

This paper was delivered at the Conference on Family Life, hosted by the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary and the Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. A copy of this paper can be downloaded from www.mcsadewcom.blogspot.com

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Title: Crossing the blurred line: Discourses on changing Family Life patterns as a challenge to Church and Society

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the family is the most important and oldest institution in the life of humanity. The family informs one's sense of belonging. Although not everyone is privileged enough to have a family, all human beings are connected in one way or another to a body called family. This can be through birth adoption, foster or any other means that makes it possible for one to be connected to a family. In the Jewish history the family as an institution defined an individual's sense of belonging. A person's identity was traced genealogically through generations. From an African perspective a person is defined through his/her family. Despite the great value that the family has on humanity, throughout history, the family has faced many challenges and transitions. This has made it difficult for scholars to come up with a single definition of the term family. In this paper, I intend to discuss some of the changes to family life in the African context, particularly in South Africa. The aim will also show how these changes have affected the church's understanding of family life. Some of the challenges faced by the church as a result of the changes in the family life patterns in South Africa will be discussed using ecclesial and societal lens. I conclude this paper with suggestions on how the church can respond to these challenges in a rapid changing society.

Different views on the definition of family

In an African context and the southern Africa in particular, the concept of a nuclear family has not precisely captured the model of an African family. Thus when speaking of African families, we talk of a holistic approach of defining the term family, which includes extended families, who also include care-givers or guardians, single parents, child-headed homes and homes headed by grandmothers. As result, in most African communities, a typical African child is raised up by

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more than one of these family structures. In discussing the diversity of families Gail Bateman (2004) argues that “What people regard as their family is their family and this is the reality we, as service providers, must deal with”. Therefore if these realities are not recognized we risk the danger of romanticizing the family as a concept. In response Edgar argues that for this reason, it is preferable to talk about families in the plural in formulating policy (Edgar, 1992). Because of the difficulty of defining families, family theorists prefer to speak about families as being social units governed by “family rules” (Goode, 1964). Theoretically the notion of adding family rules helps in concretizing the essence and value of defining a family.

Families are the primary source of individual development and they constitute the building blocks of communities. They link, under a common identity, young and old members, men and women, providers and dependents. This conviction goes back a long way as illustrated by the Confucian adage that “The strength of the nation derives from the integrity of the home”. From a contemporary perspective, the family is seen as the most important source of social capital (Putnam, 1995:20).

In conclusion to the definition of family, there are two broad perspectives on the current state of the family, in most of our societies. The one perspective sees the family as an institution in decline (Mabetoa, 1994). The other approach sees the family as an institution responsive to social change and therefore undergoing transformation in both structure and function (Viljoen, 1994).

A sense of belonging to a family structure in most African contexts plays a significant role in one’s life. A Tonga proverb which says *mwananshyaufwidakucizyalilo* translated as a deer’s child goes back to die at its birth place places significant value to the role a family plays in a person’s life in terms of one’s originality. Although this proverb may not be applicable in our context due to changes in family life patterns, its value can still be seen in programs such as one of South Africa’s Television program called *Nkumbulekhaya*¹. A close look at such a program reveals how some of the displaced family members have fought for many years to be reunited with their loved ones.

¹An SABC program which is broadcasted countrywide, to help people connect with the family members who they may have lost contact over a period of time.

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Some of the trends that have contributed to transitions in family life structures

Southern Africa and South Africa in particular has a number of unique circumstances that affect the structure and definition of the term family. Some of these factors include its history of apartheid, and particularly the migrant labour system which destabilized family structures by removing male figures from the communities; missionary influence and colonialism which also contributed to some of the patriarchal ways of defining an African family; HIV and AIDS which has contributed negatively to the structure of the family through deaths of parents who are the breadwinners and lastly some of the trends informed by modernity.

As a result of these factors, families throughout the world are adjusting to a variety of broad social, cultural, economic and religious settings. This transition is caused by a paradigm shift in the way in which family life is understood. What is called a traditional family is being replaced by what is called non-traditional family setting which consists of single parenthood, reconstituted families, gay and lesbian families, childless families, child-headed families and families headed by grandmothers. From a Christian perspective, these transitions have also challenged the church's definition of family. Florence Bourg sees families as churches she argues that Christian social teachings cannot continue to operate simply at the level of policy rather theologians must look to how and where values and practices are cultivated and that means paying attention to the home. P6 Family life is often believed to be a place where Christians experience unity of the personal spiritual and the social.

The household is a unique locus of social significance. In a typical African setting the household is usually a place where ethos of ordinary life is played out, where decisions that impact the shape and progress of the community are made. It is a place of religious affiliation and ritual observation it is the initial school for an African child where they learn the norms and values of the community through guidance from the elders. Although the following illustrations of a family life are believed to be the acceptable way of life, the current scenario on the ground tells a

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different story. This is because family structures and family patterns have constantly been undergoing changes. In the sections that follow I will discuss some of the challenges to family life pattern in the Southern African context.

Marriage and sex orientation

Sexuality is so basic to our identity that we hate to see it as something unstable, plastic or vulnerable to change. Our Christian belief constantly reminds us that sex is a gift from God and it had its place in marriage between man and woman. As a result of this sex orientation becomes a strange thing that needs to be fully understood in the context of our faith.

We do not want to be reminded that the Greeks considered homosexuality natural presenting little or no problem to the practice. We also do not want to be reminded that many families in the older days including biblical ones found polygamy as normal as monogamy. Our Christian traditions have for a long time defined the boundaries of belief on such matters. At the same time our faith has also informed the way we understand and respond to these issues as such our conception of family is constantly challenged by these changes.

Reality on how we define a family as church has come to our door step. We don't need to wonder thousands of miles to know that our workmate, church member or even a family member holds a different definition of what a family is and if we do forget the media is always there to remind us. When a member of your church comes to you and wants to baptize their child what questions do you ask them? Where is the father? Is this your biological child?

Case study on challenges to family life

Senzo's story in generation² is a good example of how some African families can respond to issues of homosexuality. Dlomo's family has never been stable he himself only had an uncle two daughters and a sister when he discovered that he had a son. What a joy for Dlomo he is now a complete man with a heir for his throne the one who will sustain the family name. But Dlomo

² This is an SABC soapy that is broadcasted every day at 20 00 hours. Although the soapy has many scenes, this story of Senzo stood out to be very appropriate during the writing of my paper.

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does not know the package this son has, he is gay and will never have biological children of his own should he intend to get married.

The response of Dlomoto the news of his son being gay cannot only be seen from a perspective of a drama for entertainment purposes but an example of the realities that have hit the African society. Senzo is rejected by his father and is told that even the ancestors cannot accept him so he is not allowed to participate in the family rituals. As Kanyoro states one of the significant custodians of the African morality is the strong belief that spiritual powers are deeply concerned about the moral conduct of the individuals and community. These powers would not hesitate to punish immorality through calamity or direct dealings with the individual (2001:61). Although Senzo is later on reconciled to the family, there is still tension between him and the father who sees Senzo's sexual orientation as unacceptable to society. But something very unique happens in the Dlomo family Senzo has made Noluntu pregnant. Dlomo's fight for a marriage of Senzo to Noluntu is not only to prove his masculine urge but to hope against all hope that one day his son may change his mind and become heterosexual. For Dlomo this is an opportune time to influence his son to change his sexual orientation. This complex drama is similar to what goes on in most of our societies today. The reality on the ground is that issues of homosexuality have catch up with us and the church is not spared. Within the walls of the church are the Sibusiso, Senzo and the child that is born from the Noluntu and Senzo relationship who will later discover all the fights that happened between the biological parents? It is such discourses that have influenced the church's response to family life in Africa.

One important point to consider in the Dlomo family is how they understand their world view as Africans in relation to the spirit world. For Dlomo a family also includes the living dead, therefore ancestors also have a say on how family life is to be governed. During the family rituals Senzo seem to be left out because of his sex orientation the argument of the elder member of the family (*baba Mkhulu*) Jabulani is that the ancestors have not recognized Senzo as a member

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of the family due to his sexual orientation. Second, their perception on marriage is based on a heterosexual approach which sees marriage to be a relationship between man and woman.

In our attempt to study people's resilience to ethical issues, the concept of world views is useful especially in trying to understanding the reasons for their resistance. This is because in the African context ethical issues are tied to religion in different ways. Worldviews inform the comprehensive framework of one's basic beliefs about things, whereas norms and values are derived from the community. According to the African world view, reality is seen as a closed system in which everything hangs together and all aspects are affected by any change in the system.

What is interesting in all this is that although Senzo realizes that he is not accepted in into his family due to his sexual orientation does not give up on the Dlomo. This is because for him a sense of belonging to a family is more important than who he is as a gay. This is reflected in his conversation with the father "Dad I am gay and nothing can change that but I still remain a Dlomo you are all I have as a family". In most African societies, the family, clan and tribe are the highest laws that determine what is good or bad. Although my paper seems to address the issue of sexual orientation from a cultural perspective this does not suggest that there are no other ways in which society has viewed the issue of sexual orientation. I also acknowledge other factors such as what I would call encroaching secularization, globalization and the relentless advancement of modernization. All these have created fear and uncertainties on the future of the family.

HIV and AIDS

According to a report by Fractured families a crisis for South Africa, South Africa has one of the highest HIV prevalence rates in the world. HIV has not only affected the socio-economic sectors but has had an incredible impact on the family. The effect of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on families is reflected in the increasing numbers of orphans and child-headed households. More and more children are growing up with absent fathers, and in single parent households. Poverty

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too exacerbates the impact of family breakdown on children. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has also profoundly affected the health and well-being of family members, and has consequently placed an added burden on children who in most cases carry the burden of parenting(see web2009).

As a result of this many South African children are not growing up in safe and secure families. Some are affected by poverty, while others are burdened by the effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Post modernity

In our attempt to address challenges of family life as Christians, there is need for us to also understand the context in which we are live in. Our faith needs to be incarnated in relations to the times and seasons it finds itself in. therefore it become crucial that we understand the specific time we live in. The church must respond to the challenges of family life in the light of a particular time, culture and context. Kanyoro adds that,“contemporary African society is lamenting a moral world fallen apart. The Africans are being torn apart, unable to retreat into the past, yet uncomfortable about the present and uncertain about the future (2001:59).”

The people of different race, colour or sex orientation that we used to hear about are now live next door to us, or sit in the same pew with us at church. There are changes in politics, religion, economy etc and so family life is not an option. However the unfortunate thing is that in all these changes the church seems to be coming from behind. There is resistance to change in most of the Christian communities and much of it has to do with the historical religiosity embedded in our traditions. Times of extreme change are good but they are also dangerous and confusing

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especially if not well handled. My first encounter with a lesbian couple/ gay person brought some culture shock to me that also challenged my faith as an evangelical Christian

Migrant labour

The history of migrant labour in Southern Africa is intricately tied to the uneven development of the capitalist mode of production at the onset of colonization. Because capitalist production started around plantation (agriculture) and mining concerns, it is these two sectors, and especially the latter, that played a dominant role in the evolution of migrant labour within the region. Labour migrant in Southern Africa dates back to the 1850s, when large numbers of men migrated to work in sugar plantations in Natal, where British colonial capitalism was taking shape. The opening up of diamond mines in Kimberley in 1870 resulted in large numbers of workers from all over Southern Africa flocking to the new mines. An estimated 50-80,000 migrant worker came to work on the diamond mines at Kimberley (Crush & Williams, 2002). The impact of migration was more pronounced on women who had to take on a role of both father and mother to the children.

In most of the South African families a number of boys had to grow up without a father figure in their homes. A research conducted on men and masculinities in South Africa found out that one of the influencing factors to male violence in some of the men is due to lack of guidance from the male figures during their times of growing up. Other findings also reviewed that the presence of a mother in the lives of these men also created a feminine value which made them into caring and loving men. Single-parent households are common phenomena in South Africa, with the majority of children growing up with one parent — in most cases a mother. Increasing numbers of fathers are absent, and is a ‘crisis of men’ in South Africa which seems to be perpetuating patterns of abuse that are most likely going to continue with future generations.

A CALL FOR A PUBLIC THEOLOGY TO CHALLENGES FACING FAMILY LIFE

In attempting to seek for a transformative approach in addressing challenges facing family lives within the church, I have chosen to use public theology as understood by de Gruchy. The author

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defines Public Theology as '*theology speaking to the public square.*' This needs to be accepted as the normative way of addressing challenges affecting family life in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. de Gruchy emphasizes the need to see Public Theology as proceeding along the lines of "a sermon at the taxi rank," or another way of telling the world what is right or wrong using modern secular language without showing any bigotry or judgement (2008/2009-125). To concur with de Gruchy, Moltman defines Public Theology as a theology that:

...gets involved in the public affairs of society. It thinks about what is of general concern in the light of hope in Christ for the kingdom of God. It becomes political in the name of the poor and the marginalized in a given society. ...it thinks critically about the religious and moral values of the societies in which it exists and presents its reflections as a reasoned position (1999:1).

John de Gruchy further argues that, doing theology in public must still be done from the perspective of those who are at the receiving end of unjust systems. He further argues that Public Theology has to be well-informed, multidisciplinary and be able to engage the issues in a way that relates to those who now exercise power and influence (2004:55). Given the challenges faced by family life within the church, I agree with de Gruchy that these different influences, contexts, points of references and forms of discourses, will require different approaches within the realms of Public Theology (2004:56).

The second approach that the church need to take is Newlands' concept of public theology as a human rights issue. Challenges to family life also need to be addressed using a human rights approach which requires dialogue within the framework of public theology. Commenting on the church's contribution to human rights Newlands poses a statement saying:

What does the Christian tradition in the past and present day have to contribute to human rights? Judging by the plethora of recent interest, the church might claim that the Christian tradition has always been an advocate of human rights. There has always been the recognition of the creation of man (sic) as a creature in the image of God. There have been pleas for religious tolerance in the early church... Calvin followed Luther in supporting the individual judgment against authority of church tradition (2004:125).

If the church claims to have been involved on the issues of justice for humanity, then the question one asks is why do we still see so much abuse within the church? Why is it that despite

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the fact that trends such as polygamy having historical roots in the church we still do not find any stipulated rules to guide the members effectively?

Peter Jones discussing on human rights from the theological perspective argues that “outside the cocooned world of the academy people are still victims of torture, still subjected to genocide, still deprived of basic freedoms... We should remember these people before we decide to forget about rights (Jones 1994:227).” This then brings a challenge to the church, as de Gruchy argues Public Theology does not find its driving energy in the corridors of the academy or the nave of the cathedral, but in the practical engagement of Christians in the social struggles of the world (2008/2009:130). Therefore issues like those of the Dlomo family require an application of Public Theology more than the laws and disciplines of the church.

From a transformative perspective, Nadar asserts that the mission of the church is often considered as “bringing the kingdom of God to the people (2005:19).” This means that the church needs to step out of its comfort zone and engage with families on issues affecting them using kingdom principles. Newlands concurs with Nadar stating that a theology which is done in isolation from the world affairs may be a coherent and academically satisfying enterprise but it can hardly be adequate (2004:130). As for Oduyoye a church is only a church when it seeks justice (2005:152). The challenge then is, can the church effectively dialogue with these families without offending its structures? deGruchy argues that:

Traditionally social and political ethics have eschewed what is going on behind closed doors, and allowed the dictates of culture and religion to shape the relationships between... parents and children. But feminist analysis has blown this apart and pointed to domestic relationships as a key locus for reflection on oppression and injustice (2008/2009:132).

A further challenge by de Gruchy is presented by what the author calls the ‘epistemological privilege of the ordained.’ (2008/2009:128) This concept illustrates that pastors and theologians are more knowledgeable than the ordinary members since they have access to the inspired knowledge from the Bible. Therefore if the church has to be effective to its members in addressing challenges that affect them in describing family life, there privileged ‘ordained’ Christians should arrive on the public scene as students not as teachers by first learning to listen

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to the wisdom that comes from their church members before criticizing them (2008/2009:129). There is also need to appreciate the role that indigenous knowledge plays in addressing social issues like child-headed homes, single parents and gay marriages. Some of its potentials as outlined by Diersthat the church has include its unique position in the society which the author sees as influencing factors on:

Long term view of development and transformation; excellent coverage in the field; regular contact with the community (same place, same time) in large and small groups; critical life transitions are marked (potential points of life intervention- baptism, confirmation, marriage...; moral authority and leadership; responsibility to nurture and protect...the community; trusted by the community (2009).

Phillips 1997 emphasizes that if the church is a space then its control over that space is in large part determined by its power to define the criteria for belonging to it. An example in this case would be the expulsion of gay people and those found in polygamous marriages.

Can the church handle the pressure of change?

Our contemporary world is like an uncoordinated and loosely jointed giant hurtles headlong down the steep slope already off balance and stumbling. The present state of our family lives is at risk of a great fall. We live in times of incredibly rapid and prolific changes, people, products, ideas and cultures meet and mingle and mutate with dazzling speed. Everything is in motion and is rated with time.

The people of different race, colour or sex orientation that we used to hear about are now living next door to us, or sit in the same pew with us at church. There are changes in politics, religion, economy etc and so family life is not an option. However the unfortunate thing is that in all these changes the church seems to be coming from behind. There is resistance to change in most of the Christian communities and much of it has to do with the historical religiosity embedded in our traditions. Times of extreme change are good but they are also dangerous and confusing especially if not well handled. My first encounter with a lesbian couple/ gay person brought some culture shock to me that also challenged my faith.

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Although the church is barraged with all these challenges on family relations, the bottom line is that at the end of it all God takes pre-eminence of all the decisions that the church ought to make. Without God the tension between what is right and what is wrong is in principle irresolvable. Once God is removed from the understanding of family concepts it is doubtful that moral claims will be compelling. Without God it is impossible for us to see the image of God in others. Without God's knowledge decision making on moral issues becomes a challenge to the church

Conclusion

Our contemporary world is like an uncoordinated and loosely jointed giant hurtles hurried down the steep slope off balance and stumbling. The present state of our family lives is at risk of a great fall. We live in times of incredibly rapid and prolific changes, people, products, ideas and cultures meet and mingle and mutate with dazzling speed. Everything is in motion and is rated with time. To conclude this paper, I would like to argue that if the church wishes to effectively address the problem of changing family life patterns there need to transform the way in which we do church. This will entail redefining what we understand by being a body of Christ? Transformation means change and change always comes with resistance. Phiri and Nadar's (2006) theory of '*treading softly but firmly*' other than '*the hammer and axe*' approach need to be pursued as the best tool when addressing these changing patterns of family life. We need to find liberative ways of dealing with these challenges. Therefore a softly but firmly approach will ensure a smooth transition of the process with little resistance from the stake holders of the practices. Second Nadar (2005) cautions us to address the corresponding theologies that engage these challenges in our context particularly in Africa. Using the words of Jesus in Mathew 10:16 "See I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." The author advises that in our determination to transform any tradition that exist within the church, culture and society we need to use a less intrusive dialogical approach if we are to achieve critically accepted results. Finally I pose a challenge to the Methodist church of Southern Africa to begin to have uncomfortable conversations around some of these ethical issues that have affected the body of Christ.

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