

Divorce and Marital Breakdown among Christians in Rwanda: A Comparative Practical-Theological Analysis

Sixbert Sangwa¹, Placide Mutabazi², Jean Bosco Muvunyi³

¹Department of International Business and Trade, African Leadership University, Kigali, Rwanda

²Office of the Executive Chancellor, Open Christian University, California, United States

³School of Business Theology, Open Christian University, California, United States

*Correspondence: ssangwa@alueducation.com

Article Info

Article history:

Received: Apr 18, 2026

Accepted: Apr 19, 2026

Published: Apr 19 2026

Copyright: ©2026 by the authors. This article is published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

Citation:

Sangwa S., Mutabazi P. & Muvunyi J.B. (2026). Divorce and Marital Breakdown among Christians in Rwanda: A Comparative Practical-Theological Analysis. *Open Journal of Science, Philosophy & Theology*, 2(1). Open Christian Press.

DOI:

[10.65655/OpenChristianPress.2026.103](https://doi.org/10.65655/OpenChristianPress.2026.103)

Abstract

Background: Divorce and marital breakdown have become increasingly visible in Rwanda within a society that remains overwhelmingly Christian in formal religious affiliation, raising urgent practical-theological questions for churches, families, and public life. Yet the problem cannot be explained adequately by doctrinal decline or legal change alone. **Methods:** This article employs a qualitative secondary-data design combining critical literature review, comparative case study, legal analysis, and practical-theological interpretation. Rwanda is examined alongside Kenya and Uganda as regional African comparators and the United States and the Philippines as contrasting global cases. **Results:** The findings indicate that marital breakdown in Rwanda is best explained by multicausal interaction rather than a single dominant driver. Official demographic and judicial evidence points to changing marital patterns, increased public visibility of separation and divorce, and the continuing salience of marital disputes within the civil justice system. Comparative analysis further shows that neither legal permissiveness nor legal restriction alone explains marital instability. Instead, socio-cultural transition, economic strain, intimate partner violence, digital media exposure, changing expectations of intimacy, and weak pastoral formation interact to intensify marital fragility. The study also finds that many churches maintain doctrinal opposition to divorce while underinvesting in premarital catechesis, conflict intervention, safeguarding, trauma-aware care, and post-crisis pastoral accompaniment. **Conclusions:** A Sola Scriptura pastoral response must therefore move beyond prohibition-centered discourse toward a thicker model of covenantal discipleship that holds together marital fidelity, justice, protection of the vulnerable, disciplined reconciliation, and responsible post-divorce care. The article contributes a Rwanda-centered comparative practical-theological framework for interpreting Christian marital breakdown in a rapidly changing society and for strengthening church-based pastoral response.

Keywords: Rwanda; divorce; Christian families; practical theology; pastoral theology; marriage; covenant; comparative family studies; African Christianity.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and problem statement

Marriage retains deep moral and social significance in Rwanda. It is a personal union, a kinship institution, a civic status, and for most Rwandans also a theological reality shaped by Christian belief. According to the Fifth Rwanda Population and Housing Census, the country remains overwhelmingly Christian by formal affiliation, with Catholics, Pentecostals, Protestants, Seventh-day Adventists, and other Christian communities together accounting for roughly 93% of the population (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda [NISR], 2024a). That fact makes marital instability among self-identified Christians pastorally consequential. When a country with such a strong Christian profile experiences sustained concern about separation and divorce, the problem cannot be treated as peripheral or merely private. It touches discipleship, child welfare, public witness, and the credibility of ecclesial teaching.

At the same time, scholarly precision is necessary. Rwanda does not publish a simple annual “Christian divorce rate” that would allow one to measure directly how many baptized or professing Christians divorce each year. What is available are official demographic, legal, and judicial indicators that make marital breakdown increasingly visible. The 2022 census thematic report on marital status and nuptiality shows that the share of persons aged 12 years and above who are married has been declining over the long term and that age at first marriage has risen to 28.2 years for men and 25.3 years for women (NISR, 2025). In parallel, recent annual reports of the Rwandan judiciary show that marital separation/divorce-related matters were the leading category in the civil docket in both 2023/2024 and 2024/2025, with 2,833 cases reported in 2023/2024 and 2,674 in 2024/2025, although the category labels are not perfectly identical across the two annual reports (Judiciary of Rwanda, 2024, 2025). The slight decline between these two years should not obscure the larger point: marital breakdown is legally and pastorally salient.

The growing public visibility of divorce and marital breakdown in Rwanda should be interpreted within a broader social context (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025b). Rwanda has undergone rapid reconstruction, urban growth, educational expansion, changing gender expectations, digital connectivity, and ongoing legal modernization since the genocide against the Tutsi. These

transitions have brought genuine goods, including stronger legal protection against gender-based violence and greater recognition of women’s rights. Yet they have also altered courtship, family expectations, authority structures, and the practical conditions under which marriages are formed and sustained. Scholars of intimate life have long argued that late modernity tends to relocate marriage from a thickly institutional and kin-regulated framework toward a more individualized and emotionally negotiated relationship model (Cherlin, 2004; Giddens, 1992). In societies that remain publicly Christian but are increasingly shaped by market pressures, mobility, and mediated ideals of self-fulfillment, the tension between covenant and contract becomes particularly acute.

From a Christian standpoint, this tension is not only sociological but theological. Scripture presents marriage as a covenantal union ordered toward fidelity, mutual belonging, holiness, and the nurture of life. Yet the biblical tradition also confronts human hardness, sexual sin, abandonment, injustice, and exploitation. The challenge for the church is therefore twofold. It must reject the normalization of disposable marriage, while also refusing pastoral simplifications that leave abused spouses unprotected or failed marriages untreated until they collapse. In Rwanda, as elsewhere, it is insufficient to repeat that “God hates divorce” without asking why marriages fracture, how churches form couples poorly, and what pastoral structures are required if covenant fidelity is to be more than rhetoric.

This article argues that the current Rwandan problem is best explained by an interaction of socio-cultural transition, legal accessibility, economic strain, digital and media influence, gendered conflict, intimate partner violence, and serious pastoral deficits in premarital, marital, and crisis care. The paper does not rely on conspiratorial accounts of a coordinated anti-Christian campaign to normalize divorce. Such claims are difficult to substantiate to the standard required for peer-reviewed scholarship. Instead, the article examines verifiable factors while acknowledging that many Christians interpret rapid moral change through spiritual-warfare frameworks. The analytic burden of the paper remains empirical, legal, theological, and pastoral.

1.2 Study significance

The significance of the study is fourfold. First, it addresses an underdeveloped field at the intersection of African Christianity, practical theology, and comparative

family studies. Rwanda is often discussed in relation to post-genocide reconstruction, reconciliation, and development, but less often as a case through which to examine Christian marriage under pressure. Second, the study responds to an ecclesial problem of immediate pastoral urgency. If Christian-majority societies cannot translate doctrinal opposition to divorce into resilient marital formation and just crisis response, then the problem lies not only in external culture but also in internal ecclesial practice.

Third, the article contributes methodologically by resisting two opposite errors: moralistic reductionism and secular reductionism. The first assumes that divorce is largely the result of moral decline and can be answered by denunciation alone. The second assumes that biblical and pastoral categories add little to the social-scientific explanation of family change. A practical-theological approach is stronger because it allows empirical evidence and theological norms to illuminate one another without collapsing one into the other. Fourth, the study contributes to policy and ministry by distinguishing between legitimate legal protection, especially in cases of abuse, and the broader cultural drift toward an exit-oriented understanding of marriage.

1.3 Research questions

This article addresses the drivers, comparative patterns, and pastoral implications of the growing visibility of marital breakdown in Rwanda: **RQ1.** What are the principal socio-cultural, legal, economic, media-related, and pastoral factors associated with the rise of divorce in Rwanda, especially among self-identified Christians? **RQ2.** How does the Rwandan case compare with selected African and global contexts, and what explanatory patterns and pastoral lessons emerge from those comparisons? **RQ3.** How can a Sola Scriptura pastoral theology of marriage, covenant fidelity, discipleship, and church responsibility address the rising divorce problem in Rwanda in a way that is biblically faithful, contextually informed, and pastorally actionable?

1.4 Scope and delimitations

The study is centered on Rwanda and treats Kenya and Uganda as regional African comparators, with the United States and the Philippines serving as non-African cases. These cases were selected because they provide meaningful contrasts in religious demography, legal regime, and pastoral discourse. Kenya and Uganda are East African societies with substantial Christian

populations, significant pastoral concern around marital instability, and literature linking marital breakdown to changing social conditions and church response. The United States provides a mature liberal divorce regime with extensive sociological literature on marriage, religion, and dissolution. The Philippines provides the opposite legal pole: a Christian-majority society without general civil divorce, yet one in which separation, annulment, and informal union dissolution still occur.

The article does not claim to produce a universal law of divorce, nor does it attempt to quantify directly the divorce rate of born-again Christians, Catholics, or other denominational groups in Rwanda because the necessary confessional datasets are not publicly available. Instead, it offers a contextually grounded interpretation of the divorce problem in a heavily Christian society, using the best available secondary evidence and drawing pastoral implications from that evidence. The study is therefore strongest as an interpretive, comparative, and practical-theological contribution.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Global divorce trends and religion

Global scholarship shows that divorce is patterned rather than random. Amato (2010) demonstrates that the study of divorce has moved from simple correlation toward more nuanced accounts of how structural inequality, marital quality, life-course timing, cohabitation, and family background shape dissolution. Cherlin (2004) argues that marriage in many modern societies has been “deinstitutionalized,” meaning that older norms governing roles, permanence, and obligations have weakened relative to values of expressive individualism and personal fulfillment. This does not mean that marriage has lost importance. Rather, marriage remains symbolically powerful while becoming more negotiable, more individualized, and more contingent on subjective satisfaction.

Religion complicates this picture. A substantial literature suggests that religious involvement can reduce the risk of marital dissolution, though the effects are uneven and mediated by congruence, practice, and gender. Call and Heaton (1997) found that shared religious participation and affiliation are associated with marital stability, while Vaaler et al. (2009) showed that religious attendance, theological conservatism, and spousal religious matching can shape dissolution risk in different ways. Hwang et al.

(2019) added that denominational discordance remains consequential across generations, even when other forms of religious mismatch are less predictive. Mahoney (2010) and Vermeer (2014) caution, however, that religion does not always operate as a simple protective factor. It can deepen solidarity and sacrifice, but it can also intensify shame, gender asymmetry, or denial when relationships become destructive.

Accordingly, the relationship between Christianity and divorce cannot be inferred merely from public profession of faith. Christian affiliation may coexist with shallow formation, low biblical literacy, or divergence between official doctrine and lived moral practice. In many settings, churches teach that marriage is sacred while failing to provide sustained pastoral accompaniment after the wedding. The result is a gap between a high theology of marriage and a thin ecology of marital support. This disconnect between doctrinal profession and embodied ecclesial ethics also resonates with earlier work on Christian ethical formation in local churches in Rwanda (Mutabazi et al., 2021). This gap is particularly acute in societies where public religiosity remains strong but institutional mentoring, counseling, and accountability are weak.

2.2 Divorce in African Christian contexts

African family scholarship resists any simplistic claim that divorce is simply a Western import. African societies historically developed culturally specific mechanisms for regulating marriage, kinship, conflict, and separation, and the disruption of these mechanisms under colonial, urban, economic, and religious change has produced new family strains. Studies from East Africa and elsewhere show that marital instability is often linked to gender conflict, financial stress, migration, childlessness, violence, early marriage, and changing expectations of intimacy, not merely to legal permissiveness. The challenge is therefore not whether divorce exists in African contexts, but how it is interpreted, managed, and moralized under rapidly changing conditions.

Rwandan literature points in this direction. Mukashema and Sapsford (2013) identify mistaken expectations, inadequate preparation for marriage, failure to assume responsibilities, poor communication, and unilateral decision-making as recurrent drivers of marital conflict in Rwanda. Their study is especially important because it highlights how marital fragility emerges before overt legal dissolution. Family violence studies in Rwanda further

indicate that marital breakdown must be read alongside coercion and abuse, not only alongside romantic disappointment or secular ideology. Bahati et al. (2022) found that intimate partner violence against women increased in Rwanda between the 2015 and 2020 DHS waves, and Kabir et al. (2023) identify education, household status, partner behaviors, and prior exposure to violence as key predictors of IPV risk. In other words, any pastoral analysis of divorce that ignores violence will be ethically and empirically deficient.

Comparable themes appear in neighboring contexts. Kenyan scholarship shows both marital instability and pastoral strain within churches. Studies from Nakuru County and Nairobi indicate that churches often stigmatize divorcees, while marital distress within Christian communities is compounded by limited pastoral follow-up, gendered expectations, and psychosocial stress (Chebbet et al., 2024; Gabriel et al., 2024). In Uganda, law-and-justice research shows that divorce and separation are among the country's most common family justice problems, while longitudinal public health research demonstrates a strong relationship between intimate partner violence and marital disruption (HiiL, 2020; Wagman et al., 2016). These African cases reinforce a basic point: ecclesial rhetoric against divorce does not automatically generate stable marriages, especially where violence, poverty, and institutional weakness are present.

2.3 Marriage, modernity, media, and individualization

The literature on modernity, media, and individualization is useful for understanding why marital norms may soften even in strongly religious societies. Giddens (1992) describes the rise of the "pure relationship," a relationship sustained primarily by satisfaction and communication rather than by durable external norms. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) likewise argue that individualization reorganizes expectations of family life by pushing persons to construct biographies more reflexively. Marriage becomes less a fixed social destiny and more a project negotiated between autonomous selves. This does not eliminate commitment, but it changes the grounds on which commitment is justified and maintained.

Digital media amplify this shift. They circulate aspirational images of intimacy, normalize comparison, increase exposure to sexual alternatives, and intensify

emotional expectations. Research on pornography, infidelity, and digital relational culture is not uniform, but the cumulative literature suggests that mediated sexual scripts can destabilize trust, patience, and fidelity in already fragile unions. Pastoral practitioners have long observed that spouses increasingly compare ordinary marriages to digitally curated ideals, while covert digital relationships, habitual pornography use, and constant mediated distraction erode emotional availability. In Christian-majority contexts, these pressures often operate beneath the surface of formal orthodoxy. Couples may profess biblical marriage while inhabiting a media environment that scripts marriage as reversible whenever it ceases to gratify.

This media-related analysis should be handled soberly. There is little evidence for grand coordinated plans to impose divorce globally, and such claims generally exceed what peer-reviewed scholarship can sustain. Yet it is entirely defensible to say that global media systems, advertising logics, entertainment narratives, and digital platforms tend to privilege expressive individualism, self-optimization, and exit options. These are structural cultural pressures, not secret explanations. For pastoral theology, the practical implication is significant: churches must understand not only what they teach about marriage, but also the rival anthropologies disciplining their members every day.

2.4 Gaps in current scholarship

Three gaps stand out in the current scholarship. First, relatively little literature integrates Rwanda-specific demographic and legal evidence with explicitly Christian pastoral analysis. Studies often remain either empirical and secular or theological and decontextualized. Second, the comparative literature is frequently too general to illuminate what is distinctive about Rwanda as a post-conflict, rapidly modernizing, Christian-majority society. Third, church discussions of divorce often under-theorize the relationship between doctrine, violence, gender justice, and institutional care. A more adequate account must hold together covenant theology, social change, legal development, and the lived realities of vulnerable spouses and children.

This article addresses those gaps by bringing official Rwandan data, African regional comparison, global contrast cases, and a *Sola Scriptura* pastoral-theological framework into a single analysis. Its premise is that neither demographic description nor doctrinal assertion

alone can explain the present challenge. The problem is covenantal, social, legal, economic, moral, and pastoral at once.

3. Theoretical and Theological Framework

3.1 Practical theology and pastoral theology

Practical theology is concerned with the faithful interpretation of lived realities in the light of the gospel and with the normative shaping of Christian practice. The present study draws especially on Osmer's (2008) formulation of practical theology as a movement through descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic tasks. This framework is useful because it prevents the church from moving too quickly from biblical principle to moral injunction without first understanding what is actually happening in marriages, why it is happening, and what kinds of action are prudent in response.

Pastoral theology sharpens that practical task by foregrounding care, discernment, formation, and institutional responsibility. In the present context, pastoral theology asks not only whether divorce is biblically legitimate, but also how churches prepare people for marriage, how they respond to escalating conflict, how they protect the abused, how they discipline the persistently unfaithful, and how they care for children and adults after marital collapse. A practical-pastoral framework is therefore indispensable because the divorce problem is not merely a matter of doctrinal position; it is also a matter of ecclesial competence and moral courage.

3.2 Sociology of religion and family change

Sociology of religion and family change provides conceptual tools for analyzing how institutions, norms, and identities mediate marital stability. Cherlin's (2004) concept of deinstitutionalization captures the weakening of taken-for-granted scripts around permanence, gender roles, and marital obligation. Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) illuminate how late-modern individualization shifts expectations toward emotional authenticity, personal fulfillment, and biographical self-construction. These perspectives do not dictate a Christian conclusion, but they help explain why marriages may become more vulnerable even in settings where religious affiliation remains high.

At the same time, the sociology of religion reminds us that religion can be both a stabilizing and destabilizing force. Religious communities can generate norms of fidelity, sacrificial love, and social support. They can also produce stigma, silence, and asymmetrical expectations if they respond to marital distress in simplistic or punitive ways. The key analytical point is that religious identity works through institutions, practices, and relational ecologies. Public Christianity without robust discipleship may not protect marriage as much as surface statistics suggest.

3.3 Biblical theology of marriage and covenant

Biblically, marriage begins not as a revocable contract but as a covenantal union grounded in creation. Genesis 2:24 describes marriage as a one-flesh union, and Jesus explicitly reaffirms this creational logic in Matthew 19:4-6 and Mark 10:6-9. The prophetic witness condemns covenant treachery in marriage, and Malachi 2:14-16 links divorce to violence and faithlessness. Paul, meanwhile, places marriage within the larger Christ-church mystery in Ephesians 5:22-33, where love, holiness, and self-giving rather than domination define the union.

The difficult question concerns exceptional circumstances. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus rejects the permissive divorce culture of his day and roots marriage ethics in God's original intent. Yet the Matthean exception clauses in Matthew 5:31-32 and Matthew 19:9 have long generated debate. Some evangelical interpreters, represented in different ways by Instone-Brewer (2002), argue for limited exceptions involving sexual immorality and covenantal breach. Others, such as Heth (2002), have defended far stricter conclusions about remarriage after divorce, even while acknowledging the gravity of abuse and severe harm. Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 adds the question of abandonment by an unbelieving spouse, while Romans 7:2-3 assumes the normative permanence of marriage.

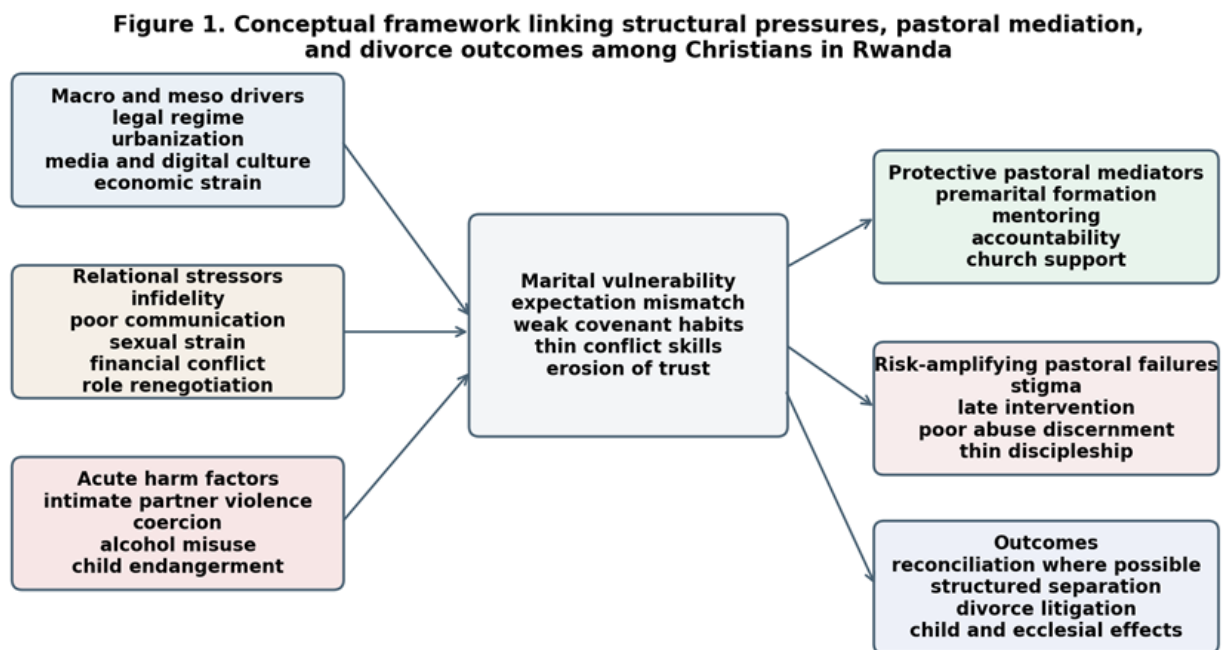
For the purposes of this article, three theological claims are central. First, Scripture presents lifelong marital fidelity as the norm and the church should not dilute that norm. Second, biblical fidelity cannot be reduced to preserving the outward shell of marriage while ignoring violence, coercion, or severe covenant-breaking conduct. The same canon that upholds marriage also condemns oppression, abuse, and hard-heartedness. Third, pastoral theology must distinguish carefully between preserving marriage where reconciliation is possible and protecting the vulnerable where serious harm is present. A *Sola Scriptura* position is not a naïve traditionalism. It is a disciplined submission to the whole counsel of God.

3.4 Analytical integration of theology and social evidence

The article therefore integrates theology and social evidence in a layered way. Biblical texts establish normative convictions about marriage, covenant, sin, and pastoral responsibility. Social-scientific evidence identifies patterns, risks, and plausible mechanisms of marital breakdown. Legal sources establish the formal conditions under which divorce is recognized and litigated. Comparative analysis then helps show which pressures are Rwanda-specific and which reflect broader transformations in intimate life. This layered approach avoids both proof-texting and secular reductionism.

Analytically, the article assumes that marital dissolution emerges when structural pressures and relational vulnerabilities meet weak formative or protective institutions. Economic strain, mobility, digital temptations, and legal availability do not destroy every marriage. They become potent where expectation management is poor, communication is weak, violence is present, kin and church support are thin, and Christian discipleship is too shallow to sustain covenantal endurance. Conversely, strong pastoral systems do not eliminate suffering, but they can interrupt escalation and provide truthful, just, and compassionate care.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking legal, socio-cultural, media, economic, and pastoral drivers to divorce outcomes among Christians



Source note. Author synthesis based on official legal materials, census and judiciary reports, and the scholarly literature cited in the manuscript.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

This study employs a qualitative secondary-data design combining critical literature review, comparative case study, practical-theological analysis, and contextual biblical-ethical interpretation. The goal is not to estimate a new national divorce rate, but to synthesize the best available evidence into a coherent explanation of the Rwandan case and a pastoral-theological response framework. More precisely, the study analyzes indicators of marital breakdown visibility and salience rather than direct confessional divorce prevalence, because Rwanda does not publish a nationally harmonized divorce rate for specific Christian traditions. Secondary-data design is appropriate because the core questions concern public trends, legal structures, scholarly explanations, and pastoral implications rather than undisclosed individual experiences.

4.2 Source selection strategy

Sources were selected according to four criteria: institutional credibility, analytical relevance, contextual proximity, and evidentiary diversity. Official Rwandan

sources include the 2022 census reports, the Rwanda Demographic and Health Survey 2019–20, the 2016 law governing persons and family, and recent annual reports of the judiciary (Ministry of Justice, 2016; National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda [NISR], 2021, 2024a, 2025; Judiciary of Rwanda, 2024, 2025). Comparative public data were drawn from official statistical or legal sources in Kenya, Uganda, the United States, and the Philippines. Peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books were used to interpret broader patterns relating to religion, marriage, violence, and modernity. Lower-quality opinion pieces, unsupported websites, and conspiratorial materials were excluded from the explanatory core of the article.

4.3 Comparative case selection logic

Kenya and Uganda were selected as African comparators because they are regionally proximate, have significant Christian populations, exhibit visible church engagement with marriage, and offer evidence on marital instability, pastoral response, or justice-system handling of separation and divorce. The United States was selected because it provides the most developed sociological literature on religion and divorce within a liberal legal regime. The Philippines was selected because it offers a

sharp contrast: a Christian-majority society in which general civil divorce is not available, yet marital breakdown persists through separation, annulment, and informal dissolution. The combination of these cases makes it possible to test whether law alone explains divorce trends. It does not.

4.4 Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeded in five stages. First, Rwanda-specific demographic, legal, and judicial evidence was assembled to establish the local context. Second, peer-reviewed literature on religion and marital dissolution was reviewed to identify recurrent explanatory mechanisms. Third, the selected comparison cases were examined for similarities and contrasts with Rwanda. Fourth, biblical texts and evangelical scholarship on divorce and remarriage were analyzed to clarify the normative theological framework. Fifth, these strands were integrated into a practical-theological synthesis yielding pastoral recommendations for Rwandan churches.

4.5 Limitations and ethical considerations

The study has clear limitations. Official data do not permit precise measurement of divorce among particular Christian traditions in Rwanda. Cross-national indicators are not perfectly comparable because legal categories, administrative systems, and survey instruments differ. Some church-related studies from African contexts are institutionally local or regionally narrow. These limitations argue for careful inference rather than for abandonment of the question. Ethically, the article avoids romanticizing marital endurance where abuse or coercion is present and resists blaming women, children, or economically vulnerable spouses for marital collapse. The protection of the vulnerable is treated as a non-negotiable pastoral responsibility.

5. Rwanda in Context

5.1 Religious and social profile of Rwanda

Rwanda's social profile makes the divorce question unusually significant for Christian pastoral theology. The 2022 census indicates that Catholic, Pentecostal, Protestant, Seventh-day Adventist, Jehovah's Witness, and other Christian communities together account for the overwhelming majority of the population (NISR, 2024a). Christianity is therefore not a small subculture but a major public frame of meaning. Yet Christian affiliation by itself

does not describe the depth of discipleship, doctrinal understanding, or family support available within churches. In many Christian-majority societies, broad religious identification coexists with moral fragmentation, uneven pastoral capacity, and powerful secular-cultural pressures.

The same census series also shows that family formation is changing. The 2022 thematic report on marital status and nuptiality records that only 49.1% of persons aged 12 years and above were married and that the share married has declined continuously over the long term, while age at first marriage has risen (NISR, 2025). Rising age at marriage can reflect educational expansion, economic calculation, delayed family formation, or changing ideals of adulthood. These are not inherently negative developments. Yet later marriage does not necessarily produce stronger marriages. In contexts of unstable employment, urban pressure, and digitally saturated courtship, delayed marriage can coexist with fragile expectations and limited preparation.

Rwanda's post-genocide trajectory also matters. Reconstruction has involved legal reform, public administration strengthening, women's representation, educational rebuilding, and increasing integration into global communication networks. These transformations have produced genuine gains, especially in formal rights protection and state capacity. They have also altered kinship mediation, gender bargaining, mobility, and the authority of older family structures. Traditional social controls over marital behavior have weakened in many settings, while modern therapeutic and consumerist scripts have become more visible. Churches therefore operate in an environment where older communal expectations have thinned, but new discipling institutions have not always matured sufficiently to replace them.

5.2 Legal and policy context of marriage and divorce

Rwanda's legal framework recognizes both the seriousness of marriage and the reality of divorce. Law No. 32/2016 Governing Persons and Family defines specific grounds for divorce, including adultery, desertion, conviction for an offense severely tainting honor, refusal to provide for household needs, serious abuse or insults, gender-based violence, prolonged de facto separation, and unjustified non-cohabitation from the celebration of marriage (Ministry of Justice, 2016, art. 218). The same law also permits divorce by mutual consent after at least

two years of marriage and requires judicial scrutiny of the spouses' intention and the best interests of children (arts. 229–234). These provisions are significant for two reasons.

First, the law does not treat divorce as a trivial private preference. It embeds the matter in formal judicial procedure, requires conciliation attempts, and addresses property, custody, and child welfare. Second, the law clearly acknowledges that marital breakdown may emerge from serious wrongdoing, deprivation, or violence. The explicit inclusion of gender-based violence prevents any responsible Christian analysis from treating every divorce petition as mere impatience or worldliness. In fact, the law's structure reminds the church that marital covenant cannot be discussed abstractly, apart from justice and protection.

The legal environment also shapes ecclesial practice indirectly. When the state provides recognizable grounds and procedures for divorce, spouses have a civil pathway to exit destructive marriages. Churches must then decide whether to respond merely with disciplinary rhetoric or with deeper pastoral discernment. Where churches lag behind the law in recognizing abuse, coercion, or material neglect as serious covenantal realities, vulnerable members may bypass ecclesial structures altogether. The issue is therefore not simply that secular law has made divorce possible. It is also that many churches have not developed credible, biblically serious pastoral systems capable of addressing the kinds of injury the law already names.

5.3 Divorce patterns, drivers, and pastoral concerns in Rwanda

The strongest official indicator of the current Rwandan problem is judicial visibility. The Judiciary of Rwanda's 2023/2024 annual report identifies divorce/separation matters as the leading category in the civil docket, with 2,833 cases; the 2024/2025 report again shows separation of spouses as the dominant civil category, with 2,674 cases (Judiciary of Rwanda, 2024, 2025). These are not direct national divorce rates, but they are highly significant markers of legal salience. They show that marital breakdown is not an occasional anomaly. It is one of the main recurring burdens carried by the civil justice system.

Why are these cases so recurrent? Rwanda-specific studies suggest that the answer lies partly in relational fragility long before litigation begins. Mukashema and

Sapsford (2013) report recurrent problems of unrealistic expectations, inadequate preparation for marriage, poor communication, non-performance of responsibilities, and unilateral decision-making. These are pastoral findings as much as psychological ones. They indicate that many marriages are entered without sufficient theological, emotional, or practical formation. In church settings this often means weddings are highly celebrated while covenantal skills are underdeveloped. When conflict later arises, couples may possess religious vocabulary but not the habits of confession, forgiveness, truth-telling, and structured problem-solving that covenant fidelity requires.

Economic pressures intensify these vulnerabilities. Relatedly, mobility and dual-career pressures may also intensify household role renegotiation and marital strain in both Christian and general populations (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025b). Rwanda has recorded meaningful development gains, but household strain remains a plausible stressor in many marriages. NISR's Labour Force Survey Annual Report 2024 estimated that the working-age population stood at about 8.3 million, of whom roughly 4.4 million were employed, about 780,000 were unemployed, and about 3.1 million were outside the labour force. At the same time, the EICV7 Poverty Profile Report placed the national poverty rate at 27.4% in 2023/24, even after substantial long-term reduction from the modelled 39.8% baseline for 2016/17. These structural pressures do not mechanically produce divorce, but they heighten vulnerability where marriages are already strained by weak communication, unrealistic expectations, or unequal household burdens.

Intimate partner violence is an even more urgent driver. Bahati et al. (2022) report that IPV against women rose from 40% in 2015 to 46% in 2020 in Rwanda, while Kabir et al. (2023) identify multiple predictors related to education, prior exposure to violence, partner behavior, and household conditions. Violence complicates any simplistic pastoral appeal to endurance. A church that counsels unconditional return to danger in the name of preserving marriage is not defending covenant. It is enabling injustice. The Rwandan legal framework itself recognizes this by listing gender-based violence as a ground for divorce (Ministry of Justice, 2016). Pastoral theology must do no less.

Media and digital life are better treated as plausible contributory pathways than as independently demonstrated drivers of divorce in Rwanda. Internet use has expanded substantially, with World Bank data

indicating that individuals using the internet in Rwanda reached 32% of the population in 2024 (World Bank, n.d.). In such an environment, digital exposure can widen access to relational alternatives, sexual content, grievance narratives, and consumerist models of intimacy, even though the causal pathway from connectivity to marital dissolution remains context-dependent. It also reshapes how conflict is interpreted. Instead of seeing difficulty as a normal site of sanctification and growth, spouses may increasingly read dissatisfaction as evidence that the relationship itself is mistaken. This is not the only cause of marital breakdown, but it amplifies dissatisfaction, secrecy, and comparison. The church must therefore address not only what couples do in moments of major crisis, but also the low-grade habits of attention and desire that erode marital fidelity over time.

Taken together, the Rwandan evidence points to a pastoral paradox. The country remains strongly Christian in public affiliation and often conservative in moral discourse, yet marital breakdown remains frequent enough to dominate civil caseloads. The most plausible interpretation is not that Christian teaching is inherently irrelevant, but that formal Christianity has not been translated consistently into thick marital discipleship, timely intervention, and justice-oriented care. The church's problem is thus partly doctrinal misunderstanding, but also institutional underperformance.

Child welfare should not be treated as a secondary consequence. Recent Rwanda-based evidence also indicates that children exposed to parental intimate partner violence face elevated risks of adverse mental health outcomes, reinforcing the claim that marital breakdown and violent household conflict must be assessed not only in relation to spouses but also in relation to offspring wellbeing. Marital breakdown often redistributes children across households, strains schooling, intensifies poverty risk, and shapes long-term attitudes toward trust and commitment. Rwanda-specific and regional research on intimate partner violence indicates that children exposed to domestic hostility carry psychosocial burdens even when they are not the direct targets of physical violence. For this reason, the pastoral question is not only whether a particular marriage survives, but what kind of moral and emotional environment children are being asked to inhabit. Churches that equate marital preservation with household health can miss this distinction. A formally intact home may still be

spiritually corrosive if it is ruled by fear, humiliation, or unrepentant betrayal.

6. Comparative Analysis

6.1 Rwanda and selected African cases

Kenya serves primarily as a regional pastoral-discourse comparator rather than as a fully harmonized statistical comparator, because it combines high levels of Christian identification, visible church influence, and public debate about marital instability, even though its administrative indicators are not directly comparable with Rwanda's census and judiciary data. The Kenya National Bureau of Statistics' 2024 vital statistics reporting documents ongoing shifts in marriage and family patterns within the country's civil registration system (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2025). Even where exact measures are not directly comparable to Rwanda's judicial or census indicators, the broader pattern is familiar: public religiosity has not insulated families from social change.

Kenyan church-related studies sharpen the pastoral comparison. Chebbet et al. (2024) show that divorce stigma within evangelical churches in Nakuru County harms the social, spiritual, and mental well-being of divorcees. Research among Catholic parishes in Nairobi likewise points to significant variation in marital stability and recommends stronger marriage formation and support structures for couples within church settings (Gabriel et al., 2024). Rwanda shares this pastoral weakness. In both settings the church can become highly vocal at the level of norms but thin at the level of accompaniment, thereby pushing struggling couples toward silence and isolated decision-making.

Uganda offers a related but distinct comparison. Peer-reviewed Ugandan evidence also shows that intimate partner violence is widespread among married women, with one BMC Public Health analysis of the 2016 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey reporting that 56% of married women had experienced some form of IPV, reinforcing the importance of reading divorce and marital disruption together with violence, controlling behaviours, and household stress. Wagman et al. (2016) further show in longitudinal Rakai data that intimate partner violence predicts marital disruption. Uganda therefore underscores the importance of reading divorce not merely as moral decline but as part of a wider ecology of violence, legal recourse, and household stress. For Rwanda, the lesson is clear: where churches fail to respond credibly to violence

and deep conflict, marital breakdown becomes a justice issue long before it becomes a doctrinal debate.

Across these East African cases, three shared features stand out. First, Christianity remains socially influential, but that influence is unevenly translated into marital resilience. Second, economic and gender-related strains intensify domestic conflict. Third, churches often underdevelop structures for mediation, trauma-informed care, and post-crisis accompaniment. Rwanda is not an outlier in these respects. What distinguishes it is the particularly sharp contrast between overwhelming Christian affiliation and the continued prominence of divorce/separation in civil justice practice.

6.2 Rwanda and selected global cases

The United States offers a global comparison from the opposite end of legal development. Divorce is widely available, the rate has been studied for decades, and the sociological literature is exceptionally rich. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the provisional 2023 marriage rate was 6.1 per 1,000 population, while the divorce rate for reporting jurisdictions was 2.4 per 1,000 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2025). The significance of the U.S. case lies less in the raw rate than in what scholars have learned from it: legal accessibility alone does not explain divorce, but neither can divorce be understood apart from inequality, family background, cohabitation trajectories, education, and changing marital expectations (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2004).

The U.S. religious literature is especially instructive for Rwanda because it shows that religion can protect marriage under some conditions while failing under others. Shared participation, denominational matching, and theologically serious commitment can reduce dissolution risk, but mismatched religiosity, gender asymmetry, and low marital quality can offset those benefits (Call & Heaton, 1997; Vaaler et al., 2009). Rwanda should not import American patterns uncritically, yet the comparison reveals a crucial point: churches should not assume that moral conservatism by itself secures marital permanence. Without relational skill, accountability, and community support, religious identity alone is insufficient.

The Philippines provides the most revealing contrast to the assumption that stricter law necessarily yields stronger marriages. The country remains a predominantly Christian society and still lacks general civil divorce for

most citizens under the Family Code, yet union dissolution persists through separation, annulment, and informal breakdown. Abalos (2017) documents rising union dissolution despite the absence of a general divorce law, and the 2020 Philippine census reported that the divorced/separated/annulled category increased from 1.5% in 2015 to 1.9% in 2020, while common-law unions rose sharply to 14.7% (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2022). The Philippine case thus demonstrates that law can slow or channel dissolution, but it cannot by itself generate the relational, moral, and institutional goods necessary for durable marriage.

For Rwanda, the comparison with the United States and the Philippines yields a balanced lesson. A liberal divorce regime may widen exit options and normalize dissolution, but a restrictive regime does not automatically produce covenantal marriages either. The decisive questions are anthropological and pastoral: What do spouses believe marriage is for? How are they prepared for conflict, sexuality, sacrifice, and suffering? What happens when betrayal or violence occurs? What institutions intervene before collapse? These questions are more determinative than law alone. The comparative aim here is analytical contrast rather than metric equivalence: the United States illustrates a mature liberal divorce regime with extensive sociological evidence, whereas the Philippines shows that formal legal restriction does not eliminate marital dissolution or informal union breakdown.

6.3 Cross-case synthesis

Cross-case synthesis suggests that marital breakdown rises in visibility when five conditions converge: weakened institutional scripts, intensified economic or emotional expectations, greater legal or practical exit options, unresolved gendered conflict or violence, and insufficient formative support from religious communities. The combination differs by context. In the United States, the legal regime and the individualization of intimacy are especially salient. In the Philippines, informal dissolution undercuts the assumption that legal restriction can secure a covenant. In Kenya and Uganda, church weakness, justice-system burdens, and psychosocial stress are more visible. Rwanda combines elements of all these patterns in a distinctly post-conflict, rapidly modernizing Christian-majority setting.

The synthesis also shows that the most pressing pastoral issues are not identical with the most visible doctrinal controversies. Churches often focus on whether divorced

persons may remarry, whether divorce is biblically permitted in a narrow set of cases, or whether civil law is too permissive. Those questions matter, but the comparative evidence suggests that more marriages are probably lost earlier, through poor premarital formation,

untreated violence, hidden sexual sin, economic resentment, and delayed intervention. A church that speaks only at the final stage of collapse has already ceded most of the field.

Table 1. Comparative overview of divorce trends and contextual indicators for Rwanda and selected comparison countries

Country	Religious profile	Illustrative indicator(s)	Legal-cultural frame	Pastoral relevance
Rwanda	Approximately 93% Christian by affiliation in the 2022 census.	Share married among persons aged 12+ fell over the long term; mean age at first marriage in 2022 was 28.2 for men and 25.3 for women; marital separation/divorce-related matters were the leading civil category in 2023/2024 (2,833) and again in 2024/2025 (2,674), although the category labels differ slightly across the two annual reports.	Civil divorce is available on specified grounds, including gender-based violence, and by mutual consent after at least two years of marriage.	Shows the pastoral tension between overwhelming Christian identification and continued marital breakdown within a strongly church-shaped society.
Kenya	Christian-majority society with strong public church presence.	Vital statistics reporting documents continuing shifts in registered family and marital patterns; church-based studies report divorce stigma and uneven marital stability.	Civil marriage and divorce are legally established within a plural legal environment.	Illustrates how strong Christian visibility can coexist with weak accompaniment, stigma, and limited relational support.
Uganda	Christian-majority society with high salience of religion in public life.	Justice-sector research identifies divorce and separation as common family-justice problems; longitudinal evidence links intimate partner violence to marital disruption.	Civil divorce remains part of the statutory framework and household disputes often enter family-law channels.	Highlights the need to read divorce together with violence, poverty, and child safety rather than as a purely doctrinal issue.
United States	Religiously plural society with a large Christian population and extensive family research literature.	Provisional 2023 marriage rate: 6.1 per 1,000 population; divorce rate: 2.4 per 1,000 in reporting jurisdictions.	Broad legal access to divorce and a highly individualized marital culture.	Demonstrates that religious identity alone does not secure marital permanence when relational, social, and institutional supports are weak.
Philippines	Predominantly Christian society with strong Catholic influence.	General civil divorce remains unavailable for most citizens, yet divorced/separated/annulled status rose from 1.5% in 2015 to 1.9% in 2020, while common-law unions rose markedly.	Restrictive divorce law combined with separation, annulment, and informal union dissolution.	Shows that restrictive law may channel marital breakdown but cannot substitute for discipleship, conflict competence, and pastoral infrastructure.

Note. Indicators are not strictly equivalent across countries. The table is intended for contextual comparison rather than direct statistical harmonization. Sources: Ministry of Justice (2016); National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (2024a, 2025); Judiciary of Rwanda (2024, 2025); Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2025); HiiL (2020); Wagman et al. (2016); CDC (2025); Philippine Statistics Authority (2022); Abalos (2017).

7. Discussion

7.1 Main explanatory patterns

The main explanatory pattern emerging from the evidence is multicausal interaction rather than monocausal decline. Divorce among self-identified Christians in Rwanda is not best explained by one master variable. It is produced where structural change, intimate vulnerability, and pastoral weakness coincide. Structural change includes urbanization, delayed marriage, shifting gender expectations, legal modernization, and digital exposure. Intimate vulnerability includes infidelity, communication failure, material stress, patriarchal domination, sexual dissatisfaction, emotional estrangement, and trauma. Pastoral weakness includes inadequate preparation, lack of early mediation, poorly trained counselors, theological shallowness, and church cultures that stigmatize disclosure more than they prevent destruction.

This account helps explain why divorce can rise in visibility even where churches continue to preach against it. Doctrinal prohibition without relational formation leaves couples morally informed but practically unprepared. Likewise, legal availability is only one part of the explanation. Rwanda's law provides legitimate pathways for dissolution, especially where abuse or serious neglect is present, but law becomes more consequential when marriages are already weak and ecclesial institutions are unable or unwilling to intervene well. The problem is therefore neither "the law" nor "the culture" alone. It is the convergence of law, culture, conflict, and church underperformance.

Gender expectations constitute another important causal pathway. Rapid social change can produce a double dislocation in which women assume greater educational and economic agency while men continue to inherit older assumptions about authority, provision, and control. Where this transition is not accompanied by biblical teaching on mutual honor, servant leadership, and shared household responsibility, conflict intensifies. Some men experience women's agency as a loss of status; some women experience men's unresolved expectations as domination or neglect. The result is not a simple "battle of the sexes," but a relational crisis of role renegotiation under modern pressure. Churches that preach submission without equally teaching sacrificial love, gentleness, economic responsibility, and repentant masculinity worsen rather than heal this crisis.

7.2 Tension between biblical covenant and contemporary rights discourse

One of the sharpest tensions in the Rwandan case is the friction between biblical covenant language and contemporary rights discourse. This broader African tension between rights-based reform and family institutional change has also been explored in recent comparative work on marital dissolution (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025). Rights discourse has delivered genuine goods, particularly by naming abuse, affirming legal personhood, and protecting vulnerable spouses. Christian analysis should not dismiss these gains. At the same time, the right language can become thin when it is detached from covenantal responsibilities, forgiveness, truthfulness, and sacrificial fidelity. In some contemporary public discourses, marriage may be framed primarily as a revocable arrangement between autonomous individuals rather than as a morally dense union ordered toward holiness, permanence, and the good of children.

A *Sola Scriptura* response should therefore be both critical and discerning. It should reject any cultural logic that treats inconvenience, boredom, or emotional disappointment as sufficient reason to abandon covenant. It should also refuse any church rhetoric that weaponizes permanence against the abused. Biblical covenant is not an excuse for captivity. It is a moral order in which vows matter, sin is named, reconciliation is pursued sincerely, and the vulnerable are defended. Where modern rights discourse protects genuine victims, Christians should welcome that limited concord. Where it normalizes disposable intimacy, Christians should resist it.

7.3 Pastoral failures, pastoral opportunities, and ecclesial responsibility

The evidence also exposes recurrent pastoral failures. Many churches celebrate weddings more effectively than they sustain marriages. Premarital counseling is often brief, generic, or focused on ceremony rather than covenantal competence. Marital distress is frequently hidden until it has hardened into contempt or violence. Some pastors lack training in conflict dynamics, trauma, coercive control, or legal obligations regarding abuse. Others default to moralizing or superficial reconciliation language, thereby discouraging honest disclosure. In some communities, divorced persons are stigmatized more intensely than adulterous, abusive, or neglectful spouses. Such patterns make the church appear less like a healing body and more like a reputational gatekeeper.

Yet the same evidence points to pastoral opportunities. Extended family involvement, when wise and non-abusive, can still function as a protective factor in Rwanda. Church communities can provide intergenerational mentoring, accountability, practical assistance, and spaces for early conflict intervention. They can teach a richer theology of suffering, patience, sexuality, repentance, and mutual service than contemporary media can offer. They can also model justice by taking abuse seriously, disciplining predatory behavior, and refusing to pressure victims into unsafe returns. The church's task is not merely to restate marriage doctrine but to build an ecosystem in which covenant fidelity becomes more plausible.

7.4 Implications for Christian teaching, discipleship, and family ministry

For Christian teaching and family ministry, the implication is plain: marital discipleship must become ordinary, continuous, and multi-stage. A one-off premarital seminar cannot bear the weight of

contemporary pressures. Churches need pipelines of formation running from youth discipleship to engagement, early marriage, crisis care, parenting, and post-crisis restoration (Mutabazi et al., 2021). They also need the courage to say two things at once. First, God's design for marriage is enduring covenantal fidelity. Second, churches that fail to protect the abused or confront the persistently unfaithful betray that same design in practice.

This integrated approach also suggests that churches should measure success differently. Success is not simply a lower reported divorce count. It is also earlier intervention, lower tolerance for abuse, better preparation for marriage, more truthful confession, stronger community support, and wiser care for children. In some cases, a church's faithfulness will be seen not in preventing every divorce, which is impossible in a fallen world, but in refusing both the normalization of divorce and the normalization of violence.

Table 2. Main drivers of divorce and associated pastoral implications

Driver	Rwanda-specific manifestation	Mechanism in marital breakdown	Pastoral implication
Weak premarital formation	High ceremonial valuation of marriage but uneven doctrinal and relational preparation.	Unrealistic expectations, poor conflict habits, and fragile covenant understanding.	Move from wedding-centered preparation to robust catechesis, mentoring, and skill formation.
Economic strain	Household insecurity, debt, underemployment, and aspirational consumption pressures.	Provision conflicts become moralized and intensify shame, resentment, and withdrawal.	Integrate household stewardship, work ethics, and realistic marital expectations into family ministry.
Digital and media influence	Growing connectivity widens exposure to comparison culture, sexual content, and exit narratives.	Normalizes dissatisfaction, secrecy, emotional alternatives, and contract-based expectations.	Teach digital holiness, attention discipline, and covenantal imagination as ordinary pastoral concerns.
Infidelity and sexual secrecy	Adultery and hidden online or offline sexual lives remain recurrent concerns in churches and courts.	Damages trust, destabilizes intimacy, and accelerates legal recourse.	Combine moral teaching with confession pathways, accountability structures, and trauma-aware care.
Gender-role renegotiation	Urbanization and changing labor patterns unsettle inherited expectations around authority and provision.	Conflict intensifies when couples lack shared frameworks for decision-making and mutual service.	Teach biblical headship and mutuality without domination, passivity, or role confusion.
IPV and coercion	Domestic abuse and gender-based violence are legally recognized and empirically significant.	Marriage becomes unsafe; preservation rhetoric can trap victims in danger.	Prioritize protection, reporting, safeguarding, and justice before reconciliation talk.

Divorce stigma and late intervention	Struggling couples often conceal crises until breakdown is advanced.	Shame delays help-seeking and reduces opportunities for de-escalation.	Build non-shaming access points for counsel, mediation, and post-crisis support.
--------------------------------------	--	--	--

Note. Author synthesis based on Mukashema and Sapsford (2013), Bahati et al. (2022), and the comparative literature reviewed in the manuscript.

8. Pastoral-Theological Response Framework

8.1 Preventive pastoral strategies

Preventive pastoral strategy must begin well before engagement. Churches in Rwanda should recover a catechetical vision of marriage in which young adults are taught that marriage is covenant, not personal branding; discipleship, not merely romance; and vocation, not merely emotional validation. Premarital preparation should be extended, structured, and competency-based. At minimum it should address biblical theology of marriage, conflict habits, sexual integrity, communication, economic stewardship, kin relationships, gender expectations, fertility and child-rearing, digital boundaries, and the meaning of repentance and forgiveness. Couples should not move from courtship to wedding on the basis of affection alone.

A second preventive measure is the formation of married mentors within the congregation. Newly married couples often need proximate examples more than abstract lectures. Intergenerational mentoring can help normalize ordinary struggles without normalizing sin. Such mentoring should be paired with periodic pastoral check-ins during the first years of marriage, when disillusionment, economic pressure, and role conflict often intensify. Churches that track weddings but do not track the well-being of newly married members are surrendering the most fragile years to private improvisation.

Prevention also requires congregations to address the moral imagination of marriage. Many Christians have inherited a narrow teaching set in which marriage is discussed only in terms of sexual purity before the wedding and divorce prohibition after the wedding. Missing in between are the virtues that actually sustain covenant over time: patience, self-mastery, truthful speech, financial integrity, hospitality, sexual faithfulness, shared prayer, and resilience under disappointment. Churches should therefore teach marriage not merely as a status to be entered but as a pattern of sanctified life to be

learned. This includes frank instruction on pornography, emotional affairs, digital secrecy, chronic resentment, and the temptation to seek private validation outside the covenant. Silence on these matters leaves couples catechized by the internet rather than by Scripture.

8.2 Crisis intervention and protection of vulnerable spouses and children

Crisis intervention requires a different pastoral grammar. When couples present with acute conflict, churches should assess not only communication problems but also patterns of fear, coercion, isolation, financial control, sexual violation, addiction, and child endangerment. Where abuse or serious threat is present, safety takes priority over preserving appearances. Temporary separation, referral to competent services, documentation, and cooperation with lawful authorities may be necessary. Rwanda's legal recognition of gender-based violence as a ground for divorce underscores that protection is not a secular concession but a moral necessity consistent with Christian justice.

Pastors therefore need training in discernment. Not every conflict is abuse, but not every appeal to patience is pastoral wisdom either. Churches should develop written safeguarding and referral protocols, identify trusted counselors and legal resources, and ensure that women, children, and vulnerable men are not sent back into danger under spiritual pressure. The best interests of children, which Rwandan law explicitly recognizes in divorce proceedings, should also be a central pastoral consideration. Children are not collateral to adult covenant; they are among the primary persons harmed by violent or chaotic households.

8.3 Reconciliation, discipline, and post-divorce care

Where repentance is genuine and safety can be maintained, reconciliation should be pursued carefully, not theatrically. Reconciliation in Christian theology is never mere resumption of cohabitation. It requires truth-telling, confession, demonstrable change, accountability, and time. Churches should resist the

temptation to announce reconciliation prematurely for the sake of testimony culture. Real restoration is slow, structured, and verifiable.

At the same time, post-divorce pastoral care is essential. Divorced persons often face grief, economic disruption, shame, loneliness, and uncertainty about their place in the church. If the church's first instinct is ostracism, it will compound suffering and drive wounded members away from the very body meant to care for them. A *Sola Scriptura* response should include serious moral evaluation of the causes of the divorce, but it should also provide spiritual support, practical aid, accountability, and clear teaching about holiness after divorce. Church discipline, where warranted, should target unrepentant sin and exploitation, not simply the social fact of being divorced.

8.4 Church, family, and public witness in Rwanda

Finally, churches in Rwanda must recover a public witness that is both doctrinally firm and pastorally credible. Public witness begins with embodied communities whose marriages are being actively nurtured, whose leaders are accountable, whose safeguarding practices are clear, and whose teaching is matched by patient care. It also involves speaking truthfully to the wider culture about the limits of both consumerist individualism and violent patriarchy. Christian witness is compromised when churches denounce secular

permissiveness while tolerating hidden abuse, serial infidelity, or economic abandonment in their own ranks.

A mature public witness will therefore include collaboration where appropriate with educators, family counselors, and lawful institutions on matters such as domestic violence prevention, child welfare, and premarital education, while retaining Christian theological distinctiveness about salvation, covenant, and holiness. The church need not adopt pluralist or rationalist frameworks to act wisely in public life. It must simply be honest about reality, faithful to Scripture, and committed to justice as well as permanence.

Theological education has a special role in this reform. Seminaries and Bible schools serving Rwanda and the wider region should treat marriage, sexuality, domestic violence, and family systems as core pastoral competencies rather than peripheral topics. Ministers often arrive in congregational leadership with sincere conviction but little formation in trauma, mediation, safeguarding, or referral ethics. A submission-ready practical theology of marriage must therefore reach beyond congregational exhortation to the training structures that shape clergy habits. If pastors are underprepared, congregations will remain underpastored at the point where family crisis most urgently requires wisdom.

Table 3. Pastoral response matrix for churches in Rwanda

Pastoral domain	Core actions	Responsible actors	Safeguard / ethical note
Youth and single-adult discipleship	Teach covenant, vocation, chastity, work, and realistic expectations before courtship begins.	Pastors, youth leaders, lay teachers.	Do not reduce marriage teaching to prohibition; cultivate moral imagination and maturity.
Premarital preparation	Require structured sessions on doctrine, communication, finances, sexuality, conflict, and family backgrounds.	Pastors, trained mentors, counselors.	Delay weddings when serious deception, coercion, or instability is evident.
Early-marriage mentoring	Pair newly married couples with mature mentors for the first 12-24 months.	Mentor couples, small-group leaders.	Support should remain confidential and non-intrusive while enabling early intervention.
Acute conflict triage	Create referral pathways for counseling, mediation, legal advice, and social support.	Pastoral staff, deacons, referral partners.	Differentiate ordinary conflict from patterns of coercion or danger.

Abuse response	Adopt written safeguarding protocols, risk assessment, and victim-centered referral practices.	Church leadership, safeguarding team, legal and medical partners.	Never treat violence as a private matter to be solved solely by exhorting forgiveness.
Reconciliation pathway	Encourage confession, repentance, restitution, and monitored rebuilding where genuine change is evident.	Pastors, mentors, counselors.	Reconciliation is not identical with immediate cohabitation and must never bypass safety.
Post-divorce care	Provide non-shaming spiritual care, economic support referral, and discipleship for adults and children.	Pastoral team, women's and men's ministries, children's workers.	Avoid both moral indifference and punitive exclusion; distinguish culpability from suffering.
Seminary and leader formation	Train ministers in family systems, trauma, child protection, legal literacy, and biblical ethics of marriage and abuse.	Seminaries, Bible schools, denominational or network leaders.	Poorly trained leaders can magnify both injustice and doctrinal confusion.

Note. Author synthesis from the biblical-theological argument and comparative pastoral literature reviewed in the manuscript..

9. Conclusion

9.1 Summary of findings

This study has argued that the divorce problem in Rwanda is real, pastorally urgent, and insufficiently explained by moral denunciation alone. Rwanda remains overwhelmingly Christian by affiliation, yet official demographic and judicial evidence indicates changing marital patterns and the continuing prominence of separation/divorce in the civil docket. The most persuasive explanation is multicausal. Marital breakdown becomes more likely where socio-cultural transition, economic stress, violence, digital influence, and weak pastoral formation converge.

9.2 Theoretical contribution

The article contributes theoretically by integrating practical theology, sociology of family change, biblical theology of covenant, and comparative case analysis. It shows that the divorce question must be treated simultaneously as a theological, empirical, legal, and pastoral matter. Law matters, but it does not explain everything. Religion matters, but affiliation alone does not secure fidelity. The decisive issue is whether Christian communities can cultivate thick covenantal practices under modern conditions.

9.3 Practical contribution

Practically, the article offers a response framework for churches in Rwanda built on preventive formation, early intervention, justice-oriented crisis response, careful reconciliation, and responsible post-divorce care. It insists

that biblical fidelity requires both resistance to disposable marriage and protection of the vulnerable. A church that chooses one without the other will misrepresent the gospel.

9.4 Recommendations for church leadership, theological education, and future research

For church leaders, the recommendations are direct: lengthen and deepen premarital formation; create mentoring structures for newly married couples; train pastors in conflict dynamics, abuse assessment, and safeguarding; develop protocols for referral and child protection; and replace divorce stigma with truthful, disciplined, compassionate care. For theological education, marriage and family ministry should no longer be treated as a marginal elective. For future research, the most pressing need is better Rwanda-specific data on Christian marital practice, including denominational differences, pastoral interventions, and the relationship between digital life, violence, and marital breakdown. Even with current data limitations, the available evidence is already sufficient to justify substantial pastoral reform in premarital formation, safeguarding, crisis intervention, and post-divorce care.

References

- Abalos, J. B. (2017). Divorce and separation in the Philippines: Trends and correlates. *Demographic Research*, 36, 1515-1548. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2017.36.50>
- Amato, P. R. (2010). Research on divorce: Continuing trends and new developments. *Journal of*

- Marriage and Family, 72(3), 650-666. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00723.x>
- Bahati, C., Izabayo, J., Munezero, P., Niyonsenga, J., & Mutesa, L. (2022). Trends and correlates of intimate partner violence victimization in Rwanda: Results from the 2015 and 2020 Rwanda Demographic Health Survey. *BMC Women's Health*, 22, Article 368. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-022-01951-3>
- Bahati, C., Nyiranteziryayo, A., Izabayo, J., Atete, P., Sezibera, V., & Mutesa, L. (2024). Mental health outcomes of offspring exposed to parental intimate partner violence in Rwanda. *BMC Pediatrics*, 24, Article 419. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12887-024-04884-y>
- Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). Individualization: Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences. SAGE Publications Ltd, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446218693>
- Call, V. R. A., & Heaton, T. B. (1997). Religious influence on marital stability. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36(3), 382-392. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1387856>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2025). FastStats: Marriage and divorce. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/marriage-divorce.htm>
- Chebbet, M. T. J., Kamunyu, R., & Kiarie, J. (2024). Divorce stigma in the church: Implications on the wellbeing of divorcees in evangelical churches in Nakuru County, Kenya. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 8(50), 298-308. <https://doi.org/10.35631/IJEPC.850022>
- Cherlin, A. J. (2004). The deinstitutionalization of American marriage. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66(4), 848-861. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-2445.2004.00058.x>
- Gabriel, K. A., Mutisya, S., & Egunjobi, J. P. (2024). The levels of marital stability among married couples in selected parishes in the Catholic Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya. *EAS Journal of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences*, 6(2), 34-42. <https://doi.org/10.36349/easjpbs.2024.v06i02.004>
- Giddens, A. (1992). The transformation of intimacy: Sexuality, love, and eroticism in modern societies. Stanford University Press. <https://psipp.itb-ad.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Anthony-Giddens-The-Transformation-of-Intimacy-Sexuality-Love-and-Eroticism-in-Modern-Societies-1992-Stanford-University-Press.pdf>
- Gubi, D., Nansubuga, E., & Wandera, S. O. (2020). Correlates of intimate partner violence among married women in Uganda: A cross-sectional survey. *BMC Public Health*, 20, Article 1008. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-09123-4>
- Heth, W. A. (2002). Jesus on divorce: How my mind has changed. *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 6(1), 4-33. <https://equip.sbts.edu/publications/journals/journal-of-theology/sbjt-61-spring-2002/jesus-on-divorce-how-my-mind-has-changed/>
- HiiL. (2020). Deep dive into divorce and separation in Uganda. <https://www.hiil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/HiiL-Uganda-Deep-Dive-Divorce-and-separation-Online.pdf>
- Hwang, W., Yoon, J., Silverstein, M., & Brown, M. T. (2019). Husband-wife religious discordance, marital satisfaction, and risk of marital dissolution in two generations. *Journal of Family Issues*, 40(9), 1201-1223. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X19835871>
- Instone-Brewer, D. (2002). Divorce and remarriage in the Bible: The social and literary context. Eerdmans.
- Judiciary of Rwanda. (2024). Annual report 2023-2024. https://www.judiciary.gov.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/Judiciary/Publication/Reports/Judicial_Annual_Report/2023-2024_Annual_Report.pdf
- Judiciary of Rwanda. (2025). Annual report 2024-2025. https://www.judiciary.gov.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/Judiciary/Publication/Reports/Judicial_Annual_Report/2024-2025_Annual_Report_VF.pdf
- Kabir, R., Hayhoe, R., Syed, H. Z., Bai, A. C. M., Sathian, B., Mahmud, I., Sah, R. K., & Vinnakota, D. (2023). Predictors of intimate partner violence among women of reproductive age group from Rwanda [Version 1]. *Routledge Open Research*, 2, Article 40. <https://doi.org/10.12688/routledgeopenres.18018.1>

- Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. (2025). Kenya vital statistics report 2024. <https://www.knbs.or.ke/reports/kenya-vital-statistics-report-2024/>
- Mahoney, A. (2010). Religion in families, 1999-2009: A relational spirituality framework. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(4), 805-827. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00732.x>
- Ministry of Justice. (2016). Law No. 32/2016 of 28/08/2016 governing persons and family. https://www.minijust.gov.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/Minijust/Publications/Laws/Law_governing_persons_and_family.pdf
- Mukashema, I., & Sapsford, R. (2013). Marital conflicts in Rwanda: Points of view of Rwandan psycho-socio-medical professionals. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 82, 149-168. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.06.239>
- Mutabazi, P., Niyitegeka, J. P., & Sangwa, S. (2021). Understanding Christian Ethics in Line With Paul's Example in Local Churches in Rwanda. *Open Journal of Business Theology*, 01(01), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7952885>
- National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda. (2021). Rwanda demographic and health survey 2019-20. <https://www.dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR370/FR370.pdf>
- National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda. (2024a). Main indicators: Fifth Rwanda population and housing census (PHC). <https://statistics.gov.rw/data-sources/censuses/Population-and-Housing-Census/fifth-population-and-housing-census-2022/main-indicators-5th-rwanda-population-and-housing-census-phc>
- National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda. (2025). RPHC5 thematic report: Marital status and nuptiality. <https://statistics.gov.rw/data-sources/censuses/Population-and-Housing-Census/fifth-population-and-housing-census-2022/rphc5-thematic-reports/rphc5-thematic-report-marital-status-and-nuptiality>
- National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda. (2025). *Labour Force Survey Annual Report 2024*. <https://www.statistics.gov.rw/labour-force-survey-2024/labour-force-survey-annual-report-2024>
- National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda. (2025). *EICV7 - Poverty Profile Report 2023/24*. <https://www.statistics.gov.rw/integrated-household-living-conditions-survey-7-eicv-7/eicv7-poverty-profile-report-202324>
- Osmer, R. R. (2008). *Practical theology: An introduction*. Eerdmans. <https://archive.org/details/practicaltheolog0000osme>
- Philippine Statistics Authority. (2022). Four out of ten persons were never married (2020 census of population and housing). <https://psa.gov.ph/content/four-out-ten-persons-were-never-married-2020-census-population-and-housing>
- Sangwa, S., & Mutabazi, P. (2025a). Rights-Based Reforms and the Corporate-Cooperative Family Paradox: A Seven-Country Analysis of Marital Dissolution in Africa (1995-2025). *Open Journal of Science, Philosophy & Theology* (ISSN: 3105-3041), 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.65655/02e9jn91>
- Sangwa, S., & Mutabazi, P. (2025b). Global Mobility and Dual-Career Marriages: Effects on Marital Stability in Christian and General Populations. *Open Journal of Science, Philosophy & Theology* (ISSN: 3105-3041), 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.65655/d0h9wj95>
- Vaaler, M. L., Ellison, C. G., & Powers, D. A. (2009). Religious influences on the risk of marital dissolution. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71(4), 917-934. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2009.00644.x>
- Vermeer, P. (2014). Religion and family life: An overview of current research and suggestions for future research. *Religions*, 5(2), 402-421. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel5020402>
- Wagman, J. A., Charvat, B., Thoma, M. E., Ndyababo, A., Nalugoda, F., Ssekasanvu, J., Kigozi, G., Serwadda, D., Kagaayi, J., Wawer, M. J., & Gray, R. H. (2016). Intimate partner violence as a predictor of marital disruption in rural Rakai, Uganda: A longitudinal study. *International Journal of Public Health*, 61, 961-970. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00038-016-0891-z>
- World Bank. (2026a). Rwanda overview. <https://www.worldbank.org/ext/en/country/rwanda>
- World Bank. (2026b). Individuals using the Internet (% of population) - Rwanda.

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USE.R.ZS?locations=RW>

World Bank. (n.d.). *Individuals using the Internet (% of population)* - Rwanda.

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USE.R.ZS?locations=RW>