

From exclusion to embrace: Welcoming fatherless families in a diverse South Africa

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Abstract

This study critically examines fatherless families across diverse societies, emphasising that paternal absence creates profound emotional, social and developmental challenges. Fatherlessness destabilises family structures and erodes social cohesion; yet practical theology offers limited inclusive engagement. Employing an exploratory design, data were collected from 25 respondents in Ikageng, Promosa and Potchefstroom (North-West, South Africa) through questionnaires, structured interviews and naïve sketches. The findings reveal exclusion, poverty, and diminished dignity, with boys prone to aggression and identity crises and girls vulnerable to insecurity and exploitation. The study contributes “streetwise ecclesiology” to restore belonging. The expression “from exclusion to embrace” delineates a transition in attitude, relationship or policy, for example, from rejecting, disregarding or alienating (excluding) an individual or family to welcoming and appreciating (embracing) them. The work of Miroslav Volf (1996) is central to the discussion of exclusion, embrace and reconciliation, which are key themes of the 2026 Society for Practical Theology in South Africa Conference and of this paper. His research focuses on the intersection of theology, public life and reconciliation in contexts of conflict and division. He explores themes of identity, otherness and the role of the church in promoting justice and healing, often drawing on his experiences and the complexities of the post-communist world, including family dynamics.

Keywords

diverse South Africa; embrace; exclusion; families; fatherless; father absence; inclusion

1. Background

Practical theology addresses the global issue of displacement by pursuing an ecclesiology of home that offers pertinent support to those who have

lost their sense of belonging (Brunsdon, 2020). Within this view, home transcends mere physicality; it embodies a multifaceted network of social connections, cultural practices and spiritual affiliations, as illustrated by the Greek term *oikos* and the African concept of *ekhaya*. Displacement signifies a profound loss of human security, resulting in nostalgia characterised by intense emotional suffering and a deep yearning for one's history or origins. Practical theologians contend that homecoming is a complex spiritual experience that requires navigating nostalgia through compassionate pastoral care. Displacement parallels the exclusion of fatherless families, where absence destabilises belonging, whereas homecoming, framed theologically, is restorative, transforming nostalgia into a communal embrace that reclaims dignity and social cohesion. This necessitates a shift from restorative nostalgia, aimed at reconstructing a bygone era, to reflective nostalgia, which acknowledges present circumstances and assists displaced persons in developing an evolving self-concept and a new identity. To do this, the church must transform "cathedral ecclesiologies" centred on denominational preservation into a functional "streetwise home-church" that serves as a sanctuary (*xenodochia*) for the disadvantaged. This society substitutes xenophobia with xenophilia, embodying a hospitality of accompaniment grounded in the *passio Dei* (the suffering of God) and *ta splanchna* (divine compassion).

At the heart of this theology is the notion of an eschatological home, which understands home as a state of communion with Christ and as an everlasting residence. In this context, both native citizens and migrants are reinterpreted as *homo viator*, or pilgrims travelling collectively towards a final homecoming that transcends national borders. Through the practice of compassionate co-existence, the church serves as a conduit between the private and public domains, restoring dignity to the fatherless and the outsider. This restorative endeavour resembles the reconstruction of a fallen wall with stones from many regions, as the church employs the "mortar of welcome" to forge a new edifice of belonging that honours the diverse narratives of each traveller. The fallen wall symbolises fractured, fatherless families; yet the church, grounded in Christ's reconciling grace, employs the mortar of welcome to construct belonging, thereby honouring diverse pilgrim narratives within God's eschatological household of faith.

Freeks (2020:162–165) describes worldwide fatherlessness as a “fatherhood disease”, resulting in an emotional void in children referred to as “father hunger”. This dilemma is continually intensified by dislocation, such as incarceration, which alienates fathers from their responsibilities as providers and guardians. During incarceration, many fathers endure anguish and profound yearning for their families. The prospect of returning home provides rejuvenation, as displaced fathers cultivate resilience and restore their dignity. By processing their separation-related anguish, these men are equipped to return home, evolving from absent fathers into men who can lead, protect and oversee their households. This rehabilitation resembles the rectification of a fractured foundation, which can pose a significant challenge for fatherless households. The next sections, covering the notion of fatherlessness, empirical work, research method, intervention and findings, place the article in perspective.

2. Introduction

Longitudinal studies by Freeks (2004, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2018a, 2018b) demonstrate that fatherlessness and paternal absence constitute a pervasive and destructive social pathology, underscoring their profound significance as destabilising forces in contemporary society. Notably, fatherlessness is a worldwide phenomenon in which children are raised without a paternal figure, whether physically or psychologically. This absence creates significant emotional voids, leading to behavioural problems such as defiance, diminished self-worth and academic difficulties. This trend, often influenced by patriarchal social structures or professional expectations, significantly impairs the development of executive functions, including self-regulation and problem-solving. Addressing these concerns over the years through research and academic publications requires establishing connections, networking and pursuing support mechanisms to alleviate significant developmental challenges for the forthcoming generation in contemporary society.

The Society for Practical Theology in South Africa recently convened a conference centred on the theme of practical theology’s “homecoming”, held from 20 to 22 January 2026. The author engages with this theme, with a sub-theme of helping others feel at home in the world, focusing on

fatherless families who experience exclusion owing to fatherlessness. At the conference mentioned, multiple papers and presentations examined the fundamental nature of family in the context of exclusion and other detrimental societal issues.

This article focuses on fatherless families, including the nuclear or traditional family. However, the author acknowledges that other family structures, in addition to the traditional family, are valuable and that fatherlessness can significantly affect them. It is important to recognise that families take various forms, and it is essential for society to acknowledge and accept the diversity that extends beyond the conventional nuclear family. Embracing diverse families entails inclusive policies, educational institutions, workplaces and communities that honour and celebrate their existence. It also requires dismantling prejudice and ensuring equal rights so that every family can flourish without fear of discrimination. Expanding our understanding of family enhances the richness, compassion and justice of society. Ultimately, accepting diverse family structures strengthens the social fabric, emphasising that love and togetherness are the fundamental pillars of family life.

Alongside this, the primary focus of this paper is to embrace and welcome fatherless households within our complex society. However, the risk of social exclusion is that it marginalises people and families, restricting their access to opportunities, resources and assistance. It cultivates inequity, discrimination and psychological suffering, thereby weakening communal cohesion. Over time, exclusion diminishes trust, incites animosity and jeopardises stability and collective progress.

Social exclusion affects fatherless families, often categorised as single-parent or non-traditional homes. Historically, these families have been recognised as vulnerable populations with limited engagement in traditional social interactions. This exclusion stems from familial disintegration and extends beyond mere poverty, encompassing a lack of autonomy and dignity. Notably, single-parent households are often underrepresented in surveys, resulting in their statistical invisibility. True social inclusion for these families requires improving their conditions of participation through better access to resources, representation and respect for their dignity (United Nations, 2016).

Furthermore, the sources characterise inclusion and exclusion as closely interconnected notions. Children within families have a deep-seated human need for exclusive relationships. Historically, society has marginalised those born out of wedlock. However, contemporary progress entails removing harmful traditional honour systems. Maintaining these relationships is essential for fostering equality and ensuring that all family members feel secure (Felix, 2024:1–4).

A key point is that discourses of exclusion signify either a fracture in social connections or the establishment of restricted group monopolies. These frameworks often intersect with poverty and social injustice. However, current understandings often rely on basic terms that overlook the intricacies of identity. Owing to the interrelatedness of inclusion and exclusion, inclusive policies may unintentionally generate new forms of marginalisation while failing to achieve genuine and profound social change (Sayed, Soudien & Carrim, 2003:231–234). Language often becomes exclusionary when it imposes Western norms and terminology on the Global South. This cultural hegemony can undermine local interpretations, as evidenced by the misclassification of the Hijra group as “transgender”, which disregards their distinct third-gender identity and cultural heritage (Bleeksma & Boumann, 2024:92–93).

Notably, practical theology is characterised by its commitment to addressing lived experience, promoting justice and nurturing significant theological discourse in contemporary contexts. As global conditions evolve – ecologically, politically, socially and spiritually – there is an urgent need to revisit, reimagine and re-establish our theological pursuits. In this context, homecoming signifies both a symbolic and a literal return to the spaces, relationships and values that cultivate belonging, interaction and the flourishing of fatherless families.

Moreover, homecoming is a deep spiritual and cultural longing, usually expressed through the African notions previously stated. However, several families remain marginalised and excluded from this ideal because of their fatherless condition. In South Africa, elevated rates of paternal absence have contributed to a fatherless society, in which single-parent families are increasingly perceived as sub-standard, often depriving children of essential parental affection and structure. These restructured families

sometimes fully remove the father from the family unit, thereby aggravating dysfunctional tendencies and societal issues. True homecoming necessitates a “streetwise ecclesiology” that provides refuge for the marginalised and endeavours to reintegrate estranged fathers into their homes (Freeks, 2020).

The 2030 Agenda asserts that all individuals should thrive and attain fundamental well-being. This vision is encapsulated in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which seek to free all nations, individuals and societal groups from poverty and hunger, while, among other objectives, promoting healthy lives and access to education, modern energy and information. Recognising that these objectives are challenging to realise without institutional reform to serve the most impoverished and vulnerable, the Agenda adopts comprehensive targets to advance the rule of law, guarantee equitable access to justice and promote inclusive and participatory decision-making. When effectively implemented and accurately measured, these aims and targets are fundamental components of social inclusion processes. Nonetheless, social inclusion encompasses a broader range of issues than those addressed in the Sustainable Development Goals. No universal goal-setting agenda can adequately address the many facets of exclusion or fully advance inclusion, especially given the diverse global contexts (García-Peña, Díaz & Muñoz, 2022:243–245; Nunes do Couto, 2024).

3. The monumental issue of fatherlessness in contemporary society

3.1 The notion of fatherlessness

In Ndereba’s (2022:84–87) research, someone who is fatherless, defined as one who grows up without a paternal figure, often has children who experience a crisis over the significance of the male position within the household. Fatherlessness may arise from the death of a paternal figure, divorce, domestic abuse or the division of familial responsibilities between the father and the family, including employment that necessitates physical separation. Men are typically relied upon for physical strength and serve as leaders and decision-makers. Fatherlessness undoubtedly affects children’s behaviour, resulting in a lack of discipline, insubordination and impoliteness. Moreover, children raised without a father develop internal

barriers that lead to harsher responses to unfavourable situations and reduced self-confidence.

Overall, fatherlessness is defined as a state in which a father is absent, both physically and psychologically, during a child's development. Such an experience will engender emotional and psychological voids in children, usually also influencing their future conduct (Mahlangu, 2025:2–3).

3.2 Fatherlessness as a destructive social issue in society

Fatherlessness has recently emerged as a significant issue, attracting the attention of numerous researchers, scholars, academics, professionals and practitioners examining various aspects of family life, parenting, marriage and well-being. According to Mahlangu (2025), Ndereba (2022) and Freeks, Peters and Louw (2022), fatherlessness is a widespread phenomenon in modern society, affecting individuals and communities worldwide across multiple dimensions and posing a considerable challenge for professionals in youth and family ministry. The problem has been recognised in several nations globally, including the United States of America, South Africa, Brazil and Russia.

Global statistics highlight the gravity of this crisis, linking fatherlessness to numerous significant societal issues. For instance, 40% of children globally do not live with their biological fathers, and a substantial proportion of negative outcomes can be attributed to fatherless households, including 63% of suicides, 70% of juveniles in state-run institutions and 85% of children exhibiting behavioural problems. These statistics demonstrate the significant influence of paternal absence on young people's mental health, juvenile crime and delinquency rates and the challenges faced by at-risk children (Freeks *et al.*, 2022).

The causes of fatherlessness, both nationally and globally, are diverse, including early teenage pregnancies that lead to a lack of paternal responsibility, paternal death, polygamous family structures that affect paternal involvement and socio-economic conditions that necessitate fathers' migration for employment. Divorce, economic hardship and non-marital births are regarded as significant contributors to paternal absence. In some settings, such as South African townships, the problem is more pronounced, historically stemming from apartheid-era policies such as the

migrant labour system and pass laws, which disrupted family structures and resulted in persistent father absence (Freeks *et al.*, 2022; Mahlangu, 2025; Ndereba, 2022).

Currently, South Africa has one of the highest proportions of non-resident fathers worldwide, with 45,4% of children living exclusively with their mothers. The erosion of stable family units fosters cycles of emotional instability, aggression and identity crises, depriving young men of reliable fatherly supervision and heightening their susceptibility to substance misuse and behavioural issues. The absence of a supportive, authoritative paternal figure impedes typical psychological development and often leads to heightened emotional and social vulnerabilities, trauma, loss and challenges in identity formation throughout adolescence. Fatherlessness transcends economic concerns; it has profound psychological, moral and spiritual ramifications, exacerbating wider societal issues, such as heightened teenage criminality, intergenerational poverty and diminished communal solidarity. Eventually, fatherlessness often engenders recurring patterns of adverse behavioural and marital problems, maintaining a detrimental cycle transmitted to future generations. Alongside this, the absence of fathers is a societal issue that undermines familial stability, adversely affects children's emotional growth, heightens the likelihood of poverty and imposes enduring repercussions on communities in terms of education, interpersonal relationships, mental health and economic well-being.

Moreover, the absence of a father is a detrimental societal issue characterised by the physical, social, economic or psychological non-existence of a biological father in a child's life. It is influenced by situations such as divorce, abandonment and emotional unavailability, which disrupt the fundamental parent-child relationship. Such disturbances typically lead to dysfunctional family relationships and a lack of affection, hindering children's ability to receive or express love adequately. As a result, children lacking active paternal figures face heightened risks of behavioural problems, emotional disorders and diminished self-esteem. This problem perpetuates cycles of poverty and markedly increases susceptibility to crime and substance misuse. Consequently, addressing this global crisis through pastoral care and ethical restoration is essential to promoting family well-being – the foundational unit of a thriving society. The absence

of a father, like a missing pillar in a building's foundation, can destabilise the family structure and, by extension, society, leading to potential collapse under external forces (Freeks, 2024a:2–3). A key point is that a missing pillar signifies the absence of essential assistance, for example, a father's absence or incomplete endeavours in life. It also signifies a disrupted relationship, for example, with God, the failure of integrity among people or the lack of a fundamental component (such as mentorship), resulting in substantial, sometimes disastrous, outcomes.

3.3 A comparative synthesis on the effects of fatherlessness on boys and girls in families and society

Fatherlessness constitutes a profound developmental crisis for boys and girls, though its manifestations differ by gender. Mahlangu (2025:3–4) observes that paternal absence impedes psychological and social development among boys, fostering emotional instability, unworthiness, rejection, violence and rage. These traumas often manifest as behavioural problems, delinquency, drug misuse, crime and gang participation. Lia and Juwita (2025:202–203) further note diminished self-control, truancy, smoking and disciplinary infractions, with fatherlessness accounting for 34,1% of juvenile delinquency. Trevor and Nwanamidwa (2025:158–159) also highlight severe emotional turmoil, diminished self-worth, academic failure, aggression, substance misuse and relational difficulties, including fear of commitment and distorted concepts of masculinity rooted in domination rather than integrity.

For girls, Mathe and Lekganyane (2025:3) reported significant psychological obstacles, including diminished self-esteem, abandonment, rejection, academic challenges, premature sexual engagement, adolescent pregnancy and relational insecurity. Freeks, Strydom and Bartlett (2015:46) emphasise unmet needs for connection among girls, leading to rejection, resentment and identity struggles, often expressed through unstable relationships. Furthermore, Zulu (2014) reported disrupted identity and academic trajectories, diminished mathematical abilities, psychological distress and loss of ancestral ties, although many girls cultivate resilience, autonomy and empowerment, supported by maternal figures. Salami and Okeke (2018:2–3) add vulnerability to risky sexual behaviour, violence, substance misuse and illegal activities to the list. Brown (2018) underscores financial

and emotional burdens, early domestic responsibilities, social isolation and romantic insecurity, with paternal absence predisposing women to distrust men and exploitative dynamics in adulthood.

Ultimately, fatherlessness destabilises both boys and girls by undermining their psychological development, socialisation and identity formation. Boys often externalise distress through delinquency, aggression and maladaptive coping, whereas girls frequently internalise it through relational insecurity, premature sexual activity and vulnerability to exploitation. Both trajectories confirm fatherlessness as a destructive social ill that requires robust familial and community interventions.

In summary, children, regardless of their gender, experience significant hardship because of fatherlessness. Even before birth, a father's perceptions of the pregnancy, his prenatal behaviour and the father–mother dynamic may indirectly affect the likelihood of adverse birth outcomes. Fatherlessness also affects teenagers. Children in these families endure the consequences of poverty. Hence, children raised without a paternal presence experience lasting harm. They are more likely to experience poverty, drop out of school, engage in substance abuse, experience unplanned or early parenthood or even be incarcerated. Although fatherlessness is not the sole cause of these issues, society must acknowledge its significant role. Countless families recognise the enduring influence of a father's presence on a child's life. Likewise, numerous children experience feelings of abandonment and low self-esteem stemming from the absence of a father. Moreover, many children resort to harmful behaviours to alleviate the anguish of fatherlessness. Therefore, it is important to note that the absence of a father is not a singular risk factor; nonetheless, it can affect children's development.

4. Empirical inquiry

4.1 Research questions

The empirical component of the study addresses the following research question:

How can society move from exclusionary practices to inclusive approaches that support and welcome fatherless families in an increasingly diverse South Africa?

5. Research method and design

The paradigm of this study is postmodern, and the epistemology is social constructionist. The study employed an exploratory design and incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to examine the experiences, challenges and feedback of fatherless families facing societal exclusion. The researcher used questionnaires, structured interviews and naïve sketches as the primary methods for collecting data from fatherless families, as described by Botma, Greef, Mulaudzi and Wright (2010:204–206). The utilisation of naïve sketches proved methodologically appropriate for eliciting spontaneous, subjective narratives, thereby preserving the participants' ontological perspectives. Subsequent analytical procedures were executed via systematic coding protocols to isolate significant thematic regularities and primary conceptual classifications.

5.1 Research design

The research design is an exploratory, interpretive, descriptive, qualitative and contextual design, embedded within a qualitative approach to investigate experiences and challenges, as set out by De Vos (2005:267–273). Such an investigation was necessary, as it contributed to the research question.

5.2 Measuring instrument

Welcoming inclusive approaches to support fatherless families is an instrument that assesses fatherless families. This measure was used to gauge the level of inclusion in the context of fatherless families. The researcher examined the experiences, challenges and feedback of fatherless families through questionnaires and structured interviews. Example questions for structured interviews are: *What challenges do fatherless families face most frequently? How do fatherless families cope with financial responsibilities?* Example questions for naïve sketches are: *How does the lack of a father (father absence) affect emotional development? Identify formation and sense of belonging among children raised in fatherless families. How does societal*

perception of fatherless families contribute to feelings of exclusion or stigma? What changes may foster a more supportive environment for these families? Descriptive research, while often used in quantitative studies, can also be applied in qualitative research (Vhymeister, 2008).

5.3 Respondents

The respondents were families deprived of social advantages because they were fatherless. The study included 25 respondents (N = 25), comprising women and children, recruited from local communities, churches and congregations in Ikageng township, Promosa, Potchefstroom district, in North West. The study was facilitated by the Evangelical Lutheran Church and Mosaic Community Developments. Mr Clifford Clive Clifton, collaborator and organiser, and Mr Mzwandile Vice, the site administrator of Mosaic Community Developments, served as the gatekeepers for this research.

5.4 Sample

The researcher investigated the experiences and challenges of fatherless families, using structured interviews and naïve sketches.

5.5 Sampling

Fatherless families were selected to participate in research on fatherhood, community engagement projects and interventions to improve family well-being at the Faculty of Theology of the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, in North West. A total of 25 families without fathers were selected to participate in a qualitative study using structured interviews and naïve sketches. Consent was obtained from all the participants or respondents.

The following inclusion criteria were used for fatherless families:

- Fatherless families are characterised by the absence of the biological father, whether through death, desertion or marital dissolution.
- Fatherless households are typically headed by a single mother, with the mother assuming primary responsibility for domestic and caregiving roles.

- Even when the father is alive, limited paternal involvement, such as irregular financial support or emotional disengagement, qualifies the family as fatherless in functional terms.
- Fatherless families often face socio-economic vulnerability, as the lack of paternal income contributes to heightened financial strain.
- The presence of dependent children underscores the impact of father absence, since their developmental and social outcomes are directly shaped by this familial structure.

5.6 Data gathering

The researcher, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa and Mosaic Community Developments identified respondents (fatherless families) from local communities, churches and congregations in Ikageng township, Promosa, in the Potchefstroom district of North West. They were contacted by email and telephone to arrange appointments for questionnaires, structured interviews and naïve sketches. The sessions took place in the comfort of their residences affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church and in the training room of Mosaic Community Developments, selected for its seclusion, supportive atmosphere, agreeable ambience, comfort and minimal interruptions, as Pinkoane (2005) advises.

5.7 Data analysis

The researcher analysed qualitative data derived from naïve sketches and structured interviews, ensuring that all raw data were converted into relevant and comprehensible data. The findings section presents the data. The researcher used open coding, following Creswell's (2009) methodological steps, which included data preparation, transcription and reflective reading to establish overall meaning. Coding was applied to segment textual data into thematic categories, incorporating anticipated, emergent and theoretically relevant codes. To ensure trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba's evaluative model was adopted, as summarised by Botma *et al.* (2010), emphasising epistemological standards of truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality. These were operationalised through strategies of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, as summarised by Botma *et al.* (2010). This approach

provided methodological rigour and strengthened the validity of the findings.

5.8 Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical permission was submitted to the Theology Research Ethics Committee, and ethical consent was granted on 1 November 2023. The ethical approval number is NWU-00881-23-A6.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa and Mosaic Community Developments operate as non-governmental, not-for-profit organisations. They collaborate closely with families and individuals without fathers across diverse societal and community settings. The researcher, the Evangelical Lutheran Church and Mosaic Community Developments implemented the intervention in accordance with the ethical agreement. Written informed consent was obtained from all the respondents. The respondents were guaranteed the right to withdraw from the research at any time should they experience discomfort. The research presented low risk to the respondents regarding the probability, magnitude or severity of harm or discomfort.

6. The research and the intervention

6.1 Research foundation

The intervention formed part of the data collection and is based on the research of Freeks (2004, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2018a, 2018b). The research entailed training and equipping materials for fatherless families. This research primarily focuses on the exclusion of fatherless households owing to father absence and fatherlessness as a social ill, and is informed by the pastoral-theological paradigm. Pastoral theology – grounded in Scripture, practical implementation and empirical reality – underscores the significance of the church and other religious communities. Situated within the global context, it provides direction for assisting, training, equipping, enabling, empowering, educating and preparing families, including fatherless families (Freek, 2011).

6.2 Objective of the intervention

The initiative aimed to assist fatherless families stigmatised by society, facing challenges and exclusion because of their lack of a paternal presence.

6.3 Planning and implementation of the intervention

The researcher planned the intervention to address fatherlessness, paternal absence and exclusion. In collaboration with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, Mosaic Community Developments and local churches in Ikageng township, Extension 11 and Promosa in the Potchefstroom district, he designed a research-based intervention focused on fatherhood, fatherless families, family well-being and paternal absence. The intervention engaged fatherless families from faith-based communities over a three-year period, during which comprehensive discussions were held to critically examine all facets of delivering a timely, effective and pertinent response to urgent social and detrimental issues, including the exclusion of fatherless families in society. Subsequently, the Family Well-being Convention was established to implement the intervention, encompassing presentations, training and equipping sessions and empowerment initiatives specifically designed for South African families, especially those without fathers. Families participated in the convention out of interest, passion and concern for fatherless families, as mentioned earlier.

6.4 Empowering fatherless families through training and equipping

Following a presentation on fatherless households, father absence, the significance of familial issues, godly parenting and family well-being, a support group of 25 family members was established, trained and equipped using the Fatherhood Training and Equipping Manual. The 25 households are fatherless, comprising mothers, women and children ($N = 25$). During the training and equipping sessions, the fatherless families discussed and deliberated on specific familial challenges, concerns and societal issues within their families. Workbooks and training manuals served as the assessment criteria for the fatherless families that underwent training. The training manual comprised seven sessions focused on training and equipping. The topics of these sessions were as follows: the notion of fathering; fatherlessness and father absence as destructive social issues;

restoring the home; parental responsibilities; developing the spiritual life of the home; the father as developer within the family; and family well-being and family life.

7. Findings

This section discusses the results of the qualitative research on fatherless households, based on structured interviews and naïve sketches. Verbatim quotations and support from the research literature are used to enrich and validate the findings. The purpose of the literature is to compare the findings with existing literature and to draw conclusions. Notably, Volf (1996) employs the phenomenology of embrace as a conceptual framework for reconciliation, drawing significantly on the Lucan narrative of the prodigal son's return. This homecoming is predicated on the will to embrace, which precedes judgements of truth or justice and prioritises the restoration of relationships over adherence to moral rules. Ten themes emerged from the structured interviews and naïve sketches. These themes are presented and discussed below.

7.1 Theme 1: Social exclusion is a serious harm to fatherless families

The respondents are convinced that social exclusion is detrimental to the flourishing of fatherless families. They expressed the following opinions:

Children experience feelings of rejection. (Respondent 16, male, shelf packer)

Children develop depression, which leads to self-harm and suicide. (Respondent 1, male, chairperson and synod delegate)

Children who grew up without fathers often feel like outcasts. (Respondent 17, male, administrative clerk)

This finding aligns with Salami and Okeke (2018:1–5), who indicate that fatherless children feel abandoned, may develop depression and stress and sometimes drop out of school.

7.2 Theme 2: The societal perception of fatherless families contributes to feelings of exclusion and stigma

The respondents strongly believe that fatherless families are socially excluded. They expressed the following views:

Society looks down at fatherless homes because they think that they are vulnerable. (Respondent 20, male, court clerk)

Exclusion has a bad influence on kids who come from fatherless households. (Respondent 11, male, supervisor)

As fathers, we feel that we are not good enough, and that is why we left. (Respondent 13, male, chairperson)

This finding aligns with Felix (2024:3–4), who indicates that exclusion is associated with negative images of discrimination and manifests in detrimental forms, such as poor self-image, inferiority and a lack of self-respect.

7.3 Theme 3: Loss of identity and no place of belonging

The respondents believe that when no father is involved, children experience an identity crisis and feel they do not belong. They expressed the following views:

Children experience feelings of loss, not welcome, confusion or insecurity when a parent is absent. (Respondent 9, female, housewife)

Children turn into rebels and [have] no future. (Respondent 4, male, security officer)

Relationships become very strained and alienated. (Respondent 20, male, pastor)

The finding is supported by Gumede (2020:72), who indicates that children experience feelings of loss and confusion when fathers are absent. Moreover, problematic parental communication leads to relationship instability, leaving them insecure and deeply uncertain.

7.4 Theme 4: Support systems are needed for fatherless families in an exclusive society

The respondents firmly believe that support systems and community structures are crucial for marginalised households. They expressed the following views:

Welfare and social services play a major role in the lives of fatherless families and in an exclusive society. (Respondent 3, male, mine safety officer)

Support systems, such as religious institutions and the [sic] welfare, shape the future of children. (Respondent 3, male, mine safety officer)

Mentorship programmes, youth groups [and] neighbourhood support networks offer guidance and positive role models. (Respondent 19, male, unemployed)

The church is a good support system for fatherless households with financial issues. (Respondent 23, female, housewife)

The finding aligns with Freeks (2011:110, 131, 176, 218), who indicates that religious institutions and mentoring programmes highlight the importance of mentoring, thereby establishing the church as a good support system for fatherless families in the modern global society.

7.5 Theme 5: Counselling sessions are necessary for fatherless households

The respondents believe that counselling sessions and conversations are important and necessary for families experiencing fatherlessness. They expressed the following views:

Counselling one-on-one sessions to build trust are needed. (Respondent 8, male, information technology specialist)

Counselling sessions help to get to the root and truth of the problem. (Respondent 6, male, manager)

The finding aligns with Amponsah (2022:451–459), who indicates that professional counselling is essential for fatherless families to mitigate various emotional instabilities that often originate in the home. Such

sessions empower parents to foster healthy environments, enabling children to achieve their full academic potential.

7.6 Theme 6: Children in fatherless families are likely to have discipline problems

The respondents maintain that children who grow up in fatherless households are prone to bad behaviour. They expressed the following views:

Children who grew up in fatherless homes are likely to commit crimes, do drugs and perform poor[ly] at school. (Respondent 1, male, chairperson and synod delegate)

The mother cannot instil discipline effectively; it is more the role of the father. (Respondent 7, female, domestic worker)

The finding is supported by Mashaba, Tshisevhe and Maile (2024:2281–2291), who reported that learners with discipline problems often engage in criminal activities, such as robbery and substance abuse. Their study identified broken homes and inadequate parenting as primary contributors to delinquent behaviour, making discipline particularly challenging in households lacking full parental involvement and effective leadership.

7.7 Theme 7: Challenges of fatherless families

Families without fathers often face significant financial challenges. The respondents expressed their opinions as follows:

We manage with one income, making budgeting most challenging. (Respondent 2, male, property practitioner)

Child support, social grants, food aid, etc., are in the place of fathers. (Respondent 2, male, property practitioner)

[The] cost of living is very difficult [sic]. (Respondent 3, female, domestic worker)

Not having enough to cover expenditure. (Respondent 13, female, housewife)

Relatives help with childcare, groceries, transport, etc., to reduce financial pressure. (Respondent 25, female, domestic worker)

The finding aligns with Freeks (2024b), who points out that fatherless families in South Africa face severe financial pressure and poverty. Without child support, single mothers must independently manage budgets for essentials such as groceries and transport, resulting in highly unfavourable socio-economic conditions.

7.8 Theme 8: Father absence and fatherlessness are destructive ills in society

The respondents regard the absence of fathers and fatherlessness within families as serious social issues. They expressed the following views:

No father means no expectation and no future. (Respondent 10, male, industrial worker)

Father absence means [the father is] not present, not available and not supportive. (Respondent 12, male, municipal worker)

Fatherlessness means dim and uncertain views for children. (Respondent 14, male, unemployed)

The finding aligns with Keet and Baron (2024:42–43), who highlight that father absence and fatherlessness are global crises that negatively affect families and communities. Moreover, these destructive social ills contribute to youth moral decline and rising crime rates, severely affecting individual development and overall stability worldwide. The finding also aligns with Freeks (2022:1–2, 6–8), who indicates that father absence and fatherlessness are destructive social ills in South African society. According to him, no father means no expectations and no future.

7.9 Theme 9: Men cannot be trusted

In their feedback, some respondents indicated that men cannot be trusted. These sentiments are reflected in the following views:

Men can't be trusted nowadays. (Respondent 15, female, housewife)

Trust in men is a bad point. (Respondent 4, male, manager)

Trust issues are a big concern in men. (Respondent 18, female, student)

The finding aligns with Kamau (2018:23–26), who indicates that children, especially girls with absent fathers, feel that men cannot be trusted. These

trust issues hinder their future adult relationships and healthy intimate interactions.

7.10 Theme 10: Mothers are the backbone of the family

The respondents maintain that mothers are forced to carry the family through difficult times. They expressed the following views:

Mothers carry the family financially in difficult times. (Respondent 5, male, information technology specialist)

Mothers are working sometimes two jobs for the family to survive. (Respondent 21, female, casual worker)

Mothers are the glue that holds families together. (Respondent 22, female, housewife)

The finding aligns with Makofane (2015:22–31), who indicates that mothers serve as the family’s resilient backbone, holding everything together. In many growing African households, mothers carry the entire financial burden alone, providing for all basic needs when biological fathers are absent from the home. Freeks (2011:4) also indicates that many single mothers raise healthy, well-groomed children alone. As competent household heads, they act as mentors who teach their children values. Despite the father’s absence, these mothers maintain stability and leadership. Their roles are significant and vital. Still, Freeks *et al.* (2018:2–7) indicate that mothers view fathers as indispensable mentors who must remain present and involved. Spiritual guidance is regarded as vital for fostering stable, God-centred family environments through active paternal leadership and care.

8. Conclusion

Fatherless families often pose significant challenges for children, who may experience rejection, depression, loss and an identity crisis stemming from exclusion. This article advances the discourse by reframing fatherless families in South Africa as both a theological and socio-cultural crisis, demanding a transition from exclusionary practices to inclusive “streetwise ecclesiology”. Its significance for practical theology lies in integrating theological visions of homecoming, empirical evidence of marginalisation

and pastoral strategies that restore dignity. The church and community must respond through hospitable, participatory praxis, thereby addressing the research question and offering a distinct contribution: fatherlessness is reconceived as a pastoral, communal challenge requiring reconciliation and embrace.

Notably, society often stigmatises these families, reinforcing the belief that the absence of a father equates to a lack of expectations and a bleak future. Therefore, counselling is necessary to address psychological issues. Men are increasingly perceived as unreliable, whereas mothers serve as the “backbone” and “glue” of families, fostering resilience and stability in the absence of paternal support.

Reimagining homecoming and belonging in a diverse world requires addressing evolving family dynamics and the realities they entail. In many communities, families lack fathers, yet they remain resilient and redefine family. Belonging is no longer tied to traditional hierarchies but emerges from networks of care, solidarity and shared responsibility. This transformation challenges cultural assumptions, urging societies to embrace homecoming, inclusivity and respect for diverse narratives of family well-being and family life. Consequently, belonging becomes active engagement, characterised by compassion, recognition and communal resilience.

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