

THE INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIAN FEMALE FRIENDSHIP  
ON SINGLE MOTHERS

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## **ABSTRACT**

This phenomenological qualitative study explores the lived experiences of Christian single mothers who attend small groups at the Single Parent Family Ministry of a multi-campus megachurch in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex of Texas. The aim was to understand how Christian female friendships influence single moms' level of faith and personal growth. There were three major findings. First, single moms initiate locating their community of friends by choosing to get involved at church beyond Sunday service. Second, single moms experience spiritual and personal growth through three levels of friendship found in The Ruth Paradigm—community supporters, mentoring encouragers, and one-on-one loyal companions. Third, this megachurch was directly involved in single moms finding their community. This was done through the church providing the atmosphere for friendship to occur which included small groups and free childcare, so the mothers could interact with likeminded Christian women.

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To the brave single mothers raising our next generation.

May you experience The Ruth Paradigm in your own life to the fullest!

# CHAPTER 1

## SINGLE MOTHERS AND THEIR FRIENDS

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Single mothers face more challenges in parenting and life satisfaction than the average married mom, as single moms are going it alone without the emotional, financial, and spiritual support of a partner in raising children. A 2020 Liberty University study examining stress and life satisfaction among single parent households confirms that being a single parent can be “extremely stressful, thereby putting the mental health of parents at risk.”<sup>1</sup> That pressure of being the sole income provider makes it especially difficult for single mothers to find time for themselves to grow spiritually, personally, or even to develop friendships.

It is common belief among scholars that women have an innate desire for connection and friendship with other women. As Diane Barth<sup>2</sup> describes this yearning in her 2018 study, women are innately endowed to have close relationships which consist of friendships with nurturing bonds and feelings of empathy towards one another. John Fitzgerald describes a close friend as “someone who is so trustworthy that you may

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<sup>1</sup> Tara Marie Whitfield, “Examining the Effects of Stress, Ego Identity, and Life Satisfaction on the Resilience of Single-Parent Subgroups” (PhD diss., Liberty University, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> F. Diane Barth, “Not Good at Friends: Bringing a Woman’s Friendship into the Frame in Psychodynamic Psychotherapy,” *Clinical Social Work Journal* 46, no. 1 (2018): 1-7.

confidently disclose to that individual your most guarded secrets.”<sup>3</sup> It takes time for close friendships to grow and trust to be earned. But when they do, these close friendships help women get through their lifetime with strength and support.

Single mothers need friends, just like married women, but they lack time to develop the bonds of close friendship. The problem is that these ladies are usually working and spending all off-work time with their kids. Since building friendships takes time spent with others and that is a luxury many single moms typically don’t have, if the church provides opportunities for single moms to spend time with likeminded Christian adults, while providing free childcare, it follows that the single mothers would have the time for female friendships to naturally develop.

The first objective of this study is to explore the lived experiences of single moms and their friendships with other Christian women met at a single parent ministry at church, to see if these friendships help them develop spiritually and personally. A secondary objective is to explore the church’s involvement in providing an atmosphere and opportunity for such friendships to develop. The experiences of the participants in this study are explored through the lens of a biblical model of female friendship this researcher has labeled The Ruth Paradigm, which looks at three types of Christian female friends—loyal companions, mentoring encouragers, and community supporters.

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<sup>3</sup> John Fitzgerald, “Christian Friendship: John, Paul, and the Philippians,” *Interpretation* 61, no. 3. (July, 2007): 284–96. Cicero *Amic.* 22; Fin 2:85; Seneca, Ep 3:2-3; Pliny, the younger, Ep 5.1.12., Fitzgerald, (July 2007): 285.

## 1.2 PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to explore the lived experiences of Christian single mothers who attend the Single Parent Family Ministry of a multi-campus megachurch in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex of Texas, to understand how Christian female friendships influence single moms' level of faith and personal growth. Christian female friendship for this study is defined as reciprocal, voluntary female connection with likeminded Christian women, including time spent together in-person.

## 1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The focus of this study is on the influence of The Ruth Paradigm's three forms of female friendship<sup>4</sup> on a single mother's spiritual formation, as well as the role of the church in facilitating the development of these friendships. To understand how Christian female friendships influence single moms' level of faith and personal wellbeing, this study will interview single moms who attend the weeknight Single Parent Family Ministry at a large church, exploring three guiding research questions. First, how do single mothers experience Christian female friendship? Second, how do Christian female friendships influence a single mother's spiritual growth, emotional support, and personal wellbeing? Third, how does this megachurch and its Single Parent Family Ministry (SPFM) facilitate the development of Christian female friendship?

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<sup>4</sup> The Ruth Paradigm is a model of Christian female friendship developed by Victorya Rogers out of the book of Ruth (2022).

## 1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study on Christian female friendships of single mothers is to create new knowledge to enable the church to better serve the single mother. This study provides currently unavailable information on Christian female friendship of single mothers. There is plenty of research on friendship of women, and there are a few studies of pastors encouraging single moms, but there was no research found on how to integrate the two and offer ways for the church to effectively support single moms in developing quality Christian friendships that will help single moms grow personally and spiritually. The study also identifies a new model of female friendship found in the Old Testament book of Ruth; this researcher has labeled the model The Ruth Paradigm.

Multiple studies have been found regarding single mothers and the stresses and hardships of raising children alone. Recent studies that inform the plight of single mothers include Kara Christensen's "Examining Relationships between Interpersonal Emotion Regulations, Psychopathology, and Relationship Quality in Female Friend Dyads,"<sup>5</sup> Tara Whitfield's "Examining the Effects of Stress, Ego Identity, and Life Satisfaction on the Resilience of Single-Parent Subgroups"<sup>6</sup> and Lydia Stater's "Female Friendship: Strength Found Through Support."<sup>7</sup> These scholars unanimously agree that

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<sup>5</sup> Kara Christensen, "Examining Relationships between Interpersonal Emotion Regulation, Psychopathology, and Relationship Quality in Female Friend Dyads" (Electronic PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Whitfield, "Examining the Effects of Stress."

<sup>7</sup> Lydia Stater, "Female Friendship: Strength Found Through Support" (Electronic Thesis. Kent State University, 2018), <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>.

wellbeing is negatively affected by stress and financial hardship, whereas friendship has been shown to help improve wellbeing. Therefore, single moms can benefit from female friendship.

A 2004 Gallup poll identified a correlation between churches that seemed to focus on developing friendships among the members and churches that seemed to be experiencing the most growth. The key findings include members with best friends at church are more satisfied and engaged with their churches, and those who worship with a best friend are more likely to say their faith is involved in every area of their lives.<sup>8</sup> Another study emphasized the large increase of singles at Church who are over the age of thirty. Among 30- to 64-year-old Christians, close to forty percent are single, with that number rising as people age beyond 65.<sup>9</sup> This statistic emphasizes the decline in dual parent families at church and the urgent need for the church to minister to the increasing people's group of single mothers.

This study will address the gap in literature on single mother friendship in the church which has been understudied, even with that statistic of single adults making up nearly forty percent of church attenders. Through the biblical and theological review, general literature review, and data collected from participants, this study aims to offer a solution to churches on how to empower and equip single mothers to develop a community of friendships with likeminded believers. The role of the church becomes the facilitator of those friendships by providing opportunities for engagement among church

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<sup>8</sup> Marcus Bourbon, "Friendship Development Among Single Adults in a Megachurch" (PhD diss., Gordon Conwell Theology Seminary, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Julie Tisdale, "Why Singles Often Give Up on Church," July 18, 2018. <https://www.ncfamily.org/why-singles-often-give-up-on-church/#:~:text=Which%20means%20that%2C%20among%2030,Why%3F>.

members and attenders, rather than putting the responsibility onto pastors and staff members to meet the needs of single mothers.

Prior to the pandemic, multi-site church campuses were a growing model for churches. An ongoing challenge of megachurches has been that it is difficult to build relationships and friendships in large settings. The pandemic emphasized that challenge. It is especially difficult for the single mom, who is often already isolated due to lack of time, to make the effort to build her community. Thus, it is significant for the church to discover how to provide an atmosphere to facilitate development of friendships for single mothers. Post-pandemic it is even more important and timely for the church to be deliberate in efforts to help church attenders, including single moms, to build supportive and encouraging friendships with likeminded Christians.

### **1.5 LIMITATIONS**

The limitation of this study is that the researcher may have bias she is unaware of as she has been a longtime active member of the church where the study took place, as well having been a mentor for single mothers, therefore she was already familiar with the single parent family ministry. Although she was aware of the experiences of some of the single moms, there was no foreknowledge of whether female friendship was effectively developed at the weeknight ministry, nor the effect of any such friendship on the single mothers' spiritual growth or wellbeing. Another limitation is that the researcher is trusting the participants to tell the truth about their experiences, and they may not tell the truth. The delimitation of this study is single mothers who attend the single parent ministry at a megachurch which includes small groups as part of the weeknight service. Other criteria of the study participants include the following: First is a woman who is



presently single. Second, a woman with at least one child at home between the ages of 0 and 18. And third, a woman who regularly attends the single parent ministry at the megachurch.

## 1.6 SCOPE

This study is coming from a Christian worldview that holds as true that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ offers peace, purpose, and personal growth. Subjects for this study will hold this truth as significant to their own lives. This qualitative research project explores the emotional wellbeing and spiritual growth of Christian single moms by conducting one-on-one interviews with single moms who attend the small groups at the single parent night at a large megachurch in North Texas. This study is not intended to include every church in the world, or even in Texas, rather it is looking specifically at one megachurch in North Texas. The friendship explored during data collection includes all three levels of Christian female friendship found within The Ruth Paradigm—loyal companions, mentoring encourages, and community supporters.

This particular megachurch was selected because of its extensive, long-established Single Parent Family Ministry (SPFM). This church has ministered to thousands of single parents and their children. SPFM was developed by Pastor Samantha Golden in 2003. A Grant Mentor program began in 2004; and Embrace Grace, LLC<sup>10</sup> shortly thereafter. Embrace Grace, LLC was founded by Amy Ford, beginning as a small group for young girls who became moms after unplanned pregnancies. In addition to weekly SPFM worship services, with a low-cost family meal offered before the service,

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<sup>10</sup> Embrace Grace, LLC, Founded by Amy Ford, 2008, [embracegrace.com](http://embracegrace.com).

this church has also provided single parents a low-cost option for an annual family vacation, a Grant Mentor Program, annual Back-to-School event, Christmas gifts, pastoral counseling, plus focus groups and classes on topics like divorce recovery, parenting, healthy relationships, and financial health.

The heart behind the SPFM is to walk alongside single parents and their children to connect them to the heart of the Father. Samantha Golden says, “We believe that one parent plus God equals a whole family and that the heart of God will do what the hand of the government never can.”<sup>11</sup> This study will explore the experiences of single mothers who attend this ministry and its small groups to see if this large church has been effective in facilitating the development of Christian female friendships that help the single mother grow personally, emotionally, and spiritually. If the church has been effective, then the hope is that this format could be replicated at other churches.

The focus is on single moms, not single dads, and the subjects will be moms who regularly attend the single parent ministry at the megachurch and are moms to children ages 0-18. The purpose of choosing subjects who regularly attend the weeknight single parent service is to focus on single moms who already proclaim to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and have made a deliberate effort to get involved in a community of likeminded Christians. The study excludes men because this study is looking at the experience of female friendship and its effect on the quality of life and spirituality of Christian women.

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<sup>11</sup> Samantha Golden, Gateway Pastor and Founder of SPFM, during interview with Victoria Rogers, April 11, 2021.

## 1.7 DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Throughout the study the following terms are used and were explained to the participants during the interview. For purposes of this study, the definitions are as follows:

1. *Christian Female Friendship*: Reciprocal female relationships between Christian women who support each other through life's highs and lows to help them grow spiritually. The purpose of journeying together in Christian friendship, as Ruth Haley Barton says, "is to listen to one another's desire for God, to nurture that desire in each other, and to support one another in seeking a way of life that is consistent with that desire."<sup>12</sup> These friends' self-disclosure and share confidential information to encourage, edify, and pray for each other.
2. *Wellbeing*: A positive perception that one's life is going well and experiencing feelings of happiness.
3. *Personal Growth*: The experience of one's life being perceived as being better than before. Knowing if growth has happened is subjective, dependent on the interviewee's own perception of such growth and will need to be stated as such by the interviewee.

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<sup>12</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009), 169.

4. *Spiritual Growth*: One perceives personal growth closer to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This ongoing development of a Christian's personal relationship with Jesus Christ involves all areas of life (spiritually, emotionally, physically, intellectually, and relationally with others). Typically, this involves prayer, Bible study, and interaction with other Christians.
5. *Christian Spiritual Formation*: is defined as a lifelong process by which God continues to develop believers more and more into the image of his Son, Jesus, through the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.
6. *Megachurch*: A protestant congregation that has an average weekly attendance of 2000 or more members in its worship services. In a 2020 survey,<sup>13</sup> 85% of megachurches labeled themselves as Evangelical.

## 1.8 SUMMARY OF WHAT IS TO FOLLOW

Chapter One has highlighted the stresses unique to single motherhood and the significance of a single mother developing three types of Christian female friendship to ease her stress, improve life satisfaction, and grow her spiritually. The chapters that follow explore how Christian female friendships affect a single mother's spiritual, personal, and emotional life as well as how the church can help facilitate the formation of these Christian female friendships for single mothers. Viewing how this particular megachurch facilitates an environment and opportunity for friendship development

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<sup>13</sup> Hartford Institute of Religion Research. <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definiton.html>.

among single moms aims to serve as a possible model for other churches to follow in order to reach the ever-increasing population of single mothers.

Chapter Two examines the six biblical passages of female friendship, including an in-depth analysis of the friendship model found in the book of Ruth. The model of three levels of friendship that emerges is The Ruth Paradigm, which when followed improves wellbeing and spiritual growth. This paradigm of friendship is shown through Ruth choosing to be the voluntary loyal companion of Naomi amid her grief. Naomi then reciprocates by becoming Ruth's mentor on her journey to find a husband. This is followed by the women of Bethlehem being Naomi's community supporters during both her grief and her joy. The biblical review will show how God uses friendship among women as one of the ways He works His plans out with humans, through other humans, as well as how God uses these friendships for emotional support and spiritual growth. The book of Ruth is the biblical example. This qualitative study explores the experiences of single mothers and their friendships in small groups to see if they are a modern-day example of the paradigm.

Chapter Three connects the findings of the General Literature Review on friendship through the eyes of philosophers, theologians, and scholars, to study the effect of friendship on single mothers. First, a philosopher, three theologians, and two famous Anglicans are examined for their views on friendship. Next, a secular review of friendship is explored to see if female friendship benefits all women. And third, literature about the church and female friendship is reviewed to evaluate the church's involvement.

Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Newton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and C.S. Lewis' views on friendship are explored in the literature review. Aristotle believes

friendship affects wellbeing, "...for without friends no one would choose to live."<sup>14</sup> Augustine was convinced "human beings cannot enjoy the fullness of happiness in this life... if there is no one they care about or anyone cares for them."<sup>15</sup> Aquinas and Bonhoeffer emphasize that spiritual friendship is how one flourishes in life. Newton's life of mentoring reveals the importance of choosing friends carefully to improve and safeguard your wellbeing and direction you go in life. And C.S. Lewis believed wellbeing is improved when you find one-on-one companions who truly get you.

Chapter Three also reviews secular scholars' views on the benefits of friendship which show they overwhelmingly agree that well-chosen female friends improve wellbeing. Rosemary Blieszner, PhD.,<sup>16</sup> found friendship indeed improve one's happiness and health throughout a lifetime. Evolutionary Psychologist Robin Dunbar<sup>17</sup> calls friendship the single most important factor influencing our health, wellbeing, and happiness.

The literature review concludes by examining the church in relation to female friendship development. Such studies include Natalie Sheet's study, "Single Mothers and

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<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics (Oxford World's Classics)*, trans. David Ross, ed. Lesley Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 124.

<sup>15</sup> Donald X. Burt, *Friendship and Society: An Introduction to Augustine's Practical Philosophy*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> Rosemary Blieszner, "The Worth of Friendship: Can Friends Keep Us Happy and Healthy?" *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging* 38, no. 1 (2014): 24–30.

<sup>17</sup> Robin Dunbar, *Friends: Understanding the Power of our Most Important Relationships*. (Hachette, UK: Little, Brown Book Group, 2021), 1-2. Dunbar is a British evolutionary psychologist. He is currently head of the Social and Evolutionary Neuroscience Research Group in the Department of Experimental Psychology at the University of Oxford. He is best known for formulating Dunbar's number, a measurement of the "cognitive limit to the number of individuals with whom any one person can maintain stable relationships."

Religiosity,"<sup>18</sup> W.A. Buck's "I Have Called You Friends: Toward relational ministry in a postmodern world: Practicing authentic Christian friendship,"<sup>19</sup> Marcus Bourbon's Friendship Development Among Single Adults in a Megachurch,<sup>20</sup> and Amy Chilton's study "Where is the Love? The Disruptive Possibilities of Women's Friendships as Participation in the Triune God." Reviewing these studies gave valuable insight to this researcher.

Chapter Four identifies the findings implemented into this project as data collected during interviews with Christian single moms who experienced the phenomenon of friendship at church within small groups. Phenomenology typically involves three to ten participants. This study began data collection with five single moms and concluded with four. Content analysis was undertaken to determine themes represented in the survey results, transcribed interviews, and the observations made by the researcher during the interviews. Through the lens of The Ruth Paradigm this researcher sought to understand how Christian female friendships influence single mothers' wellbeing and spiritual growth. Two instruments were used for data collection. Those instruments were a multiple choice ten-question written survey and a face-to-face open-ended questions interview expanding on their answers to the survey.

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<sup>18</sup> In her 2014 study "Single Mothers and Religiosity," Natalie Sheets examines single mothers compared to coupled mothers and the differences in their public and private practices of religiosity. Data came from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2007 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey. Natalie Sheet's study findings suggest that, while there are differences in single and coupled mothers in both their public and private practices of religiosity, the cause of these differences is being driven by other social factors rather than marital status alone. Income, age, education, and race account for most of the differences between single and coupled mother's religious practices.

<sup>19</sup> W.A. Buck Jr., "I Have Called You Friends: Toward Relational Ministry in a Postmodern World: Practicing Authentic Christian Friendship," (DMin Project, Drew University, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Bourbon, "Friendship Development Among Single Adults in a Megachurch."

Chapter Five includes the summary, conclusions, discussion, and implications of this study of lived experiences of these single mothers and their Christian female friendships developed at the megachurch in North Texas. The general picture that emerges from the analysis is that the experiences of the single mothers in this congregation show that this church has been effective in providing opportunities for Christian female friendships to develop personal and spiritual growth in the single mother. The hope is to encourage other churches and megachurches beyond the church where this study took place to begin offering programs that instigate an atmosphere for community, mentoring, and one-on-one friendships to develop.



## CHAPTER 2

### BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

#### 2.1 RUTH – A PARADIGM OF FEMALE FRIENDSHIP

Since ancient times female friendship has been an avenue for compelling improved wellbeing among women. God uses relationships among women to deliver emotional support, increase spiritual growth, and accomplish His purposes. Six times female friendship is addressed in the Holy Bible. The specific women used as biblical examples show that God cares about the plight of women of all ages, marital status, and social standing—including widows, single women, and mothers. Of those six biblical instances, three of the women were single (Naomi, Ruth, and Jephthah’s daughter), two were widows (Naomi and Ruth), and two were married (Elizabeth and Mary who were both pregnant at the time).

Half of the female friend examples are concentrated in one book where a paradigm of female friendship is seen throughout an 85-verse narrative. Arthur Cundall says, “The book of Ruth is about friendship. The devotion that Ruth shows to Naomi and the care that Naomi exercises towards Ruth run through the book.”<sup>1</sup> In Ruth is found a symbol of abiding loyalty and devotion through three types of female friendship—one-on-one loyal companions, mentoring encouragers, and community supporters. The one-

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges and Ruth: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Tyndale, 1968), 241.

on-one companionship between Ruth and Naomi offers a compelling look at *hesed* (a display of unmerited kindness and loyalty) among humans in the form of female friendship (Ruth 1:16-17). The mentorship of Naomi delivers encouragement, guidance, and prayer for Ruth (Ruth 3:1-6). Lastly, the book of Ruth presents supportive friendship among the community of women in Bethlehem towards Naomi through both her times of agony and her times of joy (Ruth 1:19-21, Ruth 4:17). In all three types of female friendship, the book of Ruth deals with ordinary people, on ordinary matters, in such a way as to show that God cares about each individual and is active in the affairs of humans.<sup>2</sup> God works through female friendships to work out His purpose and bless those who trust Him (Ruth 4:15-22).

This researcher believes The Ruth Paradigm is an ideal model for female friendship. These friends encourage, advise, and pray for one another. Reflected in these scriptures are expected behaviors and characteristics of good friends, including mutual affection, longstanding loyalty, trustworthiness, prayer, emotional bonding, goodwill, and self-less reciprocal beneficial acts and deeds towards one another. The purpose of this biblical/theological study is to understand how such Christian female friendships influence a Single Mother's level of faith and wellbeing. To do this, we examine the nature of friendship, with the focus on the dynamic between Ruth and Naomi. Emphasizing the relevance of their bond, Rabbi Stu Halpern points out this is the "only biblical friendship between two named women; it spans the length of an entire book."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cundall and Morris, *Judges and Ruth*, 229.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Stu Halpern. "You've Got a Friend in Me: Ruth and the Dynamics of Friendship." *Shavuot on Sefaria*. <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/239597?land=bi>. 32.

Their friendship is also between two individuals of vastly different cultural backgrounds and ages.

### 2.1.1 Three Themes of Ruth

Among scholars there are two undisputed themes in Ruth—the justification for the kingship of David over the house of Saul, and the explanation of David’s gentile bloodline.<sup>4</sup> There is a third important theme that many scholars acknowledge, although they do not give it the priority that this researcher believes it deserves. That third theme is female friendship. Displayed through edification and loyalty, the dynamic friendship of Ruth and Naomi serves to improve both women’s wellbeing (through emotional support and spiritual growth) and to accomplish God’s purpose in their lives.

The entire book of Ruth is about the ways of God in human life exemplified by ordinary women exhibiting friendship through a life of *hesed* (compassionate loyalty). Pasa Koroth, author of *Hesed-Spirituality of the Family of Ruth*, says, “The values stressed in [Ruth] are the qualities of the characters of the narrative who are almost fully the personification of *hesed* חֶסֶד.<sup>5</sup> These characters display a spiritual message of benevolent love among female friends. A reading of the book also teaches that God rewards human faithfulness and uses it for his purposes (1:8-9; 2:11-12). The book of Ruth begins and ends with the emptying of Naomi through devastating loss and a full

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<sup>4</sup> A. Boyd Luter and Barry C. Davis, *Ruth & Esther: God Behind the Seen* (Focus on the Bible Commentary) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 13-93.

<sup>5</sup> Pasa Koroth, “*Hesed-Spirituality of the Family of Ruth*,” *Bible Bhashyam* 17 (1991): 160. Brian Britt, “Unexpected Attachments: A Literary Approach to the Term חֶסֶד in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27, no. 3 (2003): 289-293.

circle journey of Naomi becoming full again,<sup>6</sup> by God’s provision enacted through a loyal friendship between two women. It opens with Naomi, a once prominent and wealthy woman of Bethlehem, now empty and poor.<sup>7</sup> Famine had hit Judah compelling her family to move to the foreign land of Moab where her sons married Moabite women. Less than ten years later all three men have died, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law as widows (1:1-5).

In utter despair, Naomi pushes away her two daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth, blessing them to move back home to their own parents so they may marry again. Orpah agrees to go home. Ruth begs to stay. In *A Sweet & Bitter Providence* John Piper says, “Naomi is telling Ruth not to come with her because her life is exceedingly bitter now and if Ruth were to follow her it would happen to her... Naomi painted the future very dark.”<sup>8</sup> Yet Ruth took her hand willingly and walked into it with her. By doing this, Ruth offers Naomi *hesed* love, establishing their continued relationship as a voluntary friendship.<sup>9</sup> This insistent, voluntary loyal act of kindness provides the despondent Naomi her first steps toward hope, as the two women make the journey in silence from Moab to Naomi’s hometown of Bethlehem. This takes a seven-to-ten-day trip on foot to

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<sup>6</sup> Korothe, “*Hesed*-Spirituality of the Family of Ruth,” 160.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Hubbard, Jr. refers to her former status as the first family of Bethlehem—think the Vanderbilts. Robert Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 91.

<sup>8</sup> John Piper, *A Sweet & Bitter Providence: Sex, Race, and the Sovereignty of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 34.

<sup>9</sup> Even though from this moment on, it is a voluntary friendship, free from legal obligation for Ruth to remain, Ruth ultimately has chosen to remain in her familial state and offer her child to Naomi to be the offspring in the line of Naomi’s late husband Elimelech. They chose to keep family ties even though it was not required, and ultimately Ruth gave her child Obed to Naomi to continue the family line while Ruth is historically known as the mother of Obed who is in David’s lineage, and it explains David’s foreign blood of the Moabite woman and Jewish father etc.

make the fifty-mile journey through rugged terrain (1:6-22).<sup>10</sup> Upon arriving to a warm welcome from the community of women (Naomi's hometown female friends), Naomi mentors Ruth. God soon provides provision and ongoing protection by Boaz, a kinsman (Chapter 2 and 3). A hopeful future is presented with Boaz choosing to marry Ruth and redeem the field belonging to Naomi's late husband (4:1-12). Naomi is brought full circle from emptiness and devastation back to fullness and joy through the birth of Ruth's baby (4:13-17). The epilogue of the book reviews the big picture that King David was the offspring of this child, and thus he justifiably can be king of Israel (4:18-22).

### 2.1.2 Etymology of Ruth

The name of Ruth reflects the theme of the narrative—female friendship. There is no consensus from scholars on the meaning of the name Ruth, as there is no such word in Hebrew as רוּת (*rut*). Regardless, female friendship is the logical assumption of its intended meaning. This can be drawn from what several scholars noted as the name coming from the root-group *ra'a* and the noun *rea' or rei'a*, meaning friend or company.<sup>11</sup> Halpern says, “This is an etymological signal that Ruth is the quintessential friend. In fact, the Peshitta, the Syriac translation of the Bible, renders her name Rei'ut.”<sup>12</sup> Scholars who follow this root group see the name Ruth as a feminine derivation of the root רעה (*ra'a* II), meaning to associate with, or be a friend of. And thus,

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<sup>10</sup> Though today the journey would take only about two hours, during the lives of Ruth and Naomi it was a treacherous, fifty mile walk that would take at least seven days. That is a long time for silence! [Livingpassage.com/footsteps-ruth-and-Naomi](http://Livingpassage.com/footsteps-ruth-and-Naomi).

<sup>11</sup> Abarim Publications' Biblical Dictionary. <https://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Ruth.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Halpern, “You've Got a Friend in Me,” 32.

the name Ruth means lady friend.<sup>13</sup> This is consistent with the focus of the book of Ruth being on the relationship between its female characters. The ladies are loyal and voluntary friends. The 85-verse book reveals how these two ladies' lives are forever changed by the choices they make and actions they take as lady friends. Therefore, even though there is no consensus on the meaning of the name Ruth, this researcher agrees with Stu Halpern, Yael Ziegler, and several Hebrew and reputable Bible dictionaries who accept the meaning to be friend. Thus, this is the clear definition of her name. The book represents the true character of female friendship that is reflected by every action of the female characters—from Ruth, to Naomi, to the community of women in Bethlehem. Thus, this paradigm of female friendship implies the logical conclusion of the meaning of her name being female friend.

### 2.1.3 Three Types of Friendship in Ruth

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, three major types of friendship are found in Ruth—one-on-one loyal companions, encouraging mentors, and community supporters. The characteristics of friendship revealed through these three forms of friendship include many of the qualities attached to male friendship throughout the Old Testament. Professor of Judaic Studies and Religious Studies at Brown University, Saul Olyan, Ph.D., lists universal friend traits as “mutual affection, seeing to one another’s welfare (Ps 35:27), paying back that which is good in exchange for the good done by the

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<sup>13</sup>Abarim Publications' Biblical Dictionary. <https://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Ruth.html>.

other, emotional bonding, loyalty, trust, and good will.”<sup>14</sup> All of these are present among the friendship of Ruth and Naomi as well. They mimic what is shown in other biblical references of ideal male friend behavior (Ps 35:12-14, 88:19, Job 19:19 and Prov 17:17). Such passages suggest either explicitly or implicitly that the friend is expected to seek a friend’s welfare (Ps 35:27), act favorably toward the friend (Job 19:21), be trustworthy (Mi 7:5) and reciprocate that which is good for the good received from the friend (Ps 35:12-14).

## 2.2 FRIENDS DISPLAY *HESED* – חֶסֶד

Good female friends display *hesed* toward one another. Cundall explains *hesed* as dealing kindly with a “warm and loyal attitude that the parties ought to have for one another.”<sup>15</sup> In this section, the Hebrew word *hesed* (חֶסֶד) and its connection to female friendship will be explored, as reflected throughout the book of Ruth. There are many uses and definitions of *hesed* in the Old Testament. This study focuses on *hesed* in relation to human friendships that reflect loving kindness, and loyalty.

Ruth is a symbol of abiding loyalty, kindness, devotion, and faithfulness. That is *Hesed*. It is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible more than 250 times (127 of the mentions in the Psalms). God is the author and originator of His divine *hesed* toward humans with whom He is in relationship. Humans mimic this godly behavior of *hesed* toward their loved ones. Brad Embry explains, “at the heart of *hesed* is loving commitment within the context of a relationship. It represents both the attitude of loyalty and faithfulness to the

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<sup>14</sup> Saul M. Olyan, *Friendship in the Hebrew Bible (The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 66, 85.

<sup>15</sup> Cundall and Morris, *Judges and Ruth*, 254.

relationship and to the related parties, and the corresponding kind and dutiful action, often expressed as help or deliverance, that arises from it.”<sup>16</sup> *Hesed* has a wide range of biblical uses and meanings. However, most scholars’ definitions are similar—such as favor, unfailing kindness, steadfast love, devotion, or affection based on a prior relationship. *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* sums up the concept of *hesed* as active, social, and enduring. “It is a demonstration of friendship or piety. It pursues what is good and not what is evil.”<sup>17</sup> Brain Britt includes human friendships among the relationships where *hesed* is present, reflecting an attitude of virtue, liturgy, and the divine-human covenant.<sup>18</sup> This researcher focused on *hesed* offered from human to human.

By looking into the socio-cultural context within which *hesed* functions, Justino Alfredo noted the vague differences in how BDB<sup>19</sup> and KB<sup>20</sup> describe the term. BDB defines the meaning of the noun **חֶסֶד** as goodness and kindness; Further, BDB, subdivides the main meaning into the kindness of man, the kindness of God, and faithfulness. The noun is translated as faithfulness, goodness, and graciousness. The KB describes it as

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<sup>16</sup> Robin Routledge, “*Hesed* As Obligation: A Re-Examination,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (1995). 195.

<sup>17</sup> Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 44.

<sup>18</sup> Britt, “Unexpected Attachments,” 289-293.

<sup>19</sup> BDB is an abbreviation for Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament by Brown, Driver, and Briggs (referred to as BDB) published in 1906. it is a standard reference for Biblical Hebrew and Biblical Aramaic. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. Commonly known as BDB, (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1906).

<sup>20</sup> KB is the abbreviation of *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* by Koehler and Baumgartner, et al. (referred to as KB) published in 1999.



loyalty, which was found to be how it is often defined when a human-to-human occurrence.<sup>21</sup> Loyalty and kindness towards established friends is the action of *hesed* most noted for this study of female friendships.

Although most scholars refer to *hesed* as an act, Carsten Ziegert concurs with Hans Joachim Stoebe (1950) clarifying that *hesed* is an attitude rather than an action, and it is the attitude of *hesed* that inspires the action. As Stoebe suggests, **חסד** is a “generous and kind attitude or a disposition of benevolence that inspires an action.”<sup>22</sup> This attitude will result in kindness and helpful actions towards a person-in-need that exceeds what the needy person would expect.

### 2.2.1 *Hesed* is Enacted by God and Humans

Both God and humans enact *hesed*. Most of the time, *hesed* describes God’s benevolent actions and attitude toward the faithful (on a ratio of 3:1), yet it is also commonly used to describe kind and loyal attitudes and behaviors of humans toward one another in a relationship. Nelson Glueck is one of the most important scholars on the **חסד** lexicon (1927).<sup>23</sup> When differentiating between *hesed* rendered by God versus *hesed* rendered by humans, Glueck shows the secular meaning of the lexeme **חסד** to denote

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<sup>21</sup> Justino Alfredo, “Translating Biblical Words: A Case Study of the Hebrew Word, **חסד**,” *Scriptura Journal* 111, no. 3 (2012): 544-554.

<sup>22</sup> Carsten Ziegert summarized this information he found in Stoebe, Gottee hingebende Gute and Treue, (19-21 47-48, 67, 133-136). “What Is **חסד**? A Frame-Semantic Approach,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* (2020): 714.

<sup>23</sup> Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, trans. By Alfred Gottschalk (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College, 1967). This book serves as a landmark study of the term’s meaning and history. He is credited as the scholar who conducted the first meaningful study of the term *Hesed*. Glueck divides the term’s uses into human and divine, secular, and religious. Britt, “Unexpected Attachments,” 291.

conduct between humans based on a mutual relationship of rights and duties.<sup>24</sup> This would include between relatives, friends, allies, and other relationships.

Of the notes from Glueck on human-to-human relationships, this researcher is concerned with *hesed* in relation to friendship. If it is a human who offers *hesed*, it falls into either a secular or a religious category. Most instances apply to divine actions or dispositions.<sup>25</sup> Gordon Clark finds **חֶסֶד** as an action of God 187 times and as an action of a human 92 times in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>26</sup> Half of the biblical uses of *hesed*, referring to the divine (127), are found in Psalms.<sup>27</sup> “In the secular sense,” says Brad Embry, “*hesed* is an act of political or personal motivation.”<sup>28</sup> Using the semantic approach, Carsten Ziegert notes that often when the agent is human the assumed meaning is loyalty.<sup>29</sup> We see all of the above in the reciprocal friendship of Ruth and Naomi.

### 2.2.2 *Hesed* **חֶסֶד** is Displayed Throughout Ruth

There are three direct mentions of *hesed* in Ruth (1:8, 2:20, and 3:10) referring to loyalty, reliability, kindness, compassion. Good friends pray for their friends. The first two instances of **חֶסֶד** are prayers of Naomi calling on Yahweh. She calls on God to bless

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<sup>24</sup> Ziegert, “What Is **חֶסֶד**? a,” 713 (references insights of Nelson Glueck’s *Hesed in the Bible*, 3, 12-13, 20-21).

<sup>25</sup> Britt, “Unexpected Attachments,” 289.

<sup>26</sup> Gordon Clark, *The Word “Hesed” in the Hebrew Bible* (London: A&C Black, 1993), 49.

<sup>27</sup> Botterweck and Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 45.

<sup>28</sup> Brad Embry. “Locating God’s Mighty Acts: God’s *Hesed*, Human *Hesed*,” *The Living Pulpit*, (Fall, 2013): 18. Brad Embry teaches Old Testament at Regent University, a Pentecostal/Charismatic/Renewal University and offers insight to *Hesed* from a Pentecostal worldview.

<sup>29</sup> Ziegert, “What Is **חֶסֶד**? a,” 712.

both Ruth and Oprah (1:8) then Boaz (2:20). The third instance of *hesed* is Boaz calling on Yahweh to bless Ruth (3:10) through a prayer blessing.

It is direct prayers calling for Yahweh's blessing that display *hesed* most clearly in Ruth. "Naomi's loving concern for her daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah, first of all, finds expression in prayer," points out David Atkinson.<sup>30</sup> She prays that the Lord, the covenant God, would deal kindly with them and that "the Lord grant that you may find a home." (1:8-9). In addition to noticing its association with prayer, it is difficult not to associate all of Ruth with the idea of **חֶסֶד** being a virtue.<sup>31</sup> Even though there are only three mentions of the word, Rabbi Tamara Cohn Eskenazi acknowledges the meaning of *hesed* "is woven into the book's entire fabric."<sup>32</sup> The book of Ruth is often cited as an example of the secular usage of *hesed*, yet Paul Embry agrees with Eskenazi's clarification that suggests that even though human agency is the primary focus in Ruth, humans who display *hesed* "...mirror the ways of God..."<sup>33</sup> God shows favor, unfailing kindness, and steadfast love on humans, who reciprocate by mirroring *hesed* towards humans with whom they are in relationship.

Throughout the four chapters of the narrative, Ruth showed herself to be fully devoted to her mentor Naomi. Robert Hubbard, Jr. says, "The unquestioning obedience

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<sup>30</sup> David Atkinson, *The Wings of Refuge: The Message of Ruth (The Bible Speaks Today Series)* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1983), 42-44.

<sup>31</sup> Britt, "Unexpected Attachments," 301.

<sup>32</sup> Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth. JPS Tanakh Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2011). Eskenazi's commentary on Ruth was awarded Book of the Year, 2011, by National Jewish Book Award in Women's Studies.

<sup>33</sup> Embry, "Locating God's Mighty Acts," 19.

showed Ruth’s firm loyalty to her mother-in-law... She, indeed, exemplified biblical *hesed* at its best.”<sup>34</sup> This is evident from the first display of *hesed* in Ruth (1:8). Amid her despair, Naomi shows selfless care and hope for her daughters-in-law, imploring them to go back to the house of their mothers. In the Old Testament this implies she is asking them to go home to find love and marriage again.<sup>35</sup> It is “Goodbye and God bless you,” as Hubbard interprets it.

The ultimate display of *hesed* is implied by the epilogue of Ruth, revealing that God rewards faithful female friends with reciprocal *hesed*. Ruth is faithful to Naomi, Naomi is faithful to Ruth, and through their trusting and faithful acts, God continues his faithful *hesed* toward humans. We see God’s faithful *hesed* as he provides a redeemer husband and an offspring that becomes the grandfather of the king of Israel, who is in the bloodline of the very Messiah of the world.

As Ruth and Naomi offer loyalty and faithful friendship to one other, they are the personification of friendship endorsed by the Apostle Paul. Such guidance includes, “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor” (Romans 12:10); and “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). Jesus taught on friendship saying, “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12); and “As you wish that others would do to you, do so to them” (Luke 6:31). This is humans showing *hesed* towards one another which is pleasing to God and ultimately rewarded.

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<sup>34</sup> Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, 206.

<sup>35</sup> Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, 102.

### 2.2.3 *Hesed* is Found Only in Pre-Existing Relationships

*Hesed* only occurs in a pre-existing relationship. One does not show loving kindness, loyalty, or faithfulness to another with whom one is not already in a relationship. Reflecting what most scholars accept about *hesed*, Johannes Botterweck emphasizes it belongs by nature to the realm of family, friendship, community, and clan society.<sup>36</sup> Ruth and Naomi fit into that category. Glueck describes *hesed* as “an attitude and the corresponding action which arises out of and is in accordance with the norms of particular social bonds” such as noted in the relationship between Naomi and Ruth. Naomi and Ruth had a longstanding preexisting relationship of in-laws before they became voluntary friends.

### 2.2.4 *Hesed* is a Choice – Friendships are Voluntary

Ruth and Naomi are voluntary friends. One of the definitions of friendship is that it is always voluntary. Naomi lovingly released Orpah and Ruth from familial obligation after the death of their husbands (1:8-9, 14). As a free woman, Ruth voluntarily refuses to leave Naomi’s side. She has chosen faithful and loyal friendship outside of any legal obligation to move forward.

Naomi offers *hesed* to her daughters-in-laws, blessing and releasing them of familial obligation. Ruth’s response is, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). This is a selfless voluntary display of *hesed* from a young widow who was also in the midst of her own

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<sup>36</sup> Botterweck and Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 51.

personal grief from the death of her husband Mahlon. Hubbard ruminates, “Whatever Ruth’s motive—deep affection, a sense of loyalty, or misguided idealism—she sacrificed her destiny to ‘cling to’ an aged, hopeless mother-in-law.”<sup>37</sup> Ruth chose to stay and support Naomi, even with Naomi pushing her away.

Throughout the book of Ruth, the relationship between Naomi and Ruth is Voluntary. It is “mutual affection with elements of behavioral parity characterizing their new, voluntary relationship (mutual trust, love, loyalty, and good will features of friendship).”<sup>38</sup> To establish that the relationship was indeed a voluntary friendship, note the moment the relationship transitioned in Ruth 1:8-9, 14. After Naomi urges Orpah and Naomi to go back to their families of origin, Naomi blesses both girls (1:8-9) then kisses them goodbye. Ruth refuses, clinging to Naomi (1:14). This is the clarity that the two daughters-in-law have fulfilled their familial expectation with “respect both to their husbands and to Naomi, and are therefore free to go their own way”<sup>39</sup> with Naomi’s blessing. Saul Olyan explains that is the moment Ruth has fulfilled any legal obligation to Naomi. She chose to remain with Naomi, and at that moment transitioned their ongoing association from familial relationship to a voluntary friendship. Olyan says, “Given that the new bond between Ruth and Naomi is both voluntary and reciprocal in nature, and that familial obligations do not constitute it,” then this is friendship.<sup>40</sup> Any further

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<sup>37</sup> Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, 116.

<sup>38</sup> Olyan, *Friendship in the Hebrew Bible*, 62.

<sup>39</sup> Olyan, *Friendship in the Hebrew Bible*, 62.

<sup>40</sup> Olyan, *Friendship in the Hebrew Bible*, 63.

association between Ruth and Naomi, and Ruth's connection to the family of her late husband Mahlon, is a voluntary relationship of friendship.

All friends share some element of common bond, be it mutual interest, season of life, or common values or beliefs. Even though female friends are not necessarily in the same age group or from the same background or nationality, they always share some form of common ground. In the instance of Ruth and Naomi, the common bond is obviously their mutual hardship as impoverished grieving widows, even though they are from different generations and different countries (Ruth a Moabite and Naomi an Israelite). The two women are female friends who share the common ground of both being widows and share characteristics of friendship common to other biblical texts. Their reciprocal, mutual friendship is apparent. Ruth helps Naomi, Naomi helps Ruth. As Olyan states, "they each pay back that which is good in exchange for the good done by the other."<sup>41</sup> They share a bond of mutual affection and consistently seek one another's welfare, which is *hesed*.

Female friendship is voluntary human interaction. *In the Message of Ruth*, David Atkinson ponders how clearly illustrated the truth is that "God's gracious providence does not over-ride human decision and human action."<sup>42</sup> Instead, God's providence works through the voluntary actions of friends who choose to stay and get involved. Through human actions, God orchestrates His purposes. It is "Ruth's request, and Naomi's encouragement, Ruth's unthinking choice of the field, and Boaz' free decision

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<sup>41</sup> Olyan, *Friendship in the Hebrew Bible*, 66.

<sup>42</sup> Atkinson, *The Wings of Refuge*, 62.

to harvest his field at this time” which are the instruments God uses to accomplish His plans to bring about the lineage of the Messiah through Ruth’s offspring Obed. Atkinson says, “This view of God is far from static and deterministic; it is living, dynamic and responsive.”<sup>43</sup> God is behind the scenes preparing the way and the timing, ready for the voluntary actions of these female friends to bring it unknowingly to fruition.

### 2.2.5 *Hesed* is Rendered to a Friend Who Cannot Help Herself

Another important element of *hesed* is that it is rendered to one who is unable to help oneself. Gordon Clark (*The Word Hesed*), Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (*The Meaning of Hesed*) and Robin Routledge (*Hesed as Obligation*) all agree that for *hesed* to occur, it must be an attitude and inspired action toward a recipient who can’t do for oneself. The parties involved include one who is able to help and one who is unable to help (for whatever particular reason or circumstance). The kind and dutiful action of *hesed*, “that is often expressed as help or deliverance, arises from that relationship,” said Routledge.<sup>44</sup> There is mercy and kindness “especially as extended to the lowly, needy, and miserable.”<sup>45</sup> Obviously, the exact nature of the expression depends on the context of the parties in the relationship.

For an action to be called *hesed*, the one receiving the act of kindness must be unable to do for herself what is needed. Sakenfeld agrees, adding that the action must be completely necessary, and the one in need of help must have no control over whether

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<sup>43</sup> Atkinson, *The Wings of Refuge*, 62.

<sup>44</sup> Routledge, “*Hesed* as Obligation,” 195.

<sup>45</sup> (BDB, s.v. **חֶסֶד**); (*What is חֶסֶד?* ), 711.



*hesed* is given...”<sup>46</sup> Clark concurs, noting *hesed* is “an emotion that leads to an activity beneficial to the recipient... a beneficent action performed, in the context of a deep and enduring commitment between two persons or parties, by one who is able to render assistance to the needy party who in the circumstances is unable to help him or herself.”<sup>47</sup> This helping a friend concept of *hesed* is especially noticeable in Ruth,<sup>48</sup> such as when Ruth reciprocates *hesed* toward Naomi when Naomi was unable to emotionally help herself on the way back to Bethlehem. Another biblical example of *hesed* is when Jonathan helps David when David couldn’t save himself at the time Saul was seeking his life.

#### 2.2.6 *Hesed* is Shown Through the Gift of Presence

There is a gift of presence in friendship during times of grave need. In those times, words are at a loss and yet silence is enough if you remain present. Ruth Haley Barton describes the gift of presence as “where you don’t say anything, you are just present. Sometimes it is not the words but the presence.”<sup>49</sup> There are moments in life when one cannot help oneself. It could be through tragedy, loss, depression, or illness. Naomi was in such a place. Ruth shows selfless, loyal friendship, as she offers love and support to Naomi during the despair of losing everything. Ruth was grieving the loss of her own husband as well when she chose to cling to Naomi in support and loyalty. She did this despite Naomi repeatedly pushing her away. In her ancient culture, upon the

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<sup>46</sup> Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), 24, 44-45.

<sup>47</sup> Clark, *The Word Hesed in the Hebrew Bible*, 267.

<sup>48</sup> Botterweck and Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 49.

<sup>49</sup> Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 169.

death of a husband, possessions all went to the closest male relative rather than the widow.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, Naomi was emptied of everything—wealth, social standing, and security—in a culture where women had no rights to their wealth or property.

Both Naomi and Ruth’s actions during their own personal tragedies are examples of positive friendship for women to follow today amid grief and loss. One can still help others while one is also hurting. Your effectiveness does not have to go on pause when you face tragedy. Naomi and Ruth’s mutual action reveals this. They chose to keep moving forward in life and simultaneously help the other even amid their own pain.

Ruth was able to perceive that Naomi’s attempts to send her away were a mix of selfless love and despondent pain. Naomi’s selfless love for her daughters-in-law freed the girls from future familial obligations and sent them off with a blessing to go start over and not be burdened with caring for her while freeing them to marry again. Naomi’s despondent pain was the other reason Ruth seemed to perceive as to why Naomi pushed them away. Hubbard points out, “In effect, Naomi joined Job in questioning God’s mysterious justice: ‘I am bitter—and Shaddai has made me so!’”<sup>51</sup> Thus, Naomi’s despair was also an obvious motivator for pushing them away.

In pain and hopelessness, Naomi pushes away the girls. John Piper says, “When we have decided that God is against us, we usually exaggerate our hopelessness. We become so bitter we can’t see the rays of light peeping out around the clouds. It was God who broke the famine and opened the way home to Bethlehem for Naomi (1:6). And it

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<sup>50</sup> Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, 112.

<sup>51</sup> Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, 124.

was God who constrains Ruth to stay with Naomi. But Naomi is so embittered by God's hard providence that she doesn't see his mercy at work in her life."<sup>52</sup> Nor does she have any clue that God has a kinsman lined up to continue Naomi's line who is about to be revealed upon return to Bethlehem (2:20).

As Naomi sees Ruth's determination to remain with her, Naomi stops resisting and says no more during their time on the road until they arrive in Bethlehem (1:18). Naomi remains silent! This is significant to note because the treacherous journey took at least seven days, more likely ten days, to walk the fifty miles from Moab to Bethlehem. Thus, Ruth's loving kindness and compassion surpassed Job's friends, as she did not turn on Naomi after the long seven days of silence like Job's friends had done. Ruth went the extra miles that Jesus talked about (Matt 5:41). She stayed present. Faithful friends remain present and when words are not found or beneficial, they remain silent in the presence of their friend.

Job's friends started out well. They sat on the ground with him in silence for seven days (Job 2:13) as they saw how much pain he was in after suffering the catastrophic loss of his family, possessions, and property. But after seven days, they no longer could remain silent and ended up negating all their goodwill by each spewing out harsh false judgment on the reason God handed down such suffering to Job.

### 2.2.7 *Hesed* is Reciprocal

Naomi offered *hesed* to Orpah and Ruth. Ruth reciprocated with kindness and acts of *hesed*. Naomi reciprocates again and mentors Ruth when back in Bethlehem. God

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<sup>52</sup> Piper, *A Sweet & Bitter Providence*. 33.

offers *hesed* to both women through Boaz and the birth of Obed. The one who receives an act of *hesed* often responds with a similar act of *hesed*, or at least the one who demonstrates *hesed* is justified in expecting an equivalent act in return. This is noted when David asks Jonathan for an act of *hesed*. In return Jonathan also asks *hesed* of David (1 Samuel 20:8, 14).<sup>53</sup> *Hesed* is a mutual duty of faithfulness.

The scholars researched for this study agreed that once someone receives *hesed* from a known relationship, it is *expected* to be reciprocated. But not all scholars agree that it is an obligation or requirement to do so. In Glueck's study discussing the expected human response to *hesed*, the recipient of *hesed* has an implied obligation "almost by the virtue of being human."<sup>54</sup> In the social life of a community of God's people, Routledge offers up that reciprocal response of *hesed* is the only right conduct toward one another. Routledge says it is "expected both because of the mutual relationship established through membership of the covenant community, and as a proper response to the *hesed* shown by God."<sup>55</sup> Therefore, there is an unspoken expectation that *hesed* will be offered back.

The joint obligation element of *hesed* is a point emphasized in the Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament when defining *Hesed* II חֶסֶד. Using Ruth 1:8 and 2:20 as its basis, it defined *Hesed* II as "Joint obligation between relatives, friends, host

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<sup>53</sup> Botterweck and Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 27.

<sup>54</sup> Willem VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1997), 211.

<sup>55</sup> Routledge, "*Hesed* as Obligation," 195-196.

and guest, master and servant; closeness, solidarity. Loyalty; faithfulness (1.8, 2:20).<sup>56</sup> Although Glueck stated the recipient has an implied obligation to reciprocate, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (1978/1985) would not go so far. While Sakenfeld agrees there is some expectation of *hesed* reciprocation, she clarified that although the recipient has responsibility to respond once *hesed* is received, that recipient is not required to do so.<sup>57</sup> Robin Routledge (2003) is in between the two views of Glueck and Sakenfeld. “A dutiful response which, whilst not legally binding, is represented as a social and moral obligation. Whether in the context of family or social relationships, the ties of friendship, the bonds established by the giving and receiving of help, or the commitment of covenant partners, *hesed* corresponds to the right behavior towards others within that relationship.”<sup>58</sup> As *hesed* is defined as the ‘goodness’ or ‘kindness’ by the giver, Routledge claims an equally significant element of *hesed* is “duty, loyalty, and faithfulness.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, the latter definition implies the obligation of the recipient in reciprocating.

This researcher is convinced that reciprocal *hesed* is not obligation, rather it is blessing that will be rewarded, no matter how small. When one offers *hesed* toward a friend one is being the hands of God. God compels the act to be reciprocated for the purposes for his people to be fulfilled. As Piper says, “For the Christian there is always a

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<sup>56</sup> Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, Volume 1* (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands, 2001), 336.

<sup>57</sup> Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible*, 45, 53-54. Ziegert, “What Is **חסד**,” a. 715.

<sup>58</sup> Routledge, “*Hesed* as Obligation,” 184.

<sup>59</sup> Routledge, “*Hesed* as Obligation,” 184.

connection between the ordinary events of life and the stupendous work of God in history.”<sup>60</sup> The book of Ruth teaches God’s purpose is to connect us to something greater than ourselves through friendship. When *hesed* is reciprocated, friends are part of something so much bigger than realized. Friends are being the hands of God to accomplish his hidden purposes of the Lord on earth.

### 2.3 MENTORSHIP

Mentoring friends encourage, advise, and pray for one another. A mentor cares and wants the best for her friend. A mentor voluntarily invests time and energy into the relationship with her mentee. If the mentee engages and follows the advice, the mentee grows spiritually, improves wellbeing, and moves forward towards her life purpose. But compliance cannot be forced. Adhering to the advice of a mentor is also strictly voluntary. This is shown through the lives of women in the Bible who stepped in to care for the women God placed in their path. Biblical instances of female mentorship include Naomi to Ruth, Elizabeth to Mary, and the older women to the younger women in Titus 2. Although the women who were doing the mentoring in these examples were older than the friends they were mentoring, age difference is not a requirement.

Wisdom writing also encourages mentorship. Solomon shares that the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel (Proverbs 27:9). “One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor” (Prov. 12:26). One man sharpens another (Prov 27:17), and friends love each other enough to tell them the truth (Prov 27:5-6, 9).

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<sup>60</sup> Piper, *A Sweet & Bitter Providence*, 121.

### 2.3.1 Naomi Mentors Ruth

After Ruth delivered a silent presence to Naomi during the fifty-mile journey from Moab to Bethlehem, Naomi repaid Ruth with sage mentorship beginning the moment they arrived in town. Naomi came up with an entire plan to do that for Ruth to help her find a husband. Perhaps that plan was devised by Naomi during the silent journey to Bethlehem. All we know for sure is that once they arrived in Bethlehem, Naomi began offering step-by-step guidance.

Throughout chapters two and three of Ruth, Naomi mentors Ruth. This is revealed regarding her work in the fields and finding food; Ruth follows her advice (2:23; 3:6) and takes the initiative to get enough food for both of them (2:2, 2:17-19, 3:17); Naomi guides Ruth towards safety by recommending she stays near the other girls to avoid assault (2:22); Naomi continues to mentor Ruth to find a husband through the developing relationship with kinsman Boaz. Ruth takes her advice (3:1-4, 9, 18); the reciprocal and mentor friendship is beneficial to both, offering material success, security, and the blessing of motherhood (4:14-15). God uses human relationships to guide us to his purposes. Ruth is the example of God using female friendships to accomplish his eternal plans. Through the advice and mentorship of Naomi, Ruth was able to feed them both and find a husband. That mentorship also led to Ruth becoming the great grandmother of King David, ancestor of the Messiah.

### 2.3.2 Elizabeth Mentors Mary

The New Testament reveals more beneficial mentor relationships between women, including the example of Elizabeth and Mary during both of their pregnancies and Paul's instructions to Titus for encouraging older women to mentor younger women.

When the angel of the Lord told Mary she was with child from the Holy Spirit, he also revealed that Mary's older cousin Elizabeth, who had been barren, was now six months pregnant as well (Luke 1:36-37). Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit when Mary arrived at her home and offered a prayer of blessing. She exclaims "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" (Luke 1:41-43). Elizabeth took Mary under her wing into her home and encouraged her. It can be presumed that Elizabeth went on to mentor the teenaged Mary through the duration of her pregnancy before Mary left for Bethlehem with Joseph.

### 2.3.3 Titus 2 – Older Women Mentor Younger Women

The other mention of female mentorship is found in Titus. Paul advises Titus to encourage mentorship among his congregation. He says, "Older women are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands" (Titus 2:3-4). These mentoring women offer guidance and support to help their younger friends navigate through the stages of life the older women have already walked in.

## 2.4 COMMUNITY SUPPORTERS

Friendship is more than just a one-on-one relationship. Friends also come in the form of group support. The third type of friendship revealed in The Ruth Paradigm of female friendship is Community Supporters. There is expectation of community support among women both when a friend is suffering loss and when a friend is celebrating victory. From biblical days on through today, women need the support of a group of friends during both good and bad times to lift them up emotionally and spiritually.

Community support often came through an Israelite custom of group mourning.



This was seen through the lives of David and Job, Jephthah's daughter and girlfriends, Naomi and her friends, and through public mourning of women that was mentioned in Jeremiah and Luke.

In a male dominated culture, it is noticed that other than a few exceptions, the discussion of group prayer, support, and group comfort is primarily in the masculine voice throughout the Bible. Group mourning was an Israelite custom and expectation in ancient times, as seen through the lives of David and Job. David spoke of the expected behavior when he was praying in distress, reminding God that when his friends were sick, he bowed his head, prayed, and "grieved for my friend or my brother; as one who laments..." (Ps 36:12-14). David also shows it was a custom to support each other when in crisis. This is shown when he complains his friends failed to offer the expected support when he was in need (Psalms 38:12, 88:8). Job's friends also came together for Job during his grief. They mourned with him as a group, sitting in silence for seven days and nights.

This researcher found six mentions of female community support within Scripture. Those occurrences included Jephthah's daughter and her friends, Naomi's community supporters from Bethlehem, Ruth finding support and safety working alongside "the girls," Jeremiah's call for the mourning women, and two incidents of Jesus addressing wailing women. Community support was emphatically needed for women in ancient times as women were considered second rate citizens with no rights of their own. Widows were even less in social and legal status, left to rely on outside support of other

women and the community because they had no rights such as ownership of property,<sup>61</sup> says Robert Hubbard, Jr. Upon death of their husbands and any male heir, widows were reduced to near poverty and vulnerability. When Naomi pushes away her daughters-in-law (offering them hope to marry again), she laments her dire circumstances as a widow with no heir. “I am in far more bitter straits than you are,” she cries.<sup>62</sup> Further evidence of a woman’s lack of any rights during that time, Naomi no longer personally owned any property upon the death of her husband and sons. Although it is apparent that she had the legitimate right to dispose of Elimelech’s property as the family’s sole survivor (Ruth 4:3), Hubbard notes, it was more likely that it was in a trust for her to dispose to another male relative or ideally an heir, rather than her to receive ownership for herself.<sup>63</sup> Hence women, especially widows, needed a community of women for support during good and bad times.

Publicly wailing women was an accepted practice at a time when women were not given other public roles. It was a common for women to play the role of public mourners to help the community deal with the calamity.<sup>64</sup> Juliana Claassens discusses women as the professional mourners in the patriarchal world. Known as Keeners, these mourners (wailing women) were a “powerful symbol of survival to injured people seeking to come

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<sup>61</sup> Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, 67.

<sup>62</sup> Naomi’s words are words of lament as also found in Isa 38:17, Lam 1:4. Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, 112.

<sup>63</sup> Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, 55.

<sup>64</sup> L. Juliana M. Claassens, “Calling the Keeners: The Image of the Wailing Woman as Symbol of Survival in a Traumatized World,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* Vol 26, no. 1 (Spr. 2010): 66.

to terms with tragedy.”<sup>65</sup> The Keeners came together in the community to support not only other women, but to mourn when tragedy struck the entire nation. “The appearance of wailing women in Jeremiah 9 corresponds to the well documented phenomenon in both ancient and contemporary societies of public and communal lamentation, especially weeping at funerals,” said Claassens.<sup>66</sup> Mourning women fulfilled a therapeutic role in society, helping survivors deal with trauma (Jer. 9:17-20).<sup>67</sup> Thus, wailing was an except public role of women in ancient societies.

Twice Jesus directly addressed the women who were lamenting for their community. Those two incidents were at the death of young girl and Jesus’ own impending crucifixion. Just before one of his miracles, Jesus speaks to the women who were weeping over the death of a ruler’s daughter, telling them, “Do not weep, for she is not dead but sleeping (Luke 8:52). Then, as Jesus was being led away to his crucifixion, he turned to the women mourning and lamenting for him, and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children (Luke 23:38). Though no longer customary for public lamenting in modern culture, the therapeutic benefits of women surrounding other women during their time of need continues through today. This is seen through women supporting their friends to help them cope when they are too overwhelmed to bear their pain alone.

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<sup>65</sup> Claassens, “Calling the Keeners,” 65.

<sup>66</sup> Claassens, “Calling the Keeners,” 65.

<sup>67</sup> Claassens, “Calling the Keeners,” 68.

#### 2.4.1 Naomi and Her Friends (Ruth 2, Ruth 4)

Twice Naomi is embraced by her community of friends of Bethlehem—when she is in despair and when she is returned full. Both times affected her wellbeing. Scholar Carolyn Pressler, PhD, did not ignore this element of female friendship, rather she credits it as one of the themes that brackets the entire book of Ruth. In the first chapter of the novella, Naomi’s community of female friends from Bethlehem “clamorously greet Naomi’s return (1:19-21),” says Pressler.<sup>68</sup> Then when the story ends, the same women will celebrate the birth of Ruth’s son, a son ‘born to Naomi.’ (4:14-17). Both instances use the feminine form of the word when the community is mentioned. Cundall explains that the verb *they said* (AV) in the feminine form shows that it is the women (RV, RSV) with whom the story is concerned.<sup>69</sup> Thus, it is the women of the community who are offering support to Naomi. Although several scholars, like Pressler, acknowledge the community gave attention to Naomi upon both her return to Bethlehem and time of her redemption, most scholars do not give community friendship the attention as a major theme of Ruth as this researcher believes is due.

Naomi’s friends surround her when she first gets to town. Even after ten years, she is remembered by her friends who were excited to see her again. Upon Ruth and Naomi’s return to Bethlehem after the loss of their husbands, “the whole town was stirred because of them...” (1:19-21). Naomi replies, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.” (1:20). Naomi’s reaction to the women of

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<sup>68</sup> Carolyn Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth (Westminster Bible Companion)* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2002), 250-308.

<sup>69</sup> Cundall and Morris, *Judges and Ruth*, 262.

the community surrounding her was to shut them down as she proclaimed she wanted her name changed from Naomi (joyful) to Mara (bitter).

The same group of women came around Naomi to celebrate when she was once again full and redeemed. When Naomi's life has returned to joy with the birth of Obed (Ruth's child) we hear of the women of Bethlehem celebrating with Naomi once again. "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer," the women said (4:14-17). And together they rejoiced and named the baby Obed, who was the grandfather of king David.

The prayer of the women of the community clearly illustrates God cares about the details of each life. With support for their friend through prayer and praise to the Lord, the community acknowledges God's role in the life of their friend Naomi (4:14-15). David Atkinson says, "Not only so, but human actions, as we have seen, point to the character of God."<sup>70</sup> He continues, "Here now, the people's prayer brings an awareness of the hand of God ... They have been witnesses to an act of redeeming love. They now seek God's blessing."<sup>71</sup> Such support in Ruth, expressed through the life of the community, is also an example of *hesed*, according to Brad Embry. "In answer to the questions, 'Where is God's *hesed* or God's activity to be found on earth?' The author of Ruth may have responded: 'Here amongst us in the community'."<sup>72</sup> This is another example of God working His purposes through human relationships.

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<sup>70</sup> Atkinson, *The Wings of Refuge*, 120.

<sup>71</sup> Atkinson, *The Wings of Refuge*, 120.

<sup>72</sup> Embry, "Locating God's Mighty Acts," 20.

#### 2.4.2 Ruth and The Girls (Ruth 2:8-9)

Three times in the book of Ruth there is evidence of the community of women supporting Ruth and Naomi. Two of those instances show support for Naomi—first is the women of Bethlehem celebrating Naomi’s return home, and second is the same community of women celebrating Naomi at the birth of Boaz and Ruth’s baby. There is another, less noticed, incidence of female support. This third occurrence is offered to Ruth rather than Naomi (2:8-14).

Scholar Stu Halpern emphasizes this seldom mentioned instance, noting that just as community support is willingly offered to Naomi from her friends in chapters 1 and 4, community support of women is also offered to Ruth, though a foreigner at the time. Boaz showed favor on Ruth and offered her support from the girls of his gleaning field. This plays the crucial role of social support for Ruth amid a patriarchal context.<sup>73</sup> While Ruth was gleaning the fields, Boaz said to Ruth, “Listen to me, daughter. Don’t go to glean in another field. Don’t go elsewhere; but stay here close to my girls” (2:8). When Boaz instructs Ruth to “stay close to my girls” he is referring to his female employees in the fields.

During harvest, most commentators assume men and women played different roles; men did the reaping while women follow collecting and binding the piles of grain. It is the fellow females in the field best positioned to provide support for Ruth as she strives to ensure economic survival for herself and Naomi.<sup>74</sup> Robert Hubbard, Jr. points

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<sup>73</sup> Halpern, as quoted from *An Ethics of Encounter: Private Choices and Public Acts*, ed. Elliot N. Dorff and Louis E. Newman, *Contemporary Jewish Ethics and Morality: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 226-227.

<sup>74</sup> Halpern, “You’ve Got a Friend in Me,” 25.

out that Boaz' instruction "seemed to grant Ruth some sort of status in Boaz's household. In modern terms, by giving access to the water cooler (v. 9) and the lunchroom (v.14), Boaz resembled a boss showing a new employee around the company."<sup>75</sup> By Boaz offering that protection, he is making it clear to all his employees that she, a foreigner, is favored and entitled to the same protection as his other girls in the field who are not foreigners.

In a world dominated by men, women—especially widows—desperately needed the support of each other for social and physical support. Ruth was far safer amongst the community of women of Boaz's field, rather than being alone and unprotected gleaning in *any* field, including that which is owned by Boaz. It is worth noting that although these girls present community support for Ruth throughout her time of gleaning, this is not a display of *hesed* (as there was no previous relationship between the girls and Ruth). However, it still is evidence of the expected community support among women.

#### 2.4.3 Jephthah's Daughter (Judges 11:34-39)

Female community friendship was reported as far back as the time of the Judges in the Hebrew Scriptures, with two specific biblical examples of group support among female friends offered during times of mourning. The first example is the friends of Jephthah's teenaged daughter. This group of companions surround her to mourn the announcement of her death sentence. Jephthah was a prophet, during the period of the judges, who had implored of God that Israel would have victory over the Amorites. He

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<sup>75</sup> Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, 156.

made a vow that if God answered his request, Jephthah would sacrifice the first thing that came out his front door when he returned home.

Upon the victory at battle, sadly it was his beloved and only daughter who ran out to greet him. When she heard about her impending demise, the response of Jephthah's daughter was to request time to grieve with her friends. "She said to her father, 'Let this thing be done for me: leave me alone two months, that I may go up and down on the mountains and weep for my virginity, I and my companions'. So, he said, 'Go.' Then he sent her away for two months, and she departed, she and her companions, and wept for her virginity on the mountains" (Judges 11:37-38 37). These loyal friends accompanied Jephthah's daughter on a two-month journey and grieved the loss of her dreams of marrying. Although her name is not revealed, her life and the group support of close friends is important enough to have been included in Scripture. It is evidence that we were not born to walk through life alone. We were made to have friends.

Biblical evidence reveals that community support of friends impacts a woman's emotional and spiritual wellbeing. It helps the woman realize that she matters. God sees her. She is not invisible. This is shown in both Old Testament examples of women receiving support through group female friendship—Naomi and her Bethlehem friends and Jephthah's daughter and her teenaged companions. Both examples of group female friendship (community friends of Jephthah's daughter and community support of Naomi) implicitly suggest a set of community female friendship norms that are identical to those shown by men in other texts (Job 2;11-13 or Ps 35: 12-14).



#### 2.4.4 Job and His Three Friends (Job 2-3)

Job's three friends are perhaps the most prominent biblical example of community support of friends during times of crisis. Upon learning of Job's calamity, three friends do precisely what friends are expected to do when tragedy strikes. They walk alongside him and embrace mourning rites. Friends, allies, and others who participate in mourning rites with mourners are often referred to by the biblical text as comforters<sup>76</sup> These men began by being faithful comforters to their friend Job.

The three friends started out well, mourning alongside and listening to Job's lamenting for seven days and nights. Then, unlike Ruth, they failed their friend miserably on day eight. Bildad the Shuhite, Zophar the Naamathite and Elphaz the Termanite initially came alongside Job to "show him sympathy and comfort him" (Job 2:11-12). Their patient compassion was praiseworthy as they sat with him while "no one spoke a word to him, for they saw this his suffering was very great" (Job 2:13). It was on day eight that they disregarded everything they did before. Job's friends gave up on the silence and began to blame Job for his problems. When Job exclaimed his agony cursing the day he was born, they began to judge him, convinced he had somehow sinned to earn the punishment he was enduring. One-by-one they take their turn blaming Job for some unseen sin he must have committed to deserve the tragedies that have befallen him.

Bad friends fail to perform behaviors that are common expectations of a friend. Job's friends and family have let him down by not offering the expected continual loyalty and support (Job 19:13-14). For Job's friends to have forgotten implies both physical and

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<sup>76</sup> Olyan, *Friendship in the Hebrew Bible*, 80.

emotional abandonment. Saul Olyan says, “According to some of these texts, such alienation is the result of offensive action taken by one party against the other or of inaction where supportive acts are expected. Job 19:13 speaks of the estrangement of what are likely friends (“those who know me”): ‘My friends are completely estranged from me’.”<sup>77</sup> Like the poor behavior of David’s former friends (Ps 36:12-14), Job’s friends who were once loyal, have failed and turned away from the expected behavior of good friends, and caused loss of wellbeing in the recipient.

Job’s friends gave up on him. Unlike Bildad the Shuhite, Zophar the Naamathite and Elphaz the Termanite, notice that Naomi’s loyal comforter, Ruth, showed faithfulness of support continually during Naomi’s great loss well *beyond* seven days. It is noted that the two women journeyed silently from Moab to Bethlehem, which is an estimated ten-day journey. During times of calamity, Ruth faithfully supported Naomi and did not fail her (Ruth 1:17-19).

#### 2.4.5 Parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)

Community support among female friends is endorsed and encouraged by Jesus during times of celebration as well, as seen in the Parable of the Lost Coin. Jesus compares his ministry to a woman who loses one of ten treasured silver coins. When projecting what would happen upon finding that which was lost, Jesus says the woman will immediately call her friends together to celebrate, proclaiming “Rejoice with me” (Luke 15:8-10). As with other parables, Craig L. Blomberg explains, Jesus has set up the

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<sup>77</sup> Olyan, *Friendship in the Hebrew Bible*, 40.

story with an implied question that compels a “yes” for an answer: “What man (or woman) of you would not do so as well?”<sup>78</sup> Of course, everyone would.

In this parable Jesus speaks of a community of female friends unanimously rejoicing with their friend who has found a treasured possession of which she has desperately searched. There is no ambiguity as to whether Jesus endorses the expectation of support and celebration. Thus, female friendship indeed includes the behavioral expectation of community support through friendship during both suffering and victory.

While Jesus speaks quite literally of community love and support among women, the greater meaning of this parable seeking and finding one lost coin out of ten is the same as the parable of the one lost sheep out of one hundred. The meaning is, like the woman who earnestly seeks her lost treasure, Jesus earnestly seeks every lost soul. Every single time one is found there is joy and celebration among God and the community of angels in heaven.<sup>79</sup> Jesus has expectation that we do the same, and he uses the example of the accepted and expected cultural behavior that women celebrate together when one of them finds that which what was lost. “There is rejoicing in the presence of angels over one repentant sinner,” reminds Blomberg.<sup>80</sup> Jesus’ rejoices along with the angels when women offer spiritual support to one another and help their friend not only find Jesus, but also grow spiritually.

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<sup>78</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 179.

<sup>79</sup> Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 180.

<sup>80</sup> David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 105.

Even when everyone else in your sphere is doing well, Blomberg emphasizes that Jesus wants Christians to go after the one who is lost, then come together and celebrate with each other when that one is found.<sup>81</sup> Earl Palmer points out, “In the celebration we realize how much we are loved, as we experience that whimsical, celebrative laughter of thankful enjoyment for the costly love of the waiting father who makes each son [and daughter] welcome.”<sup>82</sup> Do not let one among you be left behind and forgotten. Christians are to encourage, support, and celebrate together, just as women are to encourage, support and celebrate together with their community of friends.

## 2.5 GOD REWARDS LOYAL FRIENDS

Female friends are rewarded for their faithful and loyal friendships—not only by humans but by God. Throughout Ruth it is apparent that God uses faithful humans to achieve His goals. The Lord orchestrates opportunities and humans choose whether to walk into them. Robert Hubbard, Jr. believes the most thematic role which “*hesed*” plays in the story is that Yahweh practices *hesed* toward His people. As God’s people practice *hesed* to each other, God rewards them.

The narrative of Ruth reveals that God uses the faithfulness of ordinary people to do great things. Hubbard says, “The book’s teaching is simple and straightforward: whenever people of faith practice God-like *hesed* toward each other, God Himself acts in them.”<sup>83</sup> The epilogue of Ruth shows that God rewards faithful female friends with

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<sup>81</sup> Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 179.

<sup>82</sup> Earl F. Palmer, *Laughter in Heaven: Understanding the Parables of Jesus* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 32.

<sup>83</sup> Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, 66.

reciprocal *hesed*. Ruth is faithful to Naomi, Naomi is faithful to Ruth, and through their trusting and faithful acts, God provided a redeemer husband, then an offspring that is not just an ordinary baby. The child becomes the grandfather of David, the king of Israel, and he is in the lineage of the very Messiah of the world. This is the ultimate in *hesed*.

Worthy of emphasis is that human deeds, not direct divine intervention, are the means through which Yahweh exercises His rule in the book and shows that He cares about women. Arthur Cundall says, “A genealogy is a striking way of bringing before us the continuity of God’s purpose through the ages. The process of history is not haphazard. There is a purpose in it all. And the purpose is the purpose of God.”<sup>84</sup> Everything done for a friend has value, no matter how insignificant it feels at the time. Supporting a friend, staying present, encouraging, offering loyalty, prayer, and kindness matters.

Not only does female friendship improve wellbeing and spiritual growth, but God’s purposes for individuals are also ushered in through the actions of humans towards humans, as seen in female friendship of Ruth. Stu Halpern says, “The salvific effect Ruth has had on Naomi has reached its culmination. Just as Naomi regained her youth vicariously through Ruth’s actions at the threshing floor, she now embraces Ruth’s baby – the product, albeit indirectly– as its nurse (4:16).”<sup>85</sup> Naomi took the child and held it to her bosom and became its foster mother. God used Ruth as the vehicle to elevate Naomi from bereft and bitter widow to woman renewed and redeemed.

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<sup>84</sup> Cundall and Morris, *Judges and Ruth*, 318.

<sup>85</sup> Halpern, “You’ve Got a Friend in Me,” 28.

We never know what effect our friendships will have through the vicissitudes of life and on our personal development and fulfillment. Stu Halpern says, “Friends bring out the best in one another... Our friends also have an idea of what we are or should be – an idea that, given our friendship, we are apt to take seriously. That is what we see of ourselves in them: not, as Aristotle may have thought, our virtuous similarities but a picture, an interpretation of who we are to them that we can use – not uncritically – to guide our self-formation, says Alexander Nehamas.<sup>86</sup> It was not Naomi and Ruth sharing a history as mother-in-law and daughter-in-law that kept them together. It was the voluntary bonds of friendship.

It is through friendship that women become who they are called to be. Wellbeing is improved by not giving up when the going gets tough, moving forward through the sage advice of a friend, and being circled in prayer by the support of the community of Christian friends. As Stu Halpern pondered Alexander Nehamas view of Ruth, Halpern said, “When I realized that these people are who they have come to be, at least in part (and it is a large part) because of their friendship, I realized that friendship, even when motivated by a desire to regain a common past, is also crucial in forging a different future....”<sup>87</sup> Friendship is crucial in our journey to becoming who we are and what we accomplish in life.

The prayers of female friends, both individual and group expressions, brings the story of Ruth full circle to show how God rewards female friendship. The Lord has

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<sup>86</sup> Alexander Nehamas, as quoted by Rabbi Stu Halpern “You’ve Got a Friend in Me,” 30.

<sup>87</sup> Nehamas, as quoted by Rabbi Stu Halpern “You’ve Got a Friend in Me,” 30.

brought Naomi from empty to full, with the aid of female friends to improve wellbeing and spiritual growth. David Atkinson says, “It is this prayer (4:14-17) which brings the story full circle and proclaims again the providential rule and care of God. The focus is now back on Naomi. She left Moab bereft of her husband and her sons. She was greeted in Bethlehem by the women who saw her grief and heard her bitterness. They now share her joy: Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next of kin!”<sup>88</sup>

Through God answering prayers of friends, Naomi’s life came full circle.

## 2.6 SUMMARY OF BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

Ideal female friendship is modeled throughout the book of Ruth. God’s care and involvement in the affairs of humans’ ordinary lives through female friendship is explicit. The paradigm of female friendship includes the voluntary reciprocal friendship among Ruth and Naomi and the community friendship of women in Bethlehem. The Ruth model is an example of three types of female friendships— one-on-one loyal companions, mentoring encouragers, and community supporters. The short narrative of 85 verses offers a compelling look at *hesed* among humans. This researcher believes this paradigm is an ideal model for female friendship even today. These friends encourage, advise, and pray for one another.

In this chapter the Hebrew word *hesed* (חֶסֶד) was explored as reflected throughout the book of Ruth and its connection to female friendship. Good female friends display *hesed* toward one another, dealing kindly with a “warm and loyal attitude that the parties

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<sup>88</sup> Atkinson, *The Wings of Refuge*, 124.

ought to have for one another,”<sup>89</sup> as Cundall says. Although the Old Testament shows many uses of *hesed*, in this study the focus is on relation to human friendships that reflect loving kindness and loyalty. There are three direct mentions of *hesed* in Ruth (1:8, 2:20, and 3:10) referring to loyalty, kindness, and compassion. *Hesed* only occurs in a pre-existing relationship. One does not show loving kindness, loyalty, or faithfulness to another with whom one is not already in a relationship.

Female friends are the human hands of God. Friends step in during difficult times to compel women to keep moving forward, even when it feels impossible to take another step. Nowhere is this more clearly shown than in the book of Ruth. In the life of two poor, ordinary widows, God uses their friendship to accomplish His eternal purposes. John Pipers says, “Nothing will be insignificant here. Huge things are at stake. God is putting in place the ancestry of Jesus the Messiah, whose kingdom will endure forever.” (Isaiah 9:7) ... The book of Ruth reveals the hidden hand of God in the bitter experiences of His people.”<sup>90</sup> And God wastes nothing—not even the worst of times.

Reflected in these scriptures are expected behaviors and characteristics of good friends. These behaviors include mutual affection, longstanding loyalty, trustworthiness, prayer, emotional bonding, goodwill, and selfless reciprocal beneficial acts and deeds towards one another. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how such Christian female friendships influence a Single Mother’s level of faith and wellbeing.

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<sup>89</sup> Cundall and Morris, *Judges and Ruth*, 254.

<sup>90</sup> Piper, *A Sweet & Bitter Providence*, 24.



As mentioned, female friendship is addressed six times in Scripture—four times in the Old Testament and two times in the New Testament. Of the four places in the Old Testament, three are found in the book of Ruth, and the other is in Judges with the story of Jephthah’s daughter and her friends who supported her in crisis. In the New Testament, both mentions of female friendship involves mentorship. Elizabeth mentors her cousin Mary as they are both pregnant with their first child. And Paul tells Titus to encourage older women to mentor younger women.

Scripture reveals positive female friendships contribute to one’s spiritual and emotional wellbeing. Good friends lift each other’s spirits and bad friends are detrimental to growth and wellbeing. Together Christians find support for faith and life satisfaction as the author of Ecclesiastes says, “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-11).

In all of Scripture, a most comprehensive paradigm of female friendship which single mothers can model is found in the narrative of Ruth. Positive female friendship is reciprocal, voluntary, and involves friends who are loyal, mutually supportive, and prayer warriors. Although this researcher has found no scriptures specifically addressing single mothers and their friends, there is enough evidence to support that Christian friendship is a healthy pursuit for increasing a single mother’s wellbeing and spiritual growth. It is logical to deduce that any scriptural example or advice on friendship and its influence on males or females, can be applied to all women, and that includes single mothers.

In Ruth is found a symbol of abiding loyalty and devotion through three types of female friendship—one-on-one loyal companions, mentoring encouragers, and

community supporters. The one-on-one companionship between Ruth and Naomi offers a compelling look at *hesed* (unmerited kindness and loyalty) among humans in the form of female friendship. Also present in their voluntary friendship is the mentorship of Naomi to Ruth. Mentoring women encourage, advise, and pray for one another. Lastly, we find supportive friendship among the community of women in Bethlehem towards Naomi through both her times of agony and her times of joy (Ruth 1:19-21). A supportive community of women surrounds each other to champion each other through various seasons of life. Through female friendship, as Cundall says, the book of Ruth deals with ordinary people and ordinary matters in such a way as to show that God is active in the affairs of humans.<sup>91</sup> God uses female friends to work out His purpose and bless those who trust Him.

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<sup>91</sup> Cundall and Morris, *Judges and Ruth*, 229.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **GENERAL LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **3.1 SINGLE MOMS, FRIENDSHIP BENEFITS, AND WELLBING**

Chapter three explores a comprehensive general literature review of friendship from the time of Aristotle to the modern day. This review is conducted through the lens of the paradigm of female friendship found in the Book of Ruth. As covered in Chapter Two, The Ruth Paradigm includes three types of female friendship that each contribute to a woman's overall wellbeing and spiritual growth: community supporters, mentoring encouragers, and one-on-one reciprocal companions. The term friendship has been identified as voluntary relationships between people of the same gender, sharing common ground, spending in-person time together, sharing mutual affection, loyalty, and reciprocal beneficial acts and deeds.

As stated, the purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how Christian female friendships influence a single mother's wellbeing and spiritual growth. Therefore, this literature review covers friendships and its reported effect on a woman's wellbeing and spiritual growth, as well as explores what the church has done to help facilitate such friendship. The review took this researcher on a path that led to three areas of research: First the path was to look at the views of important historical figures on friendship. Second, this researcher conducted a deep general literature review of female friendship and its effects on wellbeing. Third, research was reviewed on what recent scholars say about the church's role in the lives of single mothers and their friends.

Research unilaterally revealed that women can benefit from developing in person, healthy female friendships in their life. Yet in today's culture, there is a hindrance to such friendship, as Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms attempt to imitate authentic friendship, resulting in the loss of connection that has turned loneliness into an epidemic.<sup>1</sup> A façade of a happy life filled with many friends does not deliver emotional support offline. Instead, research shows that it is in-person female friendships that offer valuable benefits to the wellbeing and emotional health of women.

There is a rich history of the development of female friendships. But there is also a prevalent feminist worldview that is antagonistic towards the church and the traditional nuclear family. Despite the vast difference in life philosophies between Feminists and Christians, they both agree that single mothers need female friendships. It is who one chooses to listen to that affects wellbeing. Thus, it matters who single moms choose for female friends. The church must step up and help single mothers develop likeminded female friends who will not only improve a single mother's wellbeing, but also help her spiritual formation and relationship with Christ. While developing friendships and choosing wise confidants does not come easy, this chapter will show that studies have revealed single mothers who have been trained in friendship skills have improved wellbeing and experienced less loneliness. Section Two of this chapter looks at important historical figures' views of friendship—including Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Newton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and C.S. Lewis. Section Three explores current

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<sup>1</sup> Juan Huertas, Gabriel Garcia, Pablo Garrido Pintado, and Jose Antonio Moreira, "Is True Friendship Possible on Facebook? A study from the psychological perspective of Lain Entralgo," *Communication & Society* Vol 35 no. 1 (2022): 233-245.

scholarly research on female friendship. Section Four concludes with a look at single moms, female friendship, and the Church.

### 3.2 HISTORICAL FIGURES ON FRIENDSHIP

This section looks at what important historical figures have said about friendship to see if it is congruent with the three types of female friendship of The Ruth Paradigm— one-on-one loyal companions, mentoring encouragers, and community supporters. To investigate philosophers and theologians’ perspective of whether friendship improves a woman’s overall wellbeing and spiritual growth, this researcher reviewed Aristotle, Aquinas, Augustine, Newton, Bonhoeffer, and C.S. Lewis. Aristotle often is the starting point for philosophers and theologians to draw upon their own definitions for friendship. Augustine expands on Aristotle and emphasizes only Christian friendship, focused on God, is true friendship. Aquinas, Bonhoeffer, and C.S. Lewis agree that spiritual friendship is how one flourishes in life. They also show similarities to both Aristotle and Augustine. All six of these historical figures agree that well-chosen friends improve wellbeing.

#### 3.2.1 Aristotle (384BC -322BC)

Most philosophers were influenced by Aristotle’s views on friendship. Scholars often refer to him when discussing the topic. He regards friendship as the most fundamental human activity where the soul and its basic components become fully activated in their intellectual and moral abilities.<sup>2</sup> A close reading of *Nicomachean Ethics* shows that Aristotle ties human wellbeing to friendship (*philia*). The Greeks consistently

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<sup>2</sup> Manitza Kotze and Carike Noeth, “Friendship as a Theological Model: Bonhoeffer, Moltmann and the Trinity.” *In die Skriflig* 53, no. 1 (2019): 1-7. Aristotle (1984:1074).

interchange the terms *philos* and *philia* to refer to a voluntary nonromantic relationship of affection as well as expressions of love to that relationship. Coleman Michael Ford says these relationships are “contrasted with kin relationships (as they were involuntary) and distant acquaintances (as they did not necessarily involve fondness).”<sup>3</sup> David Konstan summarizes the theologian by saying Aristotle best understood love and friendship “...as an altruistic desire which, when reciprocated, results in a state of affairs that Aristotle, and Greeks in general, called *philia*.”<sup>4</sup> Aristotle’s view affected theologians for centuries and still does today.

There are three categories of friendship according to Aristotle—friends of utility, friends of pleasure, and friends of the good. Friends of utility are friends who are useful to each other; friends of pleasure are friends who enjoy each other’s company; and friends who are good are friends who share mutual respect and admiration for each other. Aristotle counts friendship as necessary for living and being well for both rich and poor alike.<sup>5</sup> The happy person does not live well alone. Whichever category of friendship one is participating in at the time, Aristotle believes friendship affected wellbeing of individuals, “...for without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods; even rich men and those in possession of office and of dominating power are thought to need friends most of all.”<sup>6</sup> Konstan summarizes Aristotle’s view on

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<sup>3</sup> Coleman Michael Ford, *A Bond Between Souls: Understanding Spiritual Friendship in Augustine of Hippo with Special Reference to His Letter*, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic Publishers, 2019), 16.

<sup>4</sup> David Konstan, “Aristotle on Love and Friendship,” *ΣΧΟΛΗ. Φιλοσοφское антиковедение и классическая традиция* 2, no. 2 (2008): 212.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 73.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 124.

wellbeing, “There is a way for humans to find themselves well in the presence of each other: by becoming good friends who assist and empower each other, they make it possible to live richer and more joyful lives than the ones they would have lived had they been living on their own.”<sup>7</sup> Thus wellbeing is closely linked to humans coming together by accompanying and sheltering each other in friendship.

Jonas Holst looked at wellbeing in friendship based on critical readings of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927). “By interpreting the Heideggerian notion of *Befindlichkeit* (wellbeing) as the fundamental way in which humans find themselves in the world, Holst defines friendship as “elevating one’s own being ...in the affective bond to others.”<sup>8</sup> As mentioned above, Aristotle would call this *philia*, which plays a crucial role in developing this understanding of wellbeing. Holst says, “humans find themselves well by sharing joy with each other and making a vital contribution to the realization of their own possibilities.”<sup>9</sup> Blending the two views of Heidegger and Aristotle, Holst argues that “joy may prove to be a more enduring indicator of and contributor to human wellbeing.”<sup>10</sup> Friends are expected to be there for each other in times of need and crisis. Konstan says, “The implicit logic is: ‘if you loved me as a friend, you would assist me in my time of need; since you do not, you are not a true friend’.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, if you are a friend you will remain.

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Jonas Holst, “Finding Oneself Well Together with Others: A Phenomenological Study of the Ontology of Human Wellbeing,” *Philosophies*, 7 (2022): 41. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies7020041>.

<sup>9</sup> Holst, “Finding Oneself Well Together with Others,” 1.

<sup>10</sup> Holst, “Finding Oneself Well Together with Others,” 5.

<sup>11</sup> Konstan “Aristotle on Love and Friendship,” 208.

Being there in time of need was clearly an expectation in The Ruth Paradigm for all three forms of friendship. Aristotle's view of friendship is congruent with the model. Good individual friends assist and empower each other to experience more fulfilment and joy. Mentoring encouragers are there in times of need to guide and offer advice to each other. Community supporters are "friends of the good" who surround and celebrate the times of winning and support in times of crisis. All three types of friends in The Ruth Paradigm involve Aristotle's version of friendship showing *philia* which he ties human wellbeing.

### 3.2.2 Augustine (354AD – 430 AD)

Augustine continued with the Aristotle view of friendship adapting it to his Christian worldview, proclaiming only spiritual friendship to be true friendship. Michael Ford's "Bond Between Souls" explored Augustine's conception of spiritual friendship as mutual encouragement to Christian living.<sup>12</sup> In Augustine's view, wellbeing and spiritual growth are improved through friendship. It is through friendship that happiness can be experienced. To Augustine, "Spiritual friendship was focused on eternity and the desire for mutual growth in Christlike virtue in preparation for God's eternal city," says Ford.<sup>13</sup> As far as the pursuit of happiness, Donald X. Burt noted, "Augustine was convinced that human beings cannot enjoy the fullness of happiness in this life and in the next if they are by themselves, if there is no one they care about or anyone cares for them."<sup>14</sup> Augustine

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<sup>12</sup> Ford, *A Bond Between Souls*.

<sup>13</sup> Ford, *A Bond Between Souls*, 196.

<sup>14</sup> Burt, *Friendship and Society*.



once remarked “It is hard to laugh when you are by yourself.”<sup>15</sup> With laughter reflecting moments of joy, he views friendship as essential for happiness.

Augustine’s tradition of friendship is within the genre of epistolography. His correspondence between friends showed they were valued and cherished. These friendships were part of his story, with friends playing different parts within their mutual experiences.<sup>16</sup> Much is learned about his view of friendship through the letters between his friends, especially a series of letters between Jerome and himself where Augustine expressed the importance of developing spiritual friendship.

Ford points out that in many of Augustine’s letters, his friendship was meant to guide others along this path towards happiness. Augustine encouraged his friend Macedonius to seek God as the highest good which would bring full realization to his happiness.<sup>17</sup> Through letters, he encouraged Proba and Demetrias in their pursuit of rightly ordered loves which would lead to happiness.<sup>18</sup> Throughout his letters, Augustine expressed the notion that there can be no happiness without friendship.<sup>19</sup> While there is continuity on the definition of friendship with earlier traditions, such as Aristotle’s views, there are also clear adaptations of Cicero’s view of friendship found within Augustine’s letters.

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<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* (Penguin Classics) Translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Random House, 1961), 2.9.17.

<sup>16</sup> Ford, *A Bond Between Souls*, 175.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, letter to Macedonius, 155.3.12.

<sup>18</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, letter to Proba, 130.6.13, 183.

<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 6.16.26.

Overall, the Bishop of Hippo conceived friendship as a means of spiritual growth. Like Cicero, Augustine believed friends think alike on many issues, both earthly and divine.<sup>20</sup> Ford clarifies, “Yet for Augustine, there was much more than mere agreement. Friendship is a union of hearts (*concordia*).<sup>21</sup> Further, Augustine believed morality is ultimately about friendship. Joseph Clair says, “For it is the temporal good of genuine friendship that is the greatest foretaste of eternal good—the singular site where the unchangeable good appears within human existence.”<sup>22</sup> According to Augustine, friends are a gift from God. Ford summarizes, “Whereas Aristotle would assert that people choose friends based on the virtue they see in others, Augustine viewed friends as those who are placed in one’s lives for the purpose of seeking God together... Friendships that have their genesis with God must find their source in God, be conformed to his will, and be mutually seeking his face.”<sup>23</sup> Augustine acknowledges you could experience friendship without it being directed towards God but that would be a less than true friendship.

Friends who do not share your faith are not true friendships according to Augustine. In Book IV of *Confessions* he calls an earlier friendship incomplete because it was not centered on Christ nor directed towards God.<sup>24</sup> He states “friendship cannot be

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<sup>20</sup> Ford, *A Bond Between Souls*, 177.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 258.1; *Contra Academicos* 3.6.13.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Clair, *Discerning the Good in the Letters and Sermons of Augustine*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 172.

<sup>23</sup> Ford, *A Bond Between Souls*, 180.

<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 4.6.11.

true unless you solder it together among those who cleave to one another by the charity poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who is given to us.”<sup>25</sup> Paul Wadell summarizes Augustine’s view of Christian friendship as a “school in Christian love”<sup>26</sup> Augustine felt true friendship occurred when one loved the good in another person, with the good being a reflection of God in that person.<sup>27</sup> Practical Theology professor Geoff Broughton takes Augustine’s view of true friendship a step further, exploring Facebook “friends” while emphasizing Augustine’s view that in-person time with friends is necessary for fostering spiritual maturity. The digital age has impacted personal friendship by imitating it only to deliver a façade of the real thing. For true friendship to occur, Broughton says it must include meeting in-person and not exclusively online.<sup>28</sup> Augustine’s insight is that in-person conversation between good friends sharpens intellectual development, resolves moral dilemmas, and fosters spiritual maturity.

While Facebook friendships share many characteristics of traditional friendships, there are significant differences. On Facebook, personal conversations have become public and intimate details previously deemed private are displayed to the world, all while the basics of friendship are missing such as confidentiality, trust, and reciprocity. Broughton concludes that for true friendship to exist, it requires more than just a digital connection. It requires gathering in-person. The Ruth Paradigm fits well in

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<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 4.4.7.

<sup>26</sup> Paul J. Wadell, “The Place of Friendship in Christian Ethics: A Response Written in Gratitude.” *Journal of Moral Theology* 10, no. 1 (2021): 197-214.

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 130.7.14; 155.4.15.

<sup>28</sup> Geoff Broughton, “The Changing Face[book] of Friendship, Fellowship, and Formation,” *St Mark’s Review*, no. 233 (2015): 74-86.

Augustine's views on friendship, wellbeing, and spiritual growth. Through the three types of friendship happiness can be experienced and intimacy with God deepened.

### 3.2.3 Aquinas (1225 AD -1274 AD)

Thomas Aquinas advocates for reciprocal one-on-one friendships. As with most philosophers, Thomas Aquinas draws from Aristotle. Following their lead, Aquinas defines friendship by *benevolentia*, *concordia*, and *beneficentia*. First is benevolence, when someone wishes the other person good and not evil. Friends want what is best for each other and celebrate with them when good happens. Second is concord, in which friends will and reject the same things. They have things in common that draw them together. Third is beneficence, when someone performs good deeds for friends and does not cause harm to her.<sup>29</sup> Theologian Paul Wadell also points out similarities between Aquinas and Aristotle regarding benefits of friendship. "Like Aristotle, Aquinas claimed that every human being has a natural desire for *eudaimonia*, a life of genuine flourishing, that we reach *eudaimonia* through the virtues, and that the virtues are acquired through friendships with people who are not afraid to reach for what is best."<sup>30</sup> Aquinas believes friendship improves one's wellbeing and spiritual growth as seen in *Summa Theologiae*, I-II where he includes friendship among the short list of what constitutes happiness.

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<sup>29</sup> Aquinas uses sometimes 'effects' (*Eth.* IX 1 [1797], but more often 'acts' (ST II-II q. 31 a. 1 sc., c.; *Eth.* VIII. 3 [1562]. 5 [1596-7], [1600], IX. 4 [1798], IX. 4 [1816], sometimes 'deeds' (*Eth.* VIII. 3 [1596], 6 [1607], VIII. 4 [1798], IX. 4 [1816], 5 [1820]). *In Rom.* 12. 3 ad v. 15-17 [9-17] [996]; also, ST I-II q. 80 a.un. ad 2: *Eth.* IX. 4 [1798]. [1814], 5 [1820]. As discussed by Daniel Schwartz in *Aquinas on Friendship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) [https://books.google.com/books?id=QsxmSjj\\_FVvC](https://books.google.com/books?id=QsxmSjj_FVvC). 7.

<sup>30</sup> Wadell, "The Place of Friendship in Christian Ethics," 200.

Along with the fellowship of friends, that list also includes enjoyment, understanding, a right will, a body, bodily health, external goods. “Each of these has a role that is either preparatory towards, perfecting of, or concomitant with happiness.”<sup>31</sup> Daniel Schwartz points out Aquinas also agreed that friendship was reciprocal. “The virtuous life is a sort of dialogue or conversation in which the friends act virtuously towards each other, thus mutually feeding the motivation of each to act in this way.”<sup>32</sup> All three forms of female friendship of The Ruth Paradigm include women acting virtuously towards each other. It is a natural assumption that single moms, too, desire to flourish and when they build a circle of friendships with encouragers who are also courageous to pursue their own best life, then wellbeing is improved on both.

#### 3.2.4 John Newton (1725-1807)

A notable role model for the second category of The Ruth Paradigm is abolitionist and Anglican cleric John Newton. His life reflected that mentoring friendships have the capacity to greatly improve both wellbeing and spiritual growth. His little recognized style of friendship was not a fad for its time, rather it is a model that can be utilized today in equipping others. Michael Morgan’s dissertation (2015) “Catalyst for Compassion: John Newton, Justice, and the Power of Friendship to Change the World” looks at the impact of Newton’s mentoring friendships. The study revealed that mentoring friends

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<sup>31</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-IIq. 4aIc.

<sup>32</sup> Schwartz, *Aquinas on Friendship*, 4.

bring out the best in others and enable them to reach their calling to change the world.<sup>33</sup> It is through relationships that God often chooses to work.

Through mentoring, Newton exponentially impacted the spiritual life of twelve friends who each became prominent Christian influencers that literally changed the world for millions. Friends that Newton mentored went on to administer lifesaving social justice against the crimes of their time—from the slave trade to widow burning to the inquisition. Those social justice reformers include William Wilberforce, Williams Carey, Hannah More, Thomas Scott, Claudius Buchanan, William Cowper, William Bull, Charles Simeon, John Ryland Jr., Thomas Charles, Richard Johnson, and John Campbell. Morgan points out that God used John Newton’s skill for mentoring as a “crucial means by which He called others into the work of compassionate ministry.”<sup>34</sup> Thus mentoring is a powerful way to not only encourage the mentee, but to literally change the world for God.

Newton’s method of mentoring friendship included ten threads. Those threads were “befriending all, not using people, spotting strategic moments, staying with friends over the long haul, highlighting God’s grace, teaching faithful presence, multiplying himself, connecting his friends to one another, championing the work, and getting out of the way.”<sup>35</sup> Each of these threads are beneficial qualities for female friends to follow. As noted in *The Ruth Paradigm*, mentoring relationships are as important to female

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<sup>33</sup> Michael T. Morgan, “Catalyst for Compassion: John Newton, Justice, and the Power of Friendship to Change the World” (PhD diss., Gordon Cornwell Theological Seminary, 2015).

<sup>34</sup> Morgan, “Catalyst for Compassion,” 246.

<sup>35</sup> Morgan, “Catalyst for Compassion,” 246-247.

friendships as they are to male friendships. If ongoing mentor friendship enabled the necessary perseverance for twelve world changers amid unthinkable resistance and challenges during the days of John Newton, then this model can work in the lives of today's overwhelmed and busy single mothers. Thus, this mentoring friend style is model for single moms to embrace support, encouragement, and guidance for their own calling.

Since true friendship is reciprocal, Newton is also a great example of how to choose friends well—friends who edify and provide both personal and spiritual growth. Before Newton became a follower of Christ, he chose friends that led him down a dark path to a career in the slave trade. His despair during that period offers clear evidence that choosing friends that lead you down a dark path of destruction diminishes wellbeing. Once born again, however, Newton transformed and chose godly friends who spoke into his life and calling. Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas all agree that choosing good friends can lead to happiness. Likewise, Single moms will benefit from carefully choosing their friends and mentors wisely.

### 3.2.5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

In the realm of community friends and supporters, our third category of The Ruth Paradigm, theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a standout—especially in his book *Life Together*. Bonhoeffer wrote of the importance of Christians gathering in community for friendship and spiritual growth, emphasizing people are looking for someone, anyone, somewhere, some place to listen to them. To that concept Bonhoeffer says “the first service one owes to others in a community involves listening to them. Just as our love for God begins with listening to God’s Word, the beginning of love for others is learning to

listen to them.<sup>36</sup> Ruth Haley Barton agrees with Bonhoeffer. “The purpose of journeying together in spiritual friendship and spiritual community (whether there are just two of you or whether you are in a small group) is to listen to one another’s desire for God, to nurture that desire in each other and to support one another in seeking a way of life that is consistent with that desire.”<sup>37</sup> This researcher also agrees with Bonhoeffer that all humans need community, and all Christians need spiritual friendship.

A 2017 article by Guido De Graaff found relevant in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s theology that Bonhoeffer counted both Church and family among the divine “mandates,” leaving friendship to a realm of “freedom” outside the mandates. Bonhoeffer’s correspondence with Bethge reveals a more singular role of the Church and congeniality between friendship. Bonhoeffer believes that friends in church were one of the basic relationships that are critical within the life of the Church.<sup>38</sup> De Graaff’s findings recognize family and friendship as complementary expressions of discipleship, each supporting the other.

Bonhoeffer views endorse all three forms of The Ruth Paradigm—one-on-one loyal friendship, mentoring friends, and community supporters. He feels they are all available and should be promoted through life in the church.<sup>39</sup> The specific practices he

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<sup>36</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1938), 84-86.

<sup>37</sup> Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 169.

<sup>38</sup> Guido De Graaf, “Friends with a Mandate: Friendship and Family in Bonhoeffer’s Ecclesiology,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 30, no. 4 (November, 2017): 390.

<sup>39</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 1*, trans. Joachim Von Soosten, Reinhard Kraus, Nancy Lukens, ed. Clifford J. Green, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 76.



suggests are defining for the life of the church are sacrificial service to the other, intercessory prayer, and mutual forgiveness (together with hearing confession).<sup>40</sup> De Graaf points out these three practices of the church are by definition reciprocal.<sup>41</sup> With these elements being God focused, these are also elements of what Augustine calls true friendship.

As with Aquinas, Bonhoeffer sees the reciprocity of friendship focusing on the community life of Christians inside the church. It is in his book *Sanctorum Communio*, that Bonhoeffer endorses reciprocity as an obvious element of friendship. The notion of reciprocal friendship being a powerful embodiment of the Church is “borne out, in fact, by Bonhoeffer’s own friendship with Bethge,” says De Graaf.<sup>42</sup> Like Augustine, Bonhoeffer believes that only Christian friendship could deliver wellbeing: “Who in our time could, for example, lightheartedly make music nurture friendship, play, and be happy? Certainly not the ethical person, but only the Christian.”<sup>43</sup> Bonhoeffer counts friendship among the stable realities in life along with marriage.<sup>44</sup> For Bonhoeffer, it is friendship that completes “the circle of happiness” (Bethge 1995:90), and affirms the worth of a person (Bethge 1995:90). As the Kotze and Noeth 2019 study points out, friendship is a deeply personal and affirming relationship between people.

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<sup>40</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 121.

<sup>41</sup> De Graaf, “Friends with a Mandate,” 399.

<sup>42</sup> De Graaf, “Friends with a Mandate,” 400.

<sup>43</sup> De Graaf, “Friends with a Mandate,” 398. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Greenwich, CT: Touchstone Publishers, 1997, 253. CF Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand and Ergebung*, 291.

<sup>44</sup> De Graaf, “Friends with a Mandate,” 232-39. Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Widerstand and Ergebung* 12/16/43.

Bonhoeffer shows a deep appreciation for honest and sincere friendship. He found friendship contributes to “the full flourishing of human life whether it be through references to the importance of community, by means of letters to friends or through poems that he had written.”<sup>45</sup> Kotze and Noeth’s study took a theological look at friendship by further looking at the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Moltmann’s theology, of which both have written extensively about Christian community. They argue friendship, as a theological model, is where Christians can practice friendship and be trained in the characteristics of Christian friendship where we are friends in freedom. Bonhoeffer’s views of community therefore imply that single mothers have much to gain by pursuing community friendship at church for support and improving wellbeing. Developing Christian relationships in the church community of other women who care and support single mothers will organically bring joy and ease stress.

### 3.2.6 C.S. Lewis (1898-1963)

Author and apologist C.S. Lewis believed friends have things in common where they have found someone just like them. The one-on-one companion’s category of The Ruth Paradigm is in alignment with his definition of friendship. Lewis said, “Friendship arises out of mere companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which others do not share and which till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening friendship would be something like, ‘What? You too? I

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<sup>45</sup> Kotze and Noeth, “Friendship as a Theological Model,” 2.

thought I was the only one’.”<sup>46</sup> Lewis is not referring merely to Aristotle’s friendship of utility, but also of friends of the good and friends of pleasure as well. Lewis would agree with the views of these historical figures on the qualities and traits of friendship. He would also agree that doing life together with your friends (as Bonhoeffer promoted) improves wellbeing and spiritual growth.

Lewis is in accord with Augustine’s concept of friendship being a gift from God and that true friendship is God focused. We don’t choose our friends. God does. “In friendship...we think we have chosen our peers. In reality a few years’ difference in the dates of our births, a few more miles between certain houses, the choice of one university instead of another...the accident of topic being raised or not raised at a first meeting—any of those choices might have kept us apart,” said Lewis.<sup>47</sup> But, for a Christian, there are, strictly speaking no chances. Lewis claimed that “a secret master of ceremonies has been at work. Christ, who said to the disciples. ‘Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you,’ can truly say to every group of Christian friends, ‘You have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one another’.”<sup>48</sup> Lewis did not personally relate to or understand female friendships and acknowledged he did not believe women and men could be friends together. However, his view on male friendship can be applied to female friendship, just as the views of the other theologians who primarily wrote from a male friendship’s perspective.

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<sup>46</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1960), 83, 100.

<sup>47</sup> Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 114.

<sup>48</sup> Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 114.

### 3.2.7 Summary Views of the Six on Friendship

Aristotle, Aquinas, Augustine, Newton, Bonhoeffer, and Lewis views on friendship are congruent with the paradigm of female friendship revealed in the book of Ruth. All three types of female friendship—one-on-one loyal companions, encouraging mentors, and community supporters—were espoused to contribute to overall wellbeing and spiritual growth by these six historical leaders.

Aristotle often is the starting point for philosophers and theologians to draw upon and expand their own definitions for friendship. Augustine believes only Christian friendship is true friendship. Aquinas and Bonhoeffer show similarities to both Aristotle and Augustine, emphasizing that spiritual friendship is how one flourishes in life. Newton's life of mentoring reveals the importance of choosing friends carefully, and when chosen well, mentoring friends can improve your wellbeing, inspire spiritual growth, and help you change the world for God. Lewis believed wellbeing is improved when you find one-on-one companions who “get you” when before you may have felt you were the only one like you. He also believed, like Augustine, that God plays a role in bringing your friends to you by placing you in your time and space in this world. All six of these historical figures agree that good friends improve wellbeing.

## **3.3 LITERATURE REVIEW OF FEMALE FRIENDSHIP**

This section covers recent literature review on female friendship to see if The Ruth Paradigm is relevance today for contributing to a woman's overall wellbeing and spiritual growth. This literature review looked at current thought from both Christian and Feminist scholars on the topic of female friendship. Scholars from both worldviews agree that female friendship improves wellbeing in single mothers. The feminist view could not

be ignored as it is prevalent in scholarly work in this postmodern culture. Feminist Rebecca Traister<sup>49</sup> found many benefits to female friendships in her study of unmarried women. She found friends are replenishing to single women, making things yearned for seem more attainable—like better work, fairer remuneration, increased self-assurance, and even just fun.

Many of the recent studies acknowledge single mothers need female friends to improve wellbeing and spiritual growth, yet they also show single moms tend to lack the time and friendship skills to develop such a supportive team. D.D.K.S. Karunanayake’s 2021 study<sup>50</sup> on wellbeing of single moms demonstrates there are major challenges facing single motherhood which include the responsibility of children, financial strain, lack of emotional support, and a negative view of single mothers by society. The strength of Karunanayake’s study is that it confirms the common challenges of twenty-first century American single mothers and emphasizes a lack of skills in developing friendships among single moms. Moturi Bochere (2021) says “Self-sufficiency is a myth. All humans need others, and ...single-parent families, orphans, and widows need others even more [than traditional two parent families].”<sup>51</sup> However, both 2021 studies of Karunanayake and of Bochere agree with Natalie Sheets that many single mothers lack the time and skills to develop such friendships.

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<sup>49</sup> Rebecca Traister, *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26433457>.

<sup>50</sup> D.D.K.S. Karunanayake, Mohamed Nazeer Aysha, and N. D. U. Vimukthi, “The Psychological Wellbeing of Single Mothers with School Age Children: An Exploratory Study.” *International Journal of Scientific Research in Science and Technology*. Vol. 8, no 1 (2021): 32.

<sup>51</sup> Moturi Ruthline Bochere, Bernard Gechiko, and Paul Kyalo, “Examination of Biblical and Theological Foundations for Single Mothers on their Spiritual Growth in The Seventh-Day Adventist Church.” *European Journal of Social Sciences Studies* 6, no. 4 (2021): 116.

Single mothers have more stress and less available free time than married moms. Single mothers are also worse off economically than coupled mothers, and they are also less apt to participate in public or private religious practices.<sup>52</sup> This is far from a small issue in America. Four out of ten children are born to unwed mothers. According to the 2021 U.S. Census Bureau,<sup>53</sup> there are over 11 million single parent families with children under the age of 18, with nearly 80 percent headed by single mothers.<sup>54</sup> Around half (52.3%) of single mothers have never married; nearly one third (29.3%) are divorced, and the remaining 18.4% are either separated or widowed.<sup>55</sup> Since 1890 the average age of marriage for women was 22. 1990-2000 saw that statistic move to the average age of 27, with many women now having children before marriage. By 2016 only 20% of Americans are married by 29.<sup>56</sup>

### 3.3.1 Female Friendship Affects Wellbeing

In both feminist and Christian literature there is an overwhelming agreement that well-chosen female friends improve wellbeing in women. Evolutionary Psychologist Robin Dunbar believes that Friendship is a single most important factor influencing our health, wellbeing, and happiness. In his 2021 book, Dunbar says, “Friendship is a two-

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<sup>52</sup> Natalie Sheets, “Single Mothers and Religiosity” (PhD diss., East Tennessee State University, 2014). <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/single-mothers-religiosity/docview/1547379278/se-2?accountid=40702>.

<sup>53</sup> U.S. Census Bureau – Table FG10. Family Groups: 2021. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2021/demo/families/cps-2021.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Statista, Percentage of births to unmarried women in the United States from 1980 to 2019. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/276025/us-percentage-of-births-to-unmarried-women/>.

<sup>55</sup> U.S. Census Bureau – Table FG6. One-parent Unmarried Family Groups with Own Children Under 18. America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2021 (census.gov).

<sup>56</sup> Traister, *All the Single Ladies*.

way process that requires both parties to be reasonably accommodating and tolerant of each other, to be willing to spare time for each other.”<sup>57</sup> He reveals that over the last decade medical researchers have been surprised at the dramatic effects of friendships—not just for happiness, but also for health, wellbeing, and length of life.

In their 2015 book *The Social Sex: A history of female friendship*, historian Marilyn Yalom and Theresa Donovan Brown survey history, literature, philosophy, religion, and pop culture. Their study also endorses that female friendship improves wellbeing among women. They explore evidence throughout history that women are made for friendships with each other. Yalom and Brown’s study looked at two of the three biblical female friendships this researcher covered in Chapter Two (Ruth and Naomi and Mary and Elizabeth). They then moved on to female friendships among philosophers, clerics, and nuns, book club and women’s club members, college friends, gossips, and more. Yalom and Brown note that no matter the setting, language, or culture, what endures are the qualities of women’s friendship.

There are four common ingredients Yalom and Brown identified as basic to women’s friendships: Affection (kindly feeling or fondness for the other person), self-revelations (she can talk openly with expectation of sympathy and support), physical contact (women hug, braid each other’s hair, paint their nails, etc.), and interdependence (“women traditionally have bonded together to help one another cope and survive”).<sup>58</sup> Although their book is written from a feminist perspective, those four basic traits show

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<sup>57</sup> Dunbar, *Friends*, 1-2.

<sup>58</sup> Marilyn Yalom and Theresa Donovan Brown, *The Social Sex: A History of Female Friendship* (New York: HarperCollins), 2015.

they accept a similar definition of female friendship that this researcher has adapted for this current study on female friendship—a personal relationship grounded in mutual affection, empathy, reciprocity, and support. Yalom and Brown conclude “that this form of female friendship has become a prized staple of American life today.... Friends step in to fill the breach, before, during, and after marriage. They may be the saving grace in lives that are overworked, over-stressed, and less committed to extended family.”<sup>59</sup> Therefore, active female friends in the life of a woman that include these basic ingredients of mutual affection, empathy, reciprocity, and support are shown to improve wellbeing.

In another study exploring the evolution of female friendship across the centuries, Lydia Stater<sup>60</sup> used the approach of reviewing female fashion. Her premise is that female friends are a women’s closest relationships, and their fashion reflects that. Stater’s research touches upon the psychology in female friendships and evaluates the changes in the dynamics of friendship over the last several centuries. Her study revealed that throughout the centuries women have found emotional support through meaningful friendships and it was easily reflected in fashion such as braiding of hair and gifting of friendship bracelets.

In the 2018 book *Rethinking Friendship*, Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl took an in-depth look at the varied nature of personal relationships in today’s culture and agree that friends improve one’s life. “No one seriously disputes that friends and friendship are

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<sup>59</sup> Yalom and Brown, *The Social Sex*, 316.

<sup>60</sup> Stater, “Female Friendship.”



essential for our happiness and wellbeing,”<sup>61</sup> said Spencer. The study takes an overall look at the changing societal view of friendship and found that “friends provide the mainstay of social support. Spencer and Paul’s research shows that people with friend-based personal communities have broad friendship repertoires including soulmates, confidants, helpmates, fun friends and associates, or a core of close friends and a larger group of more casual friendships.”<sup>62</sup> This is congruent with The Ruth Paradigm of a broad friend group of individual friends, mentoring friends and community friends. Their research found friends provide “much needed support and intimacy ... enabling people to relax and cope with the pressures of contemporary life.”<sup>63</sup> Similar to Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas and Bonhoeffer, Spencer and Pahl agree that friendship’s strongest forms are based on trust, commitment, and loyalty.

Two years after the release of Spencer’s book, the worldwide pandemic hit testing the impact of friendship on wellbeing. Heidi Haverkamp wrote a journal article on the effects of the Covid pandemic on friendship. She found that there are many ways to find happiness in life, but the “most important and the easiest, may simply be spending time enjoying our relationships and friendship.”<sup>64</sup> In “Close Friends,” Haverkamp argued that America’s view of the “Good Life” was focused more on accumulation—income, home, possessions—than on relationships, which became apparent during the pandemic when

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<sup>61</sup> Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl, *Rethinking Friendship: Hidden Solidarities Today* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 211.

<sup>62</sup> Spencer and Pahl, *Rethinking Friendship*, 132.

<sup>63</sup> Spencer and Pahl, *Rethinking Friendship*, 210.

<sup>64</sup> Heidi Haverkamp, “Close Friends: The Pandemic Made a Hard Decision Clear,” *Christian Century*, (May 5, 2021): 10-11.

everything shut down. Thus she blames the recent epidemic of loneliness on Americans spending more time on self-improvement rather than relationship improvement.<sup>65</sup>

Haverkamp concludes, “In this time when so many are struggling with isolation, perhaps it would do us all good to fall back on this most simple of values for a good human life, a good Christian life—that we simply make time to be with one another, not for any reason other than to be happy.”<sup>66</sup> Close friends provide that opportunity.

### 3.3.2 Quality Friends Meet In-Person

In a 2022 study to see if social media reflects quality friendship, Juan Garcia Huertas’ found that less than 14.83% of participants felt social media provided personal growth.<sup>67</sup> Thus the prospect of true friendship being developed on Facebook is slim.

Huertas said the results of the study “allow us to affirm that the psychological experience of true friendship does not exist on social media platforms.”<sup>68</sup> Friendship represented across of social media platforms is merely a symbolic projection, a myth, used to promote relationships between users which are far from any full experience of true friendship.

Authentic friends find time to meet in person, converse through phone calls and texts, and participate in ways of connecting other than merely social media. Huertas’ study reveals that connecting only on social media, and never meeting in person, does not constitute a genuine friendship, rather it delivers the illusion of a relationship. It is possible for

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<sup>65</sup> Haverkamp, “Close Friends,” 10.

<sup>66</sup> Haverkamp, “Close Friends,” 11.

<sup>67</sup> Huertas, Pintado, and Moreira, “Is true friendship possible on Facebook?” 233-245.

<sup>68</sup> Huertas, Pintado, and Moreira, “Is true friendship possible on Facebook?” 242.

women to maintain long distance friendships over the years but at some point, the friendship would have included quality in-person time to establish the bond.

### 3.3.3 Benefits of Female Friends

The consensus of recent scholars is that female friendship improves wellbeing in women, as mentioned earlier. Here is a brief discussion of several of those scholar's work. Gina Erato<sup>69</sup> and Sandy Sheehy<sup>70</sup> found there is benefit to female friendship throughout life's transitions—from pregnancy to widowhood. Diane Barth<sup>71</sup> and Kara Christensen<sup>72</sup> confirm female friendship is a relevant ongoing source of support and encouragement, even though it carries risk of conflict. Having a non-related female friend has shown to help with postpartum depression, anxiety, and with grief over the loss of a loved one. Christensen revealed how women can improve their wellbeing as they support each other socially and emotionally through one-on-one friendship. Lastly, two case studies, Linda Layne and Susana Sonnenberg's, affirm there are benefits of quality female friendship for single moms, as well as acknowledge the challenges of finding and building such quality friendships.

Female friendships are beneficial to pregnant women. Gina Erato's 2021 study, "Female friendships and social support during the perinatal period," examines the role of non-relative female friendships during pregnancy. It evaluated the association between

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<sup>69</sup> Gina Erato, "Female Friendships and Social Support during the Perinatal Period," (PhD diss., Oklahoma State University, 2012).

<sup>70</sup> Sandy Sheehy, *Connecting: The Enduring Power of Female Friendship* (New York: William Morrow, 2000).

<sup>71</sup> Barth, *Not Good at Friends*.

<sup>72</sup> Christensen, "Examining Relationships between Interpersonal Emotion Regulation, Psychopathology, and Relationship Quality in Female Friend Dyads."

social support and perinatal outcomes, including symptoms of postpartum depression and anxiety and infant birth weight. Erato found that female friendships were deemed protective and helpful for the pregnant moms regarding perinatal mental health and in offering social support and buffered health outcomes for both mother and baby. Findings showed that over one-third of women surveyed had a non-maternal figure female friend. Although female friendships were not a significant protective factor for perinatal or infant health outcomes, the findings did provide unique characterizations of women's relationships during pregnancy. The strength of the article is that it shows that non-related female friendships are beneficial to the emotional health of moms during their pregnancy whether they are married or single.

Friends were found to have both a good and bad effect on wellbeing. In *Not Good at Friends* (2018) psychotherapist Diane Barth discusses how friendship among females is both an ongoing source of support and encouragement and conflict and pain. She found that her clients' female friendships often hold keys to unrecognized relational issues of their own. Barth also found female friendships are related to a client's history and childhood experiences with friends. Many things affect how women develop friendships, such as cultural beliefs, expectations, crises, life experiences, and transitions. Barth concluded with the common belief that women are innately endowed to have close female relationships.

Two case studies reveal single mothers feel the need for friends. Linda Layne's study<sup>73</sup> on Carmen is a single mother by choice. Susana Sonnenberg's case study<sup>74</sup> is on her own life of friends. Linda Layne's study explores how Carmen's personal and professional life shaped her view of intimacy. The author cited several studies by sociologists on the importance of intimate friendships (Budgeon 2006, Jamieson et al 2006 and Bianchi et al 2006) and noted that single mothers and divorced women place friendship with other women as more of a priority. Developing deep friendships as a single mother of three was found to be difficult for Carmen. This was due to lack of time, a habit of focusing too much on self during conversations, fear of judgment, and Carmen's lack of trust. However, she agrees the benefit outweighs risk to find time to develop female friends. The subject of the case study felt a true friend for her is one she would be willing to tell of her troubled upbringing. The journal article confirmed other research, that it is difficult for single moms to find time for deep friendships, but it is worth the effort.

The second case study was found in *She Matters*, a book by Susanna Sonnenberg on the depth of female friendships and how they have personally influenced her own life—for good and for bad. Sonnenberg reveals how she was nourished, inspired, torn apart, and sometimes haunted by her friendships, but each left her with another life lesson for her to seek to understand. She covered friendships from childhood to adulthood, the effect of Facebook, roommates, how motherhood changed things, seasons of friendship

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<sup>73</sup> Linda L. Layne, "A Changing Landscape of Intimacy: The Case of a Single Mother by Choice," *Sociological Research Online* 20, no. 4 (2015): 156-71.

<sup>74</sup> Susanna Sonnenberg, *She Matters: A Life in Friendships* (New York: Scribner, 2013).

and more. This case study confirms female friendships influence wellbeing, for good or for bad depending on the quality of the friend.

### 3.3.4 Benefits of Community Female Friends

Two studies on community friendship are relevant to this literature review through the lens of The Ruth Paradigm. Michelle Piotrowski 2015 phenomenological study<sup>75</sup> offers an in-depth exploration of how thirteen midlife females experienced long-term friendships. It offers insight into the function of friendship in midlife. There are seven major findings: First, self-object needs are met in friendships such as through mirroring and idealizing self-object experiences. Second, individuals in midlife continue to seek opportunities to address early needs through current friendships. Third, having a long-term friend bear witness to shared experiences over time helps organize a coherent narrative of one's experiences. Fourth, self-object functions are internalized over time. Fifth, crucial personal and relationship development continues throughout midlife. Sixth, continuity is a key aspect of these friendships. And seventh, these factors promote building and strengthening a continued consolidation of the self, as well as delivering ongoing improvement of wellbeing. The strength of this study is that it is directly addresses the benefits of female friendship for life satisfaction and emotional support.

The second case study on community female friendship is "A Band of Sisters."<sup>76</sup> Kevin Lawson did a case study of a women's Bible study group that has met for over

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<sup>75</sup> Michelle Piotrowski, "Self-Object Experience in Long-Term Friendships of Midlife Women," *Psychoanalytic Social Work* 25, no. 1 (2018): 17-41.

<sup>76</sup> Kevin E. Lawson, "A Band of Sisters: The Impact of Long-Term Small Group Participation: Forty Years in a Women's Prayer and Bible Study Group," Talbot School of Theology, *USA Religious Education* Vol.101 No. 2 (Spring, 2006).

forty years. His study reveals how friendships were formed and how these women did “life together” by gathering for Bible study. The report discussed the impact on the lives of the women who participated in it. It also addressed how this long-term group survived the loss of members and leaders, how it has continued to be welcoming of new participants, and the perceived benefits and drawbacks of long-term groups compared with short-term groups. Although this study was not exclusively about single mothers, the strength of it is that it affirms female friendship developed in church held enduring benefits of long-term friendship on a woman’s quality of life, spiritual growth, and wellbeing.

### 3.3.5 Benefits of Teaching Friendship Skills to Single Moms

Several studies emphasized that single mothers rely on emotional support of other women to improve their wellbeing. However, friendship skills do not necessarily come naturally. Hence it is worthwhile to teach those skills. Single mothers can benefit from being taught social and friendship skills as well as being provided opportunities to develop friendships and utilize the skills learned. In her study on single mothers’ wellbeing and self-care in poverty, Susan Long’s participants expressed how their friends, coworkers, family, and children, supported their wellness.<sup>77</sup> A specific finding of this study is that single mothers receive support from other single mothers. Long’s study also found that it may be useful to connect single mothers to one another to develop

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<sup>77</sup> Susan M. Long, Madeline D. Clark, Rachel Jacoby Ausloos, and Carla McGhee, “The Wellness and Self-Care Experiences of Single Mothers in Poverty: Strategies for Mental Health Counselors,” *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* 41, no. 4 (2019): 343-58.

friendships via group counseling or other support groups in the area.<sup>78</sup> Spiritual support was cited as a positive factor by the participants as well.<sup>79</sup> Thus, getting involved in small groups at church or Christian organizations can be beneficial for developing female friendships for single moms.

Single mother's friendships were described again as offering emotional support and practical help in Charlotte Morris's 2019 article "The Significance of friendship in UK single mothers' intimate lives."<sup>80</sup> Their friendships provide single mothers the possibility of positive identification instead of judgment. In this journal article about single mothers, friendships were often accorded a higher status than the romantic relationship in the single mother's lives.

Study after study show that valuable benefits are found in cultivating healthy female friendships. Rosemary Blieszner, PhD.,<sup>81</sup> an expert on friendship since the 1990s, found that not only does friendship improve one's happiness and health throughout a lifetime, but also that women who were taught social friendship formation skills saw an improvement in their happiness level and experienced less loneliness. Her study showed that programs that teach social skills and friendship formation offer benefits of more happiness for the respondents. A study by Stevens, Martina and Westerhof (2006) also offered a program to a treatment group of lonely women— twelve weekly lessons on self-esteem, relational

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<sup>78</sup> Long, Clark, Ausloos, and McGhee, "The Wellness and Self-Care Experiences of Single Mothers in Poverty," 354.

<sup>79</sup> Long, Clark, Ausloos, and McGhee, "The Wellness and Self-Care Experiences of Single Mothers in Poverty," 352.

<sup>80</sup> Charlotte Ann Morris, "The Significance of Friendship in UK Single Mothers' Intimate Lives," Policy Press, *Families, Relationships and Societies* 8, no. 3 (2019): 427-443.

<sup>81</sup> Blieszner, "The Worth of Friendship."



competence, friendship formation and maintenance. Like them, Blieszner found that women who received guidance on friendship formation made new friends. Moreover, those who both made new friends and improved existing friend-ties reported less loneliness. Those who lack the skills to initiate friendship may benefit from assistance toward cultivating satisfying relationships that could contribute to health and happiness.

For centuries, it has been evident that wisely choosing friends affects wellbeing. Emily Midorikawa<sup>82</sup> emphasized the importance of carefully choosing friends and building skills to cultivate safe confidants in one's life. Camille Martina's journal article supports both Blieszner and Midorikawa findings that there is added benefit in teaching skills for developing female friendships.<sup>83</sup> Research confirms that female friendship has been shown to contribute to wellbeing in single moms. It has also been observed that some single moms lack the skills of choosing and developing quality friends. Therefore, it is beneficial to provide opportunities where such skills are taught to single mother who lack them.

### 3.4 THE CHURCH, SINGLE MOMS, AND FRIENDS

This section looks at Christian scholars' recent literature on female friendship, single moms, and the Church, as it relates to The Ruth Paradigm and single moms' overall wellbeing and spiritual growth. Several Christian scholars reports that having supportive social relationships with likeminded women who share their faith is an asset to

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<sup>82</sup> Emily Midorikawa and Emma Claire Sweeney, *A Secret Sisterhood: The Literary Friendships of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot & Virginia Woolf* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

<sup>83</sup> Camille M.S. Martina, Nan L. Stevens, and Gerben J. Westerhof, "Change and Stability in Loneliness and Friendship After an Intervention for Older Women: *Ageing and Society* 38, no. 3 (2018): 446.

single mothers. In her study "Single Mothers and Religiosity,"<sup>84</sup> Natalie Sheets found a need for the church to create an atmosphere where single mothers can find time to form female friendships. "Considering that single mothers have less time, money, and social support than coupled mothers, they would also have less time to attend religious services or participate in other public and private practices of religion."<sup>85</sup> Friendship is a powerfully influential way to reach single mothers to improve spiritual growth and wellbeing, while offering support.

Youth Pastor Rene Gomez also emphasizes the need for the church to proactively mentor and minister to single moms. In his journal article "True Religion: How the Church Can Care for the Single Mother," Gomez claims single moms are often unseen, alone, and isolated.<sup>86</sup> They do not have the luxury of free time to develop close friendships because they are busy surviving and providing for their children. Therefore, local churches need to offer opportunities for these moms to interact with like-minded women for friends and mentoring. Moturi Bochere agrees and recommends developing a theology of the single mother that will incorporate the idea of holy friendship as the basis for healthy relationships.<sup>87</sup> Church can be an ideal place to develop female Christian friendship.

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<sup>84</sup> Sheets, "Single Mothers and Religiosity," 41.

<sup>85</sup> Sheets, "Single Mothers and Religiosity," 41.

<sup>86</sup> Rene Gomez, "True Religion: How the Church Can Care for the Single Mother," *The Journal of Discipleship & Family Ministry* 2, no. 2 (Spring, 2012): 94-95.

<sup>87</sup> Bochere, Gechiko, and Kyalo, "Examination of Biblical and Theological Foundations for Single Mothers on their Spiritual Growth in The Seventh-Day Adventist Church."

One of the realities inside the church today is a postmodern culture pushing to take over. The traditional nuclear family is more and more the exception rather than the rule. The church attendees are no longer made up of a majority of two parent families. And the church needs to minister to all who come, including the increased number of single mothers and their children. Thus, Christian churches cannot ignore the population of single parent families among their congregations any longer. More than ever, the local church needs to step up to serve and minister to this vast people's group of single mothers and help facilitate developing likeminded female friendships.

God cares about the single mother and the widow. Therefore, the Church is called to do the same. By facilitating the development of friendship skills among single moms, a church can help single moms develop a support system including The Ruth Paradigm's three forms of friendship (loyal companions, mentoring encouragers, and community supporters). This model improves both their wellbeing and spiritual growth.

#### 3.4.1 Single Moms Grow Spiritually with Friends at their Side

Several studies reveal spiritual and emotional benefits of female friendship at church. Such relevant studies include *Friendship Development Among Single Adults in a Megachurch* by Marcus Bourbon,<sup>88</sup> *I Have Called You Friends: Toward relational ministry in a postmodern world practicing authentic Christian friendship* by W.A. Buck,<sup>89</sup> and *Where is the Love* by Amy Chilton. These studies focus on female friends at church and strongly show the spiritual and emotional benefits of female friendship at

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<sup>88</sup> Bourbon, "Friendship Development Among Single Adults in a Megachurch."

<sup>89</sup> Buck, "I Have Called You Friends."

church as well as the church's role in encouraging and promoting supportive and peer friendships between likeminded Christians.

Marcus Bourbon's 2012 study discusses the effects of friendships among single adults at church. He found that close interpersonal relationships initiated in the church have the common thread of true spiritual friendship. What distinguishes spiritual friendships from other relationships is that they are centered in Christ. In his study, Bourbon found that single adults experiencing friendships at church were able to grow spiritually and in other areas of life because of the timely advice given to them by their friend they met at church. These friendships were among single adults, and this included single moms. The friendships were found to encourage and equip the Christian singles in all areas of their lives.

Buck's study showed it was possible for the church to facilitate positive friendships at church. Clinton's study affirms female community friendship is a vehicle the church ought to promote as it provides avenues for the mutual sharing of goods and information, strengthening faith and social communities through loyalty, commitment, and healing. Both studies are discussed further in Section 4.4 Community Supporters.

### 3.4.2 Single Moms and One-on-One Friends at Church

Single moms' wellbeing and spiritual growth can be enhanced by the development of the first type of female friendship in The Ruth Paradigm--likeminded, one-on-one friends. Choosing likeminded peers at church who encourage the best in you can benefit anyone looking for support and encouragement. Michael Gregg<sup>90</sup> examined

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<sup>90</sup> Michael J. Gregg, "Relational Resourcing of Pastors Authentic Peer Friendship That Sustain and Heal," (DMin project, The Kings University. 2007).

the effects Peer Friendships on sustaining the healing of pastors. If peer friendship is beneficial for pastors, who are known to spend their lives helping others and yet benefit from spiritual and emotional support to improve wellbeing and spiritual growth, it follows that peer friendship can benefit others who also live a life investing in others. Single moms are another people group who invest their lives helping others--their children.

Like pastors, single mothers also are in need of emotional support to help improve wellbeing and spiritual growth which can be provided through one-on-one peer friendship. Gregg calls this “relational resourcing.” He found that relational resourcing helped maintain better self-esteem, wellbeing, and satisfaction in ministry. It confirms the notion that for one to thrive in your life, career, and ministry, one must not “go it alone” and expect to find fulfilment. Rather, building peer friendship with others who are walking in your shoes because they have the same ministry to others, you can stay on track, be motivated to continue, and heal from your own wounds. Gregg’s peer friendships dissertation offers relevant insights confirming friendships within the church offer “relational resourcing” and improve wellbeing. Gregg concludes that meaningful relationships are “the divine prescription for developing and sustaining genuine relationship with God and in the community of His people” (Gregg, 2007, 25). Buck, Gregg, and Bourbon’s studies offer further insight into friendship support developed at church, revealing that it is not merely the pastors who contribute to the lives of single moms. Lay leaders and congregants are needed to facilitate one-one-on friendships.

### 3.4.3 Single Moms and Encouraging Mentors at Church

Single moms' wellbeing and spiritual growth can be greatly improved with the help of the second type of female friendship in The Ruth Paradigm and that is the mentoring supporters. Mentors offer guidance at crucial moments of life as well as advice during ongoing daily living to help achieve goals. Research discovered several Christian organizations that work with pregnant single moms. Mary Somerville<sup>91</sup> wrote an article of one group that offers step by step guidance for churches to offer mentoring for pregnant teens through being a friend and offering a positive role model. It is hoped that as the mentor displays Christ's love and grace, the teen woman will desire to have Christ in her own life in a vibrant and meaningful way. However, Somerville has strict rules for the teen moms to follow or they will be "cut off" from the program. Though well intentioned, the rules felt rather legalistic in a mentoring/witness environment.

Another ministry found is Amy Ford's national non-profit Embrace Grace, that operates out of local churches. This ministry offers teenaged girls' long term small group mentoring throughout an unplanned pregnancy and beyond. Embrace Grace facilitates friendship for single moms through small groups, with a goal of offering spiritual growth and practical training on parenting skills.

### 3.4.4 Single Moms and Community Supporters at Church

Community supporters for single moms, the third type of female friendship in The Ruth Paradigm, can be developed at church to facilitate improving wellbeing and spiritual growth. A relevant study that reveals that the church can facilitate friendships

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<sup>91</sup> Mary L. Somerville, "Ministering the Love of Christ to Single Teen Mothers" *The Journal of Discipleship & Family Ministry* Vol 2, no 2 (2012): 42-55.

was conducted in Oklahoma. The local church developed a duplicatable six-week small group study for their congregation on how to learn to develop friends. W.A. Buck's study "I Have Called You Friends" showed it was possible for the church to facilitate positive friendships at church.

With the help of a team of lay advisors, this new Christian friendship ministry intended to immerse participants in the practice of Christian friendship. The ministry is repeatable, including interactive methods that contribute to the development and deepening of existing relationships among participants, while encouraging significant interactions with the potential for making new relationships within a congregation. Buck deduced that since God is the creator of human relationships, then God is relational and Christians in turn should be relational. Therefore, friendships at church are important. The format of the small group curriculum at this church was a typical format for small groups (open with prayer, share a short lesson, break up into smaller groups for questions and answers to build peer relationships among the attendees and spiritual growth on a topic, share prayer requests between one another, then close in prayer). If small groups work for facilitating relationships for an entire congregation, which results of Buck's study implied, then small groups are potentially beneficial for helping single mothers develop friendships and grow spiritually and emotionally.

Amy Chilton evaluated female friendship by looking into the work of Ecumenical Theologian Paul Fiddes. Her article "Where is the Love?" argues that by participating with the relational God through female friendships, we and our communities can be transformed. Community friendship is the vehicle that church life appears to produce in Chilton's study. She affirms that female friendships in the church provide avenues for the

mutual sharing of goods and information, and the strengthening of faith and social communities through loyalty, commitment, and healing. Such avenues to build a community of friends at church include helping with a “baby shower, choir guild, prayer circle, meal train, preacher in heels, nursery worker, and potluck chefs who sustain the ‘family’ of the local Baptist church”.<sup>92</sup> Like Buck’s and Bourbon’s studies above, Chilton’s looks at the spiritual and emotional benefits of female friendship at church and the church’s role in both encouraging and promoting it. When the church makes it possible for there to be community and space to develop friendships then those friendships can naturally and organically progress.

A megachurch in North Texas has a twenty-year, well-established program for single moms. Samantha Golden developed The Single Parent Family Ministry at the megachurch in 2003 with the desire to encourage, empower and equip single parents on their journey with their children, whether they found themselves as a single parent by choice or by circumstance. “The heart behind the SPFM has always been to give a hand up, not a handout, and walk alongside single parents and their children and connect them to the heart of the Father. We believe that one parent plus God equals a whole family and that the heart of God will do what the hand of the government never can,”<sup>93</sup> says Golden. Among the many aspects of the Single Parent Family Ministry is weekly services for both parents and children, focused small groups, and classes on topics like divorce recovery,

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<sup>92</sup> Amy L. Chilton, “Where is the Love? The Disruptive Possibilities of Women’s Friendships as Participation in the Triune God,” *Perspective in Religious Studies* Vol 45, no. 1 (Spring, 2018): 35.

<sup>93</sup> Samantha Golden, Single Parent Family Ministry, Gateway Church, Texas, during an interview with Victorya Rogers April 11, 2021.



parenting, healthy relationships, co-parenting, financial health, budgeting, leadership development, etc. Small groups are a major part of the ministry.

Another effective ministry for facilitating community friendship among single mothers and supporting the wellbeing of teen moms is Embrace Grace,<sup>94</sup> (as mentioned above in Section 3.4.3). Embrace Grace also serves at this particular church and works alongside their SPFM to offer ongoing support for young, single girls in unplanned pregnancies. This ministry includes support groups, bible studies, and parenting classes. Small groups are the primary way they support these young pregnant teens.

As noted by Samantha Golden, the small group environment is where one-on-one friendships have the best chance to develop organically among single mothers. This is due to the opportunity to be included and drawn in to safely reveal oneself among likeminded single moms during question-and-answer periods. Main church services are not conducive to friendship development. This is because of the nature of the service offering no interaction other than a brief greeting of one's neighbor before sitting down after worship songs. Therefore, single mothers would only interact with whomever accompanied them to service.

God designed Christians to be in community to do life together through the Church. Doing life together includes all Christians regardless of marriage status or family circumstance. In this post-modern culture where the nuclear family has diminished and single parent families have increased, it is important for the church today to develop services and outreach opportunities to equip these single mothers. Encouraging female

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<sup>94</sup> <https://embracegrace.com/>.

friendship at church and providing opportunities for single mothers to build friendships can be effective ways to offer emotional support and spiritual growth.

### 3.4.5 Listening Skills for Female Friendship Development

Be it one-on-one peer friendships, mentoring friends, or community supporters, listening to one another is an important trait of female friendships. Just as Bonhoeffer believes listening is a first service owed to others, Ruth Haley Barton and Kate Murphy agree. Barton says, “The purpose of journeying together in spiritual friendship ... is to listen to one another’s desire for God, to nurture that desire in each other and to support one another in seeking a way of life that is consistent with that desire.”<sup>95</sup> This is how bonds are developed and growth occurs. As Kate Murphy admonished, “Listening is arguably more valuable than speaking.”<sup>96</sup> To really listen is to be moved physically, chemically, emotionally, and intellectually by another person’s narrative.<sup>97</sup> People get lonely for lack of people listening to them. Murphy claims “listening, more than any other activity, plugs you into life.”<sup>98</sup> Thus listening is an important skill to be taught and encouraged in both the small group environment and the development of any form of female friendship.

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<sup>95</sup> Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 169.

<sup>96</sup> Kate Murphy, *You’re Not Listening: What You’re Missing and Why It Matters* (Celadon Books, a division of MacMillan Publishers, 2019).

<sup>97</sup> Murphy, *You’re Not Listening*, 3.

<sup>98</sup> Murphy, *You’re Not Listening*, 23.

### 3.4.6 Church Attendance and Wellbeing

Considering the influence of the postmodern worldview in America, including diminishing numbers attending any church each week, it is relevant to investigate if the church even remains a place of influence on the lives of individuals, including single moms. Jennifer Lowry conducted a quantitative study investigating the extent that there was a relationship between church attendance, church participation, and the wellbeing of single mothers in North Carolina Protestant churches.<sup>99</sup> Lowry's results suggested that church attendance is still relevant and had a moderate-to-strong positive and statistically significant correlation with wellbeing (66%) as well showing church participation with a moderate-to-strong positive and statistically significant correlation with wellbeing (56%).

The conclusion of Lowry's study showed a correlation between church attendance, church participation, and wellbeing which is important to this researcher because it reveals that being in community at church improves quality of life. By pastoral leaders grasping an urgency to help this population of single mothers' experience personal growth and wellbeing, you are benefiting your entire community of believers.

Another recent study addressed the need for the church to focus on single mothers and their children in a postmodern world where the nuclear family no longer makes up most churchgoers. Stephanie Townes "Towards a Theology of the Single Mother" (2017) found the lack of practical pastoral care for single-parent families is due to the focus of current conservative evangelical theology on the traditional, nuclear family. A theology of the single mother could open that conversation, and in turn, churches could begin to

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<sup>99</sup> Jennifer Ikner Lowry, "Examining Single Mother's Religious Practices and Their Wellbeing," (PhD diss., Grand Canyon University). ProQuest Dissertations. Publishing. 10748850.

pastor and minister to the rising numbers of non-traditional families. This study justifies the need for churches to help facilitate friendships with single moms amongst its congregation to aid in their edification, emotional and spiritual support. The church has been stuck into thinking traditional family teaching is all they need to preach. Remaining in this way of thinking misses out on a major part of this postmodern population who need Jesus just as much as traditional families need Jesus.

Though many churches across the country have lacked in serving the single mother well, there are churches and Christian organizations who are making inroads helping to facilitate female friendship among the single moms, offering training and guidance on friendship develop to help them choose friends well. The Single Parent Family Ministry developed at this megachurch in North Texas, and the small groups offered by Embrace Grace, are two strong examples of friendship training and development facilitated by a church.

### **3.5 SUMMARY OF GENERAL LITERATUE REVIEW**

Through the lens of The Ruth Paradigm's three types of female friendship—one-on-one companions, encouraging mentors, and community supporters—Chapter Three explored a literature review of friendship from the time of Aristotle to the modern day. This literature review led to a path of three areas of research, with a goal of understanding how Christian female friendships influence a single mother's wellbeing and spiritual goal. First the path was to look at philosophers and theologians' views of friendship, including Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Newton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and C.S. Lewis. Second, a deep general literature review what conducted on

what recent scholars say about female friendship and wellbeing. Third, research was examined on the church's role in the lives of single mothers and their female friendships.

A rich history of female friendship was found. Research unilaterally revealed that women can benefit from developing in-person, healthy female friendships. Yet in today's post-modern culture, there are hinderances to easily finding and developing such friends. Facebook, and other social media outlets imitate friendship, resulting in an epidemic of loneliness.<sup>100</sup>

While developing friendships and choosing wise confidants does not come easy, this chapter revealed single mothers who have been trained in friendship skills have improved wellbeing and experienced less loneliness. Churches have been slow to realize that the nuclear family no longer makes up the majority of those sitting in church pews. Therefore, a shift must occur to extend more ministry focus on the single parent family. The church is needed to step up and help single mothers develop likeminded female friends who will not only improve a single mother's wellbeing, but also help her spiritual formation and relationship with Christ.

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<sup>100</sup> Huertas, Pintado, and Moreira, "Is True Friendship Possible on Facebook?" 233-245.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **4.1 A STUDY ON SINGLE MOTHERS AND FRIENDSHIP**

This project was undertaken as a qualitative study to hear stories from single mothers about their friendship with other Christian women. The study was carried out by exploring the lived experiences of single mothers who attend small groups at the weeknight services for single parents at a megachurch in North Texas. The aim of this study is twofold. The first is to investigate the influence of the three levels of Christian female friendships based on The Ruth Paradigm on the wellbeing and spiritual formation of single moms. The model evolved from this investigator's biblical research for this study that is explained in detail in Chapter Two. The second goal of this study is to assess the church's role in facilitating the development of such friendships.

The qualitative research took a phenomenological approach, utilizing multiple data collecting methods including one-on-one interviews as well as an initial ten-question survey. The two instruments were used to identify the effects of female friendship from the Participants perspectives. The researcher sought to identify the impact of these relationships on a single mother's wellbeing and spiritual growth, especially when those friendships evolve from the all-female small groups that are an ongoing part of the single parents' weeknight ministry at the church.

There were three guiding research questions motivating this study. First, how does a single mother experience Christian female friendship? Second, how do Christian

female friendships influence a single mother's spiritual growth and personal wellbeing? And third, how does this megachurch and the small groups facilitate the development of Christian female friendship for single moms? With these three guiding questions in mind, this researcher interviewed single mothers who attend the Single Parent Family Ministry of a megachurch in North Texas.

In the survey, the various types of friendship were explained to the Participants. Best friends were defined as reciprocal friends who love each other enough to tell the truth, without judgment, all while cheering one another on throughout life's highs and lows. Close friends were described as reciprocal relationships where both individuals share confidential information to encourage, edify, and pray for each other, although not quite given a best friend status. Mentors were defined as confidants who encourage and advise a single mom in her personal and spiritual life. Community Supporters were explained as a group of Christian friends whom you cautiously share some private information, discuss God and your spiritual life, yet remain guarded in some areas of your personal life.

The definitions of other key terms were explained to the single mothers during the interview phase, which included wellbeing, personal growth, and spiritual growth (cf. Chapter One). Wellbeing was explained to be a positive perception that one's life is going well and experiencing feelings of happiness; Personal growth was defined as the experience of one's life being perceived as being better than before; Spiritual growth is experienced when one perceives herself growing closer to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

## 4.2 THE PROJECT

In preparation for the study, this researcher chose a venue where there was already an indication that Christian female friendship was occurring among single mothers. A North Texas megachurch and its Single Parent Family Ministry (SPFM) was selected for recruiting participants. The ministry began over twenty years ago as a weeknight service for single parents with childcare and children's program provided during the service for free. Single mothers are encouraged to get involved in small groups to build relationships. Established by Pastor Samantha Golden, the goal of the program is to minister to single parent families through an atmosphere that results in healing, restoration, unconditional love, and acceptance.<sup>1</sup> Golden's philosophy is that an atmosphere of grace and truth *over time* allows change. She states, "We realize there's a process and trauma. There are areas of their soul that needs to be healed, and SPFM hopes that we are creating that space in their journey."<sup>2</sup> The program's ultimate mission is to empower and equip single parent families to achieve wholeness in parenting, finances, and healthy relationships, while creating an opportunity to establish friendships, serve God together, and go deeper in their relationships with the Lord. There are small groups for single moms and separate small groups for single dads. This study only looked at the small groups for moms as the focus is on single mothers and their friendships, not single dads. The participants chosen for this study attend the small group Bible studies for the single moms.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://gatewaypeople.com/ministries/single-parent-families>.

<sup>2</sup> Samantha Golden interview with Victorya Rogers (April 11, 2021).



### 4.3 IDENTIFYING THE METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study was a qualitative phenomenological approach. Qualitative methodology is about observation and interviews from small samples, then making meaning from the data collected. Whereas quantitative research often looks at large samplings, John W. Creswell says, “we conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories and hear their voices.”<sup>3</sup> Since interviewing was the chosen direction for this study, a qualitative methodology was necessary, as opposed to a quantitative, because this study is specifically dealing with the felt needs and lived experiences of the subjects. This qualitative research project explores the wellbeing of Christian single moms by conducting face-to-face interviews with single mothers who are involved in small groups at a large church in North Fort Worth, Texas.

#### 4.3.1 Research Design

The research design chosen for this qualitative study was phenomenological research. John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell define phenomenological research as “a qualitative strategy in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study.”<sup>4</sup> For this study the phenomenon is the three levels of female friendship based on The Ruth Paradigm. The phenomenon is explored as data collected during interviews with Christian single moms who experienced this phenomenon of friendship. Phenomenology typically

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<sup>3</sup> John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Fourth Edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2018), 45.

<sup>4</sup> John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*, Fifth Edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2018), 249.

involves three to ten participants. This study began with five single moms and concluded with four.

#### 4.3.2 Research Process

Participants were chosen for inclusion in this study based on the following criteria. First a woman who is presently single. Second, a woman with at least one child living at home under the age of eighteen. Third, a woman between the ages of 25 and 49. And fourth, a woman who regularly attends small groups at the single parent weeknight services of large church in North Texas.

#### 4.3.3 Research Bias and Ethical Consideration

This study is coming from a Christian worldview that holds as true that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ offers peace, purpose, and personal growth. The researcher shares these beliefs and values. Subjects for this study claim to also hold this as true in their own lives.

Any unconscious biases on this researcher's part comes from her twenty-year history as a life coach. From 2011 until 2020 she was also a mentor for single moms at this megachurch in the Grant Mentor program.<sup>5</sup> She is an author of Christian dating books<sup>6</sup> written to help women make better choices in love and life. Married for twenty-five years, and mother of two adult children, this researcher was single until her mid-

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<sup>5</sup> The Grant Mentor program was a two-year program for single moms funded by a private donor at the church. It financed single mothers accepted into the program as they pursued a college degree over a two-year period. Part of the criteria for acceptance included regularly meeting with a life coach provided by the church.

<sup>6</sup> Victorya Michaels Rogers, *Finding a Man Worth Keeping* (Eugene, OR: Howard Publishing, 2005).

thirties and has firsthand experience with emotional challenges many single women face. However, it is her experience as a mentor to single moms that gave her unique insight into the challenges single mothers face that are not part of the daily life experience of married mothers.

It has also been this investigator's experience that people only change when they want to change. No matter how logical or sage the advice, unless or until someone chooses to change, improvement will not occur. Even when a client repeatedly says she wants to change her life, it is her actions that confirm or deny that claim. Although bringing this experience and bias to the study, this researcher sought participants who were Christians and already indicating they wanted to improve their wellbeing and spiritual health. This was evident by the participants' choosing to be involved at church beyond merely attending Sunday service.

#### **4.4 DATA COLLECTION AND INSTRUMENTS**

##### **4.4.1 Instruments Used in Data Collection**

There were two instruments designed to collect data for this qualitative phenomenological study — a survey questionnaire and an interview. Multiple choice survey and open-ended face-to-face interview questions were developed from information gleaned during the writing of the biblical and literature review in addition to the three guiding research questions. Data collection was conducted through three steps: First, each participant was emailed the IRB Informed Consent and ten-question survey. Second, a time was set to meet each participant for in-person signing of the consent form in front of this researcher, as well as handing in the completed questionnaire; Third, a one-on-one interview was conducted with each participant to expand on survey answers.

Both instruments were aligned with the three guiding research questions of the project as well as the three types of friendship identified in The Ruth Paradigm (one-on-one loyal friends, mentors, community supporters).<sup>7</sup> The in-person interviews sought to expand on the answers given by each participant on the ten-question survey. This was achieved through clarifying open-ended questions of each participant.

#### 4.4.2 The Survey

Upon showing interest in the project, eligible subjects were emailed both the IRB Informed Consent and the survey. The survey consisted of ten multiple-choice, closed-ended questions. The questions had been approved by the research advisor prior to sending to participants. A time was scheduled to meet each potential subject in person. Informed consent was established as official upon the researcher witnessing each participant sign the form in her presence. At that time, the researcher collected both the signed consent and the completed questionnaire. Several subjects filled out the survey in her presence rather than bring it back completed. The average time to complete the survey was ten minutes.

#### 4.4.3 The Interview

The second portion of data collection was face-to-face interviews with the single mothers who completed the survey. The strategy for the second phase was to conduct interviews to gain in-depth, expanded answers from the survey questions and observe the participants demeanor as they answered each question. One of the goals of the in-person interview phase was to provide a comfortable setting to encourage each participant to feel

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<sup>7</sup> See Chapter Two of this project.

at ease answering the questions. Once subjects were chosen, and their signatures obtained on the informed consent form, interviews were conducted then transcribed to be analyzed for recurring themes and diverse experiences. Individual interviews took between thirty to sixty minutes.

Two of the participants were able to meet in person for their interview. The location chosen was the greenroom at the North Fort Worth campus of the church. The greenroom is a warm and inviting living room setting with which these two participants were familiar. The other two subjects chose to do a Zoom meeting from their homes.

The interviews were audio and video recorded (except one where the subject did not want to be on camera at the time of the follow-up interview). Valuable information was gained from these in-person meetings, drawing heavily on the rapport and interaction between the participant and the researcher. Each audio recording was transcribed into a Word document, and the data was stored on the researcher's laptop. Backup copies were kept on the researcher's iCloud drive and a hard copy in researcher's secured file cabinet. Similarly, the ten-question surveys were each printed into hard copy and secured in researchers secured file cabinet as well as saved on PDF on researcher's laptop and iCloud drive.

## **4.5 THE FINDINGS**

### **4.5.1 Survey Findings**

It was understood that the commonality between the women is that they are all single moms who are Christians. It was also already known that the participants are regular attenders of this particular church and actively involved in the weeknight Single Parent Family Ministry as that was on the criteria for inclusion in the study. The survey

questions were designed around the model of three levels of female friendship based on The Ruth Paradigm. The model was developed out of this researcher's biblical-theological research as she discovered Naomi and Ruth were the primary biblical example of Christian female friendship (cf. Chapter Two). On the survey the participants were asked questions with multiple choice answers to gain a sense of their perception of their friends. They were asked what qualities in a friend are most important, as well as how many of their current friends exemplify those traits. They were also asked to reveal the number of casual friends (community supporters), mentors (encouraging mentors), and best friends/close friends (loyal companions) they currently have as well as if any of those friends were met at this church and if so, where at church. It was also relevant to discover how they experienced those friendships and how often and where they connected. Lastly, participants were asked whether they felt these church friendships improved their personal wellbeing, life satisfaction, and spiritual life.

The first part of the survey focused on best friends and close friends (the loyal companion level of The Ruth Paradigm). When asked about the number of friends in the first category of Christian female friendship—best and close friends—a mixture of responses came in from the participants. One mom marked that she does not currently have a best friend. Two participants said they had two best friends. The other two participants marked they currently have one best friend including the mom who did not complete the interview phase. Participant One, who said she currently has no best friend, also indicated that she is without close female friends. One participant checked three close friends, another marked one, and two said they have two close friends, including the mother who did not complete the interview portion. The second category of

friendship in The Ruth Paradigm is a Christian mentor. One participant marked that she currently has no mentors. Two others currently have one mentor, while one marked four, and the participant who did not complete the interview phase marked three.

The third category of female friendship in The Ruth Paradigm is community supporters. The survey included two levels of friendship in this category—Christian Friend and Casual Christian Acquaintance. Three participants have six or more Christian friends with whom they share some private information, discuss spiritual topics, but remain guarded in some areas. Two of the participants said they have one to two friendships that meet this criterion.

In the survey, community supporters were referred to as casual female acquaintances with whom one has friendly, superficial conversations, but the moms remain guarded about how much personal information to reveal to the group. Trust is built over time. Four of the three participants marked that they have fifteen to twenty casual Christian acquaintances. The other two wrote that they have three to five.

The survey also revealed a consensus that the single mothers considered a good listener and encourager as the most important qualities of female friends. The next two were that they share similar interests and defend each other's reputation. The next quality was that friends provide advice. When differentiating between female friend and Christian female friend, the top two qualities of a Christian female friend are one who offers emotional support through difficulty and one who prays with her friend. The next two preferred qualities of their Christian friends were that they share the same values and hold each other accountable. Lastly, it was important to the participants that their Christian friends are willing to discuss God and spiritual things.

In the context of questions pertaining to personal wellbeing and life satisfaction, four out of five surveyed checked that they couldn't live without their Christian friends as these friends have increased their personal wellbeing and provided emotional support through the hard times. Four out of five also checked the next category of wellbeing, which was that Christian friends helped increase personal wellbeing and feelings of life satisfaction (in areas such as emotions, spiritual walk, sense of happiness, guidance, and goal pursuit). One of the five admitted that in the past she has also suffered emotional harm and betrayal by Christian friends.

Collectively, the participants responded that they experience their Christian friendships through phone calls, group text, social media interactions, in person Bible study, and occasional social activities. The topics engaged in most often among the friends is first, parenting and their children; second, sharing life challenges, and third, discussing God, current Bible study, life goals and dreams. Several other topics were mentioned but not as frequently as these listed.

The church's involvement in facilitating female friendship was on the survey. All five participants marked that their church has helped them meet female Christian friends through small groups. Four of them met some friends through the weeknight worship service of the Parent Family Ministry, and three moms wrote that they developed close and best friends directly at the small group portion of the weeknight single parents' service.

#### 4.5.2 Interview Findings

The interviews sought to go deeper into the single mother's experience with female friendship at the single parent ministry. This was done by expanding and



clarifying their original answers to the survey questions. The Ruth Paradigm inspired the in-depth open-ended questioning during this phase of data collection, looking closely at how the single moms experienced their one-on-one loyal companions, mentoring encouragers, and community supporters. As the interviews unfolded, this researcher became more intrigued in assessing if the single mothers experienced these three types of female friendships within their small groups. Further questions were to identify what ways those relationships affected the participants spiritual growth and wellbeing. Lastly, participants all acknowledged the church's involvement in the developing of those relationships.

What was learned was that all participants developed friends at the church's weeknight single parent ministry. All four are actively involved in small groups where their community supporters were developed. From this community of friends, each found at least one close or best friend. Several participants referred to their small group as their family. In time, two of the participants' spiritual growth allowed them to become small group leaders as well as mentors to other single moms.

All four participants said they prayed with their friends. Prayer was experienced both in the small group environment as a whole and one-on-one with a friend either in person or on the phone. Participant One summarized her friendship experience in the community by saying, "They help me not be so isolated because I'm good at isolating myself. Even when I'm not part of a conversation in the group, they make me feel part of the conversation. This makes me feel part of the community and part of my church." No longer feeling isolated was a repeated comment from participants.

Participants said they each had at least six friends that they call their community supporters out of the small groups. Three of the four subjects developed at least one best friend through that community. And all acknowledge they have at least one mentor from the single parent ministry that offers them spiritual guidance, advice, encouragement, and one-on-one attention where they feel seen by God.

The single mom who marked zero on her survey as far as best friend, close friend, and mentor, re-evaluated her friendships at the time of the face-to-face interview. She mentioned she is developing a close friend. They are attending single parent night together and have had a few play dates with their kids. Although she had not thought of her single-parent pastor as a mentor, after hearing the definition she now feels that her pastor has acted very much as a mentor to her, as she reaches out through calls and texts. She even helped this participant find employment at the church.

Regarding the category of one-on-one friends, Participant Three said she has a friend who fits this criterion as they pray together and get through things together. Participant Two said, “God put these women in my life so I can be where I am now... I just believe friendship is one of the best things that you can have... Without Christian friendships, you will not grow because you do not have a mirror.” The participants stated they communicate with their friends in various ways including in person, on the phone, and through texts—sometimes multiple texts a day. They also keep track of each other’s social media accounts.

On their mentoring relationships, three of the four found their mentor through a pastor on the single parent staff. Participant One says the pastor, who she now sees as a mentor, “reaches out and texts me and notices me. I’m not alone. She prays for me.”

Participant Two says her mentor helps her get through the hard times. “She doesn’t make me feel shame. She’s such a blessing and not judging... My mentor has a heart for God. She paid attention to me and encouraged me in the midst of my pain.” And Participant Three said she and her mentor talk about her problems, pray together, and jointly get through the hard times.

In the category of community friendships, the participants all made similar comments like “Hey, these are my people.” Participant Two said, “With my community I’ve definitely experienced spiritual growth. We talk about *God stories*.” Participant Three offered, “Just to know you don’t walk alone makes me emotional. They are my support system with a soft place to fall.” With Participant Four saying “You are part of a family. Part of a community. Your spiritual life grows as you lead each other closer to God. When one in the group is down you all lift that one up and keep doing that for each other.” That their community of friends help them grow emotionally and spiritually was a consistent response.

When asked if the church helps develop friendships, all participants credit the Single Parent Family Ministry for assisting them in finding their friends and community. Participant One, who has not been successful in finding close friends said, “The church has been a huge support. They are why I have friends and emotional support. The church has been a positive influence in my life and helped me find my community—my family.” Participant Two said, “The groups at church—Embrace Grace, Embrace Life, and all the other small groups—they help friends happen. They help because a lot of these groups are very intentional because they have discussions. It opens up the opportunity for you to be at the table. You’re talking to each other, telling your testimony, and vice versa.

Friendships are truly organic.” Participant Three offered similar views, saying, “I built my community through the small groups. First was Embrace Grace when I was pregnant. Then after graduating out of that, I continued at the other small groups offered through the single parent ministry. You get to know these moms. We do life together.” And Participant Four repeated the same sentiment as the other three and said, “I met friends organically by attending Single Parent Family Ministry and its groups. The church does that well.” Therefore, there was repeated evidence that this church helped facilitate friendship.

#### **4.6 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The data of this phenomenological qualitative study was collected and analyzed to validate this project’s thesis that Christian friendships have a positive influence on single mother’s spiritual formation and personal wellbeing. By exploring the experiences of single mothers at this megachurch, this researcher aimed to discover if the services, ministries, and programs have been effective in facilitating the development of Christian female friendships that help single mothers grow personally, emotionally, and spiritually. Findings show that this church’s single parent ministry has been effective.

Through the lens of The Ruth Paradigm consisting of three types of female friendship (one-on-one loyal friends, mentoring encouragers, and community supporters), this researcher sought to understand how Christian female friendships influence single mothers’ wellbeing and spiritual growth. Two instruments were used for data collection. Those instruments were a ten-question survey and a face-to-face interview, with open-ended questions, to elicit an expansion of their answers to the survey.

There were five who completed the survey and four who completed both the survey and the interview. The three guiding research questions that motivated the study were first, how does a single mother experience Christian female friendship? Second, how do Christian female friendships influence a single mother's spiritual formation and personal wellbeing? And third, how does this particular megachurch's Single Parent Family Ministry facilitate the development of Christian female friendship?

The participants all experience ongoing overwhelm from stress and busy schedules due to juggling multiple jobs and solo parenting, as was evident in the literature review. Thus, they faced challenges in finding availability to schedule both the survey and the interview. Completing all phases of data collection took three months. One participant who conducted her one-on-one interview via Zoom, could not find someone to watch her toddler, thus her toddler was running around the home causing multiple interruptions and distractions while the mother attempted to focus on answering questions. The mother was apologetic, but we were not able to reschedule due to her busy life. Another participant chose not to have her interview videotaped, although she was willing to meet the researcher in person for the first phase of data collection.

All participants acknowledged that the stress that comes with single parenting makes it difficult to dedicate time to focus on their own needs of developing friendships. Therefore, the single moms said they were grateful for the small groups at their church for enabling them to find their community. Participants commented that as their community friendships developed and deepened, their wellbeing and faith also grew. Free childcare was credited for the moms being able to relax and focus on themselves during the weeknight service.

The next chapter concludes this study revealing the major findings of this phenomenological qualitative study. The data has been thoroughly analyzed for recurring themes. Returning to the researcher's thesis about the connection between Christian female friendship and spiritual growth and wellbeing, Chapter Five reveals what the small groups at this church has contributed to the participants. Analysis of the data revealed the researcher's conclusions which are discussed along with recommendations for further studies, and contributions this researcher feels this study offers.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **THE RESULTS**

#### **5.1 SINGLE MOTHERS NEED FRIENDS**

##### 5.1.1 Summary of the Study

The results of this project reveal that female friendship, established at church, is a vital and beneficial component of a single mother's wellbeing and spiritual growth. Scholars agree that all women, including single mothers, have an innate desire for connection and friendship with other women. However, it takes time for close friendships to develop and trust to be earned. Since building friendships takes deliberate time spent with others, and time is a luxury many single moms don't easily have to spare, the church has an opportunity to fill a void by providing an atmosphere for single moms to spend time with likeminded Christian adults, while free childcare is provided, so single moms can develop Christian female friendship.

##### 5.1.2 Purpose of the Qualitative Study

The purpose of this qualitative study has been to explore the lived experiences of Christian single mothers who attend the single parent ministry of a multi-campus megachurch in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex of Texas. The aim was to understand how Christian female friendships influence single moms' level of faith, personal growth, and life satisfaction. This study attended to the gap in literature on single mother friendships within the church. For this study, Christian female friendship is defined as

one-on-one time spent with likeminded Christian women who support each other through life's highs and lows to help them grow spiritually; these friends self-disclose and share confidential information to encourage, edify, and pray for each other. Through data collected, and both the biblical, and literature review, this study aims to offer a solution to churches on how to move forward and equip single mothers in developing a community of friends who are likeminded believers in Jesus Christ.

### 5.1.3 Research Questions

This project looks through the lens of the three levels of female friendship found in The Ruth Paradigm (loyal companions, mentoring encouragers, and community supporters),<sup>1</sup> to see how female friends affect a single mother's wellbeing and spiritual growth, as well as examines the role the church can play in facilitating the development of these friendships. To understand how Christian female friendships influence single mothers, this researcher interviewed single moms who attend the weeknight services of the single parent ministry, exploring three guiding research questions. First, how do single mothers experience Christian female friendship? Second, how do Christian female friendships influence a single mother's spiritual growth and personal wellbeing? Third, how does this church and its Single Parent Family Ministry facilitate the development of Christian female friendship?

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter Two of this project.



## 5.2 SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS

### 5.2.1 Review of Methodology

The methodology for this study was a qualitative phenomenological approach, exploring the phenomenon of the three levels of female friendship and making meaning from data collected. The goal was to see if Christian friends improve the spiritual life and wellbeing of Christian single moms. This was done by interviewing single mothers involved in small groups at the Single Parent Family Ministry of a large church in North Texas. This study began data collection with five single moms and concluded with four.

There were three criteria for participation in the project: first was a woman who is presently single. Second, a woman between the ages of 25 and 49 with at least one child at home under the age of eighteen. And third, a woman who attends small groups at the Single Parent Family Ministry. There were two instruments used for data collection — a survey questionnaire and an interview. Both instruments were aligned with the three guiding research questions of the project as well as the three types of friendship identified in The Ruth Paradigm.

### 5.2.2 Major Findings

The analysis of the research and data collected confirmed the author's hypothesis that Christian female friendship improves a single mothers wellbeing and spiritual growth by providing encouragement, guidance, and support. It was unanimous among the participants that Christian female friends pray for each and that the single moms felt God gave them their friends to get through hard times. A recurring theme was also that friends keep single mothers out of isolation by letting them know they are not alone.

There were three major findings resulting from this study. First, single mothers choose to pursue friendship. Second, all three levels of friendship from The Ruth Paradigm provide spiritual growth and improved wellbeing. Third, the church was directly involved in facilitating friendship among these single mothers.

#### *5.2.2.1 The Moms Chose to Pursue Friendship*

The participants expressed a deliberate choice to seek Christian friends. Each took the risk of stepping out of their comfort zone and going by themselves to visit the single parent family weeknight service in hopes of making friends. They each felt insecure at the beginning but continued to attend. Each were seeking like-minded female friends who shared their values and said they did not have that before connecting to this single parent ministry.

Once they made the decision to attend regularly, vulnerability through self-disclosure was risked, trust built, and a supportive community was developed where they were once alone. Casual acquaintances developed through repeatedly seeing the same women at the weekly weeknight service. It was in small groups that relationships were built.

#### *5.2.2.2 All Three Levels of Friendship offer Spiritual Growth and Wellbeing*

The single mothers experienced their community supporters through attending small groups at the SPFM night of the church. The participants said they grow spiritually through studying the Bible, praying together, and sharing what God is doing in their lives. When one is going through a crisis, they all jump in to help. Their community reciprocally helps each other with practical needs like childcare, moving, finding

furniture, setting play dates. They expressed that their small group has become their family. “My people” was a repeated description by the mothers.

The participants found mentoring encouragers within their community, and all claimed one of their mentors is a SPFM pastor. Their mentors let them talk through their problems causing them to feel heard and seen. The data reflected the participants do not feel judged or shamed when their mentor holds them accountable. Instead, like their loyal friends, she seeks the best for them. She reminds them of who they are in Christ, discusses appropriate scriptures for the circumstances, prays with them, encourages, advises, and offers them a positive outlook for the future.

Each participant said they found at least one close friend within their small group. The single moms said they experience their ongoing friendship with their loyal one-on-one loyal companions through attending church together, talking on the phone, and frequently texting—often multiple times a day. They socialize before and after the weeknight service, and occasionally meet for play dates with their children. The most frequent topic of conversation is their kids and parenting challenges. They talk about God’s involvement in their life and are each other’s source of emotional support. The participants all said they pray with and for each other. They speak positively, set goals, and love each other enough to tell the truth when they notice that their friend is slipping back into isolation, making wrong choices, or experiencing self-doubt.

### *5.2.2.3 The Church was Involved in Facilitating Friendship*

The participants credited their church with being directly involved helping single moms develop all three levels of friendship of The Ruth Paradigm. This was done by the church providing an atmosphere where friendship could take place. The atmosphere included a specific night at their North Fort Worth campus exclusively for single parent families to gather for a worship service, social time before and after, and a breakout segment for small groups. Free childcare was provided during the service.

Community friendships happened organically by the moms consistently attending the Tuesday evening service and the breakout small groups where they got to know the other mothers over time. The question-and-answer period of small groups are very intentional to draw the moms out, compel vulnerability, and allow the moms to slowly build trust.

The church was also directly involved in the participants finding mentors and close friends from relationships built through their small groups. Further, the church was involved in developing leaders from within the small groups. Two of the four participants are now small group leaders and mentors.

### 5.2.3 Unexpected Findings

The researcher did not set out to discover a paradigm of female friendship from Ruth, but once found, the model shaped the rest of the study. From there this investigator sought to find if single mothers experience any or all three of these types of female friendship—they do. A second unexpected finding was that this researcher was not expecting a unanimous result crediting the church with directly contributing to the

development of their friendships. The third unexpected finding was community friendships were developed *before* close friends or mentors were found. It will be fascinating as future studies are conducted on single mothers and Christian female friendship to see what other unexpected findings are found.

#### 5.2.4 Controlled Circumstances the May Have Influenced Study

The controlled circumstances of this study were that all participants attend the small groups at the SPFM weeknight service and that may have influenced the positive results of all having established a community of like-minded friends among the single moms who attend. The researcher did not foresee that the volunteers responding to an inquiry for participants would all be moms who had already invested time and energy building friendship within their small groups. The results of the interviews revealed the participants had each consciously chosen to seek out a Christian support system of likeminded women and they found that through the small groups at the SPFM at this church.

#### 5.2.5 Summary of Results

There were three major findings of this qualitative study. The first was that the single moms all initiated finding their community by choosing to get involved at church beyond merely attending a Sunday service. Each participant of this study made a conscious decision to seek out a support system to help them emotionally and spiritually, and they found it.

The second major finding was that each participant experienced spiritual and personal growth through the three levels of friendship evident in The Ruth Paradigm.

Community supporters were found first. Each established their community supporters in the small groups of the single parent ministry, then developed a few close friends organically within the small group as self-disclosure took place, and bonds began to form with likeminded women. They each found a mentor through the small groups as well.

The third major finding of this study was that this large church was directly involved in the single moms finding their community through presenting an atmosphere where it could happen—a service conducive to relationship building, and free childcare provided so the mothers would have time to interact with other adults. The results noted that this megachurch is being effective with encouraging the development of community and female friendship through their small groups, but there is room for improvement as the church is not perfect. One mom mentioned that she aged out of the first few Bible studies and felt disconnected for a season until the ministry expanded and began Bible studies that were not directed exclusively for pregnancy or the first two years of parenthood.

### **5.3 FINDINGS RELATED TO THE BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL REVIEW**

The results of this study confirm what was revealed in this researcher's biblical theological review on female friendship and that is when women live out The Ruth Paradigm, they experience wellbeing and spiritual growth. God uses female friendship to accomplish his purposes. The three levels of female friendship emerged out of the Old Testament book of Ruth that revealed how female friends walk one through a lifetime. From Ruth choosing to be the voluntary loyal companion of Naomi amid her grief, to Naomi reciprocating by becoming Ruth's mentor on her journey to find a husband,

followed by the women of Bethlehem being Naomi's community supporters during both her grief and her joy. The same model of friendship that helped Naomi has been shown to help the single moms of this study on their journey to wellbeing and spiritual growth.

### 5.3.1 Level One – Loyal Companions

Christian female friends are loyal companions who are trustworthy, kind, reliable, faithful, and affectionately see to one another's welfare, paying back loyalty with good. As seen throughout the book of Ruth, true friends offer the gift of presence amid devastation. Ruth stayed with Naomi even while Naomi was pushing Ruth and Orpah away (cf. Chapter 2, 2.2.6). *Hesed* was shown through the gift of presence. Like Naomi, the participants of this study shared moments when they were at such a dark place, they could not help themselves. In pain and hopelessness, humans tend to look at the bad and forget the good. Friends pull us out of that and remind us of who we are in Christ.

Participant Two shared of a time when she was depressed and could no longer smile. She was in an emotional place where she could not help herself. Her best friend took notice and reminded her of who she truly was, telling her that she believed lies of the enemy. Also taking notice was her mentor who believed in her so much that at that very moment the mentor asked her to write her testimony of how far God has brought her and share it with the entire group of single moms. Through the gift of presence of these two friends, God returned joy to this single mom.

### 5.3.2 Level Two – Mentoring Encouragers

There are three instances of female mentoring in Scripture. Naomi mentors Ruth, Elizabeth mentors Mary, and older women are encouraged to mentor younger women in

Titus 2. As Ruth's mentoring encourager, Naomi guided and advised Ruth on the path to achieving her goal of establishing a new life and finding a husband. Naomi also prayed repeatedly for Ruth (Ruth 1:8-9, 2:20). The results of this study revealed that the participants each have a mentor who, like Naomi, guides, advises, encourages, and prays for each of them to accomplish God's purposes in their lives.

### 5.3.3 Level Three – Community Supporters

There are three scriptural references of community supporters for women. Twice we see support of Naomi by her community of friends in Bethlehem (Ruth 2, Ruth 4). The third mention was support of Jephthah's daughter by her friends who surrounded her before her death (Judges 11). These are examples of *hesed* where the community renders help to one who cannot help oneself. There is also celebration among the community when joy returns, such as the Bethlehem women celebrating with Naomi at the birth of Ruth's baby. The results of this study confirmed that community support is a common occurrence among small groups. The participants shared stories of when the community rallied around them in times of need. Prayer and practical help were rendered as a common occurrence whenever one is hurting. The participants also have strategic ways that needs are shared—either through prayer requests at group, in the group texts, or private social media groups.

### 5.3.4 God Works Through Female Friends to Accomplish His Purposes

Friendship is one of the ways God works his plans out with humans, through other humans. God uses friendship for emotional support, spiritual growth, and for guidance in accomplishing his purposes through us. The book of Ruth is the biblical



example. The participants of this study are a modern-day example. Through the support of their community of friends found in small groups, the single moms of this study grew closer to God. They are actively working out God’s plans for their lives through the encouragement of their friends.

### 5.3.5 Summary of Biblical and Theological Findings

The lived experiences of this study’s participants included similar bonds of friendship expressed between Ruth to Naomi and Naomi to Ruth. God rewards faithful female friends with reciprocal *hesed*. Christian friendships pray for one another and offer helpful action towards each other that exceeds even what a friend expects. This friendship is reciprocated and offers continual affection, seeing to one another’s welfare, paying back loyalty, trust, and goodwill.

## 5.4 FINDINGS RELATED TO GENERAL LITERATURE REVIEW

While this is the first study on the experiences of single moms and their female friends met at church through small groups, the results are consistent with the literature review on benefits of friendships towards wellbeing and spiritual growth. Moturi Bochere (2021) says “Self-sufficiency is a myth. All humans need others, and ...single-parent families, orphans, and widows, need others even more [than traditional two parent families].”<sup>2</sup> Many studies acknowledge single mothers need female friends to improve wellbeing, yet lack time to develop such a supportive team.

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<sup>2</sup> Bochere, Gechiko, and Kyalo, “Examination of Biblical and Theological Foundations for Single Mothers on their Spiritual Growth in The Seventh-Day Adventist Church.”

#### 5.4.1 Results Agree with Historical Figures View of Friendship

Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Newton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and C.S. Lewis views on friendship are congruent with the model of female friendship reflected in the book of Ruth. All three types of female friendship were espoused to contribute to overall wellbeing and spiritual growth by these historical figures. Whichever of the three categories of friendship one is participating in at the time, Aristotle believes friendship affects wellbeing, "...for without friends no one would choose to live."<sup>3</sup> Augustine was convinced "human beings cannot enjoy the fullness of happiness in this life... if there is no one they care about or anyone cares for them."<sup>4</sup> Aquinas and Bonhoeffer emphasize that spiritual friendship is how one flourishes in life.

Newton's life of mentoring reveals the importance of selecting friends carefully. When chosen wisely, mentors can improve your wellbeing, inspire spiritual growth, and help you change the world for God. C.S. Lewis believed wellbeing is improved when you find one-on-one companions who "get you" when before you may have felt you were the only one like you. The typical expression of opening friendship would be something like, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one."<sup>5</sup> Like Augustine, Lewis also believed God plays a role in bringing your friends to you by placing you in your time and space in this world. All six of these historical figures agree that good friends improve wellbeing

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 124.

<sup>4</sup> Burt, *Friendship and Society*.

<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 83.

and spiritual growth. The results of this qualitative study share the same views of these six, that friendships deliver positive benefits on overall wellbeing and spiritual growth.

#### 5.4.2 Results Affirm Scholars View on Friendship Benefits

Recent literature overwhelmingly agree that well-chosen female friends improve wellbeing. Rosemary Blieszner, PhD.,<sup>6</sup> found that not only does friendship improve one's happiness and health throughout a lifetime, but also that women who were taught social friendship formation skills saw an improvement in their happiness level and experienced less loneliness. Evolutionary Psychologist Robin Dunbar believes friendship is the single most important factor influencing our health, wellbeing, and happiness. In his 2021 book, Dunbar says, "What has surprised medical researchers over the last decade or so is just how dramatic the effects of having friendships actually are—not just for our happiness, but also for our health, wellbeing, and even how long we live."<sup>7</sup> The single mothers interviewed for this study shared they feel they could not live without their friends who they give credit for bringing them out of isolation and into happiness within a community of belonging.

#### 5.4.3 Results Agree that Listening is a Crucial Trait of Friendship Affecting Wellbeing

Data confirmed single mothers want friends who are good listeners and encouragers. A good listener was more important to the participants than receiving advice. Be it one-on-one peer friendships, mentoring friends, or community supporters,

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<sup>6</sup> Blieszner, "The Worth of Friendship."

<sup>7</sup> Dunbar, *Friends*, 1-2.

listening to one another is an important trait of female friendships. Just as Bonhoeffer believed listening was the first service one owes to others in a community, Ruth Haley Barton and Kate Murphy agree. Barton says, “The purpose of journeying together in spiritual friendship ... is to listen to one another’s desire for God, to nurture that desire in each other, and to support one another in seeking a way of life that is consistent with that desire.”<sup>8</sup> Kate Murphy said, “To really listen is to be moved physically, chemically, emotionally, and intellectually by another person’s narrative.”<sup>9</sup> This concept is confirmed in this qualitative study.

#### 5.4.4 Results Affirm Recent Studies on Role of the Church in Friendship Development

The results of this study revealed the church was directly involved in facilitating a community of like-minded female friends for improved wellbeing in the single moms. The literature review also affirmed that single moms benefit from supportive social relationships with likeminded women who share their faith. In her study "Single Mothers and Religiosity,"<sup>10</sup> Natalie Sheets found a need for the church to create an atmosphere where single mothers can find time to form female friendships. W.A. Buck’s<sup>11</sup> and Marcus Bourbon’s<sup>12</sup> studies show spiritual and emotional benefits of female friendship at church, as well as the church’s role in encouraging and promoting it. But no study was

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<sup>8</sup> Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 169.

<sup>9</sup> Murphy, *You’re Not Listening*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Sheets, “Single Mothers and Religiosity.”

<sup>11</sup> Buck, “I Have Called You Friends.”

<sup>12</sup> Bourbon, “Friendship Development Among Single Adults in a Megachurch.”.

found specifically on how the church can help develop those recommended female Christian friendships for the single mothers.

Marcus Bourbon found that single adults experiencing friendships at church were able to grow spiritually and in other areas of life. This was because of the timely advice given to them by their friend met at church. These friendships were found to encourage and equip the Christian singles in all areas of their lives.

Amy Chilton's 2018 study<sup>13</sup> argues women and their church communities are transformed by participating with the relational God through female friendships. She affirms that when the church offers women an opportunity to build a community of church friends through opportunities such as a "baby shower, choir guild, prayer circle, meal train, preacher in heels, nursery worker, and potluck chefs..."<sup>14</sup> faith is strengthened.

Buck's 2010 study showed it was possible for the church to facilitate positive friendships for the church congregation through small groups. Whereas Buck explored the benefits of small groups on the topic of developing friendships for the entire congregation, this current study looked at the development of friendships that came out of small groups aimed specifically at single moms. Friendship grew out of the practice of attending a small group and allowing oneself to be vulnerable and, over time, self-disclose to organically develop friendships within the group through becoming known and being drawn to likeminded women. As C.S. Lewis put it ""What? You too? I thought

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<sup>13</sup> Chilton, "Where is the Love?" 35.

<sup>14</sup> Chilton, "Where is the Love?" 35.

I was the only one."<sup>15</sup> These three studies (Bourbon, Buck, and Clinton) agree with the results of this researcher's phenomenological study showing that single mom's wellbeing is improved when the church provides the opportunity for friendship to develop naturally and organically through small groups.

#### 5.4.5 Summary of General Literature Review

The results of this study were congruent with the literature review showing that like all women, single moms can and do benefit from developing in-person, healthy female friendships. In-person female friendships were shown to improve wellbeing of women and there is value in teaching social skills to help women develop those friendships (Blieszner,<sup>16</sup> Piotrowski,<sup>17</sup> and Sonnenberg<sup>18</sup>). The literature review made clear that there are abundant programs for single mother to gain temporary help with food and finances. There are ample programs for training job skills and self-sufficiency. But no research was found prior to this current qualitative study on how single mothers can develop their own community of quality female friendships.

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<sup>15</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 83.

<sup>16</sup> Blieszner, "The Worth of Friendship."

<sup>17</sup> Piotrowski, "Self-Object Experience in Long-Term Friendships of Midlife Women."

<sup>18</sup> Sonnenberg, *She Matters*.

## 5.5 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Among the participants, the results of this doctoral project reveal it was the single mothers' intention to find an atmosphere that made a community of friends possible for them. No matter how sage the advice, unless or until someone chooses to change, improvement will not occur. Participants of this study chose to take the steps to get involved at church beyond weekly Sunday service. Feelings of being alone and a habit of self-isolation plagued most participants before they consciously chose to go and find "their people" and community.

Busyness continues to overwhelm participants, even when a community of support is established. Interview segments exposed a lack of free time and finances to allow opportunities to consistently socialize with friends, other than at church where childcare is provided for free. Yet the results show that even though life continues to have challenges for the single mothers, Christian female friendship still improves spiritual growth and personal wellbeing through all phases of life. These friends help carry the single mother through each challenge, lift her up emotionally, and bring her closer to God as she pursues personal goals and continues to parent as a single mom.

The objective of this study is to create new knowledge to enable the church at large to better serve single mothers. These moms are making up an ever-increasing population within the church congregation. Therefore if the church continues to inadequately serve these moms, not only will the church miss an important opportunity to reach this growing population for Christ, the church will also miss out on reaching their children—the next generation—for Christ.

This study provides valuable information on Christian female friendship of Single Mothers that was unavailable before this study, and that is the model of three types of female friendship and how it can be instigated, developed, and facilitated by the church. There is plenty of research on friendship of women, and there are a few studies of pastors encouraging single moms. However, there was no research found on how the church can effectively support single moms in developing quality Christian friendships to equip and support them personally and spiritually. This study revealed when single mothers decide they are ready for help, they will show up. The church needs to be ready to reach out and provide the atmosphere, teaching, and childcare for these mothers.

## **5.6 RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.6.1 Recommendations for the Church**

No matter the size of the congregation, every church can reach single mothers by making them a priority. It does not require a separate weeknight service.

Recommendations for the Church at large are to have carved out time where childcare and children's programs are provided for free, simultaneous with small group Bible studies for single moms that include intentional discussion. It is recommended that these small groups are facilitated by trained leaders who graciously draw out the mothers, as trust is built over time. Churches are encouraged to also train mentors for single mothers and to provide curriculum geared toward the needs of single mothers to help them grow spiritually, personally, and in parenting skills.



### 5.6.2 Recommendations for Further Studies

Further study is recommended on the friendship of single mothers at other churches to see if any additional churches have been successful at reaching this growing population of single mothers. The limitation of this study is that it took place at a large megachurch with ample staff, resources, and a long history of focusing on the needs of single mothers. In this post Christian world, single mothers are an ever-increasing segment of the congregation and can no longer be ignored with church programs continuing to be primarily focused on dual parent households.

In addition, it would be beneficial to do a study on various small group curriculums. This can help establish a pattern of what is more effective in developing friendship among the single mothers at various stages of her life, such as pregnancy, early parenting, sustained parenting help, empty nesting, and developing leaders among the mothers.

## 5.7 CONTRIBUTION

Sparked by this study, this researcher is planning on writing a full-length book on The Ruth Paradigm, followed up by writing a six-week Bible study geared for single mothers on how to develop and grow the three levels of female friendship in one's own life. The researcher is also planning on developing a model for a single mother's ministry to include a similar atmosphere provided by this megachurch's weeknight SPFM but geared for churches of smaller sizes. It will also include a formatted curriculum with up to four sessions for church leaders to learn how to replicate the model and will provide

suggested topics of study, as well as offer insights on selecting and equipping mentors and small group facilitators.

## **5.8 CONCLUSION**

Single mothers can and do experience the three levels of female Christian friendship found in The Ruth Paradigm. When the church presents the atmosphere for friendship to occur, coupled with free childcare, single moms can focus on their own needs to grow spiritually and personally. Interpersonal relationships developed at church, as Augustine and Bonhoeffer acknowledged, present the common thread of true spiritual friendship. True friendship includes female friendships among single moms. The church must care about the single mother, especially since she is nearing forty percent of the church population in this post-Christian era. No matter the church size, this study offers a formula for the church to help single mothers get connected to likeminded women, and in turn, improve their wellbeing and grow spiritually.

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