

cdr

'Great expectations' versus 'reality checks': UK Christian clergy spouses' experiences of divorce and separation and implications for pastoral care

Item Type	Article
Authors	Oakley, Lisa;Ann, Lorraine;Vaughan, Sarah;Carroll, Janine;Lafferty, Moira
Citation	Oakley, L., Ann, L., Vaughan, S., Carroll, J., & Lafferty, M. (2025). 'Great expectations' versus 'reality checks': UK Christian clergy spouses' experiences of divorce and separation and implications for pastoral care. <i>Pastoral Psychology</i> , 74, 867–884. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-025-01261-z
DOI	10.1007/s11089-025-01261-z
Publisher	Springer
Journal	<i>Pastoral Psychology</i>
Download date	2026-05-21 17:26:25
Item License	https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10034/629664



'Great Expectations' versus 'Reality Checks': U.K. Christian Clergy Spouses' Experiences of Divorce and Separation and Implications for Pastoral Care

Lisa Oakley¹ · Lorraine Ann¹ · Sarah Vaughan¹ · Janine Carroll¹ · Moira Lafferty¹

Accepted: 10 September 2025
© The Author(s) 2025

Abstract

Challenges associated with clergy marriage and divorce have been documented, and the impact of marital breakdown on clergy spouses has been recognised. However, there is a paucity of work that addresses the specific support needs of Christian clergy spouses and what constitutes effective pastoral care for this population. This article presents a mixed-methods study conducted in 2023 of divorced and separated clergy spouses in the United Kingdom which explored their understandings of pastoral care and support experienced before, during, and after marital breakdown. Twenty-seven participants completed an online survey, and 13 took part in a follow-up semistructured interview. The findings illustrate that pastoral care needs are higher during and after marital breakdown, but a considerable number of the participants did not receive pastoral care. Where care was received, participants rated it higher when provided by family, friends, and organizations than by the church. The study also demonstrated the impact of expectations of clergy marriage on the experience of marital breakdown. Importantly, high expectations of model marriages acted as barriers to disclosing marital breakdown. The findings demonstrate a lack of adequate pastoral support. A thematic analysis yielded a series of recommendations for effective pastoral care. These were providing care with the person at the center, holistic and individualized care, pre-emptive care, and persistent and consistent care. Overall, the study highlighted the profound impact of expectations on clergy marriages and the need for improvement in pastoral care for clergy spouses. This improvement of care should include training on the issues highlighted in this study.

✉ Lisa Oakley
l.oakley@chester.ac.uk

Lorraine Ann
4uintegrativecounselling@mail.com

Sarah Vaughan
sarah.vaughan@chester.ac.uk

Janine Carroll
j.carroll@chester.ac.uk

Moira Lafferty
m.lafferty@chester.ac.uk

¹ Division of Psychology, University of Chester, Chester, UK

Keywords Divorce · Separation · Clergy · Spouse · Pastoral · Support

Introduction

In 2022, approximately 80,000 divorces were granted in England and Wales, with 1 in 10 occurring within the first 7 years of marriage (Office for National Statistics, 2024). Many factors can affect a marriage, such as infidelity, substance abuse, and financial problems (Scott et al., 2013). While divorce is currently an accepted practice in modern society, attitudes towards divorce can be affected by personal and wider societal beliefs, such as religion. Konstam et al. (2016) found that divorced women who identified as practicing Catholics disclosed that they felt ashamed and worried that they would no longer be accepted within their religious community due to its strong beliefs about divorce and marriage. These perceptions held by members of a congregation might be felt more strongly by those who are married to someone in the clergy due to their more prominent role in the community. However, clergy marriages often experience additional issues such as the lack of family privacy, the spouse attending to the needs of others, and frequent relocation (Hall, 1997), all of which can increase marital stressors and contribute to the end of the relationship.

Gonzalez (1999) found that U.S. pastors framed divorce as a failure by one or both parties to maintain the relationship. As such, the expectation of a clergy marriage is that both spouses are model citizens who have the ideal marriage and are looked up to by other members of the community (Armstrong, 2015). These expectations, combined with the fact that religious sermons can often frame divorce as a deviant act (Hobbs, 2023; Jenkins, 2010), can mean spouses feel unable to raise issues surrounding marital problems or breakdowns. In Yoruba Christians, it was found that cultural, personal, and relational reasons led to divorce. However, many Christian traditions only permit divorce in certain circumstances. This reinforces the idea that marriage should be upheld as a way of showing Christian values (Uorko & Enobong, 2022), thus creating a culture and environment that deters individuals from disclosing and/or seeking support when they are experiencing negative issues or problems in their marriage (Hileman, 2008). Disclosure is important in facilitating coping, but this requires a healthy relationship both within and outside of the marriage (McMinn et al., 2008).

Clergy spouses fulfil many roles and are expected to act and behave in certain ways that can be in contrast to their authentic sense of self (Jones & Plisco, 2021; Potts, 2021). They are often required to attend functions, entertain guests, conduct themselves in a self-controlled manner (Drumm et al., 2017; Frame & Shehan, 1994), and be accepting of the fact that the marital relationship is triadic, with the ministry and the church the dominant partner (Potts, 2021). The impact of these facts can increase the stress and pressure felt by the spouse (Darling et al., 2004) and may affect the marital relationship (Wells et al., 2012). Spouses often report that they work behind the scenes. At the same time, the clergy member receives public acknowledgement and adoration from the congregation, which can lead to the spouse being blamed by their community when the marriage fails (Kurtz et al., 2017). This can lead to feelings of isolation, shame, and guilt, depriving the clergy spouse of social support and possibly inhibiting their desire and ability to seek help (King, 2003).

When marital relationships break down, clergy spouses often perceive family members as the most supportive (Lee, 2007). One reason for this may be the psychological safety provided by family members and their understanding of the ministry marriage. It may

also be that, throughout the marriage, the externally portrayed image of being a spouse has reduced access to genuine friendship and support (Jones & Plisco, 2021). Research has suggested that some spouses do use other sources of support to help them through a divorce. Some individuals have reported utilizing their personal religious beliefs as a means of self-support but acknowledge that more formal support from the religious community has been lacking (Kurtz et al., 2017). Other spouses have sought professional support; however, counselors may require training to understand the religious context in which the spouse is embedded (Hileman, 2008; Murray, 2002). A lack of contextual knowledge may limit the effectiveness of the support and be seen as a barrier to engaging with professional help. More research is therefore needed to investigate why spouses refrain from seeking support from the wider community and what factors affect their support-seeking behavior.

Within the Church of England, there is a formal role called the bishop's visitor. This role was introduced in the 1980s specifically "to support clergy spouse/partners in the event of a clergy marriage facing difficulties or coming to an end for any reason" (Church of England, 2021). This role includes providing support, identification of needs, signposting services, and safeguarding considerations. However, there is a lack of research on the impact of this role. While research has shown how divorce can impact clergy spouses, research on their specific support needs is less prevalent. There is little discussion of what constitutes effective and helpful support for clergy spouses experiencing marital breakdown. There is also little exploration of any needs explicitly related to the role of being a clergy spouse. The present study aims to redress this imbalance and explore the support received and the unmet support needs of clergy spouses during and after divorce/separation.

Methods

Design

The study employed social constructionist epistemology and critical realist ontology. This approach accepts that experiences of clergy marital breakdown and pastoral care are shaped by culture and context, whilst also acknowledging the uniqueness of each individual's experience as important to explore. However, it is also essential to integrate experiences to more fully understand this area.

The research employed mixed methods, utilizing an online survey and follow-up interviews to collect both qualitative and quantitative data on experiences of pastoral support before, during, and after marriage breakdown.

A two-stage survey design process was employed. Initial survey questions were developed from a review of the literature. These were subsequently shared and discussed with the leadership of Broken Rites.¹ Engaging those in the leadership of Broken Rites in co-creating the survey ensured that the language, tone, and terminology were sensitive to and understood by the participants.

In the first section of the survey, an initial series of items invited participants to identify the importance of and need for various domains of support (spiritual, emotional, financial,

¹ Broken Rites was founded in 1983. It is a small organization whose full members are all divorced/separated spouses/partners of a member of the clergy. It provides peer-to-peer support. Associate membership is available for those who support the aims of the organization.

counseling, social/friendship, legal, and housing support) at differing stages of the marriage breakdown (before, during and after) using a 5-point Likert scale with anchors of 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Next, participants rated who had been most helpful (church or people within the church, family and friends, organizations or people external to the church) in providing the differing domains of support, again using a 5-point Likert scale with anchors of 1 (*very helpful*) to 5 (*very unhelpful*). The second section contained three qualitative questions focused on pastoral care and clergy marriage to identify areas that would act as prompts for the semistructured interviews. The survey ended with an invitation for participants to leave an email address if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview.

Interview script development

The interview script consisted of 13 questions. The opening questions were designed to establish rapport. Core questions related to the research aims included views on the support received, areas of unmet need, and support providers. The final questions focused on participant' views of recommendations related to clergy divorce moving forward. A copy of the interview script is available from the lead author.

Participants

Survey Twenty-seven adults (26 females) were recruited for the survey, covering an age range between 40 and 80 years ($M=61.00$ yrs, $SD=11.50$ yrs). Of the sample, 18 identified as white British, and 52% were currently attending church; 81% were from an Anglican/Church of England context. Participants had been married for an average of 19.57 ($SD=8.39$) years and had a mean age of 47.30 ($SD=6.64$) at the time of marital breakdown or divorce. At the time the survey was conducted, the mean time since marital breakdown was 14.66 ($SD=10.78$) years.

The choice of participants invited to interview was determined by the desire to represent diversity in the sample. Participants invited to interview represented a diversity of age ranges, church denominational backgrounds, church attendance, length of time since marital breakdown, and those with and without children. As a safeguarding consideration, any participant whose marital breakdown had been within the last two years was not included in the sample. This was to balance the principles of autonomy and choice about participation with the protection of those engaging in research from further harm.

Interview Thirteen participants were interviewed (all female), aged from 42 to 75 years ($M=59.85$, $SD=10.96$). Of the sample 54% identified as white British, and 46% were currently attending church. Participants had been married on average for 17.8 years ($SD=7.52$) and had a mean age of 47.92 ($SD=7.01$) years at the time of marital breakdown or divorce. At the time of the interview, it had been 12.51 ($SD=9.52$) years since the marital breakdown.

Data collection An advert about the study was posted on the Broken Rites Facebook page. This provided an outline of the study and the link to the survey. Those who clicked the link were taken to the information about the survey, the consent questions, and then the survey questions. The survey was open from March 2023 to May 2023.

Participants were sent an email to invite them to participate in the interview stage of the research. Those who indicated a willingness to participate were provided with the information sheet and consent form. Once consent was given, online interviews were then arranged, conducted, recorded, and transcribed.

Data analysis Likert-scale responses were re-coded so that 1 equated to very *unhelpful/strongly disagree* and 5 equated to very *helpful/strongly agree*, such that high scores represented that the help needed or the support received was very helpful. The number of participants who did not receive support was calculated. Scores for support received were then based only on those who had received support and thus provided a Likert score. Data are presented as descriptive statistics.

As the aim of the qualitative questions within the survey was to develop the interview questions, these data are not reported here. For the interview data, inductive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2013) was used. The analysis followed the six-stage model of Braun and Clarke, adopting guidelines from their recent reviews of the approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). The analysis identified key messages in the responses. The stages of analysis included familiarization, systematic data coding, and three coding sweeps conducted at the semantic and latent levels. Following the suggestion of Braun et al. (2016), the data were removed to ensure the codes evoked the data without needing to access the original transcripts. Initial themes were generated that shared a central organizing concept. The research questions were revisited to ensure they were answered. Then themes were reviewed and named to reflect the central organizing concept. To provide some investigator triangulation, a consensus discussion took place between two members of the research team to check the codes and themes.

Ethics

The study was given ethical approval by the Division of Psychology ethics committee at the University of Chester. The research was designed in accordance with the British Psychological Society's ethical guidelines (British Psychological Society, 2021). A participant information sheet was developed for the surveys and interviews, providing details of the study focus, procedure, and dissemination activities as well as post-interview withdrawal details and sources of support. Thus, to ensure participants could make an informed choice about participation and understood that participation was voluntary, due to the sensitive nature of the research, a distress protocol was developed for the interview stage. All data was stored securely. All identifying details were removed at the transcription stage, so the data were anonymized.

Reflexivity

The interviewer, also a divorced clergy spouse, needed to bracket their own experiences and perceptions whilst conducting the background research, creating the survey, and interviewing (Chan & Boyd Farmer, 2017). Throughout the research process, they kept a reflective journal (McNair et al., 2008; Nowell et al., 2017). In addition, they employed reflective exercises before and after the interviews to explore their assumptions, values, and life experiences, thereby creating greater awareness of how these factors might impact the process (Chan & Boyd Farmer, 2017). On occasion, when they identified with the negative

experiences participants disclosed in the survey and interview responses, they took this to personal counseling (McNair et al., 2008). However, the shared religious background and experiences between the participants and the interviewer facilitated understanding of the religious culture of the participants and the religious language used in the survey and interviews, minimizing misinterpretation (Briggs, 1986).

Results

Quantitative findings

Support needed and received For all domains, support needs were typically rated higher during and after the marital breakdown rather than before, indicating that these are crucial periods to consider. The need for emotional, spiritual, and social/friendship support was consistently high across all phases, peaking during the breakdown. Housing support was relatively low compared to other domains, though it increased post-breakdown (see Table 1).

On average, half the sample received support from the church or people in the church. However, when support was not received, it was consistently not received across the breakdown timespan in all domains of support. For support from family and friends, the patterns varied across domains, with more people not receiving financial, legal, or housing support. However, friends and family tended to provide greater spiritual, emotional, and social/friendship support (as referenced by the smaller number of people reporting not receiving support). Furthermore, the reduction in the number of people not receiving support across the timespan of the breakdown could indicate the acknowledgement that greater support is needed during and after the breakdown. More people did not receive support from external organizations. The pattern indicated that this type of support was received more often after the breakdown rather than before or during, highlighting possible competency-based differences. In addition, it is also important to recognize that this support came from within familial and religious support networks. Despite this, there was a significant proportion of individuals who did not receive support (see Table 1).

Ratings of the support received Support ratings highlight distinct patterns across sources. Family and friends, organizations, and people external to the church more consistently received high ratings across all stages of the breakdown, especially in domains like emotional and social support. Notably, spiritual support from family and friends increased after the marital breakdown, whereas domains like counseling saw a decline. Church-related support, however, showed greater variability, although support was generally rated higher across the domains after the marital breakdown. These findings emphasize the value of having external and personal networks during challenging times, though the type and timing of the support needed can shift significantly (see Table 2).

Qualitative findings

This section presents key themes relevant to expectations and reality, identified through reflexive thematic analysis. These themes form the basis of a series of recommendations

Table 1 Mean ratings of support needed and the number of participants who did not receive support across seven domains (Spiritual, Emotional, Counseling, Social/Friendship, Financial, Legal, and Housing) during the periods before, during, and after a marriage breakdown

	Support Needed		Number of participants who did not receive support												
				Church/People in the Church				Family and Friends				External to the Church			
	Before	During	After	Before	During	After	Before	During	After	Before	During	After	Before	During	After
Spiritual	3.85 (1.26)	4.26 (1.06)	4.33 (1.07)	12	11	12	11	11	10	8	11	10	11	10	8
Emotional	4.37 (1.04)	4.70 (.67)	4.70 (.70)	14	13	14	7	4	4	3	7	4	7	4	3
Counseling	4.00 (1.11)	4.56 (.98)	4.63 (.88)	18	15	15	18	18	18	17	18	18	18	18	17
Social/Friendship	3.77 (1.11)	4.11 (1.16)	4.30 (1.10)	10	9	13	6	6	6	3	6	6	6	6	3
Financial	3.54 (1.17)	4.30 (1.10)	4.23 (1.07)	17	15	17	17	15	15	12	17	15	17	15	12
Legal	3.70 (1.27)	4.67 (.62)	4.56 (.70)	22	18	22	23	23	21	19	23	21	23	21	19
Housing	3.41 (1.25)	4.15 (1.30)	4.15 (1.23)	17	14	15	20	20	18	17	20	18	20	18	17

Support needed ratings are given as mean values (SD), with 5 equating to very needed and 0 to not needed. The number of participants who did not receive support is given as number of participant and *n*

Table 2 Mean ratings of support received across all sources and seven domains (Spiritual, Emotional, Counseling, Social/Friendship, Financial, Legal, and Housing) during the periods before, during, and after a marriage breakdown

	Church/People in the Church			Family and Friends			Organizations or People External to the Church		
	Before	During	After	Before	During	After	Before	During	After
	Spiritual	3.07 (.10)	3.08 (1.08)	3.07 (.10)	3.33 (1.04)	3.76 (.75)	3.95 (.71)	3.75 (1.04)	3.57 (.96)
Emotional	3.17 (1.19)	3.54 (1.13)	3.67 (.65)	4.00 (1.21)	4.39 (.89)	4.35 (.57)	3.82 (.87)	4.08 (.64)	4.06 (.94)
Counseling	3.50 (.93)	3.82 (.98)	4.18 (.87)	3.89 (.60)	3.50 (.76)	3.33 (.87)	4.11 (.93)	4.50 (.67)	4.00 (1.29)
Social/Friendship	3.71 (.83)	3.24 (.90)	3.46 (.66)	4.25 (.72)	4.43 (.68)	4.17 (.82)	4.00 (.67)	4.00 (.63)	3.94 (.75)
Financial	2.63 (.52)	2.80 (1.03)	3.50 (1.07)	3.50 (.53)	3.58 (1.64)	4.00 (.88)	2.80 (1.10)	3.90 (.74)	3.87 (.64)
Legal	2.75 (.50)	3.00 (1.06)	3.25 (.50)	3.67 (1.15)	3.40 (.55)	3.50 (.76)	3.80 (1.10)	4.00 (1.07)	3.93 (1.10)
Housing	3.00 (1.00)	3.25 (.87)	3.50 (1.08)	3.50 (.84)	4.11 (.93)	4.10 (.74)	3.00 (.82)	3.83 (.75)	3.86 (.90)

Values given as mean rating (*N*/*S*) and standard deviation (*SD*)

for improving pastoral care. These recommendations can be found at the end of the discussion section.

Impact of expectations of clergy marriage and families Participants noted unrealistically high expectations of clergy marriage. These included the expectation that a clergy marriage should be a model marriage, happy and perfect. As one participant put it, “The idea is that your marriage will be perfect, a model to others and you will always be happy.” It was noted that there was often an expectation that clergy spouses would support their partners in their work, “for the spouse or partner to be supportive of their partner’s ministry.” However, some participants noted that they were expected to provide quiet support without overshadowing the clergy member: “Well, to be there to do everything, I think to do to sort of be the power behind the throne but keep quiet.” Similarly, it was noted by one participant that the role was to support but not to “create any waves or to put the head above the parapet or cause any problems or issues.” The findings suggest that the expectations were linked to a feeling that “they just want everything to tick along hunky-dory.” In addition to the high expectations of clergy spouses, there were also expectations of the couple’s children in terms of their behavior and presence at church, “I mean, the other thing about being a model family is that your children are expected to be impeccably behaved.” Despite the level of expectations, several participants commented on how much they enjoyed the role of clergy spouse: “I loved that role.”

In the research, expectations of model families and idealized marriages appeared to have direct implications when marriage difficulties arose. High expectations seemed to act as barriers to being able to share marital difficulties and led to feelings of shame and guilt: “I felt mortified and ashamed that, you know, I couldn’t keep my marriage together.” They also led to concern about judgement from, or impact on, the church community, “We were very much like the model family with, you know, lovely family, two children and all happy and jolly, and so it did come as a shock to everyone, then, when things went wrong”. One person commented that marital breakdown was “an embarrassment to the church.”

It was clear from the research findings that there were unrealistic and idealistic expectations about clergy spouses, marriage, and families, and these expectations had implications for those who then went on to experience marriage breakdown.

Impact of marital breakdown The impact of marital breakdown was clear throughout the survey and interviews, “What happened to us, the shock and the trauma was immense. You know, so much so that I can still feel it here when I say that to you.” Some noted feelings of injustice, particularly where they were compelled to move out of the marital home, and for the children were also impacted: “the injustice of it and the effect on the kids, the injustice for them.” One participant recounted the injustice of having to move with no support given during this process, “I’ve got two young children, and and we had to move out. Yeah. No, no one helped, no one helped.”

One of the key outcomes was isolation: “That’s why I’m really glad that you’re doing some proper research on this because at the time I felt so alone and completely unsupported.” Isolation was compounded by the breakdown of the relationship not only with the spouse but also with the wider church community, “I was really heartbroken to leave him, not for him, but because it kind of felt like breaking with the parish.” One participant likened the impact to that of a bereavement, “It was a loss. Yeah, it was. Because you have the bereavement of the marriage and then you have the bereavement of the church community.” Isolation for some was also a result of a lack of pastoral care and support, “But pastorally

I felt a little bit, you know, like I was sort of floating out in space, you know, linked to a spaceship with a kind of umbilical cord, but not really with anybody". The depth of that impact of the isolation experienced was spoken about in several interviews. One participant summarized this powerfully: "I came across an amazing quote the other day that I wrote down because it... it's the worst cruelty that can be inflicted on a human being is isolation."

Some noted the long-term nature of the impact of clergy marital breakdown: "So it's the long term because the impact of what has gone on continues to this day", "I was just traumatized for about two years, and I never thought this would happen to me". For one participant the outcome was the need to take early retirement, but this could potentially have been avoided if support had been in place: "I took the decision to take early retirement 'cause I wasn't doing the job properly, and I wasn't doing the job properly because of the impact on, the impact by the marriage breakup and the lack of, the lack of support and pastoral care. I wasn't functioning".

Overall, the survey and interviews demonstrated that clergy marital breakdown had both short- and long-term impacts, and the depth of impact was clearly detailed. A factor that is of importance is that clergy marital breakdown includes the relationship, family, and broader social network, as with other marital breakdowns. However, this impact also includes the church community. It involves a breakdown of relationships and support, as well as experiences of isolation from a community that had previously been an integral element of life and, for some, a valued part of their identity. The qualitative findings suggest the necessity of good-quality, accessible pastoral care for clergy spouses.

Lack of effective pastoral support Whilst the need for support was clearly documented in the findings, many experienced a lack of support when marital breakdown occurred: "The fact is that there is no help or provision for clergy wives", "The church should not abandon clergy wives or their children", "I received none of that. I didn't get a text, e-mail, letter, visit, phone call, absolutely nothing. I was pretty much airbrushed out of the system, to be honest with you." One participant noted a need for support but a lack of this in practice. "I needed and I felt that I deserved some pastoral support, and I got absolutely nothing." Others commented on the failure of people to listen and respond when marital breakdown occurred: "I was never listened to, and neither have other clergy wives. They have never been listened to." Being unable to access pastoral support was common across experiences: "I didn't have a voice, I didn't have access to anybody." One participant noted the focus being on the clergy member rather than on themselves. This resonated with other interviews, "I got such little support... little help from anywhere that it did seem like it was all about him, really. He was the important one."

For others, there were experiences of pastoral care and support, but these were unhelpful or ineffective. "The pastoral care that I received when my marriage broke down was, quite frankly, fairly rubbish, and I think from my membership of Broken Rites, I think that's a reasonably common experience". Others' experiences of pastoral care were damaging: "My own experience was so appalling." The need for pastoral care was summarized powerfully in one quote: "I was holding everybody together, but nobody was holding me together."

A few participants discussed Bishop's Visitors, whose role was developed specifically to offer support to clergy spouses. Some participants had positive experiences of Bishop's Visitors. However, for others, the Bishop's Visitor was not experienced as helpful or able to provide the pastoral care the individual required. "In my situation, I couldn't access the Bishop's Visitor without going through the Bishop". "At our very first meeting she said to me, oh, I'm here for emotional and spiritual support, and I thought great, I've got loads of

that, what I need is financial and legal know-how.” For one participant when a Bishop’s Visitor left there was no replacement care, “so that pastorally wise, the Bishop’s Visitor pootles off... nobody takes over from there.”

It is clear from the research that pastoral care was absent before, during, and after the participants’ marital breakdown, despite their real need for this form of support.

Positive experiences of pastoral care and support There were some examples of positive pastoral care and support that participants received. One participant noted, “I had myself experienced clergy marital breakdown and I was pleased with the pastoral care I received. It made me feel less alone.” Others commented on specific organizations that had provided exemplary care for them: “Broken Rites is an amazing support system,” “I heard about the Clergy Support Trust, and they have been phenomenal.” Others received care and support from informal sources such as friends and relatives: “My support came from my parents.” For some participants, people from within churches provided support following the breakdown of their marriage: “Some people in the church were amazing.” Those holding roles within the church institution were recognized as providing support for some: “The bishop was unbelievably brilliant,” “The archdeacon was very helpful.” The role of the Bishop’s Visitor was experienced as positive by some of the participants in the study: “And I was put in touch with the Bishops Visitor, she was very good... she listened, but she also provided practical support that she offered for a few months”, “The thing is that this Bishops Visitor I met was marvelous”, “The most help I got was from the Bishops Visitor”.

The findings illustrate a range of positive experiences of pastoral care through personal and institutional support. They demonstrate the impact that this care can have and that there is already some good practice in this area. Understanding the key components of positive pastoral care is fundamental for replicating it and developing models that include these elements.

The participants described several kinds of pastoral care that they wanted. Their responses in the surveys and interviews are summarized in the following subsections.

Care with the person at the center The first key element of effective pastoral care emphasized in the interviews was the need for it to be centered on dignity and respect, recognizing the personhood of each individual. Several quotes illustrated this powerfully: “I just wanted to be treated as a human being,” “I’m a person myself,” “Treat me as a human being who has feelings.” One participant asked for pastoral care which “treats me with respect and courtesy and just understands who I am.” These quotes resonated across the interviews, emphasizing both the need for pastoral care and the factors that make it effective and supportive. A core factor is that pastoral care needs to center and value the person, reflecting this through dignity and respect.

Holistic and individualized care Beyond being person-centered, survey and interview responses emphasized that pastoral care needed to be holistic and able to address the many areas of life that were impacted by clergy separation and divorce. Participants noted that pastoral care needed to provide support across the financial, practical, emotional, spiritual, mental health and wellbeing, and social domains: “I mean, physical well-being, it’s all of it really. It’s your physical well-being, your spiritual well-being, your emotional well-being. I think it encompasses all of that really, I think particularly in a church setting, I think that sort of we should be more aware of all parts of people and all different kind of areas of life

that can need that kind of care and support". Participants noted that good pastoral care was a deliberate action, "It looks like a deliberate caretaking."

Participant responses frequently emphasized the need for holistic and individualized pastoral care. Some responses suggested a focus on certain areas of care, while other areas were absent. For some individuals, it was essential that their spiritual needs were considered alongside their practical needs. Therefore, pastoral care for clergy spouses should consider all aspects of the individual, including personal needs and requirements. Pastoral care needs to be tailored to the individual if it is to be effective and helpful.

Pre-emptive care The need for pre-emptive information and action was clear in both the survey and interview responses. Participants reflected that more information was needed about clergy marriage breakdown and where to obtain information and support, "I think it's like that information gap, it's knowing how frequent this is, you know at least one in four clergy marriages fail after ordination, and you don't know where to get help from". The responses reflected the need for preparation for marriage and information about support for marital breakdown to be provided early in the marriage: "I think there needs to be some degree of preparation for the spouse", "There is a need for information which is clearly accessible and given early on in the marriage". Participants felt it was important to provide clergy spouses with information about relevant sources of support that could be available to them in the case of marital breakdown and difficulties: "I think people need to know about Broken Rites at theological college." Some participants were unaware of the role of the Bishop's Visitor: "I had no idea but there was such a thing as a Bishop's Visitor that I could access." The need for pre-emptive care was emphasized by some participants who stated that when marriage breakdown is being experienced, there is a lack of personal resources to invest in finding support: "When you're bereft, grieving, traumatized, in total shock that your life has changed beyond recognition overnight, there is no spare energy to be proactive".

One of the challenges participants faced was that information about support for clergy marriage and breakdown was given to the clergy member and not to the spouse. They recommended that independent information should be provided to clergy spouses, as reflected in the following quote: "I think people need to know the fact of the matter is that clergy families do breakdown, you never think it's going to happen to you. So, improving pastoral care going forward is about giving clergy spouses independent information from their partners."

Overall, it was clear that there was little pre-emptive information provided about marital breakdown and clergy divorce for clergy spouses. This left them unprepared when they faced these experiences themselves. Information about where to access help and support when experiencing marriage difficulties and breakdown was limited and often provided to the clergy member rather than the clergy spouse. It was often at the point of marital breakdown, when individuals were experiencing loss and trauma, that they were required to seek support for themselves. Therefore, clergy spouses should receive information about clergy marriage, clergy marriage breakdown, and sources of support independently at the start of their marriage.

Persistent and consistent care A further aspect that participants reflected upon was the need for pastoral care, which was both persistent and consistent. Responses highlighted the importance of regular contact and check-ins with the clergy spouse: "Make contact, make contact and support, actually check in to see how they're doing." A prevalent message

across the survey and interviews was that good pastoral care required an investment of time and regular contact with the clergy spouse. Other reflections were around the need for consistency of care. It was felt most helpful to have somebody who could provide ongoing care and support rather than a range of individuals and agencies: “It needs to be kind of one person allocated as an ongoing link, so there’s always someone, an ongoing person, and you don’t have to keep retelling the story to somebody else all the time”.

As demonstrated earlier, divorce and separation had a profound, and ongoing impact on clergy spouses. Therefore, participants suggested that pastoral care must reflect the longevity of the impact and trauma experienced, “Well, you know, three to six months and the person should be sorted, but I think that probably it’s the case for many but it’s not always, and I think it’s like having a safety net if you need pastoral care again”.

The responses demonstrate that effective pastoral care must be proactive, persistent, and consistent to fully support individuals experiencing marital breakdown.

Discussion

The findings show that expectations of clergy spouses and marriages were linked to the impact of marital breakdown and created barriers to disclosing marital difficulties. It is important to note that many clergy spouses felt positively about their roles. However, when marital breakdown occurs, a dissonance arises between the expectations and the reality of marriage. This results in personal feelings of guilt and shame but also, at a community and institutional level, difficulty with processing and accepting marital breakdown. This therefore poses challenges for implementing timely and effective support for the spouse.

This learning has direct implications for the development of effective pastoral care. The findings from the survey and interviews echoed the work of Armstrong (2015), who reflected on idealistic expectations of clergy marriage. In the current research study, participants shared expectations of model marriages and children who were involved in the life of the church and who always behaved well. Participants also noted that the role of clergy spouse held with it a range of expectations, including active support of the spouse and engaging in a range of roles within the church context – thus, being a significant part of the church community in a supportive role for their spouse. Participants also reflected on *how* they were to conduct these roles, which was often quietly behind the scenes and without overshadowing the clergy member to whom they were married. This resonates with Frame and Shehan (1994), who commented that the job requirement of a clergy spouse is to serve the community whilst maintaining composure and self-control. However, the understated nature of the clergy spouse role may compound difficulties experienced during and after marital breakdown. As discussed in the introduction, Kurtz et al. (2017) note that the quiet nature of support provided by clergy spouses often leads to a focus on the public ministry of the clergy member. The consequences of this can be blame directed at the clergy spouse when marital breakdown occurs.

It is important to note that several participants experienced the role of clergy spouse as positive and integral to their identity and felt like valued members of their community. It is important for those providing pastoral care to have a detailed understanding of the expectations of clergy spouses and to consider that this role can be a valued part of an individual’s identity, which changes when marital breakdown occurs. Pastoral care needs

to acknowledge and support individuals in considering the impact on identity and how this can be addressed.

The expectations related to clergy marriage created substantial barriers when marital difficulties began to be experienced. Participants commented on finding it difficult to share about the realities of their marriage in a context where clergy marriage was seen to be ideal and permanent. Christian teachings on divorce as a form of failure (Gonzalez, 1999) or the framing of divorce as deviant within religious communities (Jenkins, 2010) can act as a barrier to the disclosure of marital difficulties. In a context where marriage is equated to upholding Christian values (Uorko & Enobong, 2022), clergy divorce and separation can be seen as the antithesis of this. Thus, idealistic expectations of clergy marriage can be argued to work against early disclosure of marital difficulties. Christian teachings on marriage and divorce may provide further barriers to clergy spouses feeling able to seek support during this time. Again, this is a critical area for those providing pastoral care to understand. The findings suggest the need to include open and transparent conversations about expectations and how they might impact disclosure in pastoral conversations. They also demonstrate why these topics should be discussed with all clergy couples early in marriage or even prior to marriage. Further, pastoral care providers should be mindful of the way in which expectations can work against disclosure and be aware that time is needed to build a relationship between pastoral care workers and clergy spouses experiencing marital breakdown. It will only be when a trust relationship is established that the spouse may feel able to share their experiences with the pastoral care provider.

One outcome of these expectations and values was the experience of shame clergy spouses felt when encountering marital difficulties and experiencing marital breakdown. Several participants commented on their sense of shame and their concern about the impact on the broader religious community. Feelings of shame have been reported in other research focused on experiences of divorce within the Catholic faith community (Konstam et al., 2016). Reflecting on the research findings, it could be argued that expectations of a model and happy marriage can result in feelings of shame when clergy spouses experience marital breakdown and divorce. Pastoral care providers who are aware of possible feelings of shame and experiences of judgement may be able to discuss these topics with those they are supporting to allow the clergy spouse to give voice to and process these feelings.

Isolation is a key theme in the research findings. Spouses often must find alternative housing and have a sense of no longer belonging to the Christian faith community that they had been serving as a clergy spouse. The results resonate with the work of King (2003), who found that isolation, guilt, and shame can reduce access to support during and after marital breakdown. This is one explanation for our research findings – that often help, support, and pastoral care came from friends and family rather than from the church or people holding roles associated with the church. Similarly, Lee (2007) found that most clergy spouses obtained support from family members when experiencing marital breakdown. If clergy spouses experience isolation during and post-marital breakdown, it may be difficult for them to obtain support from the church. Further, the research study reported in this article found that only about half of the participants were still attending church. Therefore, sources of support available from the church may not be easily accessible. Further, there is evidence in previous literature of a paucity of formal support being offered (Frame & Shehan, 1994). Therefore, where support roles exist, it is essential that clear information about these roles is provided pre-emptively.

The research findings make it clear that information about marriage breakdown and support needed to be available from the start of the marriage and provided directly to clergy spouses. Currently, information is provided to clergy members. Information

should also be independently provided to the clergy spouse and should focus on the needs and experience of the clergy spouse. Pre-emptive care could make a significant difference when a couple is beginning to experience marital difficulties. If there is active early reflection on the expectations of clergy marriage and spouses, this could result in productive conversations, which might promote earlier sharing and disclosure. Further, if information is provided before an individual experiences marital difficulty, at which time their resources may be they will already have the information they need about how to access support.

Some individuals did comment positively on the support received from those holding church roles or roles related to the church. The role of Bishop's Visitors was reflected on by some participants. This role was created specifically to support clergy spouses and partners when experiencing marital difficulties. Participants described both positive and negative experiences of this role, and the findings from this research may provide further guidance for the training and development of people serving in this role. The study highlights the need to reassess the formal support provided by the church, including relevant training for those in associated roles. The findings of this article should be included in this training, together with the recommendations for the improvement of pastoral care previously developed from the study (Oakley et al., 2024a).

A further related factor is the lack of support for the spiritual needs of clergy spouses. Survey and interview data indicated that many people had a desire to continue with their faith and to discuss spiritual issues. However, they often lacked the support needed to do so. As clergy spouses are often in the position of having to leave their local faith community and place of residence, they may not have easy access to trusted members of their faith community to receive support. External agencies and therapeutic support may not feel equipped to address the spiritual aspects of their experience. Previous studies have shown a lack of faith literacy in statutory services as well as in counseling and therapy (Murray, 2002; Oakley et al., 2019, 2024b). The study shows the need to approach pastoral care holistically, including spiritual issues, and to ensure support is accessible to those experiencing marriage breakdown.

The findings from this study provide clear evidence of the relationship between expectations of clergy marriage and spouses and the barriers to disclosure of marital difficulties and accessing appropriate pastoral support. They also provide a detailed description of qualities of pastoral care that would be helpful for divorced and separated clergy spouses. The recommendations reflect the experiences of clergy spouses during and after marital breakdown and separation. One consequence of marital breakdown is often an impact on the individual's sense of self, including a change to roles, residence, activities, and identity. The key to good pastoral care is that the care is person-centered. The individual is put back at the center of care and support, and the person is seen within the service provided.

The findings illustrated that support was needed across many domains: financial, practical, emotional, emotional, spiritual, mental health and wellbeing, and social. The need for holistic care was evident in the study. This care needs to be deliberate and intentional, taking account of all the barriers that are faced by clergy spouses.

Participants shared the traumatic and lasting impact of clergy separation and divorce but often contrasted this to the short-term care that was available. The study's findings provide an argument for additional areas of impact for clergy spouses, including impacts on their role in the faith community, access to this community, and their spiritual life. Therefore, pastoral care needs to be consistent and persistent to address the lasting level of trauma and impact experienced.

Strengths and limitations

This study is one of only a few studies to focus on the pastoral care needs of divorced and separated clergy spouses. The mixed-methods approach has enabled the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data to explore this area further. However, the sample cannot be considered representative as it was recruited through one U.K. organization providing support to divorced and separated clergy spouses. Although not deliberate, the interview sample consists only of female clergy spouses. Some Christian groups have women and LGBTQ+ clergy. It is therefore accepted that the findings are not generalizable across divorced and separated clergy spouses. The sample size is relatively small, and therefore the results should be interpreted accordingly. However, there is clear learning and application from the study findings, which can lead to an improvement in pastoral care in this area. Further research is needed across diverse cultural contexts and in different clergy relationships, for example, where spouses identify as male or in LGBT+ relationships, to determine if the findings from this study have universal resonance or if there are differences in various study populations.

Conclusion

This study focused on understanding the experiences of pastoral care of divorced and separated clergy spouses. This paper has illustrated the link between expectations of clergy marriage and spouses and the experience of marital breakdown and argued that current expectations lead to barriers to disclosure and accessing support. There is a need to consider addressing these expectations in the future. Further, the study illustrates the importance of training those who are providing pastoral care in issues related to expectations, barriers, the impact of clergy divorce and separation, and the need for holistic pastoral care.

Acknowledgements We would like to acknowledge Broken Rites for their funding of this study and for their contributions to the research design, as well as for acting as gatekeepers for recruitment.

Author Contribution LA designed and conducted the research and drafted the reflexivity section of the manuscript. LO supervised the design and conduction of the research, analysed all interview data, and wrote the qualitative methods section and the discussion and conclusion. SV analysed the quantitative data and wrote the quantitative method and results sections. JC analysed the qualitative survey data and wrote the introduction and compiled the reference section. ML supervised the design and conduction of the research and edited and revised the whole manuscript.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Armstrong, N. (2015). Divorce and the English clergy c.1970–1990. *Twentieth Century British History*, 26(2), 298–320. <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwu062>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2—Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. Sage.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Weate, P. (2016). Using thematic analysis in sport and exercise research. In B. Smith & A. C. Sparkes, *Routledge handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise* (pp. 213–227). Routledge.
- Briggs, C. L. (1986). Learning how to ask: A sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139165990>
- British Psychological Society. (2021). *Code of ethics and conduct*. <https://explore.bps.org.uk/content/report-guideline/bpsrep.2021.inf94>
- Chan, C., & Boyd Farmer, L. (2017). Making the case for interpretative phenomenological analysis with LGBTGEQ+ persons and communities. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 11(4), 285–300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15538605.2017.1380558>
- Church of England. (2021). Policy and guidance for the Church of England in the care of the spouses and partners of divorced and separated clergy. https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/spouses-and-partners-of-divorced-and-separated-clergy-policy-final_-002.pdf
- Darling, C. A., Hill, E. W., & McWey, L. M. (2004). Understanding stress and quality of life for clergy and clergy spouses. *Stress and Health*, 20(5), 261–277. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.1031>
- Drumm, R., Cooper, L., Seifert, M., McBride, D., & Sedlacek, D. (2017). “Love everybody, keep your mouth shut, don’t have an opinion”: Role expectations among Seventh-day Adventist pastor spouses. *Social Work and Christianity*, 44(3), 94–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2017.1363011>
- Frame, M. W., & Shehan, C. L. (1994). Work and well-being in the two-person career: Relocation stress and coping among clergy husbands and wives. *Family Relations*, 43(2), 196–205. <https://doi.org/10.2307/585323>
- Gonzalez, H. A. (1999). Pastors’ theological perspective on divorce and remarriage. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 31(1–2), 141–159. https://doi.org/10.1300/J087v31n01_08
- Hall, T. W. (1997). The personal functioning of pastors: A review of empirical research with implications for the care of pastors. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 25(2), 240–253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009164719702500208>
- Hileman, L. (2008). The unique needs of Protestant clergy families: Implications for marriage and family counselling. *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 10(2), 119–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19349630802081152>
- Hobbs, V. (2023). The discourse of divorce in conservative Christian sermons. In L. L. Paterson & G. Turner, *Approaches to Discourses of Marriage* (pp. 89–106). Routledge.
- Jenkins, K. E. (2010). In concert and alone: Divorce and congregational experience. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 49(2), 278–292. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2010.01509.x>
- Jones, L., & Plisco, M. (2021). The stories of women, by women, married to male ministry leaders. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 24(10), 1037–1049. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2021.1990873>
- King, S. (2003). The impact of compulsive sexual behaviors on clergy marriages: Perspectives and concerns of the pastor’s wife. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity: The Journal Of Treatment And Prevention*, 10(2–3), 193–199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/107201603902306307>
- Konstam, V., Karwin, S., Curran, T., Lyons, M., & Celen-Demirtas, S. (2016). Stigma and divorce: A relevant lens for emerging and young adult women? *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 57(3), 173–194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2016.1150149>
- Kurtz, F. B., Rennebohm, S. B., Lucas, H. L., Carlile, J. A., & Thoburn, J. W. (2017). “Learning to have a voice”: The spouse’s experience of clergy sexual misconduct. *Pastoral Psychology*, 66, 437–460. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-017-0764-2>
- Lee, C. (2007). Patterns of stress and support among Adventist clergy: Do pastors and their spouses differ? *Pastoral Psychology*, 55, 761–771. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-007-0086-x>

- McMinn, M. R., Kerrick, S. P., Duma, S. J., Campbell, E. R., & Jung, J. B. (2008). Positive coping among wives of male Christian clergy. *Pastoral Psychology*, *56*, 445–457. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-008-0122-5>
- McNair, R., Taft, A., & Hegarty, K. (2008). Using reflexivity to enhance in-depth interviewing skills for the clinician researcher. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *8*, 73–83. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-8-73>
- Murray, K. A. (2002). Religion and divorce: Implications and strategies for counseling. *The Family Journal*, *10*(2), 190–194. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480702102008>
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Oakley, L., Ann, L., Vaughan, S., Carroll, J. & Lafferty, M. (2024a) Experiences and recommendations of pastoral support for divorced and separated clergy spouses, Division of Psychology, University of Chester. https://www.brokenrites.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Broken-Rites_University-of-Chester-Research-Report_WEB.pdf
- Oakley, L., Kinmond, K., & Blundell, P. (2024b). Responding well to spiritual abuse: Practice implications for counselling and psychotherapy. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, *52*(2), 189–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2023.2283883>
- Oakley, L., Kinmond, K., Humphreys, J., & Dioum, M. (2019). Safeguarding children who are exposed to abuse linked to faith or belief. *Child Abuse Review*, *28*(1), 27–28. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2540>
- Office for National Statistics. (2024). *Divorces in England and Wales: 2022*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/divorce/bulletins/divorcesinenglandandwales/2022>
- Potts, D. J. (2021). Suffering in silence: Examining the silent suffering of the wives of Christian clergy, advocating for their voice and value. *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Advancing Theory and Professional Practice Through Scholarly and Reflective Publications*, *75*(1), 51–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1542305020968050>
- Scott, S. B., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., Allen, E. S., & Markman, H. J. (2013). Reasons for divorce and recollections of premarital intervention: Implications for improving relationship education. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice*, *2*(2), 131–145. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032025>
- Uorko, F., & Enobong, S. I. (2022). Divorce amongst Christian couples in Yoruba land: Challenges and implications. *HTS Theological Studies*, *78*(3), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i3.7562>
- Wells, C. R., Probst, J., McKeown, R., Mitchem, S., & Whiejong, H. (2012). The relationship between work-related stress and boundary-related stress within the clerical profession. *Journal of Religion and Health*, *51*, 215–230. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-011-9501-9>

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.