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## Stories of Pastors' Wives, their Responsibilities, and their Mental Health

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Health

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Marsha P. Wilson

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2025

Abstract

Stories of Pastors' Wives, their Responsibilities, and their Mental Health

by

Marsha P. Wilson

MACP, Trinity International University, 2015

BS, University of Phoenix, 2004

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

February 2025

## Abstract

Church ministry has many written and unwritten rules, responsibilities, and expectations for those who choose to serve in pastoral roles. Some responsibilities and expectations cause church pastors to experience stress and burnout, which has residual effects on their wives and families. Many church leaders or congregations are not aware of or consider the emotional impact of unwritten rules and expectations on the pastors' wives. The purpose of this narrative research was to explore the stories of Protestant church pastors' wives and highlight how their various supportive roles in marriage and ministry impacts their emotional and mental health. With a feminist theory lens, considering gender-role expectations and related stressors, seven participants were recruited, meeting the inclusion criteria of being cisgender female, aged 18 or older, and currently or previously in a heterosexual marriage to a male Protestant church pastor. Results from narrative coding identified five common themes: identity development as a pastor's wife, concern for husband's emotional well-being, financial responsibility, feeling overwhelmed, and spiritual responsibility/call to ministry. Pastors' wives freely shared stories about their emotional distress and personal victories within ministry and marriage. The outcomes of the study will help counseling professionals take a more informed approach in providing emotional support, education, and advocacy for pastors' wives. Counselor educators and supervisors can be better equipped to meet the needs and concerns of this population and employ stress-relieving coping skills and strategies to support pastors' wives in their various roles.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this research, first and foremost to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ in whom I placed my faith at an early age. My faith led to the opportunity to personally experience the joys and triumphs as well as the hurt and betrayal of church ministry.

I would also like to dedicate this research to my family and friends who supported and encouraged me to finish, especially in moments when I did not want to. I am thankful for their patience, and I fully acknowledge their sacrifices during this journey with me.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Pastors' wives are a unique population who often feel called into a supportive role as wives or first ladies of their husband's church. The responsibilities of a church pastor often extend beyond delivering a sermon from the pulpit. They take on responsibilities and stressors that have been comparable to first responders in caring for their congregations (Boadi & Starr, 2023; Hill et al., 2003). Pastors' wives, in their commitment to support their husbands in ministry, often encounter challenging social role expectations that are not always discussed or publicly recognized. In addition to providing emotional support for their husbands, research indicates that pastors' wives are often expected to attend weekly church events, conform to certain standards of appearance, and essentially remain seen and not heard while setting an example for other women in the ministry (Drumm et al., 2017). Some pastors' wives are so busy with ministry and church-related responsibilities that they unintentionally neglect their children's needs because they are too tired (Jones & Plisco, 2021).

Although pastors' wives share much of the stress burden of their husband's ministry, they do not have the equivalent amount of emotional support or attention to sustain these stressors (Drumm et al., 2017) and suffer in silence (Jones & Plisco, 2021; Potts, 2021). This study explored pastors' wives' social and emotional needs and how traditional role expectations and criticisms have impacted their mental health. With the results, counselors can be more informed and active in providing emotional support, education, advocacy, and attention to the need for mental health resources. Within the literature, there is a lack of supportive resources for mental and emotional health

available for pastors' wives, and counselor educators may not be aware or equipped to train counselors to meet the unique needs of this population. This research has helped uncover some of the needs and concerns of pastors' wives and the stress-relieving coping skills that could be developed to meet those needs and support them with managing the emotional impact of their roles in ministry and marriage.

### **Background**

Pastors' wives have various roles in church as wives and mothers, and they face expectations and scrutiny with little to no social or emotional support (Chan & Wong, 2018). However, pastors' wives often remain silent about their struggles to avoid adding stress to their husband's responsibilities, which can affect their mental health (Potts, 2021). Some have worked outside of the home or sacrificed their own needs to address limited finances, and their stress from loneliness is difficult to share due to social expectations and assumptions. Future study is needed on role strain for the spouses of ministry leaders to enhance knowledge and understanding of ways to support ministry families (Jones & Plisco, 2021). Lack of role identity for pastors' wives results in increased stress, burnout, and decreased satisfaction in daily life experiences (Drumm et al., 2017). Women in ministry have a passion for providing emotional support to serve women in their church ministry but with questionable efforts to ensure the supports were in place for themselves (Shaw et al., 2020). There is a need to explore how pastors' stress and compassion fatigue are transmitted to their wives and vicariously impact their mental and spiritual well-being (Luedtke & Sneed, 2018).

This study was specific to the traditional heteronormative context of church

ministry roles within Protestant norms where the roles of church pastors or senior leaders are typically occupied by men. This is not to suggest that these same stress-related occurrences are not experienced within marriages to female pastors or even within same-sex ministry marriages. This study was needed to highlight how the social and emotional needs of pastors' wives are often overlooked in the context of their husband's role in ministry. The roles that ministry wives take on in support of their husbands are often wrought with scrutiny, unrealistic expectations, isolation, and stress. This study will bring awareness to these emotional challenges and promote supportive resources to help pastors' wives continue to strive with less stress.

### **Problem Statement**

Church pastorship has been described as a role that experiences expectations and burnout at levels comparable to emergency service responders and crisis or mental health providers (Dunbar et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2003; Kansiewicz et al., 2022). Studies have suggested that approximately 65% of pastors are either suffering from burnout or on the verge of burnout (Dunbar et al., 2020). These high incidents of burnout or compassion fatigue have been reported to vicariously affect their wives who share the stress experiences of their husbands' ministry and are themselves often stressed and scrutinized closely by congregants and subjected to the unrealistic traditional expectations within their role (Adams et al. 2017; Boadi & Starr, 2023; Hill et al., 2003).

The high levels of burnout for pastors have been thoroughly researched; however, the unique stress experiences of their wives have been largely understudied or attended to (Luedtke & Sneed, 2018). Although pastors' wives share much of the stressors within

their husband's ministry, they do not often have equivalent access or attention to the emotional support to healthily sustain these stressors. Pastors' wives are often considered an added benefit to the church that has hired her husband; a two-for-one deal, with high expectations laid out for her in that important role (Murphy-Geiss, 2011). Though support for pastors related to burnout, stress, and compassion fatigue have been explored, there is little information on the support available to pastors' wives related to their encounters with emotional strain in their roles. Instead, research indicated that pastors' wives tend to suffer silently and with uncertainty about whom they should trust with their pain (Potts, 2021). This gap presented a problem, in that, without this information, counselor educators and supervisors are likely ill-equipped to train counselors to support pastors' wives and counselors may have difficulty finding resources to do so.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the social, emotional, and mental health needs of pastors' wives, uncovered through their personal stories about their experiences, role expectations, and their identity development as wives supporting their husbands in church ministry.

### **Research Question**

What are the life stories of pastors' wives' emotional health in their identified roles while supporting their husbands in church ministry?

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

Feminist theory was the theoretical framework used for this study. Feminist theory can be a meaningful method to engage people in critical reflection and

engagement in transformational feminism (hooks, 2000). Feminist theory, when focused on integrating thinking and practice, can bring about feminist change in individuals' daily lives (hooks, 2000). Mass media outlets often misrepresent or categorize the work of feminists as controversial and entangled in political movements, sorted with capitalist patriarchy and intentions to transform entire groups or societies. Feminism, when intended to transform, works to integrate feminist thinking across race, gender, class, level of education, or sexuality in ways that are relatable and give voice to people's feelings and ideas that are usually suppressed or kept to themselves (hooks, 2000).

The feminist theory framework was used to identify pastors' wives' thoughts and feelings about their various roles within their marriages, families, and in church ministry. Previous research indicated that conservative Christian ideals have created expectations about mothering, choosing to work outside of the home, and level of involvement in church ministry (May & Reynolds, 2018; Watters et al., 2021). Some social norms dictate an expectation of prosocial behaviors for women. In some church denominations, these prosocial behavior expectations include providing emotional support, sacrificing their own needs to help others, and submissively caring and sharing their time, talent, and treasures (Eagly, 2009; May & Reynolds, 2018; Watters et al., 2021). Taking a feminist theory approach for this study helped to examine how gendered roles and expectations contributed to any discriminatory, oppressive, or marginalized experiences for pastors' wives. The feminist theory approach helped to provide context and understanding of any power inequities and barriers faced when balancing roles and responsibilities related to marriage or ministry (Watters, et al., 2021). This approach encourages healthy



conversations about controversial issues and whether a certain group should “have the right” to choose, speak to, or engage, and create a safe space for creating changes in thoughts and actions (hooks, 2000).

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study was a narrative research approach. Narrative inquiry is a collaborative venture between the researcher and the participants ranging from systemic methods to open-ended explorations of meaning (Saldana, 2016). Narrative inquiry is used to uncover how participants’ stories can be interpreted to illuminate the life and culture that was created (Patton, 2015). A narrative approach helped to illuminate the life and culture of pastors’ wives as they shared their life stories about supporting their husband’s work. Storytelling is seen as a basic form of communication where people recall what has happened, put experiences into a sequence, develop explanations, and manipulate the chain of events that shape individual and social life (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). The pastors’ wives’ stories revealed the nuances and encounters of this unique population and their personal views and perspectives about their experiences in ministry. Exploring the stories of pastors’ wives’ and their perceived roles in supporting their husbands in ministry will allow others to hear and understand how they have balanced their positions in ministry and marriage.

Data for this study includes narrative interviews, a specific method of data collection that supports the belief that human experiences can be expressed in the form of a narrative or story. With this approach, participants’ stories are captured through interviews, transcribed, and analyzed for patterns or themes that might help researchers

learn more about specific individuals, their society, and their culture (Patton, 2015). Face-to-face interviews with pastors' wives was an appropriate method for capturing data through their stories. As the researcher/interviewer, it was important to keep field notes to document personal thoughts and reactions to the information shared which was also used in data analysis. The "elicitation technique," by Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000), with four phases used to activate the participants' story schema and elicit their narrations, was utilized for the study to provide a detailed background and outline.

### **Definitions**

A few key terms were used throughout this study and are defined here.

*Pastor:* Commonly defined as the person in leadership at a local church. The general responsibilities of this leadership role involve preaching and personal ministry to the members of the church congregation. It is not uncommon for churches to have multiple pastors on staff, each with a more narrowly defined set of responsibilities (Theopedia.com, n.d.).

*Protestant:* Defined as an umbrella term for various Christian denominations rooted in the Protestant Reformation movement to separate from the Roman Catholic Church in the early sixteenth century (Anderson, 2023). In general terms, Protestant can be viewed as any Christian denomination that is not Catholic.

### **Assumptions**

One assumption of the study was that the data from the participant's stories would be inductive. As a mental health professional, my desire to help created an assumption that help is needed. There was an assumption that pastors' wives supported their

husbands in their role and that the unrealistic demands or expectations outlined in previous research were a common experience. My role as the researcher was to be objective and engage in the research process without seeking particular findings. There was also an assumption that the participants would be forthcoming, honest, and transparent in their storytelling. However, the data that were collected were not meant to be generalizable to a larger population but instead to provide specific knowledge about each participant's emotional experiences in marriage and in ministry within their role as a pastor's wife.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This research study was an attempt to gain an understanding of pastor's wives' experiences in their various roles, how these experiences have impacted their emotional health, and what resources, if any, would be needed to best support this population. The focus was to increase awareness and understanding to develop strategies to meet the social and emotional needs of pastors' wives. The research participants were limited to a traditional hetero-marriage of cisgender females who are married or were previously married to a male church pastor and that supported him in church ministry. Previous research indicated that in this traditional marriage scenario it is more likely for wives to feel pressured or marginalized in their role (Daniel, 2009; Murphy- Geiss, 2011; Steiner, et al., 2019).

### **Limitations**

In addition to whether participants would be honest and forthcoming with their storytelling, there was the limitation of potential researcher bias in the data collection,

analysis, or reporting. Unintentional biases could have stemmed from my personal experiences in church ministry and could have potentially influenced the interpretation of the interviews. Reflective journaling, peer debriefing, and discussions with my committee chair helped address these limitations and strengthened the dependability of the research.

### **Significance**

The purpose of this narrative study was to bridge the gap in the literature about the mental and emotional support needed for pastors' wives and to help educators and supervisors in their training of counselors to meet the unique needs of pastors' wives. Exploring the stories of church pastors' wives will contribute to social change by bringing attention and awareness to this population whom research indicates are expected to provide unwavering support, forgoing their own needs, and whose thoughts and opinions are often suppressed or discounted (Boadi & Starr, 2023; Murphy-Geiss, 2011). Pastors' wives are generally not encouraged or given the opportunity to speak out, despite the injustices that they encounter, the impositions of church responsibilities on their family, and the unrealistic expectations to be "perfect." Taking the time to ask pastors' wives to share their intimate stories about their experiences while supporting their husbands in church ministry helped to validate their journey and can be an encouragement to other church ministry wives who encounter similar experiences. This research will bring an understanding and awareness of the emotionality and loneliness often experienced by pastors' wives and begin to consider safe spaces for pastors' wives to be heard.

This narrative study provided rich information for the future development of

support for pastors' wives. Counselors can better understand how to meet their emotional needs and encourage or even normalize self-care practices as they maneuver through life in church ministry. Counselors can advocate for self-care opportunities, respect for privacy, and family-strengthening activities that should be emphasized and reinforced in the hiring practices of churches. This information could be shared with church governance members, staff, and congregations, encouraging them to support their pastors' families and alleviate some of the pressures and unrealistic expectations that are put on pastors' wives. As a result of this study, counselor educators can be better equipped to understand the context of pastors' wives who may come to them for services. They will be positioned to understand and describe the stories of pastors' wives, potentially highlighting areas for supportive education and training. Further, Christian mental health providers can help impact change in the lives of pastors' wives who might sacrifice their well-being to support the mission and expectations of their church. It has been suggested in previous research that helping professionals who identify as Christian can be a powerful source of healing by advocating for this group within their denominations, educating church congregations, pastoral leaders, and administrators about the stressors, pressures, and detrimental impact of the expectations placed on pastor's wives (Drumm et al., 2017).

### **Summary**

Exploring the stories of pastors' wives who have supported their husbands in ministry suggested that the level of burnout and stress for pastors' wives was largely understudied compared to studies on these constructs for their husbands. Bridging the gap

in the literature related to the support available to pastors' wives will help mental health counselors and other helping professionals understand and meet the social and emotional needs of pastors' wives.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Recent literature recognized the high stress and burnout levels for pastors and church ministry leaders; some at levels comparable to first responders (Boadi & Starr, 2023; Dunbar et al., 2020; Kansiewicz et al., 2022; Visker et al., 2017). The high incidents of stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue have been reported to vicariously impact pastors' wives who encounter stressors, criticism, scrutiny, and unrealistic expectations by church leaders and congregations (Adams et al., 2017; Boadi & Starr, 2023; Hill et al., 2003; Jones & Plisco, 2021). Unwritten social and gender role expectations for pastors' wives have affected their responsibilities and caused additional emotional and spiritual contrition (Drumm et al., 2017).

Stress experiences have been largely studied and attended to for pastors, while attention to the mental health of pastors' wives has been largely understudied. Pastors' wives have been reported as a population in need of advocacy and support to address their unique needs (Jones & Plisco, 2021; Luedtke & Sneed, 2018). Although pastors' wives share much of the stress burden of their husband's ministry, in addition to their roles and responsibilities at home, little has been reported about intentional mental or emotional support available to address these stressors. The purpose of this narrative study was to learn the stories of women married to male pastors and how role expectations, congregational responsibilities, and ministry assumptions impacted their mental and emotional health. These insights will equip mental health professionals with information to support and advocate for these women. Counselor educators will be more informed and prepared to train and educate counselors to meet the unique needs of this population.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The literature search for this study included peer-reviewed articles found within the Walden Library by keyword search in the EBSCO database, APA PsychInfo, SAGE journals, SocIndex, Taylor and Francis Online, and the ProQuest Religion Database. Keyword searches included *pastor OR minister OR clergy AND wife OR spouse AND role identity AND burnout OR stress OR female roles OR division of labor in the home OR congregation OR mental health services OR ministry careers AND narrative inquiry*. Additional relevant research literature was found in reference lists and reviewed to ensure no critical literature was missed.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts**

#### **The Impact of Pastor Stress and Burnout**

Pastors' wives are often challenged with the realities of secondhand stress and burnout from their husband's commitment to their work. The most common stressors reported have been lack of social support, financial stress, and time and workload stress (Heck et al., 2018). These were attributed to long work hours, and intrusive and demanding expectations from their congregations, and their families. In a study on the level of occupational stress and burnout among pastors, Visker et al., (2017) noted that 65% of the pastors interviewed were feeling symptoms of burnout or on the verge of burnout. The study highlighted how many pastors neglected self-care practices and family time was often sacrificed to attend to church-related issues.

These high incidents of burnout and compassion fatigue have had detrimental effects on pastors' wives and families (Boadi & Starr, 2023). Pastors' role identity



development makes it difficult to recognize personal problems or to ask for help (Pooler, 2011). The stress of church work can lead to some pastors avoiding the tensions at home by “hiding out” in their church work rather than attending to their hurting family members (Daniel, 2009). Pastors may also feel lonely without anyone to talk to about their personal or family concerns or challenges, often out of fear of how they would be perceived (Heck et al, 2018). However, when they do seek support, pastors often rely primarily on family support and delay seeking help until their level of occupational distress reaches crisis level (Kansiewicz et al., 2021). Thus, the clergy’s chronic stress promotes health risks that negatively impacted their relationships with family (Heck et al., 2018).

These issues of stress and burnout for pastors and the negative impact on their families have been a topic of research for more than a decade. While research has highlighted high levels of stress and burnout from the demands of church ministry, there were no specific suggestions to remedy the vicarious impact of these stressors on pastors’ spouses or families or how to tend to their specific needs. Pastors’ wives often feel alone and isolated away from family members and disconnected from their church communities, lacking a sense of belonging anywhere (Hill et al., 2003). The quantity of supportive relationships does not equate to the quality or satisfaction with those relationships (Lee, 2007). Pastor’s wives have few, if any trusted friend relationships (Chan & Wong, 2018; Heck et al., 2018; Potts, 2021). Therefore, looking at ministry without considering the role of the spouse ignores a factor that could influence a pastor’s leadership (Daniel, 2009). Additionally, being married to a pastor changes the way that

the spouse experiences their church community, changes their behaviors, and impacts opportunities to develop relationships; ignoring these needs could fuel the spouse's resentment toward the church (Daniel, 2009). Research has shown a correlation between the participants' emotional and spiritual health being tied to their view of God and their interpersonal relationships, primarily the relationship with their husband, the pastor (McMinn et al., 2008).

Burnout for pastors can also lead to moral failures in their marriages such as infidelity, pornography addiction, and other violations of their pastoral and marital vows. An increasing number of pastors have considered stepping down from their roles in ministry citing marital strife as one of the stressors that led to burnout (Shellnut, 2021). A study on pastors' spouse's experiences with clergy misconduct uncovered reports of the emotional trauma for their spouse and their children. Some of the participants reported struggling with the dilemma of either protecting their children from the misconduct of their spouse or being transparent with them and concerned for their children's perception of their father (Kurtz et al., 2017). Others indicated that their most significant turmoil was watching their children suffer through the family conflict. Jones and Plisco (2021) discussed the various stressors associated with being a pastor's wife and concluded that it is a high-stress role worthy of further exploration, however, less attention has been given to potential remedies or solutions to help pastor's wives cope with their stress (Luedtke & Sneed, 2018).

### **Expectations of Ministry**

Several studies have highlighted unrealistic expectations, scrutiny, and criticism

experienced by pastors' families, and the unwritten pressures for perfection from their congregations (Adams et al. 2016; Boadi & Starr, 2023; Hill et al., 2003; Lee, 2007). Jones and Plisco (2021) identified a "*long-standing, unspoken assumption that the married, hired minister would come to the job with a wife who fulfills many roles*" (p. 1046) however she is not typically compensated or formally recognized for her work in these roles. The authors cited Nesbitt (1995) who spoke on the occupational value of a pastor's spouse expected to willingly accept the traditional role as an unpaid church co-worker. This suggested that this perspective on pastors' wives has become a cultural norm over time with little change evident in at least the last two decades. Hiring a pastor and his wife was seen as a "two-for-one deal" (Murphy & Geiss, 2011). Many wives felt alienated or disconnected in those assumptive roles (Jones & Plisco, 2021).

Pastors' wives indicated a common theme of feeling misunderstood and struggling to find a balance between being all things to all people, enduring the pressure of perfectionism in the roles as wife and mother, and remaining available to be a friend to everyone else (Jones & Plisco, 2021). The authors cited Miller (2016) who described pastors' wives' role as one of "emotional isolation" with the responsibility of sharing her husband's stress burdens with little to no space or support to hold her own. The participants discussed expectations to volunteer in some capacity within the church, regardless of their calling, ability, or talent.

The need to understand the unique roles and responsibilities of the pastor's wife and not speculate but ask about her needs and accept that she is a woman with her own personal challenges and emotional needs was highlighted by Jones and Plisco (2021).

Pastors' wives reported struggling to protect their children from the scrutiny and expectations, noting that their children were held to a higher standard than any other children in the church. The feeling of being restricted from expressing their true feelings openly was also highlighted.

Similar themes surfaced related to unrealistic expectations for pastors' wives regardless of their skill or experience, adding to their level of stress in a study by Boadi and Starr (2023). The participants highlighted expectations on their "time, knowledge, and spirituality" and for them to have unlimited or unrestricted access and insight about "everything" (p. 137). The authors discussed the expectation for pastors' wives to be available and present "at all times," engage a positive attitude and suppress any adverse emotional responses that might indicate they are stressed or angry. Health concerns and consequences that manifested for participants as a result of stress-related expectations and the worry that developed in case of failure to meet those expectations were also discussed.

### **Gender Role Expectations**

Beliefs and attitudes about gender roles within marriage and parenting were explored by Steiner, et al., (2019). The authors discussed the concept of work-to-family conflict (WFC), particularly for working mothers. They assumed that higher levels of WFC would be experienced by working mothers who held more traditional gender-role attitudes within their households. Their study yielded results that indicated that in addition to their participant's gender-role attitudes, other factors such as their husband's gender-role attitude, their workload, and the age of their children also impacted the levels

of WFC for participants. Egalitarian gender-role attitudes versus traditional gender-role attitudes were also defined and explored.

The authors' hypotheses were confirmed that working mothers married to husbands with more traditional gender-role attitudes experienced higher levels of WFC compared to working mothers married to husbands with more egalitarian gender-role attitudes. Their outcomes lend to this study in suggesting that pastors' wives whose husbands hold more traditional gender-role attitudes might be more likely to experience higher levels of WFC. The study also provided an example of conflict for dual-income parents and the division of parenting responsibilities in the case of a sick child at home, as an example. The couple's individual and collective gender-role attitudes impacted perceptions of whose work-role took priority and how daily routines would be reorganized and renegotiated to accommodate their role of parenting the sick child.

Implied social and gender role expectations could cause pastors' wives to resent the church and their responsibilities which can lead to emotional and spiritual shame (Drumm et al., 2017). These expectations included providing emotional support for her husband and congregation members, attending all scheduled church services and events, meeting, or exceeding the expected standards of appearance, being present but not engaged, and setting an example for the other women in the church. The pastor's wives' experiences in church ministry have been viewed as a system with a spectrum ranging from accepting role responsibilities regardless of how unreasonable, to being informed upfront about the potential for heightened stressors. A premise to agree to the systemic role expectations has been generally established while suggestions for addressing or

eliminating the stressors have not been indicated (Drumm et al., 2017). The expectation to attend to prosocial behaviors within the church and the pressure to perform could be linked to unaddressed mental health outcomes (Watters, et al., 2021). The loneliness and emotionality of pastors' wives as they maneuvered through the various roles and expectations put on them with little to no social support have also been highlighted (Hill et. al., 2003; Potts, 2021).

Watters et al., (2021) explored the contradictory roles that women held within the church, at home, and in their work settings. The results of their study highlighted the challenges associated with balancing their multiple roles and the contradictions within the values, beliefs, and role expectations. The authors quoted Bartkowski and Hempel (2009) who noted that the role of a submissive caregiver was the accepted role for women in many church denominations.

Traditional role expectations of the minister's wife can also be explored and considered from the perspectives of the minister's husband and the blatant irony of him receiving special attention for his participation and given fewer expectations in ministry, if any (Daniel, 2009). Ministry marriages are always in the public spotlight and while the pastor, whether male or female, might be used to the public attention, their spouses must develop strategies to maneuver in and out of that public space, careful to avoid scrutiny or present any behaviors that might bring shame or negative attention to their spouse or family (Daniel, 2009).

### **Financial Stressors**

Financial stress was highlighted as one of the most reported stressors for pastoral

families (Chan & Wong, 2018; Heck et al., 2018; Jones & Plisco, 2021). Pastors' salaries were cited as being low and insufficient for maintaining a decent life compared to the cost of living. Some pastors' wives disclosed that they had to depend on family support and a supply of provisions from other sources to help cope with their financial stress burdens (Chan & Wong, 2018). Heck et al. (2018) discussed the variation of compensation for pastors which often depended on the denomination and the size of the congregation. The authors cited only 60% of pastors in medium-sized congregations received health insurance or retirement benefits (p. 116) and some denominations paid the same salary to their pastoral staff regardless of the size of their congregation, with little consideration for cost-of-living expenses. In the cases where family income was limited, some pastors' wives decided to work outside of the home, a decision that brought its own set of controversies and scrutiny.

The nuances of conservative Protestantism views for wives working outside of the home and the economic impact on families were explored by Reynolds and May (2014). The authors discussed how the decision to work left pastors' wives subject to admonition by the church for not putting their families first, especially when they had young children at home. For some, the option to not work outside of the home was not feasible or realistic. Depending on the size of their church congregation, pastoral families might live on low incomes without the benefit of Social Security or retirement benefits. If they live as residents in the church's parsonage, those pastors' families do not have the benefit of building property equity or wealth (Luedtke & Sneed, 2018; McMinn et al., 2008).

The theme of finances was identified as a difficult topic for pastors' wives to

discuss openly (Jones & Plisco, 2021). Being aware that their household income was directly funded by church members' giving, some pastors' wives described a spectrum of emotions in dealing with the stigmas associated with discussing financial struggles and being sensitive to how their spending was portrayed, having to strategically decline invitations to expensive outings, or the sadness associated with wishing they could afford to be a stay-at-home-mom. The assumption that the pastors' wives would join their husbands in ministry as unpaid co-workers caused strain and resentment toward the church (Murphy-Geiss, 2011; Nesbitt, 1995).

### **Feminist View of Division of Labor**

Defining and understanding the nuances of the feminist movement created some confusion for pastors' wives as they navigated their roles in ministry. Watters et al. (2021) conducted a study exploring the contradiction of roles for women in church. Some participant's views on feminism were cautiously supportive of feminist views with a strong desire for equality but careful to not be seen as expressing "radical" viewpoints. The study highlighted the challenge for women to balance multiple role expectations while holding to their Christian values and beliefs.

May and Reynolds (2018) examined the affiliation between religion and work-family conflict for men and women. The authors found that conservative Protestant women who worked outside of the home were met with division of labor expectations that encouraged them to work a "second shift" taking on traditional roles of "keepers of the home" regardless of the number of hours worked outside of the home and despite growing evangelical support for men being encouraged to be role models and active



parents and servants to their wives and families. This tendency to adopt traditional gender roles in the home was reported to increase the tension experienced between their work and family roles (p. 1803).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Numerous studies have documented the high level of stress and burnout for church pastors (Boadi & Starr, 2023; Dunbar et al., 2020; Kansiewicz et al., 2022; Pooler, D. K., 2011; Visker et al., 2017). Many studies also acknowledge the vicarious impact on pastor's wives (Adams et al. 2017; Boadi & Starr, 2023; Hill et al., 2003; Jones & Plisco, 2021) yet this population is still recognized as an understudied group regarding mental and emotional strategies or advocacy to support and improve their overall wellbeing and unique needs (Jones & Plisco, 2021; Luedtke & Sneed, 2018).

The expectations placed on pastors' wives related to their roles and expectations have been explored and have been indicted as an additional source of stress and scrutiny as they navigated through and balanced public attention and private responsibilities (Drumm et al., 2017; Potts, 2021; Steiner et al., 2019; Watters et al., 2021).

Financial stressors and the division of labor in the home from a feminist perspective have been explored and considered to be an unspoken area of concern for pastors' wives (Jones & Plisco, 2021). Choosing to work outside the home, whether out of financial need or personal desire, can bring public attention and scrutiny to something generally regarded as a private family matter and create another source of stress for pastors' wives (Chan & Wong, 2018; Heck et al., 2018; Murphy-Geiss, 201).

This narrative research study explored the stories of pastors' wives' experiences

and expectations in ministry and helped to fill a gap in the literature related to the mental and emotional support needed to address vicarious stress and burnout. Highlighting these stories has provided valuable insight into how pastors' wives interact with and experience their roles and responsibilities and how mental health counselors and supervisors can provide effective support and resources to engage emotionally healthy responses to their various stressors.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the social, emotional, and mental health needs of church pastors' wives, uncovered through their personal stories about their various roles and identities in supporting their husbands in church ministry. This gained understanding will contribute to developing stress-relieving coping skills that can be used to meet the unique needs and concerns of pastors' wives and help them manage any stressors more healthily. Exploring the stories of pastors' wives contributes to social change by bringing attention and awareness to this population whom research indicated are often marginalized and positioned to be voiceless supports (Murphy-Geiss, 2011).

Narrative inquiry was the methodological approach used for this study. The narrative approach is used to examine participants' stories about their lived experiences as the source of the research data. Narrative researchers collect personal narratives about their participants' lives, including their relationships, life choices, journeys, accomplishments, and challenges. Conceptually, the participants' stories offer a view into the sociocultural meanings when understood and then analyzed as narratives (Patton, 2015). Through narrative analysis the researcher gathers the collected stories and interprets them, places them in context, and compares them to other stories (Patton, 2015). As a researcher with a counseling background and a desire to know and understand people, the narrative approach helped address the core questions that Patton (2015) presented regarding narrative inquiry: "How can the participants' narrative [story] be interpreted to understand and illuminate the life and culture that created it?" and

“What does this narrative or story reveal about the person and world from which it came?” (p.209).

### **Research Design and Rationale**

This study addressed the question “What are the life stories of pastors’ wives’ emotional health in their identified roles while supporting their husbands in church ministry?” The phenomenon of interest for this research was the stories of pastors’ wives and their emotional health in their identified roles as they support their husbands in church ministry. This narrative inquiry was used to focus on how pastors’ wives’ perceived roles and traditional feminist roles impacted their emotional and mental health and what resources, if any, can be put in place to help them manage identified stressors. Previous research has indicated that pastors’ wives are not provided with adequate attention or support to help manage the impact of ministry expectations on their emotional health (Boadi & Starr, 2023; Drumm et al., 2017; Luedtke & Sneed, 2018; Murphy-Geiss, 2011). This research explored some of the unique needs and concerns of pastors’ wives and brought attention to the need for resources that could support the emotional impact of their roles in ministry and marriage.

Using a narrative inquiry approach was grounded in the participants’ individual stories about their experiences in their role as a pastor’s wife. A key component of narrative research is exploring the stories of individuals. This was appropriate for this population as it provided a safe space for them to share without judgment or scrutiny. Narrative inquiry honors these stories and records them as a source of knowledge and create new considerations (Patton, 2015). The narrative approach was an appropriate fit

for this research topic as it is rooted in the belief that participants provide the researcher with more comprehensive understanding of the topic through their descriptive stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the researcher, it was important to define any internalized biases and experiences that might have influenced the data collection or analysis processes or negatively impacted the validity and credibility of the research data (Patton, 2015). My background in church ministry provided direct access to church pastors and their wives but also opened me to bias as it related to my perception of unmet needs or hardships of pastors' wives. The criticism and scrutiny of pastors' wives that I witnessed firsthand led to my interest in exploring their stories. This narrative study had to be approached without bias or assumptions, yet being human, it was not a realistic goal (see Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Keeping a reflexive journal and discussing my thoughts through peer debriefing and with my dissertation chair were effective ways to manage some of these biases and present quality and objective data outcomes of the study. Reflexive journaling also helped create transparency in the research process. Critical self-reflection helps researchers consider the ethical implications of the power-knowledge relationship with participants (Ortlipp, 2008).

Storytelling was a less intimidating approach to research for engaging participants who might be more open to telling their story rather than participating in a case study or focus group that might feel more formal or academic. It was this intimate and personal nature of the approach that led me to select narrative inquiry for my research study.

Storytelling also aligns with Protestant faith praxis and the study of Jesus Christ who used stories or parables in his teachings recorded in biblical scriptures. Storytelling was a comfortable and familiar form of communication for the pastors' wives. To reduce any additional risk of bias I met with my committee chair to work through any additional bias. Member checking also provided participants with the opportunity to correct any of my analyses.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The target group of interest was pastor's wives who are or have supported their husbands in church ministry. A convenience sampling strategy was used, drawing from a diverse population of pastor's wives that were easily accessible and known to me or within a network of contacts. When a sampling strategy is purposed for the study, consideration must be made for the resources available, the questions being asked, and any potential constraints (Patton, 2015). The participant selection was based on certain inclusionary criteria. The criteria for inclusion of participants were that they must be a cisgender female, aged 18 or older, currently or previously in a heterosexual marriage to a male church pastor, and the participant's husband is or was a pastor in a Protestant denomination church. Selected participants were provided with informed consent, sent electronically, that indicated their agreement and willingness to participate, and they all agreed to have their interview recorded for transcription.

The proposed number of participants for this research was between six and eight. The sample size was determined by participants meeting the outlined criteria, and a

priority toward reaching the point of saturation. With narrative inquiry, researchers seek more in-depth and descriptive data rather than large sample sizes that may seek more generalizability (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Therefore, the sample size was based on the quality of the interviews over the quantity (Kim, 2016). The number of participants could have been increased if new concepts were introduced to confirm data saturation, when no other significantly different key concepts related to the research were provided (Patton, 2015). The diversity of the sample and sample size can also impact saturation. Data saturation can occur prematurely if the researcher's sampling frame is too narrow (Patton, 2015). All interviews were information-rich cases where the participants met the inclusion criteria and were willing to participate. The participants indicated they felt comfortable sharing their stories freely so that common themes could be uncovered among the individual stories and then linked to levels of analysis across the sample.

Participants were identified and recruited from open and closed social media groups (Instagram and Facebook) related to being a pastor's wife. The additional participants were identified through snowball technique and through networking with church affiliated contacts who were known to me. The identified potential participant pool within an established organization, Church United, a local church leadership group that offers cohort meetings for various subgroups, including pastor's wives, did not provide participants for the study as originally anticipated.

### **Instrumentation**

The researcher is considered the primary instrument in the qualitative research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Kim (2016) reinforced that the role of the narrative

researcher is not to counsel or interrogate the participants, but rather to develop trust and rapport with them to help generate high-quality data. Patton (2015) discussed the central idea of researchers using open-ended questions that encourage the participants to provide responses in their own words and from their perspectives.

Narrative interviews are open-ended, unstructured interviews where the interviewer approaches with a listening ear, holding space for the participant to tell their own story related to the topic, with little to no interruption from the interviewer (Kim, 2016). For this research, I engaged the “Elicitation Technique” outlined by Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) which included four phases to activate the participants’ story schema and elicit their narration. Phase 1, *initiation*, set the foundation for the interview process and introduced the central topic (evaluating their emotional and mental health in their role(s) while supporting their husband, a pastor, in church ministry). Phase 2, *main narration*, allowed the participants to tell their stories without interruption. As the researcher I engaged by taking notes, actively listening, and providing non-verbal prompts to show interest, followed by probes for any additional information. Phase 3, *questioning phase* began after the participants had come to a natural end of their narrative. Using the participants’ verbiage (from handwritten notes) I engaged with related follow-up questions to fill in any gaps in data. Phase 4, *concluding talk* was an unrecorded, relaxed time for small talk following the formality of the interview and was an opportunity to reiterate my appreciation for their participation.

The interviews were conducted over HIPAA-compliant Zoom. It was important for both the participant and me to secure quiet locations, free from distractions and away



from others who may hear or see the interview (Ravitch and Carl, 2021). Using the Elicitation Technique was an appropriate data collection method for approaching this study since narrative inquiry invites participants to share their personal and social stories. Like the counseling room setting, the participants were provided with personalized considerations in a safe and welcoming space and invited to share their stories freely.

An opening statement was included to explain the purpose of the interview, review the procedures to ensure privacy and confidentiality, and allow the participants to ask any questions before beginning the interview. The interview also had a closing statement and review of the study's procedures, the next steps, soliciting permission to follow up, if needed, and explaining what the research findings would be used for. A debriefing statement highlighted crisis resources provided in the informed consent document in case they felt any emotional distress after exiting the interview.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

The procedures for this study were sent to Walden University's Institute Review Board (IRB) for approval. Once approved to begin the data collection process, recruitment efforts were initiated to seek out participants who met the inclusionary criteria. Attempts were made to recruit participants from open and closed social media groups related to being a pastors' wife, and local community church partnerships and organizations known to me. Potential participants were given the option to voluntarily participate by responding to the researcher-developed invitation sent via email (Appendix C). Potential participants were contacted using encrypted email to confirm if they met the inclusion criteria for participating in the study.

Once participants confirmed inclusion criteria, the informed consent form was sent to them via email. The consent forms included an explanation that participants could end the interview early if they became fatigued or distressed and schedule any potential follow-up interviews. Each participant was asked to reply to the receipt of the informed consent with the words, "I consent," indicating their agreement to participate in the study.

The participants were then contacted via telephone or encrypted email to arrange a date and time that was convenient for them to be interviewed. The participants were given the option to meet in person at a private location of their choosing or a video-based interview via HIPAA-compliant Zoom platform. Using a secure Zoom platform was preferred, primarily because of the ability to download and save the audio recording and VTT transcription which was a convenient time-saving feature. The Zoom feature could have been used in a face-to-face interview using the HIPAA-compliant Zoom as the recording device providing a safe, secure, and accessible method of interviewing. A secure Zoom link was sent via email prior to the interview start time to allow for easy access in the participants' email inbox.

The interview guide (Appendix A) was used during the interviews. The interviews were recorded by video and audio using VTT format in Zoom. In narrative research, recordings are critical to ensure the accuracy of the participant's words and are the core feature of narrative inquiry capturing the individual's story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The data transcripts saved in VTT format were downloaded, reviewed, edited, and transferred to Microsoft Word document software.

The interviews were scheduled for up to one hour (60 minutes) with a plan to

allow 2 to 3 hours for transcription review after each interview to capture reflections as soon as possible. The interview process began casually by first thanking the participants again for their willingness to participate and explaining what to expect for the next hour. Preparing the participants for the Elicitation Technique style of narrative interviewing was emphasized by explaining it would not be the typical “television type” interview, but an opportunity for them to share freely and candidly about their experiences of being a pastor’s wife. It was important to reemphasize having a private space to conduct the interview, free from distractions or noise, if possible.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The participants’ stories were captured through interviews, transcribed, and analyzed for patterns and themes (Patton, 2015, p. 209). Their stories will help counselors and counselor educators to learn more about their culture and general social meaning. Saldana (2016) noted that narrative coding is appropriate for exploring intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences to help researchers understand the human condition and what they know through their stories. Narrative coding helped identify structures and themes in reflection of the verbatim interview transcripts.

Saldana (2016) noted that eclectic coding, a combination of first-cycle coding methods, is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies. Kim (2016) noted that qualitative data analysis is the first step for narrative data analysis and involves finding short words and phrases that can be attributed to a portion of the data. The complex process can be reduced to four basic elements of codes, categories, patterns, and themes. This involves paraphrasing passages or paragraphs into summary sentences and then

summarizing those sentences into keywords to generate meaning.

Taking the thematic analysis approach that Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) noted is a stepwise procedure of qualitative text reduction, the first step involved paraphrasing passages or paragraphs into summary sentences. Those sentences were then summarized into keywords to generate meaning. Kim (2016) noted that narrative analysis seeks to develop an understanding of the meaning that participants give about their experiences.

A Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was used to present the identified keywords and statements from the transcript. The columns were labeled by themes or thematic statements that were drawn directly from the transcripts that captured or summarized major ideas (Saldana, 2016). Hand-coding with Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word was used to manage codes and themes to be analyzed for similarities or differences and the kinds of relationships that exist between them such as ideas, concepts, or terms that were repeated, or certain metaphors and analogies, or other issues suggested by the data. The themes were listed in the column next to the transcript and then categorized based on commonalities to reflect possible groupings and relationships (Saldana, 2016). The goal was to reduce the data into more manageable sections and group the sections that cover similar topics. Once that analysis was complete, a review of what the participants said about each topic was conducted to further explore similarities and differences (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2015).

Patton (2015) noted that some researchers find hand coding easier and more productive than computer analysis. Researchers have found that by reading and re-reading the data themselves, they can discover more patterns and categories on their own.

For the more concrete thinkers and processors, they opt out of computer coding, finding that reviewing and manipulating the concrete data by hand, fitting data into multiple themes, and being able to merge their initial impressions with themes that emerged later in the process is more fulfilling.

Coding requires the researcher to use an analytic lens (Saldana, 2016). How the researcher perceives and interprets what is happening in the data depends on what type of filter covers that lens and viewpoint of the phenomenon. Lamar and Forbes (2020) highlighted the importance of awareness of any cultural or ideological biases that might influence their interpretation of the needs of their participants. The authors encouraged researchers to remain vigilant of how they address cognitive dissonance of their research participants.

Atlas.ti and other qualitative data analysis platforms present a healthy argument for using QDA software that could have assisted in organizing and presenting the data analysis, however, the software is unable to think like a human, therefore the preferred method was to employ hand coding, despite the time resource that it required. Patton (2015) stated that “the real analytic work takes place in your head” (p. 775).

Since narrative inquiry is interested in the rich contextualization of the research participants’ stories (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000), fewer participants were needed and larger QDA software was not needed. Hand coding provided the opportunity for active involvement in the analysis process and reporting for this study.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

The strength of qualitative research is often considered in terms of its

trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is critical in narrative research, and Shenton (2004) noted that trustworthiness is improved by ensuring the research procedures satisfy four criteria: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

### **Credibility**

The narrative write-up requires rich descriptive detail and a three-dimensional rendering of the participant's story, with emphasis on how the participant's experiences progress through time (Saldana, 2016). These details lend to the credibility or confidence that participants and related stakeholders can have in the findings (Kurtz et al., 2017). Demonstrating findings that are congruent with reality also speak to the credibility of the research (Shenton, 2004). The findings of this study demonstrated credibility related to the identified research topic of exploring the stories of pastors' wives' emotional health while supporting their husbands in church ministry.

Adopting well-established research methods also adds to the credibility of the research (Shenton, 2004). This study included detailed steps in the coding process. Saldana (2016) noted that the types of data used for coding include interview transcripts. Interview transcripts and reflexive journaling were used for this study.

Credibility was also established in the form of collaborative debriefing throughout the research process between myself, my committee chair, and supportive colleagues. The reflexive processes involved in data collection and analysis, and the vision for the study were expanded as others offered their experiences, perceptions, and suggestions for alternative approaches (Shenton, 2004).

**Dependability**

Utilizing overlapping methods of data collection also speaks to the dependability of the study. Having the processes within the study reported in detail enables a future researcher to repeat the work and gain similar results (Shenton, 2004). O'Connor (2011) noted that providing a detailed account of the methodology used in their study demonstrated evidence of detailed and systematic exploration of the data. The steps that were proposed for the interview, transcribing, and coding processes have all been reported. To demonstrate dependability or the consistency of the results, the data were reviewed multiple times with an audit trail to document the process.

**Transferability**

Transferability can be demonstrated by having a clear phenomenon of interest, identifying participants that fit into that phenomenon, and detailing the research method. Transferability was further demonstrated by sampling as broadly as possible within the identified research parameters which yielded a diverse participant selection (Kurtz et al., 2017).

**Confirmability**

Confirmability, or the degree of balance between presenting subjective and objective results (Kurtz et al., 2017) was demonstrated by acknowledging that there would be an expected level of bias in analyzing and interpreting the data and the participants' stories as accurately as possible. Shenton (2004) identified the concept of confirmability as ensuring as far as possible that the work's findings are "the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of

the researcher” (p. 72). Ongoing reflective commentary provided an audit trail as well as highlighting transcripts and identifying descriptive and thematic codes for methodological description. Stepping back and “washing my brain” throughout the process helped to minimize any personal predispositions or biases toward the data collected.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Narrative inquiry is a profoundly relational form of inquiry therefore ethics played a central role throughout and beyond the research process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Kim (2016) discussed the ethical principles to be considered in human research most notably, respect, integrity, beneficence, and justice. Ethical considerations during the interviews were managed the same as any counseling session including informed consent which provided information about the purpose of the research study and the method of data collection (Kim, 2016). Participants were informed and reassured of the guidelines of confidentiality including the obligation to report potential harm to self or others.

It was important to be mindful of the cultural norms related to sharing information outside of the marriage and any reservations the participants may have had regarding sharing personal details relative to their husband’s role in the church community or connected experiences. Attention to any negative outcomes or consequences for the participants was also considered and the adherence to confidentiality on the part of the researcher was emphasized. Sharing personal details about their marriage and ministry challenges had the potential to elicit deeply emotional responses, and it was important to



hold space for those emotions to be expressed and all were offered a “time out” if needed.

The interviews were meant to be personal yet not too intrusive and solicit stories about the joys and triumphs as much as the challenges and heartaches of their experiences in ministry, but only as much as the participants were willing to share. Being comfortable with asking probing questions challenging social desirability biases, if detected, were important to collect honest commentary. Some of the information shared might have been embarrassing, so creating a non-threatening environment and being received as a collaborator in creating a narrative for their stories was important.

### **Summary**

A narrative approach was used to provide insight into the stories of pastor’s wives about their emotional health in their identified roles while supporting their husbands in church ministry. The narrative approach provided valuable insight into how the participants’ stories help to make meaning of their experiences. The role of the researcher is an important feature in narrative analysis, and it was important to be aware of any biases or ethical implications that might have influenced the data collection process.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative study was to learn the stories of pastors' wives and their emotional health as they supported their husbands in church ministry. As the researcher, I sought to understand the experiences of pastors' wives and to uncover themes of how being a pastor's wife affected their emotional health. This understanding can inform counseling professionals and provide awareness of the emotional needs of pastors' wives to promote supportive resources and approaches for this population. The study was designed to answer the research question, "What are the life stories of pastors' wives' emotional health in their identified roles while supporting their husbands in church ministry?" The following chapter will discuss the setting of the study, participant demographics, data collection, and analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and the results.

### **Setting**

The research study was conducted in the United States. All of the interviews were conducted and recorded using a HIPAA-compliant Zoom platform. No known personal or organizational conditions influenced the participants or their experiences at the time of the study or interviews. There were no known conditions that might have influenced the interpretations of the study results. No obvious or significant distractions were noted, and all participants confirmed they were located in a private and comfortable setting in their homes or office.

### **Demographics**

Other than confirming the participants were married or previously married to a Protestant pastor, their gender, and age over 18, no other demographic information was

asked during the interviews. Some participants disclosed additional demographic details as they shared their stories. For example, some participants discussed how their age, race, or financial status impacted their roles and responsibilities in church ministry. Since not all participants shared demographic information, no demographic table or details will be outlined here.

### **Data Collection**

The “elicitation technique” was used to collect data from seven participants. The interviews took place from my home office and audio recorded via HIPPA-compliant Zoom platform. There was one participant for each interview. The duration of each interview varied between 48-102 minutes. Participant 1’s (assigned pseudonym A.B) interview was 102 minutes, Participant 2’s (C.D.) was 55 minutes, Participant 3’s (E.F.) was 68 minutes, Participant 4’s (G.H.) was 72 minutes, Participant 5’s (I.J.) was 48 minutes, Participant 6’s (K.L.) was 73 minutes, and Participant 7’s (M.N.) was 80 minutes. Each participant spent time sharing their story; some shared about their joys and triumphs and others shared about the offenses, expectations, and assumptions experienced in their various roles.

#### **Phase 1: Initiation**

The first phase of the elicitation technique is initiation. During this phase I was able to set the foundation for each interview process and introduce the central topic of hearing the participant’s stories about their emotional and mental health in their role(s) while supporting their husband, a pastor, in marriage and in church ministry. I prompted each participant’s storytelling by stating, “Please tell me about what it is like to be the

wife in a high-profile role while supporting your husband in church ministry.”

### **Phase 2: Main Narration**

During the second phase, the main narration, I refrained from questions or comments and allowed the participants to share their stories freely and candidly, without interruption. I engaged in each interview only by quietly taking notes, actively listening, and providing non-verbal prompts to show my interest until the narration came to a natural end. Phase 2 concluded with the prompt “Is there anything else you would like to share at this time?”

### **Phase 3: Questioning**

In the third phase, I used the participants’ verbiage (from handwritten notes) to engage in related follow-up questions to fill in any gaps in data. I used the opportunity to clarify timelines of events or to better understand the emotional impact of what was shared. One question consistently asked was “If you could go back and tell your younger self one thing about being a pastor’s wife while supporting your husband in ministry, what would that be?” In several interviews, this question prompted additional storytelling about how they came to be married to a pastor.

### **Phase 4: Concluding Talk**

After the formality of the interview, the concluding talk was an unrecorded, relaxed time for small talk following the formality of the interview and an opportunity to thank the participants for agreeing to the interview. In honoring the elicitation technique, I was intentional in refraining from interrupting or prompting for more details until Phase 3. I kept my audio on mute and used non-verbal expressions to show interest. No unusual

circumstances or disruptions were encountered during data collection. There were no variations in data collection from the plan presented in Chapter 3.

### **Data Analysis**

Chapter 3 outlined the process of data analysis to include each participants' story captured through individual interviews, transcribed, and then analyzed for patterns and themes (Patton, 2015, p. 209). Narrative coding was used to identify structures and themes in reflection of the verbatim interview transcript. I was able to uncover words and phrases to attribute to a portion of the data and then reduced them to four basic elements of codes, categories, patterns, and themes (Kim, 2016). I used the thematic analysis approach outlined by Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) for qualitative text reduction and coding frame. This involved several reviews of the audio recordings and the recorded transcripts, and then paraphrasing passages or paragraphs into summary sentences. Then the data were further summarized and reduced into keywords to generate meaning. This narrative analysis was aimed at developing an understanding of the meaning that the participants gave about their experiences as the wife of a pastor (Kim, 2016).

I used a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to arrange the data into columns to organize and present the identified keywords and statements from the transcript to generate meaning. The first column included phrases directly from the transcript. The second column was the first reduction into summary sentences, and the third column listed keywords (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). The columns were labeled by themes or thematic statements that were drawn directly from the transcripts to capture and summarize major ideas (Saldana, 2016). By hand-coding with Microsoft Excel and

Microsoft Word I was able to manage codes and themes to analyze for relationships that existed in the similarities, differences, ideas, concepts, and terms that were repeated. Once the analysis was complete, I reviewed what the participants said about each topic and further explored the similarities and differences (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2015).

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

Credibility was demonstrated in this research by using rich descriptive details related to the research topic of exploring the stories of pastors' wives' emotional health while supporting their husbands in church ministry (Shenton, 2004). Adopting the elicitation technique, a well-established research method outlined by Jovchelovitch and Bauer, (2000), added to the credibility of the research which included interview transcripts and reflexive journaling (Shenton, 2004). The research proposed six to eight participants; however, saturation was met with a total of seven participants.

Credibility was also established in the form of collaborative debriefing throughout the research process between myself, my committee chair, and supportive colleagues. These reflexive processes were involved in data collection and analysis, and the vision for the study was expanded as others offered their experiences, perceptions, and suggestions for alternative approaches (Shenton, 2004).

#### **Transferability**

Transferability was demonstrated by having a clear phenomenon of interest and identifying participants that fit into that phenomenon by sampling as broadly as possible within the outlined research parameters (Kurtz et al., 2017). Snowball sampling was

helpful in yielding a diverse participant selection of seven women who are married or were previously married to a Protestant church pastor. Narrative interviewing provided the opportunity for participants to share rich details in their stories freely, without prompting or interrupting.

### **Dependability**

To demonstrate dependability the data were reviewed multiple times with an audit trail to document the process. The steps proposed for the interview, transcribing, and coding processes are all reported in detail and will enable future researchers to repeat the work and gain similar outcomes (Shenton, 2004).

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability was demonstrated by acknowledging that there would be an expected level of bias in analyzing and interpreting the data and the participants' stories as accurately as possible. I ensured that the work's findings were the result of the experiences and ideas of the participants, rather than my characteristics and preferences (Shenton, 2004). Ongoing reflective commentary, highlighting transcripts, identifying descriptive and thematic codes, and "washing my brain" throughout the process also helped to minimize any personal biases toward the data.

## **Results**

The stories of seven pastors' wives were explored to develop an understanding of the meaning of their lived experiences as they have supported their husbands in marriage and ministry. Thematic data analysis revealed five themes related to the research question, "What are the life stories of pastors' wives' emotional health in their identified

roles while supporting their husbands in church ministry?"

## **Themes**

### ***Theme 1: Identity Development as a Pastor's Wife***

Theme 1 was developed from the participants describing their emotional experiences with transitioning, adjusting, and accepting their role as the pastor's wife in their husband's church. Disclosures ranged from initial uncertainty about their place in the role to fully accepting the role and responsibilities. Participant M.N. shared her preconceptions of the role of a pastor's wife:

I wasn't thinking I was going to be a pastor's wife, it wasn't negative against them, they were doing a great job with it, but I just felt there was a lot of pressure to be, I want to say, perfect, but to be watched by a congregation... I felt like pastor's wives were just their own separate breed of people that could sit there and they could like deal with all the things that their husbands had to deal with and they were able to sit with grace, and somebody always had an eloquent smile on their face, and always were just embracing people and making sure they cared and ministered to people, an in my mind that wasn't who God had called me to be.

Participant K.L. expressed her initial uncertainty about being a pastor's wife and how she created her own role and responsibility based on her passion and not a predetermined expectation:

When I first became a pastor's wife I was like, oh, I don't like this. I don't fit, this feels awkward, and I don't feel that way anymore... I don't serve in children's, I



don't greet, but what I love to do, and what I am passionate about doing, I love people, and so I go to church early enough that I can just be in the halls hugging, touching, and talking to everybody...I feel like my ministry is to just be present in the halls.

Participant G.H. discussed how she protested the unfair perceptions and expectations directed toward her regarding her role as the pastor's wife in her church:

People who use the term "First Lady" it gives this connotation as if like it all belongs to the man, and the woman is just like this little helper...but they didn't respect me as a woman of God...there were some that came in from more like a Baptist or Pentecostal background that had a little bit more tradition, and so in those types of ministries the man is seen as the head, whereas the woman again, all she was is supposed to do is run the women's group, right, or outreach, or over the event's committee, right. That's how a lot of people view the role of the female in the church, the wife in the church.

I.J. shared how she embraced her role as a pastor's wife by overcoming insecurities and focusing on her love for her husband and the mission of their ministry:

I feel in this role, if I wasn't secure in who I am and secure in the power that I have and that I take ownership of, it probably would have ate me up. I probably would be so insecure about my appearance, you know, like I know I have flaws like...I don't like being on camera, I don't like taking pictures... but I love my husband so much and I believe so much in our mission that that we are working towards within building our community and helping our people and growing

ministry that the mission is bigger than my own hangups, you know I can get past it because I believe that much in the mission.

A.B. shared her experience with expectations of her role implied by church members:

I was approached one Sunday by this lady...and she's talking to me, and she goes that she's like I'm sensing that you don't fully have this pastor's wife thing figured out. And I was like, "probably not, I said I've only been a pastor's wife for a year or two," and she goes, "well you know, you're not supposed to have a job....no, your role as a pastor's wife is to be here and take care of the church. You should be here every day."

***Theme 2: Concern for Husband's Emotional Well-Being***

Theme 2 was evident through participants' sharing how they witnessed their husband's experiences with burnout and their concern for their husband's emotional well-being. A.B. shared how she responded directly to church members after witnessing her husband's emotional struggle and overwhelm with his work in ministry:

I remember waking up at 3 in the morning, and seeing him sitting off the side of our bed with his hands on his head like this and just looking down, and he was just like sitting there, and he was so deeply depressed...after a board meeting...I remember going out in the hall...and [someone] said something about [her husband] and I just said... I'm going to stop you right there...I said the only people that check on my husband is me, his mom, and an older lady in the church...I said we're the only three people who check on him. Not a single man in this church ever checks in on him, asks him if he's doing okay, asks him how

they can support him, tell him that he's loved, that he's doing a good job. None of you are doing that...and I was like he needs emotional support, just like the rest of us, but none of you are offering it to him...I thought I was gonna walk in that building and find my dead husband and I mean just that's how bad it was, I mean he was like having suicidal ideation and all that. Like it was, it was terrible.

K.L. shared how witnessing her husband being overwhelmed by ministry responsibilities has been the most challenging part of being a pastor's wife:

The hardest part for me being a pastor's wife has not come from outside pressure or expectations, it has been more of what he goes through, and then the availability or lack thereof when he comes home because he has so much responsibility...by the time he would come home there were no words left, or he was so emotionally spent by the really hard ministry things, you know...he could come home, and I felt like there was nothing left of him to give...he just got to the point where he was like, I don't think I can do this anymore...he like really struggled not to take his own life.

M.N. shared about valuing quality time and being mindful of what she shares with her husband:

He has been overly tired the last few years...he is overly tired, and our time is less and less all the time, so I value when he does have moments for me so we can make those moments...then church wise...and then how to respond to situations...I know I have his ear, so I do pay attention to what I say and how I say it and then I watch him and his response because I know my husband. He's a

very calm, sweet spirit, but he has...he has a temper. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, it's not pleasant, so I know he tries not to show that side of him. He tries to temper that, but sometimes it bubbles up, and I don't want it to bubble up, at least with people outside.

I.J. discussed her husband pouring into ministry with minimal support:

He pours so many hours into it, he's really trying to make a difference, and it's kinda hard when you don't have enough people to, really it's enough people in terms of body count, but enough people to actually lean into the vision to actually want to grow, to actually want to do more, be more.

### ***Theme 3: Financial Responsibility***

Theme 3 was evidenced by most participants indicating their husband's salary was not sufficient and their need or decision to work outside of the home to support their household and/or their ministry. M.N. shared her thoughts and feelings about money and ministry stating:

I mean, I know that people do make money in pastoring, and whatever, that has not been our experience. We're not, we haven't, not that we will never have money, but that's not why we went into this. You know, we went into this because God called us....it's not a paying profession like, oh, I want to be a pastor's wife, so I can, my husband can make millions of dollars, so it is definitely something we do because God called us...we don't get paid enough from the preaching part, so both of our salaries together becomes like an income we can live off of.

G.H. expressed how she and her husband forwent a salary from the church and considered their ministry as giving to the church:

We did everything together financially. It was our money that funded the church... serving the people because we'd never received a salary, so everything we did was, we gave to the church, we didn't take from the church, so we never received a salary or anything. Once a year they would give us a love offering and we would get \$5,000 each 'cause we didn't want our service to be about money.

E.F. talked about some of the restrictions that come from a limited income and the creativity it fostered with the resources allocated to them:

We couldn't afford babysitting on a ministry salary, and we were a one income family...vacations were important in the summer for my husband to disconnect...and when you've got a shoestring budget and you've got children, you know, you have to be creative with vacationing...people in the church would criticize us and would say, you know, it looks like you guys have a lavish life, we didn't, we made our food, we got creative...and that was the time where my husband...he was not their pastor, he was not counselor, he was Dad.

C.D. discussed her rationale for choosing to work full-time to support her husband, family, and the church's ministry:

He made reference to, you know, maybe you should stay home, because after I start having children, stay home. But I wasn't having that. I wasn't gonna have him working 3 jobs, you know, got him teaching all day and then him going to another job and him ministering. No, we're gonna do this together, so we had a 2-

job household, him working, I'm working, that's how we work this thing, and we work ministry together.

A.B. shared some of the financial realities during the earlier years of ministry sharing:

He was only getting paid \$150 a Sunday, so basically it covered gas. We were driving an hour and a half, so he was also working as a substitute teacher...it wasn't what he wanted to do but it's what paid the bills...we lived with his parents for about 6 months.

I.J. shared, why she chooses to continue working full-time, sharing:

I have too many benefits here at work, like I have healthcare, I make a good salary...now if the church did pay me the same, and if the church did give me the monies and all of those things, then yeah, I would lean all the way in, and that would be my full-time job. I just, you know, the way this economy is set up, realistically, no I can't do it...they barely pay my husband well, but they pay him well enough for us to you know, live.

#### ***Theme 4: Feeling Overwhelmed***

Theme 4 was developed from the Pastor's Wives sharing their emotional responses to feeling overwhelmed by church ministry or mistreated by church members and the impact on their emotional health and marriage. M.N shared that she reached a breaking point with church ministry:

Eventually I told my husband, and we'd been praying about it, that I felt like if I stayed at the church, I wasn't going to make it, like my physical being had had shut down to the point where my emotional self and I was tired.

G.H. shared how ministry impacted her overall wellbeing:

I wanted to take time off; we wouldn't take time off. It's like all we did was ministry, ministry, ministry...here we were doing all this work for the Lord, hosting all these big events, and just, you know, again, not feeling valued and respected and being criticized.

E.F. shared how emotional distress for her built up over time:

The little things that you neglect, that honestly do become these mountain ranges and create chasms in a marriage and we had to relearn how to really talk to one another...our complaints were a lot of like, you know, you have so much energy at church, but when you come home you're exhausted...I would think, well, maybe if we weren't in ministry we could do so much...what I learned through counseling...is pastors' wives need advocacy. Because you carry everyone else's pain and sorrow and sadness...we've learned to suffer silently, to cry without breathing.

C.D. shared, how she initially withdrew from ministry sharing, "At one point I kind of retreated because it was just too much. Um, I felt that I was sacrificing family. Then I felt like I wasn't getting the attention that I deserved."

K.L. shared, about the juxtaposition of ministry obligations, self-care, and being her genuine self:

I will do things I don't want to do, I say yes to everything, but then I live with this low-key mild anger about it, because I don't want to be doing it. But who am I angry at, because I could have said no...it's a lonely place to be a lot of times

because you feel like...you can't be yourself...we're going to be late for church and I'm yelling and screaming and like repenting on the way to church...and then you walk in the church with a smile on your face. If I were just a regular congregant I wouldn't have to slap this smile on my face, you know.

E.F. reflected on her ministry experiences with hope, despite the challenges:

It was like drinking from a fire hydrant...and it was terrifying and amazing...you don't understand how taxing it can be until someone else says to you, how are you able to handle all of this? And we used to think it was a good thing that he could handle all of this, but now I look back and think there were warning signs we needed to see...ministry and marriage, hand in hand are beautiful, but they are messy.

***Theme 5: Spiritual Responsibility and Call to Ministry***

All seven participants expressed that they experienced a calling or a responsibility to God within their role as a pastor's wife. Some expressed initial resistance to this calling while others expressed that their calling is their primary motivation and encouragement to continue in their role. C.D. shared how her thought process transitioned as she embraced her calling and responsibility to God as the pastor's wife:

You know, you're trying to make the mission that God has given you work according to God's purpose...when God is working in your life, they know it...if you are going to let the light shine from within, you better be living that life you're talking about... An (older) pastor's wife...she looked at me, she said, baby, listen, God has called your husband, the man of God, to ministry, and when



He called him, He also called you because both of you, you're not here. You're one...I come home and I'm thinking about it, I said, you know what, I gotta change some things...because his ministry is my ministry, and what she said to me had me understand that I am an integral part in the ministry.

E.F. shared how she embraced her role and ministry as a spiritual experience sharing:

I was very young when we got married. I had no idea what we signed up for...in counseling...[the counselor] said this to me, and I'll never forget it, he said...you all are going into ministry, and he said, if I am going to officiate this wedding, and you're gonna go into ministry, I have to know that I know before the Lord that you guys are compatible, and that you would do the Lord, um, that you would reveal His glory and not detract from it...that stuck with me, I think that was the Holy Spirit that embedded it, and it's like just, embedded it into my heart because I took it very seriously...it laid out the trajectory for like the framework of like how important it was for us to really have good support systems in place for our marriage moving forward in ministry.

I.J shared, the normalcy of ministry in her life sharing, "Prior to us being married and prior to us starting a relationship, I always served in ministry...I've always just been involved."

G.H. also shared how ministry had been an important part of her life, even before marriage:

We weren't together very long, you know, I really got involved in the evangelism...I've always been the kind of person, even prior to meeting

him...and so when he and I got together, you know, I got more and more involved in it. We started holding Bible study...and outreach...to the extent where we felt God called us to start a ministry...we felt led by the Lord...and started our ministry together...we were probably married, what, a year, two years...we were doing ministry for as long as we were married, so that's all we kind of knew.

M.N. shared her personal calling into ministry, separate from her calling to be a pastor's wife:

It really is interesting how, when God called me into ministry...I wasn't thinking that I was going to be a pastor or a minister, I just thought I was going to be a teacher of God's Word...God called me into ministry, I met (my husband)...and I was now engaged to a minister...so we knew we're in ministry together...I feel like God gives you pieces of things, because if He gives you the whole sometimes, you may say I can't handle the whole piece of cake, I can only handle a crumb. And so he gave us crumbs that led us into ministry.

K.L. shared her initial hesitation about becoming a pastor's wife:

I did not marry a pastor, so I was like, no, no, no...but it was really beautiful the way that it happened...when I first became a pastor's wife, I was like, oh, I don't like this, I don't fit. This feels awkward, and I don't feel that way anymore...we feel very loved by our church...it seems like a dream sometimes that I get to do this, but it's definitely not easy...I just did not think like life of ministry was what we were like, what I was walking into when we got married.

### **Discrepant/Nonconforming Cases**

In a review of discrepant cases and non-conforming data, it is important to mention that two of the participants were ordained pastors as well as pastors' wives. One participant was newly married and had been a pastor's wife for less than one year. One participant was a divorcee and shared her experiences before, during, and after being married to a pastor. All of the participants indicated that they had children, and three participants had at least one child prior to marriage to the pastor. One unique dynamic that was shared is three of the participants disclosed that they had experienced significant trauma and/or sexual abuse prior to being married to a pastor. One participant shared that she departed from the Protestant faith for a time after feeling that God was absent and uncaring and had left her and her husband to fend for themselves during the conflict and hardships of their ministry.

### **Summary**

This chapter reviewed the results of this narrative inquiry related to the research question, "What are the life stories of pastors' wives' emotional health in their identified roles while supporting their husbands in church ministry?" The research uncovered five main themes related to each participants' role identity, financial concerns, the impact of vicarious stress on their husband, their own distressing experiences, and their perspective on their spiritual responsibility or personal calling into ministry. Chapter 5 will review my interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, and recommendations based on the implications for social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this narrative research was to highlight the social and emotional experiences of Protestant church pastors' wives and how their supportive roles in marriage and ministry impacted their emotional health. Taking a feminist theory approach, considering role expectations and other related stressors has provided data from seven participants' stories that can help inform counseling professionals in their approach in providing emotional support, education, and advocacy for pastors' wives. Using data from this research, counselor educators and supervisors can be better equipped to meet the needs and concerns of this population and develop stress-relieving coping skills and strategies to support pastors' wives in their roles in ministry and marriage. The key findings were analyzed and reduced to five themes: identity development as a pastor's wife, concern for husband's emotional well-being, financial responsibility, feeling overwhelmed, and spiritual responsibility/call to ministry.

### **Interpretation of the Findings by Theme**

#### **Concern for Husband's Emotional Well-Being**

The literature described in Chapter 2 revealed that stress and burnout levels for pastors and church ministry leaders can be comparable to first responders (Boadi & Starr, 2023; Dunbar et al., 2020; Kansiewicz et al., 2022; Visker et al., 2017). The findings from this current research confirm and extend knowledge on this issue evidenced by the participants' sharing their experiences in witnessing their husband's emotional distress often fueled by his role and responsibilities as the pastor. Three of the participants disclosed that their husband had struggled with suicidal thoughts and that the only

protective factor was the thought of leaving his wife to care for their child or children. The stressors in each instance varied. Some were due to having too many administrative responsibilities and working long hours within the church and others were due to witnessing tragic losses among the congregants they ministered to. One participant discussed how her husband was overcome with grief after preaching at a memorial service for an infant. Another participant shared how when tragedy hit their own family, her husband could not be present because the patient in the next room happened to be a church member in need.

The participants expressed that their concern for their husbands manifested into feelings of helplessness, anger, resentment (toward the church), and frustration. Some participants took assertive action and rose to defend their husbands, while others supported their husband by withholding any bad news until he was emotionally ready to hear it. These incidents tied directly to the theme of pastors' wives feeling overwhelmed.

### **Feeling Overwhelmed**

Research indicated there were vicarious implications from the stress experiences on the emotional health of pastors' wives (Adams et al. 2017; Boadi & Starr, 2023; Hill et al., 2003). Most of the participants of this study indicated that they reached a significant level of distress and overwhelm that impacted their emotional health and, in some cases, the health of their marriage relationship. One participant's marriage ended in divorce after more than 20 years of marriage and ministry. She indicated that her husband was a "different" person at the pulpit than he was when he came home. Another participant stated that she does not think pastors should get married, indicating that it is

unfair for them to have to choose between the church and their family because both need them equally. She and her husband ultimately decided to leave ministry completely to pursue other careers. One participant expressed being “done” with her marriage after more than 15 years of “competing” with her husband’s ministry responsibilities. She described how she even got to the point where she rationalized how she could secure an apartment and live life as a single mom with her children. A few of the participants shared how they stopped attending their husband’s church for a time and took the opportunity to stay home and rest or visit another church where they could remain unknown and experience ministry with no responsibility.

### **Identity Development as Pastor’s Wife**

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 discussed the unrealistic expectations, scrutiny, and criticism experienced by pastors’ families, and the unwritten pressures for perfection from their congregations (Adams et al. 2016; Boadi & Starr, 2023; Hill et al., 2003; Lee, 2007). The participants of this study shared similar experiences with scrutiny, assumptions, and expectations of them in ministry; however, most of the participants indicated that those experiences did not impede them from assuming their role in ministry nor did they have any significant impact on their marriage relationships. Most participants in this study indicated that they anticipated bad behaviors from their church members and confronted it directly, often shielding their husbands from the unimportant comments or scrutiny by church congregants. A few participants shared how they engaged in verbal altercations with presumptuous church members and even church staff, having to defend their role as the pastor’s wife. This self-advocacy played a role in

confirming their role-identity and helped to motivate them to embrace their responsibilities and uphold their husband's honor.

### **Financial Responsibility**

Research also indicated there were significant financial stressors related to compensation being disproportionate to cost of living and required some pastor's wives to work outside of the home (Chan & Wong, 2018; Heck et al., 2018; Jones & Plisco, 2021). This current research aligned with those findings evidenced by the majority of the participants expressing that their husbands' salaries were not sufficient to meet their families' needs. All but one of the participants held full or part-time jobs unrelated to their husband's ministry.

### **Spiritual Responsibility and Call to Ministry**

One unique finding that was not found in the literature review was the spiritual connection or calling to commit to a ministry lifestyle. All the participants shared their stories and experiences about their responsibilities to God in their role as the pastor's wife and within their church's ministry. This appeared to alleviate or reduce the level of distress when the participants viewed their experiences from a higher level or spiritual responsibility.

Taking a feminist theory approach for this study helped to highlight the gendered roles and expectations within church ministry. Two of the participants held roles as ordained pastors or co-pastors in their church working alongside their husbands. This was a unique finding that allowed the opportunity to explore any discriminatory, oppressive, or marginalized experiences and provided context and understanding of any power

inequities and barriers faced when balancing their roles and responsibilities (Watters et al., 2021). Two of the participants had the same or higher academic credentials than their husbands yet were not afforded the same level of respect or reverence for their role as co-pastor within their church or by their congregants.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were two main limitations to trustworthiness that arose from this current study, as identified in Chapter 1. One was whether all the participants were honest and forthcoming with their stories. The other was my potential biases as a researcher with a background in counseling and church ministry that could have influenced the interpretation of the data. I engaged in reflective journaling, multiple reviews of the transcripts and audio recordings, peer debriefing, and discussions with my committee chair to help overcome any limitations and strengthen the dependability of the research.

### **Recommendations**

My recommendations for further research are based on the strengths of the current study. Using narrative inquiry provided firsthand, unfiltered knowledge about the experiences of pastors' wives in their roles as they have supported their husbands in church ministry. A quantitative study exploring these experiences delineated according to specific demographic similarities or differences might yield results that could develop supports that address more specific cultural implications such as race, age, church denomination, or size of the church.

This research outlined intentional inclusionary criteria for cisgender females, aged 18 and older, currently or previously married to a male pastor of a Protestant church.



Since this study was specific to the traditional heteronormative ministry roles, it could be beneficial to explore how these same stress-related occurrences are experienced within marriages to female pastors and within same-sex ministry marriages.

All of the participants indicated that they had children prior to or during marriage to their husband, the pastor. Some pastors' wives indicated they had to guard their emotional responses to stress or conflicts to protect their children from forming negative impressions of the church or their father's role in church ministry. Future studies to explore the stories of pastors' children could uncover their untold experiences and reveal an additional perspective within ministry families.

### **Implications**

This research has potential for impacting positive social change by bringing attention and awareness to a population that is not often considered or given a platform to discuss their needs or experiences outside of their inner circle. Providing the space and opportunity for pastors' wives to share their stories about their experiences in marriage and in ministry provided validation that their stories matter and has the potential to offer a relatable journey for other pastors' wives to begin seeking supports and safe spaces to be heard.

Several of the participants indicated they felt they could benefit from counseling services, some indicated that they were already actively participating in counseling, and others noted that they wished they had felt comfortable considering counseling as an option. Participants indicated they had limited friends or social circles and that it was necessary to protect their husbands and family from too much exposure or potential

scrutiny. This research provides an opportunity to advocate for more options and support for pastors' wives such as vouchers for free or discounted counseling services considering the financial limitations of pastors' families. There might also be a need for a compilation of resources in addition to future research that might continue to provide an opportunity for this population to give voice to their experiences.

### **Conclusion**

My personal encounters in church ministry prompted my desire to explore the stories of pastors' wives and their marriage and ministry experiences. As a mental health counselor with a desire to seek and serve underserved populations, I began to consider that stress and pressures of ministry might vicariously transfer to pastors' wives and families. I reflected on my own biases toward pastor's wives during my time in ministry and recognized that their personal and emotional experiences were mostly unknown. Engaging in this narrative research about the emotional health of pastors' wives has helped to uncover experiences and encounters for a unique population that is often misjudged, misunderstood, and rarely recognized as an individual outside of the spotlight of ministry. All the participants indicated that they were surprised, and some were relieved that someone had taken an interest in their life experiences as a pastor's wife, and they were excited to participate in the research. During the closing remarks, participants shared their gratitude for me taking the time "to care" and for my genuine interest in their emotional well-being.

Several participants indicated that having access to counseling services might have helped them overcome emotional strain sooner. Three participants indicated that

part of their role as the pastor's wife now is to help support other pastor's wives to help them avoid some of the hardships that they encountered. Mental health professionals should be aware and available to help these women. Some participants expressed how something as simple as asking how they are doing helped them to feel seen and valued. Several of my colleagues familiar with church ministry expressed that this research was "important" and "much needed." I hope that future researchers will use this data to continue exploring and working to uncover more information on how to address the specific emotional needs of this population. Church members with financial capacity can offer respite for pastors' wives by donating funds specifically designated for counseling services, offering their vacation homes as getaways/retreats for ministry families, or sponsoring date nights and childcare. Pastors' wives endure unique hardships in marriage and in ministry. Bringing awareness to these experiences can help counselors and counselor educators be equipped to step into the sensitive and spiritual spaces to provide support, healing, and advocacy.

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## Appendix: Interview Guide

### **Interview Guide**

Using the Elicitation Technique

#### **Preparation**

##### **Request permission to record the interview**

*Thank you for agreeing to meet for our interview. Your participation is valuable to the study and the goal is to help other counselors and supervisors better understand and support pastor's wives and their families. The informed consent form that you agreed to indicated you met criteria to participate based on your age (over 18), you are a cisgender female and are married or previously married to a male church pastor within the Protestant denomination. The informed consent also outlines my adherence to confidentiality standards and expresses how your identity and any information that you share will be protected.*

##### **Explain the procedure of narrative inquiry**

*Narrative inquiry is a type of qualitative research that is meant to explore and gain an understanding of how people make meaning of their life experiences, told from that person's perspective or your "stories."*

##### **Uninterrupted storytelling**

*I will invite you to share your stories in marriage and ministry as it relates to your role as a pastor's wife. This will not be a typical back-and-forth type of interview that you may see on television talk shows. The platform here is all yours to share your story without interruption. This time together will be recorded, and I will be taking mental and*

*physical notes while you share, but please speak freely and candidly, and take as much time as you would like to share your experiences. With that said, if at any time during your sharing, you begin to feel uncomfortable or that you need a break, please let me know. Your comfort and welfare are my priority in this process and if there is anything I can provide to help you feel more comfortable, please let me know.*

### **Questioning**

*After you have finished sharing your story, I will likely ask a few questions for further detail about the information that you have shared. Again, this will not be a television interview format. The questions I might ask will focus on filling in the gaps, if any.*

### **Conclusion**

*Once we are both in agreement that we've come to a natural endpoint, and you have shared all that you would like to, I will stop the recording and we can just chat, "off the record" about your experience, or anything else you would like to discuss, or even any questions you might have for me. What questions do you have for me now, before we begin recording?*

## **Phase 1: Initiation**

### **Forming Initial Topic for Narration**

*May I have your permission to audio record our interview today?*

*[wait for verbal 'yes']*

*I am married and before becoming a licensed mental health counselor, I worked in church ministry supporting pastors for several years. I am interested in understanding what it is like to be the wife of a pastor in church ministry. Please tell me about what that*

*is like to be the wife in a high-profile role while supporting your husband in church ministry.*

### **Visual Aids**

*[No visual aids considered at this time]*

### **Phase 2: Main Narration**

*[Engaged listening without interruption]*

*[Non-verbal prompts]*

*[Note Taking]*

*Is there anything else you would like to share [as a pastor's wife while supporting your husband in church ministry?]*

*What else would you like to share [as a pastor's wife supporting your husband in church ministry?]*

### **Phase 3: Questioning**

*[based on information shared in Phase 2]*

*\*What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of your greatest joy in marriage and ministry?*

*\*What were some other joys and triumphs in marriage?*

*\*Tell me about some of the emotions you felt as a wife when...*

*\*What did family time look like at the beginning of your marriage journey to now?*

*\*If you could go back and tell your younger self one thing, about being a pastor's wife while supporting your husband in ministry, what would that be?*

*\*What experiences did you have that you might say are different from other wives whose*

*husbands do not work in full-time ministry?*

*\*Is there anything else that we haven't covered that you would like to share about being a pastor's wife?*

*\*Is there anything else you would like to share?*

*[If nothing more to share]*

*I really appreciate all that you have shared and enjoyed hearing your stories about your journey as a pastor's wife. Thank you. If there is nothing else you would like to share, I will end our recording now.*

#### **Phase 4: Concluding Talk**

*[Recording stopped]*

*[Small talk]*

*Thank you once again.*