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Resilience of Christian marriages in contemporary society as viewed through the lens of spirituality

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The complex context of contemporary society with the dynamic element of digital technologies, challenges Christian marriages in several ways. This article aimed to identify theological resources that can help Christian marriages flourish in the given context. The objective of this study was to identify theological resources, that can be used to encourage Christian marriages to flourish amid the challenges brought by the context of the digital age. This article followed the method of a literature study. The discussion started with an overview of the context of the digital age, and the relevant challenges that it poses to Christian marriages. This was followed by a pastoral perspective that was presented on the concept of spirituality. The article concluded by exploring the construct of resilience, through the lens of spirituality as it relates to Christian marriages. It was discovered that relational resilience is needed for Christian marriages, to meet the challenges of this context. Oneness was identified as a crucial element in the resilience of Christian marriages, when it is viewed through the lens of spirituality. The prominent connection between resilience and spirituality, stimulated reflection on a relational view on the Trinity as well as a marital spirituality, which informed the understanding of oneness, that can exist in Christian marriage relationships. Two overarching theological resources were identified, that can be applied in pastoral care to encourage the resilience of Christian marriages in a digital age. The first resource relates to the oneness of the Trinity, which spouses can imitate in their marriage relationship in order to increase intimacy. Secondly, marital spirituality was explained as a shared path of faith to which spouses commit, in order to intentionally practise an awareness for God's presence, to honour closeness to the church and to be devoted to one another in daily life.

Contribution: The challenges that Christian marriages face in a digital age, are placed in the context of spirituality and trinitarian theology, making an innovative theological contribution, by identifying theological resources that can enable Christian marriages to flourish.

Keywords: Christian marriages; digital technologies; pastoral care; resilience; Trinity; oneness in Christian marriage; marital spirituality

Introduction

Digital technologies brought about changes in the social environment of contemporary societies. This article is concerned with changes in marital relationships as one of the effects of a digital culture. The relational quality of marriages is challenged in several ways, which presents a question regarding the theological lenses that may inform a pastoral approach, aimed at enhancing the resilience of Christian marriages in a digital age. The increase in self-idealisation and narcissistic behaviours on social media platforms, creates opportunities to invest in a variety of relationships besides the primary marital relationship (Halpern, Katz & Carril 2016:120). Some of these relationships remain in an online environment, while others deviate into physical offline interaction. One of the major contributors to such interaction, is the phenomenon known as identity play.[1] Identity play confronts all role players with questions regarding authenticity,

1. Identity play speaks of the freedom to create one's identity online, playing with recreating and editing of one's online persona as required by, or adapted to different audiences and different digital platforms (Turkle 2011:194–195). Importantly, these online representations can affect one's relational engagements as well as one's self-perception not only in the online world, but also offline (Halpern et al. 2016:117; Yee et al. 2009:304–305).

Note: This text has not been published in article format before. The article's focus feeds into the purpose of a larger project, a PhD thesis by Ferreira (2021), entitled *Enhancing the resilience of Christian marriages in the digital age: A pastoral study*. The PhD thesis has been submitted in article format according to the general rules of the North-West University (South Africa), of which the relevant stipulation reads: 'In the article format, the research reports could include either published research articles or unpublished manuscripts in article format. If more than one article or manuscript are used, it must be presented as a unit, supplemented by an overarching problem statement, a focused literature analysis and integration, and a summarised concluding discussion' (General Rule A.7.5.7). The PhD thesis contains a series of three articles of which the current article is the second article in the study process. Article one focused on a contextual orientation of the digital age, the current and second article's focus lies in concept clarification. Article three aimed to integrate the findings of the first two articles, to present a pastoral perspective on the resilience of Christian marriages in a digital age.

integrity and congruency, bringing change in the process of identity formation in both individuals and marriages. The existence of numerous online support groups for 'gamer widows'[2] (Ahlstrom et al. 2012:1; Hertlein & Hawkins 2012:1; Northrup & Shumway 2014:270), suggests that online games and the interaction with avatars[3] affect marriage relationships in adverse ways. Literature indicates that there are complex interactions between social networking sites (SNSs) and marriages. These complexities become evident in, among others, a change in the quality of communication between spouses, which can lead to an increase in marital conflict (Carter 2015:2; Valenzuela, Halpern & Katz 2014:100). Social networking sites platforms are secretly exploited for personal, emotional or sexual gain (Burton 2017:1; Carter 2015:1) and provide increased opportunities for infidelity, due to increased interaction with people outside the primary relationship (Burton 2017:17–18).

Turkle (2016:11, 25, 42), however, refers to people's ability to display resilience[4] in the face of the challenges of the digital age. The focus of this article is the resilience of Christian marriages in the face of relational challenges, arising from the digital age, especially around discovering what enables a marriage relationship to thrive and flourish in this age. Put differently, the aim is to illuminate the means that Christian marriage partners have at their disposal to unlock purpose and meaning in an everchanging digital context, to enhance the resilience and quality of their marital relationship. As will be demonstrated, this focal point correlates closely with the construct of spirituality as viewed from a Christian perspective.

Theoretical framework

Various academic fields have paid increased attention to the concept of spirituality, including psychology (Pitta 2015), psychiatry (Janse van Rensburg et al. 2015), philosophy, education and sociology (Miner, Dowson & Devenish 2012:viii) and theology (Dreyer 2003; Wolfteich 2014:332–334).

Spirituality is a rich and diverse term. Some of its meanings include wellness, beliefs and values, a concern for transcendent meaning to everyday life, holistic healing, religious systems, holistic orientation to life, optimal health, existential questions of life and being, wholeness, the practise of holiness and a personal source of purpose in life (Dreyer 2015:655; Herholdt 2008; Janse van Rensburg et al. 2015:1840;

Lombard 2016:3; Louw 2016:64–68; Puchalski et al. 2014:11; Schneider 1989:684; Van den Berg 2008:122–126; Wolfteich 2014:331). A definition of spirituality has been presented by a group of interdisciplinary participants at a conference in 2009 and Puchalski and Ferrell (2010) articulate it as follows:

> [S]pirituality is the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose, and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature and to the significant or sacred. (p. 25)

The words 'significant or sacred' as used within this generalised definition, suggest that spirituality can be employed in conversations across various religious and cultural traditions. Louw (2016:219) mentions that as spirituality gained field in more secularised societies, understanding the construct became 'accommodative and inclusive within the interfaith dialogue. It seems as if "spirituality" is more neutral (non-specific) and creates a common ground between different religious traditions'. Louw (2016) describes 'a kind of consensus in literature' regarding the meaning of the concept *spirituality* as follows:

> In general, there is a kind of consensus in literature that 'spirituality' refers to the integration between belief systems and concrete, existential life events. Spirituality refers to a way of life determined by norms, values and convictions that give meaning to life, motivates people to endure in suffering and help to display a kind of resilience and hopeful anticipation. In this regard, it is emphasised that spirituality is closely related to the capacity of the human spirit to discover purposefulness in life and to deal with ultimate values regarding destiny and fate. (pp. 67–68)

This article attempts to clarify spirituality from a pastoral perspective. The pastoral understanding of spirituality does not refer to a generalised connectedness to the significant or sacred, but to a connectedness 'between the divine Spirit/Pneuma and the human spirit/soul within the reality of life' (Louw 2016:66). Within this connectedness the process of meaning making and identity formation of an individual takes place, while this is in turn connected to one's self-perception and life orientation. 'Spirituality includes every dimension of human life, one's entire human existence as an authentic person in God's presence' (Dreyer 2011:1).[5]

In pastoral theology,[6] spirituality embodies a fundamental theme of study. Dreyer (2003:715) identifies spirituality as the main focal point of Henri Nouwen's understanding of pastoral care. The suffering person and the pastoral care mediator are both seen as spiritual beings who live in the presence of God (Dreyer 2003:720), therefore pastoral care is essentially spiritual. Dreyer continues that spirituality is 'about the way in which people experience God's presence' (Dreyer 2003:720), citing from Nouwen, who defines it as a 'new way of being in the world without being of it' (Nouwen cited by Dreyer 2003:720) – known as *Dasein*. To explain and

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2. A 'gamer widow' is the spouse of an online gaming addict. The 'widow' is usually the spouse who does not engage in online gaming and therefore experiences their spousal relationship as dead or non-existent, since it has been replaced by excessive time spent in online gaming (Ahlstrom et al. 2012:1).

3. An avatar is a character created by a user, which serves as his or her online representation, often in idealised form (Ahlstrom et al. 2012:5). It creates a doorway through which one enters and participates in the world of online gaming. Individuals still experience 'a sense of embodiment within their own avatar', making intimacy and sexual engagement possible and very real, even though it takes place within a virtual world (Lomanowska & Guitton 2016:139–140). According to Ahlstrom et al. (2012:2) more than a third of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Gamers are married, implying that online gaming can no longer be viewed as an entertainment mainly utilised by youth. See Hertlein and Hawkins (2012:19–22) for an overview of different areas of couple's relationships that are affected by online gaming.

4. Resilience can be explained as an individual's ability to stay healthy, function well and thrive despite adversity (Patterson 2002:233; Van Breda 2001:1, 5). This article endorses the following definition of resilience: the ability to 'withstand stress, regain strength, adapt, and find solutions to life's challenges and setbacks' (Beck & Robinson 2015:64).

5. Spirituality is a dynamic and complex phenomenon. See Louw (2016:64–70) for a more elaborated definition of spirituality, as well as Louw (2016:219–272) for a detailed discussion on the relevance of spirituality in pastoral caregiving.

6. Pastoral theology is understood as a sub-discipline of practical theology (Osmer 2008:12–13), and it aims to instil hope in people amidst the challenges faced in everyday living (Louw 2016:63–64).

illuminate the concept of spirituality further, Dreyer argues in view of Nouwen's work that it is imperative for the pastoral care mediator to move beyond psychology, since a suffering person needs healing, sustaining and guiding (Dreyer 2003:720). The subject field of pastoral care developed through a process of rediscovering spirituality, when *cura animarum* was understood finally as spiritual care and spiritual direction, which involved a major change of focus towards holistic healing and interconnectedness between human existence and God (Louw 2016:65). This perspective implies that 'a spiritual approach to healing is paramount' (Louw 2013:2).[7] A Christian understanding of spirituality is rooted in the paradigms of eschatological, incarnational, pneumatological and hermeneutical thinking (Grobler 1997:220, 239; Louw 2012:198; Venter 2015:2).

Knieps-Port le Roi (2006:61–62) explains that Vatican 2 brought about a change in a Christian understanding of spirituality. Spirituality was no longer viewed as something to be practiced only by office-bearers, but as something that exists in the daily lives of all believers: it 'amounted to a way of life in which faith gave shape and direction to human life as a whole'. Christian spirituality entails a constant developmental process throughout life, characterised by spiritual practices and virtues such as faith, love, hope, wisdom, peace, patience, humility, courage and so forth (Grobler 1997:220; Louw 2012:184–185, 2013; Perrin 2007:26–27).

A holistic orientation towards spirituality, where it is viewed as an umbrella term, is important (Lombard 2016:3). This includes various religious attitudes and practices of faith (Knieps-Port le Roi 2006:60). Spirituality and religion are often used as synonyms (Puchalski & Ferrell 2010:22), but for the purpose of this study the difference between these constructs is important. Although religion, which relates to spirituality, has a strong connection to the transcendent realm (Louw 2016:222), it also relates to an 'organized and institutional group-oriented entity' (Dreyer 2015:655), that functions within culture and society. As explained earlier, it has become evident that in contrast to this understanding of religion, spirituality is concerned with meaning and purpose in life, emphasising the personal component as opposed to the institutionalised element of religion. Although these terms are closely related to each other, the researcher therefore does distinguish between them. Spirituality can find expression in religious experiences, but this is only one possible element of a person's spirituality (Puchalski & Ferrell 2010:22), since the latter encompasses a more inclusive phenomenon (Perrin 2007:32). Louw (2016:66, 220) says that 'spirituality points to faith in a supreme being' and that it 'underlines a new interrelatedness between faith and life'. Based on this, we can see that faith is an essential part of spirituality, while both terms continue to enjoy a strong connection to transcendence (Louw 2016:223). Regardless of

what or who a person chooses to place his or her faith in, this practice is an essential part of one's spirituality, though it does not define a person's spirituality. All three terms – spirituality, religion and faith – have been identified as resources for resilience (Dreyer 2015:656).

Research conducted among patients with mental disorders, showed a greater relation between spirituality and resilience than religiosity and resilience (Mizuno et al. 2018:316). Spirituality also received specific attention in resilience research (Dreyer 2015:654–655; Magezi & Manda 2016:1; O'Grady et al. 2016:166–167; Pillay, Ramlall & Burns 2016:2; Richardson 2002:313). According to Dillen (2012:61, 66), spirituality and resilience mutually support each other, and the connection between spirituality and resilience studies is indubitable and invaluable. These differentiations between the different constructs around spirituality, then inform the decision here, that this concept will be most suited for the present argument.

Resilience as a couples-related construct

Resilience studies find its origin in the field of positive psychology (Baumgardner & Crothers 2014:7) and includes various foci such as the resilience of children (Finestone 2013; Garmezy 1987:74; Gunnestad & Thwala 2011), adult and family resilience (Boss 2002; Hawley & Dehaan 1996; Walsh 2006), community resilience (Dreyer 2015; Houston 2018) and resilience in the workplace (Kupers 2018; Van Breda 2016).

According to Skerret (2015:4–5), *resilience* as a construct related to couples, has not been widely studied. Literature presents two opposing views of the term. The work of Karen Skerrett and Keith Sanford is used to demonstrate these opposing views. Sanford, Backer-Fulghum and Carson (2016:1243) and Sanford et al. (2017:660) explain couple resilience as 'a process in which a couple engages in relationship behaviours that help each member adapt and maintain a high level of well-being during stressful life situations'. This explanation creates the impression that couple resilience should be understood in light of the relationship that serves as a protective factor for the resilience of every individual[8] within the relationship. The focus is therefore on the individual's resilience, and how the couple's relationship supports this dynamic ability. The second understanding of couple resilience refers to a relational construct, that consists of more than just the combination of the resilience of two partners (Skerrett 2015:18). '… the heart of a resilient marriage resides in the question: 'What do WE need to do that will best serve our relationship?' (Skerrett 2013:53). Here the focus is on the potential of the relationship to be resilient, rather than the resilience of the individuals. In discussing couple resilience as a relational construct, Skerrett (2013:53) makes use of terms such as 'relational growth' and

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7. See Louw (2016:64–68) for a detailed explanation of the rediscovery of the concept of spirituality for pastoral care. This caused a shift from understanding the soul as an entity separated from body and life, to understanding it as a 'vital ingredient of all human, social and environmental relationships'.

8. Research does confirm the important role of significant relationships as a protective factor for individual resilience (Walsh 2013:66); the focus of the current article is, however, slanted to couple resilience, and not individual resilience.

a mutual identity of the couple described as *we-ness*. In this article, couple resilience will be defined as the ability of the dynamic system of a couple's relationship to 'withstand stress, regain strength, adapt, and find solutions to life's challenges and setbacks' (Beck & Robinson 2015:64).

Although Sanford et al. (2016:1246)[9] identify positive relational behaviours like that of *we-ness*, they do not classify this as one of the primary components of couple resilience. Skerrett (2015:5–15) gives an overview of research that identifies different components of resilience at a relational level, and states that 'just as there are multiple pathways to resilient outcomes for individuals, the same is true for couples'. Based on her empirical research involving multiple couples, she does, however, claim that *we-ness* is 'the unique dynamic that characterizes couple resilience' (Gildersleeve et al. 2017:1; Skerrett 2015:18). *We-ness* should not be mistaken for companionship: it refers to a state of mind, where the differences between two partners are valued to bring forth symbiosis (Reid & Ahmad 2015:147). In this article, attention will be given to the concept of *we-ness*, as it is accepted that strengthening it in a marriage, may lead to the strengthening of the resilience of the marriage. The implication, however, is not that resilience and *we-ness* are synonymous, but rather that a strong nexus exists between the two terms. Although there possibly are other factors that contribute to couple resilience, the decision for focusing on *we-ness* in this article, is twofold:

• Karen Skerrett is an authoritative researcher and pioneer on the topic of couple resilience. Her research[10] indicates that 'we-ness' constitutes the unique dynamic that characterises couple resilience.
• The notion of 'we-ness' is evident in theological studies relating to marriage. This makes it the most appropriate choice in the present article given its pastoral focus around marital resilience (cf. Louw 2012, Dreyer & Van Aarde 2007, Vorster 2008. Lowry 2012, Seager 2014).

We-ness through the lens of spirituality

As previously explained, the Christian understanding of spirituality is not informed by a connection to transcendence in general, but by an interconnectedness with God. This interconnectedness is based on a specific understanding of who God is, as presented within the Christian tradition. Venter (2012:2–3) draws on the research of theologians such

9. Sanford et al. (2016) conduct a qualitative study with 525 participants, aiming at discovering types of resilience behaviours that individuals notice and naturally experience in their romantic relationships. As mentioned earlier, the present article endorses Skerrett's definition of couple resilience; nevertheless, Sanford et al. (2016) do reveal an element worth mentioning. They identify 49 types of behaviours present within couple relationships, that can contribute to the resilience of each partner. Two of these 49 behavioural types relate closely to that of 'we-ness: (1). Partners worked together as a team; (2). Partners viewed the situation as something they were experiencing together.
This indicates that *we-ness* can serve as an important element of couple resilience, over and above its role as an important element of individual resilience.

10. Karen Skerrett and Karen Fergus (both researchers within the field of psychology) collaborated in compiling a book, *Couple Resilience*, which was released in 2015. The book contains research from 16 scholars, and throughout its chapters, the concept of 'we-ness' is predominant. This source demonstrates that 'we-ness' is an essential part of couple resilience, and it could even be said that the one cannot exist without the other.

as John Zizioulas and Jurgen Moltmann, to explain that understanding the essence of God is only possible by including the concept of the Trinity. The Trinitarian understanding of God shows, that within Christianity God himself is presented as a being in relationship (Ackermann 1998; Knieps-Port le Roi 2006:67; Mason 2005). It is this Trinitarian understanding that constitutes the uniqueness and the strong relational element of Christian spirituality (Perrin 2007:32; Venter 2015:2–3), informing the Christian perspective on the concept of *we-ness*.

The second half of the twentieth century signified renewed interest in Trinitarian theology (Venter 2019:1). Various critical voices have been raised against this 'Trinitarian Renaissance', of which Venter (2015, 2019) provides a thorough and compelling overview. Despite this, two noteworthy developments regarding Trinitarian research continue around the personhood and relationality of God (Venter 2015:3). If God exists as three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the relational and social element of the trinity cannot be eliminated, as these three persons exist in relation to one another (Venter 2015:3). 'We worship a triune God. There is a dialogue within God; between Father, Son and Spirit. Ours is a Trinity which is in relation' (Ackermann 1998:20). The researcher ratifies Venter (2015:7) when he says that 'the distinctiveness of a Trinitarian spirituality cannot be reduced to a single denominator', such as the relationality of God. Relationality and *we-ness*, as expressed within the Trinity, however, are the elements of a Trinitarian spirituality most relevant to the present study.

The following quote from Ackermann (1998) sheds light on the characteristic of *we-ness*, that can be found within the relationality of the Trinity:

> [T]he mutual self-giving relationship of the Trinity does not mean that Father, Son and Spirit are collapsed into one undifferentiated divinity. Each member of the Trinity acts as an agent. Each one of the divine persons of the Trinity gives of the self to the other, while at the same time each reflects the presence of the other. (p. 20)

A Christian spiritual perspective on *we-ness* does not imply the complete fusion of two elements; it does not replace individuality. It is understood that a sense of unity and *we-ness* exists within the Trinity, because all partners practise the freedom to be themselves completely, while committing to mutual self-giving for the sake of unity in the relationship (Bevans 2018:34). This relational space signifies an environment where individuals exist as one unit while embracing each other's uniqueness.

Holland et al. (2016:219) use Acts 17:28 to explain that this same sense of *we-ness* that is present in the Trinity can also exist in a person's faith relationship with God. According to Mason (2005), progress in spirituality comes from accepting that we are united and made one with God because of Christ. This acceptance of oneness with God causes certain relational implications, whereby the image of God can be made visible within human relationships (Mason 2005). It is as if this same

we-ness expressed within the Trinity can be reflected in human relationships. As image bearers of God, humanity was created with a relational capacity like that which exists in the Trinity. It is expected that the community of believers should reflect the relationality, which is found within the Trinity, where unity exists among believers without jeopardising the uniqueness of everyone (King & Whitney 2015:51; Venter 2012:3).

Relationships are central to the being and well-being of people, as no one was ultimately created to be alone; it is by relating to others that individuals experience growth, happiness and fulfilment (Ackermann 1998:17–18). 'Relationships are not optional. We do not live self-contained, self-directed and undisturbed existences' (Ackermann 1998:20). The relational element of Christian spirituality reveals itself in an encounter between a transcendent God and a human being, as expressed within human relationships (Grobler 1997:219 & 237; Louw 2012:180). 'Our God is a relational God, which is why he created Adam *and* Eve. The image of God is not in the man alone but in a relationship' (Mason 2005). Subsequently marriage can be an environment where the expression of God's image within the concept of *we-ness* can be optimised. The explanation concerning foundational beliefs that accompany a Christian spirituality, clearly shows that there is a unique understanding of *we-ness* within a theological framework. *We-ness* has been studied in theology as it relates to marriage and has been labelled with synonyms such as *we-space* (Louw 2012:87–104), or *oneness* (Dreyer & Van Aarde 2007:635–637; Vorster 2008:467). Authors such as Mason, Lowry and Seager discuss the *we-space* in marriage by means of the relational elements of the Trinity (Lowry 2012:15; Mason 2005; Seager 2014:71). According to Lowry (2012:14), the unity within the Trinity is an example of the oneness that can exist in a marital relationship. Put differently: the image of God can be expressed within a marriage relationship, where oneness between spouses reflects oneness of the Trinity (Seager 2014:71). This concept of *oneness* can serve as an important bridge builder between a pastoral perspective and the resilience of Christian marriages, which will be discussed next.

Oneness in Christian marriages

Vorster (2008:467) explains *oneness* in marriage as a triangular relation between the spouses and Christ (cf. Eph 5:21–33), causing unity to exist between two individuals on a physical and spiritual level. From a clinical psychological perspective, *we-ness* or *we-consciousness* speaks of a couple's 'awareness that they belong to a larger entity that transcends each of them as individuals', thus creating focus on the team dynamic, and placing 'concerns for individual fulfilment in the background' (Skerrett 2013:53–55). The Christian spiritual perspective of this study does acknowledge this reciprocal interaction between focusing on the self in marriage, as well as focusing on the *we*.

However, this reciprocal interaction is understood in light of the oneness of the trinity, where God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit exist as three persons in unity, and not as one undifferentiated divinity (cf. Ackermann 1998:20), which implies equal emphasis on oneness and the individual.

Anderson (2012:61) states that the paradox central to all intimate relationships, concerns the balance of intimacy and autonomy. While every individual *I* should experience support in a marriage, it is also crucial that the communal *we* should be promoted (Anderson 2012:61). This balanced focus on the *I* as well as the *we* in the marriage, directly relates to the Christian spiritual perspective on the resilience of marriage, as explained by means of a Trinitarian theology. One can say that as much as the individual *I* should experience support within marriage, it is also important to strengthen the *we* or oneness of the marriage, in order to enhance the resilience of the relationship. Once this takes place, the marriage relationship itself will have the ability to be resilient and respond effectively to various relational challenges. 'It is the identification and affirmation of acceptable diversity' that serves as the basis for a mature establishment of oneness, according to Barton (2016:51).

Knieps-Port le Roi (2006) refers to marital spirituality, which takes the current conversation regarding the balance of intimacy and autonomy, one step further. This can be considered as a key factor in theological discussion of resilience in Christian marriages in a digital age. It is a 'consciously and jointly willed cultivation of the faith' between spouses, where the personal faith of the individual can be shared with one's spouse (Knieps-Port le Roi 2006: 62–63). Knieps-Port le Roi (2006:66) acknowledges that successful relationships require, that individuals bring their autonomous experiences of God to the relationship. He does, however, emphasise that there is a difference between merely acknowledging spirituality within marriage, and the notion of 'marital spirituality' (Knieps-Port le Roi 2006). This latter can be described as a joint path of faith (Bishop Wanke, cited by Knieps-Port le Roi 2006:63), that focuses on oneness in a marriage relationship, where both spouses are centred on recognising God in their shared experiences. Being conscious of God's presence in one's marriage, and sharing one's spiritual experiences with each other, bring a unique dynamic and understanding towards intimacy within Christian marriages. This exclusive understanding of intimacy is founded on God's faithfulness, and Christ's acts of reconciliation, as verbalised by Louw (2012):

> The we-space of the Bible is created by a unique understanding of intimacy. This kind of intimacy is not merely about romantic love – it is essentially ethical. Intimacy implies a choice which represents an acceptance of responsibility for the other. Love is about a 'yes' now without the possibility of rejection later on: it describes an unqualified, continuous process and commitment to the notion: partnership for life. (p. 89)

Marital spirituality entails more than the sharing of each spouses' spiritual experiences with one another. It speaks of a commitment towards a life-long journey that a couple undertakes together, whereby the marital relationship can grow to contain spiritual significance within itself. Building

on the shared spiritual experiences between spouses, marital spirituality further implies that a Christian experience of faith can be nourished in the experience of the marital relationships. A distinctive Christian spirituality can be generated by the 'experience of the marital relationship', which differs from the spirituality that a celibate can experience (Knieps-Port le Roi 2006:64–65).

It can therefore be concluded that a Christian spiritual approach towards couple resilience lies not only in the unique understanding of oneness as expressed in the Trinity, but also in the potential of a shared spiritual experience, to be contained in the marriage relationship. The communal spiritual experiences that spouses share, signify a Christian spirituality that makes way for oneness to exist and be strengthened between spouses, by means of their shared path of faith. A shared spirituality can then be regarded as a vehicle that facilitates the process of growth in oneness, within Christian marriage.

Knieps-Port le Roi (2006:70–72) identifies three ways in which marital spirituality can be enhanced, which could lead to the strengthening of couple resilience.

- Closeness to experience

Once a couple cultivates an intentional sensitivity for God's presence in all their shared experiences, growth can take place in marital spirituality.

- Closeness to the church

Marital spirituality should not be completely separated from previous understandings of Christian spirituality. The 'Church's treasury of religious expressions and narratives', is a resource that will continue to develop and shape marital spirituality.

- Devotion to one another in everyday life

Marriage relationships are not self-evidently spiritual, as it exists primarily within human realities. Therefore, awareness concerning the spiritual dimension in a marriage relationship, should be intentionally created. This can be done by setting aside time and a designated space or area for special interaction between spouses, and by creating symbols or rituals that enable a marriage relationship to flourish.

Spiritual resources for the resilience of Christian marriages

Considering the above, it seems that couple resilience lies in the Christian understanding of *we-ness* as portrayed in the Trinity and Christian spiritual experiences, that can be generated within the marriage relationship, resulting in distinct marital spirituality and intimacy. Knieps-Port le Roi (2006:71) explains that by honouring closeness to the church, and by drawing from the 'church's treasury of religious expressions and narratives', as mentioned, authentic spirituality can be discovered and enriched. The 'church's

wealth of religious expressions and narratives' is to be found among others, in the spiritual resources it presents for resilience. The concept of spiritual resources[11] can be associated with protective factors for resilience, as applied in the field of psychology. Skerrett (2015:5) refers to protective factors that relate to couple relationships such as communication skills, beliefs regarding commitment and the individuals' level of spirituality, which can protect the relationship against potential negative consequences of adversity.

Dillen (2007, 2012) presents a Christian theological perspective on resilience in the context of childhood studies, identifying grace and resurrection hope as resilience values. Dreyer (2015) studies resilience theory from an epistemological and hermeneutical perspective, in relation to community resilience, and refers to joy, love, peace and faith as 'theological values' for resilience. Vorster (2018:480–493) aims at identifying buffers against gangster identity formation, by studying Christian narratives in relation to resilience. From these narratives Vorster (2018) derives the following theological motives for resilience:

> Patience and humility derived from the notion: *Christ as example* – 1 Thess 1:3 / 2 Tim 3:11 (p. 480);
>
> Courage (fortitude) and faith derived from the *character formation* motif – Rom 5:3–5 / 1 Pet 1:6 – 7 / Jam 5:10 (p. 488–491); and
>
> Hope derived from the *eschatological hope paradigm*. (pp. 492–494)

Brunsdon (2015:482) states that there exists a relation between the construct of resilience and wisdom as a potential resource for resilience. The spiritual resources underlying resilience – grace, hope, joy, love, peace, faith, patience, humility, courage and wisdom – also characterise Christian spirituality, guiding the lived experiences and actions of believers. In the same way, these spiritual resources for resilience should be valued and practiced within a marriage relationship, in order to guide the daily interaction of spouses, enhancing oneness between them and stimulating marital resilience.

A pastoral understanding of the resilience of Christian marriages in the digital age

This article argued that a key principle in understanding resilience as a relational construct, lies within the concept of *we-ness*. This is explained as the mutual identity of a couple, a state of mind, where both partners have the freedom to be themselves while committing to mutual self-giving for the sake of the unity in the relationship. *We-ness* is also accepted as the prominent dynamic which characterises marital resilience. Due to the strong connection between resilience and spirituality, the *we-ness* of marriages and the relationality of a Trinitarian theology has been discussed, leading to the recognition of the concept of *oneness* as a focal point.

11.Although theological researchers acknowledge the importance of spiritual resources for resilience, there has been different synonyms assigned to this concept. For example, Dreyer (2015:656) uses the concept of 'theological values', Dillen (2012:66) labels it as 'theological concepts', and Vorster (2018:475) uses 'theological notions'.

Bevans (2018:33–34) mentions that the Trinitarian understanding of God reveals his active involvement in 'the world's events, in human experiences and cultures.' Bevans (2018) further states that all theology seeks a practical outcome:

'An adequate systematic theology of the Trinity', David Cunningham argues, 'is a theology that results in a "Trinitarian practice" since faith is stirred to imitate the Trinity's work in the world and to participate in the divine mission' (p. 43).

Therefore, the oneness of the Trinity serves as an example of the oneness that can exist within Christian marital relationships. As the marriage relationship is navigated through the challenges of the digital age, an imitation of oneness should find its expression in the daily lives of spouses.

Knieps-Port le Roi (2015) states that:

[R]esearch on marital spirituality indicates that on a practical level couples have a desire to disclose the marital union as a locus of a transcendence or divine grace in which they may put their hope for a fulfilling relationship beyond what they are able to realize by their own human competences and capabilities. (p. 587)

It is in cultivating awareness of God's presence within a marriage relationship, that spouses, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can embody spiritual resources such as grace, hope, and joy, love and so forth. This embodiment of spiritual resources enhances marital spirituality and imitates the oneness of the Trinity, which portrays relational resilience within a challenging context such as the digital age.

Conclusion

This article focused on spirituality, as an important pastoral theological lens for understanding resilience in the context of Christian marriage. By considering various relational dynamics of the digital age, questions were raised concerning the resilience of Christian marriages in this context. It was discovered that a Christian spiritual approach to marital resilience contains two prominent elements:

Firstly, oneness as informed by the relationality of the Trinity. The relational element of oneness, as presented in the Trinity, was discovered as foundational to the Christian understanding of *we-ness* and can act as mediator between spirituality and the resilience of marriages. If both spouses commit to imitating the oneness of the Trinity in their marriage relationship, it will increase the relationship's capacity to be resilient.

The second element is marital spirituality, that is understood as a shared path of faith that spouses commit to. Marital spirituality finds expression in practising intentional awareness for God's presence, honouring closeness to the church, and devotion to one another in daily life.

Pursuing this marital spirituality, with the goal to imitate the oneness of the Trinity, may invoke special intimacy between spouses on all dimensions of marital life, whereby God is fully present. The pastoral perspective offered here[12] will enable the marriage relationship to flourish in the digital age, as it empowers the Christian couple with theological resources to navigate themselves in this complex and challenging era.

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12.This article emphasises the need for further reflection on how pastoral care mediators can guide spouses in the process of enhancing their marital resilience in the digital age. The latter is discussed in a third article, as part of the overall research project, of which the present article forms part.

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