


Promoting family well-being: A practical and eco-theological engagement

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

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

Corresponding author:Fazel Freeks,
fazel.freeks@nwu.ac.za**Dates:**

Received: 27 Feb. 2024

Accepted: 10 May 2024

Published: 30 May 2024

How to cite this article:

Freeks, F.E., 2024, 'Promoting family well-being: A practical and eco-theological engagement', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45(1), a3135. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.3135>

Copyright:

© 2024. The Author.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

The importance of family well-being relates to the eco-theological discourse, ecology and family. Father absence, gender-based violence (GBV), and moral and values quandaries are social ills in society and are linked with eco-theology by shared values. Ecological issues are pressing concerns in the modern world. This article asserts that eco-theology, a form of constructive theology, focuses on the intricate connections among religion, nature, society, the church, and, notably, the 'family' as a vital social unit. From a theological perspective, human beings and the relationships in which they function, are grounded in the very Being of God. However, societal perspectives often depict families as afflicted, fractured entities marred by violence. Disruptions in family life reverberate throughout society, undermining its foundational moral fabric. Amid significant shifts in family structures, South Africa is observing a growing prevalence of fractured relationships, further exacerbating societal challenges. Scriptural teachings, part of the intervention, offer guidance for navigating life's complexities, including within the family, faith communities and broader society (2 Tim 3:16). Thus, this article aims to contribute insights to this critical discourse.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article underscores the role of pastoral care within practical theology, particularly in addressing prevalent social challenges encountered by families. These challenges encompass issues such as father absence, divorce, erosion of values and immoral behaviour. The imperative for developing pastoral care strategies to tackle these issues is evident. These strategies may involve equipping families with necessary skills and support.

Keywords: eco-theology; practical theology; family; wellbeing; fatherhood; father absence; gender-based violence; moral values.

Background

The Christian doctrine that promoted the manipulation and exploitation of nature for human benefit was known as the 'theology of human responsibility over nature', or stewardship. For a considerable period, *eco-theology* primarily focused on exploring the relationship between humanity and the natural world (Conradie 2020:2). The term *eco-theology* gained traction in the late 20th century, particularly among Christians, as it became intertwined with the burgeoning field of ecology. Eco-theology, a theological discourse, accentuates the interconnectedness of God's creation, particularly the natural world. The term 'eco' originates from the Greek word 'oikos', meaning household (Santmire 2019).

Eco-theology achieved full recognition in the 1960s, marked by the seminal contributions of the Protestant eco-theologian Joseph Sittler. Sittler's groundbreaking work, drawing from Paul's letter to the Colossians, advocated for a reimagined notion of grace that embraced rather than shunned nature. Engaging in dialogues with ecologists such as Aldo Leopold and reinterpreting Christian poets like Gerard Manley Hopkins through an ecological lens, Sittler pioneered the incorporation of ecology into theological discourse. In response to escalating eco-theological concerns, Christian eco-theology emerged as a formal academic field in the 1970s (Conradie 2020:1).

The Africa We Want, also known as Agenda 2063, embodies the vision of the African Union (AU) for the year 2063 (AU 2015), envisioning a continent where Africans have actualised their collective aspirations for prosperity, well-being, and the full empowerment of women, youth, boys and girls. A peaceful Africa, driven by its own people, hinges upon the realisation of the seven aspirations delineated in the vision for 2063. Of particular relevance to this discussion is the sixth aspiration, which underscores the importance of Africa's development being driven by its people.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

This entails unlocking the potential of all Africans, including women and youth, and ensuring the well-being of children. This aspiration aligns closely with the promotion of family well-being (AU 2015).

As the 20th century approached, the world found itself at a critical juncture, propelled by a confluence of factors including rapid urbanisation and industrialisation. The widespread adoption of technologies, especially in mining and agriculture, coupled with the pervasive pollution of land, sea and air across the globe, underscored the severity of the challenges facing humanity. Concerns regarding human survival on Earth were compounded by a growing recognition of the interconnected challenges posed by extreme poverty, the depletion of non-renewable natural resources, and rapid population expansion. Communities worldwide found themselves grappling with unprecedented difficulties amid this global crisis. As a consequence of the myriad issues stemming from human activity on the planet, the Christian concept of human dominion over nature faced scrutiny from both proponents and detractors of the faith. By the end of the 20th century, many people considered the idea of human dominance over nature to be scandalous. Nevertheless, certain prominent Christian figures in public policy and theology persisted in championing this perspective, advocating for business-as-usual approaches despite mounting evidence to the contrary.

According to Vorster (2023:117), humans should understand first and foremost that the Creator 'owned' the created world, and God gave humans the responsibility of 'ruling' it. Rather than being a permit for exploitation, the 'dominion' was understood to be a return to Adam and Eve's role as caregivers. Moreover, God's creational order serves as the basis for understanding families (Vorster 2023:117). Numerous principles derived from the creation narrative hold significance for the establishment of family life (Vorster 2023:117).

Introduction

Recently, the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa (SPTSA) organised a conference focused on Practical Theology and Eco-theology, held from 23–25 January 2024. One of the presentations addressed the imperative of enhancing family well-being amid the challenges of a society plagued by destructive social ills. The central premise of this article is that family well-being is deteriorating within the South African context, influenced by a multitude of factors.

Thus, it is deliberate to apply eco-theology to South African families (fathers, mothers and children) because it enhances family well-being. Certain families are involved in the community engagement intervention for family well-being. Numerous families have a limited theological understanding of the social issues discussed in this paper because of the emphasis placed on eco-theology. As a result, families are concerned, confused and outraged. The support system for families helps a family cope with the stresses of societal ills like father absence, gender-based violence, and moral and ethical dilemmas.

Family well-being

According to Yaxley, Gill and McManus (2012):

positive mental health is defined as ... a state of wellness in which a person is aware of their own talents, is able to handle daily stressors, works effectively and efficiently, and is able to give back to the community. (pp. 13–14)

The term 'well-being' is commonly used for a variety of meanings depending on the situation (Yaxley et al. 2012:13–14).

Family well-being in South African society is undermined by various social ills and destructive forces, notably the absence of fathers, gender-based violence (GBV), and a deficiency of moral values, especially prevalent among the youth. These three challenges will be examined in the subsequent sections of the article.

South Africa, marked by a lengthy history of conflict, stands as one of the world's many unequal nations (Gouws 2022). Startling statistics depict the nation grappling with alarmingly high levels of violence, cementing its status among the most violent globally, a distressing reality often normalised by various researchers and authors (Gouws 2022). Moreover, the country is witnessing significant transformations in family composition, leading to a proliferation of broken relationships. According to DuBois and Miley (2010), recalibrations in the parent-child dynamic become imperative. Henceforth, the discourse on father absence becomes pertinent.

Father absence as a destructive social ill in society

The aforementioned has notably led to the prevalence of father absence (Kesebonye & P'Olak 2020:1). According to Molongoana (2016), '[F]ather absence' refers to the physical, social, financial, and psychological absence of a biological father from the life of his child. Meyer (2018:4) identifies these aspects as contributing factors to the breakdown of parental relationships. While Meyer suggests these aspects as *reasons* for father absence, Mabusela categorises them as *factors*. These include fathering children outside of marriage, abandonment, divorce, emotional unavailability despite physical presence, employment or social dislocation (where the father resides separately from the family), and death, all of which contribute to father absence (Mabusela 2014:13).

Father absence also encompasses situations where fathers lack regular interaction with their children and fail to significantly influence their development (Makofane 2015:22, 24). According to Eddy, Thomson-de Boor and Mphaka (2013:7), fathers who do not reside with their children, refrain from communicating with them, and fail to provide financial support are deemed absent fathers. Although the absence of fathers is acknowledged as detrimental, it is important to recognise that fathers who are present in their families can also have a negative impact on the family's well-being (Meyer 2018:2).

The impact of father absence hinders children from both receiving and expressing love, leading to the manifestation of consistent behavioural issues among them (Freeks 2022b:1). Consequently, father absence must be recognised as a social factor capable of exacerbating the challenges and difficulties encountered by many South African families (Department of Social Development 2021). In the absence of a father, weakened relationships become more prevalent, resulting in an increase in dysfunctional family dynamics and a deficiency of affection (Ellis et al. 2012).

In situations where there is a deficiency of affection, the emotional toll of a father's absence tends to be more severe (Morse 2016:14). Furthermore, children raised in families without a father figure not only have limited access to health, education and other forms of support but are also more susceptible to emotional and mood disturbances (Holborn & Eddy 2011:4). Thus, it becomes evident that the emotional availability and engagement of a father are just as crucial as his physical presence (Holborn & Eddy 2011:4).

Father absence persists as a pervasive issue in post-apartheid South Africa (Khan 2018:18). While this phenomenon is not unique to South Africa, it remains a significant hurdle confronting the nation's citizens (McGee 1993:19). Father absence is a global challenge and a substantial social issue with profound implications for families, society and the economy as a whole. Moreover, it often thrusts numerous households into a cycle of poverty (Mutegei 2015:xiv). The widespread absence of fathers exerts a negative impact on all facets of life for both families and society (Mutegei 2015:2). Carstens (2014) asserts that the absence of fathers largely contributes to dysfunctional family dynamics. This phenomenon of father absence transcends individual nations and extends to continents such as Africa, America and Europe (Mutegei 2015:2).

Gender-based violence

Another destructive social ill affecting the well-being of families in South Africa is GBV. According to Finchilescu and Dugard (2018:3), GBV is defined as any act of violence against women (or mothers) that causes or is likely to cause physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering, including threats, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. This definition corresponds with the terminology employed by the United Nations General Assembly meeting convened in 1993. The term 'gender-based violence' covers a range of behaviours, including rape, assault and sexual harassment (Finchilescu & Dugard 2018:3). Sexual harassment is defined as any form of harm, unlawful conduct or physical attack perpetrated by one individual against another; it is not gender-specific and can occur anywhere (Finchilescu & Dugard 2018:3).

Gender-based violence and sexual violence are serious concerns for girls in South African schools, as highlighted by Mayeza and Bhana (2021). The numerous cases of GBV

reported during the strict coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) lockdown, which confined families to their homes, were especially concerning. Interestingly, amid the lockdown, greater emphasis was placed on addressing abusive relationships and the psychological trauma they induce, rather than on the tangible impacts of COVID-19 affecting people worldwide (Mahlangu et al. 2022).

Gender-based violence is also a major cause of unstable, disrupted and broken families, representing a form of warfare against women and children and exerting a destructive force on family life (Freeks 2023:1). It presents a grave threat to health and safety. Despite 29 years of democracy, South Africa continues to grapple with numerous human rights violations (Mashau 2022:1), indicating that GBV is on the rise, with adverse consequences for families residing in the country.

Furthermore, the high statistics of GBV brings the matter to the forefront of political, social, economic, educational and governmental agendas. These statistics underscore the gravity of the issue. According to Mahlangu et al. (2022), one in four adult women in South Africa experiences GBV. Their research further reveals that one in three children will endure sexual and physical abuse before reaching the age of 18. Motene (cited by Mile 2020:4) argues that because some crimes remain unreported and perpetrators go unpunished, statistics only reveal half of the story. According to Mile (2020:4), two out of every five women will suffer physical abuse at the hands of their spouses, and one out of every three women will experience sexual assault. Lekabe (cited by Mile 2020:4) further highlights that between 2019 and 2020, a staggering 380 rapes were reported in educational institutions, underscoring the pervasive nature of GBV. Additionally, Vallabh (2022) notes that African American women in the United States face a 35% higher likelihood of experiencing abuse compared to their white counterparts, despite comprising only 20.8% of the population.

Based on these statistical data, South Africa has the highest global rates of femicide, with an average of one woman killed every 4 h (Frieslaar & Masango 2021:3). Gender-based violence affects one-third of women globally, which calls for it to be regarded as abnormal (Kabongo 2021:1).

It is unsurprising that families are perceived as abused, broken, divorced and fractured units where violence occurs, considering they are the primordial and most fundamental form of relationship in the world (Carstens 2014:9–11).

Moral decay and the lack of values

Moral decay and a lack of moral values are identified as the third social ill and destructive force examined in this article, greatly compromising family well-being within South African society. The discussion around values is not new in South Africa. It often arises when educators and policymakers confront issues related to human rights abuses, societal moral decline and a lack of discipline in schools (Van der Merwe 2011:1). According to Gumede (2022), the moral values of

South African society, whether shaped by democracy, culture or religion, significantly impact people's behaviour, personal spaces, daily interactions, and the functioning of business, politics and government. However, it is noteworthy that these values have frequently been compromised.

Moral values determine what individuals consider appropriate behaviour for themselves, how they believe others will perceive their actions, and what society deems acceptable or unacceptable conduct. Morality provides the framework for guiding behaviour, choices, and actions to prevent misuse, theft, and harm to others. When the fundamental moral principles that should govern behaviour are violated, people in South Africa either engage in widespread corruption or turn a blind eye to it.

Consequently, families are confronted with a moral quandary, necessitating the immediate integration of faith-based principles to tackle this predicament within society. Contemporary society finds itself amid a precarious state of moral deterioration. Families and educational institutions encounter numerous hurdles and grapple with pervasive behavioural issues, particularly among the younger generation (Sekhaulelo 2021:1). The disruption of family life carries far-reaching implications for society as a whole, as it infringes upon the fundamental social morals of the community (Vorster 2023:114).

It is of utmost importance that children are raised in families that offer them sufficient education grounded in moral principles, including discipline and respect (Neufeld & Davis 2010:94–95). The family plays a crucial role as the primary educational institution for young children, imparting values through both instructional methods and, more significantly, by setting an example. Children learn from observing their parents' conduct and can anticipate their behaviours from an early age, thereby shaping their own actions and responses accordingly.

A society's core social values are jeopardised when stable family relationships experience disruption, subsequently affecting the entire society. It is inevitable that any society characterised by broken families will also have compromised moral standards. South Africa, known for its diverse family structures, has historically held various moral codes that accommodate these structures. For instance, tribal traditions upheld patriarchal, heterosexual and predominantly polygamous family units, which placed emphasis on authoritative relationships as a means to raise children in alignment with the tribe's beliefs and practices. The well-being of the tribe hinged upon the establishment of authority structures between parents and children at different stages of development (Vorster 2023:114).

In a context where moral ambiguity prevails, the violation of human dignity within familial settings, including instances of domestic abuse such as GBV, and other destructive practices, can be mitigated through the cultivation of spiritual

and religious values. By imparting knowledge pertaining to the moral foundations of family life, parenthood, and responsible family planning, it becomes possible to address the pervasive issue of homelessness among South Africa's street children. Moral values should be accorded a central role in initiatives such as family counselling and youth sexual education. By promoting the fundamental principles of the family unit, all moral agents engaged in human development and education could help to mend the broken family (Vorster 2023:122).

The moral deficit in society requires recovering the forgotten mandate of character formation (Magezi & Madimutsa 2023:3). Morals and values play a crucial role in character formation and, by extension, in the well-being of families. Consequently, family well-being cannot be effectively achieved in society without character formation. Building character within families involves the integration of values and beliefs (Magezi & Madimutsa 2023:3). If character development is prioritised in terms of family well-being, it can greatly contribute to Christian formation (Magezi & Madimutsa 2023:3). Character development is a collaborative activity among various community institutions, such as the church, educational institutions and even the family (Magezi & Madimutsa 2023:3).

Empirical investigation

The empirical part of the investigation centres around the following research question:

Research question

From the above problem statement, the research question arises: *How can families be restored in terms of well-being and flourishing in society?*

Sub-questions arising from the main research question include:

- What guidelines can be identified for fostering flourishing and well-being in families in the Community Engagement (CE) Project on Family Well-being: A Practical Theological Engagement?
- How can families be trained, equipped and empowered to deal with father absence, GBV, and moral and value dilemmas in society, with the aim of effecting transformative and positive change in society?

Research objectives

The research objectives were to:

- Explore what guidelines are available for promoting the well-being and flourishing of families within the CE Project on Family Well-being: A Practical Theological Engagement.
- Facilitate the training, equipping and empowerment of families, with the aim of fostering transformative and positive change within society.

Research method and design

This article utilises an exploratory design and a qualitative approach to investigate the experiences, challenges and feedback of families with absent fathers, GBV, and the values and moral dilemmas that arise in society. The researcher utilised structured interviews and naïve sketches as the primary methods for data collection from families (Botma et al. 2010:204–206).

Measuring instrument

Using structured interviews and naïve sketches, the researcher attempted to investigate the experiences, challenges and feedback of families. Although it is typically employed in quantitative research, descriptive research can also be used in qualitative research (Vhymeister 2008).

Participants

The participants consisted of families comprising adult fathers and mothers, with a total of 30 participants ($N = 30$), drawn from local communities, churches and congregations in the Ikageng Township, Potchefstroom District, with the assistance of Mosaic Community Developments. Mr Mzwandile Vice, the site administrator of Mosaic Community Developments, was the gatekeeper for this research project.

Sampling

Families were chosen based on their engagement in the CE project on Family Well-being: A Practical Theological Assessment, where they received training, resources and support. A total of 30 families were selected for participation in the qualitative research, comprising structured interviews and naïve sketches.

Data gathering

The researcher and the Mosaic Community Developments identified the participants (families) from the local communities, churches and congregations in the Ikageng Township, Potchefstroom District, and contacted them by telephone to schedule appointments for the structured interviews and naïve sketches. These sessions took place in the training room of the Mosaic Community Developments, chosen for its privacy, conducive environment, pleasant ambiance, comfort and minimal distractions (Pinkoane 2005).

Data analysis

The researcher analysed the qualitative data obtained from the structured interviews and naïve sketches, ensuring that any raw information was transformed into generally relevant and comprehensible data. The results section discusses the data further.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the Theology Research Ethics Committee (TREC) and ethics consent was received on 1 November 2023. The ethics approval number is NWU-00881-23-A6.

Mosaic Community Developments, operating as both a non-governmental organisation (NGO) and a non-profit organisation (NPO), works closely with families across various societal and community contexts. The researcher and Mosaic Community Developments conducted the intervention in adherence to their ethical agreement. During the initial stages of family training, equipping and empowerment, written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants. They were assured of their freedom to withdraw from the study at any point if they felt uncomfortable. In terms of probability, magnitude or seriousness of harm or discomfort, the research project and study posed minimal risk to the participants.

Research and the intervention programme

Research foundation

The primary focus of the research project was the well-being of families, guided by the pastoral-theological paradigm. Pastoral theology, characterised by its grounding in Scripture, practical application and empirical reality, emphasises the role of the church and other faith communities. Situated within the broader world, it offers guidance for supporting, equipping, empowering, educating and preparing families.

The aim of the intervention

The purpose of the intervention (which is based on the research project) was to train, equip, educate and empower South African families to fulfil their crucial role in society and in church.

The planning and implementing of the intervention

To address the aforementioned issues, the researcher partnered with Mosaic Community Developments, as well as churches and congregations in Ikageng Township, Extension 11, Potchefstroom District, to devise an intervention grounded in the research on family well-being, fatherhood, father absence, GBV, and moral and values dilemmas. The intervention engaged faith-based families from the local community over a 6-month period, during which thorough discussions took place to critically address every aspect of implementing a timely, effective and relevant response to pressing social issues, including father absence, GBV and decline in moral values within families and society. Subsequently, the Family Well-being Convention was launched to carry out the intervention, featuring presentations, training sessions and empowerment initiatives tailored to

South African families. Families participated in the convention out of genuine interest and concern for the issues and challenges that impact families and society, as outlined earlier. Invitations were extended to families from neighbouring communities, as well as churches and congregations in Ikageng, Potchefstroom, to attend a presentation dedicated to family well-being during the convention held between 2023 and the beginning of 2024. A group of 30 family members attended the presentation on that specific day.

Training of families

Following the presentation on the fundamentals of family well-being, a support group of 30 family members was formed and trained using a family well-being training manual with the fatherhood programme. The 30 families are single-parent families, consisting of mothers and children ($N = 26$). The biological father is absent, and in other cases deceased ($N = 4$). During the training sessions, families shared and deliberated on certain family issues and social ills within their own family. Workbooks and training manuals served as the assessment criteria for the families that were trained. The training manual included seven practical and relevant sessions, which were as follows: the prevalence of father absence; the issue of gender-based violence (GBV); fathering and mothering concepts; family well-being; pastoral counselling; family values; and character-building components.

Findings

The findings obtained from the families who participated in the structured interviews and naïve sketches are discussed, utilising verbatim quotes and support from literature to enrich and validate the research findings. The literature review aims to compare the results with prior research and draw conclusions. The following six themes emerged from the structured interviews and naïve sketches:

Theme 1: Family well-being matters

For the participants, family holds immense significance and is highly esteemed in society. Participants expressed their views as follows:

'Family well-being is where father and mother are both present and available in the lives of children.' (Participant 1, female, housewife)

'There is a void or vacuum or gap when one parent is present. This is difficult sometimes.' (Participant 2, female, housewife)

'Peace and happiness in the family brings well-being.' (Participant 3, female, housewife)

'These elements can eliminate conflict in the family.' (Participant 4, female, housewife)

Barnard (2018:6) corroborated the findings by suggesting that family well-being can be understood within an ecological framework, which enables families to flourish despite

adversities. Existing research indicates that children who lack affection and nurturing from one or both parents often encounter difficulties in acquiring fundamental life skills such as emotional regulation, trust-building, maintaining relationships and self-awareness. These challenges may ultimately precipitate risky behaviour (Louw & Louw 2014:360; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman 2016:335). The primary caregivers responsible for nurturing family well-being are typically mothers and fathers. However, in situations where mothers and fathers are absent due to various circumstances, other primary caregivers such as aunts, uncles, grandparents and community members may step in to contribute to the well-being of the children. Additionally, the active engagement of parents or caregivers fosters the adoption of healthy habits and the development of constructive coping mechanisms (Yogman & Eppel 2022:15). Strong early bonds are crucial for children to mature into content and self-sufficient adults. This profound connection between parent and child significantly contributes to personal resilience (Frees & Simeon De Jager 2023:3–4).

Theme 2: The importance of Christian values

According to the participants, family well-being is influenced by Christian values such as respect, love, prayer and faith. In this regard, the participants indicated the following:

'Values [*or virtues*] serve as rules and guidelines for how children should act and behave.' (Participant 5, male, gardener)

'Today's youth and children have no longer respect for their parents and other authority figures such as teachers.' (Participant 6, male, cleaner)

'It is important to go back to biblical or Christian values.' (Participant 7, male, unemployed)

'They are lacking values.' (Participant 8, male, unemployed)

Karakas and Lee (2004:57) assert that effective parenting is rooted in values like love, unity, peace and harmony, which form the bedrock of family well-being. Children acquire faith-based values from their home, church and community. Values such as Christ's love, forgiveness and compassion can significantly contribute to the spiritual development of children (Frees 2022a:1–2).

Theme 3: Stronger families are needed in the current society

The participants believe that pastoral counselling strengthens family bonds. They posit that a strong family can resiliently navigate life's challenges. The participants expressed the following views:

'Pastoral Counselling works well because families are emotionally stable.' (Participant 9, female, cleaner)

'When a family is weak, children have the tendency to leave home when there is conflict.' (Participant 10, female, domestic worker)

According to Patton (2005), pastoral care and counselling are deeply rooted in Christian philosophy and behaviour, and a set of guiding principles directs the pastoral response to

various societal issues. However, pastoral care and counselling encompass more than just offering spiritual guidance; it also means taking practical action to assist families, individuals and communities in need (Mk 12:31) (Lartey 2003).

Theme 4: Father absence is a destructive social ill

Furthermore, the participants indicated that father absence is detrimental to families and society. The following excerpts capture their views:

‘Many fathers abandon their families when their wives are still pregnant with their children.’ (Participant 11, male, learner)

‘Family members are at risk and vulnerable because of father absence.’ (Participant 12, female, learner)

Existing research suggests that children who experience father absence may face heightened vulnerability to various challenges, including substance abuse, sexual abuse, violence, crime, suicide, as well as emotional and behavioural issues (Reuven-Krispin et al. 2021:453; Thompson 2018:6). While father absence is not unique to South Africa, it remains one of the country’s most significant social and destructive ills (Dobbs 2013:2). According to Albert et al. (2021:2), the pervasive and persistent nature of father absence in South Africa is exacerbated by unreported fatherhood, denial of paternal responsibilities, household dissolution and divorce. Psychologically, children affected by father absence often experience low self-esteem and subpar academic performance (Magqamfana & Bazana 2020:169).

Theme 5: Gender-based violence breaks families and society

The participants emphasised that GBV has severe consequences for South African society and families. They underscored the fact that the media extensively reports on the effects of GBV in our country, as noted below:

‘Gender-based violence is a monster.’ (Participant 13, female, housewife)

‘Gender-based violence strip[s] women and mothers from their dignity.’ (Participant 14, female, domestic worker)

‘Gender-based violence is caused by men and fathers who are supposed to protect families.’ (Participant 15, female, cleaner)

In South Africa, GBV has become a prevalent phenomenon. It is defined as the expression of power and dominance through physical and verbal acts, as well as violence against an individual based on their gender (Banda 2020:2). Most of the killings and acts of violence against women and children are committed by men (Finchilescu & Dugard 2018:3).

Freeks (2023:3) highlights that husbands, fathers, grandfathers, uncles, male siblings, family members and even women perpetrate violence against women and

children. The most vulnerable and likely victims of GBV in South Africa are young black women from impoverished neighbourhoods (Vallabh 2022).

Theme 6: Church attendance is paramount for the well-being of families

The participants expressed concerns about the youth’s lack of interest and involvement in church life, which is a source of worry for the community’s Christian pastors. They firmly believe that regular church attendance is crucial for families to experience spiritual growth and formation, particularly among the youth. These sentiments are echoed in the following excerpts:

‘Low church attendance is the norm in the community.’ (Participant 16, female, housewife)

‘Young people refuse to go to church.’ (Participant 17, female, housewife)

‘Some parents are no more willing to go to church.’ (Participant 18, female, housewife)

Jansen (2015:104) highlights a concerning trend regarding the lack of youth participation in church activities. It is noted that extremely low church attendance among the youth is prevalent, with many outright refusing to attend. Furthermore, there is a notable indifference among young people towards engaging in church-related activities. Political motivations often influence the youth, leading to conflicts and disruptions within some churches. Additionally, churches often lack trained youth leaders and relevant youth programmes that could help them reach out to the local youth. While the church could potentially serve as a refuge for young people facing challenges, this is not always the case, as it has become disconnected from the struggles of the youth.

Many young people who are active in church life often do not feel loved or cared for, as most churches are often more interested in the passion of youth than in their complexity as human beings (Root 2015:30).

Conclusion

Families encounter a myriad of challenges, and pastoral care stands poised to play a pivotal role in nurturing their faith and spirituality, fostering character development, and instilling a moral compass aligned with the precepts of their faith. Through pastoral care, families’ wounds and problems can be addressed, while a sense of belonging within a faith community can significantly contribute to their well-being. We recognise the presence of societal ills and destructive forces, yet remain steadfast in our belief that God possesses the power to mend and restore. Moreover, families grapple with internal strife alongside societal and ecclesiastical challenges. Nevertheless, through pastoral care and counselling, our aim is to imbue families with the conviction that God can restore and heal, enabling them to thrive and flourish within society. The intervention will be fully described in a subsequent article.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contribution

F.E.F. is the sole author of this research article.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study and project.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

- Africa Union (AU), 2015, *Agenda 2063: The Africa we want*, Final edn., viewed 16 January 2024, from https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/33126-doc-06_the_vision.pdf.
- Albert, L.M., Edwards, J., Pence, B., Speizer, I.S., Hills, S., Hahn, K. et al., 2021, 'Associations of father and adult male presence with first pregnancy and HIV infection: Longitudinal evidence from adolescent girls and young women in rural South Africa (HPTN086)', *AIDS & Behaviour* 25, 2177–2194. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-020-03147-y>
- Banda, Z.J., 2020, 'A survey on gender-based violence – The paradox of trust between women and men in South Africa: A missiological scrutiny', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(1), a5797. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.5797>
- Barnard, H., 2018, *The wellbeing of families in a South African resource-constrained community of Pretoria*, Magister Educationis – M.Ed., University of Pretoria.
- Botma, Y., Greef, M., Mulaudzi, F.M. & Wright, S.C.D., 2010, *Research in health sciences*, Pearson's, Cape Town.
- Carstens, C., 2014, *The world needs a father: A trainers' guide*, Paarl Media Printers, Cape Town.
- Conradie, E.M., 2020, 'The four tasks of Christian ecotheology: Revisiting the current debate', *Scriptura* 119(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.7833/119-1-1566>
- Department of Social Development, 2021. *Revised White Paper on families in South Africa*, viewed 27 February 2024, from https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202107/44799gon586t.pdf.
- Dobbs, P., 2013, *The impact of fatherlessness on the way one relates to God as Father*, dissertation – MTh, University of Otago, viewed 16 January 2024, from <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/4672>.
- DuBois, B. & Miley, K.K., 2010, *Social work: An empowering profession*, Pearson Education, Boston, MA.
- Eddy, M.M., Thomson-de Boer, H. & Mphaka, K., 2013, 'So, we are ATM fathers': A study of absent fathers in Johannesburg, Centre for Social Development in Africa and Sonke Gender Justice.
- Ellis, B.J., Schlomer, G.L., Tilley, E.H. & Butler, E.A., 2012, 'Impact of fathers on risky sexual behavior in daughters: A genetically and environmentally controlled sibling study', *Development and Psychopathology* 24(1), 317–332. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S095457941100085X>
- Finchilescu, G. & Dugard, J., 2018, 'Experiences of gender-based violence at a South African University: Prevalence and effect on rape myth acceptance', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 36(5–6), NP2749–NP2772. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518769352>
- Freeks, F.E., 2022a, 'Transforming fatherless children through faith as a strength perspective: Challenging father absence as a social ill in South African society', *Pharos Journal of Theology* 103(2), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.103.2038>
- Freeks, F.E., 2022b, 'Responsible citizenship is more than a label!: Faith-based values in the domestic domain', *Pharos Journal of Theology* 103(2), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.10330>
- Freeks, F.E., 2023, 'Gender-based violence as a destructive form of warfare against families: A practical theological response', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(2), a8969. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i2.8969>
- Freeks, F.E. & Simeon De Jager, E., 2023, 'Father absence is a risk factor for child neglect and abuse: A biblical and multidisciplinary approach to transform broken families in the South African landscape', *Pharos Journal of Theology* 104(2), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.104.29>
- Frieslaar, B.V. & Masango, M., 2021, '“Blessings or curses”? The contribution of the blessing phenomenon to gender-based violence and intimate partner violence', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(4), a6242. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6242>
- Gouws, A., 2022, 'Violence against women is staggering high in South Africa – A different way of thinking about is needed', *The Conversation*, November 29, viewed 16 January 2024, from <https://theconversation.com/violence-against-women-is-staggeringly-high-in-south-africa-a-different-way-of-thinking-about-it-is-needed-195053>.
- Gumede, W., 2022, *Strengthening democratic morality to undo moral breakdown*, Working Paper 15, Democracy Words Foundation, viewed 26 February 2024, from <https://www.democracyworks.org.za/strengthening-democratic-morality-to-undo-moral-breakdown/>.
- Holborn, L. & Eddy, G., 2011, *First steps into healing the South African family*, Report, South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg.
- Jansen, A., 2015, 'n *Holistiese perspektief op die missio Dei: 'n evaluering van die sendingwerk van die Christelike Gereformeerde Kerken in KwaNdebele (RSA)*, Proefskrif – PhD, Noordwes-Universiteit.
- Kabongo, K.T., 2021, 'The fight against gender-based violence: A missional nurturing of people of peace', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42(1), a2194. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i1.2194>
- Karakas, F. & Lee, M.D., 2004, 'A qualitative investigation into the meaning of family wellbeing from the perspective of part-time professionals', *Equal Opportunities International* 23(1/2), 57–77. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02610150410787855>
- Kesebonye, W.M. & P'Olak, K.A., 2020, 'The influence of father involvement during childhood on the emotional well-being of young adult offspring: A cross-sectional survey of students at a university in Botswana', *South African Journal of Psychology* 51(3), 383–395. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0081246320962718>
- Khan, Z., 2018, *Men and the child support grant, gender, care child well-being*, Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, SA.
- Lartey, E.Y., 2003, *In living colour: An intercultural approach to pastoral care and counselling*, Jessica Kingsley, London.
- Louw, D.A. & Louw, A.E., 2014, *Die ontwikkeling van die kind en adolescent*, 2de uitg, Psigologie Publikasies, Bloemfontein.
- Mabusela, M.H.M., 2014, *Absent fathers: An ecosystemic exploration of context*, Doctoral dissertation, University of South Africa.
- Magezi, V. & Madimutsa, W., 2023, 'Character formation and leadership development: A symbiotic bond for the practice of theological education', *Theologia Viatorum* 47(1), a206. <https://doi.org/10.4102/tv.v47i1.206>
- Magqamfana, S. & Bazana, S., 2020, 'Absent fathers: Psychological and socio-economic implications for black children and directions for future research', *Journal of Psychology in Africa* 30(2), 169–173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2020.1744299>
- Mahlangu, P., Gibbs, P., Shai, N., Machisa, M., Nunze, N. & Sikweyiya, Y., 2022, 'Impact of COVID-19 and the link to women and children's experiences of violence in the home in South Africa', *BMC Public Health* 22, 1029. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-13422-3>
- Makofane, M., 2015, '“Not all men are fathers”: Experiences of African women from families with absent fathers', *Social Work* 51(1), 22–44. <https://doi.org/10.15270/51-1-426>
- Mashau, T.D., 2022, 'Reimagining gender-based violence in the eye of the COVID-19 storm and beyond: A practical-missiological reflection on an African family through the lenses of the biblical narrative of Tamar', *Religions* 13(5), 394. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050394>
- Mayeza, E. & Bhana, D., 2021, 'Boys and bullying in primary school: Young masculinities and the negotiation of power', *South African Journal of Education* 41(1), 1858. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v41n1a1858>
- McGee, R.S., 1993, *Father hunger*, Servant Publications.
- Meyer, J., 2018, 'Restructuring the Christian Fatherhood Model: A practical theological investigation into the “male problematic” of father absence', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(1), a4870. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.4870>
- Mill, K., 2020, *Gender-based violence: A South African plague*, viewed 15 January 2023, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344748162_Gender_Based_Violence_A_South_African_Plague.
- Molongoana, K.R., 2016, *Experiences of father absence: The subjective accounts of young women who grew up without a father*, Doctoral thesis, University of Witwatersrand.
- Morse, S.B., 2016, *Developing a role for men in preventing human trafficking into the sex industry in Madrid*, Unpublished doctoral thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary.

- Mutegi, C.K., 2015, *The impacts of father absenteeism on social vulnerability among modern families in Kenyan urban households: A case study of Kibra County, Nairobi, Kenya*, Unpublished master's dissertation, Catholic University of Eastern Africa.
- Neufeld, B. & Davis, G., 2010, 'Civic, respect, civic education, and the family', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 42(1), 94–111. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2008.00506.x>
- Patton, J., 2005, *Pastoral care in context: An introduction to pastoral care*, John Knox, Westminster, PA.
- Pinkoane, M.G., 2005, *Incorporation of traditional healers into the national health care delivery system*, Doctoral thesis, North-West University.
- Reuven-Krispin, H., Lassri, D., Luyten, P. & Shahar, E., 2021, 'Consequences of divorced-based father absence during childhood for young adult well-being and romantic relationships', *Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Science* 70(2), 452–466. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ifa.12516>
- Root, A., 2015, 'Stop worrying about the Millennials: Learn to love them instead', *Christianity Today* 59(1), 30–36.
- Santmire, H.P., 2019, 'Ecotheology', *Encyclopedia.com*, viewed 16 January 2024, from <https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/ecotheology>.
- Sekhaulelo, M.A., 2021, 'The profile and manifestation of moral decay in South African urban community', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(4), a5422. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.5422>
- Thompson, E., 2018, *Fatherlessness in childhood: A contributing factor to substance abuse in adult males*, Unpublished master's dissertation, Chicago School of Professional Psychology.
- Vallabh, D., 2022, 'Criminalising gender-based violence is not enough', *Mail & Guardian*, viewed 11 February 2023, from <https://mg.co.za/>.
- Van der Merwe, P., 2011, 'n Skoolgebaseerde sosiaalemosionele program as strategie teen misdaad en geweld', *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* 51(3), 388–402, viewed 04 Februarie 2024, from <http://0-web.b.ebscohost.com.innopac.up.ac.za/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&sid=ca83efc9-3d80-4ed1-83ca-i7dc784727b8d%40sessionmgr110&hid=110>.
- Vhymeister, N.J., 2008, *Quality research papers: For students of religion and Theology*, 2nd ed., Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Vorster, J.M., 2023, *Finding a moral compass for South Africa: Where are we? Where could we go?*, AOSIS, Cape Town.
- Yaxley, V., Gill, V. & McManus, S., 2012, *Family well-being: Measuring what matters*, NatCen Social Research, London.
- Yogman, M.W. & Eppel, A.M., 2022, 'The role of fathers in child and family health', in M.G. Grau, M. las Heras Maestro & H.R. Bowles (eds.), *Engaged fatherhood for men, families and gender equality, contributions to management science*, pp. 15–30, Springer, Cambridge, MA.
- Zastrow, C.H. & Kirst-Ashman, K., 2016, *Understanding human behavior and the social environment*, 10th edn., Cengage Learning, Boston, MA.