

Marital Challenges Faced by Couples at Harvest House International Church in Gweru, Zimbabwe: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract:

Background: Marriage in contemporary Zimbabwe is under considerable strain, shaped by economic instability, shifting gender norms, and evolving cultural expectations. Religious institutions, particularly Pentecostal churches, have emerged as critical sites of marital support, yet limited empirical research has examined the specific challenges couples face within these faith communities. This study investigated the marital challenges experienced by couples at Harvest House International Church (HHIC) in Gweru, Zimbabwe.

Materials and Methods: In this study, qualitative phenomenological design was employed, drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 married couples (24 individuals) purposively selected from the congregation.

Results: Thematic analysis, informed by Bowen's family systems theory and social exchange theory, revealed five overarching themes: (1) financial strain and material expectations, (2) shifting gender roles and role conflict, (3) communication breakdown and emotional disengagement, (4) extended family and in-law interference, and (5) infidelity and social media influence. The findings suggest that marital challenges within this church context are multifaceted, reflecting broader societal transformations while being mediated by religious expectations and communal accountability structures.

Conclusion: The study concludes that churches should consider developing culturally sensitive, contextually relevant marital enrichment programmes that address both spiritual and practical dimensions of marital life. Recommendations are offered for pastoral counsellors, church leadership, and mental health professionals working with Christian couples in Zimbabwe.

Key Word: Marital challenges, Christian couples, Pentecostal church, Zimbabwe, Marital conflict, Pastoral counselling, Family systems theory, Social exchange theory.

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I. Introduction

Marriage occupies a foundational position in Zimbabwean society, serving as a cornerstone for social, cultural, and spiritual life (Baloyi, 2022). Traditionally understood not merely as a union between two individuals but as an institution that establishes connections among families, communities, and ancestral lineages, marriage functions as a key mechanism through which social cohesion and intergenerational continuity are maintained (Baloyi, 2022; Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). However, the institution of marriage in Zimbabwe is undergoing profound transformation. The forms and meanings attached to marriage have changed significantly in recent decades, shaped by globalisation, technology, increased migration, religious plurality, and shifting cultural systems (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). These changes have introduced new tensions into marital relationships, creating what some scholars have described as a "clash of values" between persisting tradition and emerging modern influences (Makumbini et al., 2025).

The Contemporary Zimbabwean Marital Landscape

The contemporary Zimbabwean marital landscape is characterised by concerning rates of marital instability. Recent research and court statistics suggest that material expectations and shifting gender norms are reshaping and often destabilising marriage (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). A nationwide survey found that of 2,300 respondents who had experienced divorce or separation, 40% identified financial disputes as the primary catalyst (Zimbabwe Institute of Sociology and Gender Studies [ZISGS], 2026). Zimbabwean family courts have reported increases in divorce filings over the past five years, with financial disputes featuring prominently among

grievances (ZISGS, 2026). These statistics underscore the need to understand the specific challenges confronting married couples in contemporary Zimbabwe.

Economic instability has emerged as a particularly potent stressor in Zimbabwean marriages (Hove et al., 2024). Research conducted during the COVID-19 era in Harare revealed that economic instability brought about by job losses and reduced incomes was a significant catalyst for marital discord (Hove et al., 2024). The confinement of families within their homes during lockdowns exposed underlying gender dynamics, leading to increased tensions and conflicts, with heightened levels of anxiety and depression further straining marital relationships (Hove et al., 2024). Limited access to support services, such as counselling and legal aid, exacerbated marriage issues, with respondents frequently citing the unavailability of these resources as a significant barrier to resolving marital challenges (Hove et al., 2024). More recent research from mining communities in Zimbabwe similarly found that economic hardship and the inability of men to fulfil traditional breadwinner roles created conditions for intimate partner violence and marital dissolution (Mhlanga & Ncube, 2024).

Gender role transformations represent another significant source of marital tension in Zimbabwe (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). While many women now seek a more equitable split of responsibilities, lingering cultural pressures still expect men to be the primary breadwinners (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). This tension between traditional expectations and evolving gender roles can create a feedback loop where financial strain and gendered expectations feed each other, potentially precipitating marital breakdown (ZISGS, 2026). Women's empowerment, partner choice, and divorce have introduced complex negotiations between persisting tradition and emerging modern influences in Zimbabwean marriages (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024).

Beyond economic and gender-related stressors, contemporary Zimbabwean couples confront challenges arising from migration, social media, and extended family dynamics (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). Migration has led to the separation of spouses, social isolation, economic adjustments, role renegotiation, work-life balance challenges, divorce, and abandonment (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). Social media, while facilitating connection, has also been associated with emotional infidelity, cyberbullying within marriages, and breaches of privacy and trust (Sava et al., 2012). Research on long-term couples has identified additional stressors including death or severe illness of a child, infidelity, chronic mental illness, in-law issues, and prolonged time apart (Heim & Heim, 2025). These findings collectively paint a picture of marriage in Zimbabwe as an institution under pressure from multiple directions (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024).

The Role of Religious Institutions in Marital Support

Within this challenging landscape, religious institutions have emerged as critical sources of marital support (Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference [ZCBC], 2026). Churches in Zimbabwe are strengthening their pastoral commitment to accompany families facing various challenges, with initiatives to train family counsellors who can support couples and families facing difficulties in their daily lives (ZCBC, 2026). Recent research across the African continent has highlighted both the centrality and the challenges of pastoral involvement in marital counselling (Makumbini et al., 2025). Studies have demonstrated that higher levels of religiosity are associated with longer and more stable marriages, likely due to shared values, community support, and faith-based coping mechanisms (Odebode, 2025). The conclusion that religious compatibility plays a role in sustaining durable marriages has implications for faith-based marital support programmes (Odebode, 2025).

However, the church's role in marital support is not without complexity (Makumbini et al., 2025). Research examining marital tensions at the interface of African indigenous traditions and Western influences has identified both converging and diverging perspectives on marriage, tradition, and cultural change among church members (Makumbini et al., 2025). Findings suggest that the church has a critical role in facilitating dialogue, mediating tensions, and developing contextually relevant pastoral approaches that honour both traditional and contemporary values (Makumbini et al., 2025). The importance of culturally sensitive pastoral care in addressing the evolving realities of African marriages has been emphasised, with proposals that effective pastoral interventions must be informed by grassroots insights and seek to reconcile tensions between tradition and modernity (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023). Spirituality, encompassing beliefs in Christianity, ancestral worship, and specific marriage rituals, has been found to be integral to positive marital outcomes within African traditions, aligning with cultural norms that encourage marriage and deter divorce (Makumbini et al., 2025).

Pentecostal Churches and Marriage in Zimbabwe

Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe, including Harvest House International Church (HHIC), occupy a particularly significant position in this landscape (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). Founded in 1995, HHIC has grown from a small gathering to a global ministry, with its first church plant established in Gweru in 2001. The church's expansion reflects the broader growth of Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe, a movement that emphasises personal transformation, spiritual empowerment, and community accountability (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). Pentecostal theology typically places strong emphasis on marriage as a sacred covenant, with church leadership actively involved in marital counselling and dispute resolution (Makumbini et al., 2025). This theological orientation

creates both opportunities and challenges for couples: while it provides spiritual resources and communal support, it may also create pressure to maintain marital appearances or to resolve conflicts through spiritual means rather than professional counselling (Makumbini et al., 2025).

Psychological Perspectives on Marriage

Beyond the sociological and theological literature, psychological research offers important insights into marital dynamics. Research on marital satisfaction has consistently identified communication quality, conflict resolution skills, and emotional intimacy as key predictors of marital stability (Heim & Heim, 2025). Studies of long-term couples have found that effective communication and emotional intelligence are essential for resolving conflicts, especially during stressful situations (Heim & Heim, 2025). The pattern whereby attempts to discuss problems escalate into arguments, leading to withdrawal and emotional distance, is a well-documented trajectory of marital deterioration (Sava et al., 2012). These psychological perspectives complement sociological and theological analyses by illuminating the interpersonal processes through which broader social stressors manifest in marital relationships.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is guided by two overarching theoretical frameworks that together provide complementary lenses for understanding marital challenges.

Bowen's Family Systems Theory

Bowen's family systems theory provides a lens for understanding how marital conflict is influenced by multigenerational patterns, differentiation of self, and anxiety within the family system (Heim & Heim, 2025). According to this perspective, marital challenges are not merely interpersonal but are embedded within broader family dynamics that include extended family relationships and intergenerational patterns (Heim & Heim, 2025). Key concepts include:

- **Differentiation of self:** The ability to maintain one's sense of identity while remaining emotionally connected to significant others. Couples with low differentiation may struggle to establish boundaries with families of origin.
- **Triangulation:** The process by which anxiety in a two-person relationship is displaced onto a third party (e.g., a child or in-law). Triangulation can perpetuate conflict and undermine marital intimacy.
- **Multigenerational transmission:** The transmission of emotional patterns and relationship dynamics from one generation to the next.

These concepts help explain how couples' struggles with extended family, communication, and role negotiation are shaped by inherited family patterns and levels of differentiation.

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory offers a framework for understanding how couples evaluate their relationships in terms of rewards, costs, and alternatives (Sava et al., 2012). Key concepts include:

- **Rewards and costs:** The positive and negative aspects of a relationship, including emotional support, financial security, companionship, and conflict.
- **Comparison level:** The standard against which individuals evaluate their relationships, shaped by past experiences and social comparison.
- **Comparison level for alternatives:** The perceived quality of alternatives to the current relationship, which influences commitment.

This perspective is particularly relevant in contexts of economic strain, where material expectations and perceptions of fairness in role distribution become salient sources of marital tension (Sava et al., 2012). Social exchange theory illuminates how couples' evaluations of equity and satisfaction are shaped by broader social comparisons and material pressures.

Together, these frameworks provide a multi-level analysis of marital challenges, connecting interpersonal dynamics (communication, conflict) with broader family patterns (differentiation, triangulation) and social-contextual factors (material expectations, comparison).

Research Gap and Justification

Despite the significant role of churches in marital support, there is a notable gap in empirical research examining the specific marital challenges faced by couples within specific church communities in Zimbabwe (Makumbini et al., 2025). Existing studies have tended to focus on either broad national trends or specific issues such as gender-based violence, without attending to the unique dynamics of marital relationships within particular faith communities (Mhlanga & Ncube, 2024). This study addresses this gap by investigating the marital challenges experienced by couples at HHIC in Gweru. The selection of HHIC as a research site is significant because it represents a large, influential Pentecostal congregation with an explicit commitment to family ministry, making

it an appropriate context for examining how marital challenges are experienced and managed within a faith community (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024).

Research Questions

The central research question guiding this study is: What are the marital challenges faced by couples at Harvest House International Church in Gweru, Zimbabwe? Subsidiary questions include:

1. How do couples perceive and describe the challenges they face in their marriages?
2. What coping mechanisms do they employ to manage these challenges?
3. How do the church community and its teachings influence how couples experience and respond to marital challenges?

Contributions of the Study

This study makes several contributions to the existing literature. First, it provides empirical evidence on marital challenges within a specific Pentecostal church context in Zimbabwe, addressing a gap in the literature that has tended to generalise across Christian denominations (Makumbini et al., 2025). Second, it integrates psychological theory with pastoral practice, offering insights that can inform the development of more effective church-based marital support programmes (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023). Third, by foregrounding the voices of married couples themselves, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how broader societal transformations are experienced within intimate relationships (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). Finally, the findings have practical implications for pastoral counsellors, church leadership, and mental health professionals working with Christian couples in Zimbabwe and comparable contexts (Odebode, 2025).

II. Material And Methods

Study Design: This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design, which is appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of individuals and understanding how they make sense of particular phenomena (Heim & Heim, 2025). Phenomenology seeks to describe the essential structures of experience as they present themselves to consciousness, prioritising participants' subjective meanings and interpretations (Sava et al., 2012). Given the study's aim of understanding the marital challenges experienced by couples at HHIC, a phenomenological approach was well-suited to capturing the depth and complexity of participants' experiences. The qualitative design allowed for flexibility in data collection and analysis, enabling the emergence of themes that might not have been anticipated in advance (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023).

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The first author is a member of Harvest House International Church in Gweru and has been actively involved in the church's family ministry. This insider status facilitated access to the research site and rapport with participants but also introduced potential biases that required careful management. Several strategies were employed to mitigate these biases:

1. **Transparency with participants:** Participants were informed that the researcher was a fellow church member and that their responses would not be shared with church leadership in any identifiable form. This transparency was intended to reduce concerns about confidentiality and encourage honest disclosure.
2. **Use of individual interviews:** Conducting individual interviews before joint interviews allowed each spouse to speak freely without the presence of their partner, potentially reducing the influence of marital power dynamics on disclosure.
3. **External supervision:** The research was supervised by a faculty member at Midlands State University who is not a member of HHIC, providing an external perspective on the analysis and interpretation of findings.
4. **Reflexive journaling:** The researcher maintained a reflexive journal documenting personal assumptions, reactions to interviews, and analytical decisions. This journal was used to identify and challenge potential biases.
5. **Member checking with external validation:** Preliminary findings were presented to a subset of participants for member validation, and the analysis was discussed with the research supervisor to challenge interpretations.

The second author, who is not affiliated with HHIC, provided critical oversight of the analysis and interpretation, helping to ensure that findings were grounded in the data rather than shaped by the researcher's insider perspective. Despite these strategies, the authors acknowledge that the first author's insider status may have influenced the data in ways that cannot be fully controlled, and this limitation is discussed further below.

Study Setting

The study was conducted at Harvest House International Church (HHIC) in Gweru, Zimbabwe. Gweru is the capital of Midlands Province and a major urban centre in central Zimbabwe. HHIC is a Pentecostal church founded

in 1995, with its first church plant established in Gweru in 2001 (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). The church has a significant congregation in Gweru and maintains an active family ministry, including pre-marital counselling, marriage enrichment seminars, and pastoral counselling services (ZCBC, 2026). The selection of this site was purposive, as the church's explicit emphasis on family life and marital support made it an appropriate context for investigating marital challenges within a faith community (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023).

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide rich, relevant information about the research topic (Heim & Heim, 2025). The sampling criteria were designed to ensure that participants had sufficient marital experience to speak meaningfully about marital challenges. Twelve married couples (24 individuals) were selected from the HHIC congregation.

The sample size was determined by data saturation, the point at which additional interviews ceased to yield new themes or insights (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023). Saturation was assessed through ongoing analysis during data collection: after the tenth couple, no new codes were being generated, and the eleventh and twelfth couples confirmed the existing thematic structure without introducing new themes. This approach to sample size determination is consistent with qualitative research conventions, where the goal is depth of understanding rather than statistical generalisation (Heim & Heim, 2025).

The sample included couples married for varying durations, ranging from 3 to 25 years, to capture a range of marital experiences. Both husbands and wives were interviewed, allowing for the exploration of potential gender differences in the perception and experience of marital challenges (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). The sample was diverse in terms of educational background, occupation, and socio-economic status, reflecting the demographic composition of the congregation.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Couple	Husband's Age	Wife's Age	Years Married	Husband's Occupation	Wife's Occupation	Education (H/W)
1	34	31	8	Informal trader	Teacher	Diploma/Degree
2	42	38	12	Civil servant	Nurse	Degree/Diploma
3	28	26	4	Unemployed	Vendor	Certificate/Certificate
4	39	36	6	Driver	Hairdresser	Certificate/Certificate
5	48	43	15	Businessman	Teacher	Degree/Degree
6	51	47	20	Accountant	Administrator	Degree/Degree
7	32	29	7	Security guard	Informal trader	Certificate/Certificate
8	45	41	16	Pastor (non-staff)	Farmer	Diploma/Certificate
9	37	34	10	Mechanic	Shop assistant	Certificate/Certificate
10	55	52	25	Retired teacher	Retired nurse	Degree/Diploma
11	30	28	5	IT technician	Receptionist	Degree/Diploma
12	41	38	13	Builder	Teacher	Certificate/Degree

Note: Education: Certificate = post-secondary certificate; Diploma = polytechnic diploma; Degree = university degree

Acknowledged Limitations of Sampling:

The recruitment strategy—announcements at church services and referrals from the family ministry coordinator—may have introduced selection bias. Couples who are actively engaged with the church's marriage ministry, who have positive relationships with church leadership, or who are relatively satisfied with their marriages may have been more likely to volunteer. Conversely, couples experiencing severe marital distress, those marginalised within the congregation, or those sceptical of pastoral involvement may be under-represented. This limitation is acknowledged, and the findings should be interpreted with this in mind. Future research should employ more diverse recruitment strategies to reach couples who may be less visible within the congregation.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which were chosen for their flexibility in allowing participants to express their experiences in their own words while ensuring coverage of key topics (Heim & Heim, 2025). The interview guide was developed based on the research questions and theoretical frameworks, covering areas such as:

- The nature of marital challenges experienced
- Perceived causes of these challenges
- Coping mechanisms employed
- The role of the church in marital support
- The impact of broader societal factors on marital relationships
- How couples negotiate gender roles and decision-making
- Experiences with extended family and in-laws

- The influence of social media on marital relationships

The interview guide was pilot-tested with two couples not included in the final sample to assess the clarity and appropriateness of questions, and minor revisions were made based on this feedback. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was conducted in a private setting at the church premises, ensuring confidentiality and minimising distractions. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data (Heim & Heim, 2025). The analysis followed the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke:

1. **Familiarisation with the data:** Transcripts were read multiple times to achieve immersion. The researcher also listened to audio recordings and reviewed field notes.
2. **Generating initial codes:** Initial codes were generated inductively, staying close to participants' language and meanings. Coding was conducted line-by-line, with codes assigned to segments of text that captured meaningful units of experience. A codebook was developed documenting code definitions and example quotations.
3. **Searching for themes:** Codes were grouped into candidate themes based on patterns of similarity and relationship. Themes were developed at both semantic (explicit) and latent (interpretive) levels.
4. **Reviewing themes:** Candidate themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the entire dataset. Themes that did not have sufficient supporting data were discarded or merged with other themes.
5. **Defining and naming themes:** Themes were refined through iterative discussion among the research team until a coherent and defensible thematic structure was achieved. Each theme was defined with a clear scope and boundaries.
6. **Producing the report:** The final analysis was written up, with themes illustrated by verbatim quotations from participants.

The analysis was guided by the theoretical frameworks of Bowen's family systems theory and social exchange theory, which informed the interpretation of themes while allowing for the emergence of unanticipated findings (Sava et al., 2012). For example, Bowen's concept of differentiation was used to interpret themes related to extended family boundaries, while social exchange theory informed the interpretation of themes related to financial strain and material expectations.

Trustworthiness:

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis:

- **Credibility:** Member checking was conducted with a subset of participants (n=4 couples) to verify that themes resonated with their experiences. Preliminary findings were presented, and participants were invited to provide feedback. All participants confirmed that the themes accurately represented their experiences.
- **Transferability:** Thick description of the research context and participant characteristics was provided to enable readers to assess the applicability of findings to other contexts.
- **Dependability:** An audit trail was maintained documenting analytical decisions, coding frameworks, and the evolution of themes. The research supervisor reviewed the coding framework and challenged interpretations.
- **Confirmability:** Reflexive journaling was used to document the researcher's assumptions and biases. The second author, who is not affiliated with HHIC, provided critical oversight of the analysis to ensure that findings were grounded in the data.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Midlands State University Faculty of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Permission to conduct research at HHIC was obtained from the church leadership. All participants provided written informed consent after being fully informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time without consequences, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023).

Participants were assured that their responses would not be shared with church leadership in any identifiable form. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to protect participants' identities. Given the sensitive nature of marital challenges, participants were informed of the availability of counselling support should they experience distress during or after the interviews.

Power Dynamics in the Research Relationship:

The first author's position as a fellow church member and his involvement in the church's family ministry introduced potential power dynamics that required careful management. Participants may have perceived the researcher as holding a position of authority or influence within the church, which could have influenced their willingness to disclose certain challenges. To mitigate this, the researcher:

- Emphasised that participation was voluntary and that refusal would not affect their standing in the church
- Assured participants that their responses would not be shared with church leadership
- Conducted interviews in a private setting away from church leadership
- Used open-ended questions and active listening to encourage participants to speak freely
- Encouraged participants to share both positive and negative experiences

Despite these measures, the authors acknowledge that some participants may have been reluctant to disclose certain challenges—particularly those involving criticism of the church, pastoral leadership, or other church members. This limitation is discussed further below.

Inclusion Criteria

To be included in the study, participants were required to meet the following criteria:

1. **Active membership at HHIC Gweru:** Participants were required to be active members of Harvest House International Church in Gweru, defined as regular attendance at church services and participation in church activities for at least one year prior to the study. This criterion ensured that participants had sufficient familiarity with the church community and its teachings on marriage (Makumbini et al., 2025).
2. **Married status:** Participants were required to be legally and/or customarily married at the time of the study. Both civil and customary marriages were included, reflecting the diverse marital arrangements recognised under Zimbabwean law (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024).
3. **Minimum marriage duration:** Participants were required to have been married for at least three years. This criterion ensured that participants had sufficient marital experience to speak meaningfully about marital challenges, as opposed to newlyweds who might still be in the early adjustment phase of marriage (Heim & Heim, 2025).
4. **Age:** Participants were required to be at least 21 years old, ensuring that all participants were legal adults capable of providing informed consent.
5. **Willingness to participate:** Participants were required to voluntarily consent to participate in the study and to be willing to discuss their marital experiences openly and honestly.
6. **Both spouses willing to participate:** For couples, both the husband and wife were required to consent to participate. This criterion ensured that the study captured the perspectives of both partners and allowed for the exploration of potential gender differences in the experience of marital challenges (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024).

Exclusion Criteria

The following categories of individuals were excluded from the study:

1. **Non-members of HHIC Gweru:** Individuals who were not active members of HHIC Gweru were excluded, as the study focused specifically on the experiences of couples within this church community (Makumbini et al., 2025).
2. **Marriage duration less than three years:** Couples married for less than three years were excluded, as the focus was on couples with sufficient marital experience to reflect on challenges over time (Heim & Heim, 2025).
3. **Individuals under 21 years:** Individuals below the age of 21 were excluded to ensure compliance with informed consent requirements.
4. **Couples in the process of divorce or legal separation:** Couples who were actively in the process of divorce or legal separation at the time of the study were excluded, as the focus was on intact marriages and the challenges faced within ongoing marital relationships (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024).
5. **Individuals unable to provide informed consent:** Individuals with cognitive impairments or other conditions that would preclude them from providing informed consent were excluded.
6. **Unwillingness of either spouse to participate:** Couples where either spouse was unwilling to participate were excluded, as the study required the perspectives of both partners.
7. **Church leadership and pastoral staff:** Church leaders and pastoral staff were excluded from the study to avoid potential power dynamics that might inhibit open disclosure of marital challenges (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023). However, pastoral staff were consulted for contextual information about the church's marriage ministry, without being included as research participants.

Procedure methodology

The research procedure was implemented in five sequential phases, each designed to ensure the systematic and ethical collection of data.

Phase 1: Preparatory Phase

The preparatory phase involved obtaining ethical clearance from the Midlands State University Faculty of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee and securing permission from the leadership of Harvest House International Church in Gweru. The researcher met with the church's senior pastor and family ministry coordinator to explain the purpose and scope of the study, discuss logistical arrangements, and obtain formal written permission to conduct research within the congregation. During this meeting, the researcher also gathered contextual information about the church's existing marriage ministry programmes, including pre-marital counselling, marriage enrichment seminars, and pastoral counselling services (ZCBC, 2026). This contextual understanding informed the development of the interview guide and the interpretation of findings.

The interview guide was developed during this phase, drawing on the research questions, theoretical frameworks, and insights from existing literature on marital challenges in Zimbabwe and comparable contexts (Makumbini et al., 2025). The guide was pilot-tested with two couples not included in the final sample, and revisions were made based on their feedback regarding question clarity, sensitivity, and flow.

Phase 2: Participant Recruitment

Participant recruitment was conducted through a combination of announcements at church services and direct invitations facilitated by the church's family ministry coordinator. The researcher made a brief presentation at the end of three consecutive Sunday services, explaining the purpose of the study and inviting interested couples to contact the researcher for more information. Additionally, the family ministry coordinator provided the researcher with a list of couples who had expressed interest in participating in church marriage programmes, and these couples were approached individually with an invitation to participate.

Interested couples were provided with an information sheet detailing the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality protections, and the voluntary nature of participation (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023). Couples who expressed willingness to participate were scheduled for interviews at times and locations convenient for them. Recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, with a final sample of 12 couples.

Acknowledged Limitation: As noted above, this recruitment strategy may have introduced selection bias by favouring couples who are actively engaged with the church's marriage ministry. This limitation is discussed further in the Limitations section.

Phase 3: Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews with each spouse individually, followed by a joint interview with both spouses together. This approach allowed for the exploration of individual perspectives while also capturing dyadic dynamics (Heim & Heim, 2025). Individual interviews were conducted first, allowing each spouse to speak freely without the presence of their partner, which was particularly important for sensitive topics such as infidelity, dissatisfaction with gender roles, or in-law conflicts (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). The joint interview, conducted after both individual interviews, provided an opportunity to observe couple interaction and to explore areas of agreement and divergence in their accounts of marital challenges.

Each interview began with an explanation of the study's purpose and a reminder of confidentiality protections. Participants were assured that their responses would not be shared with their spouse or with church leadership in any identifiable form. The researcher then asked open-ended questions from the interview guide, using probes and follow-up questions to encourage elaboration and clarification. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted in a private room at the church premises, which was familiar and accessible to participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. The researcher also kept field notes documenting observations about the interview setting, participants' demeanour, and any contextual factors that might inform the analysis.

Phase 4: Data Transcription and Management

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher within 48 hours of each interview to maintain freshness of recall and to facilitate early identification of emerging themes (Heim & Heim, 2025). Transcripts were checked against the audio recordings for accuracy and completeness. Participants' names and other identifying information were replaced with pseudonyms during transcription to protect confidentiality. Transcripts were stored on a password-protected computer, and physical field notes were kept in a locked cabinet. Only the researcher had access to the original recordings and transcripts. Transcripts were imported into qualitative data analysis software to facilitate coding and theme development.

Phase 5: Data Analysis and Verification

Data analysis followed the six-phase thematic analysis approach described in the Methods section. The researcher engaged in iterative reading of transcripts, generating initial codes, and developing candidate themes. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, several verification strategies were employed. First, the researcher maintained an audit trail documenting analytical decisions and the evolution of themes (Heim & Heim, 2025). Second, preliminary findings were presented to a subset of participants in a follow-up meeting to obtain member validation and to ensure that the themes resonated with their experiences. Third, the analysis was discussed with the research supervisor, who provided critical feedback and challenged interpretations. Fourth, the researcher engaged in reflexivity, documenting personal assumptions and biases that might influence the analysis. These strategies are consistent with established criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023).

III. Result

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed five overarching themes representing the marital challenges experienced by couples at HHIC Gweru: (1) financial strain and material expectations, (2) shifting gender roles and role conflict, (3) communication breakdown and emotional disengagement, (4) extended family and in-law interference, and (5) infidelity and social media influence. Each theme is presented below with illustrative quotations from participants, using pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Theme 1: Financial Strain and Material Expectations

Financial strain emerged as the most frequently cited marital challenge across all participants. Couples described how economic pressures created tension, conflict, and in some cases, a pervasive sense of hopelessness about their marital future. The theme comprised three sub-themes: unemployment and income instability, material expectations and social comparison, and gendered financial dynamics.

Unemployment and income instability was a pervasive concern. Many participants described how job losses, reduced incomes, or the precarious nature of informal employment created a constant backdrop of anxiety that permeated their marital relationships (Hove et al., 2024). A male participant, Tawanda (married 8 years), explained: *"When you cannot provide for your family, you feel like you have failed as a man. The pressure builds up, and sometimes you take it out on your wife even though it is not her fault. The economy is just too hard."* A female participant, Rudo (married 12 years), described the emotional toll: *"We are always worried about money. It is the first thing we talk about in the morning and the last thing at night. There is no peace in the house because we are always calculating what we can afford and what we cannot."*

From a social exchange perspective, these narratives illustrate how economic strain disrupts the perceived balance of rewards and costs in marital relationships. When men cannot fulfil the culturally expected role of provider, they may perceive themselves as failing to deliver expected rewards, leading to feelings of inadequacy and withdrawal. Women, meanwhile, may perceive an imbalance between their contributions and the rewards they receive, contributing to resentment and conflict.

Material expectations and social comparison emerged as a significant source of marital tension, particularly among younger couples (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). Participants described how social media and peer pressure created unrealistic expectations about the material trappings of a successful marriage. A female participant, Chiedza (married 4 years), reflected: *"On social media, everyone's marriage looks perfect. You see other couples going on expensive holidays and buying nice things, and you start to wonder why your own husband cannot do the same. It creates resentment without you even realising it."* A male participant, Farai (married 6 years), echoed this sentiment: *"My wife compares me to her friends' husbands. She says, 'Look at what so-and-so bought for his wife.' It makes me feel like I am not enough."*

These narratives reflect social exchange processes in which couples evaluate their relationships against comparison levels shaped by social media and peer observation. When perceived rewards fall short of comparison levels, dissatisfaction and resentment may emerge, even when objective material conditions have not changed.

Gendered financial dynamics reflected the complex interplay between traditional expectations of male breadwinning and emerging realities of women's economic participation (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). Several couples described tensions arising from disagreements about financial management and decision-making. A female participant, Nomsa (married 15 years), observed: *"I work and contribute to the household, but my husband still expects to control all the money. He says it is his role as the head of the house. But I also want a say in how our money is used."* A male participant, Blessing (married 10 years), acknowledged the tension: *"It is difficult because culturally we are taught that the man is the provider. But when your wife earns more than you, it challenges everything. You feel like you are losing your position in the family."*

These findings suggest that financial strain in marriage is not merely about the absolute level of resources but about how resources are perceived, controlled, and distributed in ways that align with (or challenge) gendered expectations. Social exchange theory illuminates how perceptions of inequity in financial contributions and decision-making can undermine marital satisfaction.

Theme 2: Shifting Gender Roles and Role Conflict

Closely related to financial strain was the theme of shifting gender roles, which captured the tensions arising from changing expectations about men's and women's roles within marriage (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). Participants described how traditional expectations of male authority and female submission conflicted with contemporary realities of women's empowerment and demands for equality. The theme comprised two sub-themes: contested authority and domestic labour.

Contested authority was a pervasive source of marital conflict. Male participants generally expected deference from their wives in decision-making, while female participants increasingly demanded equal partnership (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). A female participant, Tendai (married 9 years), described her frustration: *"My husband says he is the head of the house, but he does not consult me on important decisions. He just announces what he has decided. I am not a child. I am his partner."* A male participant, Kudakwashe (married 14 years), expressed his perspective: *"The Bible says the husband is the head of the wife. But my wife says that was for biblical times. We argue about this all the time."*

From a family systems perspective, these conflicts can be understood as struggles over differentiation and the negotiation of boundaries within the marital subsystem. Couples who have not achieved sufficient differentiation may struggle to establish a marital relationship that is distinct from inherited family patterns and cultural scripts. The invocation of biblical authority by male participants suggests that religious teachings may reinforce traditional gender hierarchies, creating additional complexity for couples negotiating role changes.

Domestic labour emerged as another significant area of conflict. Female participants consistently described feeling overburdened by household responsibilities, particularly when they also worked outside the home (ZISGS, 2026). A female participant, Ropafadzo (married 11 years), explained: *"I work full-time, I take care of the children, I cook, I clean, and my husband does nothing at home. He says those are women's duties. But we both work. It is not fair."* A male participant, Tatenda (married 7 years), acknowledged resistance to change: *"I know I should help more at home, but it is difficult. I was raised to believe that cooking and cleaning are not for men. It feels like I am being asked to become a woman."*

These findings suggest that gender role conflict is not merely about practical divisions of labour but about identity and the meanings attached to masculine and feminine roles. For men, sharing domestic labour may be perceived as a threat to masculine identity, while for women, the unequal burden of domestic work may be experienced as a lack of recognition and respect.

Theme 3: Communication Breakdown and Emotional Disengagement

The third theme captured the progressive deterioration of communication and emotional connection that many couples described as a central challenge in their marriages (Heim & Heim, 2025). Participants described how initial attempts to discuss problems often escalated into arguments, leading to withdrawal and emotional distance. The theme comprised two sub-themes: destructive communication patterns and emotional withdrawal.

Destructive communication patterns characterised many couples' interactions about conflictual issues (Sava et al., 2012). A female participant, Rutendo (married 13 years), described: *"Whenever we try to talk about money, it turns into a shouting match. He accuses me of being materialistic, and I accuse him of being irresponsible. Nothing gets resolved."* A male participant, Simba (married 5 years), reflected: *"We do not know how to talk to each other without fighting. Sometimes it is better to just keep quiet."*

These patterns are consistent with research on marital conflict that identifies escalation, negative attributions, and withdrawal as key processes in marital deterioration (Sava et al., 2012). The finding that couples lack skills in constructive conflict resolution suggests that many couples have not developed the communication competencies necessary for managing disagreements productively.

Emotional withdrawal was frequently described as a consequence of repeated communication breakdowns (Heim & Heim, 2025). A female participant, Kudzai (married 18 years), explained: *"I have stopped telling him how I feel because it does not make a difference. I just keep things to myself now. We live together, but we are like strangers."* A male participant, Tapiwa (married 9 years), acknowledged his own withdrawal: *"I find it easier to just go to my phone or go out with friends than to sit and try to talk to my wife. The silence is painful, but the arguments are worse."*

From a family systems perspective, emotional withdrawal can be understood as a strategy for managing anxiety within the marital system. When couples cannot resolve conflicts through communication, withdrawal may function as a way to reduce immediate tension, but it also undermines emotional intimacy and erodes the foundation of the marital relationship.

Theme 4: Extended Family and In-Law Interference

Extended family dynamics, particularly in-law interference, emerged as a significant marital challenge for many couples (Baloyi, 2022). In the Zimbabwean context, where marriage is traditionally understood as an alliance between families rather than merely between individuals, the involvement of extended family members in marital affairs is often considerable (Baloyi, 2022). A female participant, Mufaro (married 6 years), described her

experience: *"My mother-in-law lives with us, and she is always criticising how I manage the house. My husband never defends me. He says I should respect her because she is his mother."* A male participant, Emmanuel (married 16 years), acknowledged the difficulty: *"There is a thin line between respecting your parents and allowing them to interfere in your marriage. I have struggled to find that balance."*

From a Bowen family systems perspective, these dynamics can be understood through the concepts of differentiation and triangulation. Couples who have not achieved sufficient differentiation from their families of origin may struggle to establish boundaries, allowing in-laws to become triangulated into marital conflicts. The husband's reluctance to defend his wife may reflect a lack of differentiation from his family of origin, as well as cultural scripts that prescribe deference to parents.

Financial obligations to extended family members were also a source of tension (Makumbini et al., 2025). A female participant, Patience (married 10 years), explained: *"We are struggling to make ends meet, but my husband sends money to his relatives in the rural areas every month. I understand that he wants to help his family, but what about our own children?"* A male participant, Gerald (married 12 years), responded to this tension: *"In our culture, you do not abandon your family. But my wife feels like she and the children come second. It is a constant source of conflict."*

These findings highlight the tension between cultural obligations to extended family and the needs of the nuclear family. From a social exchange perspective, financial transfers to extended family may be perceived by wives as a cost that reduces resources available for the marital relationship, while husbands may perceive these transfers as a cultural obligation that cannot be reneged.

Theme 5: Infidelity and Social Media Influence

The final theme addressed the challenges of infidelity and the role of social media in facilitating both emotional and physical affairs (Sava et al., 2012). Participants described how social media platforms created new opportunities for infidelity and eroded trust in their marriages. The theme comprised two sub-themes: social media and emotional infidelity, and the aftermath of physical infidelity.

Social media and emotional infidelity was a concern expressed by both male and female participants (Sava et al., 2012). A female participant, Sharon (married 8 years), described: *"I discovered that my husband was having private conversations with a woman on WhatsApp. He said it was nothing, but the messages were intimate. It broke my trust."* A male participant, Brian (married 11 years), expressed a similar experience: *"My wife spends all her time on Facebook and Instagram. She says she is just connecting with friends, but I feel like she is more interested in her online life than in our marriage."*

These findings suggest that social media creates new contexts for marital challenges by enabling intimate connections outside the marriage and by competing for attention and emotional engagement within the marriage. From a social exchange perspective, social media may expand the "comparison level for alternatives," making it easier for individuals to imagine alternative relationships and potentially reducing commitment to the current relationship.

The aftermath of physical infidelity was described as one of the most devastating marital challenges (Heim & Heim, 2025). A female participant, Grace (married 20 years), shared: *"My husband had an affair with a woman at his workplace. I found out from a friend. I was devastated. I did not know if I could ever trust him again."* A male participant, Blessing (married 7 years), described the consequences of his own infidelity: *"I made a mistake. I was weak. Now my wife does not trust me, and I do not know how to rebuild what I broke."*

Infidelity represents a profound violation of trust that disrupts the foundational assumptions of the marital relationship. The finding that both men and women described infidelity as devastating suggests that the emotional impact of infidelity is not gendered in the way that cultural stereotypes might suggest.

Coping Mechanisms

Beyond the identification of challenges, participants described a range of coping mechanisms they employed to manage marital difficulties. These coping mechanisms can be categorised into three types: faith-based coping, social support, and professional help.

Faith-based coping was the most frequently cited strategy (Odebode, 2025). Participants described prayer, scripture reading, and seeking pastoral counsel as central to their efforts to manage marital challenges. A female participant, Rudo (married 12 years), explained: *"When things are difficult, I pray. I pray for my husband, I pray for my marriage. Sometimes it is the only thing that keeps me going."* A male participant, Tawanda (married 8 years), described: *"The church has taught us that marriage is a covenant, not a contract. That helps me to keep going even when things are hard."*

These findings align with research suggesting that religiosity is associated with marital stability, potentially through shared values, community support, and faith-based coping mechanisms (Odebode, 2025). The framing of marriage as a covenant rather than a contract may encourage perseverance through difficulties by imbuing the marital relationship with sacred significance.

Social support from fellow church members was also important (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023). A female participant, Chiedza (married 4 years), described: *"There are other women in the church who understand what I*

am going through. We talk and support each other. It helps to know you are not alone." A male participant, Farai (married 6 years), mentioned a men's fellowship group: *"We meet as men and talk about the challenges we face. It is a safe space where you can be honest without being judged."*

These findings suggest that the church community functions as a source of social support that can buffer against marital stress. However, the finding that men valued a "safe space" for honest disclosure suggests that mixed-gender settings may not always provide the conditions for open discussion of marital challenges.

Professional help was sought by some couples, though barriers to access were frequently mentioned (Hove et al., 2024). A female participant, Nomsa (married 15 years), described: *"We went for counselling at the church, but it helped only so much. We needed professional help, but it is expensive and we cannot afford it."* A male participant, Tatenda (married 7 years), expressed hesitancy: *"I did not want to go for counselling. It felt like admitting that I had failed as a husband. It took a long time for me to agree to go."*

These findings highlight the importance of making professional counselling accessible and destigmatising help-seeking within church communities. The finding that some participants were hesitant to seek counselling because it felt like admitting failure suggests that masculine norms may discourage help-seeking, potentially leaving some couples without access to needed support.

IV. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that marital challenges faced by couples at HHIC Gweru are multifaceted, reflecting both broader societal transformations in Zimbabwe and the unique dynamics of a Pentecostal church community (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). The five themes identified—financial strain and material expectations, shifting gender roles and role conflict, communication breakdown and emotional disengagement, extended family and in-law interference, and infidelity and social media influence—collectively paint a picture of marriage as an institution under pressure from multiple directions (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). These findings align with and extend existing literature on marital challenges in Zimbabwe and comparable African contexts (Makumbini et al., 2025).

Financial Strain and Material Expectations

The primacy of financial strain as a marital challenge is consistent with recent research documenting the economic dimensions of marital instability in Zimbabwe (Hove et al., 2024). The finding that economic instability was a significant catalyst for marital discord echoes research conducted during the COVID-19 era, which found that job losses and reduced incomes pushed couples to their breaking points (Hove et al., 2024). The gendered nature of financial strain is particularly significant: men who cannot fulfil the traditional breadwinner role experience feelings of inadequacy and frustration that may manifest as withdrawal or aggression, while women who contribute financially increasingly demand a voice in financial decision-making (Mhlanga & Ncube, 2024). This dynamic has been documented in research on masculinity and socioeconomic violence in Zimbabwe, which found that men who cannot provide for their families feel their concept of masculinity undermined, leading to frustration and sometimes violence (Mhlanga & Ncube, 2024).

From a social exchange perspective, these findings suggest that financial strain disrupts the perceived balance of rewards and costs in marital relationships. When men cannot fulfil the culturally expected role of provider, they may perceive themselves as failing to deliver expected rewards, leading to feelings of inadequacy and withdrawal. Women, meanwhile, may perceive an imbalance between their contributions and the rewards they receive, contributing to resentment and conflict. The finding that material expectations and social comparison exacerbate financial strain highlights the role of comparison levels—shaped by social media and peer observation—in shaping marital satisfaction.

Shifting Gender Roles and Role Conflict

The theme of shifting gender roles and role conflict reflects broader transformations in Zimbabwean gender relations (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). The tension between traditional expectations of male authority and contemporary demands for gender equality is well-documented in recent scholarship on marriage in contemporary Zimbabwe (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). The finding that women's empowerment and partner choice have introduced complex negotiations between tradition and modernity is echoed in the present study, where couples described ongoing struggles over authority, decision-making, and domestic labour (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). The resistance of male participants to sharing domestic duties is consistent with research on the tenacity of patriarchal norms in Zimbabwean marriages (ZISGS, 2026). However, the study also revealed that some male participants acknowledged the need for change, suggesting that gender role attitudes may be gradually shifting, albeit unevenly (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024).

From a family systems perspective, these conflicts can be understood as struggles over differentiation and the negotiation of boundaries within the marital subsystem (Heim & Heim, 2025). Couples who have not achieved sufficient differentiation may struggle to establish a marital relationship that is distinct from inherited

family patterns and cultural scripts. The invocation of biblical authority by male participants suggests that religious teachings may reinforce traditional gender hierarchies, creating additional complexity for couples negotiating role changes.

Communication Breakdown and Emotional Disengagement

The theme of communication breakdown and emotional disengagement highlights the importance of interpersonal processes in marital satisfaction and stability (Heim & Heim, 2025). The finding that couples often lack skills in constructive conflict resolution is consistent with research on long-term couples, which identified effective communication as a primary coping mechanism for marital survival (Heim & Heim, 2025). The pattern described by participants—where attempts to discuss problems escalate into arguments, leading to withdrawal and emotional distance—is a well-documented trajectory of marital deterioration (Sava et al., 2012). The research on couples' coping with chronic stressors similarly found that effective communication and emotional intelligence are essential for resolving conflicts, especially during stressful situations (Heim & Heim, 2025). The present study's finding that some couples used faith-based coping mechanisms, including prayer and pastoral counsel, as a resource for managing communication difficulties suggests that religious resources can support, but do not replace, the development of communication skills (Odebode, 2025).

From a family systems perspective, emotional withdrawal can be understood as a strategy for managing anxiety within the marital system. When couples cannot resolve conflicts through communication, withdrawal may function as a way to reduce immediate tension, but it also undermines emotional intimacy and erodes the foundation of the marital relationship.

Extended Family and In-Law Interference

The theme of extended family and in-law interference is particularly significant in the Zimbabwean context, where marriage is traditionally understood as an alliance between families (Baloyi, 2022). Research on in-law conflict has identified it as a significant but often overlooked cause of marital problems, frequently leading to emotional distress and family breakdowns (Baloyi, 2022). The finding that Christian women in Nigeria often coped with in-law conflict through silence and prayer, while Muslim women more openly demanded fairness, suggests that religious and cultural factors shape responses to this challenge (Makumbini et al., 2025). In the present study, female participants generally described feeling unsupported by their husbands in conflicts with mothers-in-law, while male participants acknowledged the difficulty of balancing obligations to parents and spouses (Baloyi, 2022). This finding underscores the need for pastoral counselling that addresses the specific challenge of extended family dynamics in African marriages (Makumbini et al., 2025).

From a Bowen family systems perspective, these dynamics can be understood through the concepts of differentiation and triangulation (Heim & Heim, 2025). Couples who have not achieved sufficient differentiation from their families of origin may struggle to establish boundaries, allowing in-laws to become triangulated into marital conflicts. The husband's reluctance to defend his wife may reflect a lack of differentiation from his family of origin, as well as cultural scripts that prescribe deference to parents.

Infidelity and Social Media Influence

The theme of infidelity and social media influence reflects emerging challenges in contemporary marriages (Sava et al., 2012). The finding that social media enables emotional infidelity and erodes trust is consistent with research on social media's impact on marriages, which identified detrimental effects including enabling emotional infidelity, cyberbullying within marriages, and breaches of privacy and trust (Sava et al., 2012). The present study found that both male and female participants expressed concerns about their spouses' online behaviour, though the specific concerns differed: women were more likely to describe discovering intimate conversations between their husbands and other women, while men were more likely to describe feeling neglected as their wives devoted attention to social media (Sava et al., 2012). These findings suggest that social media represents a new frontier of marital challenge that pastoral counsellors need to address (Makumbini et al., 2025).

From a social exchange perspective, social media may expand the "comparison level for alternatives," making it easier for individuals to imagine alternative relationships and potentially reducing commitment to the current relationship. The finding that social media enables emotional infidelity suggests that the boundaries of marital exclusivity are being challenged by new technologies that facilitate intimate connections outside the marriage.

Coping Mechanisms and Implications for Pastoral Practice

The coping mechanisms identified by participants—faith-based coping, social support, and professional help—align with research on religiosity and marital stability (Odebode, 2025). The finding that higher levels of religiosity are associated with longer and more stable marriages, likely due to shared values, community support, and faith-based coping mechanisms, is supported by the present study's findings (Odebode, 2025). Participants

consistently described prayer and scripture reading as central to their efforts to manage marital challenges, and the church community provided a source of social support that helped couples feel less isolated in their struggles (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023). However, the study also revealed barriers to seeking professional help, including cost and the stigma associated with counselling (Hove et al., 2024). This finding highlights the importance of making professional counselling accessible and destigmatising help-seeking within church communities (ZCBC, 2026).

The study's findings have important implications for pastoral practice (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023). The identification of five distinct yet interconnected marital challenges suggests that church-based marital support programmes need to address multiple dimensions of marital life rather than focusing narrowly on spiritual matters (Makumbini et al., 2025). Financial counselling, communication skills training, and education about gender equality should be integrated into marriage enrichment programmes alongside biblical teaching on marriage (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023). The finding that couples value faith-based coping mechanisms suggests that these resources should be affirmed and strengthened, while also connecting couples to professional counselling when needed (Odebode, 2025). The challenge for pastoral counsellors is to develop approaches that are both theologically grounded and psychologically informed, addressing the practical realities of couples' lives while honouring the spiritual dimensions of marriage (Makumbini et al., 2025). This aligns with research suggesting that the church has a critical role in facilitating dialogue, mediating tensions, and developing contextually relevant pastoral approaches that honour both traditional and contemporary values (Makumbini et al., 2025).

Power Dynamics

An important consideration that emerged from the analysis is the role of power dynamics in shaping both the experience and expression of marital challenges. Gender power imbalances were evident in several themes, particularly in relation to financial decision-making, domestic labour, and extended family dynamics. Male participants generally expected deference from their wives in decision-making, while female participants increasingly demanded equal partnership. These dynamics reflect broader patriarchal norms in Zimbabwean society, which are reinforced by some religious teachings that emphasise male headship.

The church context adds another layer of complexity to power dynamics. The church's emphasis on marriage as a sacred covenant may create pressure for couples to maintain marital appearances and to resolve conflicts through spiritual means rather than seeking professional help. Additionally, the researcher's position as a fellow church member may have influenced participants' willingness to disclose certain challenges, particularly those involving criticism of the church or pastoral leadership.

These power dynamics have implications for pastoral practice. Pastoral counsellors need to be aware of how gender and religious power dynamics shape couples' experiences and to create safe spaces for both partners to voice their concerns. This may require challenging some traditional teachings about gender roles while affirming the spiritual dimensions of marriage.

Limitations

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample was drawn from a single Pentecostal church in Gweru, and the findings may not be generalisable to other church contexts or to the broader population of married couples in Zimbabwe (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023). Different denominations may have different theological emphases and pastoral practices that shape how couples experience and respond to marital challenges (Makumbini et al., 2025).

Second, the recruitment strategy—announcements at church services and referrals from the family ministry coordinator—may have introduced selection bias. Couples who are actively engaged with the church's marriage ministry, who have positive relationships with church leadership, or who are relatively satisfied with their marriages may have been more likely to volunteer. Conversely, couples experiencing severe marital distress, those marginalised within the congregation, or those sceptical of pastoral involvement may be under-represented. The findings should be interpreted with this limitation in mind.

Third, the study relied on self-report data, which may be subject to social desirability bias, particularly given the church context where participants may have been reluctant to disclose certain challenges (Heim & Heim, 2025). The use of individual interviews conducted privately was intended to mitigate this limitation, but some participants may still have been hesitant to reveal marital difficulties. The researcher's insider status may have exacerbated this limitation, as participants may have been concerned about how their disclosures would be received by a fellow church member.

Fourth, the study focused on intact marriages and excluded couples in the process of divorce or separation, which means that the perspectives of couples whose marriages ultimately dissolved are not represented (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024).

Fifth, the study was conducted at a single point in time, and the cross-sectional design precludes examination of how marital challenges evolve over the course of marriage (Heim & Heim, 2025). Longitudinal

research would provide valuable insights into the trajectory of marital challenges and the effectiveness of coping mechanisms over time (Heim & Heim, 2025).

Directions for Future Research

Future research should address these limitations by examining marital challenges across different denominations and church contexts, including a comparative analysis of how different theological orientations shape the experience and management of marital difficulties (Makumbini et al., 2025). Research with couples whose marriages have dissolved would provide important insights into the factors that lead to marital breakdown (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). Longitudinal studies following couples over time would illuminate the dynamics of marital challenges and the factors that enable some couples to survive and thrive while others do not (Heim & Heim, 2025). Additionally, research examining the effectiveness of church-based marital support programmes would provide evidence to guide pastoral practice and resource allocation (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023). Finally, research that integrates qualitative and quantitative methods would allow for the testing of hypotheses about the relationships between specific marital challenges, coping mechanisms, and marital outcomes (Odebode, 2025).

V. Conclusion

This study investigated the marital challenges faced by couples at Harvest House International Church in Gweru, Zimbabwe, using a qualitative phenomenological design. The findings reveal that couples in this faith community confront a complex array of challenges that reflect both broader societal transformations and the unique dynamics of their church context (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). Financial strain and material expectations, shifting gender roles and role conflict, communication breakdown and emotional disengagement, extended family and in-law interference, and infidelity and social media influence emerged as the five overarching themes characterising participants' experiences. These challenges are interconnected, with economic pressures exacerbating gender role tensions, communication difficulties undermining efforts to resolve conflicts, and extended family dynamics complicating couples' ability to establish autonomous marital relationships (Makumbini et al., 2025).

The study's findings underscore the critical importance of the church as a site of marital support while also revealing the limitations of existing pastoral approaches (ZCBC, 2026). Couples consistently drew on faith-based coping mechanisms—prayer, scripture reading, and pastoral counsel—as resources for managing marital difficulties, and the church community provided valuable social support (Odebode, 2025). However, the study also identified gaps in the support available to couples, particularly in relation to professional counselling, communication skills training, and education about gender equality (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023). The challenge for church leadership and pastoral counsellors is to develop marital enrichment programmes that are both theologically grounded and psychologically informed, addressing the practical realities of couples' lives while honouring the spiritual dimensions of marriage (Makumbini et al., 2025).

The study makes several contributions to the literature. It provides empirical evidence on marital challenges within a specific Pentecostal church context in Zimbabwe, addressing a gap in research that has tended to generalise across Christian denominations (Makumbini et al., 2025). It integrates psychological theory with pastoral practice, offering insights that can inform the development of more effective church-based marital support programmes (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023). By foregrounding the voices of married couples themselves, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how broader societal transformations are experienced within intimate relationships (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). The findings have practical implications for pastoral counsellors, church leadership, and mental health professionals working with Christian couples in Zimbabwe and comparable contexts (Odebode, 2025).

In conclusion, marriage in contemporary Zimbabwe remains a vital institution, but one that is under significant pressure (Manase & Chiweshe, 2024). The church has an important role to play in supporting couples to navigate these pressures, but this role must be exercised with wisdom, cultural sensitivity, and psychological insight (Makumbini et al., 2025). By developing marital support programmes that address both the spiritual and practical dimensions of marital life, churches can contribute to the strengthening of marriages and the well-being of families in Zimbabwe (ZCBC, 2026). The couples who participated in this study demonstrated remarkable resilience and commitment to their marriages, often drawing on their faith and community to sustain them through difficult times (Odebode, 2025). Their experiences offer valuable lessons for pastoral practice and point to the importance of continued research and reflection on how best to support Christian marriages in the twenty-first century (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023).

Declarations

Author Contributions: Elton Tirivokunze conceptualised the study, conducted data collection and analysis, and drafted the manuscript. Levison Maunganidze supervised the research, provided critical feedback on the analysis and interpretation, and revised the manuscript. Both authors approved the final version.

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Ethical Approval: Ethical clearance was obtained from the Midlands State University Faculty of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Permission to conduct research at HHIC was obtained from the church leadership.

Data Availability: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to the sensitive nature of the data and the need to protect participant confidentiality, transcripts will not be made publicly available.

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