





# Experiences of divorced people in Pentecostal churches in Botswana



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**Background:** Cases of divorce are on the increase across societies and within the Pentecostal churches. Pentecostal church doctrine disapproves of divorce, and the people experience discrimination consequently. Despite the overall impact divorce has on the spiritual well-being of the victims, Pentecostal churches do not provide sufficient support to them.

**Objectives:** The objectives of the study were to explore the lived experiences of divorced people in Pentecostal churches and the impact divorce had on their spiritual well-being.

**Method:** A qualitative phenomenological design was utilised. The study recruited six divorced people, three pastors and 24 men and women from three Pentecostal churches. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to select the sample. A thematic content analysis was used to analyse data.

**Results:** The study revealed four major effects that divorced people face such as psychological and emotional effects, social effects, spiritual effects and economic effects.

**Conclusion:** The study's findings unearthed the impact that divorce has on the divorcee's spiritual well-being. Although the Bible disapproves of divorce, some research indicates that divorce may have positive outcomes in some instances, and therefore, it should not always be viewed negatively.

**Contribution:** The findings of the study would possibly assist Pentecostal church leadership in coming up with effective interventions that can support divorced members in the church.

**Keywords:** divorced; lived experiences; Pentecostal church; consequences; good; bad; spiritual; well-being.

## Introduction

### Background of the study

An increase of divorce cases is seen across societies (Branch-Harris & Cox 2015; Manna, Doriza & Oktaviani 2021; Mohlatlole, Sithole & Shirindi 2018). According to Harkonen (2013), divorce (the termination of a marital union) continues to ravage people's lives. Many of the marriages are dysfunctional (Sayers, Kohn & Heavey 1998). Although people desire to get married, staying married is not an easy task (Stewart et al. 2016). Some of the common causes of divorce are childlessness, early marriage, poor communication, high expectations, financial crisis, infidelity, and a lack of intimacy (Elijah & Yusufu 2020). Divorce is a stressful and psychologically challenging experience in life. Therefore, religion can serve as a powerful source of relief for individuals coping with stressful experiences like divorce. No wonder many people turn to religion when faced with life-threatening challenges.

Although one would expect that divorce would not be found in church, some of the people who divorce are people in church (Comfort & Chinyeaka 2018). Consequently, deciding to end a marriage to some religious people can be a hard decision to make mainly because of religious beliefs. It is ultimately leading to stress among religious people (McMahon 2018).

Guttman (1993) has argued that religions have specific positions on issues of divorce, which tries to suppress its likelihood. Most importantly, research has shown that religious people, because of their robust moral beliefs and convictions in marriage, are less likely to divorce compared to less religious people (Tanaka 2010). However, as Senekane (1995) puts it, disapproval of divorce has led many couples in churches to find themselves stuck in unhappy marriages, which, in turn, affect their overall well-being.

As stated earlier, traumatic negative and positive effects of divorce have been documented (Mohi 2015; Nathanson 1995). Divorce can positively change the trajectory of a person. A high number of people reported being happier and more successful in their lives after divorce (Mohi 2015). To a certain extent, ending a marriage could be the best decision for some couples. Conversely, research confirms that divorce among church members have detrimental negative effects on their health as well as their spirituality (Simiyu 2021; Tanaka 2010). In addition, some researchers view it as a spiritual crisis for both men and women whose religious beliefs are challenged (Nathanson 1995). It is also argued in a study by Krumrei, Mahoney and Pargament (2009) that 78% of participants confirmed to have experienced spiritual challenges because of divorce. In a more recent study, the divorced felt ashamed and ceased attending church services because of their divorce status (Simiyu 2021).

Mitigating the effects of divorce among people in churches is therefore crucial. Tanaka (2010) has studied the significant and positive effect of church participation on the well-being of divorced members. Although there are various stress coping styles (Simonic & Klobucar, 2017), Sen, Colucci and Browne (2022) emphasised that religion provides comfort and coping strategies during difficult times. Nathanson (1995) also writes about religion as a source of strength. Spiritual well-being is important as it soothes the soul. In this article, we report the unheard stories of divorced people and how their experiences at their local churches affected their participation in church and their overall spiritual growth. This study contributes to the body of knowledge in the area of divorce.

## Problem statement

Divorce has become a frequent topic of discussion around the globe (Branch-Harris & Cox 2015). Despite the emotional pain, and the overall impact divorce has on the spiritual well-being of the divorcing couples, the church does not provide sufficient support to assist in dealing with the pain and spiritual welfare. Mahoney, Krumrei and Pargament (2008) have reported little support given to divorcing individuals in religious institutions. It is against this background, therefore, that the study explored the impact of divorce on the spiritual well-being of divorced people in Pentecostal churches in Botswana.

## Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of divorced people in Pentecostal churches and the impact divorce had on their spiritual well-being. The glaring paucity of research about divorce in Pentecostal churches in Botswana has necessitated this study.

## Research objectives

- To explore the lived experiences of divorced people in Pentecostal churches in Botswana.
- To identify the impact of divorce on the spiritual well-being of divorced people in Pentecostal churches in Botswana.

## Theoretical framework

Narrative therapy was used as a lens to understand the experiences of divorced people in church. According to Hamby (2018:7), narrative therapy 'provides a possible answer, gifting autonomy and authority to a population that is generally regarded as vulnerable and powerless'. The origins of narrative therapy were to allow the voices of oppressed groups in society to be heard and in this case, the divorced in church. Research has revealed that the divorced are mistreated and labelled. The experiences have detrimental effects on their overall well-being. The most popular narrative therapy techniques, according to Sudeath, Kerwin and Dugger (2017), include speaking and testifying, developing stories based on unique outcomes, finding unique outcomes, embodying conversations, speaking, and finding the missing but implicit in the story, using spirituality in narrative couples and families, and asking questions. Therefore, narrative therapy is best for this study because it allows divorced people to share their experiences, name the problem, and separate themselves from the problem. Divorce experiences can have unpleasant ramifications that can have enduring effects. Therefore, to regain a successful life, the divorced must visualise a new and positive perspective about themselves and refuse all the negative thoughts that are attached to divorce.

The technique of storytelling allows the problem and the client to be separated and these are the stories that try to define them. In this case, the divorcees distance themselves from their divorce status. Sharing of stories helps clients to organise their lives and make informed decisions. In turn, counsellors empathise in their quest to understand the clients' worldview (Freedman & Combs 2008). The main role of the counsellor, therefore, is to uncover what stands behind their stories and lead the client to envisage the future. Counselling, therefore, can help divorcees gain happiness and live successful lives even after divorce, as observed by Mohi (2015). As Halligan, Chang and Knox (2014) put it, through narrative theory, divorced people visualise their divorce experience as distinct from their identity as well as recognise what they can and cannot control. This view about themselves will determine their healing process. Therefore, the main job of the counsellor is to dig up what stands behind their narratives or stories and help the clients to foresee the future positively.

The effectiveness of the therapy lies with the counsellor who builds a conducive and supportive environment that allows clients to generate discussion that has meaning out of the stories that they share during the session. The divorced therefore need supportive structures such as marriage counsellors to help them go through the process of storytelling about their divorce experiences. The counsellors play a supportive role of reassuring and assisting clients throughout the re-authoring process, to affirm as well as support new clients' narratives (Hamby 2018; Lee 2017). Previously, narrative theory has been used by pastors among church congregants to help them co-construct new and alternative

narratives in the light of God's word (Skidmore 2002). Hamby (2018) also used this theory with children facing family transition because of divorce.

## Research methods and design

### Study design

The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design in which the data were collected through in-depth interviews. According to Lester (2019), the phenomenological design approach is to illuminate the specific, to identify the phenomena through how participants are perceived by the actors in a situation. The approach assisted in getting a holistic picture of what real life is like for divorced people (Miles & Huberman 1994). Phenomenological design seeks to describe the meanings embedded in human experience to understand the essence of the phenomena investigated (Van Manen 1990). Phenomenology was therefore adopted to understand the lived experiences of divorced individuals and the impact of divorce on their spiritual well-being in Pentecostal churches (Rubin & Babie 2001).

### Study setting

Christianity is a broad religion with several denominations, which do not subscribe to the same doctrine. Hence, the focus of the study was based on one of the denominations, the Apostolic Pentecostal church. According to Owoye (2008), Pentecostal church believes in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which is evidenced by speaking in tongues as stated in Acts 2:1–13. Members of the Pentecostal church are taught to disengage themselves from all sorts of evil or immorality and rather embrace holiness as a lifestyle (Owoeye 2008). The study took place in three Pentecostal churches in Gaborone. Pentecostal churches across Botswana and the world over are fundamentally the same in the sense that they subscribe to the same doctrine of the word of God (Bible). The three churches used in this study have branches across all the major villages and cities in Botswana. It was therefore appropriate for the three churches to represent the Pentecostal churches in Botswana.

### Study population

The study population was made up of divorced people, pastors and members from the churches. However, it was not possible and easy to find divorcees in some churches. Many couples would find it difficult to continue fellowshiping in the same church post-divorce. As a result, some had moved to other churches, while some had backslidden.

### Sampling strategy

Purposive and snowballing sampling was used to select participants for the study. Eligible participants had to have been married for at least six months before they divorced; they had to be of age 21 years and above; they had to have been members of a Pentecostal church for a period not less than 12 months; participants had to include both male and female divorcees. A sample of six divorced, four male and

two female divorced people, three pastors, 24 men and women were selected for the study. As the topic was very sensitive, the study relied upon the congregational pastors to set up appointments with the divorced and sought their consent to participate. However, an inclusion criterion was not only based on willingness to participate, but participants had to fit into the inclusion criteria discussed above.

### Data collection procedures

The main data collection tool utilised in the study was in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. In total, nine interviews and six focus group discussions were conducted in *Setswana*, which is the native language of the participants, and the questions asked helped in obtaining in-depth accounts of the lived experiences of the divorced on their spiritual well-being. The interviews were later transcribed into English by the researchers. Interviews were conducted at the participants' place of choice, such as their respective churches, while others preferred their homes. The interviews took an average of one and a half hours.

### Data analysis

Content analysis of transcripts was utilised, and emerging themes were established. In line with the data analysis adopted for the study, analysis was performed in different stages. The data were transcribed and translated into English. When transcripts were read and reread, common experiences of the divorced became apparent. These common experiences were coded, grouped, and regrouped into themes. Finally, the major themes were used to define the lived experiences of divorced people and to determine the impact of divorce on their spiritual well-being.

### Ethical considerations

Before the commencement of the study, the following research protocols were observed. Permission to conduct the research was sought from the University of Botswana Office of Research and Development (ORD) for ethical review and approval. Further permission was sought from pastors who served as gatekeepers from the three churches, and the participants themselves. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to decline participation at any stage of research, without any detrimental consequences. Those who agreed to take part in the study signed consent forms, and with their consent, their interviews were audiotaped. The recording was performed to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. Pseudonyms were used during data collection to safeguard their identity. Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Botswana Review Board (No. UBR/RES/IRB/ GRAD/023).

## Results

Four major themes emerged from the analysis, namely psychological and emotional effects, social effects, spiritual effects, and economic effects.

## Psychological and emotional effects

When asked to share their experiences as divorcees in the church and members of the congregation, participants reported different psychological and emotional experiences. Table 1 shows some of the comments they made during the interviews.

The findings indicate that divorcees in Pentecostal churches experience a rollercoaster of emotions ranging from confusion, shock, and embarrassment to emotional pain or hurt and most of all loneliness. Shock, confusion, and embarrassment were the least experienced emotions with each emerging from three different interviewees. Hurt and/or pain was the second least experienced emotion as it emerged from three different interviews. Loneliness was the most experienced emotion as it emerged from four different interviews. While divorced people may be experiencing all these emotions differently, it is apparent that one emotion can lead to another, and a solution to one may also be a solution to others. It appears from these findings that loneliness is the most experienced emotion, which could be a breeding ground for emotional pain, shock, confusion, and embarrassment. The sooner the church responds to the problem of loneliness, the better the mitigation of emotional problems of divorcees. Those divorced individuals who had children in their marriages experienced additional emotional burdens resulting from the fact that they had to communicate with their divorced partners about children.

## Social effects

Under the social effects, four sub-themes emerged, namely a lack of communication, rejection, stigmatisation, and a lack of support.

### A lack of communication

Findings revealed that the divorced who did not initiate the divorce make attempts to keep communication open between the two parties, but the parties who initiated the divorce would be too hurt and needed no communication whatsoever with the other, except in cases where there were children in the marriage. Some even had to leave the church just to cut communication, as they were struggling with unforgiveness. Pastors and members of the church shared the same concern. Table 2 shows some of the comments made about communication during the interviews.

### Rejection

Besides two divorcees, all the other participants did not experience any strained relationship between themselves and fellow church members. Participants 5 and 6 revealed that they experienced some discomfort in terms of relationships with fellow church members. Table 3 shows their comments regarding social effects.

These findings show that without support, deliberate assurance and love, divorcees may experience rejection in the church. Rejection is likely to cause low self-esteem. It is

clear from the comments shown in Table 3 that the experience of rejection was not explicit and might as well have been a false experience resulting from an inferiority complex disorder.

## Stigmatisation

Related to rejection was the experience of stigmatisation. While majority of the participants did not experience rejection as explained above, many did indicate that they

**TABLE 1:** Comments on Psychological and emotional effects.

Participant	Age (years)	Gender	Comments
1	31–40	Male	'I was used to being with a wife, now I feel very lonely, I am a lonely person.'
2	41–50	Male	'It was really hard, it was not easy .... I have no one to talk to, I am lonely.' 'I went to this church because I was in a state of confusion.'
3	41–50	Female	'I have been in pain for a long time.'
5	41–50	Female	'I was hurt beyond measure.'

**TABLE 2:** Comments on lack of communication.

Participant	Age (years)	Gender	Comments
1	31–40	Male	'We do not have any relationship, we do not talk, and the only time we talk is when it's about the child. She has moved out of my life, she is doing her own thing, and I am doing my own thing here. Whenever she needs the child for school holidays or over the weekend, she just sends a relative to come and get the child but when I want the child I just go and get the child. She doesn't come to my house.'
2	41–50	Male	'The last time we spoke was 2007 when we were at court, I tried calling her 2 years ago to wish her Happy new year and she never picked up my calls.'
4	41–50	Male	'There is still pain, communication is still there but not enough we have limited time to meet.'
6	41–50	Male	'I avoid her at all costs. She abused the communication we had, she thought I would come back. As a result, I had to cut the communication. I told her whenever she wants to talk about the child's issue, she should do it through my mother.'

**TABLE 3:** Comments on rejection.

Participant	Age (years)	Gender	Comments
5	41–50	Female	'But at times when people are talking you can pick their reception concerning divorcees.'
6	41–50	Male	'People no longer are free around you, they only talk to you whenever it's necessary.'

**TABLE 4:** Comments on stigmatisation.

Participant	Age (years)	Gender	Comments
1	31–40	Male	'I felt I was neglected, my church was not there for me.'
5	41–50	Female	'I do not think we are given the same treatment, you will find that the other person is handled this way, but I would say I stay away from people, I am not into groups, after church I greet and go home. But some of the things even if they are not direct but when people talk you can pick that they are talking about you.'
6	41–50	Male	'Last week the congregation was informed about our intentions to get married with my fiancée, it was quite ... they only clapped after sometime. Divorce is still a taboo in church, you will find yourself without friends ... you do not get any encouragement from people, and you are just a loner. People think that when you are a divorcee you are not Christian enough.'

experienced signs of stigmatisation, in which case they were not receiving the same treatment as other church members. Some of the comments about stigmatisation and differential treatment are shown in Table 4.

### A lack of support

Divorced people experienced a lack of support in their local church. All divorcees, except one, felt neglected. A divorced man during the interviews revealed that no one in the church gave him support during the most painful and trying time of his life. The emphasis was in terms of provision of counselling services. This could be a sign that the participant needed somebody to talk to. The comments are shown in Table 5.

### Spiritual effects

Even though suspension is commonly practised in most churches, all participants revealed that divorce harms the spiritual well-being of divorced people in Pentecostal churches. Being required to step down from serving and taking part in church activities helped in their healing process. While the practice of debarring divorced people from serving is meant for their good as the pastors opined, some participants revealed that it affects their spiritual well-being negatively, while others felt it helped them grow spiritually. This was revealed in the comments shown in Table 6.

As indicated in the comments shown in Table 6, exclusion from church activities whether voluntarily or involuntarily bring in varied feelings such as condemnation, discomfort, guilt, while on the other hand it brought spiritual growth. The church doctrine promotes marriage for life or until death takes the other partner, which is the only time a married person is free from marriage vows. So, divorce goes against the church doctrine and makes the individual vulnerable and could easily backslide. While the Bible disapproves divorce, there are circumstances where divorce is the solution.

### Economic effects

Findings also revealed that divorce leads to loss of assets, for example, house or cars. These may have negative spiritual effect on the divorcee because they may no longer be able to attend church and participate in spiritual activities as before. One of the participants' view is shown in Table 7.

## Discussion

The findings of this study provided insights into the experiences of divorced people regarding their spiritual well-being. In this study, the age range of the participants was 31 years – 60 years. All the participants, except one, were married between the ages of 20 years and 30 years. It is possible to say that the participant married at this age because of their level of maturity and their readiness to marry. Similarly, drawing from previous researchers, such as Herawati et al. (2023), Ningrum, Latifah and Krisnatuti (2021) share a common view that age in marriage is an

**TABLE 5:** Comments on lack of support.

Participant	Age (years)	Gender	Comments
1	31–40	Male	'I never got any counselling from my church, no body from my church nobody, Church leaders did not help me, they did not counsel me.'
2	41–50	Male	'Pastor encouraged and counselled me.'
6	41–50	Male	'There are few people checking to say hi.'

**TABLE 6:** Comments on spiritual effects.

Participant	Age (years)	Gender	Comments
1	31–40	Male	'I had to take some time from ministering in church ... I took a break and after a break I just got involved like nothing has happened.'
2	41–50	Male	'It affects prayer life, you can't pray freely and study the word.'
3	41–50	Female	'It affected my participation, I could not manage in the Sunday school.'
4	41–50	Male	'Suspension makes you to look like a bad person, your service in the church is really affected.'
5	41–50	Female	'I was uncomfortable. I felt that when you are in leadership you should be in line with the word of God. I was very clear about not being a member in that status, I needed time to heal.'
6	41–50	Male	'I was in the church board as a church secretary. Afterwards, I declined any position because I didn't want to affect other people spiritually.'
7	51–60	Male	'She no longer comes to church.'

**TABLE 7:** Comments on economic effects.

Participant	Age (years)	Gender	Comment
5	41–50	Female	'He took everything and I was left with few things.'

indicator of readiness for marriage. In some Pentecostal churches such as Deeper Life church, the acceptable age to get married for males and females is 25 years and 21 years, respectively. However, Owoye (2008) argued that marrying at the right age does not guarantee a successful marriage.

Regarding duration in courtship, one divorcee spent less than four years, while five divorcees spent more than two years in courtship before they got married. Therefore, the length of courtship, according to the findings, may not necessarily determine the success or failure of marriage. Duration of courtship therefore remains a contested issue. Romm (2018) argued that staying longer in courtship is associated with high possibility of a happy marriage. While this view may prove true in some instances, it may not in some. Case in point, in this study the participants spent more than two years in courtship before a marriage commitment and yet ended up divorcing. This could be attributable to the fact that people tend to hide their true character during courtship, which later manifests after the wedding.

Data collected on length of marriage showed that four divorcees had been married for 1 year to 10 years, two had been married for 21 years to 30 years, and 11 years to 20 years, respectively. The majority of the divorcees had an inter-church marriage meaning that they married from other churches or Christian denominations, except one who married from the same church. It is important to notice that

interchurch marriages are likely to end in divorce as revealed by previous research. Having similar religious belief systems and practices is linked with greater marital satisfaction (Çetintaş & Ekşi 2020).

Findings revealed that all the participants reported being affected by divorce one way or the other. Previous studies have shown that the divorced experienced spiritual challenges because of divorce (Krumrei et al. 2009). In this study, psychological and emotional effects, social effects, spiritual effects, and economic effects were the most negative experiences that the divorced had to go through in church, post-divorce.

On a positive note, some divorce victims indicated that they experienced a deeper relationship with God post-divorce. Platovnjak's (2015) study revealed that people who went through divorce have reported high levels of spiritual growth. This confirms the conclusion by Nathanson (1995) that intimacy with God contributes significantly to the spiritual growth post-divorce. Despite the pain the divorced went through, their divorce experiences strengthened their faith and helped them to have a stronger belief in God. This could be attributable to the fact that they spend more time in prayer seeking God's guidance and intervention. An attitude that God emphasises in *Matthew 11:28* where he is calling all those who are heavy-laden to come to Christ. Research by Mohi (2015) confirms that most of the victims of divorce retrospectively reported being both happier and more successful post-divorce.

The divorced were wounded emotionally and experienced feelings of shock, confusion, and embarrassment, consequently their social interaction is negatively affected. This finding supports previous research that divorce brings pain, guilt, anger, and victims tend to experience feelings of denial and shock resulting in isolation (Simonič 2014; Simonič & Klobučar 2017). These experiences often make the divorced feel embarrassed to socialise, which Thadathil and Sriram (2019) say leads to emotional insecurity and a negative effect on their well-being. A more recent study revealed that divorce leaves the victims with the following effects: sleeplessness, decreased levels of happiness, tiredness, loss of appetite, loss of weight, increase in illness, death and decrease in anxiety (Elijah & Yusufu 2020).

According to most of the participants, divorce was a gruesome experience for them because there was no one to support them. This finding corroborates with Tsuma and Atony's (2019) study, which revealed a lack of support structure for the divorced community in the church that makes the divorce victims feel isolated and rejected.

The other most important finding is that suspension from church activities affects the divorced spiritually. The action could be motivated by stigmatisation and rejection. It emerged from the study that being required to step down from church responsibilities had a negative effect on the spiritual well-being of the divorced. The finding is consistent

with views by Deal (2007), that if the divorced are limited in church participation, they may withdraw from church relationships and may either move to a new religious affiliation or forego a religious affiliation altogether. To some, the movement to a new church where their challenges are unknown could be the end of their spiritual journey as they may choose to ultimately cease church attendance altogether, especially when they feel overwhelmed. The finding is also supported by Nathanson's (1995) assertion that divorce badly ruins spirituality. Moreira-Almeida, Lotufo Neto and Koenig (2006) have found that religious involvement is generally connected with positive cognitive processes that enhance resilience and generate purpose.

Contrary to the belief that isolating the divorced could help them recover spiritually, research has proven that when the divorced are actively involved in church, it keeps them busy and may prevent unwanted acts that they may regret later in life. This finding is substantiated by Tanaka (2010) who has studied the significant and positive effect of church participation on the well-being of divorced members. As Idler and Kasi (1992) found, religious involvement prevents and reduces unhealthy lifestyles. Involuntary stepping down can have far-reaching consequences as it can bring feelings of rejection. This is so especially because some churches follow the church policy to stop people who have committed sins of a sexual nature or sexual immorality of some sort from participating in leadership roles in the church. However, some divorcees reported that they grew spiritually post-divorce as stepping down gave them the opportunity to re-think and re-connect with their God.

Although many people use religion to cope, as well as a source of guidance and direction in times of difficulties, the study revealed rejection as what some of the participants experienced. The finding mirrors Smith and Smith's (2000) survey of parishioners from three religious institutions in New York City, USA. The findings revealed that individuals going through divorce denied having received sufficient support and assistance from their church. The rejection may emanate from the verse in Malachi 2:16 that strongly disapproves of marriage dissolution. This finding tallies with the discussions in Mahoney et al. (2008:106) that 'religious institutions offer divorcing individuals little in the way of spiritual teachings, scriptural stories, or rituals that could facilitate effective spiritual coping responses with this painful transition'. This could mean that churches do not have ready structures that can assist individuals going through divorce. Contrariwise, previous researchers, such as Koenig, King and Carson (2012) and Paloutzian and Park (eds. 2013) shared that religion plays a major role in the coping process for individuals who are struggling with significant stressors or life-changing events such as divorce. In addition, Hale and Clark (2013) found that religion can lead to feelings of guilt and negative obsessive thoughts. Thus, McMahon (2018) questioned the accuracy of religion as always helpful.

In addition, the cause of rejection also could be that church leadership and members find themselves in a dilemma of

whether to embrace the victims as it is contrary to the word of God. Generally, divorce is unquestionable among the Christians; they believe in Christ's teaching on marriage and divorce, and use it as their model. Therefore, as Christ disapproved divorce, so all Christians should totally avoid divorce at all costs (Anaana, Ahura & Tyoakaa 2019). Consequently, God's word would take precedence in some people's lives than satisfy human earthly desires, for the word of God is more spiritual and has long-lasting effects. Supporting the divorced would be like condoning divorce. Probably, this could be the genesis of a lack of support from church leadership and members as narrated by some participants. Clearly, some members who are in unhappy marriages are just caught up in those marriages for fear of the word in the Bible, which firmly disapproves divorce (Senekane 1995). To some, they may feel there is no point in continuing in faith because of the decision they took to divorce. Hence, they do not consider themselves children of God anymore as they believe that they would have been disobedient to God and may feel unworthy to stand before God. This is in support of Krumrei et al.'s (2009) argument that church people may feel guilty for not adhering to the biblical principles. Simiyu (2021) observed the same feelings of being disobedient before God. Based on the above assertion, it is of utmost importance that the divorced should get complete support from the church members at large for the sake of their spiritual well-being.

It would not be wrong to assume that happiness and success may be eminent because divorce marks the end to suffering for some spouses, especially for those who have been in abusive marital relationships like some mentioned in this study. Divorce is also a learning curve for some to guard against falling into the same path in future relationships.

It is worth noting that serving in church may be a motivating factor as well as a therapy that could still encourage the divorced to attend church and feel that they belong. Salley (2021) has confirmed that religious rituals such as church attendance, prayer, reading of the Bible and faithfulness to God contribute largely towards a successful and satisfying marital experience. Hummer et al. (1999) also confirmed that people who actively participate in religious activities live longer than those who are not actively involved in religion.

While it is important to be involved in church activities, equally important is the fact that they need support to heal emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. In this study, the divorced were bruised and needed to recuperate. There is a need for divorcees to go through the healing process. Majority of the participants felt they could not study the word of God or pray. McMahon (2018), who studied the experiences of divorce among Catholic women, reported that some women left the religion or rejected God because of divorce, while some turned towards God.

However, being suspended from church activities could serve as a positive strategy in their healing process and pave a way

for their restoration process as it gives them the opportunity to re-write their stories and find positive ways to deal with the divorce issue. Separating themselves from the problem of divorce prevents the divorced from using the problem to dictate their identity. The separation possibly could effectively take place when the divorced are not preoccupied by anything like serving in church. Furthermore, being free from serving could probably allow introspection and give the divorced time to seek professional help for support and affirmations of their new narratives (Hamby 2018).

Moreover, suspension from serving in church could also allow the divorced to gain their strength back. Some participants intentionally felt they needed to step down because of the Scripture that addresses the issue of caring for others; the scripture commands them to take care of others' spiritual well-being. As recorded in 1 Corinthians 8:13 that '... if what I eat causes another believer to sin, I will never eat meat again as long as I live- for I do not want to cause another believer to stumble' (Holy Bible New Living Translation 2006). The scripture implies that if one does something that has the potential of making one to stumble or fall, he or she should consider stopping for the sake of that person. As such, some divorced people end up stepping down from their leadership roles to safeguard the spiritual lives of those to whom their service may be a stumbling block. Findings of this study revealed that some of the divorced stepped down as they were sensitive to other people's spirituality.

This study also unearthed a lack of communication as a fundamental consequence of divorce. This is largely attributable to protracted anger and bitterness towards the ex-spouse. Forgiveness is therefore cardinal to the healing process. The Bible encourages forgiveness. Forgiveness does not only have spiritual benefits but also mental and psychological advantages as well.

Forgiveness is an imperative cognitive process in a healthy adjustment after divorce even among religious people. For example, a previous study among 135 separated or divorced parents who attended a brief seminar on forgiveness established a strong positive relation between forgiveness and good quality of co-parenting after divorce (Bonach & Sales 2002). This study's findings established that to forgive was a struggle that the divorced were failing to deal with, which contributed hugely to why most of them ultimately ended up leaving their churches.

### Strengths and limitations

The study offers valuable contributions to the body of knowledge on the experiences of divorced people in church. Recruiting of participants was a challenge; some divorced people had moved from their churches, so it was difficult to trace them. As only three churches were used, the study's findings, therefore, cannot be generalised across all the Pentecostal churches in Botswana.

## Implications and recommendations

The findings of this study can generate important implications and recommendations to enhance increased knowledge regarding the experiences of divorce on people's spiritual well-being. Based on the findings, relevant programmes to support divorced people in Pentecostal churches should be an integral part of church's goal. Pentecostal church people should practise what they preach by showing love to the hopeless like the divorced people. The view of the church concerning divorce should also be considered in the light of Deuteronomy 24:1, which is testament that divorce may have positive outcomes in some instances. The study could also be used as a baseline for future research on the effects of divorce on the spiritual well-being of Pentecostal Christians.

## Conclusion

The study revealed that the consequences suffered by the divorced manifested in many ways. Psychological and emotional effects, social effects, spiritual effects, and economic effects were at the core of the challenges of the divorced in this study. The divorce experience was debilitating, and it completely weakened some of the divorcees's spiritual strength they had before they went through the divorce process. What the divorced go through in Pentecostal churches (as shared by the participants) is contrary to the view that places of worship are normally seen as places of comfort and support for the less recognised people in the community (Setlhare, Wright & Couper 2014). Church should be a place of solace for people going through challenges in life. Failure to help the divorced contributes to many people losing faith in God and eventually backsliding. Therefore, the church needs to develop support systems for the divorced. A weakened spiritual growth arising out of the divorce experience was raised; the study concludes that spirituality plays a vital role among individuals facing life challenges such as divorce. It is therefore vital that the church should be ready to encourage, counsel and provide emotional and psychological support to the divorced as well as encourage positive ways of coping with stress during times of trouble.

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### Authors' contributions

B.M. was involved in study methodology, investigation, formal analysis, conceptualisation, writing original draft, reviewing and editing as well as administration. M.G. was involved in the study methodology, formal analysis, investigation and writing original draft, reviewing and editing. L.M. was involved in conceptualisation, formal analysis, investigation, writing the original draft and reviewing and editing. T.J.M. was involved in formulating

the study conception and methodology, investigation and writing the original draft and reviewing and editing.

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### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, B.M., upon reasonable request.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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