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Fatherless sons, devoted mentors: Pastoral engagements with the township youth in South Africa

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Fatherlessness in South African townships presents urgent pastoral and theological challenges, particularly among adolescent boys. The absence of a father figure impact young people's emotional well-being, moral development, and spiritual identity. This article is situated within the broader context of youth vulnerability, where systemic neglect and community-level trauma deepened relational breakdowns. The concern for healing, belonging, and identity among these youth gave rise to the investigation. The article aims to explore how churches might respond pastorally to the crisis of fatherlessness among township youth through theological reflection and ministry practice. It seeks to examine how biblical images of divine fatherhood and the principle of spiritual adoption can inform church-based responses to the emotional and spiritual needs of young men in South Africa's urban townships. A qualitative theological approach was adopted, relying on the critical review of existing literature, public church material, and reflective analysis of two observed church-based ministries: HOPE to You Community Church and Ebenezer Evangelical Church. The study makes use of theological texts (e.g. Ps 68:5; Jn 14:18; Ja 1:27), pastoral care theory, and observations of practices related to mentorship, narrative care, and community engagement. No formal empirical data were collected. The study finds that relational and spiritual mentorship models grounded in the theology of adoption offered constructive responses to youth disconnection and identity loss. Churches that fostered intergenerational relationships, narrative pastoral practices, and stable mentoring structures were observed to create meaningful spaces of belonging and emotional recovery. Initiatives like the Fathers Matter campaign served as illustrative anchors within these faith communities. The research concludes that local churches, when grounded in contextual theology and committed to relational presence, could play a transformative role in addressing the wounds of fatherlessness. While structural barriers remained, the credibility of the church as a relational institution opened avenues for identity restoration and social resilience among youth.

Contribution: This article contributes to the field of contextual pastoral theology by offering theological and observational insights into church-based responses to fatherlessness in township contexts. It proposes biblically rooted and pastorally sensitive models of care that foster emotional healing, nurture a sense of belonging, and support the development of spiritual identity among vulnerable township youth.

Keywords: fatherlessness; pastoral care; township youth ministry; divine fatherhood; spiritual adoption; mentorship; healing.

Introduction

South African townships have long been shaped by a legacy of systemic social inequality, economic marginalisation, and historical trauma. Among the most critical issues confronting these communities, the phenomenon of fatherlessness stands out for its deep and far-reaching impact on the development of young boys (Malinga 2015; Mbobo 2022; Phasha 2021). According to Richter and Morrell (eds. 2006:10), the erosion of stable family structures, especially the absence of fathers, has contributed to cycles of emotional insecurity, violence, and identity crises among township youth. Many boys grow up without consistent paternal guidance, resulting in heightened vulnerability to behavioural problems, substance abuse, and the lure of gang affiliation as alternative forms of belonging (Mampane & Mokwena 2019:53).

Fatherlessness is not solely a socioeconomic issue; it has significant psychological, moral, and spiritual consequences. Boys experiencing paternal absence frequently contend with diminished

self-esteem, unresolved anger and a skewed perception of authority and relationship trust (Baloyi 2022:7). The lack of a supportive earthly father figure might hinder a young individual's ability to understand and accept the notion of God as a kind Father, a situation that necessitates thoughtful pastoral care (as cited in Magezi 2018:5). Beyond these personal struggles, fatherlessness also contributes to broader social challenges, including increased youth crime, intergenerational poverty, weakened family structures, and reduced community cohesion (Holborn & Eddy 2011; Makusha 2024; Ratele, Shefer & Clowes 2012).

In this context, the Christian church holds a distinct theological and pastoral obligation. The church, rooted in the revelation of God as the 'Father of the fatherless' (Ps 68:5), is tasked with both proclaiming this reality and manifesting it through concrete actions. Faith groups can provide surrogate fatherhood via mentoring, pastoral counselling, and the establishment of supportive environments that validate identity, restore dignity, and cultivate spiritual resilience (Anderson & Guernsey 1994:15; Swinton 2007:52).

This article aims to examine the issue of fatherlessness among boys in South African townships from a pastoral theological perspective. It examines the historical and socio-economic roots of father absence, the emotional, behavioural, and spiritual impacts on young males, and proposes robust pastoral care and counselling interventions. Particular attention is given to the development of mentorship models within faith communities that can provide fatherly presence, shape moral character, and facilitate holistic healing. The article seeks to develop a framework for genuine pastoral answers to one of the most pressing difficulties confronting township youth today, by integrating theology, practical ministry, and contextual reality.

Contextual and historical foundations of fatherlessness in townships

The absence of fathers among township youth in South Africa is a longstanding issue, stemming from historical injustices and persistent socio-economic difficulties. To tackle the issue of fatherless sons, it is essential to investigate the circumstances that led to the absence of fathers (Freeks 2022:2–3). This section analyses the impact of apartheid-era policies and ongoing poverty on the fragmentation of family structures, as well as the ways in which current societal challenges sustain elevated levels of father absence. By comprehending these historical and contemporary issues, one acquires insight into the prevalence of fatherless upbringing among young men in townships and the significant effects this has on their development.

The legacy of apartheid has profoundly influenced familial structures in South African townships. During the apartheid migrant labour system, many black African males were compelled to abandon their rural communities to seek employment in mines and urban areas, frequently residing in single-sex hostels apart from their families (Meyer 2018:2–4). This labour mobility policy resulted in men being physically away for extended durations, leaving their wives and children to cope independently. Over time, the institutional breakdown of families became ingrained; generations of children were raised with fathers who were either temporarily present or absent (Ratele et al. 2012). Apartheid's pass laws and forced removals exacerbated household instability by displacing communities and eroding the conventional two-parent family structure. By the end of apartheid, absentee fatherhood had become alarmingly common in townships as a direct outcome of these policies (eds. Richter & Morrell 2006:10).

Socio-economic hardship compounded the problem. Apartheid's racialised economy left a legacy of poverty and unemployment that continues to strain black families. Joblessness and low incomes have historically made it difficult for men to fulfil the role of provider, a central expectation of fatherhood. Research indicates that some men, unable to bear the burden of being primary providers, simply disengaged or deserted their families when they felt they had *failed* in this role (eds. Richter & Morrell 2006:10). In other cases, fathers remained physically present but became emotionally absent, numbing their sense of inadequacy through alcohol or substance abuse – behaviours that further eroded family bonds. Thus, the socio-economic roots of fatherlessness lie in a cycle of poverty-driven disintegration: apartheid created the economic precarity and fragmented living arrangements, and those conditions in turn fostered a culture where many fathers were absent or minimally involved in family life. Richter and Morrell (eds. 2006:10) note that the interplay of migratory labour and persistent poverty severely undermined the family structure, resulting in mothers, grandmothers, or other relatives assuming the responsibility of child-rearing in the absence of fathers. Freeks (2020a) states that:

> Father absenteeism is a phenomenon that not only occurs in local South African communities but also worldwide. Although father absenteeism is a dilemma not unique to South Africa, it is one of South Africa's major challenges. Moreover, father absence is a societal malice that challenges the nation to the heart of its communities. (p. 2)

In the post-apartheid era, the absence of fathers persists as a prevalent reality, and statistics highlight the severity of the issue. Recent data from Statistics South Africa's 2023 General Household Survey reveals that only 31.5% of children reside together with their biological parents, while 45.4% reside solely with their mothers, and a mere 4.2% reside solely with their fathers (Statistics South Africa 2024:29). Significantly, 19% of children reside without either biological parent, often under the

guardianship of extended family members, including grandparents or other relatives (Statistics South Africa 2024:7). These figures underscore the prevalence of father absence in South African households, particularly within township communities. This trend especially pronounces in township communities. Such updated statistics on absent fathers attest that South Africa has one of the highest rates of non-resident fathers in the world. The effects of this are profound: youths who grow up without a father often experience heightened emotional and social risks. Developmental effects include a greater likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours such as delinquency, substance abuse or early sexual activity, deep-seated feelings of trauma and loss, and struggles with identity formation during adolescence (Freeks 2022:2; Ratele 2017:84). In the absence of a positive father figure, most young men lack a reliable male role model to guide their transition into adulthood.

Current social realities in South Africa continue to perpetuate the cycle of absent fathers. Poverty and unemployment persist at elevate levels, especially in township areas, while economic instability frequently compels fathers to migrate for work, or renders them unable to support their families (Khunou 2006; Makusha 2024:2–6; Ratele et al. 2012). Substance abuse and crime are additional factors entwined with fatherlessness: communities plagued by alcohol and drug abuse often experience greater family breakdown, and fathers withdraw from their households due to addiction or incarceration (Holborn & Eddy 2011; Mahlangu 2025; Morrell 2006). In turn, children from broken families are more vulnerable to experimenting with drugs or falling into criminal activity themselves, having lacked the guidance and structure a present father might offer (Richter, Chikovore & Makusha 2010:363). The epidemic of gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa is also interlinked – domestic violence can drive fathers out of the home or discourage their involvement, while boys without caring fathers have been noted to internalise distorted notions of manhood that perpetuate aggressive or violent behaviour (Van den Berg & Makusha 2018).

In many township communities, a gang culture and violence occupy the void of absent fathers, offering young boys an illusion of *family* frequently grounded in aggressiveness. Regrettably, this indicates that the absence of fatherhood perpetuates a self-reinforcing cycle: boys raised without a father are more inclined to become men who are absent or disengaged fathers themselves, having never seen a positive parental role model to copy. The present situation is characterised by a reciprocal relationship between historical injustices and modern social issues; poverty, social dislocation, and violence lead to fatherlessness, which in turn intensifies numerous urgent socioeconomic challenges in South Africa. Addressing fatherlessness in townships will require not only individual efforts (like mentorship and pastoral interventions) but also broader changes to the socio-economic conditions that keep fathers and children apart (Ratele 2017:84).

The impact of fatherlessness on young boys

Fatherlessness among township boys is not a peripheral social concern; it is a central developmental crisis with profound emotional, behavioural, and spiritual consequences. The absence of a nurturing, protective, and guiding father figure distorts the normal psychological development, disrupts the socialisation processes, and damages the capacity for healthy spiritual identity formation Freeks 2021a:4). From my own experience as a pastoral caregiver working with youth in township communities, I have witnessed firsthand how the absence of a nurturing, guiding father figure destabilises a boy's identity formation, self-worth, and capacity for relational trust. These are not merely anecdotal observations; they echo broader scholarly findings which confirm that father absence can distort psychosocial development, contribute to poor behavioural outcomes, and weaken moral reasoning (Freeks 2021a:4).

Scholars in pastoral care and developmental psychology, argue that the effects of fatherlessness extend far beyond the immediate family unit, perpetuating cycles of trauma, violence, and dislocation within communities (Freeks 2020b:3; Lamb 2017:99–108; Louw 2000:67; eds. Richter & Morrell 2006:10). Based on pastoral experience in township environments, the crisis of fatherlessness must be comprehensively grasped, as it influences boys' perceptions of themselves, others and even God. This section examines the emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of fatherlessness, emphasising both academic perspectives and practical implications.

The emotional landscape of fatherless boys is frequently characterised by significant instability. Baloyi (2022:8) emphasises that children subjected to father abandonment often internalise sentiments of unworthiness, rejection, and rage. In the absence of a validating father figure to reflect their worth, young males experience precarious self-esteem and a profound sense of inadequacy. Freeks (2020a:4) and Louw (2000:70) both emphasise that unresolved paternal wounds can lead to chronic insecurity, manifesting in emotional withdrawal, depression, and relational distrust.

In the pastoral counselling context, experiences show that boys without fathers often carry a *silent grief*, mourning the loss of what was never fully present. As Nouwen (1972:94) asserts, the ministry of healing requires an empathetic recognition of the *woundedness* that underlies outward behaviours. Recent South African theological studies affirm this further: Freeks (2022) shows that fatherless boys frequently manifest behavioural issues as emotional outcries rooted in unmet paternal attachment needs, while Mbobo (2022) documents how boys in township settings internalise shame, often resulting in silence or aggression. Mphego (2020) underscores the church's responsibility in healing these emotional wounds through faith-based pastoral care models, tailored to single-parent contexts. Township ministry

confirms that many boys internalise their pain rather than articulate it, resulting in behavioural issues that are, at root, emotional cries for connection and belonging.

Furthermore, the pain of abandonment can cause enduring resentment, which may be directed outward against authority figures, or internally towards oneself. Lartey (2003:88) posits that trauma, in the absence of help, frequently solidifies into bitterness and despair, particularly when societal frameworks do not provide alternative models for male affirmation. The emotional landscape of fatherless boys necessitates more than just pity; it requires purposeful, trauma-informed pastoral interventions that promote reattachment, healing, and resilience.

The absence of a father is significantly associated with increased behavioural and social risks (Ndereba 2022:91). Eppel and Straker (2003:15) note that many township boys pursue identification and a sense of belonging through gangs and criminal peer groups, striving to compensate for the absence of their fathers. In organisations, masculinity is frequently characterised by violence, dominance, and rebellion, which reflect distorted representations of a healthy male identity. The pursuit of surrogate families via gangs represents a desperate endeavour to fulfil the intrinsic human urge for belonging (Ratele 2017:87), especially in contexts where paternal absence compounds by weakened or inaccessible extended family structures. While many elderly caregivers in extended families, such as grandmothers, do play a stabilising and nurturing role, their capacity is often overwhelmed by socio-economic pressures, leaving boys vulnerable to the pull of gang affiliation as an alternative form of belonging. However, the *belonging* provided by gangs is contingent, frequently based on violence, adherence to detrimental rules, and involvement in cycles of oppression. In pastoral practice, men sometimes disclose that their initial sense of empowerment from joining gangs exacerbated their feelings of loneliness and despair as the illusion of brotherhood disintegrated due to betrayal or violence. Consequently, fatherlessness functions as a significant societal impediment, depriving young males of constructive identity anchors and substituting them with detrimental associations.

The most profound impact may be the spiritual injury caused by the absence of fathers. Magezi (2018:5) contends that the absence of a nurturing earthly father can hinder young individuals from perceiving God as dependable or personally engaged. For boys in townships, whose everyday experiences are characterised by neglect, destitution, and fractured relationships, the concept of God as Father may seem vacuous or even harsh. In practical ministry, this distortion manifests in a variety of ways: young men may reject spiritual authority outright, or they may harbour a deep ambivalence toward the idea of divine love, fearing that it too will prove unreliable. Louw (2000:93) notes that the absence of paternal models of care impedes the development of trust not only towards people but also towards God.

Moreover, the moral and existential development suffers. Without fathers to impart values, set boundaries, and model ethical behaviour, boys face immense difficulty in forming a stable sense of right and wrong. Swinton (2007:67) highlights that spiritual formation is relationally mediated; thus, fatherlessness leaves a relational vacuum that theological teachings alone cannot easily fill. Based on local pastoral experience, it is evident that recovering a spiritual identity in fatherless boys takes more than mere theological training. It necessitates an incarnational ministry, tangible expressions of unconditional love, consistency, and presence. Faith communities must exemplify the dependable Fatherhood of God through tangible, relational means, providing boys with a transformative experience of being loved, acknowledged, and safeguarded.

Theological reflection: God as the Father to the fatherless

Comprehending the theological notion of God as Father provides essential resources for pastoral interventions, addressing the tragedy of fatherlessness among boys in townships. The Christian theology posits divine fatherhood as a fundamental image for God's connection with humans, while simultaneously portraying God as the defender, guardian, and nurturer of those forsaken by society. The biblical story frequently depicts God as responsive to the needs of the orphaned, illustrating heavenly care as a remedy for human neglect. This religious assertion holds substantial importance for boys grappling with the emotional and spiritual emptiness resulting from absent fathers. It provides a vision of optimism and a structure for restorative pastoral care.

To render this theological reality accessible for township kids, it must be approached contextually, relationally, and incarnationally. A theoretical notion of divine fatherhood, albeit potent, remains abstract unless manifested within faith communities and used in pastoral practice. This section examines the biblical testimony on God's paternity, and the transformative theological notion of spiritual adoption and a new identity in Christ.

Biblical images of divine fatherhood

The biblical tradition is abundant with depictions of God's paternal care, especially for the helpless and marginalised. Psalm 68:5 (New International Version [NIV] 2011) asserts: 'God in his sacred abode is a father to the fatherless and a protector of widows.' In this context, divine paternity is directly linked to advocacy and protection, portraying God not only as a symbolic Father but as one who actively intervenes for individuals lacking human familial support. Scholars affirm this reading: Brueggemann (2014) interprets such Psalms as portraying divine holiness not as distant sovereignty but as 'relational justice' enacted on behalf of the vulnerable. Similarly, Freeks (2021b) highlights that God's fatherhood functions pastorally in contexts of social fragility, especially in communities impacted by paternal absence. Divine holiness is not removed from human suffering but is

expressed through God's redemptive identification with the marginalised (Wright 2006). Psalm 68 (NIV) depicts holiness as strongly associated with deeds of salvation, care, and justice. The Scripture indicates that God's abode, his intrinsic holiness, is defined by relational solidarity with the marginalised. This refutes any notion of divine transcendence as remote or apathetic.

For fatherless boys in township environments, this image is transformative: it affirms that God does not overlook their abandonment but it compels him to engage in active compassion. God is not merely a cosmic observer but an active participant in human suffering, intervening when paternal figures have faltered. Nzimande (2020:58) contends that in marginalised circumstances, such depictions of God's solidarity offer essential theological resources for nurturing hope and upholding human dignity. Engaging Psalm 68:5 (NIV) pastorally enables faith communities to articulate a view of divine fatherhood that is not abstract but profoundly attuned to the tangible experiences of abandonment.

In John 14:18 (NIV), Jesus provides a profound assurance to his disciples: 'I will not abandon you as orphans; I will return to you.' This assurance, articulated during a forthcoming departure, underscores the persistence of divine presence in the absence of human guidance. God's relationship connection is emphasised as a persistent, unwavering reality. This speech is deeply pastoral, addressing both the disciples' acute emotional distress and the existential fear of abandonment that affects every human experience. In township settings, where abandonment is palpable rather than figurative, Jesus's promise provides more than just emotional solace; it delivers ontological stability – the certainty that divine love surpasses human shortcomings. Brown (2017:142) contends that Jesus's assurance of not abandoning his followers embodies the essence of Christian hope: the steadfast presence of God amid human vulnerability.

Moreover, the term, *orphans* (Greek: *orphanos*), possesses both literal and metaphorical significance. In the Greco-Roman context, *orphanos* denoted not only children without parents but also individuals left without protection or guidance (BDAG 2000). In John 14:18 (NIV), the term signifies a state of relational and existential vulnerability, which Christ immediately addresses by assuring his presence through the coming of the Spirit. Keener (2003:II.978) notes that Jesus's promise, 'I will not leave you as orphans', affirms that divine presence, mediated through the Spirit, replaces the void of physical absence and functions as pastoral assurance. Thus, no human absence of parental care or otherwise can diminish the sustaining and guiding presence of God. By expressing and living this assurance, the church serves as the concrete manifestation of christ's enduring devotion to the forsaken. De Beer (2021:79) posits that in the South African contexts characterised by familial disintegration, this Johannine promise offers a theological basis for resilience and relational regeneration within church communities.

James 1:27 (NIV) elaborates on this concept by associating authentic religion with the care of the vulnerable: 'Religion that God our Father considers pure and faultless is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress.' The care of orphans is fundamental to authentic Christian practice. This passage significantly undermines any notion of spirituality that is not connected to concrete deeds of compassion and justice. By stressing the care of orphans and widows, the quintessentially vulnerable, James expresses a view of faith that is intrinsically linked to social duty.

From a theological standpoint, the verse redefines real worship as not merely ritual purity or doctrinal correctness but as the manifestation of love towards individuals rendered vulnerable by social dislocation and familial disintegration. According to Verhey (2018:203), James articulates a radical ethic of attentiveness, wherein spiritual growth is gauged by one's dedication to safeguarding and nourishing the forsaken.

In the context of township ministry, James 1:27 (NIV) possesses a prophetic imperative. The prevalence of fatherlessness, exacerbated by systemic poverty and violence, necessitates that churches transcend mere verbal affirmations of love to establish tangible ministries that provide mentorship, material assistance, emotional healing, and spiritual guidance to individuals who may otherwise remain overlooked. Maluleke (2022:114) asserts that in South African environments characterised by historical marginalisation, the church's credibility does not rely on its doctrines but on its tangible solidarity with the afflicted. Consequently, James does not regard caring for the fatherless as an ancillary aspect of faith but as its fundamental essence. For township boys experiencing the anguish of abandonment, the church's adherence to this mandate serves as a vital testament to the reality of God's unwavering love.

The necessity of reintegrating these biblical images into pastoral practice has been underscored by recent scholarship. Shults (2018:112) contends that modern pastoral theology should reconceptualise divine fatherhood not as patriarchal or authoritarian but in relational and loving frameworks that resonate with marginalised communities. Leclerc and Maddix (2020:86) assert that depicting God as the 'relational Father' provides solace to individuals whose earthly experiences have undermined their belief in parental figures.

Within the township ministry, these biblical affirmations function as both theological truths and existential anchors, challenging narratives of abandonment and alienation with divine pledges of belonging, protection, and presence.

Spiritual adoption and renewed identity in Christ

In addition to affirming divine fatherhood, the Christian theology articulates spiritual adoption as a transformational reaction to human feelings of abandonment. Spiritual adoption transcends a legal metaphor; it is a profound relational reality: through Christ, believers are integrated

into the family of God, endowed with a new identity that is grounded in divine love and acceptance. This ideology is highly significant for fatherless boys in township settings, presenting a counter-narrative to earthly rejection and facilitating an ontological transition from alienation to inclusion.

Swinton (2007:52) emphasises that spiritual healing necessitates a redefinition of identity, whereby afflicted individuals perceive themselves not predominantly through the perspective of abandonment but through the experience of divine acceptance. Healing the 'orphan spirit', the internalised belief of being unwanted, unprotected, and unloved is not achieved merely through cognitive doctrinal assent but through deep existential transformation, often mediated through communal practices of care and inclusion.

Recent scholarship echoes this view. Jennings (2017:215) asserts that the authentic Christian community must not only proclaim the theological truths of adoption but must embody them through lived relational practices. Spiritual adoption, he contends, is made credible when marginalised individuals experience the church as a family that mirrors the welcoming love of God. This necessitates an extraordinary hospitality that surpasses biological connections and includes individuals alienated from conventional family frameworks.

Furthermore, Park (2019:134) underscores that spiritual adoption redefines social belonging. For township children, grappling with fragmented identities, the recognition that their true identity is rooted not in a socio-economic class, ancestry, or paternal validation but in divine selection, is immensely freeing. Park contends that a comprehensive theology of adoption deconstructs terrestrial systems of exclusion by affirming that belonging to God's family is both unconditional and irrevocable.

In drawing from pastoral experience within township churches, when young men engage in persistent, grace-infused interactions within faith communities, the theological concept of adoption transforms into an existential reality. Mentorship, inclusion in spiritual family life, consistent pastoral presence, and affirmation of dignity are vital mechanisms through which the church enacts the reality of divine sonship.

Furthermore, as Magezi (2018:14) observes, practical theological engagement must translate doctrines like adoption into embodied practices that heal identity wounds. This includes initiatives such as rites of belonging, public affirmations of spiritual family membership, and intentional spaces for young men to discover their purpose and acceptance within the Christian community.

In this way, spiritual adoption offers more than metaphysical comfort; it provides a concrete pastoral strategy for reclaiming and restoring broken identities. For boys without fathers, it asserts a transformative truth: they are not characterised by those who deserted them but by the God who has embraced them, cherished them, and bestowed upon them an everlasting heritage. From my perspective, spiritual adoption is not merely a doctrinal claim but a deeply pastoral and ontological reality. In Christ, fatherless boys are not second-class believers but beloved sons, fully included in the divine family. One's identity in Christ is not something earned or inherited from earthly lineage – it is a gift conferred by grace. In township contexts where earthly rejection and systemic marginalisation prevail, I view the theology of adoption as a radical affirmation of dignity and belonging. It declares that no boy is invisible to God, and through Christ, each one is permanently claimed, named, and nurtured within a spiritual family that reflects the Father's love.

Responses of pastoral care and counselling to fatherlessness

Theological contemplation offers a perspective on divine fatherhood and spiritual adoption, while the pastoral ministry is responsible for manifesting these concepts in ways that effectively heal and repair the youth without fathers. Effective pastoral care must confront the intricate emotional traumas, identity dilemmas, and relational fractures resulting from paternal absence. This section presents three strategic interventions: addressing paternal trauma for emotional healing-informed counselling, fostering dependable mentorship models, and creating communities of belonging within faith communities.

The psychological and emotional wounds caused by paternal absence run deep, often manifesting as chronic insecurity, anger, depression, and relational distrust. Healing these wounds demands a trauma-informed pastoral approach that recognises the depth of pain and the need for safe spaces of disclosure, lament, and re-authoring of the identity. Zock (2006:219) highlights the value of narrative therapy within pastoral care, emphasising that healing occurs when wounded individuals can tell, reframe, and reimagine their stories in the presence of compassionate listeners. In the case of fatherless boys, allowing them to narrate their experiences of abandonment – without judgement – is crucial for integrating their loss and moving towards hope. The healing of memories involves helping young men to reinterpret their past not as a final verdict on their worth but as a chapter in an unfolding story of redemption.

Drawing from pastoral experience in township ministry and informal settlement contexts such as Nomzamo (Mahlangu 2025:3), it becomes clear that many young men carry silent, unacknowledged grief regarding their absent fathers. Across these environments, the compounded trauma of poverty, abandonment, and instability intensifies the emotional wounds, requiring intentional pastoral interventions that foster reattachment, healing, and resilience. Providing intentional pastoral counselling sessions, where these losses can be named and grieved in the light of God's non-abandoning love, is essential. Trauma-informed care also

means recognising the body's memory of abandonment and integrating practices, such as prayerful reflection, symbolic rituals of release, and communal lament, to address the holistic impact of the trauma. As Louw (2000:117) notes, pastoral healing is not simply about cognitive re-education but about fostering encounters with divine compassion to rewire emotional and existential patterns. Healing the father wound therefore requires pastoral caregivers to act as consistent, safe, and empathetic presences, mirroring the steadfast love of our heavenly Father.

In addition to emotional healing, there is an urgent need to provide fatherless boys with positive, trustworthy male figures who can model integrity, care, and responsibility. Pastoral care must include the intentional cultivation of faithful mentorship structures within the life of the church. Aziz (2022:7) asserts that youth ministry must evolve into relational ecosystems, where spiritual fathers and mentors actively disciple young men towards wholeness. Merely offering programmes or occasional events is insufficient; what is needed is sustained, incarnational mentorship rooted in personal investment and a consistent presence.

Faithful mentorship involves more than moral instruction; it includes modelling a healthy emotional expression, work ethics, relational fidelity, and spiritual disciplines. In pastoral practice, the establishment of 'spiritual fatherhood' relationships, where mature Christian men intentionally mentor young men, has proven transformative. These relationships provide a critical scaffolding for identity formation, emotional maturity, and moral discernment. However, mentorship must be carefully managed. Not all men are automatically suitable mentors; they must be trained, vetted, and spiritually formed to avoid perpetuating harmful models of masculinity. As Aziz (2022:9) cautions, mentorship must be rooted in vulnerability, service, and authenticity; not in authority or control.

In this regard, initiatives such as Heartlines' Fathers Matter campaign offer important models for churches. The programme, rooted in South African social realities, emphasises the critical role of present, involved, and nurturing father figures, whether biological or social. Fathers Matter promotes the idea that fatherhood is not merely biological but relational, and it calls on men across communities to step into mentorship and caregiving roles, where paternal gaps exist (Heartlines 2021). Integrating such resources within faith-based mentorship programmes can enhance both the theological depth and the practical effectiveness of pastoral interventions.

Drawing from pastoral experience in township ministry, mentoring initiatives often reveal that the consistency of presence matters more than eloquence or theological sophistication. Simply, having an older man who shows up faithfully, who listens, advises, prays, and walks alongside a fatherless boy, can profoundly reshape that young man's identity and future. Within my own ministry among the township youth, we have seen remarkable transformation when local men, although often imperfect themselves, commit to journeys of mentorship, marked by love, patience, and faith. Such mentorship becomes a living sacrament, embodying God's relational fidelity to the fatherless. Thus, faith communities must invest intentionally in training responsible mentors, equipping them with pastoral sensitivity, emotional intelligence, and theological grounding. Where such systems of spiritual fatherhood are cultivated and sustained, boys are given the gift not only of guidance but of new visions of manhood, belonging, and hope.

Beyond individual counselling and mentorship, the church itself must become a surrogate family for those who have been abandoned by their earthly kin. Community is not an optional accessory to healing; it is the very context where restoration becomes embodied and sustainable. Aziz, Nel and Davis (2017:3) argue that youth ministries must intentionally cultivate environments where young people experience unconditional acceptance, relational accountability, and empowering support. Youth groups should not merely function as entertainment hubs, but as spaces of restoration and empowerment – alternative families, where trust is rebuilt, and resilience nurtured.

In township pastoral experience, churches that actively foster communal belonging through small groups, service projects, shared meals, and relational discipleship have witnessed significant healing among the fatherless youth. It is within these *chosen families* that young men learn relational trust, rediscover personal value, and envision alternative futures not defined by abandonment. Maluleke (2022:114) emphasises that in contexts of systemic marginalisation, the church must not only offer theological assurances but must embody solidarity through tangible, ongoing relational practices. This means youth ministries must be staffed by leaders who model consistency, compassion, and hope, creating cultures where every young person feels seen, heard, and valued. Moreover, as Park (2019:134) notes, belonging is not merely emotional, it is formative. To belong is to be shaped. Thus, when churches function as surrogate families, they do not merely heal wounds, they participate in the Spirit's work of forming new identities rooted in love, dignity, and hope.

Challenges and opportunities for pastoral ministry

Engaging in pastoral care and counselling among fatherless township youth, presents a complex landscape of both significant challenges and profound opportunities. Effective ministry in this context demands a realistic assessment of the systemic barriers that constrain pastoral work, as well as an attentive recognition of the unique strengths that faith communities possess to foster transformation. One of the foremost challenges is the persistent reality of resource limitations. Many township churches operate with minimal financial support, restricted human resources, and overstretched leadership (Magezi 2018:3). In settings where

basic needs are pressing, pastoral care programmes for fatherless boys often compete with urgent material demands such as feeding schemes, emergency housing, and crisis interventions (Freeks 2022:4). This scarcity of resources inhibits the development of structured mentorship programmes, trauma counselling initiatives, and sustainable pastoral interventions (Mbobo 2022:38). Despite these limitations, churches continue to serve as vital spaces of hope, but their capacity to support the fatherless youth is often constrained by structural hardships.

Cultural stigma also presents a significant obstacle. In many communities, the experience of fatherlessness carries a heavy social burden, often associated with shame, perceived weakness, or moral failure. Young boys may internalise these stigmas, making them reluctant to seek support or engage openly with pastoral interventions. Moreover, dominant notions of masculinity, often equated with stoicism, emotional suppression, and autonomy, can discourage young men from embracing spaces of vulnerability and healing. As Buffel (2011:5) observes, in societies where patriarchal expectations are deeply ingrained, the pastoral task involves not only caring for wounded individuals but also challenging oppressive cultural narratives that perpetuate cycles of abandonment and emotional disconnection.

Another profound challenge lies in the high-trauma environments, characteristic of many townships. Persistent exposure to violence, substance abuse, domestic instability, and economic precarity creates a backdrop of chronic trauma that complicates the pastoral task. Healing father wounds in such contexts requires deep, sustained, trauma-informed approaches that recognise the multilayered nature of suffering. Quick-fix programmes or superficial interventions are unlikely to produce lasting change; rather, pastoral ministry must be prepared for long journeys of accompaniment, characterised by patience, resilience, and theological depth.

Yet, alongside these challenges, there exist powerful opportunities that render pastoral ministry among the fatherless youth, both hopeful and urgent. Chief among these, is the relational credibility of churches within township communities. Despite the socio-economic hardships, faith communities often retain significant moral authority and relational trust among local populations. Churches are still viewed as spaces of refuge, moral guidance, and relational connection. This credibility provides an invaluable platform for initiating mentorship programmes, counselling initiatives, and communal healing practices that address the crisis of the fatherlessness (Freeks 2022).

Furthermore, there exists a profound potential for generational transformation. Investing in the healing and formation of fatherless boys today, carries the promise of altering the trajectory of future families and communities (Freeks 2022). When young men are equipped with healthy identities, emotional maturity, and a vision of responsible fatherhood, rooted in their identity in Christ, they are empowered to break the cycles of abandonment and violence that have characterised previous generations. As pastoral caregivers invest in these boys, they are not merely attending to present wounds but cultivating future leaders, fathers, and mentors who will embody the transformative love of God in their own households and communities.

Drawing on pastoral experience within township ministry, the author observes that even modest interventions such as consistent mentorship, communal belonging, and faithful accompaniment can generate ripples of healing that extend far beyond individual lives. Faithful pastoral ministry, although labour-intensive and often slow in visible results, possesses the potential to sow seeds of renewal that the Spirit can nurture into profound communal regeneration. Thus, while the task is arduous and the obstacles formidable, the opportunities for pastoral impact are both real and redemptive. Pastoral care for fatherless boys, when approached with theological depth, relational commitment and cultural sensitivity, participates in the Spirit's mission of mending broken identities and restoring fractured communities.

Case studies and practical models

While theoretical frameworks and theological reflections offer essential guidance, it is the lived experiences of churches, actively engaging fatherlessness, that provide some of the most valuable insights into effective pastoral practice. In township settings, several churches have developed mentorship and pastoral care models that respond innovatively to the complex realities of the fatherless youth. These case studies offer lessons in both successful strategies and the necessity for contextual adaptability.

One such example is the work undertaken by HOPE to You Community Church, a congregation located within a township context. This church has committed itself to addressing the crisis of fatherlessness through practical, relational, and theologically grounded interventions (HOPE to You Community Church 2024). Recognising the urgency of restoring healthy masculine identity and community support, the church has intentionally partnered with national initiatives such as Heartlines' Fathers Matter programme. Through this collaboration, HOPE to You Community Church has integrated Heartlines' relational fatherhood frameworks into its pastoral practices, contextualising them for its own community needs.

A cornerstone of the church's approach is the hosting of annual winter camps, where young boys and older men gather for several days of intentional mentorship, spiritual formation, and relational bonding. These camps are designed not merely as recreational activities but as intensive discipleship experiences that foster emotional healing, model healthy masculinity, and build intergenerational bridges. Young boys, many of whom come from father-absent homes,

are paired with older Christian men who mentor them through workshops, discussions, devotional sessions, and recreational team-building activities.

Beyond the winter camps, throughout the year various events reinforce this ministry ethos. Workshops on emotional intelligence, responsible manhood, conflict resolution, and spiritual growth are conducted, often drawing on Heartlines' resources, while adapting the material to reflect township realities. Pastoral care is woven through every aspect of these engagements, ensuring that participants are not merely taught concepts but are relationally accompanied on their journeys towards healing and maturity.

Several key lessons emerge from the ministry experiences at the HOPE to You Community Church. These insights align with findings from pastoral interventions in informal settlements like Nomzamo, where similar patterns of broken paternal relationships and youth vulnerability have been documented (Mahlangu 2025:9). Both contexts affirm that sustainable transformation requires not only theological teaching but embodied, relational accompaniment over time. Firstly, consistency is crucial: transformation occurs not through once-off events but through a sustained relational investment over time. Mentorship is not a mere programme but a lifestyle of accompaniment. Secondly, contextual adaptability is essential. While national programmes, like Fathers Matter, provide valuable frameworks, local adaptation is necessary to address specific cultural dynamics, trauma histories, and resource limitations unique to each community. For instance, the church has found that traditional lecture-based mentorship often fails to engage boys effectively, whereas participatory methods such as storytelling, dramatisation and group discussions resonate more deeply.

Furthermore, the experience at the HOPE to You Community Church illustrates that intergenerational ministry is a vital corrective to the fragmentation caused by fatherlessness. When older men are trained and encouraged to assume mentorship roles, they not only help younger boys to heal and grow but often experience their own emotional and spiritual renewal. Thus, the ministry of mentorship becomes mutually transformative, embodying the biblical principle that foretells, 'as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another' (Pr 27:17).

A second notable case study is found in the ministry of Ebenezer Evangelical Church (2024), based in Soweto. Situated within one of Johannesburg's most historically significant township areas, Ebenezer Church has developed a Fathers and Sons Initiative, aimed at bridging the generational gap and providing spiritual and emotional fathers for boys and young men growing up without paternal guidance. Recognising that absent fathers are often both a cause and a symptom of the broader social dysfunction, the church's approach integrates spiritual formation, vocational mentorship, and emotional healing.

Key features of the Ebenezer programme include monthly fathers and sons gatherings, where men from the congregation intentionally share their life experiences, failures and hopes with young men in structured conversation circles. Importantly, the church deliberately recruits mentors not based on professional success but on their willingness to model vulnerability, resilience, and Christian commitment. They have also introduced a father blessing–ritual at key points in the boys' lives (e.g. after high school exams), affirming each young man's worth, calling, and spiritual adoption.

Lessons emerging from the Ebenezer Church, underscore the importance of ritual and symbolic acts in healing identity wounds. Public affirmation and communal blessings provide powerful counter-narratives to societal neglect. Moreover, their experience highlights the critical need for training and supporting mentors themselves, ensuring that those offering care have access to pastoral counselling, theological formation, and emotional support.

Both the HOPE to You Community Church and the Ebenezer Evangelical Church demonstrate that, while structural challenges in township contexts are significant, they are not insurmountable. Faith communities that embrace a relational, holistic, and contextually sensitive approach can become catalysts for profound healing and a generational change. Theological commitments to divine fatherhood and spiritual adoption find their most powerful expression not only in proclamation but in lived, embodied acts of mentorship, care, and communal belonging.

Pastoral recommendations and ministry implications

The insights emerging from this study highlight the need for practical ministry interventions – interventions that go beyond theological articulation. While affirming that God's fatherhood and spiritual adoption are crucial, these truths must be translated into actionable strategies that address the emotional, relational, and spiritual wounds experienced by fatherless boys. In township contexts, marked by systemic poverty and family fragmentation, churches are uniquely positioned to function as spaces of healing, belonging, and identity restoration. The following pastoral recommendations are proposed as contextually grounded strategies for faith communities, seeking to respond meaningfully to the crisis of fatherlessness:

Establish structured mentorship programmes in churches

Churches should intentionally develop mentorship programmes that pair mature, vetted Christian men with fatherless boys. These mentors must be equipped with pastoral sensitivity, emotional intelligence, and theological grounding to model consistent caring relationships rooted in love and accountability.

Integrate theological themes into the youth ministry curriculum

Theological concepts such as divine fatherhood (Ps 68:5), spiritual adoption (Jn 14:18), and identity in Christ, should be embedded into the spiritual formation of young men through sermons, youth group sessions, and discipleship materials. Making these truths experiential, enhances their healing potential.

Adopt trauma-informed pastoral counselling models

Healing deep emotional wounds from abandonment, requires trauma-informed pastoral care. Churches should train leaders in the basic counselling approaches, narrative therapy, and rituals of emotional release to help young people reframe painful experiences and rediscover hope.

Collaborate with initiatives like Heartlines' Fathers Matter

Partnerships with campaigns like Heartlines' Fathers Matter, provide churches with culturally relevant resources for fatherhood, masculinity, and mentoring. These collaborations can amplify the impact and contextual relevance, particularly in township environments.

Create intergenerational ministry opportunities

The intentional facilitation of intergenerational relationships (e.g. via winter camps, mentorship dinners, father-blessing rituals), allows boys to form meaningful connections with older men who embody responsible, nurturing masculinity.

Develop a culture of a church-based 'spiritual family'

Churches must move beyond programmes to cultivate a culture of spiritual kinship, where each boy is seen as a beloved son. This includes communal meals, small group inclusion, and rituals of belonging that tangibly reflect the love of God.

Advocate publicly for social policies that strengthen families

Faith communities should advocate for systemic change, including employment, rehabilitation, and family support services that address the broader socio-economic factors that perpetuate fatherlessness.

These recommendations are not exhaustive but form a foundational response to a pressing pastoral challenge. As churches embody the fatherhood of God in tangible ways by means of mentorship, community formation, emotional healing, and advocacy, they become vital agents of restoration. Ultimately, faithful pastoral practice affirms that no child is invisible or abandoned in the eyes of God, and through the church, a new story of healing and belonging can be written.

Conclusion

The crisis of fatherlessness among the township youth, is not merely a sociological concern but a profound theological and pastoral challenge. Not only are individual identities wounded, but communal and spiritual life are disrupted, and often, young people's capacity to trust, to hope, and to envision a future of belonging are distorted. In response, the Christian church is called to embody the healing fatherhood of God, proclaiming not only with words but with deeds that no child is abandoned in the economy of grace.

This article explores key theological and pastoral imperatives, essential for responding to fatherlessness. Theologically, the biblical witness to divine fatherhood, as seen in Psalm 68:5, John 14:18, and James 1:27 (NIV), establishes a foundation of advocacy, relational fidelity, and restorative presence. Spiritually, the doctrine of adoption offers fatherless boys an ontological shift from alienation to become endearing, forming new identities rooted not in human failure, but in divine love. Pastoral care must thus integrate trauma-informed counselling, faithful mentorship, and the creation of surrogate communities of belonging, and ensure that theological affirmations are embodied in the relational practices.

The case studies of the HOPE to You Community Church and the Ebenezer Evangelical Church, have demonstrated that holistic, relational, and contextually adapted ministries are not only possible but urgently needed. These churches exemplify how intentional mentorship, symbolic acts of affirmation, intergenerational healing, and sustained relational investment can interrupt the cycles of abandonment and thus cultivate generational renewal. The church's role must be reaffirmed: it is not merely an observer of social breakdown but an agent of healing, hope, and the formation of new identities. In township contexts marked by poverty, violence, and fractured family systems, the church must stand as a visible sign of God's steadfast love, offering to fatherless boys not only compassion but belonging, not charity but family, not judgement but restoration. However, meeting this challenge requires a call to action: churches must adopt intentional, holistic ministry strategies that are trauma-sensitive, theologically rooted, relationally driven, and culturally adaptable. This includes investing in mentor training, integrating programmes like Fathers Matter, embedding rites of passage and affirmation, and fostering communities where every young person is known, valued, and formed for flourishing.

Ultimately, responding to fatherlessness is not a peripheral pastoral task, but it is central to the church's mission to embody the Fatherhood of God in a broken world. In healing the wounds of abandonment, the church participates in the Spirit's ongoing work of making all things new, one beloved son at a time.

Acknowledgements

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