seasons, as clergy and pastoral counselors remain ever-patient as the victim recovers and their fruit and spirit are restored.

Research Distinctives

In a perfect world, counselors would not be needed because there would be no trauma; however, the Kingdom of God is not yet fully realized; thus, a utopian view that the church will never wound its sheep is cognitively dissonant with reality. The action research in this project presents a first-of-its-kind approach whereby a professional counseling practice seeks to heal the

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[99] F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 309.

wounded through counseling, create relationships with local churches, and responsibly escort the wounded back to a safe church where the wounded can thrive. Research has done an excellent job of uncovering the ugly truth about narcissistic, spiritual, and religious abuse within the church. Authors like DeGroat, Kruger, Barlow, Baker, Hawkins, Kimbrough, Henke, Damgaard, Garret, McKnight, Zylstra, and Diederich have led the charge in the last five years when it comes to researching spiritual abuse. Several of these authors have posited logically sound theoretical approaches that identify and may serve to heal wounded individuals. However, to date, there has not been any action research that analyzes the success of counselors who network with local churches and apply existing theories. How effective are the theories and methods that the authors posit? The answer appears unknown at present. This project seeks to address this unknowing gap by analyzing this researcher's success or lack thereof and responsibly reintegrating Christians into local churches by combining posited theories, best practices, and the latest research available with direct action aimed at ushering the spiritually abused back to church.

Conclusion

The problem presented in this action research project is that Life Management Group lacks a method to responsibly reconcile spiritually abused Christian clients to the local church. The purpose of this DMIN action research project is to develop a therapeutic paradigm that provides individual, compassionate, and holistic soul care for spiritually abused Christians and subsequently analyze the success of participants' integration with local churches. This researcher posits that if clients participate in Life Management Group's therapeutic process, then these individuals will be successful in reintegrating into a local fellowship. Upon successful integration, the researcher and the participant jointly obey the writer of Hebrews call to "stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is

the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Heb 10:24-25, NASB95). Regardless of the spiritual traumas that a wounded Christian may have sustained leading to their habitual abstinence from Christian fellowship, the writer of Hebrews makes no allowance for such abstinence. The place of the Christian is in regular fellowship with the saints. Pastoral counselors who are trauma-informed stand uniquely positioned to counsel and care for spiritually wounded clients. By leveraging strategic partnerships with local churches in Augusta, Georgia, proper vetting of prospective churches, and patiently guiding wounded Christians through an individual-focused trauma recovery process, it is believed that the wounded believers in LMG's care will find their way back to Christian fellowship.

Narcissistically abusive church leaders do exist, and they wound others, as Adam and Eve, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Paul, and Jesus knew all too well. The inner rage of a narcissistic leader often, if not always, expresses itself outwardly toward friends, family, and church members. In a perfect world, this would not happen; however, when it does, someone needs to be positioned to pick up the pieces of the wounded in the wake of a narcissistic abuser. The church seems like it would be able to provide quality spiritual trauma recovery; however, if the church is the abuser or is perceived as the abuser, then church-internal counseling is not a safe option for the victim. It is the hope that this action research project will address the vacancy of application in the church regarding spiritual trauma and recovery. Theory, principles, and self-help books and journals are one thing; however, getting into the trenches with wounded clients and systematically analyzing the results of an implemented therapeutic process that leads them back to thriving church fellowship is quite another. It is the hope of this researcher that this project will heal many in Augusta on their journey back to church. It is a further hope that this project

will lay a foundation for ministers and pastoral counselors in Augusta and other cities to initiate their own action research and learn from the therapeutic recommendations provided in this project.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The action research methodology is designed to address the problem presented in chapter one; that is, one hundred percent of self-identified Christian clients that Life Management Group (LMG) receives for pastoral counseling state that they are not active in any local faith community due to abuses of the church whom they perceive has wounded them in some manner. The action research methodology echoes chapter two's theological and theoretical foundations. Chapter three will explain the design of the action research project intervention within the context of a counselor-counselee relationship at LMG in partnership with select local church clergy and leadership teams.

Intervention Design

The intervention design will comprise an action research-based approach that places the researcher within local churches and in the lives of LMG clients to establish best practices for churches to create a spiritually safe environment. Simultaneously, the researcher will provide spiritual safety guidelines and counseling for wounded Christians who desire and attempt integration with local ministries. By serving as a bridge between local ministries and wounded Christians, this researcher anticipates that clients who present with spiritual wounds at LMG will heal through therapeutic intervention and ultimately integrate into a local church wherein they will thrive in Christian fellowship. The intervention design will include initial interviews with church leadership teams and pre-therapeutic client intake screenings, weekly counselor-client check-ins, client journals, weekly or bi-weekly client counseling sessions, and post-intervention

interviews with participating clients and church partners. After conducting action research, this project will culminate with detailed participant data, pragmatic client-church reintegration solutions, and best practices for counselors and clergy that will be learned in the applied intervention processes to bridge the gap between the spiritually abused and safe church homes.

Method

The method of research presented in this project is action research. Stringer defines action research as a research method that, when applied, is a collaborative approach to research that seeks to change the social, organizational, and personal dynamics of the research so that all who participate benefit from its outcomes while, at the same time, succeeds at building positive working relationships and communication styles between research participants and researchers.[1]

The researcher in this project has invested over thirty years in ministry with and to various churches and ministries in the city of Augusta and the Central Savannah River Area. The researcher is also a senior pastor of a well-respected church in the city, which allows organic peer-to-peer discussions to take place many times with former colleagues, peer senior leaders, and their current staff. The researcher recognizes this as a fortuitous situation, as good relationships may pave the way to accessing the philosophy, doctrine, culture, and counseling methods of local churches. The researcher will go to great lengths to ensure that any ministerial relationship, friendship, or acquaintance will not be abused or taken advantage of for the sake of acquiring biased feedback, overlooking instances of abuse, or excusing a church's need for improvement in certain areas identified during this study. The researcher has placed a check and balance procedure in the research, most notably, the assistance of objective peers and colleagues within LMG's pastoral counseling department who volunteered to assist with objectivity when

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[1] Ernest T. Stringer, *Action Research*. 4th ed. (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014), 15.

reviewing interview answers. Second, the researcher has enlisted the assistance of two PhD-level peers who may provide objectivity in unforeseen instances where the researcher may need objective feedback. In instances when a close colleague or peer is interviewed, the researcher will submit the interview forms and feedback to these individuals and professional colleagues at LMG for review if a conflict of interest arises and objectivity is difficult to maintain.

Project Conceptualization

Action research objectives will be accomplished by skillful implementation of pastoral counseling that will heal the wounded soul so that the client may be open to the possibility of integrating with a vetted safe church. From client intake until church integration and closing interviews, this researcher proposes a twelve-week timeline in which it is expected that wounded Christians will begin to or will have fully integrated into a safe church. A twelve-week expected timeline is based on the experience of previous client averages to reintegrate into a local church and is a best-educated guess for future clients. Given the spectrum of possible traumas and unlimited possibilities for trauma response and perspective faith shifts from trauma, any attempt at integrating with a local church will be a success at some level for the individual client and this project. In some instances, it is possible that an individual or family is too traumatized to consider attending a church at all. In these unfortunate scenarios, client progress will still be monitored. The researcher will take solace in being the counselor of choice to come alongside these deeply wounded individuals with ongoing pastoral counseling and care.[2] When the time is right, even if the time is after the action research is complete, it is the hope that these deeply wounded clients will eventually find their way home to a safe church. The researcher seeks to

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[2] As an intermediary solution, the researcher may propose online streaming worship services from the pool of vetted safe churches in this study.

build a bridge from the client to the church, and there is no minimum or maximum speed limit on the bridge. The expected timeline for this DMIN action research is detailed in table 3.1.

Table 3.1. The action timeline associated with the project overview and intervention design

	Church Leadership	Volunteer Clients
Week 1	Contact targeted local churches and schedule initial interviews with church leadership teams	Contact prospective candidates, schedule initial interviews, screenings, and intake
Resources:	List of potential churches for research participation (Appendix I) Church Informed Consent (Appendix H)	Spiritual Abuse Screening and Intake Form (Appendix B) LMG New Client Intake Packet (Appendix C) Client Consent Form (Appendix L)
Weeks 2-4	Facilitate initial interviews with church leadership	Conduct any outstanding initial interviews and intake; facilitate counseling sessions for spiritual abuse victims; discern client intent to integrate into a safe church; eliminate volunteers unwilling to consider church reintegration
Resources:	Church Leadership Interview: Spiritual Abuse Awareness (Appendix A)	Spiritual Abuse Screening and Intake Form (Appendix B) LMG Progress Notes (Appendix D&L)
Weeks 5-8	The researcher analyzes data and ranks churches according to objective safety scores (included in Appendix A); facilitates any outstanding interviews with church leadership teams	Facilitate concurrent counseling sessions for spiritual abuse victims; monitor the progress of client-church integration
Resources:	Church Leadership Interview: Spiritual Abuse Awareness (Appendix A)	LMG Progress Notes (Appendix D) Client Reintegration Matrix (Appendix E)
Week 9	Finalize church leadership scores and analyze and publish significant strengths and weaknesses of each church	Facilitate counseling sessions for spiritual abuse victims; continue to monitor the progress of client reintegration
Resources:	Church Leadership Interview: Spiritual Abuse Awareness (Appendix A)	LMG Progress Notes (Appendix D) Client Reintegration Matrix (Appendix E)
Week 10	Contact participating churches to schedule a closeout in-person or telephonic meeting; church-specific safety scores are to be reviewed with staff at this meeting	Facilitate concurrent counseling sessions for spiritual abuse victims; continue to monitor the progress of client reintegration
Resources:	Church Leadership Interview: Spiritual Abuse Awareness (Appendix A)	LMG Progress Notes (Appendix D) Client Reintegration Matrix (Appendix E)
Week 11-12	Conduct closeout in-person or telephonic meetings; church-specific final safety scores and anonymous client feedback to be reviewed with staff during this meeting	Conduct closing interviews with volunteer clients, continue monitoring clients still attempting integration with local churches
Resources:	Church Leadership Interview: Spiritual Abuse Awareness (Appendix A) Church closing interview (Appendix G)	Client Closing Interview (Appendix F)
Week 13-14	Synthesize Data	Synthesize Data
Resources:	Review all resources and compose Spiritual Safety Summary for churches (Appendix J)	Review all resources and make final updates to Appendix E

Church Leadership Engagement: Week-by-Week

Week 1. The first step in implementing the action timeline in Table 3.1 is contacting churches and agreeing to meet for in-person interviews. The researcher will call selected churches to arrange face-to-face meetings with clergy, leadership, staff, and any church-internal staff subject matter experts in the fields of pastoral or professional counseling. The initial interview will carry the banner of "collaboration to stem the tide of religious and spiritual abuse in Augusta, Georgia." The researcher will attempt to collaborate with no less than seven churches in weeks two through four, in which they will be scheduled for an initial sixty to ninety-minute initial meeting. The initial interview will be a collaborative interview-styled approach. Additional churches may be interviewed as the project progresses, not to exceed twelve participating churches.

Weeks 2-4. During the initial interview, church leadership will be invited to join the researcher in discussing existing church-internal practices and collaborating to find and apply new approaches that may help stem the tide of spiritual abuse in the congregation and in the church's geographic footprint of outreach. Leaders will sign the *Church Informed Consent Form* (Appendix H) during the initial meeting, and the interview will begin immediately after.

Leaders will be engaged from a list of fourteen questions from the interview document, *Church Leader Interview: Spiritual Abuse Awareness* (Appendix A). Church safety scores will be positively or negatively impacted by all fourteen questions in terms of creating an initial church safety score (Appendix J). Everyone participating in the meeting will receive a full copy of the interview document to share a common operating document to streamline the initial interview process and reduce any confusion from potentially misunderstood questions.

Weeks 5-9. The critical metric that will be established from the initial church leadership interview is an initial spiritual safety score. An overall spiritual safety score may range from 0-50, derived from discussions and answers to the fourteen questions from Appendix A. The researcher will then objectively review all discussions and answers by church leadership and average high-quality answers against the total number of questions (fourteen). For example, suppose a church provides excellent discussion, thoughtful answers, and concrete plans for extant and future spiritual safety procedures. In this case, the church may receive maximum points for the question (based on 50 available points divided by 14 total questions equals 3.57 points per question). Churches will be ranked by their overall initial spiritual safety scores for the purpose of determining which churches represent the best option for LMG client referrals. Initial scores will not be divulged to the church until the end of the project; however, any significant safety concerns will be addressed and discussed as soon as possible with the church leader. It is not expected that any church will receive a perfect initial safety score; however, lower-than-average scores will cause the researcher to pause when considering referrals to these churches, barring considerable exceptions, such as a church's significant commitment to improving its spiritual safety culture with concrete and measurable steps.

Week 10. During the entire action research process, the researcher will be in close contact with churches demonstrating high initial safety scores due to the proclivity of the researcher to send spiritually abused clients to these churches. Suppose a church does not score particularly well in the initial interview, but the church demonstrates a significant commitment to spiritual safety during the interview. In that case, these churches may still receive client referrals based on

the best collaborative judgment of the researcher and client.[3] Churches that do not interview well and demonstrate a significant lack of a safe spiritual culture and awareness will not receive LMG client referrals. In weeks 10-12, the researcher will request an in-person or telephonic meeting to discuss initial safety impressions and scores and any LMG client feedback that has been received during action research. If, for example, a church causes spiritual harm to a referred LMG client, this will reflect in a church's final *Spiritual Safety Summary* and result in a deduction of points (up to twenty-five) in this category on the *Spiritual Safety Summary* (Appendix J).

Week 11-12. Final meetings with churches will be in-person (preferred) or via telephone or virtual conference. During final meetings, initial safety scores will be discussed in depth, as well as any positive or negative interactions of LMG clients with the church. Additionally, any church progress or regression from the initial interviews will be highlighted, and outstanding concerns will be addressed. Based upon improvements to the church's spiritual safety culture and concrete commitments to future improvements, the church may score up to twenty-five points in this category on the *Spiritual Safety Summary* (Appendix J).

Weeks 13-14. The researcher will analyze all resources and data for each partnered church and produce the one-page *Spiritual Safety Summary* (Appendix J) and cover letter that will be mailed to each church or discussed in person at a closeout meeting. All partnered churches will receive a detailed summary of their initial safety scores, anonymous client feedback (as long as the feedback does not identify the client in some way), recommendations for sustainment, and researcher feedback for future improvements.

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[3] All referrals will be based upon the needs of the client; therefore, researcher-client collaboration is necessary for any referral, especially when attempting integration with a church that may carry a level of risk to the client's spiritual well-being.

Client Engagement: Week-by-Week

Week 1. Concurrent with the above action steps regarding clergy and church leadership engagement, prospective volunteer clients within the LMG database will be chosen and contacted from a filtered pool of approximately seventy-five clients that the practice has flagged as spiritually or religiously abused, whether by a religious organization, religious individual, or other religious activity or group (e.g., a cult). Spiritual abuse is often comorbid with emotional and psychological abuse and disorders like PTSD and C-PTSD; therefore, specific mentions of spiritual or religious abuse are mentioned by the client in their counseling and flagged as individuals who may be good prospects for participation in this study. The counselor of each LMG client has reviewed prospective client files, and discussions took place in LMG treatment team meetings with the researcher and the LMG clinical director for approval to add a spiritual and religious abuse "flag" to the existing client's counseling record. This list has been compiled; however, this document is kept anonymous to this project due to federal, state, and ethics board regulations prohibiting exposure of client or patient medical or mental health information. During this study, selected clients will be assigned a participant identification number known only to the researcher; for example, "LMG008." This anonymous moniker will be used to identify individuals when analyzing their progress during counseling and church integration efforts. The existing pool of prospective clients, coupled with any new clients and volunteers that may express interest in the immediate community, may be included as prospect participants and will be given an initial screening (Appendix B), intake documents (Appendix C), and a pro-bono initial counseling session to determine if the individual qualifies for the study. The researcher posits that no less than seven and no more than fifteen clients will be accepted into this study. This researcher believes that a client load of above fifteen clients will overwhelm the counseling

schedule and practice resources, and any number of clients below seven will not provide a large

enough sample for quality analysis.

At the outset of client enrollment in the study, participants will complete and sign the

Client Consent Form (Appendix L) during their initial counseling session. Clients will be

allowed as much time as is needed to ask questions and ascertain any information that they need

to make an informed decision about whether this study is beneficial for them. The tool that will

be utilized to track individual client progress with counseling and church reintegration is the

Client Reintegration Matrix (Appendix E); this matrix is a left-to-right representation of

individual client progress throughout the study. The matrix includes a week-by-week breakdown

of all activities, including major milestones (e.g., salvation, baptism, membership), counseling

attendance, and notes that will be used in the final analysis of church safety cultures. Appendix E

is a tool for at-a-glance progress and is an extension of the researcher's field notes. Client names

and church names will not be displayed; all client names and church names will be assigned

random identification numbers known only to the researcher to preserve confidentiality.[4]

Weeks 2-9. Week two begins the hard work of spiritual, emotional, and psychological

recovery for clients. Pastoral counseling will be administered once per week, and check-ins will

be provided on weeks when a client cannot attend an in-person session. Clients who miss three

consecutive counseling sessions or check-ins without a satisfactory excuse will be dismissed

from the study. Appendix E will provide a detailed attendance record of client participation in

counseling sessions, check-ins, and overall church integration success.

The theoretical construct driving the spiritual abuse and recovery counseling facilitated

by this researcher finds its theological and practical application in the literature review of chapter

two of this project and the professional methods employed by this researcher while practicing

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[4] Example: "LMG008" (client) and "Church E" (church).

pastoral counseling with spiritually traumatized individuals. From the outset, it must be said that every client will have unique backgrounds, traumas, cultural preferences, and diagnoses common in trauma survivors (i.e., PTSD, C-PTSD, mood disorders, depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, personality disorders, and substance abuse disorders). It is impossible to suggest a one-size-fits-all recovery curriculum that will meet the needs of all clients; however, by bringing to bear the full experience and training of this researcher over decades of ministerial and counseling experience, the following counseling theories, therapies, and techniques will be employed: 1) cognitive processing, 2) supportive, 3) educational, 4) theological, 5) insight-oriented, 6) solutions focused, 7) family systems, 8) emotions focused, 9) dialectical behavioral, 10) cognitive behavioral, 11) relapse prevention, 12) low-level addictions counseling (case-dependent) with concurrent referrals to third-party addiction and substance abuse experts, 13) attachment theory, 14) narcissistic and emotional abuse recovery, 15) intimate partner violence recovery, 16) toxic anger management, 17) personality disorder management, and 18) marital and family therapy. The researcher stands poised to implement whatever interventions are needed within the limits of the researcher's qualifications, training, and credentials in the state of Georgia. In some cases, the client will receive homework and take-home curriculum items to reinforce counseling session methods and, in so doing, expedite one's own recovery. Homework assignments will be decided on a case-by-case basis and at the researcher's professional discretion.

Finally, when the client is ready to begin their church integration journey, they will be provided with the *Safety Guidelines for Church Attendance* (Appendix L) guide to ensure that clients pay attention to the church culture, environment, and people. This document is not intended to make a client paranoid or hypervigilant while visiting a church (paranoia and

hypervigilance are common behaviors in trauma survivors); however, it is the position of this researcher that abused clients need a safety mechanism or a "center" to turn to order to avoid thinking traps, blind spots, troublesome situations, and personality types that may have hurt them in the past, thus potentially avoiding the activation of a trauma response while visiting a church.

Weeks 10-12. Weeks 10-12 provide clients with a robust closing counseling session that will include a client closing interview (Appendix F). The client's spiritual, emotional, and psychological health will be assessed, and all church interactions will be reviewed and discussed. Clients will determine if they have found a spiritually safe church during this final session. Clients who require ongoing counseling and care will be identified and invited to continue counseling with LMG.

Weeks 13-14. Weeks 13-14 provide an opportunity for the researcher to gather and analyze all data from appendices, progress notes, and important information in the researcher's reflective journal (field notes), acquire final peer-reviewed comments and analysis, and write *Spiritual Safety Summaries* (Appendix J) for participating churches with anonymous client feedback.

Data Collection

Data will be gathered by all methods specified in table 3.1 and any specified appendices referenced in this chapter. All data, including new or unforeseen data, will be reported in each client's case study file and reported in chapter four of this project. Data will be collected in a seven-pronged approach which includes 1) The objective observations of the researcher at all times throughout action research, much of which will be compiled in the researcher's reflective journal, 2) interviews with church leadership (Appendix A), 3) Initial intake interviews (Appendix B and C), 4) client counseling session progress notes (Appendix D), 5) client journal

entries, 6) church closing interviews (Appendix G), and 7) client closing interviews (Appendix F), which will include a brief survey of a client's overall healing journey during counseling sessions and church integration.

Permissions

Approval of the project will be obtained from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) before recruiting clients, contacting churches, or initiating any discussion of the action research with clients or churches. Please see the IRB approval letter provided at the end of this project. Written approval will be given by Life Management Group (LMG) to use their facility (Appendix M), business name with this researcher as their representative, and publication of select professional documents for the purpose of this research to remain compliant with federal and state regulations. Church and client permissions will be obtained during the initial weeks of action research.

Promotion, Recruitment, and Project Participants

The current pool of approximately seventy-five clients flagged for spiritual abuse by LMG is the primary recruitment source for client participants. The researcher and the client's counselor (if the assigned counselor is not the researcher) will contact individuals from this pool during future counseling sessions with the intent of recruiting them to participate in this study. Additionally, it has been identified that approximately twenty spiritually abused clients are active in pastoral counseling with the researcher at LMG. All will be asked to participate in the study during their regularly scheduled counseling sessions. At this time, no additional recruitment materials or publications are needed, as the existing pool of prospective clients would overwhelm the research and make the project unmanageable. It is projected that fifteen clients will

overwhelm project resources and time available. The primary reason for this limitation is that there is limited time to counsel and provide additional as-needed guidance to fifteen clients in one week, as one hour per client equates to fifteen working hours total plus assistance that may be needed to assist with church integration or answering urgent calls from participating churches and clients.

Similarly, it is estimated that no less than seven churches and no more than twelve churches will be included in the project due to the adequate sampling that seven to twelve churches will provide. This researcher anticipates that of the churches that will be contacted, some will decline participation, which has been addressed in the limitations section. The churches selected for this action research project are listed in Appendix I by description only to preserve the integrity and reputation of participating churches. Actual church names will be kept on file and represented in relevant appendixes and consent forms.

Implementation of the Intervention Design

This section provides a detailed description of the implementation of the intervention design that tackles the issue of spiritually wounded Christians abstaining from all faith activity after encountering spiritual abuse. This section includes a description of the interview settings for church leaders and for participating counseling clients, an in-depth description of the action steps, and the process of gathering quantitative and qualitative data.

The Church: Data Analysis from Outreach to Final Safety Assessments

As outlined in table 3.1, all interviews with church leaders in the city of Augusta are predicated on outreach by the researcher via e-mail, social media messenger platforms, phone calls, and personal visits. The researcher achieved the most positive response from church

leaders through social media messaging. It is admittedly surprising that 56 percent of positive

church contacts and subsequent commitments to participate came through social media

messaging services (e.g., Facebook Messenger, LinkedIn). The researcher suggests that this level

of positive feedback through social media messenger services highlights the need to maintain a

professional online presence before encroaching on the church's physical and theological turf via

social media. A positive and professional online presence, therefore, appears to be a must for the

individual attempting to effect positive change in a digital world. For example, five churches in

this study did not reply to multiple e-mails or phone calls; however, they did reply to social

media messaging.

Of the twenty potential churches targeted for this study, ten churches agreed to participate

(see Appendix I). This participation rate exceeded the expectation of a minimum of seven

churches. To protect participating churches and provide confidentiality, each church is assigned a

moniker from *Church A* through *Church J* in and on their individual church file that the

researcher maintains.

The Initial Interview, Consent, and Spiritual Safety Scores

Once churches agreed to participate, a time and place for initial interviews were set up

and attended by the researcher and church leaders. Locations for interviews ran the gambit from

church board meeting rooms to the pastor's office to the local coffee shop or breakfast restaurant.

It is important to note that the researcher and church leaders took all precautions to limit

sensitive discussions in public spaces. In the initial meetings, the *Ministry Organization Consent*

Form (Appendix H) was signed by each church, and the *Church Leader Interview* (Appendix A)

was conducted.

Based on the feedback and discussion from the initial interview, the *Spiritual Safety*

Summary (Appendix J) was populated with an initial safety score of up to fifty points from

questions and answers derived from Appendix A, with each of the fourteen questions worth 3.57

points (50/14 = 3.57). This initial score was then extrapolated and recorded on the *Church*

Spiritual Safety Awareness Matrix (Appendix N), which is used to rank order churches in terms

of the perception of safety given to the researcher by the church leadership. In sum, the higher

the rank-ordered church score derived from the initial interview, the more likely the researcher

was to refer LMG clients to these churches, at least initially.

An additional and unforeseen step that was required to be added to the researcher's

process was the need to personally attend select church services of the participating ministry

organizations to ensure that the worship setting is as safe as it was portrayed to be in the initial

church leader interviews (Appendix A). This step was not anticipated to occur in this project;

however, it became necessary after *Church C* aced their initial safety interview in week one with

a 50/50 score but was found to have significant and observable deficits in safety by two referred

clients, *LMG003 and LMG005*, who visited this same church in week two and week three

respectively. The deficits noticed by LMG clients were most notably an overly aggressive

greeting staff that "suffocated" the visitors with constant pressure and "exhausting conversation

in my personal space" when "I just wanted to worship and enjoy my time with God; they ruined

my first experience back to church in over one year."[5] There were other spiritual safety

violations at this church; however, these will be discussed in detail in chapter four. Feedback like

this from a client lowered *Church C's* overall safety score, the portion of the score that is based

on client feedback (see Appendix J, question 2), which in this case prompted a visit by the

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[5] Quotation shared with permission from client LMG003. LMG 005 cited similar issues after their visit.

researcher to observe and confirm the same safety vulnerabilities that clients may experience and report. In this case with *Church C*, the researcher reached out to the pastor directly to gently discuss the two clients' perceived violations of spiritual and physical safety. Both clients have an existing PTSD diagnosis and cannot handle overwhelming social interaction.[6] Both clients did not return to this church for a second visit due to the perceived risk to their spiritual, mental, and emotional health.

Concluding the Study: The Church

At the conclusion of the study, at approximately ten to twelve weeks, each church was given a final interview, the *Church Closing Survey* (Appendix G). Some final meetings did occur via a phone call or virtual video call based on the schedules of busy pastors and leaders. In these final meetings, each church received a written copy (or verbalized if over the phone or a virtual call) of the study findings for their church. For this final meeting, the *Spiritual Safety Summary* (Appendix J) was reviewed in-depth, questions were asked, and challenging discussions took place; most importantly, discussions of needed improvement to the church's spiritual safety culture were based on the researcher, church leader, and LMG client feedback. These final meetings culminated with the presentation and in-depth (yet confidential) discussion pulled from quantitative and qualitative data. Data triangulation was achieved from the insider angle (church leaders), researcher angle (LMG clients and the researcher),[7] and two independent PhD advisors in the professional and pastoral counseling field, which provided an outsider angle;[8] both advisors requested anonymity for professional reasons. Relevant feedback and highlights from personal interviews, participant journals, and field notes were on display in the final meetings

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[6] PTSD Client symptoms and experiences at *Church C* were shared confidentially.

[7] Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 72-78.

[8] Ibid.

with leaders. Sharing this data helped facilitate productive conversations and fostered an urgency among church leadership teams to create spiritually safe church cultures. Church leaders appear to take significant notice when people do not visit their church a second time due to perceived or real spiritual safety concerns.

Finally, based on the closing interview, church leaders and the researcher agreed upon the implementation of future spiritual safety best practices and timelines by which these safety mechanisms could be put into action. These recommendations and conclusions will be based on the church's insight from day one of the study, improvements made during the study up to the present day, LMG client observations, and the researcher's personal observations. Churches may score up to twenty-five points (Appendix J, question 5) based on their willingness to ensure spiritual safety will be provided to their flock (with measurable goals and timelines).

The results of a church's spiritual safety culture will be captured in a spiritual safety score based upon all the Appendix J criteria; this score will be communicated to the church leadership and placed in the *Church Spiritual Safety Awareness Matrix* (Appendix N). The *Church Closing Survey* (Appendix G) contains the answers from church leaders, which will be reviewed and taken into consideration for future research and discussed more at length in chapters four and five.

<div align="center">The Client: Data Analysis from Outreach to Closing Interview</div>

All study participants were recruited from the existing client pool of LMG clients, specifically those labeled with a confidential "spiritual abuse" flag in their files. Of the clients that the researcher currently sees for counseling, approximately seventy-five clients claim spiritual abuse in some way. Overall, fourteen clients were successfully screened and recruited into the study via face-to-face discussions in established counseling-client relationships with the

researcher. Clients received weekly pastoral counseling in the researcher's confidential office space setting, and all clinical notes were recorded on *Progress Notes* (Appendix D). No other location can legally be utilized to conduct counseling sessions with clients by this researcher.

The Initial Interview, Consent, and Guidelines for Church Attendance

Based upon the initial interaction with participating clients in session one, the researcher screened each prospective client with the form *LMG Client Intake Form: Supplement* (Appendix B), which the client signed and dated with a witness signature affixed. Appendix B is specific to this study and is a supplement to the LMG practice intake packet (Appendix C). If the researcher determined that the client met the criteria for spiritual abuse and was eligible for the study, the client then read the consent form, asked any questions they would like, and signed and dated the *Participant Consent Form* (Appendix L). Once this form was signed, the client began their first pastoral counseling session. In the final moments of the initial counseling session, the client was given the *Safety Guidelines for Church Attendance* form (Appendix K) for them to use as a safety mechanism when they visit a new church. As stated before, Appendix K is not intended to make the client paranoid of a church; it is a reference intended to anchor the client mentally, emotionally, and spiritually while they explore a new church setting, much like a small child will cling to a blanket when afraid of the dark or becomes emotionally distressed.

All client participant interviews, and counseling sessions took place at 2808 Hillcreek Drive, Augusta, Georgia, 30909. This location is significant for several reasons: 1) this address is the practice location of the researcher; thus, no additional overhead costs were incurred to meet with clients in another location; 2) this address is where the researcher is covered by counselor liability insurance in the event of malpractice or other legal concerns, 3) this site offers complete

confidentiality in accordance with the counselor's code of ethics,[9] and 4) this location offers built-in administrative support personnel with whom clients regularly interact to schedule appointments, keep confidential records, request insurance billing (if necessary), and request referrals.

Concluding the Study: The Church

At the conclusion of the study, the researcher administered the *Client Closing Interview* (Appendix F), where clients were able to give feedback on all facets of the study. In the closing interview, clients told their stories of spiritual abuse recovery and church integration. Clients gave an overall assessment of the effectiveness of the churches visited, interaction with the researcher, and stories of their personal journeys, which were often recounted in client journals. Some of these stories will be told to augment the results presented in chapter four. In each final session, the counselor and client determined if a spiritually safe church home was found and if the client intends to continue attending this church. Finally, clients had the opportunity to highlight any area of improvement for this study and suggest ideas for future research; this feedback will be highlighted in chapter five.

Summary of the Intervention Implementation

The implementation of the intervention design was accomplished as proposed. Overall, the study included ten participating churches and fourteen participating clients. All fourteen participating LMG clients completed their prescribed twelve-week pastoral counseling and church integration program; twelve of these clients found safe church homes. All ten participating churches completed all requirements for the study. Three churches stood above the

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[9] *AACC Code of Ethics.*

rest and consistently exemplified the highest standards of spiritual safety and contributed to best practices for future application. The following chapter will analyze the quantitative and qualitative data collected from all appendices, journals, and field notes described in chapter three. Primary consideration will be given to the *Client Reintegration Matrix* (Appendix E), *Church Leader Interview: Spiritual Abuse Awareness* (Appendix A), *Safety Guidelines for Church Attendance* (Appendix K), and the *Client Closing Interview* (Appendix F) to assess this study's impact on the lives of fourteen spiritually abused clients and their capacity to successfully reintegrate into the local churches of Augusta, Georgia.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Descriptive Data Evaluation

As identified throughout this action research project, Life Management Group does not have a process to responsibly aid spiritually abused Christians in their search for a safe local church home. As posited by the researcher, LMG clients who participate in this project, and the therapeutic process that is practiced herein, will be successful in reintegrating into fellowship with a local church.

The action research results are evaluated in five sections. The first section comprises a brief review of the data collection and scoring protocols. Section two gives an overview of participating clients and church demographics. Section three analyzes client data found in the primary qualitative data sources: the *Client Reintegration Matrix* (Appendix E), the qualitative data collection sources, *Safety Guidelines for Church Attendance* (Appendix K), and the *Client Closing Interview* (Appendix F). Section three is arguably the most verbose section in this study, given the emphasis on client perspectives in their interaction with churches. Section four will analyze the primary qualitative data collection sources utilized while interfacing with churches: *Church Leader Interview: Spiritual Abuse Awareness* (Appendix A) and the *Church Closing Survey* (Appendix G). Appendix J, the *Spiritual Safety Awareness Score,* will be presented toward the end of this chapter. Finally, section five is a brief evaluation from clients and churches regarding what this action research project did well and what could be improved.

Data Gathering and Scoring Protocols

In addition to the data-gathering sources listed above for clients and churches, the

Spiritual Safety Summary (Appendix J) is completed for each participating church at the end of

the project. Scores are derived from a list of fourteen questions that were asked during the initial

interview with participating church leaders; this data is recorded in Appendix A, the *Church*

Leader Interview: Spiritual Abuse Awareness. Each question asked in the initial interview will be

evaluated by the researcher and a peer reviewer if necessary. Each question is assigned up to

3.57 points per question, for a maximum initial interview score of 50 points (__/50); this score

total will be recorded under item one in Appendix J. Chapter three introduced the outsider angle

as two PhD-level peers who will assist in scoring if any answer presents an ethical dilemma for

the researcher. For example, if the researcher cannot stay objective with an answer out of

doctrinal prejudice, preference, experience, activated emotional response, or ignorance; one or

both peer reviewers will be asked to aid in scoring the answer. During this project, both peers

were asked to assist with one answer (two times) during the study in reference to Appendix A,

question 6, due to perceived abusive positions taken by two churches regarding women's roles in

the church.

Second, the *Spiritual Safety Summary* (Appendix J) requires scoring for question 2:

"Summary of LMG client interactions while visiting your church (__/25)." After the screening,

intake, and first counseling session for participating LMG clients, each client is given the form

Safety Guidelines for Church Attendance (Appendix K); thereupon, clients evaluate the safety of

the churches they visit. After twelve weeks of counseling and church integration efforts, the

clients are given a *Client Closing Interview* (Appendix F). Appendix F will capture final

comments and will summarize the client experience in this study. The combination of answers in

Appendix K and F will not be scored in a traditional right or wrong manner. Clients' emotions, spiritual journeys, psychology, etiology, and physiology present too many variables for anyone to objectively score their answers, like a mathematics quiz. Client answers are complex and represent perspectives and worldviews from eighteen to seventy-eight years of age. Therefore, all client answers on Appendix K and F were reviewed in person with the researcher to take all these unique variables into consideration and balance any issues that may be seen as abusive with their unique histories. Any answer that violates spiritual safety as perceived by the client may result in the participating church receiving as low as zero points for this section of the *Spiritual Safety Summary* (Appendix J). The bottom line: if the church violates only one item pertaining to spiritual safety, the client may be so turned off to the church that they do not return; this happened in several instances in this study. In fact, some Appendix Ks were not completed in full because LMG clients left the service early due to a perceived or actual threatening environment at the church.

Finally, the *Spiritual Safety Summary* requires up to twenty-five points to be accounted for in item five: "Recommendation for implementation of best practices (__/25)." Like item two, the unique feedback by LMG clients, now coupled with a church's willingness to incorporate spiritual safety improvements, or sustain safe practices already in place, will determine the score for this item. For example, if a church severely offends a LMG client through perceived or actual abusive language or actions, and the church has no desire to modify its language or actions, a zero score will most likely be assigned for this item. In a similar instance where a LMG client is offended (not the same as being convicted by the Holy Spirit of sin), and the church has this offense brought to them by the researcher, or the client and the church modify its approach as to no longer offend. This church may score as high as twenty-five points due to its willingness to

change and protect its flock. Again, there are too many spiritual, emotional, psychological, and physiological variables to conduct completely objective scoring. In all instances where help was needed, outsider perspectives were solicited, as previously described.

When items one, two, and five are scored, churches may receive a score of up to one-hundred cumulative points. All scores will be recorded in Appendix N, the *Church Spiritual Safety Score Matrix*. Churches with the highest scores from this study have proven that they have the potential to provide best practice insights and may serve as an example of spiritual safety to the community. High-scoring churches will also receive post-study LMG client referrals; these churches may also become great starting points for future studies to find out what they are doing right at all levels of the organization.

Participant Demographics: LMG Clients

As discussed in chapter two, Augusta is a town of many demographics and church traditions. Of the approximately seventy-five potential clients for consideration, fourteen clients agreed to participate in this project. Table 4.1 represents relevant client demographic information for this action research.

Table 4.1. LMG Client Demographics

	Frequency	% of LMG Clients
Gender		
Male	7	50.0
Female	7	50.0
Age		
18-25	1	7.1
25-35	4	28.6
35-45	6	42.9
45-55	0	0.0
55-65	2	14.3
65 and older	1	7.1
Relationship Status		
Single	2	14.3
Married (1st time)	6	42.9
Divorced and Single	4	28.6
Divorced and Remarried	2	14.3
Highest Education Level		
High School Graduate	4	28.6
Associate degree	1	7.1
Bachelor's Degree	5	35.7
Master's Degree	4	28.6
Doctorate	0	0

Categories of demographic significance in table 4.1 are extracted from client responses in the *Safety Guidelines for Church Attendance* (Appendix K), *Progress Notes* (Appendix D), and the researcher's observations. As one may discern, the sample of male and female participants is evenly split with seven males and seven females. Age is significant to this study due to the church culture requested by clients when considering church attendance. For example, all three clients over age fifty-five skewed toward selecting a church environment that did not have loud

music, or any music at all, and was void of a "theatrical show."[1] Clients aged forty-five and younger (mostly those with children) tended to skew toward churches with robust children's programs and services and programs that will keep the family unit "engaged, entertained, and occupied."[2]

Client relationship status (e.g., married, single, divorced) came into play in two distinct conversations with clients who attended two separate churches and "felt shamed for simply being a woman."[3] The same client identified as twice divorced and is hypervigilant toward "anti-woman" messages and doctrine. She carries significant shame from a congregational (voting membership) Baptist church in the recent past. Two other women in this study expressed similar concerns when visiting churches. One of these women possessed a ministry degree and felt that the church would not allow her to minister in any capacity. This woman did not return to that church.

Client education level became significant when one client with an advanced theology degree and working toward a PhD noted that "Scripture was often taken out of context in the sermon. I checked the credentials of the senior pastor online and was disappointed to see that his bachelor's degree was not ministry related. It explained why I felt the sermons were shallow and sometimes presented doctrinal errors. This made me feel unsafe because now I'm always on alert for errors in his sermons. I don't want to feel that way when I go to church."[4]

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[1] Anonymous quote from a client due to age demographic preferences, which could be used to identify this client.

[2] Anonymous quote from a client due to family emphasis and age demographic presented, which could be used to identify the client.

[3] Confidential quote from a client due to the gender demographic presented, which could be used to identify this client and injure the church's reputation.

[4] Quote from client LMG007 found in client's *Progress Notes* (Appendix D).

Participant Demographics: The Churches

Of the twenty prospective churches that represented an even distribution of mainline

denominational churches in Augusta, ten agreed to participate in this project. Of the ten

abstaining churches, five politely declined to participate at this time, and five did not answer the

researcher either by email, phone call, or social media messaging. Table 4.2 represents the

relevant participating church demographic information for this action research.

Table 4.2. Church Demographics

	Frequency	% of Churches
Denomination		
Baptist	1	10.0
Southern Baptist Convention	2	20.0
Methodist	1	10.0
Non-Denominational	3	30.0
Evangel Fellowship of Churches	1	10.0
Church of Christ	1	10.0
Vineyard USA	1	10.0
Highest Education Level of Clergy		
High School	0	0.0
Undergraduate (Ministry)	4	40.0
Undergraduate (Not Ministry)	3	30.0
Master's degree (Divinity/Theology)	2	20.0
Master's degree (Not Ministry)	0	0.0
Doctorate (Doctor of Ministry)	1	10.0
Pastoral/Lay Counseling Ministry?		
Yes	6	60.0
No	4	40.0
Church Governance Structure		
Pastor-led, Voting Board of Directors/Elders	8	80.0
Pastor-led, Voting Congregation	1	10.0
Elder-led, Voting Congregation	1	10.0

Categories of significance in table 4.2 are extracted from church leader responses from

Appendix A, *Church Leader Interview: Spiritual Abuse Awareness*, *Church Closing Survey*

(Appendix G), and the researcher's observations.

As discussed in the previous section, clergy education level was a topic of discussion in

client counseling sessions. The higher the level of education in ministry, the more comfortable

the clients felt when attending church services and activities. Of significant note: of the three

churches that have leaders with advanced degrees in ministry (see table 4.2), all three are at the

top of spiritual safety scores (Appendix N). Appendix N will be discussed in more detail later in

this chapter.

As seen in table 4.2, forty percent of participating churches do not have an established

pastoral or lay counseling program. From interviews and follow-on discussions, these churches

did not appear interested in establishing these ministries. Of consequence, these churches also

scored the lowest on Appendix N, the *Church Spiritual Safety Awareness Score Matrix.* This will

be discussed in greater detail when Appendix N is reviewed in this chapter; however, there does

seem to be a trend emerging where clients feel safe in churches that have ministry-trained leaders

and in churches that have established pastoral and lay counseling ministries.

Finally, it was deemed by clients that the church governance structure is important to

them due to recently reported major spiritual traumas inflicted by elder-led and pastor-led

churches with voting congregations. Two clients shared similar horror stories of the voting

congregation governance model. One client stated in a counseling session:

> The ignorant congregation judged me, harassed me, stalked me, and shamed me
> publicly in a special meeting for divorcing an abusive husband who tried to kill
> my son and me multiple times with a gun. No one would listen. The pastors
> dismissed me when I brought up my concerns privately and told me that 'God
> hates divorce' and that I should 'just hang in there because that's what Jesus
> would do, and Jesus wants me to be a dutiful wife. They handed me a religious

book on marriage (which I burned) and told me they were going to bring me up
on church discipline charges if I went through with the divorce. I was confused
and horrified. I wanted to die. My safe place was no longer safe. I wanted to kill
myself every day for months after that, and I hated God for a very long time after
until I came to counseling, and I've been here [at LMG] for over a year. I'm
finally able to consider trying to find a new church.[5]

Coincidentally, the two congregational voting governance models in this study ranked at the

bottom of the *Spiritual Safety Score Matrix* (Appendix N).

The Client's Journey Home to a Safe Church

The Client Reintegration Matrix

The *Client Reintegration Matrix* (Appendix E) serves as the central document that keeps

a record of client progress in their 1) counseling attendance at LMG, 2) real-time updates on

client's major milestone events (e.g., baptism, salvation, commitment to a church home,

membership), and 3) maintaining visibility on the client's and their paired church (column two);

this allows the researcher to prioritize which churches need to be contacted on a regular basis and

highlights the churches that the researcher can personally attend to observe the safety of LMG

clients and the spiritual safety culture of the paired church. As a caveat, all churches in Appendix

E are identified by a moniker of "Church A," "Church B," "Church C," and so on, to maintain

confidentiality and to preserve participating church reputations.

The data represented in Appendix E was extracted and placed into a summary chart

entitled table 4.4, *Client Reintegration Summary*. Table 4.4 analyzes and displays major events

and trends that clients experienced in their church reintegration journey.

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[5] This client's quote is shared with permission; however, her identity will remain anonymous and uncited
due to the sensitive nature of the reported spiritual abuse, her gender being identified, her reputation among her new
community of faith, and the ongoing shame attached to such a traumatic experience.

Table 4.3. Client Reintegration Matrix

Client Reintegration Matrix

Client Name	Paired Church	Week 1 (Initial Milestone Achievements)				Week 2-4 (Counseling)			Week 5-9 (Counseling)					Week 10-11 (Closing Interviews)		Week 12-14 (Synthesize Data)			Notes
		Contact	Interview	Intake	Counseled	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	
LMG001	Church A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Found church home at church A, baptized in week 9 with spouse, ongoing counseling
LMG002	Church A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Found church home at church A, baptized in week 9, ongoing counseling with another LMG counselor
LMG003	Church A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓			Found church home at church A, no longer requires counseling
LMG004	Church D	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Found church home at church D, received salvation and is considering baptism, ongoing counseling
LMG005	Church A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Found church home at Church A, ongoing counseling
LMG006	Church C	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓			Disabilities impeding church attendance, watching online services with church C, ongoing counseling
LMG007	Church E	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Found church home at church E (family), ongoing counseling
LMG008	Church E	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓			Found church home at church E (family), ongoing counseling, overcoming Christian "cult" trauma
LMG009	Church G	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓			Still searching for church home, major spiritual trauma from local churches and family of origin
LMG010	Church F	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓			Baptized in week 7, found church home, ongoing counseling
LMG011	N/A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓			Having a hard time attending (spiritual trauma), ongoing counseling
LMG012	Church I	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Found church home (w/ family) at church I, ongoing counseling
LMG013	Church I	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓			Found church home (w/ family) at Church I, ongoing counseling with another LMG counselor
LMG014	Church J	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓			Found church home at church J, considering small group participation, ongoing counseling

Table 4.4. Client Reintegration Matrix Summary

	Frequency	Percentage
Client Averages		
Total Sessions Available to 14 Clients (14x12=168)	168	100.0
Total Sessions Attended by Clients	149	88.7
Total Sessions Missed by Clients	19	11.3
Clients Who Found a Safe Church Home	12	85.7
Average Weeks to Commit to a Church (of those who visited a church (12) = 69/12)	5.75	N/A
Client Major Milestones		
Visited at Least One Church	12	85.7
Experienced Salvation / Rededication	2	14.3
Established Membership	9	64.3
Received Water Baptism	5	35.7
Took Part in the Lord's Supper	11	78.6
Gave Finances to a Church	11	78.6
Active in a Small Group	5	35.7
Active in Outreach / Evangelism	1	7.1
Established New Friendships at Church	12	85.7
Still Looking for a Church	2	14.3
Trauma Preventing any Spiritual Activity	1	7.1
Active Counseling Status		
Requires Counseling After Study	12	85.7
No longer Requires Counseling After Study	2	14.3

The extracted data from table 4.3 that is represented in table 4.4 appear to overwhelmingly support the thesis statement of this action research project: if clients participate in Life Management Group's therapeutic process, then these individuals will be successful in reintegrating into fellowship with a local church. Twelve of the fourteen LMG clients who participated in this project claim to have found their way back to a community of faith; this resulted in a church reintegration success rate of 85.7 percent.

During the early weeks of the project, clients struggled at times with the idea of integrating into a local church. However, concurrent pastoral counseling sessions allowed participants to open up to the researcher about their struggles and spiritual traumas. Therein, they found faith-based encouragement and professional counseling therapeutics to assist their spiritual recovery.

Clients successfully attended counseling sessions with the researcher 88.7 percent of the time, attending a cumulative 149 appointments out of a possible 168 appointments available. Green check marks in table 4.3 represent successful attendance. Conversely, clients missed or rescheduled 11.3 percent of scheduled counseling sessions, represented by red Xs in table 4.3. Of the fourteen clients that completed the study, two are still having a hard time finding their way back to a community of faith. Spiritual, emotional, and physical abuse prevents one client from making the full leap back to church; however, in week twelve, this client stated that they would soon be ready to make an attempt. The second client struggles with both spiritual trauma and significant physical disabilities, which does limit an ideal in-person integration with a local church. While not ideal, this client is regularly viewing a participating church's worship services online; however, this client has not tried to integrate into any meaningful relationships with people in the church. These two clients continue to receive services from LMG and the researcher.

Of the twelve clients who visited a church at least one time (85.7%), all twelve successfully reintegrated into a church home after an average of 5.75 weeks from the start of the study. The application here is that if a counselor, pastor, friend, family member, etc., is patient and compassionate enough to come alongside a wounded soul, church reintegration is possible.

Of the fourteen clients participating in the action research, two claimed to experience salvation and/or rededication to faith in Christ (14.3%). This was unexpected, as these two clients claimed that they had attended church before as children. They were both taught, by abusive parents, that faithful church attendance and good works qualified them to go to Heaven. Amazingly, these two individuals experienced full surrender to Jesus in the first few weeks of this study, both in pastoral counseling sessions. The researcher tested their testimonies, and both clients sincerely believe Jesus is their Lord and Savior and the only way to receive atonement for their sin. It is, therefore, not surprising that these two clients have demonstrated the most radical change in behavior and are making enormous strides in counseling and in their personal lives. One of these clients has gone so far as to enroll in a master's degree program majoring in Christian discipleship. The other client has taken an active role in advocacy for multiple local charitable organizations and is becoming more active in his new church home.

To round out the statistics, nine of the fourteen LMG clients established official membership at a church (64.3%), five received water baptism (35.7%), eleven stated they took part in the Lord's supper, communion, or eucharist (78.6%), eleven gave at least one financial donation to a church (78.6%), five clients are active in a small group (35.7%), one client is active in an outreach ministry (7.1%), and twelve clients state that they have developed meaningful relationships in their church (85.7%). After becoming part of a safe church, two clients state that they are no longer in need of counseling services due to improvements in their spiritual, emotional, and psychological health (14.3%) and the social and spiritual support available at their new church; while twelve clients preferred to continue in a counselor-client relationship for now (85.7%).

Finally, the study revealed two clients that were unable to reintegrate with a church, at least in person. As stated previously, one client is attempting to slowly integrate due to physical disabilities by watching online streaming services. The second client is still working with the researcher to process spiritual, emotional, psychological, and physical trauma (all caused by a clergy member in the name of God) endured in early childhood. This individual's prognosis is hopeful, as the client has expressed a willingness to try church again soon.

<div align="center">Significant Client Concerns and Highlights</div>

From the outset of the study, LMG clients expressed concern, dread, fear, betrayal, and a myriad of other complex emotions over past harmful interactions with at least one former church, which translates to fears of future church participation. Within the first few weeks of this study, common positive and negative themes began to emerge as clients completed their initial interview sessions and began visiting churches. During clients' weekly counseling sessions, they carefully unpacked their experiences as they visited new churches, made new friends, felt afraid of crowds, felt overwhelmed by overaggressive greeters, experienced the presence of God for the first time in their lives, and the list of complex emotions goes on and on. From client insights week after week, major themes began to emerge based on their experiences and answers to questions on their *Safety Guidelines for Church Attendance* (Appendix K) document. Many client experiences were then confirmed in their *Client Closing Interview* (Appendix F). Table 4.5 illustrates the top themes that were addressed in many client counseling sessions. While there is simply not enough bandwidth in this project to dissect every highlight and concern encountered, there are consistent themes that emerged as clients told the story of their journeys back to church. All client quotes from here until the end of this project will be anonymous due to the researcher's best judgment in keeping the client's identity safe and the church's reputation intact.

Table 4.5. Clients' Top Highlights and Concerns

	Frequency	*% of Clients*
Client's Significant Concerns		
Members Are Too Possessive Over Seating	6	42.9
Multiple Identical Services	5	35.7
Financial Manipulation from the Pulpit	4	28.6
Overaggressive Greeters and Congregants	3	21.4
Felt Shamed from the Pulpit	3	21.4
Service Felt Chaotic: Too Informal	3	21.4
Gossip and Divisive Cultures Evident	2	14.3
Client's Significant Highlights		
Sensed the Presence of God	11	78.6
Genuineness of the Pastors and Staff	9	64.3
Given Adequate Personal Space	9	64.3
Felt Comfortable Asking for Prayer/Counseling	7	50.0
Felt Welcomed by Volunteers/Greeters	7	50.0
Friendliness of the Congregation	6	42.9

Client's Significant Concerns

Topping the cumulative list of client concerns extracted from Appendix K and F and reflected in table 4.5 is that regular attendees and members are too possessive over where they sit in a worship gathering. Of all the concerns and traumas fleeced out in intense counseling sessions, years of trauma and grief processing, and "weep[ing] with those who weep" (Rom 12:15, NASB95), the appearance of this leading topic surprised the researcher in terms of how to analyze what appears to be such a petty issue: or is it petty? This issue may strike at the core of one of Apostle John's greatest concerns, highlighted as the farewell thought in his first epistle: "Little children, guard yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21, NASB95). Is it possible to value where one sits so highly in a worship service that something as banal as a seat can become an idol, especially in instances where a person or relationship can be offended or damaged over one's possessive nature over where they sit? Almost 43 percent (42.9%) of clients reported major

concerns that this may be possible. In fact, the apostles James and John brought this concern of

seating arrangements to Jesus personally: "They said to Him (Jesus), 'Grant that we may sit, one

on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory…'" (Mark 10: 37, NASB95). While James

and John were tussling over who would sit with Jesus in positions of authority in his earthly

kingdom (a fundamental misunderstanding by James and John of the nature of the kingdom of

God), the spiritual principle is the same: where I sit matters. In fact, their audacious request

stoked the flames of jealousy and division among the rest of the disciples, who now felt

"indignant" toward James and John (Mark 10: 41, NASB95). Does this same heart flaw persist

2,000 years after James and John became at odds with their disciple brothers over where they

desired to sit in relation to where Jesus spoke, correlating directly to a modern worshiper's desire

for their preferred proximity to the pulpit of which the pastor speaks?

Fundamental to Jesus' retort to the Jewish legal expert when questioned: "Which is the

greatest commandment in the Law?" (Matt 22:36, NASB95) Jesus resurrected the portion of the

Shema, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with

all your mind' (Deut 6:5, NASB95) ... The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as

yourself" (Matt 22:37-39, NASB95; see also Mark 12:30-31, NASB95).[6] One client recalled her

experience at the first church she visited for this project:

> My teenage son, who is autistic, was sitting at the end of the row close to an exit.
> He awkwardly went to find the restroom when we were singing the second song.
> We were really enjoying the worship up to that point, and I even teared up a little
> because I felt God's presence, and it had been so long since I had been to church.
> Before my son reached the door to the lobby in his search for a restroom, a lady in
> about her sixties promptly swooped in within seconds to claim the seat as her
> own, claiming it was where she always sat, so I was told that we needed to move
> my family of six down the row, which actually made another family have to pack
> their belongings and move down the row as well. I was completely upset,
> irritated, and embarrassed. At that moment, I knew we would not come back to

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[6] The Gospel of Mark emphasizes "might" instead of "mind," as seen in Matthew's Gospel. "Might"
appears to mirror Deuteronomy 6:4-5, NASB95 (The *Shema*) more directly.

[that church]. My autistic son tried to return to his seat, but the woman would simply not move; this made my son very upset. We decided to leave the service early before the pastor even spoke. I cried on the way to the car; I was so upset. My son was confused, and my husband and other children were just angry at how they treated me and [our autistic son]. This was my first attempt at going to church in years. It's going to take me some time to be ready to attend another church.

If this petty scenario sounds made up, the researcher assures the reader that it is not. Several counseling sessions were needed to convince this mother and family to try a different church. The researcher also had to discuss this scenario with the pastor of the partnered church, who was horrified at what one of his members did. While seemingly petty, it does not take much to scare off and disrespect an individual, especially individuals with spiritual trauma. This scenario speaks to the violent fallout of failing to love our neighbor as ourselves, fundamentally placing a chair or pew as an idol above a special needs child's safety and security and this very fragile family's need to worship without encumbrance. This is only one of six similar reports where church regulars made visitors move because they were occupying "my seat."

The remaining concerns will not receive this level of detailed attention, as the insights are much more in line with what the researcher and reader may have expected to see in a study such as this. Second to concerns of members being possessive of their seating is that when a client attended a church with multiple services, they felt like they were attending "one of three churches under the same roof." Transitions between services were rushed because the parking volunteers and ushers were always rushing the previous service out to their cars to make room for the next wave of attendees. Multiple clients stated that they did not feel special or seen as an individual with real needs and spiritual trauma that they would like to talk about with someone. Clients felt overlooked and like "just a number who was expected to tithe." Many clients stated that when they attended a church with multiple services, they did not have time to find people

who would pray for them. "It just felt so rushed" was the recollection of one client who attended

a prominent church in the city. Furthermore, as one client stated:

> I attended two services one Sunday because I was meeting a friend who came to a later service, and I wanted to make sure he felt safe at the church. I was shocked that the third service was identical to the second service (that I attended) in every way. The pastor's speech was flawlessly identical to the previous service, the band didn't miss a single note and sang the exact same order of verses and choruses, and the communion was a carbon copy of the previous service. Even the "spontaneous and Spirit-led" moments in one particular song at the end of the service and the "altar call" were 100% identical. I felt like was watching a perfectly rehearsed theatrical presentation twice.

This client was not alone. Similar statements were made by four other clients who attended

multi-service churches.

The summary of the remaining five major topics of concern that clients complained about

are:

1) Four LMG clients felt financially manipulated from the pulpit to give to campaigns

and "worthy causes" on their first visit. In all four cases, out-of-context Scripture was allegedly

used to bolster a local need to build the following two items: a "children's ministry building" or

a "youth ministry building." All four clients did not return to the churches that were requesting

funds for ministry projects. Coincidentally, one client stated:

> If the pastor would have just preached his sermon about finances in the context of the Scriptures from which he was quoting and didn't apply it to the urgency of building a church building, I was ready to give $1,000 to the church that morning. My offering should have been between God and me; it was supposed to be special as my first gift to God's church in years. But at that moment, my financial gift to God felt cheapened as the sermon shifted from the Bible to talking about bulldozers, concrete, clearing land, and creating a place for children so they wouldn't bug their parents during worship [client sarcasm]. I felt manipulated and I haven't been back since.

2) Three clients reported they were turned off by overaggressive greeters and congregants

"smothering" them on their first visit. "Pressure to sign up for programs and fill out 'contact

cards' was oppressive and put me on alert." These three clients did not return to these churches

for a second visit; instead, they moved on to other churches.

        3) Three clients reported "formulaic" sermons with perceived "law-based" steps to

become more holy or live better. This approach to preaching made them feel shame for not being

able to live up to the high standards of what the pastor preached. One client who attended a

service where a step method was used in the sermon stated:

> I literally failed to love my wife better at lunch after a Sunday sermon entitled,
> 'Five ways to love your spouse better.' I violated step two of the pastor's sermon,
> and I felt immediate shame like I had failed God. My wife, of course, let me know
> that I had violated point number two of the sermon and told me I wasn't being
> like Jesus. I felt like a failure in that moment, kind of like when I was a teenager,
> and my parents drug me to church and lectured me for not being a good enough
> Christian if I didn't do everything the pastor preached about. I actually got angry
> at myself for failing and this led to a big fight between me and my spouse.

Another client, who had an advanced degree in theology, astutely observed,

> With sermons like "Seven Steps to a Better Marriage," "Five Ways to Parent as
> Jesus Would," or "Four Ways to Become a cheerful giver." What if I don't meet
> every step that the pastor's sermon outlays? Am I in sin? Did I mess up? I
> certainly feel like I would judge myself if I messed up and I would feel shame.

This client equated sermons like these as tantamount to trying to keep the law, only to posit that

the law brings death, shame, and guilt (see 1 Cor 15:55-57; Rom 8:1-17). This client and his

spouse kept attending the church, as they were able to overlook this issue for now, but they

continued to struggle with issues of shame and works-based righteousness in their counseling

sessions for the remainder of the study. The couple states that they are willing to claim this as

their home church, but they have plans to discuss their concerns with the pastor when they get a

chance. This couple also stated that they had hesitation in speaking to the pastor due to his

"lower education level, not even in ministry. This conversation could get awkward since I can

interpret the Hebrew and Greek, which he took out of context."

4) Three clients stated that one church they mutually visited felt chaotic and was, in one client's words, "way too informal, out of order, and bordering on disrespectful to God. It was cringey." Two of the three clients who attended did not give this church a second chance. The third client lasted a few more weeks at that church and left the church for the same reason.

5) Gossip and divisiveness were reported by two clients who attended the same church, as is referenced in point four (above); these clients report feeling incredibly uncomfortable hearing passive-aggressive comments from the pastor to the elder and from the elder to the pastor. "There was clearly something going on between those two, and our pew-mate decided to fill us in with the latest gossip of the pastor-elder feud over a disagreement over women's roles in ministry." Neither client returned to this church.

Clients' Top Highlights

It is easy to highlight the negative features of a church, especially when working with clients whose defensive walls are up to avoid being injured again. Despite clients' best efforts, some clients did report they had trauma responses, were "activated," or were "triggered" around certain people and situations when visiting churches. Given the demographic of clientele, it is most important to this study to determine where churches are vulnerable to hurting spiritual abuse survivors. However, the researcher believes it is important to highlight the positive interactions that clients experienced while visiting churches that made them feel spiritually safe. This section will be briefer than discussing clients' significant concerns; however, it can be a starting point for ministries to see what spiritually safe churches are doing right in the eyes of their visitors. According to Appendix K and F, LMG clients reported the following insights found in table 4.5:

1) Overwhelmingly, clients agreed upon their most desired aspect of a church home: they want to experience the presence of God when they attend church. Eleven of the fourteen participants stated they did sense God's presence in the churches they decided to call home. Clients state that they appreciated churches that did not rush through service and gave adequate space to worship, pray, and meditate on the Word of God. The way churches served communion and allowed time at the end or during service to pray for people was consistently brought up in counseling sessions as a strength of some churches.

2) Nine participating clients emphasized the importance of "genuineness" from the pastors, staff, and volunteer staff.

3) Nine clients stated that by being given adequate personal space, they were more at ease and more apt to worship, interact, give financially, and return for a second visit.

4) Seven clients felt safe enough in their church visits to ask for prayer, guidance, and counseling. Sixty percent of churches interviewed did well in this area of focus since these churches had established pastoral and lay counseling ministries (see table 4:2).

5) Seven clients appreciated the "first impressions" given by the greeting staff and volunteers. Gift bags and free coffee from the church's coffee bars ranked at the top of the most appreciated gestures. Clients overwhelmingly recognized how comfortable they felt when greeted warmly by someone, escorted to their seats, and shown where the restrooms were.

6) Finally, six clients highlighted the friendliness of the congregation in the churches that they eventually settled into as a church home. One client remarked, "It's amazing what a genuine smile and empathetic hug can do for a person. Just to know someone in that church saw me and cared for me brought me to tears."

The Church's Journey to Spiritual Safety

Pastor and leader feedback and initial and final church leadership interviews provided a treasure trove of insights, best practices, wisdom, and significant red flags of safety vulnerability within partnered churches. Seven predominant safety themes arose in formal (Appendix A and G) and informal discussions (recorded in the researcher's observations). Table 4.6 ranks these topics in order of occurrence.

Table 4.6. Church Spiritual Safety Red Flags

	Frequency	*% of Churches*
Church Spiritual Safety Red Flags		
No Pastoral or Lay Counseling Ministry	4	40.0
Perceived Abusive Positions Toward Women	4	40.0
Heavy-Handed/Inconsistent Church Discipline	2	20.0
Ignorance of Bylaws/Doctrine	2	20.0
Harsh Expressed Judgement of LGBTQ+ Lifestyle	2	20.0
Perception of Staff-on-Staff/Volunteer Abuse	2	20.0

As highlighted in table 4.2 (Church Demographics) and table 4.6, forty percent of participating churches do not have a pastoral or lay counseling ministry established. The same four churches do not have a referral plan to send people in need to vetted counselors in the community. In the category of oppressive/abusive positions toward women," the same four churches expressed the outright restriction on women being allowed to minister in any capacity, "except holding babies and teaching Sunday school to women and children." Several participating female clients were not referred to these churches during the project due to the hardline stance against women in ministry and the nature of power abuse that female LMG clients have suffered. Two of the four churches mentioned above are governed by congregational vote for major matters and church disciple; another reason LMG clients were not referred to

these churches is based on their past traumatic experiences in congregational churches; the risk

of re-traumatizing these individuals presented too much risk. One emerging pattern that the

researcher noted: of the four churches that do not have a lay or pastoral care ministry and express

oppressive and/or abusive positions toward women have senior leaders who have not been to

seminary. All four leaders referenced here possess bachelor's degrees with majors in disciplines

other than ministry.

A similar theme emerged in the final four red flag categories in table 4.6. The two

congregational governance model churches presented spiritual safety concerns in their initial and

final interviews in the following categories: 1) heavy-handed/inconsistent church discipline

practices subject to congregation voting, 2) clergy's ignorance of bylaws/doctrine, 3) harsh

personal judgments of LGBTQ+ lifestyles, and 4) one of the congregational churches had

multiple recent instances of staff-on-staff and staff-on-volunteer abuse. The church interview

process ascertained that the individual who committed the abuse was not vetted properly by the

church hiring committee, nor were background checks run on the individual. The other church to

have recent instances of staff-on-volunteer abuse is non-denominational. The church stated that it

also did not properly vet this individual by acceptable hiring and qualification standards or by

any reasonable adherence to biblical leader requirements.[7]

Table 4.7, which is identical to Appendix N, represents the culmination of the *Church*

Leader Interview: Spiritual Safety Awareness (Appendix A), the *Church Closing Survey*

(Appendix G), researcher observations and field notes, *Safety Guidelines for Church Attendance*

(Appendix K), *Client Closing Interview* (Appendix F), and client *Progress Notes* (Appendix D).

Churches are ranked in high to low order regarding spiritual safety.

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[7] See Titus 1:5-9

Table 4.7. Church Spiritual Safety Awareness Score Matrix

Church	Initial Safety Awareness and Culture Score (Appendix A, G)	LMG Client Feedback (Appendix K, F, D)	Spiritual Safety Summary, Item 5 (Appendix J)	Final Spiritual Safety Score
	50 Points Possible	25 Points Possible	25 Points Possible	
Church I	50	25	25	100
Church H	46	25	25	96
Church J	43	25	25	93
Church E	46	21	21	88
Church B	35	21	21	77
Church D	32	21	21	74
Church A	43	14	14	71
Church G	39	10	10	59
Church F	21	10	20	51
Church C	46	0	0	46

Opportunities For Intervention Design Improvement

The researcher included research feedback questions in the *Client Closing Interview* (Appendix F) and *Church Closing Survey* (Appendix G). Clients were overwhelmingly thankful for this action research project, given the desperate desire of many participants to reintegrate into a local church body; however, they did not know how to overcome their unresolved traumas and reckon with the abuse they suffered at the hands of clergy, organizations, and Christian family members. Clients highlighted the pains to which the researcher went to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Clients often requested that the researcher accompany them to church as they were understandably scared and anxious to attend a new church. Perhaps, in future studies and/or applications of this study, a researcher, clergy member, or clinician can involve a process (covered by liability insurance and in accordance with local laws and licensing boards' ethics) to accompany often fragile clients to church.

Church leaders did not recommend any areas of improvement for this study; however, they expressed their desire to know more about the abuse and traumas that may be extant within their congregation. Church leaders overwhelmingly want to stay in touch with the researcher for future questions, guidance, and educational opportunities. The researcher will speak to the staff and congregations of churches to compassionately address the problem of spiritual abuse and trauma. It is the opinion of the researcher that several significant studies need to be undergone to explore in-depth the results encountered in this action research; many of these opportunities will be discussed in chapter five.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This chapter revisits information acquired and developed in chapters one and two with the methodology and results of the intervention described in chapters three and four. The overarching purpose of this chapter is to provide the "so what?" of this action research. Chapter five attaches significance to the findings of this action study, offers explanations, draws conclusions, extrapolates lessons, makes inferences, and confers meanings upon significant results and themes that this study revealed.[1]

The Problem, Purpose, and Thesis Revisited

As identified in chapter one, this action research project seeks to address the problem that Life Management Group lacks a method to responsibly reconcile spiritually abused Christian clients to the local church. The purpose of this DMIN action research project is to develop a therapeutic process that provides holistic soul care for spiritually abused Christians and subsequently analyze the success of participants' reintegration with local churches while participating in this therapeutic process. The researcher posited that if spiritually abused LMG clients participate in Life Management Group's therapeutic process, then these individuals will be successful in reintegrating into fellowship with a local church.

Research Implications

From the study's outset, the researcher attempted to fill an application gap by figuring out how to responsibly reconcile spiritually abused Christians to the local church. This researcher

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[1] Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 212-13.

admittedly embarked upon a thesis project that has not been attempted before in terms of the context: a board-certified pastoral counselor in a professional counseling firm attempting to reconcile wounded Christians who claim they have been spiritually abused to a local church in Augusta, Georgia. The researcher owes a great debt to those who have written on the topics of spiritual, narcissistic, emotional, and even physical abuse in the church. The foundation of knowledge provided by the authors cited in this project proved to be critical in this researcher's quest to apply trustworthy knowledge and therapeutic techniques to spiritually abused clients for the purpose of their healing and reconciliation with Christ's church. The research by Connie A. Baker, Charles DeGroat, Michael Kruger, Neil Damgaard, and others cited in this project has proven indispensable in understanding the depth and breadth of spiritual abuse in the church. However, to date, this is the only action research project that attempts to reconcile spiritually abused Christians to the local church in Augusta, Georgia.

The action research presented in this project concludes that individuals in this study that have experienced spiritual abuse at the hands of a church organization, clergy member, or Christian family member can successfully reintegrate back into Christ's church with the compassionate love and help of a skilled practitioner and loving church home. Twelve of the fourteen LMG clients who participated in this project claim to have successfully reintegrated with a safe church home, resulting in a church reintegration success rate of 85.7 percent.

Research Applications

As the project progressed, major themes began to materialize in pastoral counseling sessions with participating clients, interviews with local church leadership, and the weekly observations of the researcher. Prior to embarking upon writing a conclusion that may appear to be yet another stick with which to beat the church, it must be made clear that the servant

leadership model that Jesus exemplifies for leaders in His church is paradoxical in nature to that of the world. As referenced earlier in this project, in chapter four, after James and John's audacious request for authority and status (to sit at Jesus' right and left hand), Jesus reminds the disciples that their request represents how gentiles (read "unbelievers") think authority and standing should be: "Rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to first among you shall be slave of all" Mark 10:42-4, NASB95). In other words, Jesus knows that the default position for those in authority is to domineer and squash those they lead."[2] This is simply not the way to lead, according to Jesus (see Luke 22:26), who says of himself, "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:11, NASB95). "I am the good shepherd, and I know My own, and My own know Me" (John 10:14, NASB95). Much like the abused and lost sheep that LMG clients represent, the pastor-shepherd makes it their mission to shepherd like Jesus: "seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. (Matt 9:36, NASB95). Without a compassionate shepherd, whether a pastor, pastoral counselor, or Christian mentor, lost and abused sheep will become "food for every beast of the field and [will be] scattered" (Ezek 34:5, NASB95). Will the shepherds reading this thesis leave the ninety-nine sheep to find the one who is lost, abused, and distressed? The researcher posits that this is the highest aim of a pastor-shepherd, as this action is most in keeping with the nature of Jesus (Matt 18:12-13; Luke 15:4-7; Psalm 23).

Moreover, it is not the nature of Jesus to abuse like the shepherds found in Ezekiel 34, but to be the Shepherd who demonstrates "perfect love" (1 John 4:18, NASB95) for His sheep.

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[2] Kruger, *Bully* Pulpit, 16.

As Jesus says to his disciples in explaining the parable of the Good Shepherd, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door; if anyone enters through me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pleasure. "The thief comes only to steal and to kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:7-10, NASB95). The church is called to replicate Jesus' loving nature and cast off any pride, fear, insecurity, and sin that may lead one in church leadership to abuse anyone within their charge. Loving Jesus' church does not mean keeping one's mouth shut and failing to speak out against abuse. Instead, quite the opposite is true.[3] Believers in the early church were encouraged by the Apostle John: "Little children, let us not love with word or tongue, but in deed and truth." (1 John 3:18, NASB95). In a perfect church, there would be no differentiation between loving words and loving actions; all orthodoxy and orthopraxy would be in response to sincere "[belief] in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love [for] one another, just as He commanded us" (1 John 3:23, NASB95).

The themes presented here may be seen simply as the researcher advocating for victims of spiritual abuse and giving the wounded a voice, encouraging the shepherds to love well as Jesus loves His sheep, for the sheep are His, and His alone. In keeping with this sentiment, four major themes emerged as the researcher synthesized all data from this project.

<div align="center">Speaking the Truth in Love: The Good Shepherds</div>

The top theme that emerged in the action research among all participant clients and in most church leader interviews is a theme that the apostles Paul and John wrote quite vigorously about approximately two thousand years ago: "speaking the truth in love" (Eph 4:15a, NASB95). Clients overwhelmingly engaged in this discussion with the researcher from two perspectives:

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[3] Kruger, *Bully Pulpit*, 17.

one, the longing to see pastors and leaders be loving in their messages and actions while

allowing God's Spirit to organically change hearts with His presence, kindness, and patience.

Whether the topic from the pulpit or in the pastor's office is tithing and finances, right actions

(orthopraxy), right thinking (orthodoxy), being a better husband, mother, or Christian in general,

clients unanimously stated they do not need to be manipulated, controlled, or silenced; their

loving response to a loving Savior is enough to gently change their hearts. Shaming a fellow

Christian or even an unbeliever to modify their behavior, or worse, try to save themselves

through adherence to the law (legalism) without heart change wrought only by God's Holy

Spirit, is a grave concern that harkens back to Paul's letter to the Roman church:

> Therefore, you have no excuse, every one of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things… Or do you think lightly on the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?[4]

Clients overwhelmingly resounded with the message of God's kindness, tolerance, and patience,

as Paul espouses. Clients stated in sessions that even "hard to swallow" messages that address

topics of sin are welcomed if they are spoken in love. Much like a police officer accused of using

excessive force, church leaders must be careful not to be heavy-handed, harsh, and overly

aggressive when confronting an individual in sin.[5] Similarly, abusive shepherds may leverage

against an individual in sin or simply use the accusation against a congregant in an abusive

manner, treating them differently, extorting the member for selfish gain, disclosing their secrets

in gossip, speaking or acting in a condescending or passive-aggressive manner.[6]

Considering clients' tremendous positive response to the themes of kindness, tolerance,

and patience found in Romans chapter one, the researcher would be remiss if the stories of two

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[4] Romans 1:1, 4, NASB95.

[5] Kruger, *Bully Pulpit*, 37.

[6] Ibid.

clients who came to know Jesus as Savior during counseling sessions were not told. In the first few weeks of this study, two men resonated with Jesus' compassionate call to lay down their shame and follow Jesus as Lord and Savior. These clients were subsequently baptized in their new church homes. One client has sold his business and has enrolled in a seminary to honor the call of God on this individual's life to make disciples. The other client has become an advocate for multiple causes, including helping people with addiction, anger, and veterans with PTSD. This client has actively taken the role of helping at least one other individual in the community deal with spiritual abuse by meeting with them at least twice a week and attending church together at the client's new church home.

The compassionate ear of a counselor opened the door to speaking the truth in love and confronting harmful patterns of sin, addictive habits, maladaptive coping behaviors, general avoidance and ignorance of God's Word, and abstinence from the fellowship of the saints. In these incredibly vulnerable moments when sin is confronted and confessed, the researcher has a choice to make: shame the clients into modifying their behavior, or the researcher could be a good shepherd and listen to the painful trauma stories of the past and tend to the wounds of the sheep; the same wounds that the sheep have been trying to tend to themselves through maladaptive behaviors in order to simply survive. From experience in this action research, the latter approach wins the lost sheep to the Good Shepherd. It is no wonder then why the apostle James penned the following: "Therefore, confess your sins one to another, and pray for one another *so that you may be healed"* (Jas 5:16, NASB95, emphasis added). The Apostle John, in the same spirit, writes, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, NASB95). Despite the most egregious sins, difficult traumas, childhood nightmare stories, and tales of church shame and abuse, the

kindness of God broke through to these two clients who thought they were saved but admitted they never knew that it is Jesus that saves and not strict adherence to church rules and authoritarian parental demands. Both individuals in this study were carrying a backpack full of shame, and in counseling learned how to lay down that burden upon hearing of the kindness and compassion of the Good Shepherd. Highlighting Jesus' compassion was of critical importance to these two individuals and to all other participating clients who needed to unload shame from wounds caused by abusive shepherds. Highlighting shame and being overly aggressive towards an already fragile soul serves no purpose except to modify one's behavior for the moment, which is tantamount to legalism, and heap more shame upon one's heart when the client fails to live up to the new expected behavior. Heart change, however, is possible only through the good news of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit working within, often facilitated by good shepherds (see John 6:63; 1 John 4:2; Rom 8:5).

<p style="text-align:center">Manipulation from the Pulpit</p>

Second, and keeping with the theme of speaking the truth in love: church leaders who love well will not feel the need to in any way manipulate their flock for gain (see Ezek 34). Sadly, 28.6 percent of LMG clients expressed concerns about feeling financially manipulated from the pulpit during their initial church visits. These clients did note that they felt tremendous pressure to tithe when the plate was passed or to give online from their seat because their seatmate "made a bigger donation than I did. I felt that I should give more." The key question to the client who expressed this emotion was, "Why did you feel like that?" The answer was simple yet profound: "I felt like if I didn't give enough, the pastor would know when they deposited the checks. I didn't want to feel like I wasn't doing my part, so I gave more." Perhaps, there may be an opportunity for future research regarding tithes and offering and determining what methods

and messaging does not cast shame upon the attendee and is consistent with Paul's instruction to the church in Corinth: "Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor 9:7, NASB95). Clearly, God loves a cheerful giver and not a shamed giver.

Feeling shame driving one's compulsion to give a financial offering to a church is consistent with 21.4 percent of client responses on their *Safety Guidelines for Church Attendance* worksheet (Appendix K) who stated they felt shamed in some way from the pulpit and 21.4 percent of clients who stated that they felt overly pressured by greeters, congregants, and the pulpit speakers to sign up for programs, mailing lists, email lists, giving campaigns, etc., that they were not ready to consider on their first visit to church. One client who gave their home address to a church to pledge a certain amount stated that "the church actually sent me an *invoice* [client's emphasis] to collect my pledge. I never went back because I felt like I would be shamed for not paying on my *invoice*, kind of like I was expected to pay on a collection letter or debt. It was so off-putting." Many clients did state that some churches they attended handled well the issues of collecting visitor information, tithes, offerings, etc., and did a good job at making them feel non-pressured to participate in these activities. It is the opinion of this researcher to take a hands-off approach to visitor interactions, much like a salesperson needs to know the right balance of helpfulness and giving a customer their space. Perhaps, a fascinating study on human behavior in the church, specifically emphasizing visitor attendance, may be launched in the future. It would be fascinating to see other-than theological research involved in a study like this; perhaps data from corporate marketing strategies, business and marketing articles, etc., may shed light on how to properly handle new "customers" in a church instead of just winging it and potentially turning off visitors from making a second appearance at church.

Unity of the Church

Third, clients crave unity within the body of Christ (Eph 4:1-6). More specifically, clients crave that the messaging presented by the pulpits in Augusta be consistent with Paul's call for unity and reflective of Jesus' command that he gave on the precipice of his arrest and crucifixion: "A new command I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this, all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35, NASB95). The heart cry of every client in this study was to find a church that simply loved them as they are, as broken and fragile, to gently guide them through the struggles in their lives, and to "stop beating me over the head with the Bible for my sin. I know I'm a sinner. I want to feel Jesus' love and forgiveness and not the church's judgment. I want to be a part of a church that loves me and where I feel welcome." This is a significant statement, as it ties the top concern of clients in table 4.5 to a church that loves one another.

As the reader may recall, the top concern of clients ferreted out by the researcher is that regular attendees and church members are overly protective of where they sit in a worship service to the point that they will offend a fellow believer or first-time church visitors, as 42.9 percent of study participants reported. To avoid rehashing the analysis presented in chapter four, it should suffice to say here that if a church speaks the truth in love and loves others well, competition for the seats of honor or any other selfish preference or pursuit will not be an issue in Christ's church. Clients long to belong to a church that is humble, gentle, patient, and shows tolerance for one another (Eph 4:2), is "devoted to one another in brotherly love; giv[ing] preference to one another in honor" (Rom 12:10, NASB95), and a church that "keep[s] fervent in love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet 4:8, NASB95). The bottom

line is that clients want to feel unified in a church that echoes the writings of Paul and Peter; they crave acceptance, love, and unity.

This action research revealed that clients want to feel unity in the church they attend; that is certain. Sadly, 35.7 percent of clients reported that when they attended churches that have more than one service on Sundays led to a feeling of disunity and even competition between worship services. Clients often stated that they feel dissociated from the other people in the church, like "they are strangers under the same roof." The statement from clients, "it was like there were three churches under one roof," was not an uncommon phrase heard in counseling sessions, and it was never spoken in a positive manner.

<div align="center">Church Leaders: Hindrances to Speaking the Truth in Love</div>

It is the observation of the researcher that the topics of speaking the truth in love and church unity were difficult to discuss with church leaders. Many leaders in this study were admittedly beholden to denominational traditions and preaching calendars that "they had to report to their boss" versus having the free will to speak as they would and as the Holy Spirit led in the context of what was going on in their congregation at the time.[7] In addition, senior leaders of all church sizes involved in this study stated that they lament that some of their subordinate staff and volunteer leaders do not have the biblical education or lifestyle to qualify them for biblical church service (see Titus 1), and this leads to congregational distrust in their leadership, thus breeding a feeling of being unsafe around select ministers. In some cases, the senior leader or pastor of the church had no say in the subordinates that were hired. When questioned on why subordinates or volunteers who do not qualify for leadership are allowed to serve in staff or in volunteer leadership roles, senior leaders stated that 1) their denomination often sends them

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[7] Multiple church leaders made statements identical or similar to this.

young individuals who have not dealt with their own issues in their life, or 2) they are so desperate for people to serve, that they overlook minor and major flaws in the individual's life; the latter was a theme more prevalent in non-denominational churches. The researcher proposes that studies be launched exploring the concerns that many leaders in this study have posited here, as a biblical unqualified clergy member is wrought with liability to the organization and to the flock God entrusts with them. This concern ties into the statistic that the top three safe churches in this study are those that hired ministers with advanced degrees.

Be Silent? Women Are Confused

One of the most charged themes that emerged in this action research is the perception by women that they are "second-class citizens" and that male clergy members twist Scripture to silence them. Of the seven participating clients in this study, all seven shared similar stories of being marginalized, silenced, spiritually, and physically abused by male church leadership, particularly in the mainline Baptist denominational churches from which six of the female participants claimed to hail from. Coincidentally, all seven women participants avoided attending any Baptist church offered in this study, instead insisting emphatically on being paired with a non-denominational church. The response by the female participants exhibits the hypervigilant and avoidant response of someone diagnosed with PTSD and C-PTSD. Entire dissertations, books, and doctrines have been written on women's roles in the church and at home; this thesis project will not attempt to dive into such a complicated theme. Instead, the researcher will simply state the observations of this study: seven of seven (100%) female participants were confirmed to have encountered spiritual abuse because they are females and refuse to attend a church of the same denomination that injured them. This is a problem. Seven uniquely created children of God were abused by shepherds who were entrusted with the care of their souls. This

researcher does not suggest that Baptist organizations in the south are abusive; however, six of seven women in this study claim, and the evidence supports, that they have been spiritually abused by a Baptist church in this city. One of the seven women report significant abuse in the Presbyterian denomination. It is the opinion of this researcher that the doctrine of select Baptist churches in Augusta be researched and examined for any language, precedent, or hostile attitude toward women that may promote the systematic silencing of a woman's God-given personhood. Women of all ages and backgrounds in this study felt like their vitality and unique gifts were neglected, overlooked, and silenced due to one issue: they are women. Some brief analysis and client quotes from female participants were shared in chapter four and will not be rehashed here; however, there appears to be a ripe field of research available to anyone looking to research instances of or doctrinal positions that support female abuse in the churches of Augusta, Georgia.

Research Limitations

From the outset of the study, the researcher considered that every client and church is unique. There is no possibility of probing the unique depth and breadth of the ten churches and fourteen clients that participated in this action research. This thesis serves as a survey, an initial glimpse, into the client's and church's most vulnerable moments in an effort to start the conversation and invoke an action process that helps spiritually abused Christians find their way back to church. The researcher cannot judge the truth or lack thereof from a client or a church leader's heart in communicating truth; however, it is assumed that clergy and clientele protected by clergy-client confidentiality and the church partnership consent agreements would tell the truth for the purpose of reintegrating wounded Christians into a safe church home.

Further Research

The researcher laments that there was not enough bandwidth, time, or resources to facilitate an immersive partnership experience in select church cultures, even if just one. The researcher proposes that many churches in Augusta, Georgia, are ripe to be studied, from their bedrock principles, origins, doctrinal, ethical, and legal liabilities, and theological traditions to their day-to-day activities, outreach activities, community partnerships, and worship services. Such studies would be a fascinating glimpse into the culture of any church. Future researchers could find an endless depth of understanding and may be able to come alongside and assist churches that express such an interest. Several churches in this study requested that the researcher continues to partner with them at a more intimate and immersive level to which the researcher would be a valuable third party to assist the church in becoming the safest and most genuine version of itself, possibly facilitating steps to help churches become the safe shepherding environment that they must be. Involvement and foci by future researchers may be as specific as individual and family interviews and surveys of church members and visitors, attending church staff meetings, ensuring doctrine and bylaws do not present the church with legal liability, providing insight and counsel to clergy and members alike to ensure the church is spiritually safe, and even providing wise counsel to those touched by spiritual abuse; both in church leadership and in the flock. The unique opportunities to study a church safety culture are endless, and as many theses and dissertations can be written as there are churches to participate.

As highlighted by the results in table 4.5, members being over-possessive of seating may require insight from a future inquirer. This researcher is admittedly stunned by the appearance of this red-flag issue topping the analysis of major client concerns at 42.9 percent of client experiences. The researcher has offered a brief analysis of this phenomenon in chapter four;

however, there is likely much more research to be done considering 1) why this phenomenon occurs in human behavior and 2) discovering ways to prevent a seating position from becoming an idol and catastrophically inflicting spiritual harm to another person to the point that they never return to church again.

Finally, at a response rate of 35.7 percent of client participants, a church's decision to conduct multiple services on one day of the week, most likely the main worship service(s) on a weekend, is perceived as promoting disunity among a church. After discussing the perspective of clients who attended their church with multiple services, senior leaders seemed reluctant to consider scaling down their services to one worship service and, in fact, were proud of their multiple services and burgeoning ministry. Most leaders cited growth statistics, budgetary needs for multiple services, being landlocked to expand their campus, etc. However, when discussing issues of staff and volunteer burn-out, failure to observe a Sabbath, the perception of disunity among LMG client visitors, verbalized competition between service quality among the congregation, and the inability to effectively disciple and shepherd three times the people (assuming three services) of what their staff can logistically handle, the leaders did not have any answers for the latter cluster of problems. In fact, these problems were not seen as problems or potential liabilities by some leaders. Some research has been conducted on the perceived revolving back door of the church where visitors, members, volunteers, and staff find their exit when they are burned out, abused, or neglected. Dusting off this research and providing action plans and solutions may be necessary to keep churches from expanding beyond their capabilities to disciple their members.

Researcher's Overall Assessment

The overarching purpose for embarking on this action research project lies in the personal, ministerial, and corporate mission of the researcher to fulfill the law of Christ, according to Paul in his letter to the Galatians. "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:1-2, NASB95). Jesus' mission is reconciliation, first to God through the cross and resurrection, then to each other through the work of Christ's church (2 Cor 17-21). This project is an attempt to define one way in which counselors and shepherds may come alongside Jesus' wounded and weary flock.

The researcher deems this project a success, consistent with the thesis statement, wherein twelve of the fourteen clients who participated in this study found their way home to a spiritually safe church. In addition, Life Management Group now has a systematic process that can be used to attempt responsible reconciliation of the spiritually abused to the local church in Augusta, Georgia.

APPENDIX A

CHURCH LEADER INTERVIEW: SPIRITUAL ABUSE AWARENESS

Church Leader Interview: Spiritual Abuse Awareness

Facilitated by James A. Getts, MDiv, BCPC

Date: _____ Time: _____

Church Interviewed: _____

Primary Leaders Present: _____

Key Definition: *Spiritual abuse* (syn. *religious abuse)* is a type of abuse that is "the mistreatment of a person by someone in a position of spiritual authority, diminishing that person's spiritual vitality and growth."[1]

Primary Questions:

1. Who are the individuals in the church who are responsible for pastoral and lay counseling?

   a) What qualifications and training do pastoral/lay counselors receive that equip them to provide counseling?

   b) Is ordainment or other certification(s) required for an individual to provide counseling to a parishioner/member?

   c) Are individual pastoral and lay counselors insured against malpractice liability? Is the church insured under an umbrella insurance policy against liability from potential psychological, emotional, spiritual, or physical harm if they were ever to be accused of misconduct or even giving harmful counseling advice by a member of the church?

   d) Do all leaders and volunteers undergo a background check, especially those who work with children in any capacity?

2. When conflicts arise in the congregation or among staff members, please describe how conflicts are resolved.

   a) Is there a model used to resolve conflict, and what is this model?

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[1] Hunt, "Abuse," 177.

    b) Are there any active conflicts in the church that have not been resolved?

3. What level of education is required to be a clergy member or on pastoral staff?

    a) Is ordainment required for clergy and pastoral staff? If so, who is the ordaining body or organization?

    b) Is there any church-internal training required to be a clergy member or member of the pastoral staff?

4. How do church members request pastoral counseling and care if needed?

    a) Does your church have a pastoral counseling program to include lay counseling? Please describe how this ministry operates.

    b) Are members aware of whom to contact to make an appointment for pastoral care?

    c) Does your church refer members to third-party organizations for pastoral and/or professional counseling services?

    d) Are other staff and leaders aware of whom to contact to receive pastoral counseling?

    e) When members seek pastoral care and counseling, what are the major needs that you see are trending? (e.g., marital problems, spiritual formation, past trauma/abuse, church-related issues, addictions, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, etc.)?

5. Are all clergy, pastoral staff, board members, elders, deacons, volunteer leaders, etc. required to abide by the church bylaws, doctrines, and policies?

    a) Are written and signed agreements required upon hiring a new member of leadership regarding obedience to all policies, bylaws, doctrines, etc.?

    b) Do members/parishioners have access to the church bylaws, doctrine, and policies?

    c) Please describe how a member may obtain, discuss, or request to view church bylaws; what form of church governance does your church utilize (elders, directors, voting members, congregational, pastor only)?

Secondary Questions

6. Are women considered equal to men in all ways in membership, service, and leadership? If no, please describe any situations whereby women are not allowed to participate and/or serve (i.e., egalitarianism versus complementarian).

7. What are some ways that you have witnessed a spiritual leader abuse members or fellow colleagues in this church?

8. Have there been instances of slander, gossip, dissension, bullying, division, doctrinal error, or spiritual abuse in the church? If so, please explain what happened and how/if these instances were resolved.

9. How would you describe the overall culture of the church, including youth and children's ministries?

10. Please describe how far out your main worship service(s) are planned (i.e., the same week, two weeks, six weeks, etc.).

11. Vignette: A female spouse who has been married for five years comes forward and tells you that she has been experiencing daily physical and emotional abuse by her husband of ten years. She states that she cannot stay married anymore and wants to divorce her husband. Who would handle this woman's situation, and how do you think it should be handled?

12. Vignette: A lesbian couple visits your church; they are affectionate toward each other and hold hands during the service. How do you feel the congregation and staff would handle their visitation?

13. When a member decides to leave the church and leadership is aware of their intentions to leave, how is their departure handled?

14. What other ministry organizations do you partner with in the community, domestically and internationally?

APPENDIX B

LMG CLIENT INTAKE FORM: SUPPLEMENT

Spiritual Abuse Screening and Intake Form (Verbal at Session One)

Prospective Volunteer/Client Name: _____

Researcher: You have self-disclosed that you are a victim of spiritual (religious) abuse. Please describe any events that you believe qualify you for Life Management Group's (LMG) spiritual trauma recovery and church reconciliation program. The counselor will write "Qualified" or "Unqualified" based on your verbal interview of spiritual abuse.

1. The research project that I am requesting to be a part of will last approximately 10-14 weeks and will require me to attend weekly pastoral counseling sessions with James Getts. I am willing to attend weekly counseling sessions.

   Please initial: _____ YES, I will.
   _____ NO, I will not.

2. The research project that I am requesting to be a part of will require sincere and earnest attempts to "match" myself with a church that my counselor and I decide is a vetted and safe church to try to attend. I am willing to make the effort after a few weeks of counseling to consider eventually attending a Christian church, ministry, parachurch worship service, or small group of my choosing.

   Please initial: _____ YES, I do.

   _____ NO, I do not.

3. I agree that I am participating in LMG's spiritual abuse recovery program willingly and without coercion. I have full intentions to recover from spiritual abuse and re-integrate into Christian fellowship at a *safe* local church that fits my needs.

   Signature: _____ Printed Name: _____ Date: _____

   Witness: _____ _____ _____

APPENDIX C

LIFE MANAGEMENT GROUP NEW CLIENT INTAKE PACKET

| PLEASE PRINT | **CONFIDENTIAL CLIENT INFORMATION** | Date:_____ |

Name:_____ Date of Birth:_____
First   Middle Initial   Last

Mailing Address:_____
Number   Street   City   State   Zip

Physical Address (If Different):_____
Number   Street   City   State   Zip

Home Phone: _____ Work Phone:_____ Cell Phone: _____
OK to Call?   ☐ Yes ☐ No   ☐ Yes ☐ No   ☐ Yes ☐ No
OK to Leave Message?   ☐ Yes ☐ No   ☐ Yes ☐ No   ☐ Yes ☐ No

Social Security #:_____-_____-_____   Sex: ☐ Male ☐ Female   Email:_____

Marital Status: ☐ Single ☐ Married ☐ Divorced ☐ Separated ☐ Other_____

Employer:_____   ☐ Full Time   ☐ Part Time

Student: ☐ Full Time ☐ Part Time Referred by:_____OK to Acknowledge Referral? ☐ Yes ☐ No

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INSURANCE INFORMATION

Primary Insurance Carrier:_____Ins. Phone #:_____

Address:_____

Policy Holder Information:

    Relationship of patient to insured: ☐ Self ☐ Spouse ☐ Child ☐ Other_____

    Policy Holder Name:_____Date of Birth:_____

    Address:_____ Sex: ☐ Male ☐ Female

    Home Phone: ( )_____Work Phone: ( )_____Cell Phone: ( )_____

    Employer:_____Email:_____

    I.D.Number:_____ Social Security Number:_____-____-_____

    Group Number:_____

Secondary Insurance Carrier:_____Ins. Phone #:_____

Address:_____

Policy Holder Information:

    Relationship of patient to insured: ☐ Self ☐ Spouse ☐ Child ☐ Other_____

    Policy Holder Name:_____Date of Birth:_____

    Address:_____ Sex: ☐ Male ☐ Female

    Home Phone: ( )_____Work Phone: ( )_____Cell Phone: ( )_____

    Employer:_____Email:_____

    I.D.Number:_____ Social Security Number:_____-____-_____

    Group Number:_____

RESPONSIBLE PARTY INFORMATION

Person Responsible for Payment (If other than patient)

    Name:_____ check if: ☐ Custodial Parent   ☐ Legal Guardian

    Address:_____

    Home Phone: ( )_____Work Phone: ( )_____Cell Phone: ( )_____

    Relationship to Patient:_____Email:_____

PATIENT'S OR AUTHORIZED PERSON'S SIGNATURE: I authorize the release of any medical or other informaton necessary to process all claims. I authorize payment of medical benefits to **Life Management Group, Inc.** for all services provided.

    SIGNED:_____DATE:_____

PROVIDER COMPLETE: ICD-Dx #1:_____ ICD-Dx #2:_____ ICD-Dx #3:_____ ICD-Dx Other:_____

Copay: $_____   New Patient: ☐ Yes ☐ No

Authorization Required: ☐ Yes ☐ No #Sessions Auth'd _____Start_____End_____Auth. #_____

Provider: 101174 - ☐ Halbur ☐ Scherer ☐ Carkhum ☐ Hays

1

Please list all of your family members:

Name:	Age	Relationship to You
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Nearest relative who is not living in your household to be used as your emergency contact:

Name: _____ Relation:_____

Home Phone: _____ Alternate Number:_____

Current Issues: What are the problem(s) for which you are seeking help?

_____

_____

_____

_____

What are your treatment goals?

1._____

2._____

3._____

4._____

Current Symptoms Checklist: (check all that apply)

( ) Depressed mood	( ) Racing thoughts	( ) Excessive worry
( ) Unable to enjoy activities	( ) Impulsivity	( ) Anxiety attacks
( ) Sleep pattern disturbance	( ) Increased risky behavior	( ) Avoidance
( ) Loss of interest	( ) Increased libido	( ) Decreased libido
( ) Concentration/forgetfulness	( ) Decreased need for sleep	( ) Suspiciousness
( ) Change in appetite	( ) Excessive energy	( ) Binging/Purging
( ) Excessive guilt	( ) Increased irritability	( ) Hallucinations
( ) Fatigue	( ) Crying spells	( )Excessive Anger
( )_____	( )_____	( )_____

Past Psychiatric History:

Outpatient treatment: ____Yes   ____ No   If yes, please describe below (reason, dates treated):

_____

_____

Inpatient treatment: ____Yes   ____ No   If yes, please describe below (reason, dates treated):

_____

_____

Please list ALL current prescription medications and how often you take them (if none, write none):

Medication Name	Total Daily Dosage	Estimated Start Date

Current over-the-counter medications or supplements:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Current medical problems:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Past medical problems, non-psychiatric hospitalization or surgeries:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

<u>Personal and Family Medical History</u>:
Has anyone in your family been diagnosed and/or treated for:

	Yes	No	If yes, which family member?
Bipolar Disorder	( )	( )	_____
Alcohol abuse	( )	( )	_____
Other substance abuse	( )	( )	_____
Anger	( )	( )	_____
Suicide	( )	( )	_____
Violence	( )	( )	_____
Schizophrenia	( )	( )	_____
Depression	( )	( )	_____
Anxiety	( )	( )	_____
Post-traumatic stress	( )	( )	_____

Previous Diagnosis/Treatment Checklist: (check all that apply)

( ) Depressed mood	( ) Racing thoughts	( ) Excessive worry
( ) Unable to enjoy activities	( ) Impulsivity	( ) Anxiety attacks
( ) Sleep pattern disturbance	( ) Increased risky behavior	( ) Avoidance
( ) Loss of interest	( ) Increased libido	( ) Decreased libido
( ) Concentration/forgetfulness	( ) Decreased need for sleep	( ) Suspiciousness
( ) Change in appetite	( ) Excessive energy	( ) Binging/Purging
( ) Excessive guilt	( ) Increased irritability	( ) Hallucinations
( ) Fatigue	( ) Crying spells	( )Excessive Anger
( ) _____	( ) _____	( ) _____

<u>Educational History:</u>
Did you attend college: _____ Yes _____ No   If yes, where: _____

Did you graduate: _____ Yes _____ No   Highest level of education attained: _____

<u>Substance Use:</u>
Have you ever felt that you should cut down on your drinking or drug use?   _____ Yes   _____ No

Do you think you may have a problem with alcohol or drug use?   _____ Yes   _____ No

Have you ever been treated for alcohol or drug use or abuse: _____ Yes   _____ No

If yes, for which substances? _____

If yes, where were you treated and when: _____

_____

How many days per week do you drink any alcohol: _____

What is the least number of drinks you drink in a day: _____

What is the most number of drinks you drink in a day: _____

In the past 3 months, what is the largest amount of alcohol you have consumed in one day: _____

4

Have you ever felt you ought to cut down on your drinking or drug use: ____Yes ____No

Have people annoyed you by criticizing your drinking or drug use: ____Yes ____No

Have you ever felt bad or guilty about your drinking or drug use: ____Yes ____No

Have you ever had a drink or used drugs first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or to get rid of a

hangover: ____Yes ____No

Do you think you may have a problem with alcohol or drug use: ____Yes ____No

Have you used any street drugs in the past 3 months: ____Yes ____No

If yes, which one: _____

Have you abused prescription medication: ____Yes ____No

If yes, which ones and for how long: _____

_____

_____

Check if you have ever tried the following:

	Yes	No	If yes, how long and when did you last use?
Methamphetamine	( )	( )	_____
Cocaine	( )	( )	_____
Stimulants (pills)	( )	( )	_____
Heroin	( )	( )	_____
LSD or Hallucinogens	( )	( )	_____
Marijuana	( )	( )	_____
Pain killers (not as prescribed)	( )	( )	_____
Methadone	( )	( )	_____
Tranquilizer/sleeping pills	( )	( )	_____
Alcohol	( )	( )	_____
Ecstasy	( )	( )	_____
Other	( )	( )	_____

How many caffeinated beverages do you drink a day: ____Coffee ____Sodas ____Tea

Do you smoke cigarettes: ____Yes ____No

How many packs per day on average: _____

How many years have you smoked: _____

Have you smoked in the past: ____Yes ____No

How many years did you smoke: _____

When did you quit: _____

Pipe, cigars, or chewing tobacco (currently): ____Yes ____No

Pipe, cigars, or chewing tobacco (in the past): ____Yes ____No

What kind: _____

How often per day on average: _____For how many years? _____

◯ Life Management Group

AUTHORIZATION FOR RELEASE OF INFORMATION

Date_____

I, _____ give permission for my counselor and/or the administrative

staff at Life Management Group to speak to the following people in regards to any

and all services provided:

1)_____ Relationship_____

2)_____ Relationship_____

3)_____ Relationship_____

4)_____ Relationship_____

5)_____ Relationship_____

Signed_____ Date_____

Signed _____ Printed Name_____
　　　　　　　WITNESS

HIPAA ACKNOWLEDGMENT

By signing below, I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this office's Notice of Privacy Practices form.

_____   _____
Client/Parent/Guardian Name Printed   Date

_____   _____
Client/Parent/Guardian Signature   Date

Refusal to Sign Acknowledgment

_____   _____
Client Name   Date

Notice of Privacy Practices was sent

_____   _____
Client Name   Date

Pages 7-9 and 11-12 are omitted at the request of LMG due to legal restrictions.

APPENDIX D

PROGRESS NOTES

PROGRESS NOTES   Date of Session_____

Client Name_____ Start Time_____ End Time_____

Other parties present & their relationship to client_____

Objectives_____

Changes in Meds: None_____ Changes_____ | DX_____ |

Changes in bio-psychosocial status: ___ None Changes_____

<u>Current Assessment of Functioning</u>: (1 = mild 2 = moderate 3 = serious 4 = severe 5 = extreme)

<u>Mental Status</u>: ___Normal __Lessened Awareness ___Memory Deficiencies ___ Disoriented __Disorganized __Delusional

__Hallucinating __ Vigilant __Other

<u>Suicide/Violence Risk</u>: __None ___Ideation only ___Plans ___Threat ___Gesture ___Rehearsal ___Attempt

<u>Mood</u>: __Normal/appropriate __Anxious __Depressed __Irritable ___Expansive __Euphoric __Dysphoric __Tearful

<u>Affect</u>: __Normal/Appropriate __Unconstrained __Blunted/Restricted __Inappropriate __Liable __Flat

<u>Insight</u>: __Good __Impairments in sight   <u>Judgment</u>: __Good __Impairments in judgments

<u>Behavioral Problems</u>: __None __Aggressive __Impulsive __Angry __Oppositional __Agitated

<u>Substance Misuse</u>: __None __Level of misuse (List Substance(s):_____

<u>Data/Issue(s) Addressed</u>:

_____

_____

_____

<u>Intervention(s) Utilized</u>: __Cognitive __Supportive __Educational __Insight Oriented __Solution Focused __Systems __EFT

__DBT __Behavioral __Relapse Prevention __Other (List) _____

Resources Provided _____

Referrals Made_____

Assessment/Progress made towards achievement of treatment goals/effectiveness of interventions:

_____

_____

Topics / Plans for next session:_____

_____

Signature_____ Print Name_____

APPENDIX E

CLIENT REINTEGRATION MATRIX

Client Reintegration Matrix

Key:

Green Check = LMG client attending counseling session	Real-time updates are in the "Notes" column
Red Check = Client missed a session of Pastoral Counseling	Green shading in weekly box = Client Found Church Home

Client Name	Paired Church	Week 1 (Initial Milestone Achievements)				Week 2-4 (Counseling)			Week 5-9 (Counseling)					Week 10-11 (Closing Interviews)		Week 12-14 (Synthesize Data)			Notes
		Contact	Interview	Intake	Counseled	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	
LMG001	Church A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Found church home at church A, baptized in week 9 with spouse, ongoing counseling
LMG002	Church A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Found church home at church A, baptized in week 9, ongoing counseling with another LMG counselor
LMG003	Church A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓			Found church home at church A, no longer requires counseling
LMG004	Church D	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Found church home at church D, received salvation and is considering baptism, ongoing counseling
LMG005	Church A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Found church home at Church A, ongoing counseling
LMG006	Church C	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓			Disabilities impeding church attendance, watching online services with church C, ongoing counseling
LMG007	Church E	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Found church home at church E (family), ongoing counseling
LMG008	Church E	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓			Found church home at church E (family), ongoing counseling, overcoming Christian "cult" trauma
LMG009	Church G	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓			Still searching for church home, major spiritual trauma from local churches and family of origin
LMG010	Church F	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓			Baptized in week 7, found church home, ongoing counseling
LMG011	N/A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓			Having a hard time attending (spiritual trauma), ongoing counseling
LMG012	Church I	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Found church home (w/ family) at church I, ongoing counseling
LMG013	Church I	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓			Found church home (w/ family) at Church I, ongoing counseling with another LMG counselor
LMG014	Church J	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓			Found church home at church J, considering small group participation, ongoing counseling

APPENDIX F

CLIENT CLOSING INTERVIEW

Dear _____,

        Thank you for participating in the spiritual abuse recovery and church integration research. I am truly grateful to you, and I would like to allow you a moment to share feedback with me that will help other spiritually wounded Christians in our city.

1. Please give your best overall description of your journey since day one of working with Life Management Group, your counselor, and the church(es) you visited.

2. Are there any counseling concepts that we discussed in counseling sessions that were particularly helpful to you?

3. At any time, did you feel emotionally, physically, or spiritually *unsafe* in any counseling session or at any church that you visited during our time together? Please describe any events that made you feel unsafe.

4. In your opinion, was being involved in this program beneficial to you? If yes, please describe how this program benefited you.

5. In your opinion, is there anything that your counselor could have done better to help you in your spiritual and emotional journey, or in helping you find a safe church home?

6. Did you find a safe church to call home? If so, please describe what attracted you to the church and why you like this church?

7. Are there any additional positive or negative comments about any of the churches you visited that you would like the counselor to know?

APPENDIX G

CHURCH CLOSING SURVEY

Dear _____,

       Thank you for your participation in the spiritual abuse recovery and church integration research. I am truly grateful to you, and I would like to allow you a moment to share feedback with me that will help spiritually wounded Christians in our city and other churches to become spiritual safe havens for Christians who are seeking a safe church home.

1. Please share your impression of the first meeting (interview) that you attended with the researcher.

2. Are there any church spiritual safety concepts that we discussed in meetings, over the phone, or otherwise that were particularly helpful to your church? Have you implemented any of these insights or ideas?

3. How would you describe your awareness of spiritual and emotional safety since the beginning of our partnership? (i.e., Has your awareness increased or stayed about the same?)

4. In your opinion, was being involved in this program a benefit to you and your church? If yes, please describe how this program benefited you personally and as a church.

5. In your opinion, is there anything that your research partner could have done better to help your church? Is there anything the researcher did well that helped your church?

6. Please describe any interactions that you may have had with any LMG client referrals to your church (it is possible that LMG clients visited your church anonymously at their request; please do not feel obligated to answer this question).

APPENDIX H

MINISTRY ORGANIZATION CONSENT FORM

Ministry Organization Consent

Title of the Project: Spiritual Abuse in Augusta, Georgia: Reconciling the Spiritually Abused to the Local Church.
Principal Investigator: James A. Getts, MDiv, BCPC; Doctoral of Ministry Candidate, Liberty University, Rawlings School of Divinity.
Co-investigator(s): N/A.

<div style="text-align:center">

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

</div>

Your church/ministry organization is invited to participate in a research study. To participate, your church must be a legal ministry organization in the state of Georgia. Church staff must be over the age of 18 to interact with the researcher and Life Management Group (LMG). Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

<div style="text-align:center">

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

</div>

The purpose of the study is to address the problem of an overwhelming number of spiritual abuse cases at Life Management Group, a professional counseling firm, where clients are claiming spiritual and religious abuse by religious organizations, clergy, and family members. Survivors of spiritual abuse often exhibit symptoms consistent with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other mental health disorders. This study seeks to discover and implement best practices in both pastoral counseling and the reconciliation of participants to a vetted safe church in Augusta, Georgia where participants may once again thrive in their faith.

<div style="text-align:center">

What will happen if you take part in this study?

</div>

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:
1. Participate in an in-person or teleconference meeting with the researcher to engage in an initial interview about the church, culture, and existing or planned best practices to help people in the city of Augusta avoid being abused by the church at large. This initial meeting will last approximately 60-90 minutes.
2. Agree to receive mostly anonymous visitors/clients from LMG as they attempt to reintegrate into a spiritually safe ministry setting. Visitors who may visit your church/ministry will be vetted recovering victims of spiritual and religious. These victims

will be in active pastoral counseling for 12 weeks as a supplement to visiting and potentially becoming a member of your church.

3. Partner with the researcher, James Getts, for 12-14 weeks and inform the researcher of any issue that may arise with a known visitor who is an LMG client. Many victims of spiritual abuse avoid religious gatherings, religious activities, churches, clergy, and even close family members, friends, or acquaintances after experiencing spiritual abuse. Victims of spiritual abuse often carry with them the potential to become retraumatized by a spiritual organization or person; the researcher needs to be aware if this happens to any LMG client who is referred to your church, as the client/visitor's mental, emotional, and spiritual health are of the utmost importance to this study and must be protected.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Direct benefits of participating churches are 1) the ability to interact with a pastoral counseling professional who can advise and partner with any church that may need insight into spiritual abuse prevention and/or recovery. 2) The church may receive new visitors and members because of this study.

Direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study are a minimum of 10 weeks of pastoral counseling to address and potentially resolve spiritual, emotional, and psychological abuse and trauma at the hands of a religious organization, group, or individual. Participants will also be required to, at minimum, attempt to attend a vetted, spiritually safe church or ministry of choice. It is the hope that participants will find a new safe church home; however, no participant will ever be pressured to attend a church if they are not ready.

Benefits to society include pro bono spiritual abuse awareness discussions, counsel, and training for participating church organizations and leadership with the intent of stemming the tide of spiritual and religious abuse in Augusta, Georgia. By bringing awareness of spiritual abuse to the local community of faith, it is the intent to heal the traumatic wounds caused by spiritual and religious abuse among residents of Augusta.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal to mild, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life, with the potential of re-exposure to religious reminders of past spiritual and emotional distress or trauma, also known as "triggers," "trauma response," or "activating events." Mild risks will be mitigated by all participants receiving professional pastoral counseling prior to, during, and after any interaction with a religious organization. In the rare instance where a participant is overwhelmed by interactions with pastoral counseling or a religious organization or individual, the client will be given the opportunity to terminate their participation in this research. In the rare event that a participant incurs any emotional or spiritual

distress or trauma from a church they visit, follow-on pastoral and professional counseling and care will be provided to the client by Life Management Group (LMG) professionals.

The researcher and any pastoral or professional counseling staff encountered at LMG are mandated reporters according to the laws of the State of Georgia.

Injury or Illness: Liberty University will not provide medical treatment or financial compensation if you are injured or become ill as a result of participating in this research project. This does not waive any of your legal rights nor release any claim you might have based on negligence.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject or church/ministry organization. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses in counseling sessions and any church meetings with the researcher will be confidential.
- Participant church staff responses published in the study will be kept confidential using an assigned church identification number known only to the researcher.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others cannot overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and will only be used for this research project.
- After three years, all electronic and manual (paper) records will be deleted and destroyed.
- No recordings of any kind will be taken in any pastoral counseling sessions, meetings at the church, or phone calls.
- Limits of confidentiality will be discussed in detail while church staff completes the initial interview with the researcher; however, as a baseline, any staff or visitor/client participant that expresses intent to suicide, harm oneself, or harm another individual or group will be reported to appropriate emergency management service personnel (EMS) or third-party crisis management teams (e.g., Georgia Mobile Crisis Response Team).

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Life Management Group. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting this relationship.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please inform the researcher that you wish to discontinue your participation.

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

The researcher conducting this study is _____. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact _____ at (XXX) XXX-XXX and _____@internet.com

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

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

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

Your Consent

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

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

_____
Printed Name

_____
Church Name

_____
Signature   Date

APPENDIX I

LIST OF POTENTIAL CHURCHES FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

(Church names are protected, only descriptions are provided)

1. Southern Baptist Convention Church, 95 employees, Approx. 3,000 members
2. Methodist Church, UNK[1] employees, Approx. 600 members
3. Non-Denominational Church, 3 employees, Approx. 40 members
4. Baptist Church, 6 employees, Approx. 400 members
5. AME Church, UNK employees, UNK members
6. Every Nation Church, 15 employees, UNK members
7. Methodist Church, 13 employees, Approx. 400 members
8. Non-Denominational Church, 2 employees, UNK members
9. Willow Creek Association of Churches, UNK employees, UNK members
10. Non-Denominational Church, 8 employees, Approx. 300 members
11. Non-Denominational Church, 3 employees, Approx. 100 members
12. Evangel Fellowship of Churches, 2 employees, Approx. 30 members
13. Methodist Church, 4 employees, UNK members
14. Southern Baptist Convention Church, UNK employees, Approx. 2,000 members
15. Southern Baptist Convention Church, UNK employees, Approx. 500 members
16. Presbyterian Church USA, UNK employees, UNK members
17. Vineyard Church USA, 10 employees, Approx. 500 members
18. Church of Christ Church, 4 employees, Approx. 75 members
19. Baptist Church, 5 employees, Approx. 225 members
20. Non-Denominational Church, 3 employees, Approx. 150 members

---

[1] UNK: abbreviation for "Unknown"

APPENDIX J

SPIRITUAL SAFETY SUMMARY

Dear _____,

      This document represents an analysis of _____ church's spiritual safety awareness and culture and is a cumulative summary of the last 12 weeks of professional interaction with your church. The following information is based on all interactions with your church from the initial interview, LMG client visits to your church, and peer-reviewed objective observations. This summary concludes with recommendations for the sustainment of the already positive safety aspects in your church that have been observed and professional recommendations for the implementation of new safety concepts.

1. Summary of the initial interview, which produced an initial safety awareness score of __/50.

2. Summary of LMG client interactions while visiting your church (__/25):

3. Summary of peer-review comments (if applicable):

4. Recommendations for sustaining observed favorable safety cultural aspects in your church:

5. Recommendation for implementation of best practices (__/25):

APPENDIX K

SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR CHURCH ATTENDANCE

Safety Guidelines for Church Attendance

Please answer the following questions as detailed as possible:

1. Were you greeted warmly by someone when you arrived?

2. After being greeted, were you given appropriate space to be on your own, worship, and generally enjoy your worship experience?

    a. Is there anything that anyone did to make you feel special?

    b. Is there anything that anyone did that was off-putting or offensive?

3. During worship, were you somehow singled out as a visitor? If so, how did this make you feel?

4. Did anyone make you feel any pressure to participate in any activities that you were not comfortable with or ready for (e.g., giving your finances, singing, dancing, after-church activities, pressure to join a group or ministry)?

5. If you need pastoral care and counseling, did you feel comfortable asking for it? Would you know whom to ask for pastoral care if you needed it?

6. Did the church make you feel safe, heard, and valued?

7. Did the church do anything "weird" that offended you or did they do anything that was inappropriate or off-putting in some way?

8. Does the church service have a good balance of formality and informality? Was it too formal or too informal? Was it very strict or chaotic?

9. Did you sense a culture of gossip, discord, division, cliques, defensiveness, anxiety/chaos, etc.?

10. Did you sense a culture of love, forgiveness, lightheartedness, grace, kindness, and goodness?

11. Did you feel safe asking questions or giving your opinion to church leadership or other members, like in Sunday school, a small group, or in corporate worship?

12. Was there an appropriate level of humor in the worship service you attended?

13. Did you feel any pressure to become a member of the church or were you pressured to join any of the church's ministries?

14. Did you sense the presence of God in the service or activity you attended?

15. Did you feel a genuine "love of neighbor" culture in the church you attended?

16. Do you feel like you want to keep attending this church? Do you feel like you fit in?

17. Please describe any additional highlights or significant concerns that may have about this church.

APPENDIX L

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Participant Consent

Title of the Project: Spiritual Abuse in Augusta, Georgia: Reconciling the Spiritually Abused to the Local Church
Principal Investigator: James A. Getts, MDiv, BCPC; Doctoral of Ministry Candidate, Liberty University, School of Divinity.
Co-investigator(s): N/A.

Invitation to be part of a research study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must have been a professing Christian or a person seeking spirituality at a time that you experienced spiritual (religious) abuse by a Christian religious organization, group, individual, family member, or relative. You must be enrolled as an active or new client of Life Management Group (LMG) of Augusta; over the age of 18. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

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

The purpose of the study is to address the problem of an overwhelming number of spiritual abuse cases at Life Management Group, a professional counseling firm, where clients are claiming spiritual and religious abuse by religious organizations, clergy, and family members. Survivors of spiritual abuse often exhibit symptoms consistent with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other mental health disorders. This study seeks to discover and implement best practices in both pastoral counseling and the reconciliation of participants to a vetted safe church in Augusta, Georgia where participants may once again thrive in their faith.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
1. Attendance in a minimum of 10 weekly counseling sessions that will last 50-55 minutes and will be documented in accordance with the ethical standards set forth by the state of Georgia; however, all documents are strictly confidential.
2. Participants who are not active in any religious activity or church will be asked to consider attendance at a church chosen from a list of vetted churches.

3. Participants will be required to complete a one-page closing interview at the conclusion of the project with the intent of providing valuable feedback to the researcher and optional feedback to any churches that the participant attended or interacted with.

<div align="center">**How could you or others benefit from this study?**</div>

Direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study are a minimum of 12 weeks of pastoral counseling to address and potentially resolve spiritual, emotional, and psychological abuse and trauma at the hands of a religious organization, group, or individual. Participants will also be required to, at minimum, attempt to attend a vetted church or ministry of choice. It is the hope that participants will find a new safe church home; however, no participant will ever be pressured to attend a church if they are not ready.

Benefits to society include pro bono spiritual abuse awareness discussions, counsel, and training for participating church organizations and leadership with the intent of stemming the tide of spiritual and religious abuse in Augusta, Georgia. By bringing awareness of spiritual abuse to the local community of faith, it is the intent to heal the traumatic wounds caused by spiritual and religious abuse among residents of Augusta.

<div align="center">**What risks might you experience from being in this study?**</div>

The risks involved in this study are minimal to mild, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life, with the potential of re-exposure to religious reminders of past spiritual and emotional distress or trauma, also known as "triggers," "trauma response," or "activating events." Mild risks will be mitigated by all participants receiving professional pastoral counseling prior to, during, and after any interaction with a religious organization. In the rare instance where a participant is overwhelmed by interactions with pastoral counseling or a religious organization or individual, the client will be given the opportunity to terminate their participation in this research. In the rare event that a participant incurs any emotional or spiritual distress or trauma from a church they visit, follow-on pastoral and professional counseling and care will be provided to the client by Life Management Group (LMG) professionals.

The researcher and any pastoral or professional counseling staff encountered at LMG are mandated reporters according to the laws of the State of Georgia.

Injury or Illness: Liberty University will not provide medical treatment or financial compensation if you are injured or become ill as a result of participating in this research project. This does not waive any of your legal rights nor release any claim you might have based on negligence.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses in counseling sessions will be confidential.
- Participant responses published in the study will be kept confidential through the use of an assigned participant identification number known only to the researcher.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others cannot overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and will only be used for this research project.
- After three years, all electronic and manual (paper) records will be deleted and destroyed.
- No recordings of any kind will be taken in any pastoral counseling sessions or of any phone calls.
- Limits of confidentiality will be discussed in detail while clients complete initial counseling intake packets; however, as a baseline, any participant that expresses intent to suicide, harm oneself, or harm another individual or group will be reported to appropriate emergency management personnel (EMS) or third-party crisis management teams (e.g., Georgia Mobile Crisis Response Team).

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

To participate in the research, you may be given the opportunity to purchase therapeutic resources that your counselor and you agree will be beneficial to your individual counseling and recovery journey. At most, resources may cost up to $20.00 for select books or workbooks. Purchasing any resource is optional and will never be required.

Participants will be required to file insurance, self-pay, or otherwise remunerate Life Management Group counselor(s) in accordance with Georgia and Federal ethics standards to receive mental health and pastoral counseling care. Hourly sessions at LMG cost $95 per session. Participants will receive a $10 discount per session on self-pay fee schedules to encourage consistent participation. In instances of financial hardship, approval from the Clinical Director and CEO of LMG must be obtained to negotiate possible hardship allowances or payment plans. Hardship allowances are not guaranteed and are rarely granted.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Life Management Group. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting this relationship.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please inform the researcher that you wish to discontinue your participation.

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

The researcher conducting this study is _____. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact _____ at (XXX) XXX-XXXX and _____@internet.com.

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

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

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Your Consent

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

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

_____

Printed Participant Name

_____

Signature   Date

APPENDIX M

LIFE MANAGEMENT GROUP PERMISSIONS FOR USE FORM

Life Management Group, Inc.

January 13, 2023

To Whom it May Concern:

I, _____ give James A. Getts permission to utilize Life Management Group (LMG) office space to conduct pastoral counseling and care in support of his action research project with Liberty University.

Furthermore, I give permission for James to incorporate the use of the Life Management Group name and necessary intake or permissions forms and templates to support his research, as these documents are necessary to facilitate the legal intake of counseling clients at LMG.

I may be contacted at   if you have any questions regarding this letter or Life Management Group.

Sincerely,

APPENDIX N

CHURCH SPIRITUAL SAFETY AWARENESS SCORE MATRIX

Church	Initial Safety Awareness and Culture Score (Appendix A, G)	LMG Client Feedback (Appendix K, F, D)	Spiritual Safety Summary, Item 5 (Appendix J)	Final Spiritual Safety Score
	50 Points Possible	25 Points Possible	25 Points Possible	
Church I	50	25	25	100
Church H	46	25	25	96
Church J	43	25	25	93
Church E	46	21	21	88
Church B	35	21	21	77
Church D	32	21	21	74
Church A	43	14	14	71
Church G	39	10	10	59
Church F	21	10	20	51
Church C	46	0	0	46

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IRB APPROVAL LETTER

IRB #: IRB-FY22-23-594
Title: Spiritual Abuse in Augusta, Georgia: Reconciling the Spiritually Abused to the Local Church
Creation Date: 11-23-2022
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: James Getts
Review Board: Research Ethics Office
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Exempt	Decision	No Human Subjects Research

Key Study Contacts

Member	James Getts	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	
Member	James Getts	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	
Member	Scott Edgar	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	