Exploring the concept of Fatherhood in addressing Moral Decline of Young People

A case study on Fatherhood among Christian believers

Eugene Keet and Eugene Baron[1]

Abstract

Families are negatively affected by the absence of fathers in the family system. Initially, the study commenced with a focus on male, biological fathers, and the significance of their presence/absence in relation to the moral decline of young people aged 12 to 23. This was done through conducting semi-structured interviews with five congregational leaders from churches in the Dwarsriver Valley[2], between Stellenbosch and Franschhoek as well as a World Café with members of five congregations.[3] However, one of the foci of the research was to investigate the understanding of the participants on the concept of fatherhood. The researcher takes note of the primary two schools of thought functioning in Christian theological discourse. The one exclusively based on a biological, male figure, with the exclusive task of the head of the household, as God ordained, and understanding of God's of fatherhood.[4] However, the other approach is a critique of such an approach, reject such an exclusive right, and include other father-figures as also God ordained, and inclusive of the fatherhood role. The focus of the article is to answer the question: How does the members of the churches in Dwarsrivier Valley conceptualises and articulates the fatherhood concept? The objective of this article was to report on the understanding of the fatherhood concept, and how the participants in the study would reflect and understand the fatherhood concept in the light of the abovementioned fatherhood paradigms.

Keywords: Dwarsriver Valley, youth, missional church, *missio Dei,* missional father, fathers, father figures, patriarchy.

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1   It should be noted that this article uses the key finds of the PhD thesis of Eugene E Keet (2023). Dr. Eugene E Keet (Ph.D) is a former student of the Department of Practical and Missional Theology at the University of the Free State (UFS), and can be contacted at eugenekeet@gmail.com. Prof Eugene Baron is an Associate Professor in the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology at the University of South Africa (UNISA), and the Editor-in-Chief of HTS Theological Studies. He can be contacted at barone@unisa.ac.za

2   The Dwarsriver Valley include the communities of Kylemore, Pniel, Lanquedoq and Johannesda

3   URCSA Kylemore, Old Apostle Kylemore, Congregational Church Pniel, Encounter Ministries Johannesdal and Anglican Church Languedoc.

4   Examples can be seen in the teachings of preaching of a famous Christian preacher, Angus Buchan. His teachings reinforce male relational power and present a „soft patriarchy", with men assuming leadership roles that demand submission and obedience from women (Nadar. 1 April 2010. „The Wrong Kind of Power". Mail & Guardian. Retrieved 5 February 2023). Buchan also believes that women who do not submit to their husbands "are going against the Word of God" (Rebecca Davis. 24 April 2017. "The Gospel According to Angus Buchan". Daily Maverick. Retrieved 5 February 2023).

1. Introduction

Moral decline is a universal challenge that affects many communities. It has also become endemic in South Africa; violence and poverty have increased in an unprecedented way, unemployment is sky high, the crime rate is shocking, and debauchery, vandalism, and corruption have basically become normal (Sekhaulelo, 2021:1-2, Khamango, 2020). According to literature the absence of fathers has a significant impact on the community and development of young people (Jansen, 2021:8-9). Like in the case of many rural communities, the Dwarsriver Valley also struggles with wounded young people with displaying a sense of hopelessness, and often result in delinquency. In the Dwarsrivier Valley where most residents are Christians, it was crucial to understand the contribution of the Christian faith to the moral dilemma. In pursuit of investigation the contribution of the Christian Faith, the understanding of the role of the father in terms of his presence/absence is an important discussion in the discourse on youth delinquency. However, among all the questions to be ask, one of the most contested concepts is that of fatherhood among various Christian scholars. It was, therefore, important to acknowledge the different understandings among Christian scholars, but also how this has been conceptualised and understood in Christian Faith communities, and its impact on addressing the issue of youth delinquency. Before discussing this tension in Christian scholarly discourse, the authors want to provide some contextual analysis on the problem of youth delinquency, and how various scholars have articulated fatherhood in the context of youth delinquency.

2. Context and background

Fatherlessness leads to an increase in households headed by mothers (Amoateng et al., 2004:5). A 2016 survey by the HSRC revealed the following statistics about South African children: About 3% (about 556,000) live with their biological fathers; over 41% (about 7,524,000) live with their biological mothers; 34% (about 6,316,000) live with both parents and 22% (or 4,148,000) do not live with any of their biological parents (Van den Berg & Makhusha, 2018:34). According to Statistics South Africa, around 60% of fathers are absent from households (Stats SA, 2017). Statistics SA's 2017 census survey indicates that 30.93% of households in the Dwarsrivier Valley are headed by women. This shows that absent father figures are also prevalent within the local context of the Dwarsrivier Valley.

According to Freeks (2013:3) a concomitant factor is the erosion of the father image which has far-reaching consequences. The absent father and fatherlessness are global problems, though, and not restricted to South Africa. According to Freeks (2013:8–18; 2011:1–4; 2004:1–6) and Freeks and Lotter (2009:520–524), absent fathers and fatherlessness have been identified as two of the most

pressing problems in at least twenty countries. Munroe (2008:18) argues that from a biblical perspective, fathers are instruments in God's hands, so their choice of instruction and discipline must be in line with what God wants. According to Freeks (2016:1) statistics and literature reflects a decline in family values and fatherhood. However, what does Freeks, and others mean by "fatherhood"?

In this article the authors reflect on the concept taking into account that behaviour and experiences of fathers in specific ecological contexts since the construction of the notion of fatherhood varies across historical periods and cultural contexts. In terms of a critical realist paradigm, the notion of "fatherhood" can be both exist objectively as a concept, appropriated as true, but being negotiated through critical engagement and in conversation. The term "fatherhood" is therefore one that is constructed within a trustful, and affirmation of God's truth through engagement with Christians. The research question on the understanding of fatherhood was prompted, because firstly conventional assumptions of fatherhood emphasise the role of a male figure in providing financial support and discipline within the family. However, the evolving understanding of fatherhood recognises that fathers are also involved in nurturing and caring roles, actively participate in child-rearing, and contribute to the overall well-being of the family. This shift challenges the notion that fatherhood is limited to specific gender identities and acknowledges the importance of diverse family dynamics.

3. Fatherhood as a contested concept in Christian theological discourse

There is no uniform definition of fatherhood, and it is understood and lived out differently in different contexts (Rabe, 2006:25). Even so, although there are numerous perspectives on fatherhood, research has shown that universally fathers play a very important role in the family (Vaughan, 2010). What is important is to establish how does different Christian scholars discuss the notion of fatherhood, based on their reading of the Bible and understanding and believing in God.

The first, and most prominent discussion is the one that underscores the patriarchal dimension of the concept. Those, for example, Meyer (2018:3) would argue that because the term is imbued with patriarchal dimensions because it emphasises protection and provision. Marsiglio and Pleck (2005:256) draws the conclusion that this conceptualisation of father also encompasses the importance of fathers as protectors, providers, and role models.

Du Pisani (2001:163) mentions that women were expected to conform to certain roles within puritan society. In stark contrast for Pillay (2013:55) patriarchy cannot be the answer to world problems, and the church should address them. She argues that patriarchy implies a man-centered perspective of life and relationships. There is a movement in South Africa can emphasises the role of Christian

men taking charge of households which is brough together under the banner of the Mighty Men Conference.[5] Nadar (2009:569) believes that this movement conveys the wrong message with its slant. She argues that it creates an incorrect impression among men about what it means to be a man because it is based on an outdated and destructive conception of masculinity. Nadar (2009:559-560) argues that rather than reducing violence among men, this initiative has the potential to make it worse. To address this problem, she suggests deconstructing, reconstructing alternative masculinities, and identifying positive role models.

The patriarchal discourse, according to Landman (2009:91), portrays the church as male, and that the Bible does not include female leaders or gays as leaders. In the LGBTQ+ community, this social mindset contributes to discrimination and violence, creating an environment that can lead to abuse and hate crimes for members of the community. According to Landman (2017:368), using gendered language in religious texts perpetuates gender inequalities and excludes individuals because of their gender. As a result, it limits the scope of inclusivity and alienates individuals who do not fit traditional roles.

To ensure the safety of LGBTQ+ individuals, Nadar (2009:2) suggests that recognising and opposing this system is essential. Meyer (2018:3) states that the concept of a divine hierarchy is based on the belief that God placed men in a higher position than women. This signal is also emphasised by Nadar (2013:554), who refers to the Promise Keepers Movement[6] and Mighty Men's Conference (Angus Buchan) in which men are considered to be the absolute heads of households. For their husbands to be the authority figures in the home, wives must support and honor them. Due to this view, men are considered to be the primary decision makers in the family, while women and children are viewed as subservient and secondary. In turn, women and children can be disrespected and their opinions and autonomy disregarded, which can lead to a lack of respect. A study by Pillay (2015:16) suggests that the Sermon on the Mount contains repeated instances of male exclusive terms such as son/s, man/men, brother, father, and he (Mathew 5:13,15,19,22,45; 6:1,16,18; 7:3-5,8,9,12,21). In her view, the Sermon on the Mount demonstrates a lack of inclusion and value for women.

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[5] Mighty Men's Conference was founded in 2004 by Angus Buchan, a South African farmer and evangelist with Scottish heritage. It empowers men spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Men are encouraged to become leaders in their homes, communities, and workplaces, and opportunities for networking and mentoring are provided. Men from all walks of life are encouraged to join the conference to promote unity, fellowship, and camaraderie (Nadar, 2009:21-26)

[6] Promise Keepers is an Evangelical Christian parachurch organization for men which originated in the United States. Promise Keepers describes its goal as «to bring about revival through a global movement that calls men back to courageous, bold, leadership. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Promise_Keepers

In contrast to these authors views on Fatherhood, as not a mere "man-affair" other scholars would use also the bible and their believe in God to emphasise men as the head of households. According to Freeks (2021:4), Bergh (2002:105-110), Morris (2007:12), and Steytler (2007:28-30) earthly fatherhood is a reflection of God's Fatherhood in the sense that it serves as a prototype or example of God's love, guidance, and protection for His children. Just as earthly fathers provide nurture, support, and example, God's Fatherhood represents the ultimate source of love, wisdom, and divine intervention for humanity. This connection highlights the fundamental roles and responsibilities of fathers in both human and divine contexts. Smail (1980:10) argues that the traditional understanding of fatherhood is often characterized by authority, provision, and role modelling. However, the idea of knowing God as Father implies a deeper spiritual connection, highlighting love, grace, and forgiveness (Smail, 1980:10).

According to Freeks (2020:1), fatherhood represents the essence of masculinity as it encompasses the qualities of strength, responsibility, and leadership. It symbolises a man's ability to provide and protect his family, just as a biological father carries the responsibility of guiding and nurturing his children. This concept highlights the importance of fatherhood in shaping a man's identity and defining his role as a spiritual leader and role model within his family. Presenting God's fatherhood image analogically suggests that the man should take on the role of a leader and provider in his family, just as in the case of Jesus Christ and the church (Freeks, 2020:5). Freeks (2018:1) asserts that the father is the priest and head of the family, and that he must govern the family according to the principles and regulations of the Bible, as described in 1 Corinthians 11:3. This is also supported by Kiesling (2017:88) that argue God reveals Himself predominantly through the metaphor of the father in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

4. Research Design

The researcher considered three paradigms: the positivistic, the social constructivist, as well as critical realism. Positivism has a strong emphasis on objectivity and scientific rigor, allowing for precise measurements and statistical analysis. However, it assumes that reality can be objectively observed and lacks consideration of social or cultural factors (Hiebert, 1999:3). In theology, some researchers might argue that the truth can be found in the biblical text without much subjective inferences, especially through exegeting and historical criticism and understanding the original languages in which the Bible was written. Social constructivism emphasises the subjective nature of knowledge and the importance of social constructs, providing valuable insights into power dynamics and societal influences. However, it may lack the ability to provide precise measurements or test specific hypotheses

(Hiebert, 1999:52). Critical realism combines elements of positivism and social constructivism, acknowledging the both the objective and subjective aspects of reality. The choice of critical realism because crucial as a paradigm for this study.

According to critical realism, reality is complex and multifaceted, and logical reasoning and empirical evidence can improve our understanding of it (Smith & Elger, 2012 :14). As a result, we can make better informed decisions based on the available evidence and better understand the world around us. In critical realism, participants in the study's hermeneutics are able to relate to existentially objective reality and the Bible.

According to a critical realism paradigm, all attempts to understand the world begin with our own concept of it. It is a combination of philosophy of science (transcendental realism) and philosophy of social science (critical naturalism). Heibert (1999:69) identifies critical realism as „critical common sensism" based on Pierce's (1955:18) definition of critical realism. Critical realism argues reality is multifaceted and complex. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of context when demonstrating claims. Our understanding of the world is incomplete, and logical reasoning and empirical evidence can assist in improving it. In order to make more informed decisions and draw more accurate conclusions, a variety of perspectives and evidence must be considered.

Based on the principle of perception, Pierce (1955:18) argues that we can determine how things really are by taking advantage of its principle. Through this knowledge, we can make more informed decisions and lead a more fulfilling life. According to Yip (2014:404), essentialist notions of cultural difference are inadequate to comprehend the complexity of postmodern and globalized societies. Using a critical realist perspective, knowledge is seen as both subjective and objective, as well as situated both within a cultural and historical context (Hiebert, 1999:74). This approach views knowledge as dynamic and constantly evolving and believes that knowledge production is a social process. It highlights the importance of understanding the context in which knowledge is produced and consumed.

In the study, a qualitative approach using the World Café[7] method with focus questions was used. The World Café method was preceded by semi-structured interviews with church leaders who served as gatekeepers for their parishioners. It acted as an intermediary between the researcher and potential research participants, granting or denying access to potential participants based on their eligibility.

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[7] Essentially, a World Café function as a focus group. A World Cafe fosters open communication and collaboration among participants. It creates a relaxed and informal atmosphere that encourages individuals to freely express their thoughts and ideas without fear of judgment or criticism. This openness allows for the cross-pollination of ideas and the sharing of diverse perspectives, leading to a more comprehensive and diverse range of solutions and insights Fouché and Light (2011:1).

The World Café format is a flexible and efficient way to facilitate large group dia-
logues. Through collaborative dialogue, knowledge is shared and possible answers
to research questions are developed.

Five churches participated in the study. These churches are: The Uniting Re-
formed Church in Southern Africa or URCSA (Kylemore), Encounter Ministry
(Charismatic/Pentecostal) (Johannesdal), Old Apostle Church (Kylemore), Angli-
can Church (Lanquedoc) and Congregational Church (Pniel). The following crite-
ria were used for selecting participants:

- Biological father figures who live with their children.
- Non-biological father figures living with young people.
- Biological mothers of children.
- Biological father figures who do not live in the same household with their
  children.
- Young people who are students or working.
- All participants must be over the age of 18.

Through this methodology, the researcher attempted to gain an understanding of
different Christians' understanding of the notion of "fatherhood" as well as that of
"fathers" themselves which allow not only their subjective construction of reality,
but their belief in terms of their own faith (Christian) and how this play into the
problematic moral decline of young people in their district.

5. Research findings

The following themes emerged as Christian participants, committed to their belief
in God, understood and describe concept of father in relationship to such a concept
and role in the Dwars River Valley. In the first instance they understood a father to
be a role model. For instance, participant GV52WC9 mentions:

> *It is worth noting to see how positively children speak of their fathers regardless of
> whether he is a drug addict, drinker or unemployed. A father remains a father.*

Barker (2008:1-3) does not only ascribe this to the father allow but would also
include it as a function of "parents" arguing that parental behaviour plays a cru-
cial role in shaping children's moral foundation. Children observe and learn from
their parents' actions, attitudes, and values, which serve as models for behaviour.
Through imitation, children develop their own sense of right and wrong, as well as
their beliefs, attitudes, and values. Therefore, in an inclusive way he states, parents
must exhibit ethical behaviour and provide positive role models to ensure their
children develop a strong moral foundation. In Freeks' (2004:102) case the father
is regarded as the ideal role model for children. He asserts that dads (reference to

male figure) who engage positively in their children's lives can also serve as role models for other dads. By embodying positive traits and accomplishments, male role models can inspire individuals to strive for success, lead with integrity, and contribute to the betterment of society as a whole. The role modelling is differently attributed also by Bogardus (2020) and Atigbi (2018) that fathers are the ones to be seen to live the Godly lives.

For their children to follow their example, fathers must live godly lives (Atigbi, 2018). Fathers provide children with a role model that they can look up to and emulate. They also provide an emotional and physical support that can help children develop a sense of security and self-esteem. As Barker (2008:1-3) states, children naturally tend to imitate their parents' behaviour. In addition to providing them with a strong moral foundation, a father who lives according to the Word of God will likely inspire his children to follow God's teachings as they grow up.

In conclusion, fathers play a crucial role in shaping their children's beliefs and values by observing and learning from their parents' behaviour. As role models and providers of emotional and physical support, fathers have a lasting impact on their children's spiritual development and their ability to follow God's teachings. The participants also describe fathers as protectors. Some of them[8] assert,

Fathers are caretakers and protectors of their familiesI believe that fathers should be caretakers and protectors of their children. Care should not only be materialistic but also emotional. They must be there for their children.

They also see a father as a protector, and is one that provide nurturing and emotional support to enhance family relationships. This conceptualisation of fatherhood is supported by scholars such as Arnone (2021:15), that argues that the traditional role of fatherhood also be supported should with roles of nurturing and emotional support. In order to provide security, affirmation, and direction, it is essential for a father to get involved in his children's lives. By doing so, the children will become better equipped to handle life's challenges and opportunities. By actively engaging in their children's lives, fathers can provide them with the necessary security, affirmation, and direction to navigate life's challenges and opportunities effectively.

According to Rabe (2006:173), the father as patriarch was a respected individual in South African society. Furthermore, the father was also seen as the protector of family against dangers of whatever nature they may be and he was a role model especially among boys The father's role as protector of the family extends beyond physical dangers and encompasses providing emotional support and stability. He is perceived as someone who safeguards the family's well-being, ensures their financial security, and offers guidance in navigating challenges. This perception instils

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[8] Participants GM54WC and GV52WC4

a sense of trust and confidence in the father, making him a revered figure in the family and community.

A number of participants in the study, such as participant ENC1, participant GV58WC21, and participant OA1, emphasise male leadership and see the man as the head of the household as a divine hierarchy. Fathers are the head and saviour of their wives and children, just as Christ is the head and saviour of the church. According to participant ENC1:

> *women can sometimes be more powerful than men, but they must also allow men to take charge. In places where women are single and head of households, marriage is encouraged since it is orderly according to Scripture and brings salvation to the household*

Therefore, Meyer (2018:10) argues that fatherhood is typically seen as a patriarchal enterprise that emphasises the provision of children with protection and care. The result of this she argues is the formation of a hierarchical family structure where fathers have power and control over their children, which can have detrimental effects on the development and well-being of children. The is reflected in the response of participant GM38FG3,

> *As a father, I also prefer that the mother should stay at home and look after the children*

Connell (2005:71) would cautions, and argue that agendered power structure reinforced this power structure by assigning women to the domestic sphere and men to the public sphere. Hovorum (2015?142) also warns against this idea of relegating women to such roles, and states, that these kinds of systems perpetuate male dominance over women, resulting in unequal access to resources and other rights. He (2015:142) also accuses the ecclesiology of churches as one of the main causes of this societal phenomenon. This approaches as seen above and raised by the participants is said to have negative consequences for men. It perpetuates the idea that men should be the sole providers and emotional a rock for the family, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and pressure to meet traditional masculine norms. Additionally, it can limit men's opportunities for emotional expression and involvement in domestic tasks, which can hinder their overall well-being and relationships with their children.

However, participants did not see male fathers, as "macho" but also having shortcomings. For instance, participant VGK2 asserts:

> *Fathers must learn to admit their shortcomings*

He support this with some biblical evidence, captured in the story of Monoah, Samson's father, that confessed to the Lord that he had no idea how to raise his son. There is a sense of "dependence" of the fathership role that participants are reflecting. Scholars like Zscheile (2012:12), are that father that is participating in God's mission should acknowledge their weaknesses since only our heavenly Father is perfect. Therefore, in terms of what the participants understood the fathers are as well vulnerable, and from such a position connect with their children on a deeper level, fostering trust and understanding. This vulnerability might create a space for open communication, enabling fathers to better understand and support their children, ultimately strengthening the bond between them.

There were those that rather focused in the function that on a title, and for them fatherhood was described in the words of participant GM46 as follows,

> *A father is not just a title but a function that one fulfils. If you act fatherly, others will see you as a father figure and respect you as such.*

Fathers are those that spend time with their children the data reveals. One of the participants (OV25WC19) said,

> *…he makes time for me and shows interest in things that are important to me.*

It is important that fathers and children have a close relationship, according to Van den Berg et al. (2021:28). Modern families require fathers and children to interact personally and practically to fulfil their social, physical, and emotional obligations. The study found that fathers who spend time with their children generally build strong bonds and foster trust and understanding. A close father-child relationship can have numerous benefits. It can promote positive self-esteem and self-confidence in children, as they feel loved and supported. It can also contribute to better academic performance, emotional well-being, and social skills. Additionally, a close father-child relationship can lead to healthier relationships with other significant adults in a child's life, such as mothers and caregivers (Van den Berg et al., 2021:28).

Some participants would argue that fatherhood is a divine calling. They argue for instance that part of their „divine vocation", fathers must act lovingly, be long-suffering and merciful, and lead by prayer (Participant GM32WC21). There were participants that see the role of father as a priestly role, as the "house priest" (OA1). What was interesting as well is that some of the participants who argue that the role has been sacramental, and therefore during the baptism in their congregation the child is returned to the father as the priest of the house (family).

Scholars such as Andoh and Hawkson (2019), would argue that fathers in the church are called to a missional lifestyle and should see themselves as God's representatives, which the participants in this case witness in their own church practice of the sacrament of the Holy Baptism. The father must show his children how to make decisions based on biblical principles, how to listen to the Holy Spirit, and how to deal with difficult situations. Fathers in the church play a crucial role in modelling a missional lifestyle to their children. They are called to represent God in their daily life by setting an example and making decisions in line with biblical principles. By actively engaging with the Holy Spirit and facing difficult situations with courage and integrity, fathers can equip their children with the same mindset and a desire to serve and follow God (Andoh & Hawkson, 2019).

The participants agreed that fatherhood was a divine calling with fathers being responsible for teaching their children about morals, values, and faith. These views were in agreement with some of the literature (Freeks, 2011:141). The implications of fatherhood being perceived as a divine calling are that it highlights the importance of fathers' role in shaping their children's moral compass and values. It emphasizes the responsibility fathers have in guiding and teaching their children about their faith.

Nonetheless, there were also a move explicit move towards an alternative, a non-biological idea of fatherhood.

The data suggest that the church is moving away from a common understanding of fatherhood as a male figure. For instance, participant OV25 states,

> *I consider my current pastor to be my father. He cares for me, encourages me and gives direction where needed. I also encourage other men in the ministry to do the same as there is such a big void and young people are looking for someone they can trust.*

There was another one that states,

> *I myself live with my aunt and uncle. My uncle is like a father to me and I treat him like that too (participant OMWC40).*

Participant OV25WC said:

> *my father himself is very involved in the church and plays a fatherly role for many other young people who are not even family. Paternity is not limited to biological connection*

Participant GM74WC said:

> *gay couples who adopt children also play a paternal role. In many cases they also perform a good task, although this is still experienced with great pessimism in our society*

In reflecting on the data, it confirms that idea that the role of a father can sometimes be played by educators, priests, grandparents and uncles According to Rabe (2006:54), non-traditional father figures such as educators, priests, grandparents, and uncles can positively influence children by providing guidance, support, and mentorship. For example, educators can instil values and life lessons through education, priests can offer spiritual guidance and support, grandparents can provide unconditional love and mentorship, and uncles can serve as role models and provide guidance in various aspects of life. These figures can collectively contribute to a child's development, shaping their character and providing a sense of belonging and security.

This might be good news for scholars such as Landman (2009:91) that would argue that the patriarchal discourse portrays the church, the body of Christ, as a male entity, and that the Bible does not accommodate female and gay leadership. Excluding female and gay leadership in the church perpetuates gender stereotypes and discrimination, undermining the inclusivity and equality that should be valued by religious institutions. It also restricts the perspectives and experiences that contribute to the spiritual growth and development within these communities, limiting the potential for diverse and innovative approaches to faith (Landman 2009:91-92). Her challenge with this approach is that it reinforces the marginalisation and exclusion of individuals who may be seeking spiritual guidance and support, creating a barrier for individuals seeking a sense of belonging and acceptance within the church.

Another significant finding is that the parenting roles are seen as being interchangeable. For instance, participant ANG1 argues that recognition must be given that roles between men and women are interchangeable and mentions:

> *… in some cases, the roles of men and women are sometimes reversed. With this, the participant suggests that fatherhood is a function and cannot necessarily be linked to a certain gender.*

Another p(ANG1) also mentions:

> *God's motherly character should be emphasised more.*

It has become increasingly common for men to assume roles traditionally held by women, including caring for children and managing the household. The traditional roles of

men and women have become increasingly flexible in recent years. Likewise, women, in turn, are taking on roles traditionally held by men, such as working full-time and pursuing higher education. As a result of the shift in traditional roles, gender dynamics have become more equitable in both the workplace and the home (Oláh et al., 2018:46-48). Women are increasingly entering the workforce, challenging the traditional position of fatherhood, which necessitates the development of a new model of fatherhood. Modern fatherhood is undergoing a significant transformation as gender roles become more flexible and societal expectations evolve. Fathers are playing a more engaged and active role in their children's lives, participating in household chores and caregiving, as well as assuming a leadership position in the family. This shift reflects the recognition of the importance of father involvement and the positive impact it has on child development and overall family well-being (Oláh et al., 2018:46-48).

As Khunou (2006:42) states in our society and social policy, caregivers are often assigned roles that are not given to others. In this new model of fatherhood, both parental roles are interconnected, and they must be supported as such in order to be flexible and fluid within the family unit. In addition to the well-being of mothers, fathers and children, this new model of fatherhood is essential (Bailey, 2015).

It is argued by Spencer (2010:5) that God is not confined to human gender roles, and a number of metaphors have been employed in describing him that are gender neutral. Their use of masculine, feminine, and neuter imagery facilitates a deeper understanding of God, including his infinite compassion and love. Both parents can share household and childcare responsibilities and contribute equally to the education of their children. As a result, both parents benefit when they work together to create a shared household and parenting arrangement.

6. A constructive discussion on the notion of Fatherhood

Due to the differing perspectives on how fathers and father figures view themselves and how they wish others to perceive them, this researcher wishes to examine the role of fathers as God's agents critically.

According to the researcher, fatherhood and motherhood are no longer binary concepts, but are rather fluid and continuously evolving. Both fathers and mothers play an important role in their children's lives, and they should both be recognized and celebrated regardless of their gender roles. In patriarchal fatherhood, power imbalances can result in the father controlling family resources and decisions. When this type of authority is abused, it can result in disrespect for the mother's role and agency within the family, thereby creating a cycle of violence that leaves the children vulnerable (Clare, 2010:184). There are some constructive contributions that scholars make that would also affirm the above and the movement of participants in the Dwars River in understanding the notion of fatherhood.

6.1 Emphasize priesthood of all believers

The study reveals that fathers play an important role in the spiritual development of families and faith communities, and that their actions play a significant role in the spiritual development of the family. It has been argued by Sweet (2009:174) that a number of Protestant denominations advocate for the concept of "priesthood of all believers". However, in institutionalized churches there exists a distinct divide between clergy and laity, which impedes the church from achieving this goal effectively.

It is the father's responsibility to lead his family at the home altar and remind them that God has bigger plans for their family as a whole, as well as for each individual. He should also encourage and promote spiritual growth and development in the family. Despite institutionalized churches separating clergy from laity, Bosch (2011:215) maintains that the priesthood of all believers was intended to strengthen Christians' sense of responsibility and call to serve God. The priesthood of all believers implies that all Christians have a shared responsibility and duty to serve God and live out their faith. It encourages individuals to take an active role in their spiritual journeys and take responsibility for their own spiritual growth and service to others (Bosch, 2011:215). This belief challenges the traditional hierarchical model of church and empowers believers to embrace their roles and responsibilities as followers of Christ.

In this researcher's view, fathers should lead their families in prayer and worship, and create an environment conducive to their spiritual growth. There is a challenge for the missional church within the Dwarsrivier Valley in preparing fathers to exercise their priesthood in their private and public life.

6.2 Embrace women's leadership in churches

Some participants advocated that men should be responsible for the welfare of their families from both a material and a spiritual standpoint. Women and children are thus often considered secondary in the family, resulting in a form of patriarchy (Meyer, 2018:3, Nadar, 2009:554).

It has been suggested by Koenig-Visagie and Van Eeden (2013:11) that patriarchal theology reflects the longstanding traditional gender roles. In the Afrikaner Christian context, for example, the emotional role of the woman is viewed as one of selflessness, as she is expected to be a caring and sacrificial mother, wife, and daughter-in-law and daughter who places her family's needs above her own.

Based on Alard's and Freeks (2021:11) view, the husband/father as head of the home should be the leader of his wife and children. This is because, according to the Bible, the husband/father is the head of the household and is responsible for leading his wife and children. He should be the one who sets the tone for the family, sets boundaries, and lays down the law. He should also be the one to provide for the family financially and ensure it is taken care of.

According to Fiorenza (1993: 220) a number of early church leaders emphasized patriarchal structures even though a different approach, one that emphasizes collective discipleship and inclusiveness. In her opinion, patriarchal structures are in conflict with Jesus' teachings, which emphasize equality and the inclusion of all people regardless of gender. In addition, she argues that the gospel message outlines a blueprint for collective discipleship through which all members of the Christian community can work together to create an inclusive, strong, and equitable community Fiorenza (1993: 220). The researches argue that embracing women's leadership will provide equal opportunities for women to take on leadership positions and encourage them to contribute to decision-making processes. It will create a supportive and inclusive environment that values and empowers women leaders, ultimately fostering diversity, innovation, and positive change.

6.3 Economic vulnerability and fatherhood

According to Meyer (2018:7), patriarchal societies traditionally view a man as the head of their household and also the breadwinner. In addition to religious teachings, this traditional view may have evolved due to the fact that the family has become the centre of society. This view is often reflected in gender roles and expectations, with women often expected to take on the role of homemaker and caregiver. This traditional view of gender roles has been challenged in recent years, with greater acceptance of women in the workplace and in other areas of life. Ademiluka (2021:1) states that various Christian teachings also support this view that males should lead, whereas females should follow. It perpetuates a traditional gender role and reinforces the idea that men should provide for and protect their families, while women should be submissive and supportive.

Men often lack the privileges of dominant and successful masculinity and parenthood because of their difficult financial circumstances (Meyer, 2018:6). Financial constraints can hinder men's ability to be involved fathers by making it difficult for them to take time off of work to care for their children, access affordable childcare options, or afford the expenses associated with extracurricular activities or educational opportunities for their children. Additionally, financial instability can strain relationships and create stress that can limit a man's ability to be emotionally present and engaged as a father. In certain parts of the Dwarsrivier Valley too there are high levels of unemployment (Imbali, 2022). Consequently, many men feel powerless and hopeless. As a result of financial insecurity, many men feel vulnerable and unable to support their children. Yet, should a man's financial situation determine whether they are fit to participate in the mission of God?

Economically vulnerable men prioritize providing for their children over other needs, according to a study (Ngcongo, 2023). Financially vulnerable fathers should

still provide their children with emotional guidance and support. It is crucial for parents to keep in touch with their children and provide them with stability and security.

Studies show that fathers who actively engage with their children communicate better, experience fewer conflicts, feel competent as parents, and have more positive relationships with their children (Circle, 2017:4). When fathers are actively involved as parents, they are more confident, more effective and have a better understanding and acceptance of their children. Fathers are more engaged in the community and have a better personal relationship. Fathers enjoy a secure attachment relationship with their children and are able to cope well with stressful situations. They feel a greater sense of reliance on others. As a result, positively involved fathers feel more confident about their roles, feel that they are capable of doing their jobs well, and have much to contribute to others in terms of their parenting skills, social skills, and work skills (Circle, 2017:4)

6.4 Missional fatherhood as a sacrificial and selfless lifestyle

As described by Freeks (2019:1), missional fatherhood involves a commitment to the well-being of one's family, as well as taking care of the people around one. Missional fatherhood refers to the idea of fathers actively engaging in the well-being of their family and caring for those around them. This involves prioritizing their responsibilities as fathers, such as providing guidance, support, and love, while also addressing societal challenges, such as fatherlessness (Freeks, 2019:1-2). By embracing this concept, the church can play a significant role in addressing the issue of fatherlessness and promoting positive family dynamics, ultimately contributing to the well-being of individuals and communities. To address it, entails a lifestyle of sacrificial love, intentional discipleship, and service.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus commands his disciples to spread the Gospel, and the *missio Dei* is God's divine plan for accomplishing this task (Buys & Jansen, 2015:228). The concept of a missional life is a call to action, to share the love of Jesus with those around us. Missional fathers show their children that faith is not a private matter only, but one to be shared with others. The researchers argue that a sacrificial and selfless lifestyle involves willingly giving up one's own interests and desires to prioritize the well-being and growth of others, particularly one's children. Missional fathers lead by example, showing their children the value of selflessness, compassion, and service to others, teaching them the importance of putting others before themselves.

7. Conclusion

The shift in the understanding of fatherhood in the Dwarsrivier Valley can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, there has been a growing recognition of the im-

portance of other male role models and father figures in children's lives, beyond solely biological fathers. This acknowledgment highlights the significance of stepfathers, uncles, and male caregivers in contributing to the well-being and development of children. Additionally, the changing family structures in modern society have challenged the conventional approach to fatherhood, which tends to prioritize traditional gender roles and responsibilities. This shift encourages a more holistic and inclusive understanding of fatherhood that aligns with the diverse and dynamic family structures present in today's world.

Some potential challenges faced by fathers in adapting to this shift may include societal expectations and stereotypes that still require men to conform to traditional gender roles, lack of support systems and resources for fathers seeking guidance in navigating fatherhood in new ways, and the potential for conflict between fathers and family members who may hold more traditional views on fatherhood. Additionally, fathers may also face challenges in balancing the demands of work and family, as gender roles and expectations continue to shift in modern societies.

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