Intimate Partner Violence in the Christian Faith Community:

Exploring the Influence of Institutional Spiritual Abuse on Marriages

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Abstract

Objective: Intimate partner violence has been under-investigated in the Christian faith population. Previous research suggests Christian women have unique vulnerabilities to interpersonal violence due to factors spanning several ecological levels. This study explored the relationship between institutional abuse, faith, spiritual impression management, psychological abuse, and the emerging construct of spiritual abuse in Christian marriages. Method: Data from 1,637 current and 149 former Christian women were collected. Factors contributing to former Christians leaving the faith were also explored. Findings: Over 30% of participants reported "often" experiencing organizational spiritual abuse and recurring marital psychological abuse every few months with former Christians experiencing significantly higher levels of organizational abuse. Key findings also included: (a) higher organizational abuse predicted higher marital psychological and spiritual abuse but lower spiritual impression management, (b) higher faith predicted higher impression management which predicted higher marital abuse, (c) marital psychological abuse and impression management moderated the relationships between organization abuse and marital abuse, and (d) close to 90% of former Christians reported negative experiences in the faith community "very much" contributing to them leaving the faith. Notably, although the relationship between systemic abuse and IPV has been theoretically associated, this study is the first to demonstrate not only a correlational but a predictive relationship. Further, the findings regarding the construct of spiritual abuse suggest differences between organizational and interpersonal spiritual abuse that warrant further study.

Keywords: domestic violence, systemic abuse, Christianity, religion, impression management, spiritual abuse

Chapter 1: Introduction

Deeply devoted Christian women are intentional in seeking marital partners who reflect and share values inherent to their religious beliefs (Knickmeyer et al., 2004, 2010). Although experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) leave all victims bewildered and confused, for Christian women, the shock of abuse is especially disorienting because it directly violates basic tenets of their faith and brings core and sacred aspects of their identities into question (Chisale, 2018; Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Johnson & Van Vonderen, 1991; Knickmeyer et al., 2004, 2010; McMullin et al., 2015; Nason-Clark et al., 2018). The complexity of addressing abuse is further confounded by culture-specific language and patriarchal beliefs perpetrators use to exploit women's desire to honor God (Knickmeyer et al., 2004; McMullin et al., 2015; Nason-Clark et al., 2004, 2018; Westenberg, 2017).

Although the literature on IPV in the general population is extensive, studies on domestic abuse in the Christian faith community are relatively limited (Ellison et al., 2007; Knickmeyer et al., 2010; Kroeger & Nason-Clark, 2001). Preliminary data have suggested rates of abuse in Christians parallel to those in the general population (Natterstad, 2020; Wang et al., 2009; Westenberg, 2017); yet, few studies have sought to examine IPV in the Christian community. It is unclear why there is a lack of research in this population, given the implications of not exploring and addressing IPV are significant for victims, their children, Christian leaders, and the community at large (Arriaga et al., 2018; Nason-Clark et al., 2018; Zust et al., 2021).

Notably, the deficit of empirical data on this topic may contribute to the lack of pastoral training on IPV leading to assumptions that abuse is minimal or nonexistent which, in turn, are implicitly conveyed to broader Christian communities (Nason-Clark et al., 2018; Zust et al., 2021). The implications for Christian women are significant as these systemic factors may

contribute to a vulnerability to experiencing IPV within this context (Epstein & Goodman, 2018; Nason-Clark et al., 2018). Specifically, failure of leaders to publicly condemn abuse in Christian contexts encourages a culture of silence that results in revictimization of abused women and reinforcement of the abuse cycle (Chisale, 2018; Knickmeyer et al., 2010; Zust et al., 2021). In the absence of adequate training on IPV, well-meaning leaders and members who trivialize victims' lived experiences of abuse, and/or fail to act to protect women, echo the narrative of the abusers which further undermine victims' sense of worthlessness and hopelessness (Epstein & Goodman, 2018; McMullin et al., 2015). In turn, Christian victims who rely on their faith to overcome hardship are forced to either stay within their faith communities and endure abuse or leave their support systems to find safety and healing (Chisale, 2018; Knickmeyer et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2009).

Importantly, although IPV encompasses physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, researchers have found psychological abuse (PA) to be the most common form of IPV (Black et al., 2011; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014), often preceding, co-occurring with, and being more damaging than physical violence (Follingstad et al., 1990; Frieze, 2005; Katz & Arias, 2000; Matheson et al., 2015; Mills, 2018; Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; Walker, 1979). Specifically, coercion, a central component of PA (Stark, 2007), strips women of their basic human right to individuate, leading to a loss of identity, reduced self-efficacy, and an inhibited capacity to seek help (Hayes & Jeffries, 2016; Matheson et al., 2015).

Notably, within the Christian community, psychological abuse seems to incorporate spiritual themes resulting in the sacred part of a victim's identity being targeted making this type of abuse especially damaging and complex to address (Dehan & Levi, 2009; Nason-Clark et al., 2018). Although pastors and therapists provided anecdotal accounts about this phenomena for

decades, researchers have only recently explored this subtype of abuse referred to as spiritual abuse (SA; Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Dehan & Levi, 2009; Oakley & Kinmond, 2014; Ward, 2011). Importantly, researchers have yet to operationalize SA (Oakley et al., 2018) and differentiate between institutional SA and interpersonal SA. That said, it appears PA and SA in organizations overlaps with institutional betrayal as the latter represents a vulnerability to experiencing abuse due to actions or inactions of organizations that result in environments where abuse is more likely to occur and less likely to be addressed (Epstein & Goodman, 2018; Platt et al., 2009). To the author's knowledge, there have only been a handful of studies exploring experiences of institutional SA (Keller, 2016; Koch & Edstrom, 2021; Ward, 2011) and only one on SA and IPV (Dehan & Levi, 2009). To date, no studies have been conducted exploring the influence of institutional SA on IPV.

Given the notion intimate partner abuse is maintained within the social and cultural contexts that allow it to be perpetuated (Goodfriend & Arriaga, 2017; Guerin & de Oliveira Ortolan, 2017), exploring the relationship between women's experiences of institutional betrayal and spiritual abuse within Christian organizations and those in marriage can contribute to a clearer understanding of how abuse in this specific population may be reinforced by systemic factors (Dehan & Levi, 2009). This, in turn, would help to better inform development of preventative measures and interventions specific to this population (Natterstad, 2020).

The primary aim of this study is to explore how experiences of spiritual abuse in organizations may influence women's experiences of both psychological and spiritual abuse within marriage. The role of impression management will also be investigated.

Literature Review

This literature review outlines the definition and impact of intimate partner violence (IPV) and the factors from across several ecological levels that represent barriers to addressing IPV in Christian contexts, including challenges for leaders and victims, religious language and beliefs, spiritual impression management, the paradox of the church, patriarchal systems, psychological and spiritual abuse, and institutional betrayal. Socioecological and feminist theories are discussed as a framework to better conceptualize the intersectionality of factors contributing to IPV.

IPV

IPV is a specific form of domestic violence that involves physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, emotional abuse, harassment, and/or stalking by current or former romantic partners (Kelly, 2011; Smith et al., 2018). Interpersonal abuse is motivated and maintained by power-disparities between perpetrators and victims (Mwaura, 2010) whereby abusers use power-over victims to their benefit (Stark, 2010).

Definition and Statistics

Although awareness of IPV has grown considerably over the last 5 decades, rates of abuse remain high with one in three women (36.4%) and 1 in 10 men (10.9%) experiencing violence at the hands of a romantic interest in their lifetime (Smith et al., 2018). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's most recent survey, 43.5 million American women (36.4%) experience psychological aggression at some point in their lives with 1 in 18 (5.5%) experiencing it in the last year. As such, IPV has continued to represent a significant and complex societal problem (Smith et al., 2018).

Although women and men can both be victims of abuse, the majority of IPV victims are women (Smith et al., 2018). Importantly, although 60% of the population in the United States identifies as Christian (Pew Research Center, 2021) and over 35% of women in the United States will experience IPV, many religious leaders and congregation members do not view IPV as a significant problem in the church community (IMA WorldHealth [IMA], 2014, 2018; Zust et al., 2017, 2021).

The Impact of IPV

IPV threatens victims' physical, emotional, and psychological safety (Ellsberg et al., 2008; Dillon et al., 2013) and can result in death (Rakovec-Felser, 2014). It also affects the well-being of children who witness abuse (Perry, 2001; Rollè et al., 2019; Strauss, 1990). Specifically, Ellsberg et al. (2008) conducted a study with 24, 097 women in 10 countries for the World Health Organization and found significant relationships between IPV and problematic health including pain, memory loss, and dizziness such that it impacted women's daily activities. Participants who experienced IPV at least once experienced more emotional distress and suicidal ideation and attempts than those with no history of abuse. Additionally, in a review of the literature on the impact of IPV on physical and mental health, Dillon et al. (2013) found IPV was associated with a broad range of challenges including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, self-harm, sleep problem, somatic disorders, chronic pain, and gynecological problems.

Further, researchers have found children who witnessed IPV have blamed themselves and can become victims if they attempt to interfere (Hamby et al., 2010). Children witnessing abuse are vulnerable to post-traumatic stress reactions, alterations in brain size and structure, significant behavioral problems, and diminished social functioning (Delima & Vimpani, 2011;

Herman, 1992; Kirlpatrick & Litt, 1997; Riedl, 2019; Rudo et al., 1998). They are also at higher risk for poly-victimization and chronic health problems. In a study by Riedl et al. (2019) of 1,480 patients, the researchers found a high correlation between child victimization, domestic violence, and significantly higher physical health problems, including chronic pain, gastrointestinal diseases, and respiratory disorders.

Notably, research has shown children who witness and/or experience violence internalize violence as a normative experience in conflict resolution, which can contribute to a vulnerability to either be revictimized and/or perpetrate violence later in life (Black et al., 2010). Ehrensaft et al. (2003) followed 543 participants for 20 years to explore the relationship between exposure to domestic violence, maltreatment, conduct disorder, and substance misuse, and the risk of being a victim or perpetrator of violence in adulthood. Results revealed exposure to IPV was the highest predictor of being a victim of domestic violence. Child abuse and conduct disorder represented the highest risk for violence toward one's future romantic partners. Taken together, these findings highlight the significant impact IPV has not just on those experiencing violence, but on the children who witness abuse who can then in turn perpetuate the cycle. This can create a multigenerational effect that impacts families and communities alike.

IPV in the Faith Community

The idea that domestic violence occurs within Christian families seems contradictory as Judeo-Christian faith is rooted in love and virtues that are incompatible with abusive behaviors (Johnson & Von Vanderen, 1991; McMullin et al., 2015; Nason-Clark et al., 2018). As such, the prevailing assumption among Christians, including pastors, has been that IPV does not represent a significant problem in the church (IMA, 2014, 2018; Zust et al., 2017, 2021).

Zust et al. (2021) conducted a 10-year study examining IPV-related beliefs of Christian congregational members and leaders and found, overall, little had changed in terms of perceiving IPV as a relatively small problem within the faith community. Specifically, although in 2005, 72% of congregational members endorsed the notion that IPV impacted "only a small number" in their church (Zust et al., 2021, p. 2968); 10 years later, that number decreased by only 2.2%. Notably, although 12.8% endorsed IPV as being a significant problem in the church in 2005, only 5.9% did so in 2015. As it relates to pastors, in 2005, 75% agreed IPV was nonexistent or a minor problem in the church, while in 2015, 78% did.

Importantly, although there are limited quantitative data on rates of abuse, to date, study results indicated rates of IPV in the faith community parallel or exceed those in the general population (Annis & Rice, 2001; Nason-Clark, 2004; Natterstad, 2020; Wang, 2009; Westenberg, 2017). Annis and Rice (2008) published results from a survey conducted in 1989 exploring the prevalence of abuse in the Reformed Church and found 1 in 8 reported physical abuse or neglect, and 1 in 5 reported emotional abuse, with 28% experiencing at least one of the three types of abuse. In a quantitative study on IPV and Christian women, Wang et al. (2009) surveyed and interviewed 1,476 Christian women and found over 50% had experienced one or more types of IPV with 25% experiencing two or more types of abuse. Relatedly, in a study exploring psychological abuse in Christian women, Natterstad (2020) found 31% of participants experienced ongoing psychological abuse every few months.

Although there is a need for more empirical research to support the prevalence of IPV, the realities of domestic violence in the faith community have been documented by therapists, social workers, and pastors for decades (Johnson & Van Vonderen, 1991; Nason-Clark et al., 2018). Yet, the topic of IPV has continued to be understudied, underrecognized, and largely

ignored (McMullin et al., 2015; Nash et al., 2009; Nason-Clark et al., 2018; Zust et al., 2021). This is concerning as IPV cannot be addressed and intergenerational transmission stopped until abuse is recognized (Wathen & MacMillan, 2013). In the meantime, this silence, referred to by Nason-Clark (1999) as a *Holy Hush* represents one of the significant vulnerabilities for deeply committed Christian women who view their churches as extended family (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000).

Challenges Religious Leaders Face

According to the literature, the factors that have most influenced religious leaders include lack of training on domestic violence (Homiak & Singletary, 2007), disbelief of victims (Bent-Goodley, 2015; Tracy, 2007), and conflicting priorities and beliefs (Miles, 2000; Ragab et al. 2018; Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005).

Lack of Training

Pastors are uniquely placed to help people facing adversity, including victims of IPV who often turn to religious leaders and the church community for help and support (IMA, 2018; Nason-Clark, 1997; Tedder & Smith, 2018; Zust et al., 2017, 2021); however, religious leaders receive little to no training on how to identify and address IPV and consequently feel ill-prepared to address it (Homiak & Singletary, 2007; IMA, 2018; Tedder & Smith, 2018; Zust et al., 2017).

Homiak and Singletary (2007) conducted a study exploring religious leaders' perceived ability to respond to instances of IPV in their congregations. Sixty percent felt ill-prepared, 32% were comfortable referring congregants to outside resources, and only 8% felt adequately trained to provide counseling. Relatedly, in a study by Zust et al. (2017), all pastors reported being approached by victims of abuse but only half had any training on domestic abuse. Notably, only 46% felt they were adequately trained. In a longitudinal study by Zust et al. (2021), although in

2005, 80% of pastors surveyed did not feel adequately equipped; 10 years later, that number had barely decreased with 77.8% reporting feeling unprepared. Notably, the survey indicated 75%–89% of participants would seek their pastor's counsel if they were in a violent relationship.

Relatedly, in a survey of 1000 protestant pastors by Lifeway Research, 81% of pastors reported being approached by victims of domestic or sexual abuse but only 46% reported being trained to deal with IPV and 50% felt ill-prepared (IMA, 2018). Interestingly, 96% of pastors reported they would feel responsible to investigate if they saw signs of abuse; however, only 29% took action regarding an IPV situation one time a year, and 25% several times a year.

This lack of training is something pastors have been reporting for decades (Fortune, 1987; Horton, 1988; Miles, 2000; Pagelow, 1981); yet, based on current literature, it appears little has been done to implement programs to educate and train leaders such that they feel adequately prepared (IMA, 2018; Zust, 2021). In the absence of adequate training, well-meaning pastors are left to navigate a very complex problem that if not identified and safely dealt with, results not just in the silencing of victims but in their revictimization (Bent-Goodley, 2015; Nason-Clark et al., 2018; Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005; Tracy, 2007).

Disbelief

Lack of knowledge regarding key aspects of IPV, including prevalence and perpetrators' patterns of behaviors, results in pastors minimizing or denying IPV, which harms the abused (Bent-Goodley, 2015; IMA, 2014, 2018; Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005; Tracy, 2007). In the Lifeway survey of pastors in 2018, although 64% of pastors agreed IPV and sexual violence occurs in the church, only 18% believed them to be a problem in their congregations (IMA, 2018). This number decreased from 25% in 2014 (IMA, 2014). In the 2018 survey, notably, although 54% of pastors accurately estimated rates of IPV in the general population, only 12%

agreed IPV occurs at the same rate in churches as in the general population, with 37% estimating only 5% of their congregation was affected by domestic violence (IMA, 2018). Overall, comparisons between these two surveys indicate little has changed in terms of acknowledging IPV as a problem within congregations. These findings align with research by Zust (2021) that showed little change over a 10-year span in the perceptions of the prevalence of IPV in churches in both congregants and leaders.

Notably, one of the effects of this underestimation of IPV was a failure to preach on abuse (IMA, 2014, 2018). In 2018, 77% of pastors spoke at least once a year on IPV, up from 65% in 2014. However, of those who spoke on IPV, 87% did so because they considered IPV to a problem in the community versus their congregations. This number had increased from 77% in 2014. Of those who did not speak on IPV, 49% refrained because they did not believe domestic violence to be a problem in their congregation, up from 29% in 2014.

In sum, although pastors reported having an increased awareness of IPV and more frequently speaking on the topic, the reasons for doing so appear to relate to the ongoing belief that IPV occurs outside of their churches and the denial or minimization of IPV occurring within congregations (IMA, 2018). These findings align with earlier research by Ware et al. (2003) who found clergy believed IPV was a problem, just not in their faith communities. Nason-Clark et al. (2018) argued the failure to publicly label and condemn domestic abuse results in the silencing of victims and the perpetuation of abuse. Specifically, in the absence of leaders publicly acknowledging the reality of abuse in the faith community, members will continue to believe the problem is nonexistent and/or irrelevant, victims will suffer alone, and perpetrators will continue to abuse (Chisale, 2018; Knickmeyer et al., 2010; Zust et al., 2021).

Conflicting Priorities and Beliefs

The limited ability to recognize IPV is further complicated by religious leaders' beliefs and conflicting priorities regarding forgiveness, grace, and restoration to uphold the sanctity of marriage (Miles, 2000; Ragab et al. 2018; Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005). Notably, these biases can influence leaders to view events in a nonabusive light often at the expense of holding abusers accountable (Kroeger & Nason-Clark, 2010; Ragab et al., 2018). In a recent study, religious leaders reported strongly opposing overt physical abuse of women and children but struggled to distinguish between outlier incidents and patterns of abuse (Ragab et al., 2018). Specifically, most clergies conceptualized incidents of domestic violence as mere extensions of heated arguments that were spontaneous, unpredictable, and unrelated, versus labeling them as abusive.

Ragab et al. (2018) proposed commitment to seeing these events as spontaneous prevented leaders from seeing patterns of violent behavior that would call for active support of victims to separate from spouses. They argued this also protected leaders' justification of tending "equally" to all parties involved including perpetrators. Notably, in the absence of recognizing IPV, pastors provided marital counseling, which to date is generally counter indicated for abusive marriages as it can invalidate victims, empower abusers, and put victims at further risk (McMullin et al., 2015). Recent research has shown there can be exceptions, however, in these cases, therapy should be conducted by highly trained therapists (Hurless & Cottone, 2018). Concerningly, in Lifeway Research's (2018) study, 70% of those who responded to victims provided marital counseling.

Beyond not recognizing IPV, pastors reported feeling conflicted by their conviction to prioritize forgiveness, grace, and reconciliation to uphold the sanctity of marriage (Levitt & Ware, 2006; Miles, 2000; Tedder & Smith, 2018). In a survey of pastors, Miles (2000) found

many clergies believed the priority should be to save marriages "at all costs" (p. 149) and to encourage victims to "forgive and forget" (p. 150). In a qualitative study of Black religious leaders, Tedder and Smith (2018) found even when clergy were aware of IPV, most of them emphasized the importance of marriage and family using scriptures. Those who supported a separation, only did so when victims were in physical danger.

Although surveys and research studies have shown most pastors felt conflicting beliefs regarding their roles and the sanctity of marriage, not all pastors prioritized intact marriages over the safety of victims. In a qualitative study by Zust et al. (2017), clergy were dismayed by victims' self-blame and decisions to remain with abusers. Although these findings are encouraging, to date, these results have represented outliers.

Notably, Levitt and Ware (2006) conducted a qualitative study exploring religious leaders' beliefs on IPV, marriage, and divorce. Although leaders held perpetrators responsible for the abuse, they also believed victims were at fault for either triggering abuse or for staying in the relationship. This aligns with previous research findings that show how cultural beliefs specific to fundamental Christianity inform these responses (Alsdurf & Alsdurf, 1989). In a study of 5,000 clergies by Alsdurf and Alsdurf (1989), 27% of pastors reported if wives would submit more, God would honor the wives, and the abuse would stop, and 20% said no amount of violence would justify divorce. Notably, 80% of the pastors had victims of abuse come to them for help.

Challenges Christian Victims Face

IPV is complex as it is enabled and perpetuated by various individual, interpersonal, and cultural factors (Kelly, 2011; Warren, 2015; Westenberg, 2017). As it pertains to Christian women, qualitative research has indicated their deep devotion to their faith may represent a

vulnerability as perpetrators exploit victims' desire to honor God, to control, and to coerce (McMullin et al., 2015; Winkelmann, 2004). Factors such as religious beliefs related to forgiveness, submission, and the sanctity of marriage; the pressure to project the image of a perfect marriage; and how the church responds have intersected to inform and influence women's responses to abuse (Nason-Clark et al., 2018).

Religious Language and Beliefs

Notably, victims must contend with their personal beliefs and convictions and attempt to reconcile them in the context of their culturally accepted norms and beliefs (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Knickmeyer et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2009). Religious beliefs and language are learned through social interactions in the family; at church, school, work; and in the community (McMullin et al., 2015; Westenberg, 2017). Beliefs are rooted in language; thus, it is important to understand the role of religious language as a factor in IPV (Winkelmann, 2004). According to Wuthnow (2009), norms that are embedded in religious practice, language, and structures of power contribute to IPV silencing and enabling. Miles (1999) noted how language helps to organize a vision that either supports or condemns domestic violence. For this study, religious beliefs are defined as culturally defined attitudes regarding religious matters in the Judeo-Christian faith, and religious language is defined as the language used to communicate concepts related to these religious beliefs.

In a review on IPV by Westenberg (2017), religious language and beliefs emerged as significant factors keeping deeply religious women from leaving abusive relationships and contributing to the perpetuation of IPV in Christian contexts. In a 9-year qualitative study involving female victims in shelters who had been in abusive marriages, Winkelmann (2004) found women used religious language to make sense of their abuse and justify staying or going

back to their abusers depending on their religious beliefs around suffering. For example, some women were willing to accept their suffering "as part of God's plan" (Winkelmann, 2004, p. 107). Suffering was accepted out of obedience to God.

Other common ways Christian women reframed their abusive experiences included defining them as it being their "cross to bear" and/or as vehicles of suffering through which their faith and perseverance were being tested (McMullin et al., 2015; Nash & Hesterberg, 2009; Nason-Clark, 2000; Westenberg, 2017). Survivors in both Winkelmann's (2004) study and a study by Nash and Hesterberg (2009) reported feeling called to exemplify Christ's love and patience and compared themselves to Job in the Bible whose faith was tested through adversities. Specifically, victims came to believe abuse was a precursor to spiritual growth.

Forgiveness, Submission, and Sanctity of Marriage

Notably, other major themes identified in studies included the language of submission, commitment to marriage until death, and forgiveness (Knickmeyer et al., 2004). It is at the intersection of these beliefs within the context of a system that supports gender inequality and is not abuse-informed, that deeply committed Christian women become vulnerable (Levitt & Ware, 2006; McMullin et al., 2015; Nason-Clark et al., 2018; Westenberg, 2017).

Forgiveness. Across qualitative studies, victims have consistently reported the call to forgive as being a factor that impeded their ability to receive the help and support they needed (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Nash & Hesterberg, 2009). Specifically, women first felt a personal conviction to forgive based on Biblical teachings (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Knickmeyer et al., 2010). Following initial abusive events, victims reported being disoriented and in disbelief as their husbands' behaviors stood in stark contrast with their pious presentations (Knickmeyer et al., 2010). That said, their husbands' histories of good Christian behaviors, sincere apologies,

invocations of scriptures that call believers to forgive "70 times 70," and victims' desire to honor God compelled women to forgive (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Knickmeyer et al., 2020; Nason-Clark, 2000). The emphasis on forgiving, despite the lack of accountability for husbands, was reinforced when victims sought counsel from their pastors who in turn quoted the same scriptures to forgive to keep their marriages (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005).

Notably, research has shown forgiveness, especially in the absence of accountability, can not only maintain abuse but cause further harm to victims (Fortune, 1988; Luchies et al., 2011; McNulty, 2011; Natterstad, 2020). In a longitudinal study on forgiveness and aggression in married couples, results indicated the more forgiving a spouse was, the more interpersonal aggression was maintained (McNulty, 2011). Similarly, in a study exploring forgiveness in the Christian population, Natterstad (2020) found higher tendencies to forgive predicted higher rates of IPV. Importantly, Luchies et al. (2010) found victims who forgave spouses who did not make amends by demonstrating victims would be safe and valued, experienced decreased self-respect and self-concept. This suggests forgiveness without evidence that abusers are making efforts to change further damages victims' identities, which are already undermined by abuse (Matheson et al., 2015). For Christian women, forgiveness then represents a significant double-bind as it is a core aspect of their faith, yet in certain contexts can lead to further abuse and devaluing of self.

Submission. Victims also cited their beliefs about a wife's duty to submit to their husbands as being instrumental in justifying their spouse's abuse and their decisions to stay in the marriage (Alsdurf & Alsdurf, 1989; Heggen, 1996; Winkelmann, 2004). Specifically, in the study by Alsdurf and Alsdurf (1989), 66% of victims who sought pastoral counsel regarding abuse were told to go home and submit to their husbands. Over half of participants were told if

they were submissive, God would honor them and resolve the abuse. These findings align with recent qualitative reports showing victims tolerated abuse because they believed in male dominance and female submission, and that respecting these views preserved their relationship with God (Alsdurf & Alsdurf, 1989; Griffin & Maples, 1997; Nash, 2011; Stotland, 2000; Whipple, 1987).

Importantly, submission is tied to forgiveness in that in this context, the act of forgiving was evidence of a woman's submission to her husband, male leadership, and ultimately God (Nash & Hesterberg, 2009; Ross, 2012). In other words, forgiving abusers was evidence of strong faith and not forgiving, a sign of weak devotion. According to victims' accounts, the idea of not being strong in their faith caused the women the most distress; yet, they felt conflicted by having to forgive and submit even in the absence of their husbands' accountability (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Knickmeyer et al., 2010).

Sanctity of Marriage. According to McMullin et al. (2015), beliefs related to the sanctity of marriage, God-ordained gender roles, and divorce were all factors preventing women from leaving abusive relationships. The notion that marriages must be preserved at all costs is rooted in the idea that intact families are the bedrock of society and churches (Egdell, 2003; Hobbs, 2020). As such, marriages must be prioritized. This provides a potential rationale for why religious leaders emphasize the preservation of marriages, even at the expense of victims' safety.

In research on religious leaders' perspectives in dealing with IPV, leaders consistently reported feeling conflicted by their duty to prioritize the sanctity of marriages (Levitt & Ware, 2006; Miles, 2000; Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005; Tedder & Smith, 2018). As such, they most often counseled women to go back to their husbands and do everything possible to save their marriages, including submitting, forgiving, and praying more (Miles, 2000). Interestingly, in a

study by Knickmeyer et al. (2004), victims reported feeling they were the ones, over their husbands, who were responsible for keeping their marriages and family intact. Taken together, the challenge for victims is having to navigate their desire to honor God by keeping their marriages intact while enduring abuse.

The Ideal Marriage and Impression Management

Notably, another challenge for victims was the pressure to project the image of an intact marriage and family (Knickmeyer et al., 2010; Levitt & Ware, 2006; Nash, 2006; Nash & Hesterberg, 2009; Westenberg, 2017). Across several studies, victims reported the need to keep the abuse a secret to maintain the illusion of having an ideal marriage (Knickmeyer et al., 2010). In the study by Knickmeyer et al. (2010), victims reported concern over being seen as weak for experiencing abuse or leaving the marriage. One participant explained the challenge of finding support because she had portrayed her marriage as so ideal her friends struggled to believe her when she finally disclosed abuse. Preserving one's image was especially important for a pastor's wife whose husband beat her. She learned to mask her emotions so no one knew what she was experiencing.

This pressure to put on the illusion of the perfect couple and family lead to impression management (Knickmeyer et al., 2010), which is defined as the conscious need to present oneself in an overly positive light to conform to social norms or ideals (Visschers et al., 2017). Because of the sensitive nature of IPV, researchers have theorized impression management influences responses of both victims and perpetrators of abuse (Dutton & Hemhill, 1992; Visschers et al., 2017). Although Visschers et al. (2017) found higher levels of impression management predict lower reports of psychological, not physical, abuse in victims, the effects were small. This led the researchers to suggest it is unnecessary to control for this bias when studying IPV.

Although this may be true in nonreligious samples, findings by Natterstad (2020) suggested this may not be generalizable to the faith community. Specifically, in a recent study exploring trait forgiveness, faith, and IPV in Christians, Natterstad (2020) found the higher the faith commitment was, the higher the participants' spiritual impression management, and the lower the reports of abuse. Given qualitative reports by Christian victims regarding the pressure to project the image of a perfect marriage and how this prevented them from seeking help, impression management in this population may represent a significant factor that should be explored (Knickmeyer et al., 2010; Levitt & Ware, 2006; Nash, 2006; Nash & Hesterberg, 2009; Natterstad, 2020; Westenberg, 2017).

The Paradox of the Church

Although studies have demonstrated spirituality, religion, and social support are critical in helping abused victims leave abusive marriages and heal, for many victims, the church's response, or lack of, served to alienate them from the very support they desperately needed (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Knickmeyer et al., 2010; McMillan et al., 2015; Nason-Clark et al., 2018; Pagelow, 1981).

In a study by Gillum and colleagues (2006) exploring the role of spirituality in the lives of domestic violence victims, 97% of the 151 participants endorsed spirituality or God as being a source of strength. Similarly, Giesbrecht and Sevcik (2000) found spirituality and being part of a faith community were critical to the process of healing for Christian victims. That said, survivors viewed the church as an extended family that could either deny the abuse and enable it; either engender shame and guilt, or label abuse and provide critical social and spiritual support.

Importantly, research has consistently shown the first-person victims most often seek help from are pastors as they are both familiar to victims and can appreciate the value women

ascribed to their faith (Bowker & Maurer, 1986; Nason-Clark, 1997; Pagelow & Johnson, 1988). This, in part, explains why victims were so confused and further harmed when pastors failed to recognize the abuse and, instead, reinforced notions that their abusive spouses used such as those regarding male headship and submission (Nason-Clark et al., 2018; Pagelow, 1981; Westenburg, 2017).

In a study of 138 abused Christian wives, Pagelow (1981) found 80% of victims who sought help from their pastor were either told to go home and forgive their spouses, and find a marriage counselor, or given unhelpful spiritual counsel. In their study, Bowker and Mauer (1986) found although 34% of victims who had contacted a pastor felt the help had been effective or very effective, 39% reported pastors being unhelpful, and 7% reported their advice led to more abuse. In a qualitative study by Nash (2006) exploring lived experiences of two Christian survivors of IPV, both reported being told by their church leaders and/or family members or friends that if they were more submissive, their problems would be alleviated. In reality, this intensified the abuse. Notably, when leaders used scripture to support their arguments, victims struggled to challenge these notions without feeling they were compromising their faith. In a more recent study by Knickmeyer et al. (2010), one of the women who spoke to her pastor immediately after her husband-to-be hit her was dismayed when the pastor stated he would simply talk to her fiancé to smooth things over because the pastor wanted to ensure the couple stayed together. Interestingly, participants in this study sensed church leaders themselves needed to see ideal marriages such that the reality of the participants' abuse was a threat to the narrative and thus needed to be discounted.

Although the literature has indicated religious victims depend on their faith and support of their religious communities to overcome domestic violence, in the absence of clear

condemnation of IPV from the pulpit and education on IPV in the church at large, victims fail to find the support they need (Chisale, 2018; Westenberg, 2017). This too often has resulted in revictimization after which many find themselves having to choose between enduring abuse and staying in their church families or leaving their social support and being safe (Nason-Clark et al., 2018).

Patriarchal Systems

According to researchers, abuse is maintained through social and political contexts (Goodfriend & Arriaga, 2017; Guerin & de Oliveira Ortolan, 2017; Kelly, 2011). Guerin and de Oliveira Ortolan (2017) argued domestic abuse should be studied within the systems it occurs. Similarly, Goodfriend and Arriaga (2017) asserted one cannot separate abuse from the cultural context within which it exists as social norms dictate levels of acceptance of abuse. Notably, researchers have argued patriarchal structures implicitly enable intimate partner violence because they foster inequality between genders (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Fortune, 1993; Hull & Burke, 1991). For Christian women who are victims of abuse, this structure can be the Christian faith community (Dreyer, 2011; Fleming, 1996; Heggen, 1996; Horton, 1988; Mwaura, 2010; Pagelow & Johnson, 1988; Phiri, 2002).

The ideal Christian marriage is rooted in beliefs of male headship and female submission such that husbands are viewed as God-ordained leaders who have been given spiritual authority over their wives (Edgell, 2003; Knickmeyer et al., 2010; Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000). Teachings on traditional gender roles include husbands being responsible for leading their families and having to answer to God for their family decisions while wives are to encourage their husbands and humbly submit to them (Eggerichs, 2004). Although most Christian men who have authority over women do not use it to suppress, coerce, and abuse them (Nason-Clark, 1997), the

patriarchal hierarchy in churches creates an ideal context for male abusers who are seeking justification for maintaining power-over female victims (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Ross, 2012). According to Mullen (2021), abusers may be drawn to these systems, especially when patriarchal churches lack knowledge regarding abuse and/or are themselves unhealthy (DeGroat, 2021; Johnson & Von Vanderen, 1991).

Notably, teachings on traditional gender roles in sermons, small groups, conferences, and in popular Christian books are spiritualized such that complying with these roles is equated with spiritual maturity and noncompliance with spiritual failure (Eggerichs, 2004). According to Albrecht (1954), culture is reflected in popular writings. As such, examination of messages of popular authors within a culture provide insight into accepted norms and beliefs. A best-seller book among Christians and churches is *Love and Respect* by Eggerichs (2004 as cited in Smietana, 2020). Since its first publication in 2004, over 2 million copies have been sold and accompanying workbooks, small groups studies, conferences are also available. In his book, Eggerichs (2004) argued wives need to unconditionally respect their husbands. He stated:

> Few seem to have considered 1 Peter 3:1–2. The apostle Peter reveals that husbands who "are disobedient to the word" (meaning they are undeserving of respect) "may be won . . . by . . . respectful behavior." A simple application is that a wife is to display a respectful facial expression and tone when he fails to be the man she wants. She can give her husband unconditional respect in tone and expression while confronting his unloving behavior and without endorsing his unloving reactions. (Eggerichs, 2004, p. 43)

For victims of IPV, such messages are confusing and dangerous as they encourage unconditional acceptance and support of a husband, no matter the context (Sawatsky & Gregoire, 2019). In a recent qualitative analysis of social media comments regarding this book, Sawatsky

and Gregoire (2019) revealed how abusive spouses weaponized concepts in the book to justify abuse while demanding respect. For several women, this resulted in increased harm (Sawatsky & Gregoire, 2019; Smietana, 2020). For example, one woman stated although she stood up to her husband when he raged earlier in her marriage, after reading the book, she stopped doing this to be more submissive. Instead of decreasing his anger, it intensified it. She left after he tried choking her to death. Although some have reported the book helped their marriage, the concern Sawatsky and Gregoire (2019) outlined was for those in abusive relationships. The spiritualization of submission and the women's commitment to their faith represented a vulnerability to increased abuse. Notably, although Eggerichs (2004) was publicly criticized by Gregoire, Focus on The Family, a large conservative Christian organization that has substantial influence in the Christian faith community, published a response denouncing the claims and standing by Eggerichs and the book (Focus on the Family, 2020; Smietana, 2020).

Importantly, male headship often extends beyond the family such that women, in general, are to submit to male leaders in the Christian faith community (Riches & Jennings, 2016). For victims of abuse, this becomes especially challenging when they fail to recognize IPV, minimize, trivialize, or deny it and instead reinforce notions of obedience and submission to husbands even when there is no accountability for abusers (McMullin et al., 2015). The damage this causes is significant as discrediting of victims echoes messages of abusers, retraumatizing them, and enables abuse to continue (Epstein & Goodman, 2018).

Psychological Abuse

Psychological abuse (PA) first emerged in studies on interpersonal physical abuse when Walker (1983) noted an emotional component in the cycle of abuse. Psychological abuse is the most common form of IPV in the United States (Black et al., 2011) and Europe (European Union

Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014) and often precedes and coincides with other forms of overt abuse (Follingstad et al., 1990; Frieze, 2005; Mills et al., 2013; Murphy & O'Leary, 1990). In a study of 234 victims of physical abuse, Follingstad (1990) found 72% of participants experienced four of the six subtypes of emotional abuse including threats of abuse, ridicule, jealousy, threats to change the marriage, restriction, and damage to property. In a study of 3,370 victims of domestic violence, 80% reported PA preceded physical aggression (Henning & Klesges, 2003). Based on these findings, the prevalence of PA as a precursor or in coinciding with other types of abuse is important to consider.

One of the challenges in defining PA is it is more subjective than physical violence and thus harder to identify (Dokkedahl et al., 2019; Kelly, 2004). Although researchers have yet to agree on a universal definition to operationalize psychological abuse (Dokkedahl, 2019; Kelly, 2004; McHugh, 2013), most have agreed PA involves efforts to dominate and control victims through overt and subtle acts such as ridiculing, coercing, humiliating, isolating, degrading, denying, blaming, undermining, and threatening (Marshall, 1996; O'Leary, 1999; Paymar, 2000; Pence & Paymar, 1993; Tolman, 1992). Tolman (1989, 1992) argued PA depends on four factors—abuse intensity, frequency, intent, and impact on victims—and includes behaviors that fall within two continuums—dominance/isolation and emotional/verbal.

Notably, research findings have indicated perpetrators weaponize intimate knowledge regarding victims' vulnerabilities and undermine their identities, which is why this particular type of abuse can be so damaging (Jones et al., 2005; Matheson et al., 2015). In a qualitative study by Matheson et al. (2015) on the effects of IPV on self-esteem, identity, and well-being in victims of physical abuse, participants reported PA as more distressing than the physical assaults they endured. Specifically, participants reported how abusers' tactics undermined the core of

who they were by causing them to question and then deny aspects of themselves leading to confusion, disorientation, and dissociation. One participant was especially distressed that the most damaging type of abuse is the least identified and talked about in the media.

Hayes and Jeffries (2016) argued PA within IPV represents a form of *romantic terrorism*. The Meriam-Webster (n.d.) defined terrorism as "the systematic use of terror especially as a means of coercion." The Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) defined it as "The unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims." According to these definitions, when there is a pattern of coercion, psychological abuse appears to meet the criteria for terrorism, especially when it is rooted in "discriminatory frameworks based on gender" (Hayes & Jeffries, 2016, p. 40) that serve to uphold the ideologies of abusers. Perpetrators terrorize victims by using coercive control to strip victims of their basic human rights to freedom and individuality.

Notably, although the harm done by physical violence may be severe, they assert coercion and control, the heart of psychological abuse, profoundly wounds victims and holds them hostage (Hayes & Jeffries, 2016). Similarly, Troisi (2018) differentiated *intimate terrorism* from situational violence based on patterns of coercive control and male dominance with the former being associated with higher levels of psychological harm. Specifically, perpetrators of intimate terrorism will use threats, isolation, intimidation, children, and economic abuse. In his study with 302 victims of IPV, Troisi (2018) sought to explore the effects of abuse on emotions. The findings indicated IPV engenders terror, fear, shame, and guilt in victims.

Unsurprisingly, PA results in mental health challenges such as depression and PTSD (Mills et al., 2017). In a study exploring the impact of PA in interpersonal relationships, Mills et al. (2017) found PA was more predictive of PTSD symptoms than physical abuse. Further,

results showed PA caused lower self-esteem and higher self-doubt, confusion, and depression, which impacted victims' abilities to cope and seek help. Interestingly, in studying survivors of IPV and individuals who escaped cults, Wolfson (2003) found both groups experienced verbal abuse, isolation, and emotional abuse. Notably, the researchers found anxiety and psychological abuse to be correlated with victims of IPV experiencing higher anxiety than former cult members. Interestingly, Norway and England have both criminalized PA (Dokkedahl et al., 2019).

Spiritual Abuse

Christian survivors of abuse have described a type of psychological abuse that seems specific to religious communities and seems especially relevant to IPV (Dehan & Levi, 2009; Knickmeyer et al., 2004; Johnson & Van Vonderen, 1991). Although the term spiritual abuse was introduced over 30 years ago through anecdotal reports by Johnson and Von Vanderen (1991), to date, studies exploring this construct have been limited (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Dehan & Levi, 2009; Oakley et al., 2018; Oakley & Kinmond, 2014).

Spirituality was defined by Shultz and Sandage (2006) as "ways of relating to the sacred" (p. 161). Hill and Pargament (2003) proposed spirituality involves the "search for the sacred" (p. 65) whereby the "sacred" refers "to persons and objects of ultimate truth and devotion" (Sandage & Jankowski, 2013, p. 367). Notably, spirituality is viewed as an internalized experience of the search for the sacred versus religion which is seen as the outward expression of faith (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006). Given this definition, abuse that involves attacking the sacred aspects of self can be especially challenging for victims who are deeply spiritual (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Dehan & Levi, 2009; Johnson & Von Vanderen, 1991).

In their book *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, Johnson and Von Vanderen (1991) introduced spiritual abuse as "the mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support, or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining, or decreasing that person's spiritual empowerment" (p. 20). They reported patterns of men who perceived themselves to have God-given power manipulating religious language and scriptures to coerce and control victims (Johnson & Van Vonderen, 1991). Since then, others have reported similar accounts whereby perpetrators not only undermine a victim's sense of self, but they specifically target that which is so sacred and meaningful: the victim's spiritual identity (Nason-Clark et al., 2018). Johnson and Van Vonderen (1991) argued this type of abuse is especially damaging as it is insidious and hides within religious language. For example, victims who struggled to forgive abusive husbands were blamed for having "an unforgiving spirit and/or a root of bitterness" (p. 100). These spiritual bypasses deflected the focus from the abuser's actions to the victim's character calling the victim's faith commitment into question. This had a powerful and confusing effect on Christian women, especially those who had a strong desire to please God (Knickmeyer et al., 2004; Nason-Clark et al., 2018).

These initial accounts seem to align with findings in research. Bent-Goodley and Fowler (2006) conducted a study on spiritual abuse exploring congregant and religious leader responses to spirituality and IPV in a group of African American men and women. Participants reported abusers using victims' spirituality against them such as requiring forgiveness of abusive events. The participants also highlighted the difference between the effects of PA and SA. One participant emphasized, "Psychological abuse is more cognitive. Spirituality speaks to the foundation of your being, the essence of who you are" (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006, p. 289).

In their study exploring spiritual abuse in abused Haredi Jewish wives, Dehan and Levi (2006) proposed spiritual abuse in the context of IPV involves impairing the victim's spiritual life, self, and well-being. Three levels of spiritual abuse emerged from their qualitative study, including belittling a victim's spiritual worth, beliefs, or deeds, preventing the victim from participating in spiritual acts, and coercing a victim to violate spiritual obligations. Belittling involved abusers mocking or criticizing the victim's prayers or character. For example, one participant relayed how her husband exclaimed her prayers had no worth and she should think about being a better wife first. Abusers also interfered with the victims' ability to participate in religious acts. For example, one husband prevented his wife from buying ingredients necessary to perform a ritual. Others reported being coerced to violate religious rules such as being forced to have sex during menses. The abuse was not merely psychological or interpersonal, it was transcendental. As such, it impacted victims at a different level of their psyche. In light of this, Dehan and Levi argued this type of abuse represents a distinct category of abuse that needs to be labeled and researched.

Notably, Dehan and Levi (2006) proposed an updated definition of spiritual abuse within the context of intimate partner relationships that encompasses frequency, severity, intent, and impact of abuse. They defined it as:

> Damaging the woman's spiritual life, spiritual self, or spiritual well-being, by means of purposely and repetitively criticizing, limiting, or forcing her to compromise or go against her spiritual conscience, resulting in a lowered spiritual self-image, guilt feelings, and/or disruption of transcendental connectedness. (Dehan & Levi, 2006, p. 1303)

Given the unique components and effects of this type of abuse, the authors called for more research to better understand the factors impacting IPV in religious women.

According to Johnson and Van Vonderen (1991), spiritual abuse occurred not only in cases of domestic violence but also within the larger context of the Christian faith community, notably, the church. Ward (2011) explored lived experiences of individuals who experienced spiritual abuse within religious groups rooted in the Judeo-Christian faith. Six core themes emerged: (a) leadership representing God, (b) spiritual bullying, (c) acceptance via performance, (d) spiritual neglect, (e) expanding external/internal tension (dissonance between one's inner and outer worlds), and (f) manifestation of internal states (biopsychospiritual repercussions).

Specifically, all participants reported their leadership being presented as God-ordained and placed in spiritual authority over victims. Ward (2011) found this to be the prevalent theme through which the other themes emerged. This dynamic inferred a spiritual hierarchy whereby leaders were deemed more spiritual which engendered authoritarian parental relationships. Key to this being maintained was the unequal power dynamic. Notably, participants were required to obey leaders as they represented God. Disobeying, or merely questioning, or disagreeing with leadership was equated with arguing with or disobeying God.

Participants' autonomy and self-direction were undermined and then criticized, leading victims to become more dependent on the leaders/groups (Ward, 2011). One participant who had experienced IPV explained how abuse was prevalent as women were told to submit to husbands regardless of behaviors. She stated, "You have nowhere to go, if you take it to the elders . . . he can be more angry with you then [sic] he was in the first place because he has got into trouble" (Ward, 2011, p. 904). Notably, since leadership was beyond reproach, any mistreatment was justified. Another victim reported feeling seduced and "violated because emotionally, spiritually, psychologically we were robbed of the right to be ourselves" (Ward, 2011, p. 906). Participants reported lack of accountability for leadership seemed to perpetuate abuse.

Notably, if participants reached out to individuals not part of the group for help, this was viewed as disloyalty to God (Ward, 2011). There were reportedly high rates of depression and suicide within their groups because members were forbidden to seek mental health services. If members experienced marital problems, they were kicked out of the church as this was an indication of weak faith or punishment by God. Although initially, members maintained their individuality, they progressively felt pressure to give up aspects of themselves leading to severe incongruence and depression. As a result, many participants developed significant somatic symptoms. As such, Ward (2011) concluded SA is complex as it intersects with cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and physical processes of individuals.

Ward (2011) argued the combination of narcissistic leadership with little accountability enabled these systems which in turn created the contexts in which both intimate partner violence and institutional abuse occurred. Similar to Dehan and Levy (2009), he also argued for spiritual abuse to be recognized as a distinct construct as the individuals affected by SA are impacted on "core spiritual dimensions" (Ward, 2011, p. 912) that otherwise would not be recognized. Accordingly, he provided an updated version of spiritual abuse by stating:

> Spiritual abuse is a misuse of power in a spiritual context whereby spiritual authority is distorted to the detriment of those under its leadership. It is a multifaceted and multilayered experience that includes acts of commission and omission, aimed at producing conformity. It is both process and event, influencing one's inner and outer worlds and has the potential to affect the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual domains of the individual. (Ward, 2011, p. 913)

The findings of these studies have important implications for Christian women experiencing IPV. Research has shown low levels of self-esteem and a loss of self-concept

contribute to women remaining in abusive relationships (Rollè et al., 2019). Given SA and PA both appear to undermine individuals' autonomy and self-efficacy, experiences of institutional abuse within Christian organizations may habituate members to abuse and, as such may represent a vulnerability for Christian women.

Institutional Betrayal

For many victims of IPV, navigating intimate partner violence involves betrayal, not just at an interpersonal level, but at an institutional and community level (Epstein & Goodman, 2018; Lee et al., 2019; Platt et al., 2009). This occurs when victims who seek support from an institution meant to protect them, instead, have their experiences trivialized and invalidated (Platt et al., 2009). Based on anecdotal accounts and qualitative studies outlined previously, it appears Christian victims have been experiencing a spiritualized form of this type of betrayal which has contributed to some of the most confusing and painful aspects of their experiences with intimate partner violence with the Christian faith community. This may be in part that these experiences seem to echo the abuse and narratives of their abusers (Epstein & Goodman, 2018).

Specifically, *institutional betrayal* has recently emerged as a construct that represents actions or inactions of organizations that foster environments where abuse is more likely to occur and less likely to be addressed (Epstein & Goodman, 2018; Platt et al., 2009). This, in turn, not only nurtures a culture of silence that creates barriers to victims seeking help, but it retraumatizes them. According to Epstein and Goodman (2018), the consequences of discounting the credibility of victims and devaluing their stories cause a devastating blow to already fragile identities of victims.

According to their research with victims of IPV, the effects of being discredited and having abuse trivialized are threefold (Epstein & Goodman, 2019). First, victims develop a sense

of futility and hopelessness, resigning to never be seen. This mirrors how they feel within the context of their abusive relationships. Second, their sense of worthlessness is reinforced. Even if victims are believed, when leadership fails to act on information, the message that is underscored is victims do not matter. This again replicates the lived experiences of victims with their abusers. Third, the victim's fragile sense of self is further destabilized causing her to question her reality. This parallels her experience with her abuser.

Importantly, researchers have found institutional betrayal has a profound impact on victims who have already been traumatized (Lee et al., 2019; Smith & Freyd, 2013). In their study, Smith and Freyd (2013) explored the effects of institutional betrayal on symptoms of PTSD in victims of unwanted sexual experiences and found those who experienced IB experienced more severe symptoms. In a study exploring IPV and institutional betrayal, Lee et al. (2019) found IB predicted symptoms of PTSD and depression, even after controlling for physical violence, sexual violence, and psychological abuse. These findings support the notion IB does not only exacerbate trauma symptoms that already exist but institutional betrayal results in additional independent traumatic wounds. Findings from other research studies showed this type of betrayal results in a decrease in victims' engagement and trust in organizations (Monteith et al., 2021). The implications for Christian women who are victims of IPV and the faith communities who wish to serve them are significant.

Research studies have consistently shown Christian victims of IPV depend on their faith and their faith communities to overcome abuse (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Gillum et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2009); yet, findings have also indicated the church's response can hinder and/or harm victims of IPV (Knickmeyer et al., 2010; McMullin et al., 2015; Nason-Clark, 2000, 2018; Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005; Winkelmann, 2004). In the absence of abuse being clearly

condemned by religious leaders (IMA, 2018; Zust et al., 2021), and within systems that foster a culture of self-silencing (Chisale, 2018; Westenberg, 2017) and maintain pressure to maintain an ideal marriage (Knickmeyer et al., 2010), seeking help from the church represents a significant risk for victims whose spiritual identities have been eroded and brought into question (Nason-Clark et al., 2018). Yet, when they take this risk and disclose abuse, they are too often invalidated by religious leaders (Johnson & Van Vonderen, 1991; Knickmeyer et al., 2010) who trivialize, deny, and/or justify abuse because of their lack of training in IPV, conflicting priorities, and biases rooted in patriarchal beliefs (Ragab et al., 2018). This results in further traumatization that forces victims to have to choose between enduring abuse and remaining in their faith communities or leaving their social support systems to find safety and heal (Chisale, 2018; Knickmeyer et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2009).

Smith and Freyd (2013) referred to such institutions as “Dangerous Safe Havens” (p. 119) because although these organizations purport to protect individuals through their said values, as members place their trust in these institutions, they become more vulnerable to being victimized and subsequently retraumatized. Although researchers who have conducted studies on IPV and/or spiritual abuse have repeatedly outlined the need for further studies in these areas, there continues to be a lack of research regarding these constructs (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Dehan & Levi, 2009; Oakley et al., 2018; Oakley & Kinmond, 2014; Ward, 2011; Zust et al., 2021). The purpose of this study was to heed that call. Specifically, this research aimed to explore both systemic and individual factors that may influence reported experiences of IPV to gain insight and inform effective preventative measures and interventions.

Social-Ecological and Feminist Theories

The social-ecological framework provides a rationale that accounts for factors that interact at various social levels to influence individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Campbell, 2009; Kelly, 2011). Embedding feminist theory within this framework sheds light on how systems that favor male power over women may contribute to issues of IPV (Jankowski et al., 2011). At the individual level, factors such as personality traits may interact with experiences at the family and church community levels to influence the development of women's religious beliefs and spiritual identities that result in vulnerabilities to IPV (Chisale, 2018). At a systemic level, factors within church settings such as belief systems that emphasize male over female power, ignore realities of IPV and focuses on restoration over accountability may serve to unintentionally perpetuate IPV (Knickmeyer et al., 2004; Nash & Hesterberg, 2009). Notably, reinforcement of contributing factors may operate at multiple levels, for example, religious language that maintains distorted beliefs related to abuse can be perpetuated by victims, their families, friends, churches, or all the above (McMullin et al., 2015; Nason-Clark et al., 2018; Westenberg, 2017). Factors in each of these ecological systems must be recognized, labeled, and studied to intervene more effectively (Kelly, 2011).

In sum, viewing the issue of IPV in this community through the lens of the social-ecological and feminist theories provides insight into how these factors from various levels may converge to create a higher vulnerability to abuse in Christian women and how they may be addressed at both personal and systemic levels (Knickmeyer et al., 2004; Nason-Clark et al., 2018).

Operational Definitions

For the purposes of this study, the main variables are defined in the following section.

Faith Maturity

For the purposes of this study, faith maturity is defined as the degree to which individuals embody the core values of the Christian faith including both internal and external expressions of faith commitment.

MPA

MPA is defined as experiences within marriages in which husbands attempted to dominate and control wives through overt and covert behaviors aimed at ridiculing, coercing, humiliating, isolating, degrading, blaming, and undermining wives.

Institutional Spiritual Abuse

Institutional spiritual abuse is defined as experiences outside of marriage and within the Christian faith community in which spiritual authority and power were used to damage a woman's spiritual life, self, and well-being through criticism and/or coercion resulting in compromises that opposed the woman's spiritual conscience and damaged her spiritual identity.

Marital Spiritual Abuse

Marital spiritual abuse is defined as experiences within marriage where spiritual authority and power were used by her husband to damage a woman's spiritual life, self, and well-being through criticism and/or coercion resulting in compromises that opposed the woman's spiritual conscience and damaged her spiritual identity.

Spiritual Impression Management

Spiritual impression management is defined as the tendency to present oneself in an overly pious, and unrealistic positive light.

Study Rationale and Relevance to the Field

Given the limited research on IPV in this population, there is a need to explore both the prevalence of IPV and the systemic and individual factors that predispose Christian women to abuse (Nason-Clark et al., 2018).

Prevalence of IPV in the Faith Community

The limited research on IPV in the faith community may be contributing to a lack of recognition of IPV by religious leaders and the church at large (IMA 2014, 2018; Nason-Clark et al., 2018). This study will contribute to the gap in literature and help highlight the realities of IPV in this population by exploring the prevalence of IPV and contributing factors.

Systemic Factors: Institutional Spiritual Abuse

Further, intimate violence is a complex issue with many factors contributing to the perpetuation of abuse (Kelly, 2011; Nash & Hesterberg, 2009). Exploring factors at different ecological levels can help to better understand the predisposing, perpetuating, preventative, and protective factors that contribute to the problem, which can then, in turn, help inform more effective interventions. Exploring the effects of institutional spiritual abuse on victim's experiences of abuse in marriage may provide insight into what systemic factors may be contributing to vulnerabilities to IPV and/or the perpetuation of abuse. Further, exploring the relationship between institutional spiritual abuse can contribute to literature on the emerging construct of spiritual abuse experienced within organizations and its effects on members of the Christian faith community.

Individual Factors: Impression Management and Spiritual Abuse in IPV

Challenges related to IPV in the faith community may be further complicated by spiritual components, such as the pressure to maintain the image of a perfect marriage, and those

associated with spiritual abuse; yet, there has been limited research on these factors (Dehan & Levi, 2009; Ward, 2011). In qualitative research findings regarding factors that inhibit Christian women from seeking help (Knickmeyer et al., 2010) and results from a quantitative study, Natterstad (2020) suggested impression management may influence how Christian women report events of abuse. Exploring the relationship between impression management and faith, IPV, and spiritual abuse, may help to further clarify how this construct may influence women of faith.

Research on spiritual abuse in IPV has been significantly limited; yet, researchers have called for it to be explored and validated as a construct as it appears to represent a type of abuse specific to religious communities that appears to cause significant harm to victims (Dehan & Levy, 2009; Ward, 2011). Exploring this emerging construct in this study can contribute initial findings and aid in supporting the call to further explore and define it as a specific type of abuse.

Relevance to the Field

There is a need for scientific, academic, and religious institutions to recognize the realities of IPV in this population to better equip and support religious leaders and to increase religious cultural competence in clinicians who may serve religious victims of IPV. This study would add to the limited literature on IPV in the faith community by exploring the prevalence of IPV and institutional abuse and help identify factors specific to this population that may predispose individuals to IPV and/or perpetuate abuse.

Further, there is a need to understand how factors within the Christian population influence Christian women's' conceptualizations of abuse. Conducting research on this topic gave voice to victims' experiences and provides valuable insight to clinicians and religious leaders regarding unique spiritual factors that should be addressed when helping religious victims. In turn, this may indirectly help reduce rates of retraumatization of victims by well-

meaning leaders, congregants, and clinicians. Additionally, exploring spiritual abuse may provide insight into how perpetrators use spirituality to exploit victims, both at an institutional and interpersonal level. Findings can contribute to the literature and help religious leaders and clinicians recognize, label, and address this insidious form of abuse.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The primary goal of this study was to explore the relationship between institutional spiritual abuse and IPV in a sample of women who currently or previously identified as Judeo-Christian. Although IPV encompasses physical, emotional, sexual, and psychological abuse, this study focused on the latter and the proposed construct of spiritual abuse. Rates of abuse, the relationship between psychological and spiritual abuse, and the relationship between these in organizations and marriages was explored. Spiritual impression management was also assessed.

Research Questions

The main research questions included:

- Do experiences of institutional spiritual abuse predict experiences of marital psychological and spiritual abuse in marriages?
- How do experiences of institutional spiritual abuse influence spiritual impression management?
- How are faith maturity and impression management related?
- Does spiritual impression management influence reported psychological and spiritual abuse in marriages?

Do experiences of marital psychological abuse predict marital spiritual abuse?

Hypotheses

Based on the research questions, the following hypotheses were formulated.

Hypothesis 1

Higher institutional spiritual abuse predicts higher marital spiritual abuse.

Hypothesis 2

Higher marital psychological abuse predicts higher marital spiritual abuse.

Hypothesis 3

Marital psychological abuse moderates the relationship between institutional spiritual abuse and marital spiritual abuse, such that higher levels of marital psychological abuse increases effects of institutional abuse on marital psychological abuse.

Hypothesis 4

Higher faith predicts higher spiritual impression management.

Hypothesis 5

Institutional spiritual abuse moderates the relationship between faith and spiritual impression management such that higher institutional spiritual abuse increases the effects of faith on spiritual impression management.

Hypothesis 6

Higher institutional spiritual abuse predicts higher marital psychological abuse.

Hypothesis 7

Higher institutional spiritual abuse predicts higher spiritual impression management.

Hypothesis 8

Spiritual impression management moderates the relationship between institutional spiritual abuse and marital psychological abuse. such that higher levels of spiritual impression management decreases the effects of institutional spiritual abuse on reported marital spiritual abuse.

Chapter 2: Methods

To better identify and understand the predisposing and perpetuating factors of intimate partner violence (IPV) in marriages of Christian women, researchers have called for studies that use a variety of designs and methodologies (Knickmeyer et al. 2010; Oakley et al., 2018).

Study Design and Methodology

A cross-sectional correlational survey design was chosen and a convenience sample of women who currently or previously identified as Christian was used.

Participants

The sample included women 18 years and older who self-identified as Christian at some point. Invitations to participate were sent to ministry leaders in churches and Christian organizations and posted on social media. Snowball sampling through word of mouth was also used. Data were collected from February 1, 2022, through March 4, 2022. Although the sample was one of convenience, the goal was to have a sample of women of various ages, ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, and denomination affiliations who currently or formerly identified as Christian. A total of 18 respondents contacted the author regarding the survey, one by phone and the remainder by email. Of those, 12 shared parts of their stories and seven offered to provide additional qualitative data. The author responded to all participants.

Measures

The following measures were used to collect relevant data.

Demographic Information

Respondents were asked about their age, religion, denomination, ethnicity, marital status, level of education, geographic location, and household income (see Appendix A). Participants

who identified as a former Christian were asked if the experiences of organizational or interpersonal abuse were related to them leaving the Christian faith (see Appendix B).

Faith Maturity

The Faith Maturity Scale-Short Form (FMS-SF; Benson et al., 1993) was used to assess spiritual maturity (see Appendix C). This 11-item self-report instrument evaluates the degree to which individuals experience and live out their faith. The items assess connection to God and altruistic social and relational actions. Together, these dimensions encompass the mandate to love God and love others which is indicative of a genuine commitment to the Christian faith (Hui et al., 2011).

Items include statements such as "I have a real sense that God is guiding me," and "I feel a deep sense of responsibility for reducing pain and suffering in the world" (Benson et al., 1993). Respondents rated their responses on a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = *never true* to 7 = *always true*. Items were summed to render a faith commitment score with higher scores indicative of higher commitment. The FMS-SF has provided evidence of cross-cultural, construct validity, and internal consistency (Dy-Liacco et al., 2009; Hui et al., 2011; Piedmont & Nelson, 2001).

Spiritual Impression Management

The Spiritual Impression Management (SIM) subscale of the Spirituality Assessment Inventory (SAI; Hall & Edwards, 2002) was used to assess spiritual social desirability (see Appendix D). Sample items include "I pray for all my friends and relatives every day" and "I am always as kind at home as I am at church." Respondents rated their agreement with items on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all true* to 5 = *very true*). In a factorial analysis, the SIM was found to load on a separate factor and displayed strong internal reliability (0.77) and solid construct validity when compared to other measures of spiritual social-desirability (Sandage & Morgan, 2014).

Item scores were summed and averaged with higher scores indicating stronger levels of impression management (Hall & Edwards, 2002).

Institutional Spiritual Abuse

The Spiritual Harm and Abuse Scale (SHAS; Koch & Edstrom, 2021) is a 27-item measure assessing lifetime experiences of organizational spiritual abuse and its effects (see Appendix E). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = *never* and 5 = *all the time*. Scores of 27–38 are considered low, 39–87 as medium severity, and 88–135 as high. Respondents indicated the extent to which they experienced events such as "Seeing scripture used to justify physical violence," and "Being blamed for harm that I suffered, rather than blaming those who harmed me." Items representing the effects of the abuse included "Having trouble navigating life outside my faith community," and "Feeling betrayed by God." Items were summed to render a global abuse score with higher scores representing higher spiritual abuse. Although unpublished, the SHAS has demonstrated good internal reliability ($\alpha = .95$).

Marital Psychological Abuse

Marital psychological abuse (MPA) was measured using the Subtle and Overt Scale of Psychological Abuse (SOSPS; Marshall, 2000; see Appendix F). This 35-item self-report assessment was developed specifically for intimate partner abuse. Sample items include indicating how often does a partner (in a loving, serious, or joking way) "Discourage you from having interests that he isn't a part of" and "Change his mind but not tell you until it's too late." Respondents rated the items using a 10-point Likert scale with 0 = *never* and 9 = *almost daily*. Items in representing subscales were summed rendering a score for subtle and a score of overt psychological abuse. Summing the two subscales renders a global score where higher numbers

mean higher levels of abuse. Internal consistency for this scale has been strong (α = .98) and high construct validity (Jones et al., 2005).

Marital Spiritual Abuse

Marital spiritual abuse (MSA) embeds religiousness into psychological abuse (Johnson & Van Vonderen, 1991). To date, there are no validated measures that assess this construct. In the absence of a scale, two items previously used in recent research by Natterstad (2020) were added to the end of the psychological abuse scale to explore the use of scripture and religious language as part of psychological abuse: "how often does he use Scripture to make you do things you don't want to do" and "how often does he criticize your walk with God." The items were developed based on preliminary findings regarding spiritual abuse and the presence of coercion and efforts to undermine spirituality using religious language and/or sacred texts (Dehan & Levi, 2009; Oakley et al., 2018; Ward, 2011). Participants rated their response on a 10-point Likert scale with 0 = *never* to 9 = *almost daily*. The items were summed to create a separate MSA score. In the study by Natterstad (2020), these items showed adequate independent reliability (α = .87) and strong reliability with the SOPAS scale (α = .98; see Appendix F, Items 36 and 37).

Procedures

Following approval by Northwest University's Institutional Review Board, invitations to recruit participants were sent to ministry leaders and Christian organizations (see Appendix H). Participants were further recruited through social media posts and word of mouth (see Appendix I). No incentives were provided. The online survey was hosted through Qualtrics, an online data collection platform. Informed consent was provided at the beginning of the survey including information about the study, a resource list for local and national hotlines, as well as contact

information (see Appendix J). Following consent, participants were automatically directed to the survey.

Participants were asked demographic questions regarding their age, religion, ethnicity, level of education, household income, and geographical location (see Appendix A). Participants who identified as currently Christian were presented with scales assessing for faith maturity (see Appendix C), SIM (see Appendix D), institutional spiritual abuse (see Appendix E), and marital psychological and spiritual abuse (see Appendices F and G, respectively). Participants who identified as being a former Christian were presented with the institutional spiritual abuse (see Appendix E), and marital psychological and spiritual abuse scales (see Appendices F and G, respectively). The former Christians were also asked whether leaving Christianity was related to either the organizational or marital abuse or both (see Appendix B). The survey concluded with a list of resources in the event they felt distressed by the questionnaire (see Appendix K). Follow-up emails were sent to all participants who reached out to the author of the study (n = 18).

Data Analysis

The variables included in this study were institutional spiritual abuse, MPA, MSA, faith maturity, and SIM. Descriptive statistics, correlational, and inferential analyses were conducted.

Variables

Institutional Spiritual Abuse. The first predictor variable in this study was experiences of institutional spiritual abuse (ISA) within the context of Christian organizations. It was hypothesized that higher exposure to this type of abuse would predict higher experiences of IPV in marriage, operationalized through marital psychological abuse (MPA) and marital spiritual abuse (MSA).

MPA. The first outcome variable in the present study was women's experiences of psychological abuse in marriage. It was hypothesized that higher lifetime experiences of ISA would predict higher MPA. It was also hypothesized that higher MPA would predict higher experiences of MSA.

MSA. Given the descriptions from qualitative studies on IPV in Christian survivors of IPV (Knickmeyer et al., 2004), and the reports by Johnson and Van Vonderen (1991) on spiritual abuse, assessing for this type of IPV seems especially important as it represents a culture-specific type of abuse that has not yet been operationalized but seems to be endemic to the faith community (Dehan & Levy, 2009; Oakley & Kinmond, 2014). It was hypothesized higher ISA and MPA would predict higher MSA. It was also hypothesized that higher SIM would predict lower reported experiences of MSA and MPA.

Faith Maturity. Previous studies have indicated mixed results regarding the relationship between faith and experiences of abuse (Knickmeyer et al., 2004). That said, results from a recent study indicated the higher the faith maturity, the higher the SIM, the lower the reports of abuse (Natterstad, 2020). Better understanding this relationship could help to better understand the pressures Christian women are facing. It was hypothesized higher faith maturity would predict higher spiritual impression management (SIM) and that higher ISA would increase the strength of this relationship.

SIM. In a recent study by Natterstad (2020) results showed the higher the faith maturity, the higher the SIM, and the higher the impression management, the lower the IPV. Taken together with the findings in qualitative research regarding impression management and IPV in Christians (Knickmeyer et al., 2010) exploring this dynamic is important as reports of abuse may underrepresent the scope of the problem.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were conducted for all demographic information, including frequencies and percentages for categorical variables. Computations were also run for all measures rendering scale means, standard deviations, internal consistency, and scale ranges for all continuous demographic variables in both subgroups.

Correlational Analysis

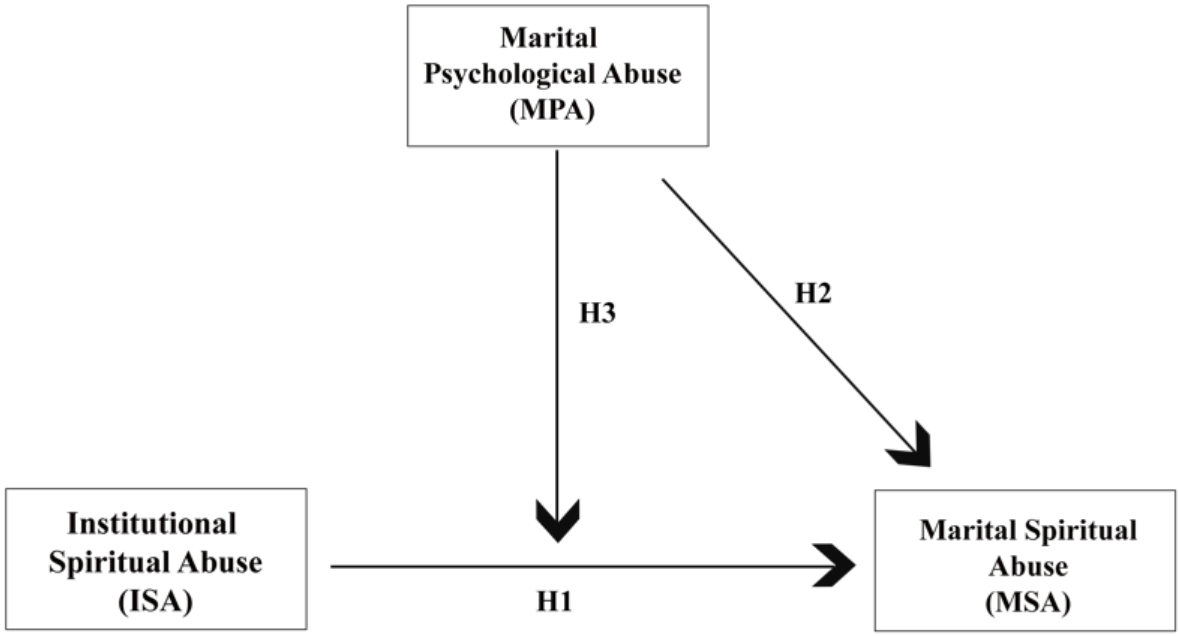
Correlation analyses were conducted to examine the direction and strength of relationships between all continuous variables. These analyses were also used to determine if the assumption of linear relationship was met for variables used in the regression analyses.

Inferential Analysis

Three multiple regression models were conducted to explore the predictive relationships between variables. In Model 1, the predictive relationship between ISA and MSA (H1), and marital psychological and spiritual abuse (H2), and the moderating role of MSA (H3) were investigated (see Figure 1). ISA was the first predictor variable entered, MSA the second, and the interaction variable of ISA and MSA was the third entered. Spiritual abuse was the outcome variable.

Figure 1

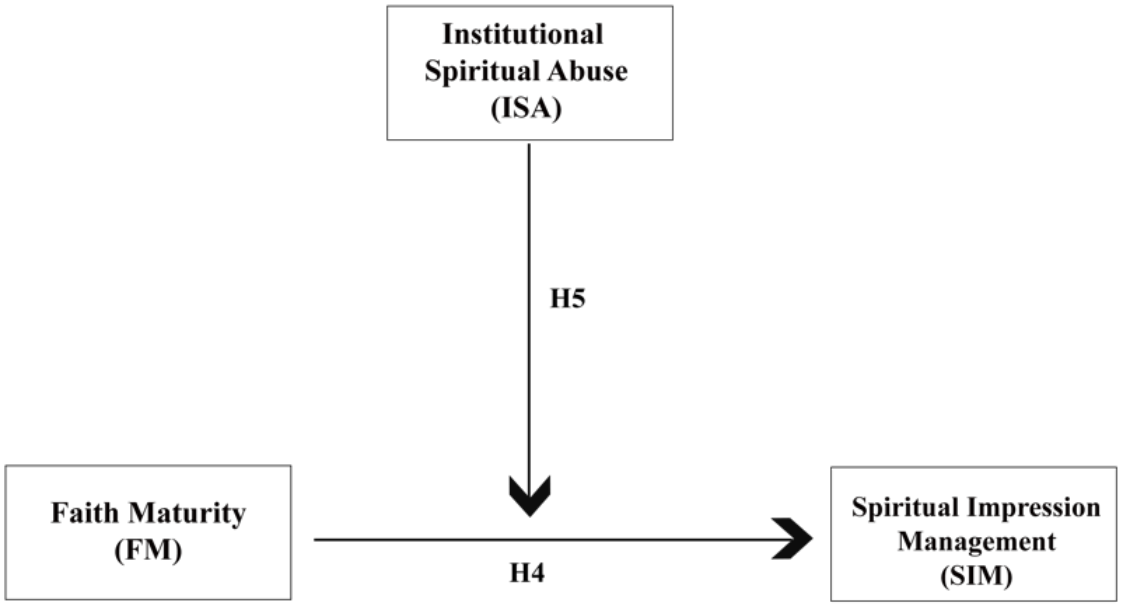
Hypothesized Model 1



In Model 2, the predictive relationship between faith and SIM (H4), and the moderating role of ISA (H5) were investigated (see Figure 2). Faith maturity was the first predictor variable entered, followed by ISA, and the interaction variable of the two was entered last. SIM was entered as the outcome variable.

Figure 2

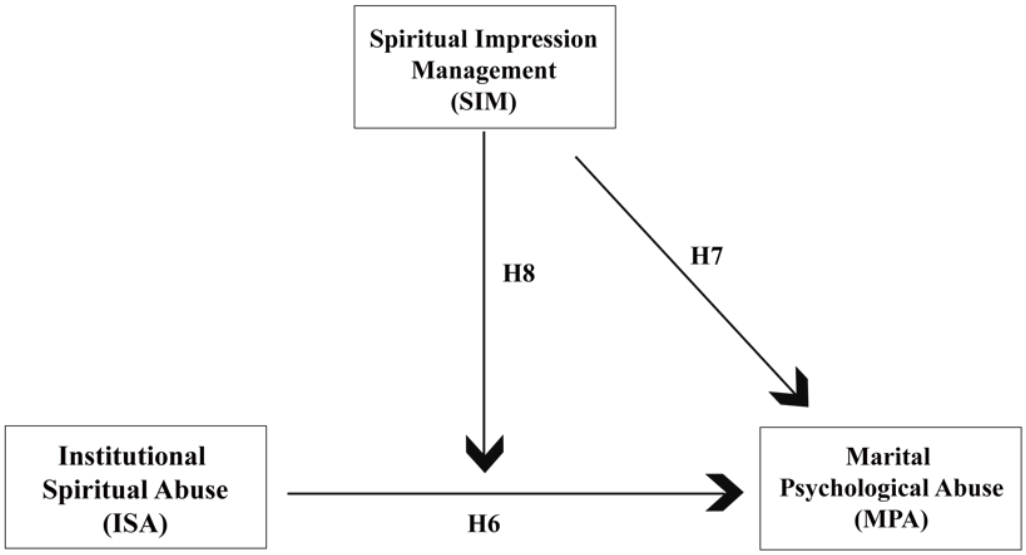
Hypothesized Model 2



In Model 3, the predictive relationship between ISA and MPA (H6), and the relationship between ISA and SIM (H7) were explored. The moderating role of SIM (H8) was also investigated (see Figure 3). ISA was the first predictor variable entered, SIM, the second, followed by the interaction variable of the two on the outcome variable of MPA.

Figure 3

Hypothesized Model 3



Summary

IPV represents a significant societal problem, both outside and within the church (Knickmeyer et al., 2010). The limited research on IPV in the Christian population may be contributing to the vulnerabilities of Christian women to IPV (Nason-Clark et al., 2018). Specifically, when pastors' desires for restoration in marriages cloud their ability to recognize IPV and this occurs within a patriarchal structure that encourages authority of men over women, the result is a system that favors abusers over victims (Knickmeyer et al., 2004; Nason-Clark et al., 2018). In these contexts, deeply religious women who are being abused and who desire to honor God believe they are doing so by submitting to the men in their lives, including their husbands and religious leaders, repeatedly forgiving their abusers, and returning to dangerous relationships (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; McMullin et al., 2015).

In the absence of religious leaders' ability to recognize the abuse and the culture-specific factors, such as religious language and beliefs, deeply committed women of faith are at risk for experiencing ongoing abuse (Nason-Clark et al., 2018). This vulnerability may be reinforced by systemic factors, such as experiences of ISA (Dehan & Levi, 2009). Conducting research exploring the prevalence of and the relationship between institutional and interpersonal psychological and spiritual abuse in the faith community can contribute to the limited studies on the subject and inform effective and preventative measures. Exploring the role of impression management and the relationship between psychological and spiritual abuse will also contribute to efforts to address this societal challenge more effectively within this population.

Chapter 3: Results

The primary goal of this study was to explore the effects of institutional spiritual abuse on experiences of abuse in marriage in a sample of women who currently or previously identified as Judeo-Christian. Although IPV encompasses physical, emotional, sexual, and psychological abuse, this study focused on the latter and the proposed construct of spiritual abuse. The main research questions included:

- Do experiences of institutional spiritual abuse predict experiences of marital psychological and spiritual abuse in marriages?
- How do experiences of institutional spiritual abuse influence spiritual impression management?
- How are faith maturity and impression management related?
- Does spiritual impression management influence reported psychological and spiritual abuse in marriages?
- Do experiences of marital psychological abuse predict marital spiritual abuse?

Other exploratory analyses were conducted to investigate the reliability of previous findings by Natterstad (2020), such as rates of institutional and marital spiritual abuse (MSA), the relationship between psychological abuse and spiritual abuse, and between faith, spiritual impression management (SIM), and abuse. Additional analyses including *t*-tests were conducted to explore differences between current and former Christians. Descriptive analyses were used to explore the degree to which institutional spiritual abuse (ISA) and marital psychological abuse (MPA) contributed to participants leaving the Christian faith and to investigate aspects of ISA such as the frequency of being asked to forgive abusers while the abuse is ongoing.

Analytic Strategy

Descriptive statistics were used to explore aspects of the variables. Correlational analyses were conducted to explore the relationships between variables and to inform inferential analyses. Regression models and t-tests were conducted to examine predictive relationships, moderation, and compare results between groups.

Data Preparation

Items from the Faith Maturity Scale, the Subtle and Overt Psychological Abuse scale, and the Spiritual Harm and Abuse Scale were summed to represent scores of faith maturity, MSA, and ISA respectively. The two items representing MSA were summed to represent a Marital Spiritual Abuse subscale. Items from the Spiritual Impression Management scale were averaged. Given the different metrics of the variables, the data were transformed to render standardized *z* scores for each of the measures (Andrade, 2021).

Listwise deletion was used to remove cases with missing data when conducting all analyses including descriptive statistics, correlational analyses, multiple regressions, and *t*-tests (Allison, 2001). Only complete cases with no missing data on any of the assessment measures were retained and used for analysis.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlational Analyses

Descriptive statistics were used to explore aspects of spiritual abuse and reasons for leaving the Christian faith in former Christians, as well as explore the frequency of abuse in both subgroups. Correlational analyses were conducted to explore the relationships between faith, SIM, organization spiritual abuse, MPA, and MSA and to ensure assumptions for analyses were met.

Predictive and Moderation Analyses

To test the main hypotheses, three multiple regressions were conducted. Each model included a multiple regression to explore the predictive relationship of the independent variables and the moderating effect of the relationship of the independent variables on the outcome variable.

Model 1 explored the hypothesized predictive relationships of ISA on MSA (H1) and MPA on MSA (H2), and the effects of the interaction between ISA and MPA on MSA (H3; see Figure 1). In Model 2, the hypothesized predictive relationship of faith maturity on SIM (H4), and the moderating role of ISA (H5) were investigated (see Figure 2). In Model 3, the anticipated predictive relationship of ISA on MPA (H6), and ISA on SIM (H7) and the effects of the two on MPA were investigated (see Figure 3).

Three *t* tests were conducted to explore potential differences between current and former Christians related to organizational spiritual abuse, MPA, and MSA.

Findings

Participant demographics are outlined with a summary of results. Descriptive statistics for study variables are also provided.

Participants

Based on a power analysis calculation conducted with G*Power software (Faul et al, 2007, 2009) for multiple regression analysis with an anticipated effect size of .0215, a desired statistical power of .80, up to four predictors, and a probability of 0.05, the minimum number of participants needed was 316. The anticipated participation was met. A total of 3,094 participants responded to the survey. Participants who failed to complete all measures (n = 1,245) were excluded from analyses. The final sample size was 1,786 participants who either identified as

currently or formerly Christian. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1. To simplify the analyses and reporting, and as former Christians were presented with only three of the five measures current Christians completed, the group was divided into two subgroups based on current versus former identification as a Christian.

Table 1

Sample Characteristics of Participants

Baseline characteristics	CC		FC	
	n	%	*n*	%
Age				
18–24 years old	29	1.8	2	1.4
25–34 years old	372	23	54	37.2
35–44 years old	630	38.9	57	39.4
45–54 years old	365	22.5	26	17.9
55–64 years old	170	10.5	3	2.1
65–74 years old	49	0.3	3	2.1
75–84 years old	4	0.2	-	-
> 85 years old	1	0.1	-	-
Ethnicity				
Ethnically of Hispanic/Latino*	45	2.7	7	4.7
White/European American	1,564	95.5	144	96.6
Black/African American	22	1.3	2	1.3
Asian	21	1.3	3	2
American Indian/Pacific Islander	23	1.4	6	4
Other			1	0.7
Denomination				
Non-denominational	667	41.1	47	33.8
Adventist	36	2.2	4	2
Anglican/Episcopal	46	2.8	5	3.6
Baptist	253	15.6	26	18.7
Brethren	9	0.6	1	0.7
Catholic	23	1.4	5	3.6
Charismatic/Pentecostal	89	5.5	8	5.8
Congregational	5	0.3	-	-
Christian Missionary Alliance	30	1.8	-	-
Lutheran	32	2	-	-
Methodist	51	3.1	1	0.7
Orthodox	5	0.3	-	-

Baseline characteristics	CC		FC	
	n	%	*n*	%
Presbyterian/Reformed	146	9	19	13.7
Other	231	14.2	23	16.6
Relationship status				
Married	1,165	71.5	96	65.3
Separated	125	7.7	9	6.1
Divorced	229	14	27	18.4
Widowed	9	0.6	1	0.7
Remarried, previously divorced	100	6.1	14	9.5
Remarried, previously widowed	2	0.1	-	-
Education level				
Some high school, no degree	11	0.7	2	1.4
High school graduate or equivalent (i.e., GED)	85	5.2	7	4.7
Some college, no degree	278	17.1	22	14.9
Associates degree (AA, AS)	126	7.8	21	14.2
Bachelor's degree (BA, BS)	630	38.8	51	34.5
Master's degree (MA, MS, MEd)	407	25.1	36	24.3
Doctoral degree (PhD, PsyD, EdD)	53	3.3	6	4.1
Professional degree (MD, DDS, DVM)	32	2	3	2.0
Household Income				
Less than $20,000	48	3	6	4.1
$20,000–$34,999	122	7.6	8	5.5
$35,000–$49,999	161	10.1	27	18.5
$50,000–$74,999	349	21.8	31	21.2
$75,000–$99,999	325	20.3	24	16.4
$100,000–$149,999	368	23	32	21.9
$150,000–$249,999	167	10.5	11	7.5
Over $250,000	58	3.6	7	4.8
Location				
Northeast	203	12.7	25	16.9
Southeast	394	24.6	26	17.6
Midwest	557	34.7	38	25.7
Southwest	149	9.3	13	8.8
West	301	18.8	46	31.1

Note. CC = current Christians, FC = former Christians, *n* = number of participants, % = percentage of participants endorsing the demographic variable.

Current Christians

The sample of participants identifying as current Christians included 1,637 women 18–85 years old, *M* = 35–44 years, representing geographically diverse areas of the United States. Most of the sample (71%) reported being married and the remaining participants were separated (8%), divorced (14%), widowed (< 1%), remarried after divorce (6%), and remarried after being widowed (< 1%). The participants identified as White/European American (95%), ethnically of Hispanic/Latino origin (2%), Black/African American (1%), Asian (1%), American Indian/Pacific Islander (1%). Most of the participants who reported their education level (1,622) were college-educated (94%) with 5% having a high school degree and less than 1% having some high school but no degree. The household income range was < $20,000 to > $250,000, *M* = $50,000–$74,999. Over a third identified as nondenominational with the remainder endorsing one of the other 13 denominations or selecting the "other" option.

Former Christians

The sample of participants who identified as former Christians included 149 women, 18–85 years old, *M* = 25–34 years, previously identifying with nine denominations. As in the current Christian group, most of the sample (64%) reported being married with the remaining being separated (6%), divorced (18%), widowed (< 1%), and remarried after divorce (9.5%). The participants identified as White/European American (96*%, n* = 144), ethnically of Hispanic/Latino origin (5%, *n* = 7), Black/African American (1%, *n* = 2), Asian (2%, *n* = 3), American Indian/Pacific Islander (4%, *n* = 6) with some participants identifying with multiple ethnic identities. Most participants were college-educated (*n* = 140) with 5% (*n* = 7) having a high school degree and 1% (*n* = 2) having some high school but no degree. The household income range was < $20,000 to > $250,000, *M* = $50,000–$74,999. Participants' geographic

locations included the five major regions of the United States. Most participants endorsed previously being nondenominational with the remaining participants selecting one of the other 14 categories including "other" unlisted denominations.

Nonspecified and Specified Denominations

Both current and previous Christians were able to select "other" and specify which unlisted denomination with which they most identify/identified. Of the 192 participants who selected other, 20% (n = 39) did not provide further details of their preferred denomination, while the remainder (n = 153) did. The most frequent denominations cited were Church of Christ (n = 16) and Wesleyan (n = 11), followed by Nazarene (n = 9) and Mennonite (n = 7). Forty other denominations were identified. Thirty participants reported past versus current denomination and/or their confusion/frustration with not knowing which denomination to choose.

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Descriptive statistics of study variables for both subgroups are reported in Table 2. Although both groups completed measures for ISA, MPA, and MSA, only current Christians also completed the Faith Maturity and Spiritual Impression Management Scales.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Variables in Current and Former Christians

Variable	Minimum		Maximum		*M*		*SD*	
	CC	FM	CC	FM	CC	FM	CC	FM
ISA	27.00	34.00	132.00	128.00	67.68	89.59	21.69	19.26
MPA	0.00	0.00	315.00	315.00	97.20	90.8	98.54	99.98
MSA	0.00	0.00	18.00	18.00	3.11	2.79	5.07	5.27
Faith maturity*	11.00	N/A	77.00	N/A	57.60	N/A	9.25	N/A
SIM*	1.00	N/A	5.00	N/A	2.78	N/A	0.77	N/A

Note. CC = current Christians; FC = former Christians; N/A = Not applicable

*Former Christians did not complete the faith-based measures

ISA

The spiritual harm and abuse scale was used to assess participant's lifetime experiences of institutional abuse and its negative internal effects (Koch & Edstrom, 2020). The minimum score possible on the scale is 27, representing no lifetime experiences of institutional abuse. The maximum score possible is 135. The mean score for Christians was 68, falling under "medium" severity, and for former Christians, 90, falling under "high" severity. Former Christians reported higher levels of institutional abuse. In this sample, the 35-item scale demonstrated strong internal reliability. In the current Christian subgroup, Cronbach's alpha was .95 and in former Christians, $\alpha = .92$.

Frequency of Institutional Abuse. Almost half (45%) of Christians and 52% of former Christians reported moderate rates of spiritual abuse and 40% of Christians and 37% of former Christians reporting severe organizational abuse. Most Christian participants (82%, $n = 1{,}407$) and formerly Christian women (96%, $n = 143$) experienced one event of ISA in their lifetimes. For example, over half of Christians (66%, $n = 1{,}077$) and former Christians (69%, $n = 103$) reported being pressured to forgive an abuser while abuse was ongoing. Of those, over 32% ($n = 532$) of Christian women and 40% ($n = 60$) former Christians reported this pressure occurring often.

Over three quarters of current Christians (81%, $n = 1{,}331$) and past Christians (91%, $n = 136$) reported witnessing leadership or group protecting or elevating abusive individuals. Of those, 595 (36%) Christians and 76 (51%) reported this occurring often. Most Christian

participants (73%, *n* = 1,196) and former Christians (88%, *n* = 131) also reported being blamed for the harm they suffered rather than perpetrators being held accountable.

Sixty-one percent of Christians (*n* = 998) and 85% former Christians saw Scripture used within a Christian organization to justify physical violence. Of those, almost a third of Christians (29%, *n* = 288) and over a third former Christians (39%, *n* = 58) reported "often" witnessing sacred texts to justify physical abuse. Further, most Christian women (82%, *n* = 1,348) and formerly Christian participants (96%, *n* = 143) reported being treated as "less than" because of their gender. Of those, 42% of Christian women (n = 643) and 69% (*n* = 103) former Christians reported often experiencing this. Specifically, 70% (*n* = 1,143) of Christians and 89% (*n* = 133) were denied opportunities within Christian organizations based on being female.

In terms of harm, 38% of women who currently identified as Christian (*n* = 615) and 71% (*n* = 106) of former Christians reported often lacking self-worth. Further, 40% of current Christians (*n* = 651) and 64% former Christians (*n* = 95) often experienced sadness over the loss of their faith/religious community. Additionally, almost a fourth of Christian participants (24%, *n* = 400) and 47% former Christians (*n* = 70) reported often lacking spiritual direction or purpose. Notably, many Christian participants (85%, *n* = 1,391) and former Christians (99%, *n* = 147) reported personally avoiding religious activities or settings at least a few times to reduce distressing feelings. Of those, 35% of Christians (*n* = 1,391) and 90% former Christians (*n* = 134) often avoided such settings.

Interestingly, 10% of Christian participants (*n* = 158) and 29% former Christians (*n* = 43) reported often feeling betrayed by God. Most Christian participants (65%, *n* = 1,066) and over a third former Christians (37%, *n* = 55) reported never feeling as if God harmed them directly. Of

those, only 4.2% of Christians (n = 69) and 19% former Christians (n = 28) reported often feeling as if God directly harmed them.

ISA by Demographic Categories. Descriptive statistics of the study variables by demographic categories are presented in Appendix L. The highest level of ISA in Christian women was reported by those who are divorced or separated, between 35 and 54 years old, endorsing White or the "other" ethnicity option, and/or reported household incomes less than $35,000 a year. Although those with a high school degree or less reported the highest levels of organizational abuse, the next highest levels were high school graduates and those with doctoral degrees. The highest levels of institutional abuse was reported by participants identifying as Charismatic or Pentecostal and/or those located in the Southeast.

The highest level of institutional abuse in former Christian women were reported by those who separated and divorced, under 35 years old, from "other" ethnicities, Hispanic/Latino, or American Indian/Pacific Islander heritage reported less than $35,000 household income, and/or have either a professional or high school degree. The highest levels of organizational abuse were reported by those identifying as formerly Anglican, Adventist, or "other" denomination and/or live in the Southwest, Midwest, and Northeast regions of the United States.

MPA

Psychological abuse in marriage was measured by the Subtle and Overt Psychological Abuse Scale (Marshall, 2000). The scale includes 35 items representing events associated with psychological abuse. The maximum potential score is 315 with a score of 0 representing no lifetime experiences of abuse and nine reflecting either one event experienced daily or nine different events experienced at least once, or a combination of experiences that occur with varying frequencies. The range of scores in both Christian and formerly Christian participant

groups was 0–315. The mean for current Christians was slightly higher than for former believers. The scale demonstrated strong internal reliability rendering a Cronbach's alpha of .99 in both groups.

Frequency of MPA. Of the 1,637 Christian and 149 former Christian participants, 71 (4%) of Christians and 8 (5%) former Christians reported no such events, while 96% of Christians and 95% of non-Christians reported at least one lifetime event. Fifty-seven percent of current and 56% former Christian women had a score of 35 or more and 41% of Christians and 49% former Christians had a score of 45 or more. On average, 37% of Christian women and 34% of former Christians experienced psychological abuse every few months.

Almost half of the Christian participants (46%, $n = 757$) and former Christians (48%, $n = 71$) reported husbands blaming them (i.e., the women) for the husbands being upset or angry every few months or more. Of those, 587 (36%) of Christian and 48 (32%) former Christian women experienced this monthly with 212 current and 21 former Christians experiencing it daily. Out of 1,637 Christian women, 682 (42%) reported their husbands caused them to question themselves, undermining the women's self-confidence and increasing their insecurity every few months. Of those, 240 (15%) women reported this occurring on almost a daily basis. Out of 149 former Christians, 58 (39%) reported experiencing the same every few months with 28% experiencing it at least monthly and 14% almost daily.

Thirty-four percent, or 558 Christian women and 30% ($n = 45$) former Christians reported their husbands doing or saying something that harms their self-respect or pride in themselves on at least a monthly basis, with 217 of current and 18 former Christians reporting this occurring on an almost daily basis. Almost a third of current ($n = 464$, 28%) and former Christians ($n = 43$, 29%) reported feeling worried or scared on at least a monthly basis without being sure of why

with 13% of both Christians (*n* = 213) and former Christians (*n* = 20) reporting this occurring on an almost daily basis. Just over a third of both Christians (*n* = 592, 36%) and former Christians (*n* = 35, 34%) reported being blamed by their husbands on at least a monthly basis for their husband's problems with 477 Christians and 35 former Christians being blamed at least monthly, and of those 12% of both Christians (*n* = 196) and former believers (*n* = 18) reporting being blamed daily.

Over a third (38%) of Christians (*n* = 631) and (36%) former Christians (*n* = 53) reported husbands who every few months tried to convince the woman that her perceptions of events were untrue. Of those, 30% of Christians (*n* = 509) and 23% former Christians (*n* = 34), reported experiencing this at least monthly with 182 Christian women (11%) and 19 former Christians (13%) experiencing this on an almost daily basis. Notably, 371 of Christian participants (23%) and 31 former Christians (21%) reported their husbands putting themselves first not seeming to care what the women wanted on an almost daily basis. Ten percent of Christian respondents (*n* = 163) and 13% to 14% former believers (*n* = 20) reported having husbands who on an almost daily basis act(ed) like they own their partner, keeping her from having time to herself, and make the wife feel guilty about something they have or have not done. Further, 205 Christian women (12%) and 16 former Christians (11%) reportedly have had husbands who on an almost daily basis made the woman worry about their own emotional health and well-being.

Of the 1,637 Christian participants, 242 (27%) reported husbands who on at least a monthly basis belittle, find fault in, or put down things that women are pleased with or feel good about with 151 of those reporting this occurs on almost a daily basis. Former Christians reported slightly less with 20% (*n* = 30) experiencing this at least monthly and 9% (*n* = 13) almost daily. Close to a quarter of current (*n* = 402) and former Christians (*n* = 33) reported their husbands

encouraging them to do something and then making it hard for them to do it on at least a monthly basis with 123 of Christian and 13 former Christians experiencing this on an almost daily basis. In addition, 35% of Christians (n = 588) and 31% of former Christians (n = 46), have or had husbands who on at least a monthly basis, get more upset than the women when she shares her feelings with their husbands with 164 of Christians and 20 former Christians reporting this occurring almost daily.

MPA and Demographic Categories. Within the Christian subgroup, the highest levels of MPA were reported by participants who were divorced and separated, 45–64 years old, Hispanic/Latino and/or African American/Black women, and/or had no high school degree (or equivalent), or a professional degree. With regards to household income, those who reported less than $20,000 a year reported higher rates of marital abuse than the other income brackets. The highest levels of psychological abuse were reported by those living in the Southeast and Southwest and/or those identifying as Catholic or Adventist.

Similarly, formerly Christian participants reported higher rates of reported MPA when divorced or separated. That said, in formerly Christian participants, those between the ages 55–64 years old, identifying as “other” ethnicities, Hispanic/Latino and/or Asian, and/or having a high school degree/GED or professional degree reported higher rates of marital abuse. Like the Christian group, rates were also higher for those reporting between $20,000 and $50,000 household incomes. The highest rates were reported by former Christians living in the Northeast or West regions of the United States and those formerly identifying as Anglican/Episcopal or Adventist.

MSA

To date, there are no interpersonal spiritual abuse scales to assess for emotional or psychologically harmful events that target the spiritual identity of victims within religious populations. As such, MSA was measured through two items used in recent research by Natterstad (2020) that may provide support for further exploration of this construct. Although there are limitations to using a two-item scale to represent a construct (Nygaard & Dahlstrom, 2002), Eisinga et al. (2013) conceded it is permissible in certain instances when the items are congeneric, and the Spearman-Brown coefficients are significant. The results for the Current Christian group showed a strong positive relationship between the two items which was significant, $r(1,635) = .70$, $p < .001$. For the Former Christian subgroup, the relationship was also strong, positive, and significant, $r(147) = .83$, $p < .001$. Further, in this sample, the subscale of MPA demonstrated strong internal reliability in both subgroups with a Cronbach's alpha of .88 in the Christian group and .93 in the Formerly Christian one.

Since the items were added to the end of the psychological abuse scale, the items were scored on the same 9-point Likert scale and summed. As such, the possible score range was 0–18 with 0 representing no lifetime experiences and 18 representing almost daily occurrences of both items. In the Christian subgroup, the mean was 3.11 with a standard deviation of 5.1. In the formerly Christian group, the mean was 2.8, and the standard deviation was 5.3. The larger standard deviation reflects a nonnormal distribution in that most participants did not report experiences of MSA; yet, the range of experiences were large. Although many experienced no MSA, some of those reporting abuse reported repeated and daily experiences of it. Future research should explore levels of abuse.

Frequency of MSA. Results showed 20% of Christian participants (n = 331) and 18% former Christians (n = 27) reported their husbands using Scripture to get them to do things they did not want to do every few months, with 15% in both groups experiencing this at least monthly (n = 331 in Christians; n = 27 in former Christians), and 80 Christians and eight former Christian women (5%) experiencing this daily. Results for how frequently husbands criticized their wife's faith were similar with 21% of women in both groups experiencing this every few months, 15% monthly, and 5% daily.

MSA and Demographic Categories. Both current Christians and former Christians who are separated or divorced reported the highest rates of MSA. In current Christians, rates were highest in those 55–64 years old, and for former Christians in those 65–74 years old. Although in Christians, the higher rates were reported by participants who identified as Hispanic/Latino and/or Black/African American, the higher rates in former Christians were reported by those endorsing being "other" ethnicities, Hispanic/Latino and/or Asian.

Both current and former Christians with high school degrees and/or reporting less than $35,000 household income endorsed higher rates of MSA. Although current Christians located in the Northeast and Southeast reported higher rates, in former Christians, those located in the Northeast and Southwest reported higher rates. Current Christians identifying as Adventist and former Christians as Anglican/Episcopal reported higher levels of interpersonal spiritual abuse.

Faith Maturity

Participants' level of faith was measured through the Faith Maturity Short-Form Scale, an 11-item measure that assesses the degree to which participants embody strong Christian faith with higher scores reflecting higher internalized and externalized faith (Piedmont & Nelson, 2001). Items are scored to render a faith maturity score with possible scores between 11–77.

Cronbach alpha for this sample indicated strong internal reliability (α = .86). The mean score in this sample (*n* = 1,637) was 57.6 (*SD* = 9.25). Former Christians were not presented with this measure as they no longer identify as Christian.

SIM

SIM was assessed using the 5-item Spiritual Impression Management Subscale (Hall & Edwards, 2002). As such, only current Christians completed the Spiritual Impression Management Subscale. The five items from this measure were averaged to render a score that reflects the degree to which participants were concerned with being seen in an overly positive spiritual light. Although more recent findings on nonreligious samples and domestic violence suggest measuring impression management or social desirability is unnecessary, findings in religious specific samples indicated this may not hold in this population (Hall & Edwards, 2002; Natterstad, 2020). In this sample (*n* = 1,637), the scale demonstrated adequate internal reliability with Cronbach's alpha of .74. The minimum score possible for this subscale was 1 and the maximum 5. The mean in this sample was 2.78 and the standard deviation was 0.77.

Most participants endorsed all five items as true to some degree. Specifically, 95% endorsed they were always as kind at home as they were at church with 14% reporting this as slightly true (*n* = 225), 31% as moderately true (*n* = 512), 34% as substantially true (*n* = 556), and 15% as very true (*n* = 254). Only 5% of women (*n* = 90) endorsed this as not being at all true. Similarly, most participants (*n* = 1,540, 94%) reported always seeking God's guidance for every decision they make. Of these, 19% reported this as slightly true (*n* = 313), 33% as moderately true (*n* = 542), 32% as substantially true (*n* = 531), and 9% as very true (*n* = 134). Only 6% reported this as not true at all (*n* = 97).

Regarding always being in a worshipful mood when going to church, 85% endorsed this as true (*n* = 1,397) with 26% endorsing this as slightly true, 37% as moderately true, 20% as substantially true, and just 2% as very true. Fifteen percent endorsed this as not being true at all (*n* = 240). Although most participants still endorsed praying for all their friends and relatives every day (*n* = 1,198, 68%) and always being in a mood to pray (*n* = 1,069, 65%), the frequency of this being true at any level decreased as compared to the other three items. Specifically, 28% of women (*n* = 465) endorsed praying for all their friends and relatives every day as slightly true, 400 (24%) did as moderately true, 228 (14%) as substantially true, and 105 (6%) as very true. A little over a quarter (*n* = 439, 27%) endorsed this as not at all true. Finally, the item least endorsed was always being in the mood to pray with 28% endorsing this as slightly true (*n* = 456), 24% as moderately true (n = 398), 9% as substantially true (*n* = 155), and only 4% as very true (*n* = 60). Over a third (35%) reported this as being not all true (*n* = 568).

Preliminary Analysis

Given the different metrics of the study variables, *z* score transformations were used to standardize the variables before running the regressions. Multivariate normality of the predictor variables and multicollinearity between variables were resolved after being mean-centered. All predictor variables demonstrated acceptable linear relationships with the outcome variables.

Primary Analysis

Based on the power analysis, to conduct moderation analyses, an *n* of 316 was required. Although the Christian subgroup met this criterion (*n* = 1,637), the former Christian subgroup (*n* = 149) did not. As such, regression analyses were conducted using only the current Christian participants. Results are reported in Table 3. Three multiple regression models were conducted to explore the predictive relationships of the study variables and test the hypotheses. The first

multiple regression, Model 1, was conducted to test Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 (see Figure 1). Model 2 tested Hypotheses 4 and 5 (see Figure 2). Model 3 tested Hypotheses 6, 7, and 8 (see Figure 3).

Table 3

Regression Models: Predictive and Moderation Effects in Christian Participants

Variable	*B*	*β*	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Model 1: Effects on MSA					
Constant	2.9	-	.07	37.82	< .001
ISA	.263	.05	.07	3.39	< .001
MPA	3.81	.75	.08	47.84	.000
Interaction ISA X MPA	.64	.134	.07	9.00	< .001
Model 2: Effects on SIM					
Constant	13.93	-	.016	171.45	.000
ISA	-.604	-.157	.016	-7.43	< .001
Faith Maturity (FM)	1.89	.491	.016	23.27	< .001
Interaction ISA X FM	-.100	-.026	.016	-1.24	.214
Model 3: Effects on MPA					
Constant	98.28	-	2.29	42.92	< .001
ISA	35.56	.36	2.29	15.51	< .001
SIM	19.47	.198	2.3	8.48	< .001
Interaction ISA X SIM	5.85	.06	2.25	2.6	.009

Note. n = 1,637. Regressions and moderation analyses conducted in Christian subgroup.

Model 1

Hypotheses in Model 1. The hypotheses for Model 1 were as follows:

- Hypothesis 1 (H1): Higher institutional spiritual abuse predicts higher marital spiritual abuse.
- Hypothesis 2 (H2): Higher marital psychological abuse predicts higher marital spiritual abuse.
- Hypothesis 3 (H3): Marital psychological abuse moderates the relationship between institutional spiritual abuse and marital spiritual abuse, such that higher levels of

marital psychological abuse increase the effects of institutional abuse on marital psychological abuse.

Multiple Regression for Model 1. The first multiple regression was conducted to explore whether higher ISA predicts higher spiritual abuse in marriage (H1), higher MPA predicts higher spiritual abuse in marriage (H2), and if the effects of higher institutional abuse on spiritual abuse in marriage are strengthened by the presence of psychological abuse (H3).

Results showed the model was significant with 66% of the variance in MSA being predicted by ISA and MPA, $R^2 = .661$, $F(3, 1{,}636) = 1{,}061.33$, $p = .000$. Higher ISA predicted higher MSA, and this was significant, $B = .263$, 95% CI [.111, .414], $p < .001$. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Higher psychological abuse in marriage also predicted higher levels of spiritual abuse within marriage and this also was significant, $B = 3.81$, 95% CI [3.66, 3.97], $p < .001$. As such, Hypothesis 2 was supported. Finally, the results showed Hypothesis 3 was also supported as the moderation interaction of ISA and MPA on MSA was significant, $B = .543$, 95% CI [.503, .783], $p < .001$.

Model 2

Hypotheses for Model 2. The hypotheses for Model 2 were as follows:

- Hypothesis 4 (H4): Higher faith maturity predicts higher spiritual impression management.
- Hypothesis 5 (H5): Institutional spiritual abuse moderates the relationship between faith and spiritual impression management such that higher institutional spiritual abuse increases the effects of faith on spiritual impression management.

Multiple Regression for Model 2. The second multiple regression was conducted to explore whether higher faith predicted higher levels of SIM (H4) and if the effects of ISA increase the effects of faith on SIM (H5).

Results showed the model was significant with 27.5% of the variance in SIM being predicted by ISA and faith maturity, $R^2 = .275$, $F(3, 1{,}636) = 206.98$, $p < .001$. Higher faith maturity predicted higher SIM, and this was significant, $B = .378$, 95% CI [.347, .410], $p < .001$; thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported. Interestingly, higher ISA predicted lower SIM, and this was significant, $B = -.121$, 95% CI [-.153, -.089], $p < .001$. Notably, the results showed no significance for a moderation interaction of ISA and faith on marital SIM; thus, Hypothesis 5 was not supported.

Model 3

Hypotheses for Model 3. The hypotheses for Model 3 were as follows:

- Hypothesis 6 (H6): Higher institutional spiritual abuse predicts higher marital psychological abuse.
- Hypothesis 7 (H7): Higher spiritual impression management predicts higher marital psychological abuse in marriage.
- Hypothesis 8: Spiritual impression management moderates the relationship between institutional spiritual abuse and marital psychological abuse such that higher levels of spiritual impression management decrease the effects of institutional spiritual abuse on reported marital spiritual abuse.

Multiple Regression for Model 3. The third multiple regression was conducted to explore whether higher ISA predicts higher levels of MPA in marriage (H6), higher SIM predicts

higher MPA in marriage (H7), and if the effects of SIM decrease the effects of ISA on reported MSA (H8).

Results showed the model was significant with 38.3% of the variance in psychological abuse in marriage being predicted by ISA and SIM, $R^2 = .383$, $F(3, 1{,}636) = 93.52$, $p < .001$. Higher ISA predicted higher levels of MPA in marriage, and this was significant, $B = 35.56$, 95% CI [31.06, 30.05], $p < .001$. As such, Hypothesis 6 was supported. Hypothesis 7 was also supported in that higher SIM predicted higher MPA in marriage and this was significant, $B = 19.47$, 95% CI [14.97, 23.97], $p < .001$. Finally, the findings showed a significant interaction effect with higher SIM increasing the effects of ISA on MPA in marriage and this was significant, $B = 5.85$, 95% CI [1.44, 10.27] $p < .001$. That said, it was not in the direction anticipated. As such, Hypothesis 8 was not supported in that the interaction effect was significant but in a positive rather negative direction.

Additional Exploratory Analyses

Reasons for Leaving the Christian Faith

Two items exploring the reasons former Christians left the Christian faith were included at the end of the survey. Eighty-seven percent of participants ($n = 126$) reported Christian organizations "very much" contributed to them leaving their faith. Only 8% endorsed "somewhat" and 4% "very little." Just one person endorsed "not at all." The second question asked how much leaving the faith was related to experiences in marriage. Almost half (43%) endorsed "not at all," 11% reported "very little," 19% chose "somewhat," and 26% endorsed "very much."

Correlational Analyses

Christian Subgroup. The correlations between study variables in the Current Christian subgroup are presented in Table 4. ISA demonstrated a moderate positive relationship with marital psychological and spiritual abuse and these relationships were significant, $r = .3$, $p < .001$. ISA was negatively and weakly associated with faith maturity ($r = -.05$) and SIM ($r = -.18$) and these relationships were significant, $p < .001$.

Table 4

Correlations of Variables in Current Christians

Variable	ISA	MPA	MSA	FM	SIM
ISA	-				
MPA	.327**	-			
MSA	.304**	.801**	-		
Faith Maturity	-.055*	.016	.045	-	
SIM	-.184**	.127**	.136**	.500**	-

Note. $n = 1{,}637$. ISA = institutional spiritual abuse, MPA = marital psychological abuse, MSA = marital spiritual abuse, FM = faith maturity, SIM = spiritual impression management. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

MPA was strongly and positively related to spiritual abuse in marriage, and this was significant, $r = .8$, $p < .001$. SIM was positively related to marital psychological ($r = .13$) and spiritual abuse ($r = .14$). Though these relationships were weak, they were significant, $p < .001$. SIM was moderately and positively associated with faith maturity, $r = .5$, $p < .001$.

Former Christians Subgroup. The correlations between study variables in the former Christian subgroup are presented in Table 5. ISA was weakly and positively related with MSA

and this was significant, $r = .2$, $p < .05$. As in the Christian subgroup, MPA was strongly and positively associated with MSA, $r = .824$, $p < .001$.

Table 5

Correlations of Variables in Former Christians

Variable	ISA	MPA	MSA
ISA	-		
MPA	.141	-	
MSA	.190*	.825**	-

Note. $n = 149$. ISA = institutional spiritual abuse, MPA = marital psychological abuse, MSA = marital spiritual abuse. *p <.05. **p < .01.

Inferential Analyses

Simple Regression. A simple regression analysis was used to explore the predictive relationship between SIM and faith maturity in the Christian subgroup. The results revealed 25% of the variance in faith maturity was predicted by SIM, $R^2 = .25$, $F(1, 1{,}636) = 548.8$, $p < .001$ such that higher levels of impression management predicted higher levels of faith maturity, $B = 4.6$, $\beta = .5$, 95% CI [4.23,5.01], $p < .001$.

Independent Sample *t* Test. An independent sample *t* test was conducted to explore the differences between Christians ($n = 1{,}654$) and former Christians ($n = 149$) and experiences of ISA, MPA, and MSA. Listwise deletion was used thus cases only included those who completed all three measures being investigated. Levine's test showed the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met and equal variances were assumed for all variables. The test was significant for ISA with a large effect size, $t(1{,}801) = -11.95$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.07$. The results indicate former Christians experienced higher levels of ISA ($M = 89.59$, $SD = 19.26$) as compared to current

Christians (M = 67.63, SD = 21.67) and this difference was significant. Although current Christians experienced slightly higher MPA and MSA than former Christians, the differences were not found to be significant.

Chapter 4: Discussion

The study discussion provides a brief interpretation of the results, integration with previous research, implications of findings, recommendations for future research, and limitations of the study.

Interpretations

The findings of this study revealed higher institutional spiritual abuse (ISA) was not just strongly associated with higher marital psychological and spiritual abuse, but it predicted both (Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 6, respectively). Results also indicated higher psychological abuse in marriages predicted higher spiritual abuse within the relationship (Hypothesis 2). Notably, psychological abuse increased the effects of institutional abuse on abuse in marriage (Hypothesis 3). In other words, although psychological abuse alone and organizational abuse alone predicted higher abuse in marriages, when combined, the negative effects of organizational abuse on marriages was stronger.

Although higher faith was associated with and predicted higher spiritual impression management (SIM; Hypothesis 4), higher levels of institutional abuse did not predict higher impression management, nor did it increase the effects of faith on impression management as expected (Hypothesis 5). In other words, although it was anticipated higher levels of ISAwould increase impression management, the findings did not support this. Instead, higher spiritual abuse predicted lower levels of concern over being seen in an overly pious light. Notably, an additional analysis revealed higher impression management predicted higher faith maturity. Meaning, women overly concerned with being seen in a positive light reported having a stronger faith. Given the nature of impression management, higher rates of faith likely represent inflated faith rather than accurate rates of faith maturity.

As anticipated, findings revealed higher impression management was not just related to higher rates of psychological abuse but predicted them (Hypothesis 6). The more participants were concerned with being seen in an overly positive light; the more marital abuse was reported. This is interesting given the opposite findings with regards to institutional abuse and impression management. Further, the more women were concerned with how they were viewed, the more institutional abuse influenced the rates of psychological abuse in marriage (Hypothesis 8).

Notably, marital psychological and marital spiritual abuse (MSA) were more strongly related than institutional and MSA. This suggests that although spiritual abuse in organizations and marriages share similarities, psychological abuse and MSA are more closely related. As such, organizational and MSA may represent distinct types of abuse. That said, given the moderate relationship between MPA and ISA, and the strong relationship between psychological abuse and MSA, it appears spiritual abuse in general includes components of psychological abuse.

Extensive descriptive analyses revealed both current and former Christians experienced surprisingly high rates of spiritual abuse with 45% of Christians and 52% of former Christians reporting moderate spiritual abuse and 40% of Christians and 37% of former Christians experiencing severe organizational abuse. Specifically, almost three quarters of women were reportedly being pressured to forgive an abuser while the abuse was ongoing. Out of the 1,786 women, 655 were “often” pressured to forgive. Further, half of former Christians and just under 40% of current Christians reported often witnessing leadership elevate abusers while a third of Christians and over half of non-Christians were blamed for what they endured. Notably, almost three quarters of former Christians and over half of current Christians, or 683 out of 1,637 women, reported “often” being treated as “less than” because of their gender.

Results revealed women are also experiencing significant levels of harm and internal distress with 721 women reporting “often” having a lack of self-worth and 817 “often” feeling isolated. Of the 817 women, 720 were current Christians. Notably, the findings of this study revealed former Christians experienced significantly higher levels of institutional abuse than current Christians and that those experiences reportedly played a significant role in them leaving the Christian faith.

Finally, this study also sought to replicate findings from previous research on the potential construct of MSA. As anticipated, the results showed a strong relationship between the subtle and overt psychological abuse scale and the two-item subscale representing MSA, replicating the findings from Natterstad (2020). Results also revealed strong internal reliability of the items suggesting they represent a single construct.

Integration

The findings are integrated with previous results and discussed including women’s experiences of ISA, the impact of organizational abuse on marriages, rates of psychological abuse, organizational versus MSA, rates of MSA, and faith, impression management, and abuse.

Women’s Experiences of ISA

The findings in this study suggest most women who engage in activities within Christian organizations report experiencing ISA to some extent and are harmed by it. More than 80% of participants reported experiencing organizational spiritual abuse with over half reporting repeated abuse. In a study by Oakley and associates (2018), 63% of participants reported organizational spiritual abuse. That said, the sample included both men (31%) and women (69%). As such, the differences in reported lifetime rates may be related to gender.

Relatedly, in the present study, over a third of women reported “often” being discriminated against because of their gender, forced to forgive abusers while abuse was ongoing, blamed for the harm they experienced at the hands of someone else, and witnessing abusers being elevated within the institutions. Notably, the message to forgive abusers has been cited as problematic within this population for over 40 years (Alsdurf & Alsdurf, 1989; Fortune, 1988; Pagelow, 1981). This is especially alarming as research has repeatedly shown forgiving abusers at the expense of accountability reinforces and perpetuates abuse (Fortune, 1988; McNulty, 2011; Natterstad, 2020).

Beyond the ongoing message to forgive, participants reported also being blamed for the abuse. The research on this being problematic in the Christian faith community also goes back decades (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Knickmeyer et al., 2010; Nash & Hesterberg, 2009). Notably, within nonreligious and religious systems alike, blaming victims is a common tactic used by perpetrators and by institutions protecting them to undermine the credibility of victims and deflect blame (Mullen, 2020). Although not all Christian organizations remain unaware of the realities of abuse within their congregations, the findings in the current study highlight the pervasiveness of organizational abuse and the tactics commonly used.

With that in mind, it is important to note research studies on institutional betrayal have shown survivors who disclose abuse to leaders who in turn either do nothing or victim blame experience secondary trauma distinct from the original traumatic event (Lee et al., 2019). As such, the high rates of participants being blamed align with the high rates of harm endorsed by this sample which may represent significant wounds incurred in addition to the original harm.

Specifically, over a third of women in the current study who identified as currently Christian reported “often” feeling isolated, lacking self-worth, grieving the loss of their faith

and/or religious community, and avoiding religious activities and settings to relieve their distressing feelings. These negative internal experiences align with previous findings on survivors of organizational spiritual abuse who reported increased levels of anxiety, depression, anger, decreased levels of self-worth, and avoidance of biblical texts (Ward, 2011). Specifically, Oakley and Kinmond (2014) reported 75% of their Christian participants reported feeling "damaged" by their experiences in churches.

Interestingly, most participants in this study were not angry with God but rather with their negative experiences within Christian institutions. Relatively few felt distrust or betrayal by God, or that they were specifically targeted by Him. That said, among former Christians, numbers were higher with around a third "often" feeling betrayed, targeted, and betrayed by God. Notably, given that former Christians experienced significantly higher rates of institutional abuse and their decision to leave was especially related to those experiences, this suggests how women are treated within Christian organizations is significantly related to women's decisions to leave the church in the United States.

Impact of Institutional Abuse on Marriages

According to the results of this study, spiritual abuse within an institution is not only related to abuse in marriages but it predicts it such that the more women experience spiritual abuse within an organization, the more it is expected they will experience both psychological and spiritual abuse within their marriages. These findings are sobering.

Researchers in the field of domestic violence have long emphasized the critical role social contexts play in perpetuating abuse (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Guerrin & Ortlan, 2017). Specifically, researchers have argued institutions that support or teach cultural norms in which power differentials based on gender, race, socioeconomic status, or age, are emphasized, create a

context in which abuse is more likely to occur and be maintained (Guerin & Ortlan, 2017). The findings of this study not only support this notion but reveal abusive systems increase the likelihood of abuse in other domains of life such as marriage.

Rates of MPA

Results referring to rates of psychological abuse based on only one event should be viewed with extreme caution as psychological abuse refers to patterns of behaviors (Dehart et al., 2010). Not all researchers agree with this making it difficult to compare findings (Epstein & Goodman, 2019). Although the present author estimates psychological abuse to include patterns of behaviors, to contextualize the findings of this present study, the rates of singular incidents were used to be able to compare the results to findings in studies of nonreligious populations. The results revealed rates of psychological abuse in this sample rivaled or exceeded those in the general population. Smith et al. (2017) reported 47% of women in the United States experienced at least one event of psychological abuse while Carney and Barner (2012) reported between 9%–90% of nonreligious specific participants endorsed one lifetime event. Of the 1,637 Christian and 149 former Christian participants, 96% of Christians and 95% of non-Christians reported at least one lifetime event. This aligns with the previous study by Natterstad (2020) in which 97% of the sample also reported at least one time event.

Given that psychological abuse often precedes and co-occurs with physical and sexual violence (Follingstad et al., 1990; Frieze, 2005; Mills et al., 2013; Murphy & O'Leary, 1990), and that this type of abuse often results in higher distress than the negative impact of physical and sexual abuse (Hayes & Jeffries, 2016), efforts to highlight the realities of abuse within this population should be prioritized.

Concerningly, results from a study by Renzetti et al. (2017) exploring psychological and physical abuse perpetration in a sample of Christian men revealed that although rates of psychological and physical abuse perpetrated by Christian men aligned with rates in one national survey of the generally population, they were considerably higher than in two other national surveys in the general population. As the authors highlighted, this was despite rates in their study likely being under-reported as (a) the purpose of the study was stated such that perpetrators likely opted out of the survey, and (b) prior research has found men underreport abuse. Taken together with the findings of the current study, these results suggest domestic violence in the Christian faith population is at least equivalent, if not higher, than in the general population. This warrants further research and attention.

Institutional Versus MSA Constructs

The findings in the present study replicated findings from Natterstad (2020) which demonstrated a strong relationship between psychological abuse and the subscale representing MSA. Interestingly, the relationship between MPA and ISA was only moderate, suggesting differences between marital and organizational spiritual abuse. Although the two-item subscale representing MSA had a strong relationship with the subtle and overt psychological abuse scale, the relationship with the spiritual harm and abuse scale developed for ISA was only moderate. Future research should explore differences between organizational and marital or interpersonal spiritual abuse.

MSA

Notably, Dehan and Levi (2009) argued MSA includes attempts to impair women's spiritual life, identity, and/or wellbeing. Researchers studying psychological abuse in relationships argue abuse includes coercion, isolation, and undermining victims' identities

(Hayes & Jeffries, 2016; Matheson et al., 2015). The first of the two items used asked women to what extent their husbands used Scripture to make them do something they did not want to do which may represent spiritual coercion. The second item asked to what extent husbands criticized women's faith which may represent undermining victims' spiritual identity. Notably, analyses of the items demonstrated strong reliability of the items suggesting they represent a similar construct. Further research should be conducted exploring the factors these items represent. Other items representing additional factors should be explored to develop a full scale.

ISA

Although some researchers aiming to define spiritual abuse have conceptualized it as a type of psychological abuse that is embedded with spiritual themes, others have argued it is its own construct (Oakley et al., 2018). Initially, Oakley and Kinmond (2014) proposed spiritual abuse as a distinct type of abuse. They have since updated their conceptualization to reflect a subtype of psychological abuse in which perpetrators systematically use sacred texts and spiritual language to coerce and control victims within a religious context resulting in harm to survivors (Oakley et al., 2018). Victims are censored, silenced, isolated, and subjected to pressure to conform, obey, and be held accountable while abusers invoke spiritual authority over them.

In developing their scale, Koch and Edstrom (2020) included six subcategories for abuse and harm from spiritual abuse including (a) abusers over abused, (b) internal distress, (c) violence, horror, and punishment, (d) authoritarian leadership, (e) harmful God-image, and (f) gender discrimination. Although the scale includes aspects that may overlap with MSA, there are components that may be specific to organizational abuse. Notably, the findings in this study suggest the SHAS is a reliable measure.

Rates of MSA

Just over a third of Christians and a quarter of former Christians reported experiencing spiritual abuse in marriage. Only 20% of Christians and 18% reported this occurring every few months. Of those, 243 Christian women experience it monthly and 80 daily. It is interesting the prevalence is much lower than the reported MPA however, not surprising given the subscale included only two items representing a construct that likely includes other factors not represented.

According to Dehan and Levi (2009), spiritual abuse within marriage includes efforts to undermine a partner's spiritual life, identity, or well-being by "belittling her spiritual worth, beliefs, or deeds; preventing her from performing spiritual acts; and causing her to transgress spiritual obligations and prohibitions" (p. 1294). Although the current study includes items that may represent one of these categories, more research is needed to explore items and develop a full scale that better represents the unique experiences of spiritual abuse within relationships.

Faith, Impression Management, and Reported Abuse

Another purpose of this study was to explore the relationships between faith, SIM, and reported rates of abuse.

Marital Abuse

In a study exploring forgiveness, faith, and psychological abuse, the findings revealed the higher the faith, the higher the impression management, which ultimately lead to lower the rates of reported abuse (Natterstad, 2020). Given the findings by Knickmeyer et al. (2010) that pressure to maintain the image of a perfect marriage was a key factor preventing victims from seeking help, Natterstad (2020) suggested participants in her study experiencing higher impression management may have under-reported abuse. As such, the author expected similar

results. However, the findings of the current study conflicted with the previous results as higher rates of impression management predicted more, not less, marital abuse.

Further exploration of impression management and faith revealed a bidirectional predictive relationship. Although faith predicted higher impression management, the opposite was also true in that higher impression management predicted higher faith. As such, an alternative way of viewing the data may be that women who are especially concerned with being seen in an overly positive light report inflated rates of faith maturity. Although lower rates may indicate underreporting, because impression management is a strategy used to minimize negative perceptions, even higher rates of abuse may underrepresent the scope of the problem (Rosenbaum & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2006).

ISA

Given the research on the prevalence of impression management in abusive systems (Mullen, 2020) and the effects of organizational abuse on individuals including decreased self-worth and trust in self (Smith & Freyd, 2014; Ward, 2011), it was hypothesized the more ISA women experienced, the more impression management they would have, and the lower the reported abuse would be. Although the results did not support this with marital abuse, they did for organizational abuse. The reasons for this are unknown. Given that psychological abuse, which appears to be a component of institutional and interpersonal psychological abuse, involves undermining victims' identities and self-worth (DeGroat, 2020; Johnson & Van Vonderen, 1991; Mullen, 2020), victims reaching a certain threshold may (a) begin to accept the blame being ascribed to them and/or (b) no longer be able to sustain efforts needed to maintain impression management strategies.

This would align with qualitative research by Ward (2011) on ISA. Specifically, the participants described double-binds in which leadership induced a sense of failure in members that could only be rectified by an increased dependence on leadership. Although the participants' self-worth decreased, they were still expected to maintain the outward appearance of everything being well. That said, the intensifying cognitive and emotional dissonance eventually resulted in emotional and physical exhaustion that led to leaving the group (Ward, 2011). Taken together, the findings suggest the role of impression management may change based on the extent and context of abuse.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

The implications from the results of this study address the effects of institutional abuse on marriages; the construct of institutional abuse; the relationships between impression management, faith, and abuse; and the reasons for leaving the Christian faith.

Effects of ISA on Marriages

To the author's knowledge, no other studies have been conducted exploring the predictive effects of institutional abuse on domestic violence. As such, this study contributes in a meaningful way to the literature on how factors within a broader ecological system can directly impact individuals and families. Specifically, social scientists and experts on organizational and interpersonal abuse have outlined the ways cultural norms likely interact to shape beliefs about self, others, abuse, and how to respond (DeGroat, 2020; Guerrin & Ortlan, 2017; Jankowski et al., 2018; Mullen, 2020; Oakley et al., 2018; Ward, 2011).

The results of this study go beyond associations between unhealthy systems and marriages. The findings revealed a direct and predictive relationship between organizational abuse and abuse in marriage which not only supports the notion domestic violence cannot be

explored independently of the context in which abuse occurs but infers abusive systems beget abuse in other aspects of life for members. As such, Christian institutions play a key role in moderating abuse and wellbeing of the women within their organizations. Notably, research has also shown for survivors of abuse, faith and having the support of their faith community represented a critical protective factor in recovery (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Nason-Clark, 2000; Zust et al., 2021). Taken together, Christian churches and organizations stand to either be a positive force in the lives of women and their children afflicted by domestic violence, or they can represent not just a hindrance but another source of trauma potentially leading to them leaving the faith altogether.

Future research is needed to explore factors that underlie and perpetuate this relationship. Notably, systemic factors that contribute to and/or perpetuate abuse include differences of power based on gender (Epstein & Goodman, 2019; Guerin & Ortlan, 2017; Levitt & Ware, 2006), and fostering a culture of silence on abuse (Chisale, 2018; Epstein & Goodman, 2021; Knickmeyer et al., 2010; Nason-Clark et al., 2018; Smith & Frey, 2014; Zust et al., 2021), both of which are present in many Christian organizations (Nason-Clark et al., 2018). Further, according to Mullen (2020), Christian organizations focused on institutional impression management do so at the expense of victims. This often results in institutional betrayal whereby victims are further betrayed by institutions they trust when instead of holding perpetrators accountable, organizations either do nothing, blame the victims, and/or elevate perpetrators (Epstein & Goodman, 2021). As such, future studies should aim to explore these and other relevant factors which may be influencing the realities of organizational and interpersonal abuse within the Christian population.

Clinically, considerations for the influence of systemic factors should be made when treating clients experiencing interpersonal violence. As it relates to this specific population, clinicians should seek to familiarize themselves with core spiritual beliefs related to the Christian faith that survivors may struggle with including spiritual identity and the impact of their reactions to those in spiritual authority over them on survivors' perceived relationship with God.

Marital Psychological and Spiritual Abuse

The results of this study align with previous research that has provided rates of domestic abuse in this population are at least equivalent to nonreligious populations (Natterstad, 2020; Wang et al., 2000). Findings also revealed higher psychological abuse in marriage predicts higher MSA in this population. This study contributes to emerging literature on spiritual abuse in marriage. The reliability of the items representing MSA warrant further exploring. Notably, research to develop a scale specific to spiritual abuse in marriage is encouraged.

Given the previous findings, clinicians should be aware that rates of domestic abuse in this population are similar to the general population and thus should be intentional in asking clients about their experiences. Notably, they should also seek to familiarize themselves with aspects of the Christian faith including spiritual language and beliefs used in strategies of spiritual abuse. Clinicians will need to understand this dynamic to be competent in helping Christian survivors wrestle with questions related to their sacred identity. Importantly, efforts should be made to educate religious leaders and Christian institutions training future clergy on the prevalence of domestic abuse in congregations and how to identify it and effectively address it without retraumatizing survivors.

ISA

To the author's knowledge, this is the first quantitative study exploring rates of organizational spiritual abuse. As such, the results contribute to the limited literature on spiritual abuse demonstrating high rates of abuse and harm to women with over 30% of women "often" experiencing organizational abuse and its negative effects.

Extensive descriptive analyses revealed both current and former Christians experienced surprisingly high rates of spiritual abuse with 45% of Christians and 52% of former Christians reporting moderate spiritual abuse and 40% of Christians and 37% of former reporting severe abuse. Alarmingly, nearly 70% of Christian and formerly Christian participants have been pressured to forgive an abuser while abuse was ongoing and over 80 % of Christians and 90% former Christians have witnessed abusers being elevated by leadership. The effects of these experiences are sobering with nearly 40% of Christians and 64% former Christians "often" experiencing sadness over their loss of faith and community, and 35% of Christians and 98% former Christians avoiding religious context/activities.

Clinicians treating Christians and former Christians should be aware of the pervasive nature of organizational spiritual abuse and familiarize themselves with unique traumas these experiences can cause. The Spiritual Harm and Abuse Scale by Koch and Edstrom (2020) was, in part, developed to be used clinically to help identify such experiences to inform treatment. As such, the use of this scale is recommended.

Given the prevalence and impact of organizational spiritual abuse on individuals and marriages, training on spiritual abuse and policies regarding safeguarding of members in Christian organizations should be developed (Oakley et al., 2018).

Impression Management, Faith, and Abuse

Although nonreligious researchers studying domestic violence have not found measures of impression management or social desirability to be significantly relevant (Visschers et al., 2017), given the apparent role of SIM in this population, efforts to better understand this construct are strongly encouraged. The results in this study not only replicated findings by Natterstad (2020) concerning higher faith and higher impression management being related but demonstrated that one predicted the other and vice versa. Given impression management involves minimizing negative aspects of self (Visschers et al., 2017) participants with high impression management likely reported inflated faith maturity. Interestingly, participants with higher impression management reported lower institutional abuse but higher marital abuse. The reasons for this are unknown. In this population, it appears impression management operates differently based on the type of abuse.

The findings from this study contribute to the growing literature on domestic violence in the faith community by exploring various factors that may be influencing reports of abuse, including impression management. However, the findings are inconsistent. As such, more research is needed to better understand this construct and how it influences reports of organizational versus interpersonal abuse and factors that may influence both.

For example, given that spiritual abuse appears to include components of psychological abuse which reportedly results in lowered self-esteem, -worth, -identity, and -trust, it is possible that at certain thresholds of organizational abuse, victims begin to accept blame ascribed to them which in turn results in a lowered need to be perceived as overly positive.

Clinicians treating this population should be aware of the apparent pressure Christian women feel to manage their image and consider how this may impact their willingness to

disclose abuse. This seems especially important given that spiritual abuse involves undermining victims' sense of spiritual identity.

Reasons for Leaving the Faith

Finally, results indicated former Christians experienced significantly higher rates of institutional abuse and harm than current Christians and this contributed to them leaving the Christian faith. This is an interesting finding given declining rates in the United States of not only church attendance but Christian affiliation (Pew Research Center, 2019). Specifically, according to a Pew research survey conducted between 2018 and 2019, there was 12% decline in participants identifying as Christian. Conversely, the percentage of those identifying as either atheist, agnostic, or having no affiliation increased from 17% in 2009 to 26%. Notably, although another survey found rates of Christians increased slightly at the onset of the pandemic (Pew Research Center, 2020), they since decreased again (Jones, 2021). Specifically, a Gallup poll conducted in 2021 showed for the first time in 8 decades, the rates of Church membership in the United States have fallen below 50% (Jones, 2021).

Although the surveys did not explore the reasons for this decline, findings of the current study offer a partial explanation in that women who previously identified as Christian experienced significant organizational abuse that directly contributed to their decision to leave the Christian faith. Future research, including both qualitative and quantitative studies, should build on these findings and explore the effects of institutional abuse on individuals who chose to leave the faith.

These findings should be sobering to Christian organizations that aim to provide a safe place for both believers and nonbelievers. As such, religious leaders and institutions training future leaders should take steps to evaluate their institutions, including their organizational

impression management tendencies, and increase their understanding of organizational and interpersonal abuse (DeGroat, 2020; Mullen, 2020). Further, academic institutions should incorporate curriculum on these topics to train future leaders and clinicians.

Clinicians treating either Christians or people formerly identified as Christian should be aware of the potential organizational abuse their clients may have experienced and be familiar with the aspects and impact of such abuse on individuals including but not limited to confusion related to spiritual identity and decreased self-worth, and the need for meaning-making (DeGroat, 2020; Mullen, 2020; Nason-Clark et al., 2018).

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study outlined include limits related to generalizability, the construct of psychological abuse, study design, listwise deletion, the Spiritual Abuse and Harm Scale, COVID-19 global pandemic, diversity, and self-selection bias.

Generalizability

Given the diversity in demographic representation within participants who currently or at one point identified as Christian, including denomination, socioeconomic status, marital status, and age, the findings can be generalized to many Christian populations. That said, given the limited ethnic representation, caution should still be used when considering non-White populations. Further, these findings cannot be generalized to other religious groups which future research should explore.

The Construct of Psychological Abuse

Psychological abuse is an especially challenging construct to study as it is not always overt and thus not easily identified by victims or observers (Jones et al., 2005). Further, there is no consensus among researchers on how to best define it nor is there a threshold such as in

physical or sexual abuse (Heise et al., 2019). Although some researchers argue psychological abuse involves events regardless of intent or impact, others believe these to be irrelevant (Hayes & Jeffries, 2016). Additionally, although some researchers report one component or event from a psychological abuse scale as representing abuse, others argue for patterns of behaviors to define abuse (Epstein & Goodman, 2019). This author agrees with the latter. As such, although over 90% of participants in this study reported a lifetime event of psychological abuse, the author does not consider this a pattern representing rates of psychological abuse. The author reported these numbers to provide a comparison to recent research on rates of psychological abuse in the general population that reported lifetime events rather than patterns. As such, in this study, the author focused on the percentages of repeated experiences of abuse.

Study Design

Several participants emailed the author highlighting challenges they faced when taking the survey. First, respondents who were divorced and remarried were unsure of which marriage to reference when completing the psychological abuse scale. Although some opted for their present marriage, others opted for their prior one. As such, the results for these participants may not accurately reflect their experiences of abuse within marriage or the relationship between organizational spiritual abuse and marital abuse. After receiving several of these emails the author contacted the IRB board director for permission to add a note in the survey which instructed participants who are remarried to report experiences from their present marriages.

Several respondents notified the author of their confusion in choosing a denomination as the denomination they had experienced spiritual abuse in was not the current denomination they attended. Notably, almost 200 participants endorsed “other” as an option when choosing denominations with 192 adding text indicating either a denomination not listed, several

denominations, or simply stating they were unsure. As such, caution should be used when considering the descriptive findings related to denominations. Future research should explore specific denominations and instances of abuse and/or provide opportunities for participants to specific past and current affiliations. Notably, several respondents indicated a willingness to complete a longer survey so that they could be able to have past and current experiences in churches or marriages accurately represented in the data.

Analysis and Listwise Deletion

Although research standards permit use of incomplete data sets for analysis, provided the missing items only represent a percentage of the total responses and researchers compensate by using pair-wise deletion or imputation (Bhandari, 2022), this author opted to use only perfect data sets given the large sample size. Although perfect data sets accurately represent the experiences of the participants who provided a response to all the questions, the results may be biased as they only reflected the experiences of participants who completed all items which may have been due to a shared trait not shared by those who did not fully complete all measures.

The Spiritual Harm and Abuse Scale

As of this date, the Spiritual Harm and Abuse Scale (Koch & Edstrom, 2020) is in the process of being published. Although it is deemed reliable, its validity has yet to be tested.

COVID-19 Global Pandemic

Although the results regarding ISA revealed high rates of isolation and other distress, the author recognizes that other factors such as the isolation due to the COVID-19 global pandemic may have confounded those findings (Gu et al., 2021).

Diversity

Although the sample in the present study was diverse in terms of age, location, household income, and denomination affiliation, it was not in terms of ethnicity and education. Although the author was intentional in reaching out to as many leaders of color as nonminority leaders, almost 90% of the sample was White and 99% had some college education. As such, the generalizability of the findings is limited as most participants were college-educated White women.

Self-Selection Bias

Research has shown people who self-select for research studies may do so based on motivations related to the study and as such samples may not be representative of the population (Bushman, 1995). In this case, given participants were made aware this study explored experiences of organizational abuse and difficult experiences in the informed consent, it is possible participants who experienced abuse in institutions or marriage were more motivated to participate than people without those experiences. As such, rates of abuse should be interpreted with caution. Future studies on domestic violence in this population are needed to explore the reliability of the findings to date.

Conclusions

The societal problem of domestic violence is complex as factors from multiple ecological levels contribute to the predisposition, and perpetuation of gendered psychological and physical violence (Goodfriend & Arriaga et al., 2017). Although the literature on interpersonal violence most often focuses on personal factors of victims and perpetrators, there are limited studies on the effects of broader systems in which both victims and perpetrators operate (Guerin & Ortlan, 2017). Because abusive strategies only work within certain cultural contexts, studying systems is

critical to effectively identifying vulnerabilities, abusive tactics, and mitigating abuse (Guerin & Ortlan, 2017; Mullen, 2020). Further, studying the type of abuse specific to a population, such as spiritual abuse in Christians, is critical to identifying abuse and effectively intervening (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006).

To the author's knowledge, there have been no studies exploring the predictive relationship of abuse on marital abuse within a specific system. Further, although there have been long-standing calls for research on spiritual abuse that occurs both within organizations and marriages, few studies have been conducted exploring this construct (Dehan & Levi, 2009; Oakley et al., 2018). As such, the primary purpose of this study was to explore how ISA may influence experiences of psychological and spiritual abuse in marriages of Christian and formerly Christian women. Additional goals included exploring the role of impression management and faith, and the construct of spiritual abuse.

The findings revealed high rates of institutional abuse and harm in both Christian and formerly Christian women. Notably, experiences of institutional abuse predict abuse in marriage. Psychological and spiritual abuse were related but also shown to be different. Rates of psychological abuse in marriages were consistent with recent research findings (Natterstad, 2020). Women high in faith with high levels of impression management reported higher rates of marital abuse but lower rates of institutional abuse. Finally, ISA played a significant role in women leaving the Christian faith.

Clinicians working with current or former Christians should be aware of the prevalence of abuse and gain competency in treating this population by familiarizing themselves with the spiritual language and beliefs related to spiritual identity. Clinicians should also be aware that faith in itself can represent a strong protective factor however, if spiritual abuse has occurred,

this should be navigated carefully (DeGroat, 2020; Johnson & Van Vonderen, 1991; Mullen, 2020). Future research should continue to explore domestic violence in the Christian faith population, as well as other religious groups. Researchers should aim to define spiritual abuse and explore the subcategories of organizational and MSA. SIM should also continue to be explored in this population.

According to Mullen (2020), having the language and gaining an understanding of how systems contribute to the perpetuation of abuse is imperative to inhibiting abuse. As such, leaders of Christian organizations and academic institutions training future ministry leaders must be willing to explore the realities of the lived experiences in their institutions, honestly evaluate their systems, disseminate critical findings, and teach leaders how to recognize and address spiritual abuse and the factors that perpetuate it.

Domestic violence is a challenging societal problem to address (Nason-Clark et al., 2018). Based on the findings in this study that build on the emerging research on abuse within the Christian faith, there may be additional challenges specific to this population that make it even more difficult to address. As such, aspects beyond the typical foci of research on abuse should be explored including how spirituality intersects with victims' spiritual identities and perpetrators' strategies, and the mechanisms needed within systems to begin to identify and mitigate abuse with their memberships (Guerin & Ortlan, 2017). Given the qualitative findings and anecdotal accounts of the unique harm engendered by spiritual abuse, researchers should aim to explore the factors that contribute to spiritual abuse in organizations and interpersonal relationships with the goals of defining it as a construct and developing measures to accurately assess it to better address it.

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Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire

1. Please tell us your age
    - Under 18
    - 18-24 years old
    - 25-34 years old
    - 35-44 years old
    - 45-54 years old
    - 55-64 years old
    - 65-74 years old
    - 75-84 years old
    - 85 +
2. Please specify your ethnicity
    - American Indian or Alaska Native
    - Asian
    - Black or African American
    - Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
    - Middle Eastern or North African
    - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    - White/Caucasian
    - Mixed or bi-racial
    - Prefer not to say
3. Do you or did you ever consider yourself Christian?
    - Yes, I currently consider myself Christian
    - Yes, I formerly considered myself Christian
4. What denomination do/did you most identify with as a Christian?
    - Non-denominational
    - Assemblies of God
    - Adventist
    - Baptist
    - Catholic
    - Episcopal/Anglican
    - Four Square
    - Lutheran
    - Methodist
    - Orthodox
    - Pentecostal
    - Presbyterian
    - Unsure
    - Prefer not to say
    - Other
5. Please specify the relationship status that best describes you
    - Married

- Separated
- Divorced
- Widowed
- Remarried, previously divorced
- Remarried, previously widowed

6. Please choose your education level
    - Some high school, no degree
    - High school graduate or equivalent (ie: GED)
    - Some college, no degree
    - Associates Degree (AA, AS)
    - Bachelor's Degree (BA, BS)
    - Master's Degree (MA, MS, Med)
    - Doctoral Degree (PhD, PsyD, EdD)
    - Professional Degree (MD, DDS, DVM)
7. What is household income?
    - Less than $20,000
    - $20,000 to $34,999
    - $35,000 to $49,999
    - $50,000 to $74,999
    - $75,000 to $99,999
    - $100,000 to $149,999
    - $150,000 to $249,999
    - Over $ 250,000
8. Please tell us which part of the United States you live in:
    - Northeast
    - Southeast
    - Midwest
    - Southwest
    - West
    - Prefer not to say

Appendix B

Factors Influencing Decision to Leave Christianity

If you no longer identify as Christian, please rate the following items on a scale of 0-3.

0 = Not at all
1 = Very little
2 = Somewhat
3 = Very much

1. How much did your experiences in Christian organizations contribute to you no longer identifying as Christian? 0 1 2 3
2. How much did your experiences of psychological abuse in your marriage contribute to you no longer identifying as Christian? 0 1 2 3

Appendix C

The Faith Maturity Scale

Directions: These questions relate to your faith. Mark one answer for each. Be as honest as possible, describing how true it really is and not how true you would like it to be. Choose from these responses:

1 = Never true
2 = Rarely true
3 = True once in a while
4 = Sometimes true
5 = Often true
6 = Almost always true
7 = Always true

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. I help others with their religious and struggles	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
2. I seek out opportunities to help me grow spiritually	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
3. I feel a deep sense of responsibility for reducing pain and suffering in the world	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
4. I give significant portions of time and money to help other people	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
5. I feel God's presence in my relationships with other people	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
6. I care a great deal about reducing poverty in the United States and throughout the world	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
7. I try to apply my faith to political and social issues	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
8. My life is committed to the God of my understanding	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
9. I talk with other people about my faith	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
10. I have a real sense that God is guiding me	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
11. I am spiritually moved by the beauty of God's creation	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o

Appendix D

Spiritual Impression Management Scale

Directions: Please respond to each statement below by writing the number that best represents your experience in the box to the right of the statement.

It is best to answer according to what really reflects your experience rather than what you think your experience should be. Give the answer that comes to mind first. Don't spend too much time thinking about an item. Give the best possible response to each statement even if it does not provide all the information you would like.

1 = not at all true
2 = slightly true
3 = moderately true
4 = substantially true
5 = very true

	1 2 3 4 5
1. I am always in a worshipful mood when I go to church	o o o o o
2. I always seek God's guidance for every decision I make	o o o o o
3. I am always as kind at home as I am at church	o o o o o
4. I pray for all my friends and relatives every day	o o o o o
5. I am always in the mood to pray.	o o o o o

Appendix E

The Spiritual Harm and Abuse Scale

Instructions: Below you will find a series of statements about experiences you may have had throughout your life in Christian churches or groups. Please indicate the extent to which you experienced each across your lifelong church/group experience:
1 = Never, 2 = Once or twice, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = All the time.

1.	Being shunned or ignored by my pastor or group	1 2 3 4 5
2.	Being pressured to forgive an abuser while the abuse was ongoing	1 2 3 4 5
3.	Seeing the leadership or group protecting or elevating abusive individuals	1 2 3 4 5
4.	Being blamed for harm that I suffered, rather than blaming those who harmed me	1 2 3 4 5
		1 2 3 4 5
5.	My church community abandoning me in a difficult time	1 2 3 4 5
6.	Vivid descriptions of Hell, Satan, Demons, or the end of the world being taught to young children that are developmentally inappropriate and/or anxiety-provoking	1 2 3 4 5
		1 2 3 4 5
7.	Seeing Scripture used to justify physical violence	1 2 3 4 5
8.	Terror or horror being used to motivate religious decisions	1 2 3 4 5
9.	Seeing Scripture used to justify abusive parent-child behavior	
10.	Being expected to consult my pastor/leader before making non-religious decisions	1 2 3 4 5
		1 2 3 4 5
11.	Behavior being excessively monitored by my pastor or group members	
12.	My pastor/leader explicitly claiming to speak on God's behalf	1 2 3 4 5
13.	Being asked to give up personal, vocational, and/or educational goals by a pastor or group leader	1 2 3 4 5
14.	Experiencing extreme pressure to take on a role of pastor, missionary, or other spiritual leader	1 2 3 4 5
15.	Being denied opportunities to serve because of my gender	
16.	Being treated as "less than" because of my gender	

The following are internal states that you may have experienced as a result of negative
religious experiences. Please indicate the extent to which you experienced each as a result of negative religious experiences throughout your life:
1 = Never, 2 = Once or twice, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = All the time.

17.	Feeling isolated	1 2 3 4 5
18.	A lack of self-worth	1 2 3 4 5
19.	Sadness over the loss of my faith/religious community	1 2 3 4 5
20.	Self-hatred or self-loathing	1 2 3 4 5
21.	Having trouble navigating life outside my religious community	1 2 3 4 5
22.	A lack of spiritual direction or purpose	1 2 3 4 5
23.	Anger upon reflecting on negative religious experiences	1 2 3 4 5
24.	Personally avoiding religious activities or settings to reduce distressing feelings	1 2 3 4 5
25.	Feeling betrayed by God	1 2 3 4 5
26.	Feeling as if God harmed me directly	1 2 3 4 5
27.	Distrust of God	1 2 3 4 5

Appendix F

The Subtle and Overt Psychological Abuse Scale

Directions: Most of these things happen in all relationships. These are things your partner may do in a loving, joking or serious way. Choose a number from the scale below to show how often he does each thing.

0 = never
1 = once
2 = only a couple of times
3 = every few months
4 = about every other month
5 = about once a month
6 = about twice a month
7 = about every week
8 = a few times a week
9 = almost daily

HOW OFTEN DOES YOUR PARTNER...

1. Play games with your head	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
2. Act like he knows what you did when he wasn't around	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
3. Blame you for him being angry or upset	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
4. Change his mind but not tell you until it's too late	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
5. Discourage you from having interests that he isn't a part of	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
6. Do or say something that harms your self-respect or your pride in yourself	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
7. Encourage you to do something then somehow make it difficult to do so	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
8. Belittle, find fault, or put down something you were pleased with or felt good about	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
9. Get more upset than you are when you tell him how you feel	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
10. Make you feel bad when you did something he didn't want you to do	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
11. Make you feel like nothing you say will have an effect on him	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
12. Make you choose between something he wants and something you want or need	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
13. Say or do something that makes you feel unloved or unlovable	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
14. Make you worry about whether you could take care of yourself	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
Make you feel guilty about something you have done or have not done	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

IN A LOVING, JOKING OR SERIOUS WAY, HOW OFTEN DOES HE...

15. Use things you've said against you, like if you say you made a mistake, how often does he use that against you later	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
16. Make you worry about your emotional health and well-being	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
17. Make you feel like you have to fix something he did that turned out badly	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
18. Put himself first, not seeming to care what you want	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
19. Get you to question yourself, making you feel insecure or less confident	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
20. Remind you of times he was right and you were wrong	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
21. Say his actions, which hurt you, are good for you or will make you a better person	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
22. Say something that makes you worry about whether you're going crazy	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
23. Act like he owns you	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
24. Somehow make you feel worried or scared even if you're not sure why	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
25. Somehow make it difficult for you to go somewhere or talk to someone	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
26. Somehow keep you from having time for yourself	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
27. Act like you over-react or get too upset	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
28. Get upset when you did something he didn't know about	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
29. Tell you the problems in your relationship are your fault	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
30. Interrupt or sidetrack you when you're doing something important	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
31. Blame you for his problems	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
32. Try to keep you from showing what you feel	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
33. Try to keep you from doing something you want to do or have to do	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
34. Try to convince you something was like he said when you know that isn't true	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Appendix G

MSA Items

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

(added at the end of SOPAS – Appendix F)

36. Use scripture to get you to do things you don't want to do
37. He criticize your "walk with God"

Appendix H

Invitations to Participate

Dear _____,

My name is Heather Natterstad and I am a doctoral student in the Counseling Psychology program at Northwest University conducting a research study on women's experiences in Christian organizations and marriages that may have been difficult and/or hurtful. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the systemic and personal factors that may encourage and/or maintain unhealthy relational patterns including psychological and spiritual abuse. I would like to request your help in recruiting women who currently or formerly identified as Christian, 18 years or older, and who have been or are married.

Would you consider forwarding this invitation to participate and survey link to the women in your church/organization? The online survey takes 15 minutes to complete and all responses are completely anonymous.

(Link)

I am happy to review all aspects of participation with you and answer any questions you may have to assist you in making your decision. If you would like to speak with me, please e-mail at [redacted]

Thank you very much for your time and consideration!

Heather

Heather Natterstad
Doctoral Student | Northwest University
College of Social & Behavioral Sciences
Project R.E.A.D.Y. Lab Manager
[redacted]

Northwest UNIVERSITY

Dear _____,

My name is Heather Natterstad and I am a doctoral student in the Counseling Psychology program at Northwest University conducting a research study on women's experiences in Christian organizations and marriages that may have been difficult and/or hurtful. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the systemic and personal factors that may encourage and/or maintain unhealthy relational patterns including psychological and spiritual abuse. I would like to request your help in recruiting women who currently or formerly identified as Christian, 18 years or older, and who have been or are married. Would you be willing to post a brief description of the research study and link on your website and/or social media accounts? The online survey takes 15 minutes to complete and all responses are completely anonymous.

I am happy to review all aspects of participation with you and answer any questions you may have to assist you in making your decision. If you would like to speak with me, please e-mail at [redacted]

Should you be willing to help, here is the link and brief description for social media:

> You are invited to participate in a research study on Women's experiences in Christian organizations and/or marriage. The purpose of the research is to better understand some of the challenging experiences in various Christian settings that women face. All responses are anonymous. Click the link below to participate (link)

Thank you very much for your time and consideration!

Heather

Heather Natterstad
Doctoral Student | Northwest University
College of Social & Behavioral Sciences
Project R.E.A.D.Y. Lab Manager
[redacted]

Northwest UNIVERSITY

Appendix I

Invitations to Participate: Social Media Post

You are invited to participate in a research study on Women's experiences in Christian organizations and/or marriage. The purpose of the research is to better understand some of the challenging experiences in various Christian settings that women face. All responses are anonymous. Click the link below to participate (link)

Appendix J

Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study about women's experiences in the Christian faith community and marriage. The study is being conducted by Heather Natterstad, as partial fulfillment for her doctoral dissertation in counseling psychology at Northwest University. The aim of this study is to better understand the relationship between experiences of institutional abuse and negative experiences in marriages. Before taking part in this study, please read this consent form in its entirety.

This study involves an online questionnaire designed to help us learn about what Christian or formerly Christian women 18 and older may have experienced in their faith communities and in their marriages. The survey typically takes 15-20 minutes and is strictly anonymous. This study has been approved by the Northwest University Institutional Review Board and involves no deception. Although no identifiable information will be collected, precautions will be taken to protect survey responses. All exported information will be password-protected and stored using advanced secure data storage technology.

Participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate at any time for any reason. There will be no negative consequences for you if you refuse to participate. You may refuse to answer any questions asked. The benefit of participating in this study is the opportunity to contribute to this understudied area of research that specifically looks at what women experience in churches and/or Christian organizations, and their marriages.

There are minimal risks associated with participation. Some individuals may be uncomfortable answering personal questions and/or may experience additional anxiety or discomfort when responding to items about potentially difficult past or present interactions in their faith communities and/or their marriages. If you feel distressed, know you are free to opt-out at any time. The purpose of our research is to better understand Christian women because we value them so your well-being is important to us.

If you choose to participate, we invite you to print out the resources below. If you feel distraught please review this list and reach out for support. The list will also be provided at the end of this questionnaire. Since this survey deals with potentially triggering questions, we suggest taking this survey in a safe and comfortable environment. The survey will begin with a series of questions about your background such as age, marital status, and denomination. If you identify as currently Christian, the survey will begin by asking questions related to your faith. If you do not currently identify as Christian, this portion will be skipped. Both groups will be asked questions regarding experiences in churches and/or Christian groups, and then about those in marriages. The survey will conclude by providing a list of resources for support.

If you consent to participate, click on the "I agree" button to start the survey. By submitting this survey, you are giving your permission for me to use your responses to learn more about what Christian women experience in marriage. What I learn will be used for a final assignment, a presentation at a research symposium in summer or fall of 2020, and potentially a scientific

journal. Please note only a summary of the information collected will be shown, presented, and/or published.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may contact me at [redacted]. You may also contact the Chair of the Northwest University IRB, [redacted]

Resources

If, at any time, you feel distressed, please take care of yourself and if needed reach out for support. I am also available to help you find a counselor if needed.

- Volunteers of America Crisis Line at 1-800-584-3578.
- The National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233 (SAFE)
  24/7 Online Chat Support https://www.thehotline.org
- FOCUS Ministries: Faith-Based Domestic Violence Help
- American Psychological Association Psychologist Locator http://locator.apa.org/
- National Register of Health Service Psychologists http://www.findapsychologist.org/
- Psychology Today Find a Therapist http://therapists.psychologytoday.com/rms/
- American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
  http://www.therapistlocator.net/iMIS15/therapistlocator/
- National Board for Certified Counselors http://www.nbcc.org/CounselorFind

Thank you for considering this opportunity.

Heather Natterstad
Doctoral Student in Counseling Psychology
College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
[redacted]

Nikki Johnson, PsyD
Chair, Associate Professor
College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
[redacted]

Please print a copy of this consent form for future reference

If you are 18 years of age or older, understand the statements above, and freely consent to participate in the study, click on the "I Agree" button to begin the survey.

I agree | I do not agree

Appendix K

End of Survey Resources

You have completed the survey. Thank you for taking the time to contribute to this research.

We recognize this is not an easy topic and encourage you to take special care of yourself. Should you feel distressed and in need of support please consider using the list of resources below. You may also contact me at heather.natterstad15@northwestu.edu or (503) 475-4746.

Resources

- Volunteers of America Crisis Line at 1-800-584-3578.
- The National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233 (SAFE)
  24/7 Online Chat Support https://www.thehotline.org
- FOCUS Ministries: Faith-Based Domestic Violence Help
- American Psychological Association Psychologist Locator http://locator.apa.org/
- National Register of Health Service Psychologists http://www.findapsychologist.org/
- Psychology Today Find a Therapist http://therapists.psychologytoday.com/rms/
- American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
  http://www.therapistlocator.net/iMIS15/therapistlocator/
- National Board for Certified Counselors http://www.nbcc.org/CounselorFind

Appendix L

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables by Demographic Category

Demographic variables	ISA				MPA				MSA			
	CC		FC		CC		FC		CC		FC	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Relationship status												
Married	65	21.5	87.5	20.1	59.5	68.9	45.6	49.2	1.6	3	0.7	1.9
Separated	72.6	21.4	99.5	8.2	219	57.8	220.2	98.9	8.8	5.8	9.1	7.8
Divorced	76	19.9	93.1	18.8	231	71.7	236.3	78.9	8.9	6.2	9.7	6.5
Widowed	59.4	21.6	91	-	101.8	111.6	185	-	3.5	6.7	5	-
Divorced and remarried	71.6	20.9	88.2	19	79.9	96	41	52.7	2.9	5.1	0.3	1
Widowed and remarried	34	5.6	34	5.7	5	7	5	7	-	-	-	-
Age												
18–24 years old	63.6	24.9	101.5	2.1	24.2	32	211	105.5	0.3	1.3	2	2.8
25–34 years old	67.3	22.3	92.4	20	61.3	77.9	59	77.1	1.6	3.6	1.7	4
35–44 years old	68.7	21.9	90.4	17.2	94.7	97.6	110.2	106.9	3	5.1	3.3	6
45–54 years old	67.9	21	84.3	19.7	127.3	105.5	106.1	111.9	4.2	5.3	3.5	6
55–64 years old	66.7	20.9	72	30	132.5	101.2	150	136.6	4.9	6.2	6	7.2
65–74 years old	61.7	18.7	65	20	91.5	97.2	129	124.3	2.4	4.7	3.7	6.3
75–84 years old	60.2	16.8	-	-	40.2	57.5	-	-	1.2	1.5	-	-
> 85 years old	52	-	-	-	64	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ethnicity												
Hispanic/Latino	66	24.8	100.3	12.4	116	104.5	146.3	131.6	4.2	5.9	8.1	9
White	67.9	21.6	89.5	19	97.1	98.6	88.8	98.2	3.1	5.1	2.6	5
Black/African American	61.5	18	91.5	23.2	113.5	102.5	118.5	167.6	4.2	5.8	5	7

Demographic variables	ISA				MPA				MSA			
	CC		FC		CC		FC		CC		FC	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Asian	66.8	19.3	88.3	39.3	90.4	95.7	131.7	158.8	2.5	4.7	9.3	9
American Indian/Pacific Islander	65.8	20.5	102.2	15.7	90.1	96.7	62.8	83.9	2.3	4.5	2.8	7
Other	70.7	24.5	114	-	54.7	77.6	227	-	0.4	0.8	17	-
Education level												
High school, no degree	78.4	27.2	102	2.8	118.4	104	12	11.3	3.9	5.5	-	-
High school grad/ GED	70.4	24.5	106.6	10.1	111.8	112.2	112.9	118.7	4.5	6.7	5.3	8.4
Some college, no degree	67.3	22.3	92.4	20	61.3	78	59	77.1	1.6	3.6	1.7	4
Associate's degree	69.6	23	94.5	12.1	99.3	96.6	99.6	97.7	3.2	4.8	3.5	5/6
Bachelor's degree	66.3	21.7	83.2	19.3	95.5	97.2	92.5	97.8	2.9	4.8	2.4	4.6
Master's degree	67	20	89/4	20.6	90.7	96.2	96.7	102	2.6	4.6	2.6	5.4
Doctoral degree	70.3	22.8	89.3	23	85.9	102.7	172.8	146.8	3.2	5.5	8	8.8
Professional degree	60	18	107.3	11.5	103.6	94.8	21	20	3	5	3.3	5.8
Household income												
Less than $20,000	76	24	96.3	21	204.2	98.7	152.8	151.9	8.7	6.6	6	8.3
$20,000–$34,999	72	22.5	100.5	13.4	163	113.5	136.1	108.9	6.7	6.8	5.2	6.9
$35,000–$49,999	69.7	20	96	18.8	113	104.6	136.4	115.7	3.9	5.6	4.9	6.5
$50,000–$74,999	68.5	21.9	93.6	13.4	100.3	99	103	105.4	3.3	5.2	3.5	5.9
$75,000–$99,999	67.8	21	92.2	17.5	77.3	83.3	87.9	94.5	2.2	4.1	2.7	5
$100,000–$149,999	66.2	21.7	80	19.4	79	89.5	45.5	54.8	2.7	4.2	0.4	1.5
$150,000–$249,999	64.8	21.9	81.4	24.1	90.8	86.2	66.7	58.6	1.9	3.4	0.4	1.2
Over $250,000	65.3	21	78.9	22.2	83.2	91.7	6.6	5.4	2.1	4	0.3	0.8
Location												
Northeast	68.9	21.8	91	19.8	95.3	96.1	97.7	105.7	3.2	5.3	3.3	6.6

Demographic variables	ISA				MPA				MSA			
	CC		FC		CC		FC		CC		FC	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Southeast	70.4	21.5	83.5	19	110	103	79.1	89.5	3.5	5.3	1.9	4.8
Midwest	65.6	21.5	91.6	18.6	89.6	97.2	84.2	91.3	2.9	4.8	2.9	4.9
Southwest	67.5	21	98.2	17.8	107.3	103	89	106.4	3.4	5.2	3.6	6.2
West	67.5	21	89.3	17.8	90	92.9	101.3	110.5	2.6	4.8	2.7	4.9
Denominations												
Nondenominational	68.3	21	82.9	22	100.6	98.2	92	100.8	3.2	5	2.8	5.2
Adventist	67.7	18.8	100.2	10.1	116.1	99.5	167	152.2	4.7	6.1	8	9.4
Anglican/Episcopal	68.8	24	103.6	12.9	57.9	70	187.6	78.1	1.4	3.5	6.6	7.6
Baptist	67.8	23	94.7	14	109.6	101	79.3	81.7	3.8	5.3	2.4	4.9
Brethren	76.5	14.8	69	-	101.5	88.6	12	-	2.9	5.4	-	-
Catholic	60.6	20.3	91	12.3	132.2	115	106	97.9	3.9	5.4	3	5.6
Charismatic/Pentecostal	71.9	22.1	100.7	11.7	101.4	103.5	101.4	95.8	3.8	5.8	3	6.4
Congregational	57.2	12.8	-	-	82.6	117	-	-	1.6	3.6	-	-
Christian Missionary Alliance	65.1	21.1	-	-	83.9	96.6	-	-	3.1	5.5	-	-
Lutheran	57.6	22	-	-	83.7	100.6	-	-	1.8	3.7	-	-
Methodist	60.6	21	83	-	62.9	78	47	-	1.2	3	-	-
Orthodox	63.4	22.9	-	-	90.8	115.7	-	-	1.6	1.5	-	-
Presbyterian/Reformed	55.2	20.7	84.4	20	87.9	100.8	102.4	126	2.8	5.3	3.4	5.8
Other (nonspecified)	63.7	25.2	103.3	9.4	86.7	91.3	36.8	35	2.5	4.5	0.8	1.6
Other (specified)	69.3	22.4	88.6	19.3	93.6	97.6	88.5	108.6	2.7	4.8	2.9	5.5

Note. CC = currently Christian participants; FC = formerly Christian participants; *M* = mean; SD = standard deviation; cells with '-' = no participants in the subgroup endorsed this category.