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Editorial

One of the pressing questions that reverberates often in African Christianity is: What is an (African) Christian family? Family is very important to the traditional Africans. Raising a family is not just a social and cultural demand that has to be meant, but also a conditional for eschatological redemption or salvation. For the African Christian, the place of family cannot also be over-emphasised. Thus, prayers for the family in all its ramifications occupy the central stage in personal and intercession sessions. Although African Christians have for a long time contended with the notions of the Christian family in general, there is a progressive acceptance of its monogynous union based on heterosexuality. However, Western values and globalisation forces have continued to shape Christian family discourses and practices. Sex and sexuality issues have been escalated and mediated so much so that Christian 'theology' of family, sexuality, and sex has to contend with the throes of globalisation.

This volume, which is a product of the 2023 conference on the theme: Christian Family and Sexuality in Contemporary Society, critically reflects the tensions, challenges, and theological prospects of a Christian family. In the lead article, Professor Knoetze departs from the general conception of the Christian family based on Christ's salvation. Although he points out that family is a contested issue in Africa, he argues that a radical conception of the Christian family should centre around relationality, forging a missional relationship with the Trinitarian God. This is in contrast with the soteriological conception of family that has blurred the missional prospects that understanding family can birth for a long time.

Adu-Gyamfi's article also radically takes on the traditional conception of sex as a purely private issue, and attempts to strike a balance between it and the sexual revolution that theology of sexuality has to contend with. Coming from a heteronormative perspective, Adu-Gyamfi strongly maintains conservative theological stand on sexuality. He argues that the biblical

understanding of sexuality cannot be traded with the offering of the over-sexualised world.

On her own, Ayo-Oladayo explores the significance and nexus between language education and family development. She points out that effective communication in the family is a sine qua non for cohesion, unity, and progress. In addition to fostering cultural understanding, supporting cognitive growth, and fostering stronger family ties, it also improves communication abilities. Oladapo and Aderele examine the positive impacts of social change, particularly technological advancement, on the family. They opine that despite the advantages derived from modern communications devices, Christian theological understanding of the family should be countenanced and appropriated by Christian families.

Odesola and Odesola reflect on the significance of sex education in the church. Although sex education has not been a major interest in missional and catechetical teaching, they suggest that contemporary challenges make it imperative for the church to be interested in sex education. Otun's article introduces a philosophical dimension to sexuality discourse. Otun views the relegation of reason in choice- and decision-making processes as unacceptable and recommends a balanced deployment of both reason and faith in sexuality matters. Gombi re-examines the accounts of Genesis and contemporary sexual expressions. In the Genesis creation stories, an explanation of the nature of sexuality takes a central, climactic positioning and is given as a fundamental fact of creation. The excessive amount of material given to sexuality highlights its relevance in the Hebrew Bible within the cosmic context of the creation narratives. The foundation for the rest of the biblical narrative and discourse on human sexuality is provided by the profound depiction of God's original plan for human sexuality at the beginning of the canon, which also captures the core ideas of sexuality.Salifu enumerates the negative effects of street hawking, such as rape, unplanned pregnancies, and violence. He recommends that the state and social institutions should intervene to stem the corrosive tide of street hawking in Nigeria.

Biar explores the disagreement between 'pre-modernism' and postmodernism. He argues that the different positions these schools of thought hold have created serious tension in how to understand human sexuality. The recognition of feeling over reason and the relativistic contours that encircle the arguments of postmodernism, modernism, and premodernism all have impact on Christian notion of sexuality. He, however, maintains that the Bible still reserves the best model of sexual appreciation in contemporary society. For Kosoluware, the negative influences of postmodernism should be frontally addressed by contemporary African Christians. It is essential that the Church in Africa rise to the challenge through teaching, counseling and intentional preaching of the gospel. Atteh examines Christian moral victory, and points out the tensions that have characterised its different interpretations. He opines that the best approach to the theological issue is to insist that the victory believers have over the flesh nature is both positional and progressive, encompassing both the divine and the human responsibilities. Asaolu tackles the increasing cases of marital infidelity in society. Articulating the causes and effects of marital infidelity, Asaolu recommends that couples act in such a way that their actions could conform with Kantian categorical imperative. Finally, Ajao makes a case for sex education as a part of socialisation in the family. He notes that it is no longer possible to hold the view that sex talk is a taboo. Therefore, there should be a conscious approach to addressing sexuality issues.

This volume is a coterie of discourses on sex, sexuality and family. The burning issues raised from multidisciplinary perspectives enrich the volume and provide a critical resource for further engagement. However, the ideas are solely the responsibility of the authors rather than the editorial board of the journal.

Benson Ohihon Igbion
Editor-in-Chief

THE FAMILY IN AFRICA AS A SAFE SPACE

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Abstract

There is a strong interest in studying families. It is the author's experience that the church in Africa does not give proper attention to family and children's ministry. On the other hand, many of the studies on family lean toward a heteronormative family, middle class, and nuclear in nature. The author links four stages to the *missio trinitatis Dei* to argue that a safe family is not only about salvation in Christ, but also about a living relationship with the Trinitarian God. Therefore, this article confirmed that family is a contested issue, especially in Africa. First, attention was given to the contextual demographic shifts in Africa. Second, different concepts or understandings of what the concept of 'family' entails were considered. Third, with the previous discussions as the background, a proposal was made to read the Bible in terms of families with a missional hermeneutics. Fourth, the implications of different understandings of salvation for the church's ministry to families were discussed. Lastly, the importance of a Trinitarian theology rather than just a soteriology was discussed for creating safe families.

Introduction
Africa the Context
This article begins with the acknowledgment that we may not and cannot talk of a homogeneous Africa. The different regions, religions, countries, and even tribes, differ so much from each other in terms of their customs, culture, and beliefs. Thus, for the purpose of this paper, it is noted that some generalisations that will be made may not be applicable to every context in Africa.

Attending to an overview of the population in Africa, statistics show that the population on the African continent will keep growing after 2030 while, on the other continents, it will reach a plateau or decline. In Africa, Niger has the highest fertility rate, with 7.08 births per woman, and Nigeria has the tenth highest fertility rate, with 5.11 births per woman. However, in its 2012 revision of the World Population Prospects (WPP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) showed that Nigeria will have the most births in Africa for 2015–2030, equal to 136 million, and the number of births in 2031–2050 will equal 224 million, while for the same periods Niger will only equal 20 million and 40 million births, respectively. In Africa, the three major causes of death among children under five are still malaria, diarrhea, and pneumonia. It is noteworthy to mention that 50% of Africa's population is under 18 (You, Hug and Anthony 2014). Although the author could not find any statistics available for the African continent relating to education, it would be important to look at the number of children who do not attend school or who start school but never finish school. It is thus not about literacy but education. Although 38.4% of African women never marry, a high percentage of them are single parents: Southern Africa 50.5%, Eastern Africa 20.8%, Central Africa 24.5%, and Western Africa 15.7%.

Families
Rabe and Naidoo (2015, 1) indicate that there is a strong interest in studying families across the globe. However, both scholars are working in the social sciences. It is the author's experience that the church in Africa does not give proper attention to family and children's ministry. On the other hand, many of the studies on families 'lean toward a heteronormative family, middle class and nuclear in nature' (Rabe and Naidoo 2015, 2). A good example is the White Paper on Families (2021) drawn up by the Department of Social Development (DSD) in South Africa. The White Paper distinguishes between the following types of families: child-headed households; a family formed through cohabitation; extended family;

homeless family; healthy family; nuclear family; skip-generation households; and social fatherhood (DSD 2021). It then continues to promote a middle-class, nuclear family.

Within most African countries, the nuclear family type – '[a] family group consisting of parents with their biological or adoptive children' (DSD 2021) was never the dominant structure. This relates to factors like tradition, religion, poverty, migration, and pandemics (cf. Rabe 2017, 2). In the Bible we also find more than 40 diverse forms of family, which is due to many of the same factors mentioned by Rabe, such as tradition, droughts, poverty, slavery, and migration. Therefore, the understanding of a family used in this paper is more amoeba-like than nuclear. Familyis used as an inclusive concept and is defined by narratives. A family might thus be described as: 'Any group who refers to and experiences themselves as a family must be regarded as a family'. Family then becomes a functional concept (cf. Muller 2009, 11), where members care for each other, and empower each other to find their own identity since security does not come from things outside of us but is first and foremost formed inside us. The concept of family is, therefore, not static but dynamic, and the word 'family' is not a noun but a 'verb' (Marais and Marais 2002).

The Bible and families
Due to different contexts and a constantly changing world, Knoetze (2015, 3) argues for a missional hermeneutics when using the Bible in family and youth ministry. Applying missional hermeneutics as described by Wright (2006, 33-47) implies the following:

> The Bible is used for more than just being' a biblical foundation' for families. Nel (2000:9) wrote that the Bible is not a handbook or a programme of 'how to do' youth ministry (family). The Bible is thus read in the first place to understand God's revelation in diverse contexts and different structures. In this regard, we refer to Bosch (1993, 440):

What is decisive for the Church today is not the formal agreement between what she is doing and what some isolated biblical text seems to be saying, but rather her relationship with the essence of the message of Scripture.

Reading the Bible using more than just multicultural hermeneutical perspectives. Wright (2006, 41) argues that 'the words of Jesus "opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures"' (Lk 24:45). It is Jesus himself who provides the hermeneutical coherence within which all people must read the Bible. The hermeneutical key is Christological; it is understanding the story that leads *up to Christ* (messianic reading) and the story that leads *on from Christ* (missional reading) (Knoetze 2015, 4).

Reading the Bible from more than contextual theologies and advocacy reading, with the conviction that my life story is part of the biblical story of God's purpose with the nations (Wright 2006, 44).

Missional hermeneutics is more than postmodern hermeneutics, thus there is room for plurality but not for relativism. 'In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christian faith offers a centre that holds not just one, but more alternatives from which to choose' (Dean and Foster 1998, 15).

Reading the Bible with a missional perspective will have, inter alia, the following consequences for understanding families. If Scripture is more than just 'a biblical foundation' for families, then the essence is that all families are important to God regardless, and therefore, we must take care of families. God uses families from different backgrounds and contexts to communicate and practice saving care for his creation. If care is conceptualised 'as a fundamental principle that directs relationships within communities' (Rabe 2017, 3), the covenants (e.g. Gen 6, 12 and 15) of God with his people (families) should then guide us in how we take care of (our) families. Thus, care

or caregiving can be described as '*an action, a mental state* and a *moral value*' (Rabe 2017, 3, italics in the original).

For these reasons, the church must be careful how it uses, for example, biblical texts like the house tables (Eph 5; Col 3; 1 Pet 3). If Jesus himself is the hermeneutical key, then we may ask questions such as: What is the implication of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus for different families in diverse contexts? This will be discussed later in the paper when we deal with different interpretations of salvation. Another implication of a missional hermeneutics will be the discovery that our family's story is part of God's story together with the context in which we live, and the church must help families to discover this. A further implication would be the discovery that being part of God's story with his creation implies that God loves and uses families in their brokenness and diversities. In short, there is no blueprint in the Bible for family structures, the functioning of families, or the participation of families in God's mission; God works with us in our pluralities. However, what is clear from the Bible is God loves families and they are instruments in the mission of God.

Using a missional hermeneutics, the family as a safe space can then be described as a group of people who view themselves as a family and commit themselves to take care of each other in their physical, mental, and moral state, even with their own vulnerabilities and brokenness in their personal physical, mental, or moral state. The church as the 'family of Christ' (Eph 2:19; Gal 6:10; 1 Tim) is therefore a good example of this vulnerability and brokenness. Thus, Christ is the ultimate caretaker for the church – he attended to us while we were powerless and unable to take care of ourselves (Rom 5:6). He saved us and made us part of God's family – the church. When we accept the salvation of Christ, he becomes the Lord of our lives, and we direct our whole life to God's honour and glory.

The following section focuses on the different understandings or interpretations of salvation from the context of Africa, considering the implications for families and the ministry to and with families in Africa.

Understandings of Salvation

Salvation is a concern of every religion. When it comes to Christianity, we want all people to be saved. The question is, however, from what and to what? In Christianity, salvation is only in Christ. Bosch (2012, 402) stated that the 'name Jesus means "Saviour"'. Therefore, the conviction that Jesus Christ gave his life as salvation for all is at the centre of Christianity. Without going into detail here, Bosch draws our attention to the fact that salvation is understood in various ways by different biblical authors, for example: 'For Luke, salvation is present salvation. … he [Paul] puts greater emphasis on the inchoative nature of salvation – it only *begins* in this life' (2012, 403). While in the Byzantine church, salvation is understood as a 'pedagogical' progression; in the Catholic and Protestant churches, 'Salvation is the redemption of individual souls in the hereafter, …' (2012, 404). In this regard, the 'work' and the 'person' of Christ are separated since God's 'salvific' actions are separated from his 'providential' actions. This means that Jesus is not only the Saviour but also the Lord – He is God. Thus, it is important to understand Christian salvation as an act of the Trinitarian God as described in the Bible and not as an act of Jesus Christ alone. See, for example, John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life'.

Whenever Christians or Christianity finds itself in new contexts, the shape and understanding of salvation is reinterpreted. This was true when the centre of Christianity moved from Palestine to the Roman and Hellenistic world, and later to the Celtic and Germanic worlds. The shift from Christendom to a modern world changed the meaning of salvation to 'liberation from religious superstition, attention to human welfare, and the moral improvement of humanity' (Bosch

2012, 405). The latest shift is from the Western (first) world to the global (Third) world. Although salvation remains central to Christianity, there is a new interest in the 'nature' of salvation. Although Western Christianity has given much attention to the 'who', the 'how', and the 'what' of salvation, with the move to the global world the emphasis has moved to the 'what' of salvation, 'wherefrom' and 'whereto' and, as such, it has become more problematised and thematised within the new contexts. This sentiment is well expressed by a Xhosa poet Jonas Ntsiko 'who referred to the salvation proclaimed to the Africans by the Christian missionaries as a "fabulous ghost, that we try to embrace in vain"' (Brand 2022, 2). At the Geneva Conference on Church and Society (1966), Richard Shaull, with reference to the 'Third World', understood and presented salvation as 'liberation, which could be achieved only by overthrowing the existing order' (Bosch 2012, 406).

It was the Bangkok meeting in 1973, of the Commission for World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) with the theme 'Salvation Today' that described salvation in four dimensions, namely: '(1) economic justice against exploitation; (2) for human dignity against oppression; (3) for solidarity against alienation; and (4) for hope against despair in personal life' (Bosch 2012, 406). When the church deals with families to enhance them as a safe space we need to take cognisance of the salvation understanding we are preaching in our churches.

Following Brand's (2022) article 'Doing Soteriology in Africa?', the present article will now address the following five Christian understandings of salvation: anthropological, social, cultural, ontological, and vitalistic.

An anthropological understanding
'The distinguishing feature of anthropological accounts of salvation is that they see the good as consisting in a certain kind of "true" or "full" humanity, rather than merely the possession or experience (by

human beings) of something external to themselves' (Brand 2022, 4-5). This implies that humans find themselves in a bad stage that requires a transformation to 'measure up to the standard of some ideal of humanity'. African Christian theologians working with the anthropological concept of salvation still work with soteriology concepts centring around justification and sanctification, which implies making human beings acceptable in the eyes of God. However, the problem facing Black people (in Africa) is from who or from what do they need salvation; it 'is not their own sinfulness, but the multitude of sins committed against them' (Brand 2022, 5). Hence, salvific faith does not refer only to one's sinfulness, but also a rejection of any sins of dehumanisation committed against the self by others. In the modern and postmodern paradigm growing in Africa, this understanding has serious implications for families. What is the 'standard or ideal family' that is viewed as good or safe? Another example is, how do children or young people see their relationship towards the (traditional) authority of their parents? What are the possible implications if family members experience or think that they are dehumanised because they disagree with the culture or the tradition?

It also needs to be mentioned that dehumanisation is not always a human activity. There are some examples of dehumanisation that are not in the hands of people, such as diseases, handicaps, and natural disasters, to name a few. From an African perspective, factors like these are recognised as evil, and therefore, salvation that only deals with personal sin is insufficient in the eyes of many African theologians. Some African concepts that relate closely to the anthropological understanding of salvation and are sometimes used by African theologians are concepts like 'ubuntu', or the 'ujamaa' – theology influenced by Julius Nyerere's 'African humanism'.
Other examples are South African Black theology, in which "Black power" occupies a central position. Here, 'Power is seen positively as part of what constitutes true humanity in the eyes of God, and

distinctions are drawn between "power over others" and shared "power'" (Brand 2022, 7). It is in relation to 'power' that the author understands the inroads the 'prosperity gospel' is making in Africa amongst Pentecostal groups and the African Independent/Initiated Churches (AICs). In these interpretations of anthropological salvation, 'the human good is understood as "wealth" or "success"' (Brand 2022, 8).

Some of the implications for an anthropological understanding of a 'safe family' might then involve a transformation to 'measure up to the standard of some ideal of humanity'. This 'ideal humanity', according to the above, will then include aspects like justice and correction of dehumanised family structures such as gender-based violence, arranged marriages, child marriages, and child labour. Another related question from this perspective might be, is a family only a safe space when it has 'power' or is it viewed as 'wealthy and successful'? Is there a blueprint of a standard or ideal family?

A social understanding

The social understanding of salvation emphasises 'that the human good can only be conceived of accurately as a *common good*, which means that any salvation worth the name, will have to be a *corporate salvation*' (Brand 2022, 9, italics in the original). This relates to the mentioned *ubuntu* principle and the African proverb: *Motho ke motho ka batho* ('a human being is a human through/with others'). Thus, if *good* is a human condition, it must also be a condition of society. Some African theologians have emphasised that 'commonality', 'togetherness', and 'solidarity' are in themselves good. From there the 'quest of belonging' in many AICs arises as a 'salvific quest'.

Another important aspect of the social understanding of salvation is 'consensus'. In light of this, we need to note that 'African democracy, in the traditional tribal setting, did not entail – at least ideally – the rule of the majority, but a process of discussion and negotiation aimed at giving a hearing to the interests of all concerned, and arriving at a decision acceptable to all' (Brand 2022, 10). African theologians find

affirmation for the quest for consensus in the Bible with the appeal to be 'of one mind' (1 Cor 1:10). The church has then the opportunity to be the arena where social harmony should be restored. In Tanzania, 'the church has been assigned a crucial role in the maintenance of the national ideal of *ujamaa* or "family-hood"' (Brand 2022, 10). According to Brand, many (African) theologians have criticised Western and capitalist values such as competition and exploitation. But they have also criticised 'pre-Christian African societies for applying these ideals of commonality only to the restricted sphere of the family, clan or tribe, …' (2022, 11). Therefore, the social understanding of salvation is built on justice for all and has 'radical socio-political and economic implications in the African context, because they are based on an understanding of the human good as a certain kind of society – certain ways of living and being human together' (2022, 11). This understanding also relates to the traditional African ideas related to witchcraft and sorcery.

> Several African writers have suggested that one of the most significant contributions of the Christian faith to African societies, is that it has radicalized traditional African ideals of unity, thereby establishing trans-tribal bonds of solidarity that have been more effective than sporadic and isolated tribal resistance in overcoming colonial and racist oppression and exploitation (Brand 2022, 13).

The social understanding of salvation certainly has some significant contributions to, and implications for, our understanding of the family as a safe space in the African culture, especially when it comes to concepts like consensus, the quest for belonging, witchcraft, the extended family, and justice for all.

A cultural understanding

The relation between culture and the gospel is 'a creative and dynamic one and full of surprises' (Bosch 2012, 466). A cultural

understanding of salvation does not deny anthropological and social understandings of salvation but, however, argues that individuals and societies also live within a cultural environment which also contributes to their identity.

> Identity can be understood according to self-definition and/or as a particular form of social representation that mediates the relationship between the individual and the communal world. Identity helps to inscribe a person in a social environment to relate to other people's positions (Knoetze 2017, 2).

Hence, the salvation of individuals and societies must also be understood as cultural transformation. Western missionaries brought the gospel to Africa from a specific cultural embeddedness. African cultures were viewed as 'no culture', 'primitive', and 'barbaric', and therefore not as being able to be a vehicle of the Christian faith. Thus, salvation was seen as 'acculturation' of the African people, saving them from their own cultural heritage. Fortunately, in the end it was admitted that Western cultures had their own flaws and weaknesses, and traditional African cultures had their own strengths. Theologically, this meant that the gospel must be experienced and expressed authentically within the African traditional cultures. It was called 'adaptation' (Catholics) or 'indigenisation' (Protestants), and later as 'inculturation'. We may never speak of 'inculturated', since inculturation 'remains a tentative and continuing process' (Bosch 2012, 466) since culture is not static and the church may discover previously unknown mysteries. Faith and salvation take place within culture, since cultural 'incarnations' belong to the essence of the Christian faith. In this regard, Bediako (2000, 3) draws our attention to the fact that 'Christianity has become a non-Western religion'.

The incarnation of Christianity into different cultures not only transforms the particular culture, but the culture also gives particular or new shapes and understandings to Christianity. 'In fact, this is now seen as precisely the reason why Christ became (and continues to

become) incarnate in the first place: to transform human culture' (Brand 2022, 15). Thus, it is not salvation *from* African culture, or *within* African culture, but salvation *of* African culture (2022, 15) or, for that matter, any other culture. When Jesus Christ becomes Lord of one's life, they become a new creature, living in a new kingdom, with a new culture.

> Inculturation is "the incarnation" [!] of the Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a "new creation" (Brand 2022, 15-16).

Some Black liberation theologians from Africa have criticised the whole concept of 'inculturation', arguing that African culture has changed over time, and that due to colonisation and oppression it cannot be determined what 'real' African culture is. They, therefore, assert that liberation should have priority over inculturation. It is argued that 'Liberation will enable African Christians to express themselves culturally, so that inculturation will then occur spontaneously, rather than being artificially imposed from above' (Brand 2022, 17).

A cultural understanding of a safe family may have, for example, the following implications: within different cultures, families can and may look different; cultural views of families can and may change as the culture is changing; intercultural families; and the liberation of families.

An ontological understanding
The concern of ontology is 'with what is (actuality), and what might be (possibility). The searching question … Is the world where human beings and communities live, such that human good can be realized?

Can reality "contain" human good?' (Brand 2022, 19). The presupposition is that God is involved in the course of world history to bring about favourable opportunities for salvation. An implication of the understanding – that 'good' is still a desired shape of reality – is that good will always be provisional in this life since salvation will be incomplete until the *Parousia*.

Black and liberation theologies in Africa have a strong undertone of the ontological understanding of salvation since it motivates people to dedicate themselves to the liberation cause. However, in the post-colonial era, where the oppression of Africans by Africans is taking place, the ontological understanding of salvation is moving from liberation to reconstruction. Although the ontological understanding of salvation is readily accepted by African theologians, it goes against the major impulses of the contemporary Western theology and, as such, is not popular in the middle-class, liberal theologies of the West (Brand 2022, 20).

African theologians also use ontological understanding to reflect on the 'spiritual or the unseen world'. A way to make the 'unseen world' more acceptable to the Western mind is to associate it with economic, political, and social societal structures. 'Thus in Black theology, for example, apartheid is described as a god or an idol, or even as "demonic"' (Brand 2022, 21). The unseen world also includes things happening to people beyond their control, like illness, droughts, and other problems. In African Traditional Religion (ATR), sacraments or rituals are used to restore the cosmic 'balance/relations'.

> The main feature of such ontology is that it emphasizes the extent to which reality is "constructed" by human interpretations and representations. … African theologians, like J.N.K. Mugambi, have recognised that the "lifeworld", the "world of experience", in which people live their lives and seek their happiness, is not simply objectively given, but is at least partially given its shape and texture by the way in which we think about it. Therefore, these theologians have insisted

that an "ontological" transformation will always have to include the transformation in the ways people perceive their situation (Brand 2022, 22).

The implication of this understanding for a safe family has to do with how the family members 'construct' their family.

A vitalistic (levenskracht) understanding

African life and culture are profoundly imbued with a devotion to life itself. This is clear in ATR where 'all human endeavours are aimed at promoting fertility, health and longevity, so that salvation is also conceived of as the transmission, protection and strengthening of the corporate life of the family, clan and tribe' (Brand 2022, 23). The biblical text most quoted to underpin this understanding is John 10:10: 'I have come so that you may have life and have it abundantly'.

African female theologians in particular ask questions like, How can Jesus help women and children in Africa to stay alive amidst poverty, hunger, sickness, war and gender-based violence? If the God of the Bible is not able to help people in these circumstances, then the salvation we read about in the Bible is not worth having. The argument goes,

> The very quest for a "good" or "meaningful" life, as opposed to life pure and simple, is responsible for the fact that most African women and children live constantly under the shadow of death. The world has sufficient resources to supply all with life, but because some people want "more than just being alive", others inevitably have to do with less (Brand 2022, 23).

The contradiction in this view is obvious since 'a vitalistic ideal of the good, the concept of life seems to stand in need of some normative filling-out' (Brand 2022, 24). The focus, therefore, is on 'biological survival'. However, according to Brand, John Mbiti viewed the church as the community that received life from Christ, and the good

consists of 'a spiritual life characterised by communion with Christ' (2022, 24). Thus, material necessities are important but immaterial in the realisation of salvation.

Maybe the vitalistic understanding is best understood and described by Mulago, Nyamati, (in Brand 2022, 24) and others, as 'vital participation'.

> … in these accounts the highest good for humanity is participation in life. Life is here conceived, not as an attribute (or set of attributes) attaching to human beings and other organisms, but as a dynamic reality (an interplay of "forces", a "cosmotheandric" dance), in which human beings, and other creatures, can participate to a greater or lesser degree – each according to its own nature.

As a missiologist, the author of this article argues that the good consists of a family life participating in the *missio Dei.* As such the family becomes a safe space when everybody participates in family life by receiving and passing on the new life received from the Trinitarian God in Christ.

Family as a safe space – the *missio Dei*

Balswick and Balswick (1989, 21) 'propose a theology of family relationships which involves four sequential, but nonlinear, stages: *covenant, grace, empowering,* and *intimacy*', as illustrated in Figure 1 below.
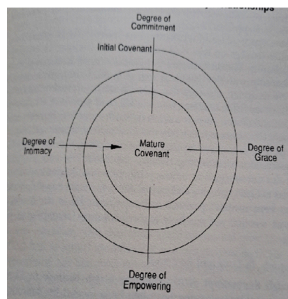
Figure 1: A theological basis of family relationships
(Source: Balswick and Balswick 1989, 21)

Using these four stages, the author wants to link these stages to the *missio trinitatis Dei* to argue that a safe family is not only about salvation in Christ, but also about a living relationship with the Trinitarian God. As such, the author (Knoetze 2015) expands the 'stages' to include the three persons of the Trinity as well as the church: God the Father – covenant; God the Son – grace; God the Holy Spirit – empowering; and the church – intimacy.

Safe in God the Father
It was already alluded to in this article that God the Father has committed himself to people and, more specifically, to families in the Old Testament through different covenants. From a biblical perspective, we may never erode the meaning of 'covenant' by defining it in contractual terms. 'The central point of covenant is that it is an unconditional commitment which is demonstrated supremely by God in the role of parent' (Balswick and Balswick 1989, 23). When God makes a covenant, he never gives people a choice in the matter; instead, the covenant is completely based on God's action. His commitment is given whether it is accepted or not. Although a response is expected from us (the other party), God's covenant stays 'everlasting' regardless of our reactions. However, the covenant also includes a responsibility to act on it in obedience. Wright (2006, 205-208) discusses this as ethical obedience. The covenant that God made with the families of Noah and Abraham were focused on the whole of creation. The implication, accordingly, is that families/people are not blessed for their own benefit, but they are blessed to be a blessing to the whole of creation, to participate in the *missio Dei*. Thus, the meaning of the covenant to make a family a safe space is *to love and to be loved.*

Safe in God the Son

From the covenant flows the grace; actually, the covenant is grace. Just like the Son, Jesus Christ, is God. Like the covenant, grace is unconditional, and it is also relational. Family relationships as intended by God are to be lived from the certainty of the covenant in an atmosphere of grace and not law. When family life is based on a contract, it is lived in the atmosphere of the law – of rewards and punishment. But within the covenant and the grace of forgiveness it becomes a safe space where every family member is equally safe. 'Grace means that order and regularity are present for the sake of each family member's needs and enhancement and not as a means of repressing and limiting them' (Balswick and Balswick 1989, 27). Thus, in a safe family, we are not scared to forgive each other, and we accept the forgiveness of the other, living to our fullest potential and being true to who we are.

Safe in God the Holy Spirit

Everyone knows that forgiveness does not come naturally to anyone; we would rather retaliate. However, it is the Holy Spirit who empowers us to be obedient to God and forgive our neighbour. While power is mostly understood to influence someone else, '[e]mpowerment is the process of helping another recognize strengths and potentials within, as well as encouraging and guiding the development of these qualities' (Balswick and Balswick 1989, 28). It is the affirmation of the individual's potential and abilities despite mistakes and failures. Empowerment has to do with service. We must serve others with our love and forgiveness so that they may live free from dependency, while we also receive their service, love, and forgiveness.

Safe in the family of God

God created people with unique communication abilities, making it possible for us to be known intimately. Wright (2006) also argues that God wants to be known by us, therefore he sent his Son, Jesus Christ

(Balswick and Balswick 1989, 30). Before the fall, Adam and Eve lived in complete nakedness before each other and before God without any shame. It is only after the fall that they tried to hide out of a feeling of nakedness and shame. Shame is born out of fear of being known intimately.

> Members of a family that is based on covenant and lives in an atmosphere of grace and empowering will be able to so communicate and express themselves that they intimately know and are known by one another. A concerted effort will be made, to listen, understand, and want what is best for the other. Not only will differences be accepted, but valuing and respecting uniqueness will be a way of confirming the other person (Balswick and Balswick 1989, 31).

Conclusion

This article confirmed that family is a contested issue, especially in Africa. First, attention was given to the contextual demographic shifts in Africa. Second, different concepts or understandings of what the concept of 'family' entails were considered. Third, with the previous discussions as the background, a proposal was made to read the Bible in terms of families with a missional hermeneutics. Fourth, the implications of different understandings of salvation for the church's ministry to families were discussed. Lastly, the importance of a Trinitarian theology rather than just a soteriology was discussed for creating safe families.

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