

In the name of the father: Pastoral care for excluded fathers

²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:23-24)

This paper discusses providing pastoral care to New Zealand fathers whom have had their relationships with their children severed (excluded fathers). The writer facilitated care and acted as a Mackenzie Friend (a layperson who assists a litigant in Court) for excluded fathers for well over a decade so has considerable experience in this field. He commences with an outline of some background issues and proposes an appropriate model of pastoral care. As part of his research, he consulted with other care facilitators, whom are referenced by initials. Of course, these are guidelines only, as every situation is unique.

Firstly, it should be noted that non government organisations have long reported systemic bias against fathers in the family courts and other agencies. Also, media releases by Families Apart Require Equality (FARE) estimated that 20,000 New Zealand children lose all contact with their fathers every year (FARE advises this figure was calculated from family court statistics) while noting that only 3,000 New Zealand children lost their fathers to the Second World War. (FARE 2002, 2004). While comprehensive discussion of these macro issues is beyond the scope of this paper, an awareness of them is essential.

An excluded father may be a survivor of domestic violence. He will probably be too embarrassed to disclose this and be aware that support for male survivors is almost non-existent and that he is likely to be treated as the perpetrator if he goes to the police. (An excluded father may have been a perpetrator in addition to or instead of being a survivor, and addressing harm he may have caused is discussed below).

An excluded father may be wary of church counselling services. Many churches (and counsellors) have actively supported anti violence initiatives that focussed on violence against women (such as white ribbon day), but ignored or trivialised violence against men. While they probably did so with the best of intentions, they will have unwittingly further marginalised male survivors of violence, whom continue to struggle to have their existence even acknowledged.

While on the subject of churches, the writer is aware of men whom have had their ministries terminated (or even been ostracised altogether) by their churches because their marriages had failed, even though there were no suggestions of them having caused harm, and care facilitators have reported similar events. (R.G. 2009). Such behaviour by any community of faith is not only intolerable, it fails to reveal Christ in word and action. Assumptions based on stereotypes are never helpful, and prejudicial judgments based on race or gender etc should

never be made in any pastoral situation. As *A New Zealand Prayer Book* reminds us, "In Christ there is no discrimination of gender, class or race." (NZPB 1989:478).

Even if not part of a church, an excluded father struggling to cope with the loss of his children will almost certainly have encountered prejudice. Excluded fathers are frequently blamed for 'walking out on their families' and for many problems.

Finally, an excluded father may well be in a desperate state by the time that he seeks help. He may be doubly hurt by a perception that nobody seems to care. Many fathers in such desperate circumstances seek solace in alcohol or other drugs, while others may resort to attention seeking behaviour or regrettable acts of desperation such as suicide.

When care is given, the importance of avoiding causing harm and maintaining confidentiality can not be overstated.

The first task in providing care to an excluded father is to simply listen. He may accept the loss of his relationship, but the loss of his place in his children's lives may make him feel like they have actually died. As one care facilitator noted, "I find many men accept the ending of their relationship but grieve over the sense that 'family' and their hoped for future has died." (N.Y.2009). There will be many emotions, such as fear, anger and grief to be acknowledged. Unburdening himself of them is necessary before he can move on. (Kornfeld 2006:193).

²⁸ 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28)

Recourse to the family court will often be necessary, urgently if removal of the children from the country is likely. While it is preferable for all parties to avoid the courts if possible, there should be no delay in filing any necessary documents if court is unavoidable. The family court is discussed in more detail later; for now it should be noted that the family court is more than a court and does facilitate mediation and counselling, although the relative lack of male counsellors has been identified as a concern. (N.Y.2009).

The care facilitator should have what Kornfeld calls a "wholeness network" (Kornfeld 2006:92), namely a network outside individuals, organisations and agencies with specialist expertise to whom the excluded father can be referred.

The *Beginning Experience* programme was especially recommended by one care facilitator. (N.Y.2009). According to its website, "We believe that through resolving the grief of a significant

loss, individuals participate in the death and resurrection of Christ as he lives in the world today; that those working through this experience can effectively walk with others for whom the experience is new and hard; and that the invitation to recover offers an opportunity for transforming one's life, and for freeing individuals to love self, others and God in new and deeper ways." (Beginning Experience 2004).

If there is substance abuse, referral to organisations like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA) would be appropriate. If there is evidence of depression, he should be referred to a medical practitioner. If this includes suicidal ideation, it may be necessary to involve a psychiatric emergency response team. In this situation, avoidance of harm takes priority over confidentiality.

Once the care relationship has been established, a plan of care needs to be established. While the writer considers that the '12 steps' (which were first formulated by AA) comprise a comprehensive theological basis for pastoral care in most situations, it must be noted that the '12 steps' were an adaptation of the principles of the Oxford Group (an evangelical movement). These principles of surrender, restitution (the writer prefers the term restoration) and sharing (Hemfelt & Fowler 1990:19) underpin the model of care proposed in this paper. However, it is important to note that these are guidelines only and that every situation is unique.

In this context, surrender must commence with an acknowledgement of powerlessness. It is heartbreaking for an excluded father to accept that the family court and related agencies now have the power to allow or prevent his children from maintaining normal contact from him, and that he is powerless over the situation. It is important to note that he is not being asked to give up his children, only to accept that the final outcome is out of his hands.

Once an excluded father has acknowledged his powerlessness, he may acknowledge that a power greater than himself has control of the situation. The power greater than himself may be the family court, which ultimately holds the fate of his family in its hands. However if he has a spiritual basis to his life, he may look beyond the court to the God of his understanding.

When an excluded father has 'handed over' the situation, restoration can begin. An excluded father should be encouraged to take personal inventory, including both good that he has done as well as any harm he may have caused. It is important to note that one can only take inventory of one's self. When an excluded father and his children have been badly wronged, he can only keep his side of the street clean, not anybody else's. A willingness to forgive should be encouraged. Obviously this can be difficult, but it should be sensitively demonstrated that if he holds resentments, even if they seem justified, he will mainly be hurting himself. Evidence of

progress with the restorative process will be a willingness to make amends and actually making such amends whenever possible, except when to do so would harm others. This includes unreservedly forgiving others who may have harmed him.

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:14-15)

If there has been harm to others, and referral is to be made to an anti-violence programme, it must be to one from a male-friendly provider, such as Man Alive.

“Run by men for men, Man Alive's team is dedicated to working with men in straightforward and practical ways. We believe that men are strengthened when they stand in a healthy community of men who support them as they face transitions in their lives.” (Man Alive 2009).

When restoration is considered to have been satisfactorily progressed, an excluded father should be encouraged to share his experience, strength and hope with other excluded fathers to help them find the peace that he will have discovered for himself.

An excluded father should now be better equipped to deal with the important task of restoring his place in his children's lives. The family court is already a difficult place for any father. He will make only it harder for if he is holding onto resentments.

The writer strongly recommends self-representation in the family court when an excluded father is suitably calm and articulate. It is his experience from being a Mackenzie Friend that family court lawyers are often unsatisfactory. Also, an excluded father will often have difficulty obtaining legal aid. (N.Y. 2009). However, he should not represent himself without help. He should enlist the support of an experienced Mackenzie Friend. Not only will a Mackenzie Friend usually be experienced, he or she will provide the service to help and not for pecuniary gain.

The best way to find a Mackenzie Friend is through a well established fathers' support group. Some groups attract individuals whom are still hurting and whose advice may not be the most temperate. It is safer to use groups whose focus is support, and the writer recommends Union of Fathers and Men's Centre North Shore. Such groups should also be included in one's “wholeness network”, along with father-friendly psychologists and other specialists and father-friendly lawyers for those whom wish to be represented.

Once the process is in place for excluded father to restore his relationship with his children, the need for care is by no means over. There may be complications such as protection orders. Also, the family court can literally take years to resolve a case, but a competent Mackenzie Friend will be able to advise and assist. Ongoing care will be required to help an excluded father through this process.

In summary, the care of an excluded father should be planned on an individual basis, but in the first instance, he should be listened to without prejudice. A plan of care can then be formed, which would usually entail a process of surrender through acknowledgment of powerlessness, followed by restoration and sharing. This will greatly help him to cope with the rigours of the family court.

Excluded fathers need care and support as much as any other sector of the community that has suffered systemic hurt, and we have ignored them for far too long.

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www.theword.tk

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<http://www.beginningexperience.org/>

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Man Alive

<http://manalive.org.nz/>

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