

MISSIONAL PARENTING AND MISSIONAL FATHERHOOD AS A *BUFFER* AGAINST FATHER ABSENCE AND FATHERLESSNESS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

This paper focuses on missional parenting and fatherhood. In the 21st century, families are undergoing multiple crises, with many of them experiencing the absence of a fatherly presence. As a result, numerous missiologists emphasise the role of church as the vision of God's mission (*missio Dei*). The church is compelled to support parents in nurturing their children in faith. The term "missional" has a profound meaning; it is not merely a Christian buzzword or catchphrase for families to appear spiritual. Missional is an activity of God, rooted in Scripture and modelled by Christ. Missional parenting involves parents modelling and educating children in God's compassion for people. Missional fatherhood signifies that fathers should lead sacrificial lives for the sake of their families.

Keywords

Missional parenting, missional fatherhood, father absence, fatherlessness.

Introduction

In order to suggest solutions and answers to the destructive social ills of father absence and fatherlessness, this paper explores the concepts of 'missional parenting' and 'missional fatherhood'. Over time, the role of fatherhood has evolved, and as a result, many families in South Africa are grappling with these social ills.¹ Fathers must therefore play a vital role in the

¹ J.G. Linn et al., 2015, pp. 12-13.

family, a role entrusted to them by God. Families should be guided by the precepts and laws found in the Bible.²

One of the major challenges facing modern families in South Africa is the issue of fatherhood. It is important to note that as parents, humans have a higher purpose or calling from God.³ Thus, it is the father's responsibility to lead his family with selfless love, before God. When children have a clear understanding of their earthly father, they are better able to grasp the concept of God the Father. Moreover, alongside being a follower of Christ, the father should also exhibit a godly character.⁴ At the same time, the way fathers talk with their spouses and children can mould their behaviour, and prepare them for life⁵.

The notion of missional parenting

In missional parenting, both the mother and the father work together to advance God's greater plan for the world on behalf of their children. The reality is that raising children can be challenging. However, parents should strive to be the guardians that God desires for their offspring. Additionally, parents should acknowledge that raising a child is their primary life goal and should seek guidance from the Lord through his grace, wisdom, and knowledge.⁶ Being missional as parents means acting in accordance with Scripture and fulfilling our mission within the family context. God intended for parents to serve as a family unit rather than individually. Therefore, missional parents need to realise that their main purpose is not to serve as family members, but rather to serve Jesus Christ. Missional parents recognise that Jesus Christ was history's first and most comprehensive missionary.⁷

Being missional also entails actively participating in mission work, which includes sharing the good news of Jesus Christ everywhere – at home, in the church, and in the community. Families can be missional in various

² F.E. Freeks, 2008, pp. 28-291; Cor. 11:3.

³ F.E. Freeks, 2011, p. 83.

⁴ F.E. Freeks, 2008, pp. 28-292.

⁵ For more information on communication, see L. Nădrag, 2011.

⁶ Anon, 2016; Wax, 2016.

⁷ W. Bevins, 2016.

ways, such as by getting to know their neighbours, engaging in their children's schools, participating in community activities, providing material or spiritual support to those in need, and praying, especially for those who have not yet converted.⁸

An intriguing missional parenting narrative is shared by Wolter.⁹ He observes that modern parents often focus more on shielding their children from the outside world than on preparing them to engage with and contribute to society. This preparation should be carried out as a mission and in accordance with God's plan and purpose for their lives. Parents should not overprotect their children or fear the worst-case scenario when their children attempt to help others. Parents who experience fear should be made aware of its negative effects, as it hinders their ability to parent effectively.

In addition, it is imperative that parents understand how *missional parenting* differs from other parenting styles. Missional parenting is gospel-centred or biblical. This analogy can be used to describe mothers and fathers as brave warriors sending their children into the world, prepared to face issues, challenges, and choices, much like warriors sending their children into battle.¹⁰

The concept of 'missional fatherhood'

As a missional father, the father takes on the primary role in the domestic domain. Moreover, missional fatherhood suggests that fathers embrace and conform to a particular role. This entails living sacrificial lives to support their families and cater to the needs of others. These fathers are dedicated to their God-given mission of modelling and instilling the love of Christ in their children. To benefit the community, these fathers ought to give up their time as well.¹¹ In Micah 6:8, missional fathers are referred to as "Micah's fathers": "He has instructed you, humanity, on what is good; what more could the Lord ask of you than to walk humbly with your God, do justice, and love kindness?"

⁸ J. Magruder, 2014.

⁹ Wolter, 2012.

¹⁰ F.E. Freeks, 2018, pp. 161-162.

¹¹ J.T. Waresak, 2016.

Moreover, missional fathers need to engage with their children about the things that truly matter in life, such as living lives that exalt God. These fathers ought to immerse themselves in matters concerning God the Father.¹² Parents should shape their children's worldview in manageable portions. This implies that a father should expose his children to the needs of others to help win over a lost and dying world for Christ. The father and family should collectively meet the needs of others, for example, by participating in missions together. By discussing this concept and sharing his enthusiasm for missions, he can inspire his children to be excited about these activities.

Additionally, he needs to ensure that his children follow instructions and respond to suggestions and assignments promptly. It is acceptable for his children to disagree or pose questions, but before they do so, they should understand and respect the importance of these missions and the values they represent.¹³

The dilemma of father absence in the world

According to Freeks' research,¹⁴ father absence – defined as the emotional, material, and physical absence of a biological father from his children's lives – is a stark reality in society. Moreover, father absence is a socially detrimental problem that intensifies challenges and difficulties for numerous families. It also includes fathers who do not engage with their children, which can lead to behavioural issues in children. As a result, children are unable to receive the love and care they need.¹⁵ The phenomenon of father absence is not limited to South Africa; it is a global trend.¹⁶ Research conducted in 21 countries identified four main issues as the most serious social problems: drugs, violence, unemployment, and fatherlessness.¹⁷ Carstens ranks father absence and fatherlessness as the fourth most pressing

¹² J.T. Waresak, 2016.

¹³ F.E. Freeks, 2018.

¹⁴ F.E. Freeks, 2024a, p. 162.

¹⁵ F.E. Freeks 2024b, p. 322.

¹⁶ P. Dobbs, 2013, p. 2; Freeks, 2013, p. 3; Williams, 2014.

¹⁷ C. Carstens, 2014, pp. 9-11.

issue in the world. These are grave concerns, and families evidently suffer greatly as a result of these issues on a global scale.

Additionally, research has shown that fathers who are actively engaged in their families and maintain strong relationships with their children are less likely to be violent, less likely to use drugs, and tend to be happier, healthier, and more effective at work.¹⁸ However, this conclusion does not hold true for all families. Research has shown that there are instances of abuse even in cases where the father does not use drugs or behave violently.¹⁹

Fatherlessness as a root cause of dysfunctional families in South Africa

Men in South Africa are acting like tyrants toward women and children, and the country is quickly turning into a fatherless society.²⁰ Fathers' influence in families has decreased dramatically since the country's democratic era. Studies have indicated that a primary cause of dysfunctional family life is fatherlessness.²¹ The following figures illustrate how devastating fatherlessness is in our society: 63% of suicides have their roots in fatherless homes; 70% of young people in state-run institutions come from fatherless homes; 80% of rapists who commit crimes out of displaced rage have their roots in fatherless homes; 40% of children in this nation do not live with their biological fathers; 85% of children who have behavioural issues come from homes without a father; fatherless homes account for 90% of homeless children and 71% of children who drop out of school.²² These figures suggest that fatherlessness is connected to most major social pathologies. Thus, a generation of South African children is being defined by the fatherlessness epidemic.²³

Additionally, a pattern of fatherlessness and social pathologies has emerged. Children who grew up in homes where the father was absent were

¹⁸ R. Levtoy et al., 2015, pp. 5-14.

¹⁹ G.M. Brelsford, 2011.

²⁰ L. Feni, 2016, p. 2.

²¹ C. Carstens, 2014, pp. 9-11.

²² C. Carstens 2014, pp. 9-11; StatsSA, 2015.

²³ C. Carstens, 2014, p. 10.

not exposed to the ideal of what it means to be a real father.²⁴ Consequently, there is a tendency for abusive and absent fathers to raise their own children without having a father figure role model.

In summary, fatherless households are an unavoidable aspect of South African society and cannot be disregarded. The problem is complex, with no obvious answers or strategies for dealing with this serious social issue. Some psychologists contend that the youth's behavioural issues are brought on by insufficient parenting. They also point out that many Black men are unable to be fathers because their own fathers abandoned them. This situation, where young boys and men turn to gangs and crime, has destroyed social structures, leading to severe family breakdowns and disrupted community cohesion.

Missional parenting and missional fatherhood as solutions and answers to families

According to Freeks' research,²⁵ families grappling with fatherlessness and father absence in South African society may find the following solutions helpful:

Being a father shaped by God the Father in Heaven

Fathers not only lead their families but also bear the responsibility of influencing the standard, atmosphere, temperament, and composition of this essential, interactive family unit. Parents need to take care of themselves before they can fulfil God's calling and provide the best possible care for their family, as God holds them accountable. Setting a good example for their children is a divine calling. Covenant education, involving children, is a component of biblical parenting. Fathers will find success in family solutions if they prioritise "God's business" over their own.

God places great importance on the family. No other social structure contains as many rules and information about the family as the Bible does. As a result, every believing family should be aware of their role and calling in carrying out God's Great Commission, which is to win the world over to

²⁴ H. Meintjies and Hall, 2013, pp. 86-89.

²⁵ F.E. Freeks, 2018.

Jesus Christ. Given the family's importance in God's eyes, God should be a constant presence in family life. As Joshua told the Israelites, "... but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord", Christian families have a missionary task to serve the Lord.²⁶ Parents and God are in a relationship. Their faith trickles down to the children, who receive spiritual nourishment from the Holy Spirit. It is imperative that parents recognise the impact of their religious life on their children's desire to seek God's presence.

The value of family time spent together or in devotions at home

Family devotions, or family fellowship, are regular gatherings of family members in the home for worship and spiritual growth. These gatherings can include singing Christian hymns and songs, discussing Christian theology, reading and discussing Bible passages, and praying together. Special days, such as the Lord's Supper, repentance, baptising "birthdays", and other family celebrations, can also be commemorated during these times.

In this context, the father serves as the family's spiritual leader. His primary responsibilities include leading the family in prayer and establishing a home altar for spiritual gatherings. The father should instil in his family the belief that God has bigger plans for them both individually and collectively, encouraging success in all areas of life. The home altar provides an opportunity for the family to read and study God's Word together.

Additionally, the father can teach the children the importance of Christian music, encouraging them to sing hymns and gospel songs, which can uplift and inspire. He should explain to his family that God "inhabits the praises of His people", and that God is present in their praises. For a family's faith, singing and making joyful music unto God can be both relieving and revitalising. Worshiping God at home is crucial as it teaches children to love and respect Him through songs and praises. Since worship is a primary function of both the church and the family, the father should help the children understand its significance.

²⁶ Jos 24:15.

Joining in worship as a family offers purpose and direction in life, as well as a means to honour and respect God. Notably, singing spiritual songs together can uplift and encourage family members through difficult times. These activities can provide a strong foundation for the family's spiritual life, creating a supportive and faith-filled home environment.

Significant salvation moments

In a Christian family, special days should be dedicated to celebrating "baptism birthdays" and commemorating moments of repentance. The father plays a key role in creating lasting memories during these important salvation experiences. As children reach the appropriate age, he should encourage them to turn from their sins and commit their lives to Jesus Christ, emphasising that repentance and baptism are outward signs of their transformation and commitment to God.

To mark these moments, the father should designate special "birthdays" for baptism and repentance, bringing the family together for celebrations similar to other birthdays, with cake and festive activities. He should also encourage family members to reflect on the significance of their repentance and the forgiveness of their sins during these gatherings, reinforcing the importance of their faith and the transformative power of their commitment to God.

The essence of attending church

From the beginning, the father needs to make it very clear that the children must attend church. Families should go to church together because these gatherings for worship significantly influence each other's worldviews and perspectives on life, including their perception of God. Besides their homes, the church is the best place for children to learn about Christian principles and the existence of God.

The church is the primary institution in society for dealing with and providing services related to particular religious aspects such as prayer, spiritual character, faith, and confidence. If the church is where children learn Christian values, then it should be unwavering in its beliefs, precepts, and

conventions. The church's teaching and fellowship should take precedence over the harmful "themes and schemes" that children are exposed to and eventually absorb from the outside world, setting the spiritual "benchmark" in society.

These children are often misunderstood and mistreated by society as members of a "lost generation". However, children should not be viewed as the church of the future. They are the church of today, still believing that the church can positively impact their lives and enable them to change society.

The father and his family's involvement in community needs

Goheen's²⁷ research on this particular notion is extremely valuable and significant to this paper. Every Christian family should prioritise their mission and the needs of their neighbourhood. By fostering spiritual unity, mission work contributes to the church's greater role in God's story. Families ought to participate in the community together, contributing to the eradication of poverty by sharing and giving to others.

Disunity within families runs counter to the gospel. Therefore, loving families should not let their fellow humans suffer; they should contribute and share freely. Families should have a mindset that affirms that everything they have or have received in life is a gift from God, including their material belongings, of which they are stewards. This is how a cohesive family should think.

Families that serve the community's needs must first and foremost be missional families, committed to exemplifying the church's unity in action. Family members should commit to seeking out and expressing the unity they have in Christ. The father should inform his family that the life-changing force of the Spirit via the Bible propels evangelistic activity in a community. Consequently, the father should instil in the family the idea that words alone cannot validate actions of justice and mercy. Such acts serve as a potent witness to the gospel's veracity because they are manifestations of selfless love. In spite of domestic challenges, family members should offer themselves as a sign of affection and a testament to the gospel's truth.

²⁷ M.W. Goheen, 2011, pp. 217-227.

Although churches are not always attentive to the most basic needs of the community, the family – led by the father – should be a valued institution, meeting these needs. The needs of the community should be the family's collective concern. Furthermore, families should also lead the way in their missionary interactions with communities. This means engaging in community issues and concerns rather than living for themselves, creating a witness in the community.

A family headed by a father can serve as an excellent example of good news in the community. Missional-oriented families should serve as witnesses of God's love, grace, and mercy to other families in the neighbourhood.

Recommendations

A missional father exhibits certain qualities, some of which are listed below:

- **Mission is selfless:** The father should clarify to his family that making disciples is an act of selflessness. Children need to understand that Christ gave His life for others. To honour their heavenly Father, fathers ought to live lives centred on serving others, teaching their children to have a heart for mission in this way.

- **Learn to be broken for others:** This involves increasing one's giving, prayers, and involvement in other people's lives. It is important for children to witness their father being charitable and supportive of others. A missional father should embody 1 Thessalonians 2:8, which emphasises selflessness and love for others.

- **Live a Christ-focused life:** It is crucial for children to see their father deeply committed to Jesus. Fathers should be motivated and focused on Jesus Christ, modelling a life of serving the Lord for their children.

- **Be Spirit-led:** A father should live according to the directions, judgements, counsel, and guidance of the Holy Spirit. He ought to share with his children how the family's prayers were heard by the Holy Spirit.

- **Show generosity:** A father should continually bestow upon others the blessings that Christ has bestowed upon him. He should use his time, resources, and energy to assist others and encourage his children to adopt an attitude of giving their money, gifts, and energy to the church and community.

- Live for God and others: Missional fathers ought to live for God and others, understanding that their lives are a gift from God and not their own. In their homes and communities, these fathers should be mission-minded and disciple-makers.²⁸

Conclusion

Society and communities desperately need fathers who are devout and devoted to their families. Such a father follows God as a heavenly Father, setting a divine example. It is the missional calling of fathers to reflect the image of God. Through the power of the Holy Spirit and His Son, Jesus Christ, they demonstrate what it truly means to have a loving relationship with God as a heavenly Father.

A loving father reflects the goodness, mercy, and love of God in a special way within his family, at church, at work, with friends, and in his community. Fathers also have the opportunity to be used by God to impact their families. For missional parenthood, it is fundamental that fathers become children of God and accept Jesus Christ as their Saviour. It is impossible for a father to be saved and not actively work to instil Christ's love and presence in his family.

Fathers should understand that being a father is a calling from God. They must serve as examples that reflect the scope and objectives of Christ's new commandment: to love others as Christ loves them. Fathers who are successful in this area have fulfilled their calling in life by providing for their families – the place where it matters the most.

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²⁸ J. Cousineau, 2013.

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