

A fatherless South Africa: The importance of missional parenting and the role of the church

**Author:**Fazel E. Freeks¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Unit for Transformational Theology and Development of the South African Society, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Fazel Freeks,
10589686@nwu.ac.za

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This article employs descriptive and explorative methods concerning father absence and missional parenting. It identifies numerous ramifications caused by father absence and the failing role of men. Father absence has been a serious social issue in South Africa, which has become more tenacious in post-colonial South Africa because of economic reasons, untold fatherhood, refused fatherhood, fatherhood accountability, divorce and dissolution of households. This social issue influenced and affected both family and society dysfunction and created a vicious cycle of poverty in many South African homes. This article aimed to lessen the predicament of fatherlessness by considering the role of missional parenting where the father and mother form a partnership and collaborate for the family's progress and actualise God's pre-eminent plan for families in South Africa. The literature review and methodology provided rich insights and considerable knowledge to help support families who do not have a father figure and men in their fatherly role. Missional parenting is gospel-centred and can be a detriment to father absence. Parents follow the example of Jesus Christ as saviour in missional parenting.

Contribution: This article employed a descriptive and explorative modus operandi and explored a respective method to effectuate family disharmony in the context of South Africa. It endorses the journal's focus on church and family in the field of Missiology and Practical Theology. A fatherless South Africa because of the social ill of father absence is a concerning issue.

Keywords: church; missional parenting; father; father absence; family; South Africa.

Introduction

The concept of father absence was coined in the 1990s by Don Browning, a theologian from the University of Chicago (Meyer 2018:7; Osmer 2008:4). Richard Osmer's hermeneutical approach to practical contribution, along with several other influential practical theologians, was influenced and inspired by the work of Browning (1991) and the empirical contribution by Van der Ven (1993) (Osmer 2008:viii). Among the contributions of Osmer is the claim that Practical Theology should fulfil four tasks and answer four related questions to achieve practical theological interpretation (Osmer 2008:4). It is these four questions and tasks that guide this article.

The first is the descriptive-empirical task of assembling data to help differentiate patterns and dynamics. The related question is: *What is going on?* (Osmer 2008:38). The second is the interpretive task of depicting on theories of sciences to understand and explain dynamics better. The related question is: *Why is this going on?* (Osmer 2008:80). The third is the normative task of utilising theological notions to clarify contexts and learning from 'good practice'. The question related to this task is: *What should be going on?* (Osmer 2008:129, 131). The fourth is the pragmatic task of deciding action plans that will impact situations into a reflective conversation. The question is: *How might we respond?* (Osmer 2008:176). This article aims to answer all four questions regarding the dilemma of fatherlessness in South Africa.

What is going on?

The statement: 'South Africa is rapidly becoming a fatherless society with men behaving like monsters towards women and children' was made in 2016 at the Fatherhood Forum situated in Mthatha in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. The forum investigated the decline in fatherhood and fatherless societies (Feni 2016; Natal Witness 24 June 2004:16). The forum further recognised that the impact of fathers in households has significantly decreased since 1994 when democracy was introduced to South Africa. The convention urged fathers to modify the situation because they have the willpower and capacity to change their limits, renew their resemblance and start over with

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revived morals (Feni 2016). This article concurs with Feni that men should develop strong biblical values against father absence; hence, transformation in individual fathers is only feasible if men encounter an entire transformation of heart.

The prevalence of father absence within the context of South Africa

The rate of father absence in South Africa is exceptionally high (Khan 2018:18). Thirty per cent of children are relatively born into single-parent households according to statistics (Feni 2016:2). In communities of predominantly black people, this figure is even more alarming where it increased to 68% (Feni 2016; Hawkins 2015). A clearly devastating trend is that fatherlessness is affecting children of all races, which means it is a social ill that harms all families in the South African context. In 2015, 1.1 million births were registered, and 64% of mothers showed no history about the birth father (Hawkins 2015). In addition, 50% of the women who went into labour were single mothers who had no support from the birth father (Hawkins 2015). It is approximated that in South Africa 2.13 million children are without fathers and vast majority of them are younger than five years (Dube 2016; Mkhize 2013:2; Statistics South Africa [Stats SA] 2017). The registration of the birth Act of South Africa needs to be amended to oblige mothers to add the father's name when children are registered. In the statistics of 2021, 21.3% of all children do not live with their fathers and mothers (Stats SA 2021). By similarity, 32.7% lived with both father and mother (Stats SA 2021). Numerous children, however, stayed only with their mothers (42.0%), while a substantial lesser percentage (4.0%) of children in South Africa lived only with their fathers (Stats SA 2021). The large number of South African children who are deserted is a serious result and cause of father absence (Mabusela 2014:13). These statistics and figures underscore the immense task for churches to fulfil their calling to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed (Ps 10:18; 68:5).

Father absence beyond our borders

Father absence is not unique to South Africa (McGee 1993:19). It is a worldwide dilemma and a serious, destructive social ill that influences and affects families and society (Mutegi 2015:xiv–2). Several sources report that 40% of all children in the West lived in homes without their fathers (Carstens 2014:10–11; Horn & Blankenhorn 1999:25; United States Census Bureau 2020). Before the turn of the century, around 33% of children were born outside of marriage (Horn & Blankenhorn 1999:25). By 2011, 67.8% of African American children were born to single-parenting homes (quoted by Shutluck & Kreider as cited in Lamb 2015:91).

An article by Wade F. Horn and David Blankenhorn in 1999 addressed the question: *Why is fatherhood America's worst social problem?* (Horn & Blankenhorn 1999:24). The authors identified two critical trends. Firstly, few men are engaged in the lives of their children. Secondly, four out of ten American children do not live in the same home as their fathers. As a result of these excruciating statistics, the Fatherhood

Movement of Blankenhorn tried to reverse these tendencies by reaching out to men to become better fathers. Their notion was that every child deserves a father (Blankenhorn 1996:71).

The consequences of father absence: South Africa and beyond

Analysts have referred to the problem of fatherlessness in South Africa as a 'courage's monster' and that the 'decay of fatherhood' destroys households and is a main cause in South Africa of the societal ills (Cape Argus 23 June 2008:15; John 2012:24; Swartz et al. 2013). Frazier (2015) indicated that the escalating amounts of absent fathers in South Africa had become an earnest matter. Many of these children live in adverse conditions because of fatherlessness. In fact, father absence is considered one of the major reasons to put the lives of households at risk (Bertelsmann 2016). Fatherhood has changed over time with the result that many families in their respective South African communities now struggle with serious problems and challenges (Linn, Wilson & Fako 2015:12–13).

Research indicates that children who grow up without fathers are more prone to factors such as poor educational outcomes and anti-social behaviour that could disrupt employment and family life (Frazier 2015). Children without fathers are in danger of detrimental life facets for instance suicide, substance abuse, poor education, poor academic performance, mental illness, criminality and low self-perception. However, there is a vast difference and tension between the Euro-American worldviews of parenthood and African worldviews. For example, in the African context the situation is different. There is an African proverb that says: 'it takes a village to raise a child' and in a South African context this proverb is connected to the value or principle of 'Ubuntu', which means that we should care for the welfare of others as we care for ourselves and the success and well-being of the child depends on the community (Tyatya 2015). In Sepedi, there is also a saying: '*ngoana ke wa sechaba*', which means that a child belongs to the community or is groomed by the community. The community is the immediate family or society that such children are growing in. Another example is the saying of the Nguni: '*intandane enhle ngumakhotwa ngunina*', which means an orphan with a mother is better off than an orphan without a mother. This highlights the significance of having a mother over a father. It is also true that numerous children without fathers excel in life. Mothers and grandmothers play a significant role in the lives of children (Mabusela 2014:48–49). South African mothers who grew up among extended families are assertive, resilient, strong, empowered, self-reliant and victorious because other family members were supportive and graceful to them (Magqamfana & Bazana 2020:169). Motherhood is significant in any family, community and society because mothers guarantee their children's health growth and development and they are the best possible educators (Leskošek 2011). Nevertheless, father absence is destructive and contributes immensely to the issue of dysfunctional family life (Carstens 2014:129, Magqamfana & Bazana 2020:169). The South Africa Institute of Race Relations

published that 63% of youth suicidal incidents come from fatherless households and a third of South Africa's incarcerated men are 18–25 years old with their own children outside the iron bars (Frazier 2015). Other factors caused by father absence are fathering out of wedlock, divorce, domestic inability such as physically present, yet emotionally absent, social dislocation and absence through death (Mabusela 2014:13). In 2008, amidst the xenophobic attacks in South Africa, offenders were characterised as the 'fatherless sons of violence' (Star 25 June 2008:15). During these xenophobic attacks many people, especially men, were brutally beaten, raped, stabbed and murdered and numerous children were left behind without fathers (Hans 2008).

South Africa is a nation who suffered one of the worst rates of fatherlessness. Fatherlessness is ravaging children not only in the South African context but also in the entire world. Although the context of this research is South Africa, it is important to indicate the global situation regarding father absence as social ill and worldwide phenomenon and fatherless children. The New York Times magazine reported the analyses of fatherhood issues by behavioural scientists. They asserted that the being of a birth father in the home could determine a child's happiness and success more than basically any other factor (Shapiro & Schrof 1995:38). Dr David Blankenhorn is an academic, expert on fatherhood in the United States and founder of the Institute for American Values. The institute drives a fatherhood movement, a broad coalition of organisations and leaders who aimed to nullify the tendency of father absence in their society. Blankenhorn states in his book 'Fatherless America', that fatherlessness is America's biggest urgent and detrimental social problem and undermines children's life prospects (Blankenhorn 1997). This implies that fatherlessness is far more catastrophic than drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, incest and corruption and other social problems (Blankenhorn 1996). These trends are agonising because fathers are not absent because of disease, death or war but choose to live in a different home (Horn & Blankenhorn 1999:24–25). Children have never felt so deserted by their fathers, and children do not know what it means to have a father (quoted by Blankenhorn but cited in Lamb 2015:91).

Popenoe's (1996:62–63) research revealed that in America, 60% of all rapists, 72% of adolescent murderers and 70% of incarcerated men were from fatherless homes (Popenoe 1996:62–63). Popenoe also illustrated that between 1960 and 1990, the percentage of children living separately from their birth fathers escalated from 17% to 36%. Alongside this statistic was a rise in crime, abortion, poverty, teenage pregnancy, high school dropouts, teenage suicide, child molestation and child abuse (Popenoe 1996:13–14). The research of Carstens (2014:10–11) denoted almost similar statistics to that of Popenoe. He indicated that 63% of suicides, 70% of juveniles in state-operated institutions, 80% of rapists motivated by displaced anger, 85% of children with behavioural problems, 90% of homeless children and 71% of learners who do not complete school come from fatherless

households. As a result of the effects of fatherlessness, 46% of all households with child headed by single mothers live beneath the breadline, compared with children with both father and mother (Fins 2020:1).

Why is it going on?

The causes of father absence in South Africa

Africa, especially South Africa, is experiencing rapid changes with the striking and noticeable issue of father absence (Kesebonye & P'Olak 2020:1). Father absence in South Africa has been widespread and tenacious in post-colonial South Africa because of rural-urban labour migration, confidential fatherhood, refused responsibility of fatherhood, dissolution of households and divorce (Albert et al. 2021:2). Richter and Panday (cited in Richter, Chikovore & Makusha 2010:360) indicated that South Africa has the minimum marriage rate on the continent and the second-highest rate of father absence in Africa.

Urbanisation and colonisation extensively changed households' agreements in the twentieth era in South Africa. This includes changing the positions that parents play, specifically the key role of the father figure (Richter et al. 2010:361–362). Authors such as Popenoe (1996:19–22) strongly believe that fathers are vital role models for children. Even so, one should not lose sight of the fact that fathers who are present can also be harmful to the well-being of the family just as an absent father (Meyer 2018:2). Domestic abuse and violence highlight that fathers are toxic to their children and wives and promotes gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa (Khan 2018:7). Moreover, GBV is prevalent and men are to be blamed for it (Khan 2018:7). Yet, a distinguishing absence of constructive fathers as good mentors remains in the South African society. Several local newspapers in South Africa have highlighted the issue of absent parents, especially in the course of raising children (Fayo 2008).

Ramphele (cited in Richter et al. 2010:360) attested that children were humiliated in the past for being without fathers. Today, being regarded as a fatherless generation creates a feeling of defeat and uncertainty. Growing up as a child without a father is excruciating and difficult. Thus, it is imperative that fathers improve relationships with their children to connect with them emotionally (Botha 2013). In the South African context, apparently there are countless activities structured for households; even so, these activities are unimportant when weighed against the plan of God for families. The plan of God for families is to make marriage and family relationships possible to endure forever and to prosper and flourish in life (cf. Col 3:1; 3:18–21). God did not only create and formed male and female but he also designed them in order to use marriage and the family to accomplish his universal plan because the family serves a key role in the kingdom of God on earth (Kelly 1996). God's plan is further to reconcile the world to himself through Christ-following parents. Therefore, marriage and parenthood reveal the character of God (Dobson 2000:166–168).

A fatherless South Africa is indisputable. The role of missional parenting and the church is of immense value and importance to families in the South African context. The dilemma is more complicated seeing that there are no clear roadways or answers to tackle this destructive issue.

What should be going on?

Is fatherlessness a problem?

Evidence shows that absence and fatherlessness challenge families and society (Meyer 2018:4). In contrast, Sarkisian and Gerstel (2012:3–4) asserted that fatherlessness is not a problem and that the historic, binuclear households are not the underpinning institute of communities but are detrimental. They view male leaders, binuclear homes as destructive to critical connections of the expanded households. This argument is contrary to the purpose of this article.

Although some do not consider fatherlessness a problem, the impact of father absence is not a new study area for authors and researchers. Most South African researchers tend to focus on the negative aspects of fatherhood because fatherhood is typically defined by the predominance of various forms of father absence, whether physical absence, lack of contact with families or disengagement (Khan 2018:17). Instead, fatherhood should be studied from the perspective of a father's direct and indirect influence on the academic performance, well-being, health, self-confidence and to manage conduct in children (Frazier 2015). This article underscores true fatherhood and seeks to teach and equip men by exploring the biblically correct concept of fatherhood, which can be best understood in spiritual terms (Blankenhorn 2001:25). Understanding the concept of fatherhood could help men become good fathers to the advantage of children (Blankenhorn 1997).

A practical theology intervention in fatherhood is an attempt to respond to existential issues such as father absence, fatherlessness and the non-involvement of fathers. There is a two-part theological question regarding the dilemma of father absenteeism and missional parenting in the South African context. Firstly, what needs be done in the context of South Africa to support households overcome the problem of father absence? Secondly, what should missional families do to help make disciples (missions) of all in South Africa? Missional parenting should be an ideal approach to dysfunctional and broken families (Buys 1983). Notwithstanding, it is important to argue that not all families without a father are broken and dysfunctional, there are countless families in the South African context that flourish well in society without a father figure (Mabusela 2014:43–49).

The missional calling of the church in family ministry

Dr Blankenhorn's crucial question to the Fatherhood Movement concerning the church was: *What should the church's role in this emerging movement be?* The response was that the role of the church is vital to combat father absence

and the causes of fatherlessness (Blankenhorn 1996:71). The church is compelled to intervene, help and safeguard families (Lamb 2015:94). The church has a clear missional calling and can function effectively as a 'support system' within the home context. Its ministry in communities with broken families and fatherless children is still very needed today. Family is a task of the triune God himself and a section of the *missio Dei* (Knoetze 2015:4) that God as Being, not an object or force can transform households (cf. Erickson 2001). According to Senter (cited in Knoetze 2015:5), the family should participate in God's mission and not in ecclesiology or soteriology. When the church intervenes and plays a fundamental role in families, then fatherless families are no less effective than a nuclear family in serving, loving and worshipping God in significant ways. The advantages of nuclear families are not only sociological but also spiritual and missional and the church can contribute to spiritual growth and successful, valuable lives (Lamb 2015:94). However, the issue of nuclear families is debatable because the nuclear family (father, mother and children) as family structure in the past is transforming and changed. Families are currently defined by relations and no more by their constituency, and in the African context, extended families are more prevalent as mentioned earlier (Mabusela 2014:13). This contribution implies that the church should equip its members to minister to families and children in jeopardy and bring them the hope of changed lives.

The New Testament model of God the Father and Jesus Christ relationship

The New Testament model of the relationship between God and Jesus addresses the need for father-child relationships that can engender a great South African society. This relationship should enfold aspects like trust, obedience, love, forgiveness, admiration, obedience, honour and unity (Parker 2008:47–50). This model is seen in the missional parenting approach where both father and mother collaborate with each other for the well-being and success of their children, both boys and girls. The father-son relationship of God and Jesus should be at the heart of every family (Davis 2012:299–300). The example of the Father entrusting his Son, Jesus, should be applied to the earthy father and his children, both boys and girls (Parker 2008:111–112). God was completely devoted to his Son and the Son to his Father. This interconnected relationship should be the ideal between the earthy father and his children within the home (Parker 2008:56–57). Moreover, true earthy fatherhood is loving and strong. It must reflect what is revealed in God the Father's relationship with Jesus. Fathers should seek to let the paternity of God the Father radiate through their frail nature (Blankenhorn 2001:25).

Furthermore, the beginning of all dominion and lordship is Father God and the lordship and authority of Jesus Christ the Son of God and the Holy Spirit are deduced from God the Father (Smail 1980). Fathers must understand this foundation to engage as a loving father in the family unit, not the call to power but the understanding that will compel them to lead

their households under the lordship and dominion of God the Father.

Missional parenting

Missional parenting implies that the father and mother collaborate in the interest of the children to succour and understand God's ideal plan for the family (Brandewie 2020). The reality is that parenting can be challenging. Even so, parents are the ideal and vital custodians God has in view regarding their children. They should take this accountability earnestly by following instructions coming from the Lord by his grace, knowledge, wisdom and by raising and taking care of children as their key mission in life to glorify God (Avellandeda 2016; Wax 2016). Missional parenting also implies that parents must represent and teach their children to enfold the love of God for persons with no relatedness with him. It further means that parents are the front runners of their household and, hence, employ an effective role in forming the frame of mind and essence of this inter-related, collaborative and crucial social entity (Austin 2007; Brooks 2008; Freeks 2011). Neither all families are by default Christian families nor are parents by default missional parents. Hence, missional parenting should be recommended as an ideal approach to South African families.

How does missional parenting work?

Being missional means carrying out missions as parents in the context of the family and conducting a biblical lifestyle. God did not intend for missional parents to do missions on their own but as a household. They also need to comprehend that their assignment commenced with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and is not centered on them as a household. The Gospel is about living under the reign of God in all aspects of life and about the Kingdom that has come near (in Christ) (cf. Ps 47:7–8, Ps 147:11–13, Mt 4:17, Mk 1:15, Lk 17:20–21). Being part in mission implies bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ in everything, in church, whether at home, or in the broader society. When missional-driven, parents will realise that Jesus Christ was the primary and absolute missionary in history and, therefore, the example that must be followed (Bevins 2016). I postulate that households should be missional in many ways, for example, involving themselves in their children's schools, in knowing their neighbours; supporting those in need (either physically and spiritually), engaging in community activities and devoting in prayer, specifically to them who didn't accept the Gospel yet (Magruder 2014).

Wolter (2012) shared a fascinating story of missional parenthood. He indicated that parents are more worried with protecting their children from the world than equipping them to make an impact on the world. This concurs with what Wolter implied, that is, parents should equip children to give and share to the world. This education should be performed as mission and in accordance with God's purpose and will for their lives. Parents should keep away from overprotecting their children or fear what could happen when children collaborate with other people. Fearful parents

must learn that fear is detrimental because it prevents them from fulfilling their parenting role effectively. Doing missional parenting varies from other structures of parenting; it is gospel-centred. The analogy can be utilised that fathers and mothers are like brave fighters freeing children in combat, meaning, in a world of issues, choices, decisions, challenges and risks. An apt portrayal regarding this analogy is given in the book of Psalms 127:

Like arrows are in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate. (vv. 4-5)

Scripture denotes this representation as a metaphor for missional parenting. In the setting of this article, the author perceives nurturing of children and the household as the most crucial foundations in life. According to Prinsloo (2003), the psalmist highlighted that without the Lord's support, man's undertakings and foundations are futile (Prinsloo 2003). The analogy of the arrows signifies an instructing system for children, which implies the mission of parents. Parents must be helped to understand several crucial aspects of missional parenthood. Children are also formed during their formative years with good discipline regarding biblical precepts (Wolter 2012). Parents need to prepare themselves to educate their children in line with the Bible in facets like discipline and educational preparation. Parents should educate their children about the gospel by engaging them in relations regarding the gospel. Parents need to make the virtues of the gospel and message part of their conduct and demonstrate it daily to children. For parents, it is essential that gospel training is carried out in context of mission, namely transmitting the gospel to the world via voice, heart and hands (Wax 2016).

Both parents and children should be instructed to pursue Christ in a fractured world permeated by challenges and issues exacerbated by father absence. A broken society usually makes it challenging for parents and children to be Christians that are constructive and dynamic. Nevertheless, the fractured world that presents these challenges and problems to children and youth is the same cosmos into which Jesus set foot in (Smail 1980; Wolter 2012).

Above all, parents are obliged to equip their children for missions by training them to follow Jesus and bear their cross (Mk 8:34). Fathers should spur their children to embrace missions as a lifestyle by praying for, amongst others, unreached families, families in despair, broken families, children without fathers and mothers. When settled usually amidst household devotedness, fathers should institute a perception for missions in the hearts of children (Goheen 2011). Demonstrating a missionary spirit, leading children along the missionary process and discussions about missions should be flawless for missional parents because they honour the Triune God. These tasks also help the family to enhance the course of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in interacting with the world (Dragt 2016; Sowell 2011).

Missional parents are also responsible for teaching children to be disciples of Christ and introducing children to the stages of discipleship by participating in discipling relationship as they mature. But before this can be done, parents themselves should cultivate a missionary lifestyle (Sowell 2011). They have a task to educate and develop children in the gospel aiming to engage in Christ's revived Church. Parents should support their children to understand and believe the gospel on a personal level. Children should know who they are and what the Father desire for them to be. Children need to know that they are part of the mission of God. The words parents speak to their children will form their priorities and skills for the future (Bevins 2016; Hales 2010; Sowell 2011). Spoken words have strength and words with love create life but negative words cause damage. Parents should be cautious how they speak in the presence of children. They must develop a pattern where their words verbalise care, which brings curing and produce an ointment for society (Dragt 2016).

A paramount question in the framework of this article is: 'How does missional parenting function in the different phases of a child's life?' In the kindergarten stage, parents should permit their children to donate some of their belongings (like toys, money or clothing) to others. Children of this age must develop a heart for giving freely. In the junior phase, children are more mature. Fathers and mothers should ask their children about their friends' spiritual needs and inspire their children to pray for them, in other words reaching out to them with the love of Christ. Missional parents must communicate daily with children in their teen or youth phase concerning the purpose of God for their lives (Sowell 2011).

Missional parents provide opportunities for children to understand the society around them as they grow up and mature. Parents must also supervise and guide children when attached to the fractured world and experience the necessity for youth reconstruction. A missional family's task is spreading the message of the Gospel to friends in society. The message of the Christ-like family must be portrayed by their testimonies, hospitality and communication (Bevins 2016; Wolter 2012).

How might we respond?

This article's apropos of a fatherless South Africa and the importance of missional parenting led to these recommendations.

Becoming missional parents moulded by the Word of Father God

Scripture is noticeably clear how God put great worth on households. The Word gives ample knowledge and instructions about family aspects than any other societal structure. It also introduces different compositions of families (Knoetze 2019:6). Every missional family must comprehend their duties and vocation to engage in God's Great Commission, for example, overcoming the world for the

Lord (Brandewie 2020; Buys 1983; Dt 6:4–6, Mt 28:19–20). Yet, missional parents are the first leaders of their own family and are responsible for shaping the worth, frame of mind, resonance and character of this fundamental connected component (Brooks 2008). Missional households are accountable to God and their calling and covenant to lead their children are divine (Bergh 2002; Knoetze 2019:2; Morris 2007; Steytler 2007; Phlp 4:19). It is when missional families are in a relationship with God that the outcome of their hope transmits towards the children they nurture through the Spirit of God (Freeks 2011).

The essence of fellowship or house altar in the home context

Missional families should consider God's guidance in their life and follow a biblical perspective and spiritual virtues. The term *house altar* indicates household worship – home routine meetings of fellowship where families study and engage in biblical scriptures, share Christian belief, devotions, worship and sing Christian songs and share in communion (Bergh 2002; Freeks 2011; Goheen 2011). In the family the father functions as priest. His key function is the devotional assembly of his family and initiating the home sanctuary. The spiritual virtues of a home altar are as follows:

Prayer gatherings

The father must guide his family in prayer meetings and make known their prayer petitions to Father God (Freeks 2004). Alike gatherings are imperative components for spiritual development within the missional household as a component. The duty of the father is to assure his children exercise devotional strictness of prayer, which is a positive signal of their proximity to Father God. The remarkable quality of devotional living is attaching a person to God and strengthen his belief to love the Father (Mt 5:6, 26:41, Mk 11:24, Lk 11:1, 18:1).

Studies in the Bible

In context of the home altar, the father must highlight the Bible as constitution in the home and crucial for family members. The missional family must study the Bible thoroughly and love it with their whole heart (2 Tm 2:15). If families nurture a love for the Word of God and this conduct is cultivated, God become then essential in the family (Hart & Hart Frejd 2010:8–9). Delving in God's Word will help the missional household comprehend that they are imperfect, frail and can make mistakes (Freeks 2011, cf. Jn 18:11).

Singing songs and hymns

Missional households should understand that Christian hymns and songs are opportunities to worship and praise God for their safety and his providing. This attitude is paramount in terms of family devotions and can inspire other families, too (Freeks 2011). The father can educate his dependants concerning the essence of Christian music and encourage them to sing hymns and evangelical songs because

Christian music has the effect to elevate the spirit. Singing can stimulate and provide a stable structure for the house altar setting because collaborating in singing spiritual songs can motivate and inspire a missional household when they are challenged with life issues. The father should elucidate his missional household regarding God's omnipresence and that he lives among the praises of his people (cf. Ps 22.3). Creating music and singing is a cheerful sound for God because it relieves and refreshes the faith of a missional household. It also helps the missional family to honour the Lord's name (cf. Ps 66:1–2).

Remarkable salvation events

Within a missional household, devoted occasions remembering household members' repentance and honouring their 'baptism birthdays' should be exceptional. The task of the father is to make these momentous salvation occasions notable moments in the family. Concurrently, the father should inspire children to commit their lives to Christ and be baptised if they are ready to do so (cf. Mt 3:11, Mk 1:4, 8, Lk 3:16, Rm 6:4, 1 Pt 3:21). The father should institute special 'birthdays' to honour commemorations of baptism, repentance and other significant occurrences.

The holy communion

The holy communion (or Lord's supper or table of the Lord) was established the night when Christ and his followers honoured the Passover before the day of crucifixion (cf. Mt 26:19, Mk 14:16, Lk 22:13). The sacrament of communion was planned to remember the passing of Christ and the belief of his second coming. The children of a missional family must be allowed to partake in the holy communion because it is an essential custom emphasising Christianity. The father should regularly conduct communion, as prescribed in the Bible (cf. Lk 2:13–20, 1 Cor 11:23). The meaning of the ritual is the honour of the household's salvation from transgression to the passing and resurgence of Jesus.

Underlining the importance of children attending church

Fathers should clarify that it is crucial for children to go to church. Missional households should go to church as members because the church influences their worldview, life view and the sight of the Father (cf. De Beer 2012; Jansen 2015). Apart from home, the church is the best applicable spiritual organisation for children to be taught in terms of the reality of the Father and Christian virtues (Haydon 1997). The house of God is the main foundation in communities that serve and work with spiritual facets, for example, faith, spiritual character, and prayer (cf. Abdool 2005; Lickona & Davidson 2005). The church's teaching and fellowship should set the spiritual benchmark in society and should surpass the adverse 'strategies and issues' that children see and follow from the secular world. The secular world usually perceives children in a perverted manner and treats them badly as a 'off-track group', which is not the case – they are the church

of today (Bergh 2002; Freeks 2011). The church should be a leeway where children can play and love themselves in their engagement with God. It should be a secure refuge where children can feel comfortable of who they are and as God planned for them to be, with no pretensions or worries.

From theory to practice

How should it be done? The church has a huge and crucial role to play. The challenges and issues of father absence, non-involvement and unavailable fathers should be tackled by outreaches to men with holistic evangelism and integral mission. Such undertakings should present the gospel to irresponsible fathers in order to lead to discipleship, marriage, family counselling and peer group ministry for new converts to develop new lifestyles of responsible Christian stewardship. Fathers must be reached with the gospel and then be trained, equipped and empowered (discipled) to become responsible, involved and available fathers, leading their families to be part of God's mission. Men in the church can act as fathers to fatherless children and demonstrate to them the love and compassion of God our heavenly Father. This is applicable to both boys and girls; moreover, young fathers should be supported and mentored by older men in the church. Through church activities and group events, children should get the opportunity to build a relationship with their heavenly Father and see themselves through his eyes. In this way, they can be healed from the feelings of rejection and inferiority, which are the legacy of fatherlessness. In addition, the church can play a vital role regarding children's births. As such, the Registration of Births and Deaths Act of South Africa should be amended to compel mothers to add the names of the fathers when they register their children's births because they need to be held responsible for their children's upkeep. The existing legislation compelling fathers to take responsibility for their offspring needs to be enforced. Although there are good laws in place, they are often not put into practice. Many mothers do not follow through on their maintenance applications, allowing fathers to father several children with different mothers without taking responsibility for them. The attitude of society towards sexual morality should change drastically. To address the enormous challenge of teenage pregnancies that contributes to fatherless children, churches should have a ministry to teach Christian sexual morals to teenage girls. There is a perception that it should be allowed because the law allows children between the ages of 12 and 15 years to have consensual sex. It is about time that parents are encouraged and strengthened to take up their rights and authority and set boundaries in this regard. This will certainly help curb the tide of teenage pregnancies. A law cannot be allowed to undermine the authority of parents and the church (cf. Goheen 2011; Mabusela 2014; Nanny s.a.).

Conclusion

Losing the concept of fatherhood in society means losing the valuable contribution of men to their families. If this trend continues, then fatherhood will no longer be seen as the ideal

concept in society. This article implies that father's matter in their missional capacity in the South African context and that society should not attempt to live without them. God's objective for the family is missional. The family is an integral unit for bringing glory and honour to God; consequently, fatherlessness caused immense social destruction to families in South Africa. Father absence is detrimental, and if society continues to ignore this problem, it will only perpetuate, causing even greater hurt among children. It is paramount that missional parenting be strongly considered a practical solution for father absence. It is the missional family, after all, that is responsible for emanating the covenantal bond of marriage and spread God's glory by raising godly, missions-minded children. Fatherhood must be taught and modelled to fatherless children. The most profound change in a man's understanding of fatherhood and dealing with father absence will come from knowing God as Father. God calls fathers with a godly purpose to effectuate within the household. Part of this purpose is to oversee their homes in consonance with biblical truth.

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