

Bridging Faith and Family: The Role of Spiritual Leaders in Marital Enrichment

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ABSTRACT

Background: Spiritual leaders play a central role in promoting healthy marriages within Christian communities through pastoral guidance, counseling, and faith-based teachings. However, empirical evidence on the extent to which their engagement contributes to marital enrichment remains limited, particularly in the Kenyan context. **Aim:** This study examined the role of spiritual leaders in enriching marriages among Christian couples in selected mainstream churches in Kitui Central, Kitui County, Kenya. **Methods:** A quantitative cross-sectional research design was employed. Data were collected from 82 married couples selected through simple random sampling using structured questionnaires. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and simple linear regression were performed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. **Results:** Respondents generally perceived spiritual leaders positively, particularly in promoting forgiveness and reconciliation ($M = 4.32$) and being approachable for marital advice ($M = 3.87$). The overall perception of spiritual leaders' role was moderately positive ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.49$). However, regular teaching on marriage received the lowest rating ($M = 2.02$). A weak positive but statistically non-significant relationship was observed between spiritual leaders' engagement and marital enrichment ($r = 0.177$, $p = 0.112$). Regression analysis further indicated that spiritual leaders' engagement did not significantly predict marital enrichment ($\beta = 0.434$, $p = 0.112$), explaining only 3.1% of the variance. **Conclusion:** Spiritual leaders provide valuable pastoral and emotional support to married couples, particularly through guidance, accessibility, and the promotion of forgiveness. Nevertheless, strengthening structured marriage education and integrating evidence-based marital support interventions within church ministries may enhance their contribution to marital enrichment.

Keywords: Spiritual leaders, marital enrichment, marriage counseling, Christian couples, faith-based interventions, pastoral care, marital relationships, Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is universally recognized as a fundamental social institution that promotes family stability, social cohesion, and individual well-being. However, contemporary marriages increasingly face challenges such as conflict, emotional distress, communication breakdown, infidelity, separation, and divorce despite the continued importance attached to marital relationships across cultures. In response to these challenges, faith-based interventions have gained prominence as mechanisms for strengthening marital relationships through spiritual, emotional, and relational support (Bailey, 2024). Faith communities provide an environment where couples receive moral guidance, counseling, and opportunities for spiritual growth that contribute to healthier and more resilient marriages. Goodman et al. (2018), in a study involving Christian, Muslim, and Jewish couples across the United States, reported that religious engagement was positively associated with marital commitment and adaptive coping skills, suggesting that faith remains an important resource for marital stability.

Among the various faith-based interventions, spiritual leaders occupy a central position in promoting healthy marriages. As bishops, pastors, priests, and other religious leaders, they provide pastoral care through teaching, counseling, mentorship, mediation, and spiritual guidance. Their influence extends beyond religious instruction to addressing emotional, psychological, and relational challenges experienced by married couples (Mofokeng et al., 2020). Studies have shown that spiritual leaders increasingly integrate psychological principles with pastoral care to enhance marital relationships. For instance, Hodge et al. (2020) found that spiritual leaders generally held

positive attitudes toward incorporating psychological approaches into pastoral counseling, while Boyer et al. (2022) reported that pastoral counseling and guidance contributed to reducing marital violence among Christian families in Uganda. Similarly, Ngige and Kimani (2020) observed that pastoral counseling effectively addressed marital conflicts in Kenya despite many church leaders having limited formal counseling training.

The relevance of spiritual leadership is particularly evident within the Kenyan context, where Christianity remains deeply embedded in family life and church leaders are frequently consulted during marital difficulties (Wanyonyi & Njoroge, 2020). In Kitui County, marriage is influenced by both Christian beliefs and the communal traditions of the Kamba community, where extended family involvement and culturally defined gender roles continue to shape marital relationships (Munyoki et al., 2023). Although these cultural structures have historically provided support through elders and communal mediation, modernization has weakened many traditional mechanisms, thereby increasing the reliance on churches and spiritual leaders as sources of marital guidance and support (Kyalo, 2011; Mbiti, 2015). Consequently, understanding how spiritual leaders contribute to marital enrichment has become increasingly important within this evolving socio-cultural context.

Role of Spiritual Leaders in Marital Enrichment

Support and Guidance

Spiritual leaders contribute to marital enrichment by providing moral, spiritual, emotional, psychological, and practical support to couples navigating marital challenges. Their pastoral role enables them to offer reassurance during periods of conflict, facilitate reconciliation, provide ethical direction, and encourage couples to strengthen their commitment to one another (Mwangi & Oloo, 2023). As trusted authority figures within faith communities, they create supportive environments where couples receive encouragement, spiritual care, and relationship guidance that foster marital resilience (Mofokeng et al., 2020).

Empirical evidence consistently supports the importance of pastoral support in strengthening marriages. In the United States, Verywell Mind (2022) reported that Christian marriage counseling, which integrates prayer with cognitive behavioral approaches, enhances trust and emotional intimacy among couples. Similarly, Umubyeyi et al. (2020), in a qualitative study among Congolese migrants in South Africa, found that spiritual leaders became indispensable support systems where traditional extended family structures were absent. Within Kenya, Aseka et al. (2021) established that pastoral support provided through church leaders significantly contributed to marital satisfaction among Christian couples in Nairobi. Collectively, these studies suggest that spiritual leaders enrich marriages by providing emotional stability, spiritual direction, and practical support that help couples navigate relational difficulties.

Teaching Practical Relationship Skills

Beyond providing emotional and spiritual support, spiritual leaders facilitate marital enrichment by equipping couples with practical relationship skills necessary for sustaining healthy marriages. Through counseling sessions, seminars, workshops, retreats, and marriage enrichment programs, they teach communication, conflict management, emotional regulation, relationship responsibility, and effective decision-making. Such educational initiatives complement theological instruction by providing practical tools that enable couples to respond constructively to marital challenges.

The effectiveness of these interventions depends considerably on the competencies of spiritual leaders themselves. Ndung'u and Makhanu (2024) argued that pastoral effectiveness extends beyond theological knowledge to include practical counseling competencies capable of addressing contemporary marital challenges. Likewise, the Transformational Leadership Africa (TL Africa, 2023) program in Rwanda demonstrated that structured pastoral leadership training enhanced church leaders' capacity to promote stable marriages through contextualized Christian teaching. Similarly, Aina (2025) observed that modern religious leaders strengthen marriages through educational initiatives that equip couples with practical skills for sustaining long-term relationships. In Kenya, Chebbet et al. (2025) and Muriithi et al. (2018) further emphasized that pastors require both theological formation and counseling competence to address emerging marital issues, including domestic violence and relational conflict. These findings underscore that teaching practical relationship skills constitutes a significant pathway through which spiritual leaders contribute to marital enrichment.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of marital life, making conflict resolution an essential component of marital enrichment. Spiritual leaders frequently serve as mediators who facilitate reconciliation, encourage forgiveness, promote peaceful communication, and restore harmony among couples experiencing marital disagreements (Payne, 2023). Their pastoral authority often enables couples to seek guidance within trusted religious environments before conflicts escalate into separation or divorce.

Evidence from diverse contexts supports this role. Galindo-Silva and Tchunte (2023) found that the expansion of Protestant churches within predominantly Catholic regions of Colombia contributed to reductions in domestic violence through the promotion of shared values emphasizing harmony, respect, and family cohesion. However, Muriithi et al. (2018) observed that despite the availability of church-based marital programs in Kenya, persistent marital conflicts remained evident, suggesting that conflict resolution strategies require continuous evaluation and improvement. These findings indicate that while spiritual leaders play a significant role in promoting peaceful marital relationships, strengthening pastoral competencies and contextualizing conflict-resolution approaches remain necessary for enhancing marital outcomes.

Theoretical Perspective

This study is anchored in Structural Family Therapy (SFT) and Cognitive Behavioral Couple Theory (CBCT), which together provide a comprehensive understanding of how spiritual leaders contribute to marital enrichment. Developed by Minuchin (1988), Structural Family Therapy conceptualizes the family as an interconnected system whose effectiveness depends on healthy boundaries, balanced hierarchies, and functional interaction patterns. The theory suggests that marital difficulties often arise from dysfunctional family structures and relational patterns. Consequently, spiritual leaders contribute to marital enrichment by helping couples strengthen communication, establish healthy boundaries, manage extended family influences, and develop emotionally supportive relationships. Studies by Finney and Tadros (2018) and Metcalf and LMFT (2023) further demonstrate that restructuring family boundaries and promoting balanced marital roles strengthen marital relationships. Nevertheless, the theory has been criticized for emphasizing Western family structures that may not fully reflect African family systems (Sue & Smith, 2022).

Complementing SFT, Cognitive Behavioral Couple Theory explains how maladaptive thoughts, emotions, and behaviors influence marital interactions (Epstein et al., 2015). The theory highlights the importance of communication, behavioral change, and cognitive restructuring in strengthening couple relationships (Colapinto, 2019). Within church settings, spiritual leaders often apply these principles by helping couples challenge destructive beliefs, improve communication, regulate emotional responses, and develop constructive conflict-resolution strategies (Asfaw, 2023). Together, SFT and CBCT provide a suitable theoretical foundation for understanding the structural, cognitive, behavioral, and relational mechanisms through which spiritual leaders contribute to marital enrichment.

Research Gap and Study Rationale

Although considerable scholarship acknowledges the contribution of religion and faith-based interventions to marital well-being, important gaps remain in understanding the specific role of spiritual leaders in enriching marriages. Existing studies have predominantly examined marital counseling, religious participation, or faith-based interventions more broadly rather than isolating the unique contribution of spiritual leaders to marital enrichment (Goodman et al., 2018; Hodge et al., 2020; Boyer et al., 2022). Furthermore, much of the available evidence originates from the United States, South Africa, Uganda, and generalized Kenyan settings, leaving limited empirical evidence from mainstream churches within Kitui Central and the broader Kamba cultural context (Nazari, 2022). Methodologically, many previous studies have relied on descriptive, cross-sectional, or small qualitative designs, limiting comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In addition, limited attention has been given to how pastoral competencies, counseling practices, and conflict-resolution strategies collectively influence marital enrichment within culturally grounded church settings.

To address these empirical, contextual, methodological, and practical gaps, this study evaluated the role of spiritual leaders in enriching marriages among couples in selected mainstream churches in Kitui Central, Kitui County. By employing a quantitative cross-sectional descriptive design within a culturally relevant context, the study contributes empirical evidence on pastoral leadership and marital enrichment while providing insights that can strengthen church-based marriage ministries, pastoral counseling, and faith-informed family interventions.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional descriptive design to evaluate the role of spiritual leaders in enriching marriages among couples in selected mainstream churches in Kitui Central, Kitui County. The design enabled the collection of quantitative data at a single point in time to examine participants' perceptions of the contribution of spiritual leaders to marital enrichment. A cross-sectional design was appropriate because it facilitated the description of relationships among the study variables within the target population while allowing efficient data collection from a representative sample (Creswell, 2023).

Study Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in Kitui Central, Kitui County, Kenya, a predominantly rural region where farming, small-scale business, and public employment constitute the major economic activities. The area is characterized by strong Christian beliefs alongside enduring Kamba cultural traditions that continue to influence marriage and family life. Mainstream churches play a significant role in providing spiritual, social, and psychosocial support to families, making the area appropriate for examining church-based interventions for marital enrichment (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

The target population comprised married couples and spiritual leaders from four selected mainstream churches: the Catholic Church, African Inland Church (AIC), Peniel Christian Church, and Jesus Manifestation Church (JMC). These churches were selected because they represented denominational diversity and maintained active marriage and family ministries. The total study population consisted of 402 participants, including 398 married couples and four spiritual leaders (County Government of Kitui, 2020).

Sampling Procedure

The study employed both probability and non-probability sampling techniques. Married couples who participated in the quantitative survey were selected using simple random sampling to ensure equal probability of selection and enhance representativeness (Cochran, 2014). Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the qualitative phase, including spiritual leaders and married couples participating in focus group discussions, because they possessed relevant experience regarding church-based marital interventions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Yamane's (1967) formula was used to determine the quantitative sample size, yielding a final sample of 82 married couples. Additionally, three focus group discussions comprising four participants each were conducted to obtain diverse perspectives based on gender, marital experience, and duration of marriage. Saturation was achieved after the third discussion, consistent with recommendations by Guest et al. (2017). Four spiritual leaders, one from each participating church, were purposively selected as key informants because of their direct involvement in pastoral counseling and marriage ministry.

Study Variables and Measures

The study examined the role of spiritual leaders as the independent variable and marital enrichment as the dependent variable. The role of spiritual leaders was assessed through indicators reflecting pastoral support and guidance, teaching of practical relationship skills, and conflict-resolution practices. These dimensions captured participants' perceptions of how spiritual leaders contributed to strengthening marital relationships through counseling, spiritual guidance, educational programs, mediation, and reconciliation.

Marital enrichment was measured using participants' perceptions of improvements in communication, emotional intimacy, conflict management, mutual support, commitment, and overall marital satisfaction resulting from church-based pastoral interventions. Data were collected using structured questionnaires administered to married couples, focus group discussions with selected couples, and semi-structured interviews with spiritual leaders. The combination of these instruments enabled triangulation of findings by capturing both measurable trends and participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2023).

Data Collection Procedure

Following ethical approval and authorization from the relevant institutions, data were collected from the four participating churches using questionnaires, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews. Structured questionnaires containing both closed-ended and open-ended items were administered to married couples to obtain quantitative data on their experiences with church-based marital interventions. Focus group discussions explored couples' shared experiences and perceptions regarding the contribution of spiritual leaders to marital enrichment, while semi-structured interviews with spiritual leaders provided detailed insights into pastoral practices, challenges, and strategies used to support married couples. Prior to the main study, the research instruments were pilot tested among nine participants drawn from three churches not included in the final sample. The pilot study facilitated refinement of the instruments and improved clarity, validity, and reliability of the questionnaire items (Kothari & Garg, 2014).

Data Analysis

The completed questionnaires were checked for completeness, coded, and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 for analysis. Data cleaning was performed to identify and correct missing values, inconsistencies, and entry errors before statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents and their perceptions of the role of spiritual leaders in enriching marriages. To examine the relationship between the role of spiritual leaders and marital enrichment, inferential statistical analysis was conducted using Pearson's product-moment correlation and simple linear regression. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to determine the strength and direction of the association between the study variables, while simple linear regression assessed the predictive influence of the role of spiritual leaders on marital enrichment. Statistical significance was determined at the 95% confidence level ($p < .05$). The findings were presented using tables and figures to facilitate interpretation and discussion.

Limitation of the Study

This study had several limitations. The cross-sectional design captured participants' perceptions at one point in time, limiting the ability to establish causal relationships between the role of spiritual leaders and marital enrichment. The study was conducted among couples from selected mainstream churches in Kitui Central, Kitui County, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other denominations, regions, or cultural contexts. Furthermore, marital enrichment is influenced by numerous personal, relational, socioeconomic, and cultural factors that were not included in the study, and these unmeasured variables may have affected the observed relationships among the study variables.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval and research authorization were obtained from the relevant university, the County Commissioner's Office in Kitui County, and the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) before commencement of fieldwork. Participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and coded identifiers, while participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Throughout the study, principles of respect, fairness, non-maleficence, and research integrity guided data collection, analysis, and reporting.

RESULTS

Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

The study included 82 married couples drawn from selected mainstream churches in Kitui Central, Kitui County. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1 to provide context for interpreting the subsequent findings.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents (N = 82)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	38	46.3
	Female	40	48.8
	Prefer not to say	4	4.9
Church Denomination	Protestant	51	62.2
	Pentecostal	22	26.8
	Catholic	9	11.0
Occupation	Formal employment	26	31.7
	Education sector	22	26.8
	Business/Self-employed	18	22.0
	Religious sector	9	11.0
	Health sector	7	8.5
Attended Marital Counseling	Yes	55	67.1
	No	24	29.3
	Prefer not to say	3	3.7
Number of Children	0	8	9.8
	1	6	7.3
	2	25	30.5
	3	32	39.0
	4	7	8.5
	5	4	4.9
Age (years)	Mean $\pm$ SD	43.23 $\pm$ 10.60	
	Median (IQR)	42.5 (36–50)	
	Range	25–71	
Years Married	Mean $\pm$ SD	16.95 $\pm$ 11.48	
	Median (IQR)	16.0 (8.25–24.75)	
	Range	0.5–46	

As shown in Table 1, the sample comprised 48.8% female and 46.3% male respondents, while 4.9% preferred not to disclose their gender. Most respondents were affiliated with Protestant churches (62.2%), followed by Pentecostal churches (26.8%) and the Catholic Church (11.0%). Regarding occupation, the largest proportion of respondents were in formal employment (31.7%), followed by those working in the education sector (26.8%), business or self-employment (22.0%), the religious sector (11.0%), and the health sector (8.5%). Most respondents (67.1%) reported having attended marital counseling, whereas 29.3% had never attended, and 3.7% preferred not to disclose this information.

Family characteristics indicated that the majority of respondents had two (30.5%) or three children (39.0%), while relatively few had no children (9.8%) or four to five children (13.4%). The respondents had a mean age of 43.23 years (SD = 10.60), with ages ranging from 25 to 71 years. The mean duration of marriage was 16.95 years (SD = 11.48), ranging from 0.5 to 46 years. Overall, the demographic profile suggests that the study largely comprised middle-aged couples with substantial marital experience and prior exposure to church-based marital support.

Perceived Role of Spiritual Leaders in Marital Enrichment

Respondents' perceptions of the role of spiritual leaders in enriching marriages were assessed using five items measuring key dimensions of pastoral involvement, including teaching about marriage, guidance during marital challenges, sermons on marriage, accessibility of spiritual leaders, and encouragement of forgiveness and reconciliation. The scale demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.79, indicating acceptable reliability for subsequent analyses.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Perceived Role of Spiritual Leaders in Marital Enrichment (n = 82)

Item	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Teaching About Marriage	2.02	1.02	1	5
Guidance on Marital Problems	3.52	1.18	1	5
Sermons Strengthen Marriage	3.41	1.12	1	5
Leaders Are Approachable	3.87	1.18	1	5
Encourage Forgiveness & Reconciliation	4.32	1.12	1	5

As shown in Table 2, respondents reported varying perceptions across the five dimensions of spiritual leadership. The highest mean score was recorded for encouraging forgiveness and reconciliation ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.12$), indicating strong agreement that spiritual leaders promote reconciliation within marriage. Similarly, respondents generally agreed that spiritual leaders were approachable for marital advice ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.18$) and that pastors provided guidance to couples experiencing marital problems ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.18$). The statement that sermons strengthen marital relationships also received a moderately positive rating ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.12$). In contrast, regular teaching about marriage received the lowest mean score ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.02$), suggesting that respondents perceived structured marriage teaching as relatively infrequent within the participating churches.

Overall Perceptions of the Role of Spiritual Leaders

To provide an overall assessment of respondents' perceptions, a composite score was computed by averaging responses across the five spiritual leadership items.

Table 3 Composite Descriptive Statistics for the Role of Spiritual Leaders in Marital Enrichment

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
SL Score	3.43	0.49	2.2	4.6

As presented in Table 3, the composite score had a mean of 3.43 ($SD = 0.49$), with observed values ranging from 2.20 to 4.60. The mean score, which was above the midpoint of the five-point scale, indicates a generally positive perception of the role of spiritual leaders in enriching marriages. The relatively small standard deviation suggests that respondents' views were fairly consistent across the sample.

Relationship Between Spiritual Leaders' Engagement and Marital Enrichment

To determine whether perceptions of spiritual leaders' engagement were associated with marital enrichment, a Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted.

Table 4. Pearson Correlation Between Spiritual Leaders' Engagement and Marital Enrichment

Variable 1	Variable 2	Correlation (r)	p-value	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
SL	MC	0.177	0.112	-0.042	0.379

The findings presented in Table 4 revealed a weak positive correlation between spiritual leaders' engagement and marital enrichment ($r = 0.177$). However, this relationship was not statistically significant ($p = 0.112$; 95% CI = -0.042 to 0.379). These findings indicate that although higher perceptions of spiritual leaders' engagement tended to be associated with higher levels of marital enrichment, the observed relationship was insufficient to conclude a statistically significant association within the study sample.

Predictive Influence of Spiritual Leaders on Marital Enrichment

A simple linear regression analysis was performed to examine whether perceptions of spiritual leaders' engagement significantly predicted marital enrichment among couples.

Table 5 Simple Linear Regression Predicting Marital Enrichment from Spiritual Leaders' Engagement

Predictor	B	Std. Error	t	p-value	R ²	Adjusted R ²
Intercept	2.702	0.934	2.893	0.0049		
SL	0.434	0.270	1.609	0.112	0.031	0.019

The positive regression coefficient suggests that greater engagement by spiritual leaders was associated with higher levels of marital enrichment; however, the relationship was not statistically significant. One possible explanation is that marital enrichment is influenced by a broad range of factors beyond spiritual leadership. While spiritual leaders may provide counseling, guidance, and moral support, the quality of communication between spouses, marital commitment, conflict resolution skills, socioeconomic circumstances, and family support systems may exert a stronger influence on marital outcomes. The low proportion of variance explained by the model ($R^2 = 0.031$) further indicates that substantial variation in marital enrichment was attributable to factors not included in the analysis. Consequently, spiritual leaders may play a supportive role in strengthening marriages, but their engagement alone may not be sufficient to produce significant differences in marital enrichment among couples.

DISCUSSION

Pastoral Support and Relational Guidance in Marital Enrichment

The findings demonstrate that respondents generally perceived spiritual leaders as important sources of pastoral support in marriage, particularly through their accessibility, guidance during marital challenges, and promotion of forgiveness and reconciliation. Among the five dimensions examined, encouragement of forgiveness and reconciliation received the highest rating, followed by the accessibility of spiritual leaders and the provision of guidance to couples experiencing marital difficulties. These findings suggest that spiritual leaders are valued primarily for their relational and pastoral roles rather than for structured instructional functions. Within Christian communities, clergy often serve as trusted confidants whose influence extends beyond religious instruction to emotional support, mediation, and reconciliation, making them integral to marital wellbeing.

These findings are consistent with previous studies demonstrating that spiritual leaders contribute to healthy marital relationships through pastoral care and emotional support. Goodman et al. (2018) found that religious involvement strengthens marital commitment by encouraging positive coping mechanisms during periods of relational stress. Similarly, Hodge et al. (2020) reported that pastoral counselling becomes more effective when spiritual leaders integrate biblical guidance with psychological principles, thereby addressing both spiritual and relational dimensions of marriage. In Uganda, Boyer et al. (2022) observed that spiritual leaders played a significant role in reducing marital conflict and domestic violence by providing counselling and reconciliation services, while Ngige and Kimani (2020) similarly found that pastoral counselling in Kenya contributed positively to conflict resolution despite many clergy having limited formal counselling training.

The present findings also correspond with studies focusing specifically on emotional and spiritual support within faith communities. Umubyeyi et al. (2020) demonstrated that spiritual leaders became vital support systems among Congolese migrant families in South Africa where traditional family support networks were absent. Likewise, Aseka et al. (2021) established that pastoral support significantly enhanced marital satisfaction among Christian couples in Nairobi. These studies reinforce the present finding that accessibility and supportive guidance remain central strengths of church leadership in promoting healthy marriages.

The strong emphasis placed on forgiveness and reconciliation reflects the unique contribution of faith-based leadership to marriage ministry. Fincham and Beach (2019) argue that forgiveness is one of the strongest predictors of long-term marital satisfaction because it interrupts destructive interaction patterns and facilitates

emotional healing. Payne (2023) similarly emphasizes that spiritual leaders often function as mediators who encourage reconciliation through biblical teaching, prayer, and counselling. The prominence of forgiveness within the present study therefore illustrates that couples perceive spiritual leaders as custodians of values that promote relational restoration and marital resilience.

The findings can also be understood through the lens of Structural Family Therapy. According to Minuchin (1974), external agents such as counsellors can facilitate healthier family functioning by helping couples restructure dysfunctional interaction patterns and strengthen communication. Likewise, Nichols and Davis (2020) argue that creating safe spaces for couples to discuss relational difficulties enhances emotional openness and problem-solving. The relatively high ratings for accessibility and pastoral guidance suggest that spiritual leaders provide an environment in which couples feel comfortable seeking support during marital challenges.

The Contribution and Limitations of Spiritual Leadership in Marriage Ministry

Although respondents generally viewed spiritual leaders positively, the findings also revealed important limitations in church-based marriage ministry. Regular teaching about marriage received the lowest rating among all dimensions measured, while sermons addressing marital relationships were only moderately rated. These findings suggest that spiritual leadership within the participating churches is perceived as being more responsive to existing marital problems than proactive in preparing couples to prevent such challenges.

This pattern supports observations made in earlier empirical studies. Ndung'u and Makhanu (2024) argue that effective pastoral leadership requires competence in both theology and practical relationship education. Similarly, Aina (2025) emphasizes that contemporary religious leaders strengthen marriages by organizing workshops, seminars, and structured enrichment programmes that equip couples with communication, conflict-management, and relationship-building skills. The comparatively low rating for regular teaching observed in the present study may therefore indicate missed opportunities for preventive marital education within church settings.

Evidence from Rwanda further supports this interpretation. The TL Africa (2023) leadership programme demonstrated that pastors who received structured training became more effective in promoting stable marriages through contextualized biblical teaching. Likewise, Chebbet et al. (2025) found that church leaders equipped with both theological and counselling knowledge were better prepared to address contemporary marital challenges, including domestic conflict and spousal violence. These findings suggest that strengthening pastoral competence may enhance the effectiveness of church-based marriage ministries.

The present findings also resonate with Muriithi et al. (2018), who reported that although churches offered marital programmes, persistent marital problems remained evident, highlighting the need for continuous review of counselling content and conflict-resolution strategies. Rather than relying primarily on reactive counselling during crises, churches may need to invest more consistently in structured marital formation programmes that prepare couples before difficulties arise.

From the perspective of Cognitive Behavioral Couple Therapy, sustained improvements in marital functioning occur when couples develop healthy patterns of communication, conflict resolution, and cognitive restructuring (Epstein & Baucom, 2022). Markman et al. (2018) similarly argue that preventive relationship education produces more enduring marital outcomes than interventions delivered only after conflict has emerged. Williamson et al. (2026) further note that structured skills-based programmes strengthen couples' capacity to manage future relational challenges. Consequently, the comparatively low ratings for regular marriage teaching suggest that opportunities for preventive intervention remain underutilized within the participating churches.

Structural Family Therapy provides a complementary explanation. While emotional support remains valuable, lasting marital improvement requires intentional restructuring of family roles, boundaries, and interaction patterns (Minuchin, 1974). Doss et al. (2020) similarly observe that faith-based leaders frequently emphasize moral encouragement but provide comparatively less structured guidance regarding relationship dynamics and behavioural change. The present findings therefore indicate that spiritual leadership would likely be strengthened through greater integration of systematic marriage education alongside existing pastoral care.

The Influence of Spiritual Leadership on Marital Enrichment

The overall findings indicate that respondents held generally positive perceptions of spiritual leaders' contribution to marital enrichment, as reflected in the moderate composite score. However, neither the correlation analysis nor the regression analysis demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between perceived spiritual leaders' engagement and marital enrichment. These findings suggest that although couples value the pastoral support provided by spiritual leaders, such support alone may not be sufficient to explain variations in marital enrichment within the study population.

This finding should not be interpreted as evidence that spiritual leadership lacks value. Rather, it suggests that marital enrichment is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by numerous interacting factors beyond pastoral involvement. Duncan et al. (2020) similarly argue that spiritual guidance constitutes one important component of marital wellbeing alongside communication quality, personal commitment, socio-economic circumstances, and family relationships. Consequently, while church leadership may facilitate healthier marriages, its influence is likely to operate in conjunction with several other relational and contextual factors.

The absence of statistically significant demographic differences further indicates that respondents perceived spiritual leaders similarly regardless of age, years of marriage, family size, or gender. Sullivan (2021) likewise found that faith-based relationship support generally benefits couples across diverse demographic groups because it emphasizes universal values such as commitment, forgiveness, and mutual respect. However, Halford et al. (2018) caution that couples at different stages of marriage experience distinct relational challenges, suggesting that marriage ministries may benefit from tailoring interventions to newly married couples, parents with young children, and long-married spouses.

The findings also support both theoretical perspectives underpinning the study. Structural Family Therapy proposes that healthy marital functioning depends primarily on family interaction patterns rather than demographic characteristics (Minuchin, 1974). Likewise, Cognitive Behavioral Couple Therapy argues that improvements in relationships result from changes in communication, cognition, and behavioural interactions between partners (Epstein & Baucom, 2022). The absence of demographic differences observed in this study is therefore consistent with the proposition that effective pastoral support targets universal relational processes rather than particular categories of couples.

Overall, the findings portray spiritual leaders as respected sources of guidance, emotional support, and reconciliation whose contributions are widely recognized by married couples. Nevertheless, the modest composite score and the absence of statistically significant predictive relationships indicate that spiritual leadership alone cannot account for marital enrichment. Strengthening marriage ministry through regular teaching, structured relationship education, pastoral training, and contextually responsive interventions may enable churches to complement their existing strengths in counselling and reconciliation while enhancing their overall contribution to stable and enriching marital relationships.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that spiritual leaders play a meaningful, though limited, role in enriching marriages among Christian couples in Kitui Central, Kenya. Respondents generally perceived spiritual leaders as approachable, supportive, and instrumental in promoting forgiveness and reconciliation, highlighting the importance of pastoral care in strengthening marital relationships. However, lower ratings for regular marriage teaching suggest that structured and proactive marital education remains underemphasized within church settings. Although the overall perception of spiritual leaders' contribution was moderately positive, statistical analyses revealed no significant relationship between spiritual leaders' engagement and marital enrichment, nor did spiritual leaders' engagement significantly predict marital enrichment outcomes. These findings suggest that while spiritual leadership provides valuable emotional and spiritual support, marital enrichment is influenced by a broader combination of individual, relational, and contextual factors beyond pastoral involvement alone. Consequently, churches may enhance their contribution to healthy marriages by complementing pastoral guidance with structured, evidence-based marriage education and counseling programs that equip couples with practical relationship skills alongside spiritual formation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Strengthen structured marriage education within churches.** Churches should move beyond crisis-oriented pastoral care by integrating regular marriage education into sermons, seminars, workshops, and discipleship programs. Providing continuous teaching on communication, conflict resolution, commitment, and healthy relationships would better equip couples to address marital challenges proactively.
2. **Enhance the capacity of spiritual leaders in marriage and family counseling.** Church leaders should receive ongoing training in evidence-based marriage counseling, pastoral counseling, and family therapy approaches. Such training would enable them to complement biblical teachings with practical relationship skills, thereby improving the effectiveness of their support to married couples.
3. **Promote collaborative and holistic marital support programs.** Churches should establish partnerships with professional marriage and family counselors, psychologists, and other family support practitioners to provide comprehensive services for couples. Combining spiritual guidance with professional counseling can address both the spiritual and psychosocial dimensions of marital enrichment, leading to stronger and more resilient marriages.
4. **Future research should explore additional determinants of marital enrichment.** Since spiritual leaders' engagement demonstrated a positive but statistically non-significant influence on marital enrichment, future studies should examine other factors such as communication patterns, marital commitment, conflict resolution skills, emotional intimacy, and socioeconomic influences. Studies involving larger samples, different geographical settings, and mixed-methods or longitudinal designs would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to successful marital relationships within faith-based communities.

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