


# Restructuring the Christian Fatherhood Model: A practical theological investigation into the 'male problematic' of father absence

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In South Africa, ideas around fatherhood, parenthood and family life are greatly shifting as people find themselves caught up between traditional and contemporary understandings of fatherhood and motherhood. Even though more than 70% of young South Africans stated in a national survey that parenthood is one of the top four defining features of adulthood, father absence is on the increase. Some in-depth literature study was conducted regarding South African research on fatherhood and father absence, and the role of both Christian churches and secular organisations in addressing some of these challenges brought on by rapidly growing figures of father absence. The article concludes with some suggestions on the development of a new paradigm in understanding fatherhood in South Africa, with special reference to the role of Christian churches in assisting men to construct a narrative around fatherhood, which will lead to satisfying relationships with their children, their partners and especially with God.

## Introduction

Zeno of Cyprus, a Greek philosopher, is said to have conceived of a cosmic unity which preceded the Roman concept of universal brotherhood, already three centuries before the birth and life of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ then extended on the idea of the brotherhood of man by proposing that God was the Father of all people (cf. Bardis 1964:1). Emory Bogardus (1955:15) suggests that, in his teachings, Jesus Christ supported the family system, at times even more ferociously than the church or the state. Additional influences in the development of the early Christian family were the Roman Civilisation and the arrangement of certain barbarian customs during the Middle Ages (cf. Bardis 1964:1). However, Christianity was and is still today one of the few religions that correlates family values with Christian teachings, as visible through the countless family life metaphors and similes used by Jesus (and presently the church) during his teachings, and through his emphasis on 'God's fatherhood and man's brotherhood' (cf. Bardis 1964:2).

As the above paragraph shows, the concept of fatherhood is as old as Christianity itself. It is, however, a concept not limited to the Christian religion (e.g. Islam and Confucianism), although the Christian concept of family and fatherhood was greatly influenced by both the Roman civilisation and barbarian customs in protest of their corrupt and self-indulgent culture (cf. Bardis 1964:1–2).

Fatherhood is a concept that has prevailed for 200 centuries and is understood in different ways by different cultures and religions globally and is therefore socially constructed. Despite these small differences in the construction of the concept, a golden thread can be seen in the meaning that most cultures and religious affiliations attach to it. Most understandings then entail a patriarchal notion, which inherently also links to the provision and protection role of the *pater*. As a general and broad definition, fatherhood is understood as a position of power over one's biological or adopted children which is justified by the provision, protection and disciplinarian role inherent in the conceptualisation of 'father' (cf. Clare 2000:184–185; Marsiglio & Pleck 2005:256). From this definition, it is clear that a family that constructs fatherhood in this manner might experience many benefits of such a presence. The opposite, however, is also true. Past narratives of traumatised families indicate that abuse of such patriarchal power can result in devastation, often perpetuated by generations that follow.

In South Africa – as elsewhere in the world – ideas around fatherhood, parenthood and family life are greatly shifting as people find themselves caught up between traditional and contemporary

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understandings of fatherhood and motherhood, especially with reference to their respective relationships with children in the family (Richter, Chikovore & Makusha 2010:2). This shifting in ideas globally is a result of an increase in divorce, non-marital childbearing and cohabitation (cf. Wilcox 2008:1); and more specifically in South Africa as a result of the strenuous migrant labour force enforced during apartheid (see Morrell 2006:19), poverty and unemployment; as well as similar changes in family construction in accordance with global western trends. Accordingly, Giddens (2003:51) states that African fathers are no different from men in the rest of the world and experience an immense shift in their personal lives when it comes to issues around sexuality, relationship development and the construction of marriage and family. What is of interest though – also emphasised by Giddens (2003:51) – is that although a revolution in family life is experienced globally in most cultures, it is met with utmost resistance by many in society.

Perhaps this resistance is well founded as the traditional involvement of a father in the life of a child has many benefits – not only for the child(ren) but also for the mother. Holborn and Eddy (2011:4) articulate both the direct and indirect influences of the presence of a father on the well-being of the family as a whole. The influence is direct because a present father is part of the discipline and emotional support of the children, and the children will have an enhanced self-esteem, self-confidence and self-efficacy, which might provide them with added motivation to attend school and study. More specifically, an emotionally present father has a direct influence on the cognitive and intellectual functioning of his children, which will result in better school attendance and performance.

Indirectly, a present father supports the mother emotionally and collaborated effort is put into decisions regarding educational matters and the health and well-being of the children. Adversely, children being raised in a home without a father figure tend to experience more emotional and mood disturbances and have less access to health, educational and other support services (cf. Holborn & Eddy 2011:4).

It is, however, important to note that physically present fathers can be just as harmful to the well-being of the family as an absent father. Similarly, a physically absent father can still be emotionally present in the lives of his children. Therefore, it is not the physical presence per se that is important, but rather the emotional availability and involvement of a father figure (Holborn & Eddy 2011:4). Another important premise is, of course, the fact that there are many ways in which a father can be 'present' in the lives of his children and can stand in relation with the mother. In any case, it cannot be denied that family structures have changed (although many families still function satisfactorily in traditional family setups), and it is unlikely in the present economic and social climate of the day to revert collectively back to the traditional model.

Even though more than 70% of young South Africans, across race, gender and culture, stated in a national survey that parenthood is one of the top four defining features of adulthood, father absence is on the increase (Holborn & Eddy 2011:4). For example, from a longitudinal study conducted in 2004, researchers have found that 26% of 11-year-olds never had any contact with their biological fathers (Richter & Morrell 2006:5). The South African Institute of Race Relations indicates that 44% of all African, urban and female parents were single, where the majority of these women were between the ages of 24 and 34 years. In turn, Statistics South Africa (StatsSA 2012) reports that only 33% of all African children live with both parents (Sevim 2015: The Cape Chameleon). In addition to this, many fathers neglect their financial and paternal responsibilities in either not being able to pay towards maintenance fees or refusing to pay because of the conflict they have with the mothers (Richter & Morrell 2006:5–6).

In paradox to these realities, participants of a study conducted by Emmett et al. (2004) voiced the importance of a parent supporting and safeguarding his or her family, and that parents are responsible for the nurturing of their children and the running of the household. From these statements, it can be concluded that many fathers desire satisfying fatherly relationships with their children and that they are – contrary to public views – concerned about the welfare of their family (Richter & Morrell 2006:5).

The question that comes to mind then is the following: where does the problem lie in this grand narrative? Is the problem the erosion of traditional family structures? Does the problem lie with men and their moral upbringing, or the lack thereof? Or is the problem perhaps that despite evidence of social change, society is trapped in a confining traditional discourse which does not provide possibilities outside the present 2000-year old frame of reference?

In this article, the researcher explores the various challenges and possibilities that both the Christian church and family in South Africa face in the construction of an appropriate and effective model of fatherhood. The first section of the article unpacks the concept of fatherhood as it is operationalised in various contexts of South Africa and explores the relationship between this contested concept with masculinity and how it is understood within the church and within the boundaries of both the traditional father-breadwinner and the new father and/or husband models. To effectively understand father absence in light of these two models, the reasons for father absence are explored.

In the second part of this article, the psychosocial context of fatherhood is canvassed in an attempt to discover the efforts of secular and non-faith-based organisations in addressing the dismay of many associated with father absence. These findings are then compared with the efforts of faith-based and Christian organisations, institutions or churches. The article concludes with a proposal for the restructuring of the

traditional and the so-called new father and/or husband model for fatherhood, in light of the ineffectiveness of these models in addressing the realities confronted by many (if not most) South African families, without negating the effectiveness of and possibilities inherent in both the traditional father-breadwinner and the new father and/or husband models, where it fits the context. The researcher justifies this proposal of restructure based on the increasing number of (father-) abandoned children, and divorced, single and unemployed fathers – abandoned by the church and other faith-based institutions.

## Background of the study

In 2010, a study was conducted with seven adolescent male orphans who resided in the greater vicinity of Pretoria, with the title: 'The spiritual and psychosocial gender specific stories of adolescent orphans affected by HIV and AIDS in the absence of a father figure: A postfoundational practical theological approach' (cf. Loubser 2010). This study aimed at addressing uncertainties about the type and nature of the relationship between HIV and AIDS and adolescent male orphans affected by this disease and all its aspects, such as poverty, exposure to crime and stigmatisation, and the lack of a father figure. This research employed methods from the qualitative research design, and more specifically from a postfoundational notion of practical theology and narrative therapy, in exploring the above issues.

This article then explores in more detail a society's understanding around fatherhood and brings this in conversation with some of the narratives of these boys, and additional research that has been conducted on the topic.

## Fatherhood operationalised

Morrell (2006:14) explains that the concept of fatherhood can be understood and lived out in many ways. Traditionally, fatherhood emphasises the biological aspect in that a father is someone who fathers a child and from that status embodies fatherhood. In modern days, and specifically within the African context, the concept of fatherhood, according to Morrell (2006:14), entails the dimensions of an economy on the one hand and socially on the other hand. Economic fathers feel responsible for the maintenance of a child's material needs and facilitate finances with that intention. Social fathers, on the other hand, live with their children and care for them emotionally and psychologically, even in cases where the children are not his biological children. The importance of this concept lies in the aspect of choice. Fatherhood and accepting or declining this role is based on a personal choice, unlike the concept of father, or fathering, which indicates biological ties (cf. Morrell 2006:14).

If we take a peek into the isiZulu culture in the 19th century, it becomes clear that every homestead (referred to as *umuzi*) was headed by the father (referred to as *umnumzana*), who

had the right to marry more than one woman, after he had paid a bride price (*ilobolo*) for every woman he marries (cf. Hunter 2006:100–101; see Guy 1987; Jeffreys 1951). Hunter (2006:101) states that fatherhood in this context had both economic and social imperatives. The *umnumzana* was the leader and the protector of his *umuzi*, and the provider as he would provide *ilobolo* to his sons, oversee his daughters' marriages and pay damages if his sons impregnated another's daughter. The father was the primary role model for his sons; however, other significant figures in the homestead also embodied the role of fatherhood, such as the uncles, elder brothers and peers. Similarly, Mahlangu (1999:110) states that in the African culture the status of the husband and the father is naturally one of authority and should be respected as such. The husband/father is an emotional leader and supports his family by being a provider, capable of 'doing anything'. Mahlangu (1999:111) also states that boys cannot address their father if not instructed to do so; in contrast, they can say anything to their mother. In the Venda tribe, the name for father (*khotsi*) literally means 'king'. As a 'king', his greatest assets are his wife (or wives) and children (Mahlangu 1999:111).

What is of interest, however, is that in most African societies, respectful behaviour towards a father is naturally extended to other male relatives:

Stayt (1968:172f.) maintains that a man calls all his fathers, brothers and the cousins whom his father call brother, in the male line, *khotsi muhulu* and *khotsi munene* which means great father (elder brother to the father) and little father (younger brother to the father) respectively. (Mahlangu 1999:111)

Krige (1962:25), referring to the Zulu traditions, asserts that because all the brothers of a father stand in a relationship of father to his sons, they are named 'fathers', act as fathers and should be respected as fathers to the sons.

During the 20th century, great changes in the structure of the family emerged as a result of colonisation, which in turn dwindled rural production. Consequently, men moved away from their homesteads in search of employment, changing the emphasis on fatherhood from the social role of the father to his financial obligations. Hunter (2006:101) states: '[A] good father was now one who provided reliable support for the *umuzi*'. As can be expected, the structure of urban marriages turned away from the extended family and community to instead focus on the nuclear family – fatherhood changed from cultural and social parenthood to biological responsibilities (cf. Brandel 1958:39; Hunter 2006:102).

In the 21st century, the character of the concept has changed. The number of social interventions which focus on supporting fathers to invest more emotional and psychological resources in the well-being of their children has increased immensely (Morrell 2006:20), indicating the development of the so-called 'new father model'. Morrell (2006:20) however makes us aware that the context in which fatherhood takes place might

affect the definition of a good father; for instance, communities where access to various resources is limited, the providence of the biological father might be re-emphasised. This is the reality of more than half of South African fathers.

The narratives of the participants of the greater study (ToLC 2010) divulge similar notions around the role of the father as one who provides a child's financial needs but add to this his role as a mentor. Many participants stated that boys specifically need a male role model (ideally his biological father) to model healthy male behaviour through his physical, emotional and psychological involvement in his life (cf. Manqoba<sup>1</sup> ToLC 2010). Similarly, Molimi<sup>2</sup> (cf. ToLC 2010) states that the physical presence of a negative male role model might be more detrimental to the development of a child than the absence of such a figure. Collectively all the participants voiced a similar notion of fatherhood: a physically or at least emotionally present person who can ensure his children of his love for them, while simultaneously assisting the mother (or another primary caregiver) in alleviating some of her financial burdens (cf. Meyer 2017:5; ToLC 2010).

## Reasons for father absence

There are many reasons given for the large number of fathers being physically, financially and/or emotionally absent from the lives of their children. Some of the primary reasons are a lack of resources and unemployment, which inevitably result in poverty. Men who feel that they cannot provide financially for their children are much more likely to evade their responsibilities. In many situations, the shame of not being able to provide for one's children drives men away from their families (cf. Morrell 2006:20–21). The participants of this study also hold that practices such as *ilobolo* (bride wealth) and *paying damages* (impregnating an unwedded woman) hinder men's capacity to take financial responsibility for their family, especially in the present economic climate where many men are unemployed (ToLC 2010).

Wilson (2006:31) emphasises the devastating effect of the migrant labour system on the structure and stability of a household, both in rural and urban areas. In the townships in urban areas, it is not abnormal for a man to have more than one family to care for. Moodie (2001) and Ramphele (1993) have found that women from the city centres and wives from the countryside compete against each other for the shared man's wages. On the other hand, men who do not have wives in rural areas are equally uninvolved in the lives of their children in the cities. As a consequence, many women not only raise their children as a single parent but also state that they want children, even if it means being a single parent, thereby perpetuating the cycle (cf. Wilson 2006:31).

Gqola (2009:n.p.) states that young men in Africa are pressurised into having multiple sexual partners, often as

1.Pseudonym chosen by the participant.

2.Pseudonym chosen by the participant.

part of the initiation process, and as evidence of their African manhood. He thereby proves his capability in pursuing women who find him attractive. The result is that many young boys – fooled into thinking that they are adults – impregnate girls. In turn, teenage fathers find it difficult to take responsibility for their children, as they are still living with their caregivers and are not equipped to take responsibility for another human being. It is interesting to note that boys who were raised by teenaged mothers tend to underperform at school, abuse alcohol and become sexually active at an early age. All of these factors increase their likelihood of fathering children as teenagers themselves (cf. Swartz & Bhana 2009:4). Not only young boys but also adult men justify multiple sexual partners in the name of their culture (Gqola 2009:n.p.). Two of the participants of this study – Kgotoso<sup>3</sup> and Manqoba (ToLC 2010) – narrated similar views regarding the moral lives of South African men. According to them, men succumb to sexual and aggressive desires and consequently use, abuse and impregnate women, without being accountable for their actions or responsible for the children they procreate.

According to chief specialist scientist at SAMRC, Bronwyn Meyers, another contributing factor to teenage pregnancy, and hence father absence, is substance abuse. She states that more than 11% of South Africans are addicted to drugs and that substance abuse correlates positively with crime, sexual violence and unsafe sexual practices, which result in many unwanted pregnancies and father abandonment. As a result, an increase in sexual violence contributes to the increase in the number of single mothers and absent fathers (cf. Sevim 2015:n.p.).

## Fatherhood and its relation to masculinity

In South Africa, fatherhood is in general directly related to manhood or masculinity. Morrell (2006:15) states, however, that for many men the route to manhood is not always clear and young men often aspire to such a status when older men do not necessarily allow them to do so. This inevitably results in a young man or boy being confused about the manner in which such (very desirable) status is obtained. Likewise, many boys are left to make their own assumptions, often from media and their peers – and in absence of a healthy male model – regarding the type of behaviour required to obtain manhood.

Morrell (2006:17) continues to say that in most societies the concept of fatherhood is laden with the ideology of masculinity, as such a role certainly confers one with the status of the 'head' of the home. This ideology is then strongly related to the concept of hegemonic masculinity and the power of the patriarch in his family home, even though, as Morrell states, it might function to the disadvantage of the woman and children in the household.

3.Pseudonym chosen by the participant.

It has been found that masculinity is constructed differently in different contexts. In cases where material resources are scarce, fatherhood is more likely to be linked to the roles and responsibilities of protector and provider (the traditional breadwinner-father model). Whitehead (2002:151) supports the breadwinner construct underpinning a sense of manhood by stating that men often validate their masculinity through their ability to 'feed and support their family' and are, in fact, foundational to the epitome of adult male identity. Morrell (2006:15) affirms this and states that to be a man means to be a father and to be a father one needs to be a breadwinner (cf. Clare 2000:188; Koenig-Visagie & Van Eeden 2013:2). Similarly, Morgan (2001:226) states that in addition to being a breadwinner, the dominant male identity assumes adult responsibilities for his wife and children and accepts his duties in securing respect. All other identities evolve from this central signifying male identity (cf. Koenig-Visagie & Van Eeden 2013:2). Interestingly, it has been noted that the father-breadwinner ideal is just that – an ideal. This model of fatherhood arose from the rise of the middle class, who ironically remain dependent on a dual source of income (cf. Brittan 2001:52; Koenig-Visagie & Van Eeden 2013:2; Morgan 2001:226). Nevertheless, it remains a dominant model for fatherhood, even in a country where the unemployment rate has increased to 27.7% (cf. Trading Economics n.d.n.p.).

On the other hand, in contexts where men have reliable and stable income, more emphasis might be placed on the domesticated role of a father to engage with his children and act in a loving and caring manner (cf. Morrell 2006:22) – the so-called 'new man/father' model. It has been seen however that this unique class of men and fathers, who are domestically more involved, is a phenomenon often limited to the white middle-class, traditional family structure (where parents are married), and often has limits to the domestic involvement of the husband and/or father (LaRossa1995:457; cf. Koenig-Visagie & van Eeden 2013:5). Whitehead (2002:154) and Silverstein et al. (1999:665), respectively, affirm that this class of men is quite a rare phenomenon in most cultures as '... the concept of nurture has not yet been deemed central to the masculine role in various cultural ideologies'.

## Fatherhood initiatives in South Africa

It is evident from numerous men and fatherhood programmes and initiatives that ascended in South Africa that the guidance of boys into manhood has become a priority. Most of these programmes and initiatives are in direct response to the increase in violence towards women and children, the HIV prevalence and the increase of father absence. What is of note here is that most of these programmes and initiatives are not conducted from any specific religious imperative. In fact, very few religious – or Christian – initiatives that aim at addressing this phenomenon and assisting fathers in their role were found.

*The Fatherhood Foundation of South Africa* (n.d.), founded by a local actor Zane Meas in 2008, is one of these Christian-based

organisations. It seems that this foundation is affiliated with the *Christ the King Church* and as such aims to:

... improve the well-being of communities by increasing the proportion of children growing up with involved, responsible, committed and loving fathers. This is done by encouraging fathers, empowering families and helping children and communities affected by fatherlessness.

The foundation's religious underpinning seems to encourage men to take up their rightful place as the 'head' of their household, from their calling as Christian men and within their brotherhood in Christ.

The second religious initiative visible online is the *Might Men Conference* (n.d.), organised by the Shalom Trust and headed by the well-known pastor Angus Buchan. As with *The Fatherhood Foundation*, the *Mighty Men Conference* aims at empowering men spiritually and in their relationship with God, and to take up their rightful place in their family homes as the breadwinner and the spiritual leader. On the web page, Angus Buchan states the following:

In 2003 the Lord laid it clearly on my heart that I need to mentor young men. The message the Lord gave me was to teach men to be: Prophet – the man who leads his family; Priest – the man who heads up his home spiritually; King – the man who is the primary breadwinner of his home.

One notices a golden thread through both of these initiatives – a calling for the man to repent and turn back to his family and take up his rightful place as the patriarch in accordance to his calling from God. It is interesting to note the similarities between such movements and *The Promise Keepers* movement from the United States. *The Promise Keepers* is an evangelical religious movement which combines biblical teaching and male support groups and advocates the idea that 'men are ordained to serve God and lead their families' (Coltrane 2001:403). Coltrane (2001) states:

Promise Keepers teachings call for the reification of male leadership and the upholding of a divine hierarchy. Power is assumed to flow naturally from God to men to women to children. In return for a 'Godly Man', women are called to graciously submit to their husbands. (p. 405)

Such a view of the family and masculinity (and the role of a husband and father) communicates to men who cannot assume such roles in their families (thereby losing their God-given right to power) – because of a multitude of economic and social reasons – that they have no 'right' in being a father figure to their children. It communicates that a man can only love from a position of power and when this power has been lost because of a loss of income, one has become redundant. In essence, these men are abandoned and left without any guidance in much-needed parenting skills. Hence, they become *spiritually abandoned fathers* – abandoned by the church.

This is the problem with a theology of patriarchy – the idea that a man has to have power – more power than his wife and his children – to be respected, loved and accepted, and to be able to contribute positively to the lives of his children.

Men are then indeed facing a 'male problematic' (cf. Browning 1995), as it seems that when stripped of all power, they do not know who they are or who they can be. This is a discourse that Christian religion through many of its institutionalised patriarchal structures is perpetuating. A discourse that does not contribute to the empowerment of the man, stripped of all power.

In contrast, several non-religious initiatives were found which in general provide guidance and support to fathers, men and young boys, with the aim of empowering them to maintain healthy, caring and loving relationships with women and children. Some of these programmes, which either focus only on fatherhood or which have an additional fatherhood programme, are The Fatherhood Project, Brothers for Life, One Man Can, Fathers in Africa and Father a Nation (FAN).

### The Fatherhood Project

This project is a division of human and social development (HSD) at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC n.d.). Its aim is to, amongst others, encourage men to respond positively to the care and protection of their children and provide men with information that will sensitise them about the influence of their involvement in the welfare of their children. As a result, men's perceptions about their role in the nurturing and caring of their children are challenged, resulting in men becoming more actively involved and engaged with their children. In addition, this initiative aims to provide support to fathers in becoming responsive, responsible and committed fathers. These aims are embodied through various community projects.

### Brothers for Life

The Brothers for Life (About us n.d.) initiative aims at promoting positive masculine norms in society and encouraging responsible behaviour towards men's sexual health. Moreover, it aims at mobilising 'men to actively engage in activities to address gender-based violence (GBV) in their communities'. Although it does not focus exclusively on fatherhood, it emphasises the concept of 'fathers' in its campaign to promote healthy behaviours between men, their partners and their children. The initiative includes various documents on its website (<http://www.brothersforlife.org/fathers.html-1>) that can assist fathers in the caregiving and nurturing of their children, and in supporting the mother of their child(ren) in her role. It emphasises that a man can be a father even if he is not wedded to the mother and living with the mother of his children.

### One Man Can

The *One Man Can (OMC) Campaign* (n.d.) is a *Sonke Gender Justice* campaign and actively advocates for gender equality, the prevention of GBV and a positive response towards the HIV and/or AIDS crises. This campaign has a *Fatherhood* project which aims at celebrating caring fathers in the media

and identifying and profiling positive, local male role models as examples of the healthy involvement of good fathers. The primary idea behind this campaign is to transform stereotype perceptions of the competencies of fathers to include more maternal and/or gender-neutral competencies. The *MenCare* (n.d.) initiative, on the other hand, aims at promoting the equalitarian involvement of fathers in the caregiving activities towards their children, and promoting non-violent and equal ways of parenting.

### Fathers in Africa

Fathers in Africa (n.d.) is a non-profit organisation that aims to radically transform society through government partnerships, advocacy, programme development, education and mentoring of men and boys to promote men as caregivers, women and children rights, and to change boys' perceptions in such a way that they can identify the benefits of gender transformation for themselves and their roles as fathers.

### Father a Nation

Father a Nation (n.d.) incorporates several programmes in support of its mission, which is to 'restore, equip, inspire and support men to be great fathers, role models, and mentors'. Its programmes include a community programme in Bophelong in Gauteng and De Aar in the Northern Cape. In Bophelong, it trains selected men to act as 'surrogate fathers and mentors' to orphaned and vulnerable children (OVCs). In De Aar, the programme aims at transforming both men and women into leaders and agents of change who can break the cycle of alcoholism and substance abuse.

The *#RealManRealDad* FAN programme conducts workshops at various organisations and communities which aim at transforming perceptions around masculinity and educating men on how 'authentic' masculinities can contribute to the development of non-violent and caring societies.

The *Boys to Men* programme utilises the idea of the age-old tradition where older men were responsible for initiating boys into manhood through the facilitation of rites of passage programmes. These programmes educate boys on a healthy transition from boyhood to manhood. Through its *Men's Camps* programme, FAN encourages ways of using men's strengths to build a positive society. FAN's *Guyology for Young Men* programme conducts inspirational programmes for boys and young men in educational institutions.

From a brief evaluation of these organisations and/or campaigns and their accompanying aims, it seems that these non-religious organisations create an environment of non-judgement and unqualified acceptance of whatever form a family might take. It is within this open-minded environment that they aim to educate boys and men about various social ills and their unconscious contribution thereof, transforming their perspectives on what it means to be a man and a father, thereby empowering them to play a positive role both inside their families and their broader communities. It seems

then that these organisations become surrogate families for those men who lost their families, where they are educated and directed on how to become a better man and a better father, in the absence of employment and irrespective of their marital status.

## Fatherhood and the Christian faith

Don Browning (1995), a theologian from the University of Chicago, has coined the term 'the male problematic' already in the 1990s, which referred to the disconnection between men and their families. This was in response to the growing number of mothers and children living in households where fathers were absent in the United States (cf. Wilcox 2008:1). According to Browning (2003:76), Judaism and Christianity can play an important role in motivating men to integrate with their families. When looking at some of the research regarding relationships between religious husbands, wives and children, it would indeed seem as if religion contains the possibility of having a positive effect on the family system.

Wilcox (2008:3–5) has found, for instance, that religion enhances the 'physical, economic, and emotional well-being of adults and children', and that religious fathers actively involved in religious traditions are in general more involved in the lives of their children and more affectionate in comparison to fathers who do not affiliate with a specific faith tradition. In the United States, lower levels of divorce are also linked to religious attitudes and lifestyles (cf. Wilcox 2008:6).<sup>4</sup>

How does religion affect positive experiences through family life? Wilcox (2008:6) proposes that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, provides both formal and informal support through their institutions to assist families with many of the challenges that they might experience, resulting in the sustenance of marriage and family life. Christianity through the institution of the church has the performative function of monitoring the behaviour of affiliates, thereby encouraging sexual fidelity and commitment to the family, and providing a meaningful order which supports men to deal effectively and constructively with the numerous stresses of daily living, in a modern, globalised world.

If the proposal that religion and specifically Christianity provide a buffer against social challenges and ills is accepted, why then – in a country where supposedly 86% of people affiliate with the Christian belief (cf. van Zyl 2016, n.d.) – are there an increase in father absence and an attack on the family social structure as a whole? Do these findings perhaps only relate to families that are not exposed to severe socio-economic constraints – the so-called 'father-breadwinner' or 'new man/father' phenomenon, which is confined to middle class, married or cohabiting families? How then does Christianity relate to the construction of fatherhood? Does it

4. In South Africa, not much research has been conducted on the relationship between religion and family life.

offer guidance and support to those fathers who are unwedded and perhaps unemployed?

Rakoczy (2004:31) reminds us that the notion of patriarchy is intertwined with Christian tradition, clearly visible in the images of God in Scripture. Fatherhood cannot be understood outside the paradigm of patriarchy. In turn, Morgan (2001:225) emphasises the embodiment of the 'male headship' in the character of the Christian understanding of father, or the patriarch. The concept of 'patriarch' is also understood as the reign of the father and is especially dominant in Christian discourses around fatherhood, attaching a godlike authority to the role of the father and the husband. It is understood in these discourses that the human father is created in the image of God the Father and therefore deserves equal amounts of respect and obedience (Morgan 2001:225). In addressing the relationship between 'husbands and wives, children and parents and slaves and their masters' (Rakoczy 2004:32), the author of Colossians 3:22–24:1 states that the relationship between a husband and his wife should be one where the wife is subjected to the husband, as it was also the norm in the Graeco-Roman society of the day.

The resulting Christian masculine ideal is then being a good and respected father (Viljoen 2011:311, 318). Take note that respect is always a consequence of the authority and power embodied in the male persona, especially in conservative circles. In a similar fashion, puritan forms of Christianity see the 'the male-headed family as the cornerstone of a healthy society', founded in the primary role of the male headship as provider and spiritual leader (Du Pisani 2001:163). It can then be concluded that the traditional Christian notion around fatherhood finds authority in the structure of the family, and for the 1st century Christians the notion of fatherhood is inconceivable outside this structure – a father loses all power and authority once removed from the family.

The study of the family provides us with valuable information regarding broader gender relationships in the wider society because the family acts as the microcosm of societal gender relations. Different ideologies around gender – especially masculine hegemonic ideologies – seek to control this microcosm in an attempt to control not only the family but also secular spaces (Morgan 2001:231–232). Because Christian religious traditions and practices are to a large extent seen as sacred and closed off to critique, they have immense power in controlling Christian gender roles in the configuration of the family (Koenig-Visagie & Van Eeden 2013:1). Similarly, cultural and religious representations of womanhood and manhood provide men and women alike with appropriate gender scripts of the performance of the respective genders (Brod 1995:15; Whitehead 2002:170). In time these scripts become idealisations on how to be a man and how to be a woman (Koenig-Visagie & Van Eeden 2013:1).

Research on conservative protestant masculinities and related evangelical movements has noted that these movements have focused on 'four archetypes of godly masculinities' (cf. Aune 2010:2): the *Rational Patriarch*, the *Expressive*

*Egalitarian*, the *Tender Warrior* and the *Multicultural Man*. Bartkowski (2004:20) argues that these different ideals of manhood enable evangelical movements to portray an idea of the godly man, which might appeal to different men in different contexts. Stewart van Leeuwen (1993:246–247) in turn postulates that the Christian man's ideal notion of masculinity relates to the concept of the 'warrior man', which relates more to securing his interests as opposed to nurturing and caring for those interests.

Viljoen (2011) conducted research on Christian male notions around fatherhood in the now discontinued South African, Afrikaans Christian magazine, *MaksiMan* and found that the general features of this magazine support the idea that fatherhood and the Christian male identity correlate positively with each other, that boys and girls are raised differently by a father and that raising boys is in some way more important than raising girls (Viljoen 2011:322). Viljoen (2011:324–325) identifies six aspects of fatherhood visible through the articles of the magazine, which are of obvious concern to the male Christian readers. These correlate with the findings of Russel et al. (1999).

The first identified aspect relates to a man's *employment and family financial support*, which are emphasised through various articles titled 'Jou Geld', in the magazine. Here the role of the father as the financial provider and the role of a wife as the primary caregiver are emphasised without considering the reality of unemployment and retrenchment facing many men in South Africa today (Viljoen 2011:324).

*Day-to-day care and interaction with children and child management and socialisation* are the second and third identified aspects, which encourage fathers to take responsibility for the psychological, emotional and physical health of their children by giving advice on how to instill healthy habits with children (Viljoen 2011:325). The fourth aspect relates to the lack of reference to *household work* – no reference is made to the role of a father in assisting with domestic duties. Ironically, however, some recipes are included in the magazine (Viljoen 2011:325).

*Maintaining relationships between caregivers* is the fifth aspect and refers to the magazine's emphasis on the fact that the rearing of children and maintenance of a marriage are a team effort by two people who are committed to each other. The magazine rarely, if ever, makes reference to divorced or separated fathers, denying this reality which forms a large part of the South African society (Viljoen 2011:325). The final aspect is *parental commitment/investment*. Here the magazine narrates the importance of parental – especially paternal – commitment to the raising of happy and healthy children. The latter two aspects might also indicate an aspiration towards the 'new man/father' ideal (Viljoen 2011:325).

In a similar fashion, Koenig-Visagie and Van Eeden (2013) investigated the different representations of gender roles in the media of three corporate Afrikaans churches in Gauteng,

South Africa, and found that the media of these churches sideline fatherhood in relation to infant care, as a possible result of the 'feminisation of the family and of the home', and might be rejected as such from dominant discourses on masculinity (Koenig-Visagie & Van Eeden 2013:10). In fact, they found that in general, the conceptualisation of male leadership took place in three broad categories: home, church and workplace (Koenig-Visagie 2012:162, 206). This directly confronts the 'new man' phenomenon and its actuality as some scholars hypothesise that the phenomenon might just be a mere construction of the media (McKay, Mikosza & Hutchins 2005:281). Nevertheless, they also found that the media of these churches explicitly aim at representing this 'new man/father' ideal through the depiction of the father as present at home, engaged with his children and involved in family activities (Koenig-Visagie & Van Eeden 2013:11).

Koenig-Visagie and Van Eeden (2013:11) also refer to 'the myth of the happy (nuclear) family', which contains and maintains elements of patriarchy and heterosexuality, while simultaneously supporting the so-called 'progressive nurturing' man. What is striking is that their progressiveness and nurturing (as depicted through the media) are limited and exclude infant care. In contrast, women and femininity in the same media are epitomised 'as passive and decorative, as a symbol of spirituality, as mothers and as taking care of others' (cf. Koenig-Visagie 2012; Koenig-Visagie & Van Eeden 2013:11). They conclude that the representation of the 'new father' ideal in the media of these churches functions at the expense of the scope of women's roles.

In the early 1990s, the familial and, consequently, the broader social landscape in the United States and Britain experienced what they called 'a crisis of manhood', as a result of changes in the traditional family structure. According to this hypothesis, masculinity is in crisis because men face the very real danger of becoming redundant and irrelevant in their familial homes, which can result in what they refer to as 'the death of patriarchy' (Clare 2000:120; Silverstein et al. 1999:684). Koenig-Visagie and Van Eeden (2013:4) are of the opinion that in South Africa similar fears are being expressed, both within the conservative Afrikaner and African Christian family and in resulting workplaces.

These changes to patriarchal power within families have resulted – both abroad and in South Africa – in a counter-attack from conservative and fundamentalist Christian movements. The most well-known movements are the *Promise Keepers* of the United States, the evangelical movement of the *Newfrontiers* in Britain and the ministry of *Angus Buchan* in South Africa, which share many similar characteristics with the former movements. These movements have some common characteristics: the propagation of an essentialist vision of fatherhood (Marsiglio & Pleck 2005:251), the conceptualisation and universalisation of parenting roles as exclusively masculine or feminine (Koenig-Visagie & Van Eeden 2013:5) and the promotion of 'hierarchical power relationship of male dominance over women in families' (Silverstein et al.



1999:667). The latter characteristic is essentially based on biblical mandate, elicited from various eclectically selected text, but which disseminates the message that a man has a distinct calling from God to 'head' his home as priest, prophet and king (see [www.mightmenconferences.co.za](http://www.mightmenconferences.co.za)).

As a benefit, Faludi (2000:240) states that these movements make it possible for many men who have lost some of their masculine power as a result of economic loss to maintain their position as the headship of the family. Likening the role of the father to the servitude of Jesus Christ might also result in more nurturing fathers.

In response to this, the following question arises: what are the role and privileges of a father who is divorced from or unwedded to a mother and not residing with the family? It is deduced from these religious discourses that an unwedded, and even more so, unemployed father is not legitimised as the 'head' of the family and might have lost all rights and privileges to any religious guidance with reference to his fatherhood. This brings into question the intentions behind the power relations inherent in the Orthodox concept of Christian fatherhood as the 'head' of the family.

## Conclusion: Restructuring the Christian Fatherhood Model

Morgan (2001:223) is of the opinion that different types of families and ways in which fatherhood is expressed and experienced have always existed. This is in line with the multiple forms of masculinity found globally (cf. Whitehead 2002:153). One such form of masculinity, which has been seen as gaining popularity within religious families, is the so-called new man/father model, where parents have renegotiated their domestic roles and involvement with regard to the rearing and care of the children (cf. Morgan 2001:228). There are a few flaws in this model, however.

The new father paradigm seems to be a bit of an ideal as fathers or men are selective in the tasks that they are willing to be involved with (cf. Cohen 1990:177). Furthermore, some researchers have noted that while the culture pertaining to fatherhood has changed quite rapidly, the behaviour of men has not changed that much. Silverstein et al. (1999:665), for example, state that 'masculine gender role socialization has not kept pace with the rapid social changes that families have been experiencing', and men have therefore not incorporated the idea of nurturing into their cultural masculine identities. Furthermore, researchers like LaRossa (1995:457) and Morrell (2006:22) concur that this model, much like the breadwinner-father model, is a mere myth in many instances and a phenomenon only for the selected middle class few.

I, the researcher, am of the opinion that the biggest flaw of this paradigm is that it does not include the myriad fathers who are unwedded or divorced and/or unemployed. Clearly, both the breadwinner-father model and the new father/husband

model are the preferred models employed by churches and other faith-based organisations in providing guidance and support to fathers, thereby instantly marginalising the majority of fathers who do not conform to these expectations. These fathers then become *abandoned fathers* – abandoned by faith-based institutions that refuse to face the reality of millions of families – ultimately resulting in *abandoned children*.

This article has indicated that various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have prioritised the 'problem' of father absence and are constructively working together with fathers, young boys and communities in empowering them with the necessary skills to become more involved, loving and caring fathers to their children in the absence of their so-called right to authoritarian power. In addition, they are empowering other men to become 'surrogate' fathers to abandoned children, hence supporting the phenomena of both abandoned children and abandoned fathers.

Perhaps it is time to consider different possibilities for the construction of fatherhood. A new construction of fatherhood need not oppose the concepts of family unity, parental authority or equal relations – it should not negate the role of the mother and the responsibilities of the biological father towards his family. It should not supersede the benefits of the traditional family model. It should, however, enhance relationships between a father and his children and his relationship with their mother. It should give unwedded, unemployed and *willing* fathers a rightful place and rightful say in the lives of their children. It should create opportunities for fathers to obtain religious support from religious institutions, as churches realise that they form part of a community of believers who are ultimately accountable to the Christian family as a whole – as broken as it may be.

The following restructuring of the paradigm around fatherhood in South Africa is then proposed:

*De-patrialise fatherhood.* Remove the notion of power from fatherhood – a father need not have money, employment or be wedded to have a rightful place in the lives of his children. A father can be more than just a disciplinarian and a material provider. A father can indeed also be a *mater*, as presented by the life and the behaviour of Jesus Christ, who spontaneously embodied anti-patriarchal behaviour (cf. Jacobs-Malina 1993:2; Van Aarde 1999:113) as stated by van Aarde (1999):

... the fatherless Jesus seemingly behaved in 'mother-like' manner as an adult. It can be seen in his sayings and deeds in which he advocated and acted a behavior of taking the last place at the table, serving others, forgiving wrongs, having compassion and healing wounds. (p. 113)

*Publicise Christian families.* Through the Graeco-Roman world, the Christian family has been privatised, which resulted in the development of strict boundaries and limitations to the care available to the nuclear family.

Often, both women and children were subjected to the wrath of the *pater*, with no one outside the family having any say in private matters. When a family loses the provider-father, the mother and children are left to fend for themselves. In contrast, the early Christian and African notion of family emphasises the responsibility of the whole community in tending to the well-being of all the children. Through publicising families, fatherless children can attain surrogate fathers to guide and mentor them, abandoned fathers can be empowered by the (Christian) community to fulfil their duties as fathers, single-mothers can also be supported by surrogate families and the church, and both the community and the church can become responsible for the combatting of patriarchal domestic abuse.

The church should be at the forefront of dialoguing the constitution of a family, in the same manner in which the historical Jesus did. In the New Testament, the metaphor of the family through the community of Christians is used to enhance basic values, and to legitimise this new-found group. This new family does not only indicate a detachment from one's blood relatives, but also an attachment to a new set of ethos and understanding of family life (cf. Mahlangu 1999:179). Jesus advocated for the *inclusion* of 'outsiders' and Gentiles into the covenant of the family, irrelative of biological relations:

Jesus' subjective identity seems to consist in the status he saw himself occupying: the protector and defender of the honor of outcasts, like marginalized women and children, giving the homeless a fictive home. (Van Aarde 1991:113)

As such all people become the family of Christ and are, therefore, responsible for each other and accountable to each other, even if they fall outside the structure of a nuclear biological family. This makes everyone in Christ a father, a mother, a brother and a sister to each other. The family is then not *privatised*, but *publicised* to the community of Christ.

In light of the 500-year reformation, and with the words of Karl Barth, '*Ecclesia semper reformanda*' [the church must always be reformed], let us reform our ideas around family, parenthood and Christianity as to build a new type of family. In the same manner that Jesus challenged the social structures of the Roman and Jewish culture, perhaps as Christians and as churches, a collective attempt should be made to *understand* our society, to *understand* the challenges people experience, with the aim of creating alternative narratives, in and through which people – the body of Christ – can develop and maintain satisfactorily relations with the people they love, the people they care for and the people they are responsible for.

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