



The role of African Theology and Spirituality in the bereavement among amaXhosa children: An Ecclesiastical challenge

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Abstract

Many people consider grief to be a single instance or short period of pain or sadness in response to a loss – such as the tears shed for a loved one at a funeral. However grieving includes an entire emotional process of coping with a loss which is traumatic, and it can last a very long time. This paper explores the impact of bereavement on young Xhosa children. It further discusses underpinnings on children's bereavement, including the need for theological guidance through African theology and Spirituality. It also discusses, through the literature review, the underpinning contributing factors. It also seeks to find some solutions to these underpinning contributing factors, at the same time offering some solutions. It concludes by discussing interventions by lay-preachers who are doing therapeutic theological response at an elementary level.

Keywords: African theology, grief, sorrow, mourning, sanctity.

Introduction

This research has been motivated by both authors' involvement in the church where they have interacted with both Sunday school children and church youth. It has been observed that there is neither theological guidance given, nor support, for young Xhosa children during bereavement. Most African people are of the opinion that children do not grieve and are immune to bereavement grief. In the African context, HIV/AIDS and many other related diseases, including road accidents, contribute to immense child grief. Examples of episodes that led to massive death incidents are the collapse of the so-called Church Hostel building in Lagos, Nigeria which claimed the lives of eighty (80) South Africans and the *Marikana* saga which claimed the lives of thirty four (34) people and left seventy eight (78) seriously wounded (Alexander et al., 2012).

Many children among Xhosa speakers are affected by these deaths, and grief becomes part of their lives. In the Xhosa context, the focus is always on the elderly people when there is death in the family. The only therapy which usually includes children is in the form of sermons and prayers. It must also be noted that in most cases, these activities are usually conducted by lay preachers who are neither trained Pastors nor Child Therapists. These preachers, however, render these services out of love and support for bereaved families. The challenge in this regard is with the language that is usually used by these preachers, which does not appeal to children. The paper aims to discuss the challenges faced by children during bereavement. It also discusses, through the literature review, the



underpinning contributing factors. It also seeks to find some solutions to these underpinning contributing factors, at the same time offering some solutions.

The Problem

Steinberg (2004:5) in Jackson (2007:6) refers to the problem statement as, “a search for a general area of interest that has a professional meaning.” On the other hand, Vithal and Jansen (2006:13) in Jackson (2007:3) maintain that “the significance of any study is its contribution to improve practice, inform policy and enrich the knowledge-base of the topic being investigated. The paper outlines the importance and effectiveness of problem statement. The problem statement should be understood as a road map and a point of departure for the research at hand. It further highlights the originality of the problem at hand. The point of departure, as far as the problem statement is concerned in this paper, is on the basis that in the grieving processes of the Xhosa speaking people, there is a tendency to overlook the way children feel during bereavement. It is usually assumed that they are too young to understand the bereavement process. It is further believed that they must not be bothered with in-depth details regarding death as this will confuse them.

In the Xhosa context, the focus and attention is always given to the elderly people when death takes place in the family. When such an occurrence takes place, the only form of therapy from Christian believers usually provided by the brethren, which usually includes children, is in the form of sermons and prayers. Correctly speaking, this intervention cannot be called a sermon - rather, it may be called messages of condolences, support and comfort. When preachers perform this intervention, they select a passage from the bible and use one text which is preached on by more than five to ten people. Songs are sung in-between, and that constitutes part of taking away the pain from the bereaved family. These services are usually done during night vigils when every member of the family is available. At such times, they are joined by their families for support and ordinary members of the community because in the African culture, *ukubhujelwa* (meaning to lose a family member) is not a private matter - it is communal matter.

The bereaved family listens to more than five lay preachers delivering sermons in the form of messages of support. It must also be noted that in most cases, these activities are usually conducted by lay preachers who are neither trained as Pastors nor Child Therapists. These preachers, however, render these services out of love and support for bereaved families. The challenge in this regard is with the language usually used by these preachers. Sometimes they use idioms and deep Xhosa expressions related to loss, and the challenge is that they do not interpret these for children to understand. Sometimes they are not deliberate in doing so, it is because they are pressurized by time, and the next preacher would be waiting impatiently for his or her turn to convey the message of support. The kind of language that they use does not appeal to children; this is even worse with today's children who are growing in a different cultural context mostly influenced by the western culture. Preachers use expressions such as: *tutwini, akuhlanga lungehliyo, imela igobebe esandleni, ibingu Thixo obenikile ikwanguye nothabathileyo, sisidla ubomi nje sikwasekufeni.*

There is no doubt these are good and meaningful expressions. However, these need to be explained to young children as priests continue to preach. In a nutshell, all they mean is: death is always in our midst, and we can never avoid it. God gives and takes life. It is assumed that children understand these concepts, but that is not the case. The authors, therefore, believe that something should be done for bereaved children in this regard. Theological support and comfort is needed in the form of African Theology and Spirituality.

Methodology



The paper uses literature review through consulting books, academic journal articles and research papers on the notion of children suffering from grief as a result of death in the family. By so doing, it is believed that this multi-disciplinary approach will inform the path to take in crafting some Black African responses to the challenges posed by bereavement on children. Importantly so, their work experience of the authors of this paper has been instrumental in shaping and conceptualizing the research paper. The researchers, therefore, espouse undertaking this research on Xhosa children bereavement in order to put forth possible recommendations for the way forward.

Literature review, Observations and Discussion

The discussion of possible gaps responsible for the impact of bereavement on young Xhosa children and the contributing factors is presented in an attempt to identify and recommend solutions to the challenge. Focus is on scholarly contributions with regards to child bereavement, and these are briefly presented and discussed.

Bowlby (1980), Worden (1986), Case (1987), Forrest and Thomas (1991) in Makunga and Shange (2009), in their research on evaluation and communication with bereaved children, extrapolate that, “research suggests that children do show grief reactions in the form of behaviour following attachment loss.” The authors further illustrate that “the emotional pain experienced by bereaved children may, at times, be unrecognized and therefore unresolved.” On the other hand, Siegel, Mesugno and Langosch (1991) in Makunga and Shange (2009) write that “psychological development and mental health of children may be affected by death in the child’s family or immediate environment.”

Nuckels (2013) affirms that “when grief is not addressed, acknowledged and expressed, it causes one to live in the shadows of the ghosts of grief; this refers to the grief that is disenfranchised or condoned.” The author also uses the term ‘carried grief’ to describe “unacknowledged and un-mourning grief.” The author also makes the point that “children are aware of and familiar with the concept of death.” Speaking in his own context, the author is of the view that “children from farms have experienced the death of farm animals as well as death of members of their extended families.” On the other hand, Kennedy (2006:1), commenting on the impact of a death of a parent, says, “The death of a parent is a life shaking event for which few are prepared.” The author also says that “the grieving period is an important time to heal...”. This experience, according to the writer, can even be more detrimental for children because they also need time to heal and must be supported and guided towards their healing.

Brewster (2010:69) in Van Ransburg (2013:19) speaks of the importance of building self-reliance in children who find themselves in crisis. The author suggests that in assisting bereaved children, one must consider the following: allow them to do what they can do themselves without intervening, encourage them positively and start where they are and with what they have available. Smith (2009) accepts this argument and further makes the following contribution with regards to children and parental death situations, which the researchers found them to be helpful: Adults must understand that children grieve differently from adults; their unique grieving process must be taken into consideration as their response to death is influenced by their age at the time of a death.

Jackson (2007:50) mentions the role of families in supporting bereaved children. The author notes, “Families have a duty to ensure that bereaved children are not alone with worries and fears.” The author further argues, “This is because children who feel safe will discuss issues pertaining to their experiences with people they can trust.” The author further affirms, “Children will also determine how they want to remember their loved one...” Woo and Wong (2003:45) in Jackson (2007:50) presents a list of five early warning signs and symptoms for caregivers to identify in their support for bereaved children. These are: when the child



excessively imitates the dead person, repeatedly mentions need to join the dead person, shows a sharp drop in school performance and is unable to respond to acts and words of comfort.

According to Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005:84) in Jackson (2007:21), "Children do not have the words or permission to voice their grief, while adults have trouble expressing their emotions." It is further argued, "When children do not discuss their feelings, it should not be assumed that they are resilient, but rather, they may be hesitant to do so because they are not encouraged or perhaps not allowed to." These authors also affirm, "If children are given facts, they will be able to think and behave in the light of increased understanding." It is further discussed that "the death of a parent/primary caregiver disrupts childhood and may impact negatively on a child's development." According to them, "Death is a subject that needs to be discussed openly and honestly with children, the details of which should be appropriate to their age and cognitive developmental stage. Mphuthi (2004) in Jackson (2007:27) argues that "Children communicate at different levels, according to their developmental or reading level."

De Klerk and Le Roux (2003) in Jackson (2007) speak of the "Importance of caregivers developing a level of emotional intelligence in children so that children are better prepared to face these challenges." This emotional intelligence is defined by these authors as "the ability to identify, understand and control thoughts and feelings, communicate them appropriately to others and have empathy with emotions of others..."

Emswiler and Emswiler (2000) in Spiegelberg (2006) speak of defence mechanisms by children. They maintain that "Even though the adult's grieving process and that of a child differs, a child will probably still experience many of the same emotions an adult does." The argument goes further that "Children lack skills for understanding, coping with and expressing what is happening with them during times of bereavement." It is further discussed that "due to the fact that children lack these crucial skills, they often use defence mechanisms to help themselves recover during times of bereavement."

Nyanjaya (2006) highlights the role of mourning rituals in grief. The author looks at funerals and memorial services as rituals that can play a critical role in the grieving process. These rituals, according to the author, have a potential to fulfil the following roles:

To give recognition that a life has been lived, they confirm the dignity and worth of human beings, they provide public recognition in a structured way that death has occurred, they allow the bereaved to publicly express and share the loss and they facilitate expression of grief that is consistent with cultural values. Cook (1998) in Nyanjaya (2006) adds to this by affirming that "these rituals can build family relationships and further assist in realignment of family roles such as an appointment of a guardian." The author further asserts that "The guardian would help the remaining spouse look after the remaining children, pending the final ceremony which is the cleansing of the spirit of the dead which takes place after a year. Hendriks (2004:137) speaks of the criticality of funerals as contributing rituals in addressing bereavement in the African context. The author maintains that "funerals are the most important examples of indigenous African rituals."

Mbiti (1977:69) in Van Heerden (n.d.), affirms that "in the Xhosa culture, death marks the beginning of a new phase of family membership. Death does not mean extinction as the dead become ancestors." Commenting on the general neglect often suffered by these children, Louw (2008:486) concedes that, Children are often neglected in the area of Pastoral care due to the mistaken idea that they are malleable and do not experience grief until their teens.



Childhood is the golden age of innocence and should not be neglected under the guise that they can cope on their own. Collins (2007:220) sheds some light in this regard: “Too often when there is little adult understanding or supervision, the disruptive behaviour at age four (4) turns into more serious behavioural problems...” This qualifies the search and endeavour to support children during their time of loss.

The writers have also observed that there is communality among Xhosa speakers. This means that people generally strive to do things together in their culture. It is confirmed that even when it comes to grieving, they grieve together. Mbiti concurs: “As life in the Xhosa tradition is communal, grieving is also a communal activity” (Mbeti, Personal Communication with Van Heerden, May 21, 2001). The writer, therefore, is of the view that the exclusion of Xhosa children in bereavement processes is not due to cultural prescripts as this culture embraces communality. This is rather based on ignorance. People in this culture seem to lack knowledge in this area. The danger of this is that the bereaved Xhosa children are not taken care of during bereavement. This has a potential to create serious problems for both the community at large and the religious community, respectively. This, according to the authors, calls for support of bereaved Xhosa children and for the religious community (church) to have programmes in place to address this phenomenon.

As it has been indicated in the topic, in terms of theological guidance, the role of African theology in this regard is explored in this paper. Collins speaks of the role of the church in counselling (Theological guidance). “The church’s overall ministry is the care of souls and caring in times of need...” Collins (2007:36). This shows clearly that the church has a role to play in taking care of the members thereof. The role of the church is, therefore, critical in this paper since the paper is focussed on the religious community and is applied in the context of child bereavement. Below is the discussion of underpinning contributing factors on child bereavement.

Underpinning Contributing factors on child bereavement

The first challenge is the lack of proper theological guidance that needs to be addressed. The Liberative Theory derived by Clinebell (1984:40-43) proposes five steps, namely: “Healing, Sustaining, Guiding, Reconciling, and Nurturing”.

Healing: This focuses on spiritual healing.

Sustaining: Issues such as preserving, consoling and consolidating are dealt with.

Guiding: This entails giving advice and listening.

Reconciling: Areas such as confession, forgiveness and disciplining are covered.

Nurturing: This covers training for new members in the Christian life and religious education.

The researchers are convinced that all five steps presented by the author in this regard are applicable to young grieving children.

The main aim of applying theological guidance to young children during bereavement is to bring healing to them since they live with their trauma of bereavement and loss. The author also speaks of *sustaining* due to the fact that sustaining also covers *consoling* and is relevant for grieving children. These children need to be consoled during the time of their bereavement by applying theological guidance in the form of African theology and African spirituality. The researchers also note the relevance of guidance as it translates into giving advice and listening. Grieving children need to be advised and listened to during their loss



and bereavement. In terms of reconciliation, they need to be reconciled both to themselves and to God the Almighty. Young children easily blame themselves when there is a crisis in their homes - hence they need to be reconciled to themselves first. They also need nurturing so that they can grow out of their crisis of bereavement and be able to stand on their own.

Louw (2008:563) speaks of several approaches with regard to theological guidance for people who grieve. These approaches connect well with the steps mentioned by Clinebell (2001:40-43).

First: It is important to provide structures by means of rituals and symbols. These structures are for the expression of emotions regarding the severity of the bonding experience to stimulate the process of parting and detachment. This process implies increasing the reality of the experienced loss.

Secondly: It is vital to act as an interpreter between the pain of the griever and God's compassion. The Pastor must, therefore, be a good listener to all the stories of pain and loss.

Thirdly: To facilitate the process and phases of grief i.e. to help the mourner to deal with expressed and latent effects of death.

Fourth: Providing support making choices for the future. This also includes the process of orientation to the reality of the loss. The mourner is helped to realize that the loss is real, so the Pastor should support the mourner to overcome various impediments. This should include readjustment after the loss. The bereaved must be encouraged to take leave of the deceased and feel comfortable about reinvesting in life.

Fifth: Rendering support by means of practical tasks of service and assistance by giving advice. People are unable to make wise choices during their phase of confusion and shock. Later on, people must be encouraged to deal with life once again and make choices on re-adjusting. In the case of the child/children, the remaining parent or guardian must not make choices and changes during the stage of confusion for the child, for example, changing schools. These changes will affect the child negatively. Children also need time to adjust to life after they have experienced loss.

Sixth: The mediation of hope by means of organic use of scripture, i.e. a periscope of scripture which applies to the needs of the griever. These must be within the context of the griever's specific phase at the time.

Seventh: To encourage communication with the deceased via a consciousness of the reality of the resurrection. The same quality of life which the deceased believer already shares in Christ belongs to the believers that are still living. This happens on the grounds of their corporate fellowship with Christ (2008:563).

These approaches by Louw are important as they expand on and build on the steps presented by Clinebell (2001) as well as the liberation theological approach by Gustavo (1970). The Pastor, or any other person who seeks to apply theological guidance to children during bereavement, should embark on these approaches and contextualize them according to the needs of grieving children during their loss. Commenting on the importance of theological guidance, Louw clearly states:

The overall goal of theological guidance is to help the survivor to complete the unfinished business with the deceased. The survivor



must be able to take leave of the deceased and must readjust to life. The creation of the Pastoral growth groups within which grievors can verbalize their grief, is one of the most important therapeutic goals. Grief is healed where love displays understanding ... where faith learns to trust (Louw, 2008:563).

It is critical to align all these approaches to the imperatives of African theology and Spirituality. This means that this whole discourse must be communicated to grieving children by means of African theology and Spirituality. Xhosa children, in particular, must be helped to verbalize their grief. This must be followed by nurturing and healing of their wounded souls. The caregiver needs to understand the language of the children, which is play therapy. Commenting on the importance of play therapy for children, Sweeney (2001:17) emphasizes that “children do communicate through play whether or not adults can interpret or understand the play”. Based on Louw’s comments, authors can conclude that theological guidance, through African theology and Spirituality reveals God’s role in suffering. When the child grieves, theological guidance confirms God’s presence with the child. God is the ultimate comforter of the child through theological guidance rendered by the caregiver.

Another issue that is discussed is children’s difficulties with language used during preaching by preachers and care-givers. As discussed previously, one of the challenges that children of this age have difficulties with is the language used by preachers when they visit bereaved families for spiritual healing. When there is bereavement in an African home, it is customary that members of the church, together with community, come and offer some support and night vigil services are conducted. These prayer services are usually held prior to the day of funeral. They are mostly done in the evenings when everybody is available. Such prayer services are usually conducted by lay preachers, and these people are not trained in preaching and counselling but do their best in rendering spiritual support to bereaved families even though they are lay preachers and not therapists. However, most unfortunately, this process does not seem to be helpful for children in this culture. This is due to the fact that the language used in this undertaking does not accommodate children and is far above their expected level.

In defining ‘language’, the Oxford Dictionary (2007:312) affirms that, “Language is human communication through the structured use of words.” In this regard, it has been established that the use of words does not accommodate children. An example of this is the use of expressions such as (*tutwini, imela igobele esandleni, akuhlanga lungehliyo, ibingu Thixo obenikile, ikwanguye nothabathileyo, sisebomininje, sikwasekufeni*).

There is no doubt in the authors understanding that these are good concepts. However, these concepts need to be explained to children since they are not usually explained as it is assumed that children understand these them. The researchers believe that children should be considered and put in the picture with regards to loss and death (sharing). Kroen (1996:16) in Jackson (2007:22-23) concedes that “sharing emotions with young children is healthier than hiding them as the former encourages children to express feelings.” Preaching during bereavement should then be designed as a sharing moment that embraces children as well. “Children should learn that no one is happy all the time and sadness is a necessary adjustment to life” (Kroen, 1996:16 in Jackson,2007:23). The researchers maintain that it is imperative that these should be communicated in the language that children understand.

Critical for this process is that the sermon should be a form of communication, and the interpretation of the message of what God Almighty is saying to our own situations. The sermon is regarded as the message of the day in the church or the house of the Lord. In other words, it is asking the question: what is God saying to us? What must we do about our lives? This poses challenges to investigate what can sermons offer to bereaved children who



are victims of loss within the church. Different sermons can be preached in different services and different occasions. Martin raises six main areas that the sermon embraces, namely: teaching, training of new converts (which he refers to as catechism), comfort, (he uses a Greek word *paraenesis*, meaning 'it speaks to') moral reconstruction, witness and lastly, witness as confession (*homologia* in Greek). The focus of this study thus lies in two aspects of the sermon: the sermon as the message of *ithemba* (hope) and the sermon reflecting a theology of *ukukhululeka* – liberation theology.

Conclusion and recommendations

The paper has tried to highlight and expose the nature of the problem for the bereaved children. It proposes that regarding bereavement, especially affecting children, sermons should embrace three things, namely: teaching, comfort, (Greek word *paraenesis*, meaning 'it speaks to') and the sermon as the message of *ithemba* (hope). These brief messages should speak to the pain and suffering caused by death and should reflect teaching on what God is saying about life and death, especially death of believers. The messages should bring comfort to the bereaved and grieving children, accompanied by a message of hope. A simple language should be used to accommodate children in order for them to follow and understand this communication. Failure to do so will be failure to bring about healing, teaching, comforting and bringing hope to a hopeless situation.

The paper also proposes that some form of teaching in preparing lay-preachers for this task should be in place otherwise we, as the Christian community, would be failing in ministering to bereaved children.

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