Restoring the view of God as Heavenly Father amongst second/multi-generation ex-members of Divergent Christian Communities[1]

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Abstract

This study departs from the premise that the twisted foundational teaching of who God the Father is, as well as His association with humans as portrayed by Divergent Christian Communities, will impair members' understanding of God the Father. Members believe that the leader, as the spiritual father of the group, is an embodiment of God the Father and the only conveyor of God's truth to them. Leaders portray a skewed picture of this role of "father" through their lifestyle and teaching about God. This skewed picture of God has an impact on those who were born in the group referred to as second/multi-generation members, which hampers their reintegration into society, and especially their

1 Divergent Christian Communities refer to groups claiming to be Christian mostly living isolated or semi-isolated from society. They are characterized by a prominent leader believed to be specially anointed to lead the community in the ways of God which deviates from the biblical message to suit the community goals. These deviated beliefs are justified as unquestionable special revelation or spiritual insight received by the leader. Divergent Christian Communities display most of the cultic traits and strategies that are visible in the different forms of coercive control generally found in cults. As a result of the control culture of these communities members' rational and decision-making abilities are numbed and replaced by an "obedient dependence" on the group for definite prescriptions of how to lead their life. The emotions of guilt, fear, and love are employed to guard over members' actions, thoughts, and, words to keep them on track.

relationship with God after leaving the Divergent Christian Community. Research already indicated that the functioning of families and the role of parents in such communities is adapted to serve and promote the goals of the community. This study investigated whether the Divergent Christian Communities' teaching of God as Heavenly Father, as well as the expression of the role of Father in the community, aligns with the biblical account. Through a survey conducted with ex-members of the Gloriavale Christian Community, it was not only confirmed that their view of the biological family in the community, as well as the concept of "father", was adapted, but more importantly, also their view of the Heavenly Father. The results of the survey confirm that the skewed picture of God the Father as portrayed by the leader and his teachings harmed their relationship with God. It caused them to struggle to shake this internalized view of the meaning of "father" because of how it differs from the description of God in the Bible. The spiritual father (leader) was indicated as the one who had the most influence in establishing this skewed view of God. The survey further emphasized the complexity of this issue and that the road to recovery entails a process where a new thinking system must be established to shake the old internalized thinking system of the Divergent Christian Community. Starting with understanding how and why this skewed picture of God is established. Followed by a clear understanding of God the Father from a biblical point of view, and no longer through the lens of the community or how He is presented by the leader. Thereafter, the ex-members will be in a better position to also understand their position in the body of Christ, the true role of family, and their contribution to the world.

Opsomming

Hierdie studie vertrek van die punt dat die leerstellings en voorgeskrewe leefwyse voorgehou deur leiers in Afwykende Christelike Gemeenskappe verdraai word om die gemeenskap te dien. Die gemeenskapsleier word meesal onvoorwaardelik as 'n gesaghebbende verteenwoordiger van God aanvaar deur lede. Die leier se gedrag en lering word aanvaar as 'n vertoon van God se karakter en wil. Wanneer hierdie tentoonstelling egter verdraai word, word daar by lede 'n negatiewe verstaan van die Hemelse Vader gevestig. So 'n negatiewe konsep van die Hemelse

Vader het 'n langdurige impak op lede en hul herstelproses na hulle die gemeenskap verlaat. Navorsing toon aan dat die verhoudings van kinders met hulle biologiese ouers in sulke gemeenskappe verander om die gemeenskapskultuur te huisves. In hierdie studie is verder gefokus op hoe die lid wat in die gemeenskap gebore word se verstaan van die term "vader" verander. Deur 'n vraelys is tweede en multi generasie ex-lede se verhouding met hulle eie vaders asook die sogenaamde geestelike vader ondersoek. Die mikpunt van die vraelys was om te bepaal of die leier se vertolking as gesant van God, formeel of informeel 'n negatiewe impak gehad het op hulle verstaan van God as Hemelse Vader en indien wel wat die impak was. Die resultate van die navorsing het aangedui dat die meeste deelnemers glo dat die geestelike vader die grootste impak op hulle gehad het. Verder dat deur die leier se leefwyse en lering hulle verstaan van God as Vader negatief beïnvloed is. Ook dat hulle na hulle die gemeenskap verlaat het, gesukkel het om hierdie gevestigde konsep van vader af te skud veral omdat dit verskil van hoe God as Vader aangetoon word in die Bybel. Die pad na herstel is om 'n nuwe denksisteem te vestig wat die denksisteem van die kulte vervang. Die studie het verder aangedui dat daar 'n nuwe verstaan van God die Vader gevestig moet word gebaseer op die Bybel om die bestaande verdraaide gemeenskapsbeskouing te vervang. Daarna moet ander aspekte soos wie ex-lede is en wat hulle doel is, asook die ware rol van familie in die lig van die Bybel gevestig word.

1. Introduction

Those born into a Divergent Christian Community (DCC), normally referred to as second or multi-generation members, have no or very limited exposure

to the outside world, social networks, or other networks because of the secluded nature of these communities. Divergent Christian Communities in this context refer to so-called Christian communities claiming to be functioning mostly according to the early Christian church in A.D. 1. Although they claim to hold to the message of the Bible, they divert foundational aspects of the message to fit the purposes of the community. They utilize cultic practices to establish the belief that they have "truth", and obedience and submission to "truth" is the only means to salvation. What members are taught inside the community needs no evaluation by any outside system or structure, as it is believed to be the "truth". In the context of Divergent Christian Communities, which mostly function as a patriarchal system, the concept of the father plays an important role. Not only is the community's existence justified by the presence and sanctioning of the Heavenly Father, but the character of the Heavenly Father is also expressed and embodied by a spiritual father or leader. The character of the father that is portrayed in the community, either by their biological or spiritual father (leader), has a profound impact on the formation of the community's children's understanding of God as a heavenly father. This study does not claim that the skewed portrayal of the father, even the heavenly father, is only confined to secluded religious groups, as it is also found in some mainline Christian churches where spiritual leaders overstep boundaries, leading to the harm of followers. Although the portrayal of the role of the father in other life circumstances may also impact a child's view of the Heavenly Father, the focus of this study is on secluded Christian groups. In this particular case, it is even more damning since the whole existence of the community is believed to be a portrayal of what the Kingdom of God, the Father, is like. Members have forsaken everything to be taken up in this special "group", believing that the group is a manifestation and expression of His will and purpose for humankind. Second-generation ex-members grapple with this twisted understanding of God as Heavenly Father that becomes nonsensical after leaving the community. It is a complex challenge for ex-members since this internalized understanding is interwoven in the community's existence, belief system, social system, and even their salvation.

This study has investigated how the concept of father and Heavenly Father is established in the Gloriavale Christian Community using a survey conducted with second and multi-generational ex-members of the Gloriavale Christian Community. The respondents consisted of males and females, and the time they have been in the community ranges from seventeen (17) to forty (40) years. It further studied the impact the established concept of father in the community has on community members, and how it can be restored. The

findings of the survey will be incorporated into the study and referred to as the reports of respondents.

2. First and second/multi-generation members

First-generation community members refer to members who joined a community at some time in their life, and second and multi-generation members refer to those who were born into a community or joined a community at a very young age and spent most of their growing up in the community (Matthew, 2017). Both first-generation and multi-generation community survivors encounter psychological challenges when leaving a community, which complicates reintegrating into society. Second/multi-generation community survivors have added challenges according to Matthew (2017:37), which include subjection "to a lifetime of spiritual and physical abuse and neglect, attachment disorder, lack of education and marketable job skills, and lack of decision-making and socialization skills, continuing family-relationship challenges, and lack of external-world support". All of this impairs their ability to become independently functioning adults. They are also more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation (Furnari, 2005). Their exposure to recurring experiences of interpersonal manipulation and control led them not only to fear other people but also to distrust them. As a result, they may be hesitant to leave family and friends and the known world of the community or make new friends who can provide support in difficult times (McCabe *et al.,* 2007). Their only "true" reference to the "ideal" life, their well-being, and salvation is the internalized worldview of the community.

2.1 *Harmful practices of cults for children and its relevance for Divergent Christian Communities*

Clinicians and counsellors involved with the counseling of ex-members of a wide spectrum of cults report on the harm cult practices and culture do to children. Based on the cultic characteristics also found in Divergent Christian Communities, these findings are helpful for this study. According to Martin *et al.* (1992), unhealthy forms of dependency are created through submission and obedience to the leader/s of cults. One such way to obtain submission is through an inconsistent system of punishment and reward. At one time, the same action can be rewarded, and at another time it can be punished as an "offense". The underlying dynamic of such practice is the volatility of what is right and wrong, creating a sense of anxious dependency and the need to

always try to please the leader despite the impossibility of ever succeeding (McCabe *et al.,* 2007). Surrounded by serious threats and criticism, a sense of insecurity and self-hatred develops that craves whatever reinforcement they can get from the leader. It further keeps them on their toes and prevents them from becoming complacent. This system of punishment is also channeled down through the parents.

An insecure, clinical, and loveless environment can have serious consequences for the development of children. The irrational belief system and inexplicable reward system hamper the development of confidence. Children are not able to develop a sense of what is right and wrong, let alone be capable of satisfying or living up to the cult system that is unquestionable, ever-changing, and inexact. Whatever they do is always "wrong". Children are deliberately yet unbeknownst to them set up by the system to fail in developing critical thinking abilities that can expose the leadership. They have been denigrated, and any contact with the outside world is restricted to ensure that such interaction with a variety of people, which will lead to learning practical skills, is controlled. With an insufficient education or education tailored for the cult culture, minimal social skills, no or little confidence in their abilities, and little emotional and social support, they are limited to challenging or breaking out of the circular thinking system of the cult (McCabe *et al.,* 2007).

Repeated trauma in a child's life forms and deforms personality. Herman (1992:96) states that the abusive environment, untrustworthy, unsafe, unpredictable, and helpless cult environment does not protect the child. Unprotected and alone, children revert to an immature system of psychological defenses to adapt and survive. One way to survive is to lie to stay out of trouble. One ex-member explains his survival in the cult as follows; "Growing up in Alon, we were always under so much pressure to be 'good' and the punishments for being naughty were often so extreme and harsh that I felt it was better to lie (give "the right answers") to avoid these unnecessarily harsh punishments" (Daniel Cult, 2018). Reber (1996:84) describes children with secure attachment while growing up as being "inoculated from adverse outcomes throughout development. Children growing up in a cult without secure attachment could have long-term negative effects including 'skew'[ing] the developmental trajectory of the right brain over the rest of the life span" (Schore, 2002:24). The right brain is dominant for attachment and the organization of the brain's essential coping mechanism occurs in crucial periods of infancy (Schore, 2002:2,26). Early life trauma can "disrupt self-regulatory processes, making children vulnerable to the development of chronic affect dysregulation, destructive behavior against self and others,

learning disabilities, dissociative problems, somatization and distortions in concepts about self and others" (Van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth,1996: x-xi).

The influence of cults prevents children from aspiring and obtaining developmental tasks such as identity, safety, and independence by stigmatizing such aspirations as worldly and selfish. A combination of the parents' absence (psychological and emotional absence while physically present), negative labels, and overt and covert negative messages about their worth, belonging, and safety contributes to children having traumatic experiences. All is working against the healthy attachment and development of the child.

2.2 Children and parents' relationships in Divergent Christian Communities

Although cults use similar techniques, including mind control, thought-reform practices, manipulation tactics, and control over members, the doctrine plays a vital role (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). All the aforementioned techniques are in service of upholding the belief system that can "save" them or improve their well-being. In Divergent Christian Communities, a concocted Christian belief system forms the foundation for their conduct. Although they claim to be using the message of the Bible, the meaning of scripture and structures are often conveniently manipulated to confirm their truth. One such important structure in the Bible is the family or relational structure, more specifically, the concept that God is Father to the believers as His children. The relationship portrayed in the Bible is one of love, care, correction, and unity. Divergent Christian Communities also claim that their functioning is based on these emotional and relational values of being family.

Being under the influence of the community leader(s) causes parents to view the role of the biological family differently, and they become dependent and in "a regressive state susceptible to abusive practices and exercising power over their children that is often the only power the parents may have" (Markowitz & Halperin, 1984:154). This power is delegated only in the service of the leader to obtain the specific outcomes of the community (Matthews & Salazar, 2014:11).

Through results obtained by a survey of second-generation ex-members of Gloriavale Christian Community, ninety percent (90%) of the respondents agreed that there are three family structures present in the community, namely the biological, spiritual, and heavenly family. All (100%) of respondents agree that the biological family is the least important structure in the community.

Most respondents indicated the Heavenly Family as the most important family structure, closely followed by the Spiritual family; some even viewed the two as linked, which brought them very close to being equally important. The reason why the spiritual family is the second most important, according to seventy percent (70%), seems to be the strong link with or even as a passageway to the Heavenly Family that ensures salvation, a means to be accepted into the Heavenly family. Love is conditional in the community based on how well you obey and submit to the rules of the community ("the church"). Another ten percent (10%) do not see the spiritual family as important. Generally, these aforementioned responses seem to emphasize that the community (spiritual family) and belonging to it are important requirements, at least for most ex-members, maybe even the most important requirement, in acquiring salvation. In a sense, it may even subtly suggest that salvation is not so much obtained individually but corporately through belonging to the community that represents and follows Christ. Thus, obedience and submission to the community ("the church") are important to ensure salvation.

To the question of what the main function of parents in the biological family was in the Gloriavale Christian Community, ninety percent (90%) indicated that the main role was for parents to subdue their children to the rules of the community. Although fifty percent (50%) of respondents indicated the need for the family to spend time together, that was not propagated as an important function of the family in the community. The reason for that seems to be the belief that rendering more importance to the biological family would lead to neglecting the precepts of the community and weakening ties with the spiritual family. One respondent described the role of parents of a biological family in the community as becoming more like siblings than parents. Respondents generally believed the biological family was dysfunctional in the community environment. Half of the respondents reported that they at times felt abused, had no or little support from their parents, and were puzzled about how they were treated and wondered what they had done wrong. One respondent described it as follows: "I became a scapegoat for everything and developed a guilt complex that I still manage today". Respondents also reported feeling neglected and having no attachment to their parents. The reason for this neglect is that the community culture dictates the full submission of parents to the precepts of the community, leaving them with little or no time to spend with their children. A few respondents reported feeling loved and cared for. One respondent had a relatively supportive upbringing, but when she became a parent herself felt guilty for prioritizing her family, stemming from accusations from the community leaders that young couples are lazy and selfish and that parents with only two children should help parents with more children.

From the aforementioned, it is evident that certain cultic tactics are engaged by the community to bring about a change in parental behavior. Unpredictability and uncertainty are two such common and powerful cultic tactics (Furnari, 2005) that keep parents on their toes, not knowing when they may overstep or violate community protocol and be disciplined or lose privileges. The ripple effect of the unpredictable environment affects parents' judgment and ability to care for and protect, resulting in a lack of support, neglect, or anger against their children. The children's reaction to this flexible and unstable environment, which many times leaves them feeling unsafe, is to develop a sensitivity to recognize danger or safety. They develop the ability to assess the state of the parent and "act" accordingly, meaning do what is required to avoid conflict and gain favor. Another way to overcome this is either to freeze and let the particular situation pass or detach from their parent (Furnari, 2005, par.7).

The culture of Divergent Christian Communities subtly employs another tactic, namely, to change the job description of parents towards their children to be in alignment with the primary mission and requirements of the leader. Continuous pressure from the leaders and the community environment lessens the importance of the parents' primary responsibility to take care of their children. It is brought about by making them believe that the desire for a special, loving, or exclusive relationship with their children is being "selfish "and not in the best interest of the goals of the community. It can be viewed that they place their children above God and the community. Whether in doubt, partly or fully convinced, parents relinquish, some reluctantly, their primary responsibility to care for their children. Some even do their best to still care for their children under these pressures. Ex-members of Gloriavale Christian Community reported in the survey that their mothers generally spent time with them, and in some instances, when the care was excessive in the eyes of the community, they got humiliated for caring too much for the children. Despite this, some respondents still felt disconnected from their mothers as a result of the demands of the community. Some respondents also reported that their fathers were kind to them, and as a result, they were also bullied and humiliated as a result of being kind to their children. It seems evident that parents' accountability for their children in Divergent Christian Communities is reduced to becoming like "managers" of their children in the community structure. The primary role is to merely enforce the leaders' view of rearing children, i.e., keep them in submission so that the community culture can be internalized. Most of the parents' time and energy is taken up by living up to the community standard, which stretches them to their limit, making it all the harder to take care of their children's welfare (McCabe *et al.,* 2007; Furnari & Henry, 2011). The lives and development of children play

second fiddle to the higher calling of the community. Apart from other forms of correction, corporal punishment is also used, which can severely harm children physically and mentally. Research indicates that early childhood trauma can "alter brain development resulting in high risk of being severely troubled adults" (McCabe *et al.,* 2007:2).

A skewed view of their parents' role, especially their father, that is established in community members, has far-reaching implications and debilitating effects on their view of God as a heavenly father. Many second-generation community members go through this type of chronic trauma, which impacts their psychosocial development and ability to develop a healthy attachment to their parents (Furnari & Henry, 2011). Their family life is not functioning according to a normal nuclear family with rules and reciprocal emotional attachments. Their family life in the community is "inconsistent, chaotic, rigid, and abusive" (Furnari & Henry, 2011:2). This implication is even more debilitating in Divergent Christian Communities.

Seventy percent (70%) of the respondents of Gloriavale Christian Community reported that their fathers did not speak much to them or spend time with them because they were too busy with things in the community. Despite fathers being too busy, fifty percent (50%) indicated that they had a good relationship with their fathers. Suggesting that although present, they were not involved with their children. Unfortunately, those fathers who cared for their children were ridiculed and called out. It seems that priority time and attention for their children was unwarranted. One respondent described his father as being soft and empathetic, but also weak and unable to make a stand. Some described that fathers' logical reasoning, need for familial autonomy, and personal desires were outweighed by the rules of the community. Hate toward their father was also indicated as a response.

To the question of what their fathers taught them from the Bible, most responded that their fathers were not trained or equipped to teach and that it was the leader's task. A couple of respondents reported that their fathers studied the Bible and gave their children some training, although such training was in line with what the community taught. One respondent described it as follows: "He effectively parroted the leader's interpretation of the Bible as attempting anything else was considered blasphemy." Suggesting that fathers were discouraged, discharged, or limited in their role to teach their family from the Bible to avoid deviation from community beliefs. One respondent painted a picture of the internal struggle parents might have gone through in the community: "I saw a man who had an extreme internal conflict and went through the motions required of him without any obvious

conviction. He loves Mum and us kids, but I sensed a lot of regret."

Ninety-three percent (93%) of respondents reported that the highest calling of a mother is to serve their husbands, followed by seventy-six percent (76%) that indicated that mothers must take care of their children's basic needs and sixty-nine percent (69%) that indicated that they are to give birth to children to extend the Kingdom of God (biological growth of the community). One respondent reported that mothers' needs came last and that they were treated like slaves in the community, expected to sacrifice themselves for everyone else. One female respondent expressed a reluctance to have children because of the fear that she would be as busy as her mother and neglect her children. Respondents generally indicated that their mothers spent time with them, but the nurturing and care of mothers also seemed to have been limited to just what was necessary. One respondent indicated that her mother was strong and stood up and was insubmissive to some of the rules; she was accused of "actions inhibited her father's ability to live out his manhood." Respondents were free to communicate with their parents except at meals and meetings. It seems that the topics of communication were subtly or even openly regulated and prohibited, with the possibility of being punished. Taboo topics included any questioning of or disagreeing with doctrine. One respondent explained: "I could communicate with my parents, but I didn't feel comfortable talking about the things that led me to leave. Any talk of this nature would've caused me a lot of trouble with the leaders that I wanted to avoid." In Gloriavale Christian Community, part of the marriage vow includes that women declare that they will not leave the community unless asked by the leader and will also not influence their husband or children to leave. If the woman leaves the community, her husband or children are under no obligation to leave with her.

From the aforementioned, it is clear that the biological family functioning in Divergent Christian Communities is converted (see diagram 1). The biological family is mostly taken up in the spiritual family. The members of the community take the place of "spiritual" brothers and sisters, the community becomes a "spiritual mother", and the community leader/s become the "spiritual father" of the spiritual family. The spiritual family seems to be linked to the heavenly family – God the Father, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, through the leader/s. The uptake of the biological family into the spiritual family makes it a hybrid family, meaning that although the biological family structure is recognized, its functioning is drastically reduced and altered in that the self-owned authority of parents is relinquished to become mainly mere enforcers of the leader's authority in the form of "middle management". Mothers remain, caregivers not only to their own families but even more to the larger spiritual family. The

spiritual family's overlap with the heavenly family indicates the designation of the leader/s to act in a dual role as representative, intercessor/mediator for the spiritual family to the heavenly family, and as the mouthpiece for the heavenly family to the spiritual family. The leader/s is the only one(s) who has access to the heavenly family, hears from God, and speaks on behalf of God. The followers learn about and receive from God through the leader (figure 1).
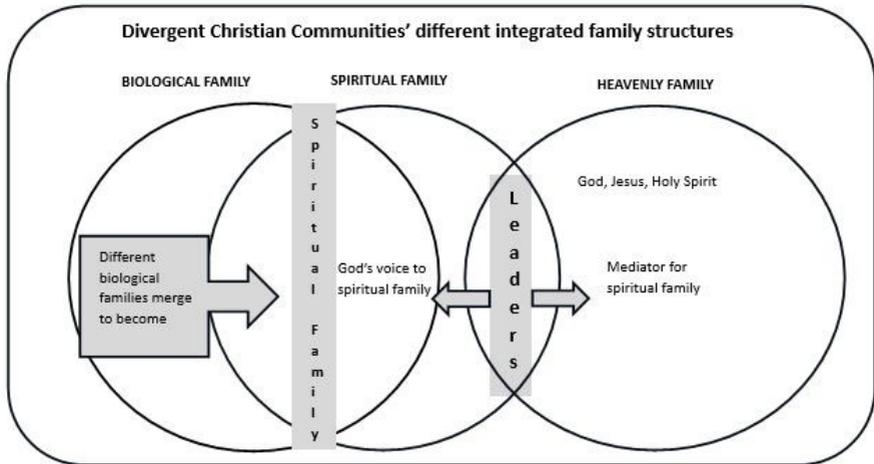

Figure 1: Depicting the different family structures in Divergent Christian Communities and how they overlap in performing different functions in the service of the community.

3. Biological family and God as the heavenly Father's portrayal in the Bible

The family is an institution of God. God commanded Adam and Eve in the beginning to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth (Gen 1:28-29). The Bible is clear on the importance of a family that, in turn, forms a society. Healthy and strong families will make strong and healthy societies. The Bible is clear that children are a heritage from the Lord, and the fruit of the womb is a reward (Psalm 127:3). Children are precious and need not be despised (Matt 18:10). As a gift from God, parents have the responsibility to educate and rear their children in the ways of God. Fathers must not provoke their children to anger but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord. Children, in turn, must obey their parents for this is right and will ensure long life (Eph 6:1-4;

Col 3:20, Prov 3:24; 22:6). Emphasis is placed on the genitive preposition "their" used in both instances firstly, signifying that this responsibility is upon the parents to train and not provoke the "their" children and secondly for the children to obey "their" parents. There is no indication that this responsibility should be given to someone else, although it happens and can be justified in certain circumstances where the parent is no longer able to fulfill this role. It is further clear by the similitude used by Jesus in Matthew 7:9-10 that parents and fathers are to look at the portrayal of the character of God as a heavenly father as guidance in training and rearing their children in His ways. As God's relationship and character are towards them, so shall earthly fathers attempt to represent it to their children. Although in incompleteness, fathers need to attempt to portray God the Father in their words and actions to their children. Children, in turn, should submit to and trust their father to care, protect, provide, and love them as the heavenly Father loves his own.

How is God's relationship with human beings portrayed in the Bible? Jesus' teaching on prayer in Matthew 7:7-11 points out that it is a duty by which God is honored, and if done correctly, those prayers are rewarded. It is the appointed way to obtain what we need, not want, especially grace to obey the precepts He had given. Three important words are used to convey the seriousness of prayers, namely to 'ask', to 'seek', and to 'knock', signifying an intensity to continue in doing that with the assurance that in so doing the one asking will be answered, the seeker will find, and for the one knocking it will be opened. This type of prayer life will result in success, not necessarily in fulfilling the lustful desires of the one seeking, but in God's will for them. Jesus illustrates the assurance that God answers sincere prayer by using a similitude taken from earthly parents and their innate readiness to give their children what they ask (Henry, 1953:91). Emphasis is placed on the evilness and brokenness of earthy parents and yet in that state, they will not give the child something else than they have asked, for example a stone if they have asked for bread. If so, then how much more will your heavenly Father give you the good things you ask? The picture is created here that we, as believers, must go as children to our Father who is in heaven in reverence and confidence that He knows best and will give us the best, even better than any earthly parent can do. An earthly parent may give things that are not good to their child, but God will give us what is good, even if we do not perceive it as such at the time.

Throughout the Bible, believers' relationship with God is portrayed as children to their heavenly Father. We find it in the Old Testament Isa. 63:16, 64:8, Jer. 3:19; and Mal 2:10. In the Old Testament, it is portrayed as God the Father who leads His people out of Egypt through the wilderness to the promised

land and even conquers their enemies on their behalf and protects them in bringing to fruition His promise. Yet the same principle applied here, namely to obey and trust the Lord and keep his commandments to experience His blessings.

In the New Testament, the believer's relationship to God as their father is clearer. Jesus refers to God as Father – both his Father and the believers' (John 20:17). It is clear when Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray to God our Father who is in heaven (Matt. 6:9). Believers have become sons and daughters of God the Father, and through the Holy Spirit they call God, "Abba", Father. Those who came to faith in Christ have been freed from slavery to fear and have been adopted as sons and daughters of God. It is through the Holy Spirit that bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God (Rom. 8:15-16). The Spirit is the seal for sonship, the distinguishing divine sign of this relationship. If not sons of God, they would not have the Spirit of God, and if they do not have the Spirit of God, they are not sons of God. It does not represent believers as children by birth, but as those who, through God's grace, have been accepted into the place of children. The relationship is of sons and daughters to the Father (Gal. 4:6-7). This relationship is not stagnant but a living relationship in which God the Father is actively involved in full knowledge of the needs of his children. He knows what we need even before we ask. He knows our very being in detail, even the hairs on our heads are numbered and taken account of, and just as not one sparrow will fall to the ground without God knowing, so careful also is the providence of God, of all his people. The believer communicates with God and God answers and provides for us (Matt. 6:25-34; 7:7-11). Because He is a loving Father, he disciplines and corrects us (Heb. 12:3-11). He forgives us if we have sinned and sincerely repent (1 John 1:9). His relationship with his own is based on his character, which is without variation or shadow of turning (James 1:17). He never leaves or forsakes His own and will finish the work started in them. Nothing can separate us from His love demonstrated through Christ. His love is perfect, and in that, we can withstand all onslaughts against us, and nothing will be able to separate us from His love (Rom. 8:31-37).

It is clear from the above that the believer is in a relationship with God the Father through Jesus Christ and the enabling of the Holy Spirit. Fellow believers are a spiritual family and serve to encourage one another. It is a loving and certain relationship of care, protection, and provision based on the believer's wholehearted trust and submission to God. It speaks of being sheltered by God, having an eternal and sure hope in Him that provides mankind's salvation through Christ. It is an unwavering assurance that stands and will stand the test of time until the day of completion when Christ returns.

In Divergent Christian Communities, however, the biological family that is supposed to be a building block in building a robust Christian community is stripped or at least limited in its modus of functioning, which makes it a strong, loving, and caring unit. Strength lies in the ability to be bonded together through studying together, praying together, and sharing and carrying one another's burdens as a family. When this modus of functioning is present in the micro family (biological family), it will also be present in the macro family (spiritual family). Instead, it seems that the biological family is disempowered for the sake of establishing a spiritual family, resulting in a weak spiritual family where members are detached from their base of strength, making them dependent on the community and increasing their susceptibility to abuse.

3.1 The Divergent Christian Community's Portrayal of God the Father

Both the functioning of the earthly family and the similitude with God the Father as a spiritual father are presented differently in Divergent Christian Communities. The portrayal of the family's function in the Bible is altered and adapted to serve the purposes of the community, causing essential damage to community members' comprehension of and relationship with God the Father.

In Divergent Christian Communities, the leaders are generally elevated to a deified position. They are believed to be "specially anointed" and on a higher spiritual level than the members. They become the only channel through which God speaks to the community members. Therefore, the spiritual leader is viewed as an image or portrayal of God the Father.

Most of the respondents of the survey indicated that the Spiritual Father in the Gloriavale Christian Community is viewed as God with and through the leader(s). Others identified the leaders as the "shepherds" (elders) of the community, also that it is a hierarchy with a main leader. It seems that their understanding is that God is somehow embodied in their leaders, who are in unison with God. Their perception of the Spiritual father's (leader) relationship with God seems to be as their only representative and mediator who hears directly from God and also speaks God's word to the people. God's mind can only be understood through the leader. He alone facilitates God's will to the people. One respondent remarked that the leader was "both charismatic and narcissistic. I didn't perceive him to be what he claimed."

To the question of what authority the spiritual leader holds, ninety-two percent (92%) of respondents reported that the leader is a special, anointed person

from God who warrants total submission and obedience to every command without questioning. One respondent remarked, "The most certain way to please God was to submit unquestioningly to the leadership." Ninety-two (92%) reported that submitting to the commands of the Spiritual father(s) (leaders) equaled submitting to God, and seventy-six percent (76%) believed that it is essential to be saved, and demonstrates accepting the leader as God's anointed representative. It is also a requirement to belong to this special spiritual family. Following the commands of the leader seems to entail a work program needed for salvation. Obedience to these instructions of "the church" will be rewarded with love and acceptance; disobedience will be punished. Challenging any of the leader's teachings was not allowed, as it was seen as an influence from the evil one and rebellion against God the Father. The comprehensive nature of this submission to the leader seems to be evident in the fact that half of the respondents reported that they were not allowed to have a personal relationship with God. That seems to suggest that for a large portion, a relationship with God is only possible through the leaders, based on their interpretation and teachings of God.

To the question of what was portrayed or taught in the community about God the Father, although thirty-eight percent (38%) indicated that He was loving and caring and gracious, eighty-four percent (84%) indicated that God was also righteous and just, and that he will punish them if He is not pleased with them. Seventy-six percent (76%) pointed out that he only demands obedience to His commands. Thirty-eight percent (38%) of the correspondents believed that their best attempts failed in his sight and that they had no assurance of His love and salvation. This response portrays a strong sense of the righteousness of God and His readiness to punish with no or little hope or assurance that His love will ever be felt or experienced by them. Nor that His grace is sufficient for them and that through faith in Jesus's offer, they can be accepted into God's family.

The unnatural and special above-reproach sanctioning that community leaders enjoy seemingly affords them the right not only to alter the concept of the earthly family but also to determine the function of the spiritual family. In the process, access to God the Father and what is pleasing to Him are altered to suit the community. A community member's relationship with God becomes an indirect relationship through the leader. God thus speaks through the leader, and the leader becomes the representative of God, not only in words but in deeds. Followers are encouraged to see the character of God through what the leader portrays and teaches. Community leaders and communities potentially convert members' "old beliefs" and views of God based on the leader's open and direct contact with God. The leader's

convincing presentation of their interpretation of the Bible seems to be the proof of this contact (Singer, 2003). The authority of the Bible becomes a powerful, creative "tool" to control members.

In Divergent Christian Communities, a patriarchal structure is commonly based on the belief in God the Father (Boeri, 2002; Jacobs, 1991; Lalich & Tobias, 2006). In the Gloriavale Christian Community, a dominant patriarchal system is prominant, as one respondent from the Gloriavale Christian Community articulated it: " … women had to submit to their husbands and call them 'lord,' according to the marriage vow, as Sarah called Abraham my lord. Before that, they submitted to their fathers, who submitted to the leader." This means the subjugation of women by men who, in turn, submit to the leader. In the Gloriavale Christian Community, fathers are generally bearers of authority while mothers are nurturers. Fathers may exercise their authority by using anger and punishment, while mothers may use guilt and shame to control their children (Matthew, 2017). The exercising of authority by fathers in Divergent Christian Communities seems to be aimed at bringing their family into submission to the leader. Fathers thus become mere implementers of the leader's instructions on how to rear children. Fathers in the Gloriavale Christian Community seemed to be coerced by the system and peer pressure to comply with a community code concerning how they treat their children. If they step out of line, they are punished and humiliated. Overall, parents put children's needs second to the community as dictated by the community culture and modus operandi. One ex-member stated: "My mum put me as the second priority. They would say explicitly, 'It's awesome that you're so submissive to us – making our path to God our priority in life" (Matthew, 2017:41). In some communities, parents' interaction with their children is even more limited. In one Divergent Christian Community in South Africa, children had to live separately from their parents in a hostel on the community farm and were not allowed to talk freely to their parents when they saw them on the farm, since it could distract them from their duties (Daniel Cult, 2007).

Although the Gloriavale Christian Community promotes well-functioning families as a foundation for the community (Gloriavale Christian Community, 2025), the family structure is used to the benefit of the community in a twofold way. Firstly, as a convenient means for the biological growth of the community, and secondly, as sub-units of control with fathers as the managers of these units. Fathers became the delegated enforcers of the community leader's commands. This arrangement not only lessens the workload of the leader but also vindicates him of any direct wrongdoing as he acts as an indirect source. Fathers are kept in place by being publicly

shamed for being out of line with the leader's directive in managing their children. The father's behavior is subtly coerced not only to win the favor of the leader but reduce the frequency of being called out, publicly rebuked, or shamed for mismanaging his children. Such a relationship is no longer passionate, loving, and caring but is based on performance appraised by the behavioral code of the leader. It is driven by fear of punishment and guilt for disappointing the leader and God. The leader becomes the spiritual father of all, while the biological father steps back to the role of obeying the leader, even concerning his family.

This formal type of relationship that parents have with their children leaves children unfulfilled and in need of attention, making them vulnerable to succumbing to emotional, physical, spiritual, and sexual abuse in such communities. The only admonishment they receive is punishment when doing wrong, with little or no chance to do things right. Abuse in a Divergent Christian Community is spiritual because it is done in the name of God (Johnson & VanVonderen, 1991). It can also be physical, which includes hitting, spanking, isolation, and food and sleep deprivation. Also, emotional, including calling people out, public or private rebuke, public humiliation, intimidation, and threats (Matthew, 2017).

Based on the reports of respondents, it is clear how the portrayal of the father through their biological and spiritual father, as well as the functioning of the community, affected the understanding of God the Father. Although God is loving and gracious, it is the righteous God who punishes that is stressed more in their teaching and actions. Also, it is impossible to please God and be sure of salvation. The second best is to work hard at obeying the rules and commands of the leaders, hoping that someday it might be enough to be saved. The consequence of this distorted picture of God the Father in Divergent Christian Communities is based on a belief formed as a result of how the community functions, emphasizing that acceptance by God comes through continued good works. It is about how well a member obeys and submits to the community culture. With this established understanding, it is clear that a person will have difficulty believing that they will be acceptable to God.

To the question of which "father" had the most impact on their understanding of God, sixty-nine percent (69%) indicated the spiritual father (leader), and only fifteen percent (15%) indicated their biological father. Eight percent (8%) indicated that neither had an impact on their view of God. The most common response to how this twisted view of God through the spiritual father and biological fathers affected them was a struggle to bridge the disconnect

between biological fathers and leaders, and what the Bible teaches about God the Father. They also expressed difficulty in imagining that the Heavenly Father is different than their biological and spiritual father. And how hard it is to shake this view of a father instilled in the community. For a few respondents, they went to the scriptures to find out.

Regarding the question of how they feel towards their parents for causing them to be in the community, forty-six percent (46%) of respondents of the Gloriavale Christian Community indicated that they are sad and angry about losing the opportunity to grow up normally. Sad that they struggle to find themselves, who they are, and what their purpose in life is. The same number of respondents also indicated that they are grateful for some form of Christian upbringing. Fifteen percent (15%) felt resentment towards their parents, and thirty percent (30%) indicated that they forgave their parents and viewed them also as victims, as some were very young when they got involved. Being born in the Gloriavale Christian Community left one respondent confused, since it is the place where she has lived all her life; how can it not be right? Generally, the respondents, although they feel robbed of certain important things in life, do not hold their parents responsible.

3.2 Aspects to be aware of in the developmental trauma of second-generation ex-members

After second/multi-generation members leave a Divergent Christian Community, there are several important issues they have to cope with and work through. These issues include: how they ended up in the Divergent Christian Community, their view of the leader, what abuse they experienced, what they have become as a result of being in the community, and why they struggle with relationships (Furnari & Henry, 2011).

Second-generation community members found themselves in a controlling group from birth without having any other option. Schooling is mostly downplayed since critical thinking is discouraged and punished if it emerges, leaving community members unable to make decisions. Decisions have mostly been made for members by the community and are standard behavior (protocol) within the confined parameters of the community. Second/multi-generation ex-members need to relearn critical thinking since it is imperative to utilize cognitive strategies to make decisions (Furnari & Henry, 2011). It is only through critical thinking that members will be able to grasp and understand the mechanics used to control them and to develop a new personal and social identity.

Their developmental and psychosocial abilities are impacted. To secure attachments, it is necessary to learn and understand normal development and how the interruption of their development affects them.

They have further developed a strict conscience and a perfectionist character due to the critical exposure to the community culture. In some cases, children may even learn to internalize the harsh conscience of the leader. The perfectionist mentality manifests in several ways: self-blaming, fear of the outside world, struggle to hold leaders accountable for their abuse, and a sense of being a failure. They need to call on resilience, the innate capacity of human adaptation and development, to overcome the challenges and recover from the debilitating community culture.

3.3 Important aspects to consider related to second and multi-generational Divergent Christian Community ex-members' concept of God

As pointed out in the beginning, the concept of God as Heavenly Father is essential in the existence and functioning of a Divergent Christian Community. It is because of God that the community claims to have the right to exist, and it is because of their understanding of God and His Word that the community established and formulated its spiritual culture and lifestyle. The leader, in essence, claims that it is because of God and His Word that they do and function as they do. In the mind of every community member, the connection is made between God as the foundation and what is happening, equating it to God's will and purpose for them. Thus, a twisted understanding of God as Heavenly Father and His character not only affects their view and concept of what it means to be a father but also affects their whole life, which was founded on the community's presentation of the Heavenly Father and His supposed will and purpose. Confused and disillusioned ex-members shy away from faith and any organized religion after leaving the community. They also do not have any pre-community social network to reunite with, like first-generation community members. Being secluded complicates making new friends since they are viewed as weird and antisocial, being out of socializing outside of the group for so long. Their concept of healthy relationships is skewed since they had to survive dysfunctional and abusive relationships. They have no real sense of the outside world, which presents challenges they are not familiar with or prepared for. They hold the belief that the world they now face is scary and evil (Matthew, 2017). They do not have much to share in terms of what they have achieved in their lives in the community, since their ambition and dreams were sacrificed to obtain a higher cause. Fear acted as the referee while in the community and directed them to

avoid ridicule and punishment in the group and not to fail spiritually. Fear still accompanies them even after they leave the community. This fear may even become more intense in the lingering belief that they have turned their backs on God. They are viewed as apostates by the community leader and those formerly seen as comrades and fellow pilgrims, navigating through this world and its deception. They remember the good times they had with other members in "suffering" for the kingdom of God. Added to this fear is that even the outside world does not understand them and may reject them. They sense a loss, a lost fellowship and family, a loss of belonging somewhere, and maybe even think of themselves as outcasts.

Their trust in any form of religion or spiritual person is scarred, if not non-existent. It was by the very presumably safe religious group and presumably godly leader that they were deceived. They find themselves in a whirlwind world of confusion, distrust, anger, a sense of being robbed of opportunities, and disillusionment, by what they were made to believe would save them. Parents who leave with their children may experience anxiety in directing and guiding their children in the right way. Questions they may grapple with are: Who is God? Why did God allow this to happen to me? Does he care about me? How can I trust God or the so-called people of God again? It becomes a cyclical refrain in their minds. All of this causes them to feel hopeless and helpless, and nobody understands or believes their lived experience (Lalich & Tobias, 2006, p. 141). Some described it as just "floating" with no purpose or direction (Singer & Lalich, 1995), or as one ex-member said, "I felt, and continue to feel, like a stranger in a strange land" (Furnari, 2005, par.40).

The starting point of recovery is summarized by one respondent who stated, "I had no reference to go back to – this has been the most difficult piece. I had to give up all the meaning I had learned – everything I learned was wrong. Accepting this is the key to my recovery" (Furnari, 2005, par. 40).

Respondents of the Gloriavale Christian Community suggested the following aspects as requirements to come to terms with what has happened to them:

- Most importantly, to acknowledge that they have been deceived and to be willing to relearn values about family, themselves, life, and other people.
- Relearn about God's grace and salvation through Christ.
- Draw near to God and find peace in Him.
- Find out how the deception happened.
- Recommit their lives to Christ, trust, and follow Him.
- Refrain from blaming others, rest in the knowledge that God is good and will see you through.

4. Suggestions for the healing of second-generation ex-members and restoring the concept of Heavenly Father

4.1 Consider the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual state of ex-members

The second-generation members find themselves in a world outside of the secluded community with no existing networks, no friends, alienated family, unfamiliarity with the functioning of society, underdeveloped decision-making skills, and untrained interaction with people not part of the community. Furthermore, they, in most cases, have a weak relationship with their parents, which has had an impact on their development. Their twisted understanding of God the Father and the group's practices alienated them from the Heavenly Father. Furthermore, they have been spiritually abused since the abuse happened in the name of God (Johnson & VanVonderen, 1991). What was supposed to strengthen them in their spirituality has come to confuse them. Their journey of restoration must start in a safe and inviting environment with people willing to listen but also to believe their stories.

Their realization that they have been deceived and abused to whatever degree is a good starting point. The process of restoration happens in stages, also known as posttraumatic recovery/growth, and includes:

4.2 Understand the circumstances and strategies that led to their deception

They need to come to terms with the coercive process that overruled or numbed their critical thinking process. Making them believe in accepting whatever was taught without questioning is a sign of obedience and submission. McCabe *et al.* (2007:1) point out that members of these groups are moved to dependency by the continuous focus and emphasis on submitting to and obeying the leader. Matthews (2017) confirms this deception and overreach of the authority of the leader, as expressed by a former member who reported that they were taught that God's will was dictated by the leader and that the leader alone could forgive sins. Their ability to question that which they did not understand or disagree with was weaponized against them as deception of the evil one. Thus, leaving them not knowing to what they are submitting to and obeying because they never saw behind the scenes and were not allowed to know (Matthews, 2017). This process has different names; one common name is mind control, and another is coercive control, meaning a subtle strategy that changes the behavior of people, making them believe that they do it of their own will and for their own best interest. This mind control

is most effective if people are made to fear projected consequences and accept the solution of the community as the only way out. They will internally convert their thinking and actions to avoid the consequences and obtain "salvation" despite their better knowledge. That is the power of fear, and this fear is not only the fear of dying but of being lost forever, abandoned by God. The colossal fear overrules the natural tendency to question and succumbs to the force of fear. The cognitive dissonance experienced continually is put to rest as doubt originating from the evil one. Over time, their critical thinking is numbed. In the end, they are rendered powerless and dependent on the leader and community, and their lives are directed more through fear, guilt, and shame than through the word of God.

Their experience must be evaluated thoroughly to explain why it happened to them and how it impacted the trajectory of their whole life. This process must be done without pressurizing them before they are ready. Step by step, always be aware that ex-members mostly have feelings of shame, guilt, and self-deceit (Furnari, 2005). It is essential to emphasize that the internalized belief system of the community will continue to dictate their thinking if not addressed and replaced. The basis for the erroneous and harmful understanding of life and God needs to be exposed and corrected. They need to understand that the things they experienced were irrational and inconsistent, and that they were brought on by coercive methods. Causing them, their parents, and other members to act as they did. If an understanding of this is not reached, the ex-member will continually refer back to their internalized twisted belief system to find justification for their actions and thoughts.

4.3   Unforgiveness

Second-generation ex-members of Divergent Christian Communities face two main perpetrators, namely those who were responsible for their abuse, namely the leaders of the community and their parents. Unforgiveness may lead to resentment, and over time, if not addressed, a root of bitterness may take hold, impacting the possibility of healing. In this regard, it is important to understand that those that offended and abused may also have been part of the same system that enslaved and entrapped them, and that by understanding God's grace, you might be able to offer grace and compassion to yourself and others. This in no way means that their offenders should not be brought to book for their offenses. Forgiveness is a deeply personal journey that may take time to process. However difficult it is, it is an important part of the healing process.

Secondly, the ex-member grapples with self-forgiveness. Hassan (2025) points out that the moral injury a member has suffered can be validating in the healing process. Instead of shying away from what happened, it is advisable to integrate the experience with the current self. Facing those symptoms not as reasons for shame but as reflective stepping stones to self-forgiveness. Healing of the self can be advanced when former members utilise their own experience to write about it or inform others. Thus, redirecting their experience to have a positive impact on others, bringing healing and moral clarity for them at the same time.

4.4   A new system of thinking

Once the belief system has been exposed, members must be guided along a new way of thinking. The thinking process of Divergent Christian Communities has several aspects, all aimed at submission, isolation, and controlling members. Three important thinking structures are internalized. Firstly, the belief in being superior to those outside the community. Their rationalization is based on a strong sense of "us" (community) and "them" (those outside the community). Secondly, the basis for the superiority mentality is that the truth is only found in the community and the teachings and instructions of the community leader/s. Thirdly, there is no salvation outside the community, and those who leave are doomed. This three-tiered belief system incorporates many small issues, but in essence, it instills a sense of distrust in different schools of thinking or other information received. Everything needs to be verified by the community's belief system. According to Boeri (2002), second-generation members of these divergent communities had little or no experience with decision-making because of their dependence on the leader of the community. This view is strengthened by the lie that critical thinking, which is essential in making the right decisions, is an enemy to distract from the truth which must be exposed. Individual thinking and reasoning are permissible, essential, and beneficial in making informed decisions. Instead of a total avoidance of outside information (media, news, and books) that was upheld, members must be empowered by their knowledge of the scriptures to discern good from evil (Steel, 2022). The old cyclical thinking system needs to be replaced with a new thinking system. Former members can be taught about goal setting and decisions by practicing small goals and decisions in their daily lives. For example, set out times for certain small goals, such as reading a few pages in a book, and decide on the time to do that. Members can also be guided to understand that mistakes can be used to learn from, instead of being just a reason for punishment, as in the community. The existence of grey areas in decision-making must be pointed out, and would

assist in steering away from a black and white thinking paradigm. Making decisions on their own will ensure their forward trajectory to independence (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009).

4.4.1 Exposing the three-tiered thinking of Divergent Christian Communities

Firstly, there is no Christian group that is superior to another, simply because all humans are imperfect human beings while on earth. Secondly, it does not hold the only truth simply because so many communities all claim to be exclusive, having the only truth, and who is right and who is wrong? Lastly, it is impossible that any community can claim that salvation is only obtainable through belonging to the community since salvation is not found in any group/community but only through and by the only savior – Christ (John 14:6).

Suggestions concerning a new thinking system include:

4.4.2 Thinking about God as the heavenly father

Once they understand that they have been deceived even about God as Heavenly Father, they are ready to restore their view of who God the Father is, as the Bible explains. No longer through the lens or interpretation of the community leader.

The term "Heavenly Father" is a central concept in Christian theology, referring to God as a loving and caring parent who resides in heaven. This designation emphasizes God's paternal relationship with humanity, His authority, and His nurturing nature. The concept is deeply rooted in both the Old and New Testaments, where God is depicted as a father to His people, providing guidance, protection, and love (Bible Hub Topical Encyclopedia, 2025).

They need to understand that no man of whatever status can equate himself with God as a heavenly father. Humans are broken and imperfect. Ex-members need to refocus on God and no longer refer to their leaders as the portrayal of God the Father. God as heavenly Father is far exalted above what any earthly father ever was able to do, seeing that He is the perfect, holy, gracious, righteous, sovereign Father (Matt. 7:9-11).

God, through His Son Jesus, is the only saviour of humankind. He has our best interests at heart. He gave His only begotten Son so that humans can have everlasting life (Joh 3:16). God the Father's love for us is incomparable to any other love we know. God, as heavenly

father, will never leave or forsake His own (Heb 13:5).

Jesus is the great High Priest and only mediator for the believer, and He is familiar with our infirmities and was tempted as we are but yet without sin. We can come boldly to the throne of grace to obtain mercy and find help in times of need (Heb 4:14-16). We do not have to approach God through a leader, but have direct access to His throne through Jesus, our high priest.

4.4.3 Thinking about themselves

West and Martin (1994) point out that members of these divergent communities have a pseudo-personality apart from their own personality. Most participants reported that they had two identities, one that was constructed in the community and one secret self that was not known to the community. The community identity thinks and acts as the community prescribes, almost robotic in nature. The true self identity is suppressed so as not to come in the way of the community identity. One former member explained that he had to relearn to recognize the inner voice that was suppressed in the community because it was not allowed (Matthews, 2017).   Some reported that they felt lost, confused, and naïve in relation to others around them. Rediscovering one's own personality after leaving a community is difficult and a process.

Former members need to find their identity as a unique creation of God. Understanding that they have been created uniquely by God and have developed their own identity. Therefore to realize and start thinking of themselves as valuable, having a role and purpose on earth.

With this understanding comes the accountability for one's life. No one can or ought to make decisions for or on behalf of you, except in emergencies. Decision-making is essential in life and is the individual's responsibility, and the Word of God guides in all aspects of life. The consequences of decisions should always be considered before making a decision, and take responsibility for your life.

Former members should be guided in reminding themselves who they are as creations of God. Different from what Divergent Christian Communities taught, each human being will be held accountable personally for their acceptance or rejection of Christ's gift. It is thus not in the power of any leader to determine who will be saved or not.

Former members need to come to an understanding that the leader can never be a mediator between them and God; only Christ is.

4.4.4 Thinking about family, parents, and spiritual family

Correction in their thinking about parents, despite the twisted view they have been exposed to, is necessary. Parents do have a God-given responsibility to care for, provide for, protect, and love their children, as was indicated above. Children have the responsibility to obey and honor their parents in God's ways (Eph. 6:1-4). It is important to note that children growing up in Divergent Christian Communities are instructed to "obey" their parents; however, the meaning of this instruction, "obey" in this context, implies obedience at whatever cost, even if it is to their detriment (Matthews, 2017). This is an abuse of this scripture to serve the goals of the community. It is thus important to emphasize that the obedience to parents is an obedience imagined as a response to the parents' faithfulness in obeying God's commands for them as parents, namely, to bring them up in the ways of the Lord. It is not blind obedience. When children grow up into adults, the dynamic changes. Although they still have the responsibility to honor their parents, they need to make their own decisions. In this regard, parents can still guide them and provide wisdom, but not enforce their decisions on them.

Members must think about the rightful parent-child relationship instead of continuing in the twisted, diverted view they have grown up with, and find guidance in the Word of God. Deciding to act accordingly to the biblical relationship will gradually bring clarity and healing.

Another aspect that former members have to deal with when their parents did not leave the community is the constant condemnation from those parents that they are lost and have turned their back on God. Or that the parents are going to hell because their child left the community. This is just another way of making them feel guilty, hoping that they will return to the community. Boeri and Boeri (2009) noted that former members leaving a divergent Christian community will struggle to come to terms with their parents' involvement in the community and the impact it had on the children's lives. Counsellors can assist in working through the parents' rejection and sacrifice of children for the sake of the community. Explaining that the dynamic is the result of the community culture that has been internalized in all members.

4.4.5 Rededication and submission to Christ as savior

Another important aspect of the restoration is a rededication or real submission to Christ as savior. It is no longer on the grounds of the works of the community that salvation comes, but through faith. For Jesus is the only way, truth, and life, and no one can come to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). The reward and punishment system of the community is replaced by a living relationship with Jesus and the direction and leading of the Holy Spirit. Communication with God the Father is no longer through a leader but through Jesus Christ in prayer and the Word of God.

Integration into society and, more so, into a religious environment takes time. The healing journey is challenging and not at the snap of a finger, but it can lead to positive and lasting growth. The silver lining of the recovery is that it will bring a greater appreciation for life and God that will bring about changed priorities, appreciation for relationships, and personal and spiritual strength. It is through trauma and suffering that resilience is developed and can produce good qualities such as risk assessment, development of stronger boundaries, and healthy relationships that value individuality and non-conformity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). As the Word states, this experience can also be seen as a testing of our faith that produces patience that will work towards perfection and lack nothing (James 1:2-3).

5. Conclusion

The evidence obtained from the respondents portrays their experience, as well as how it may differ from one to another based on different factors. Some have been away from the Gloriavale Christian community longer than others and may have adopted their views on certain issues. However, the survey has helped determine some mutual beliefs and experiences that align with other research. It confirmed a different functioning of the family and view of God the Father in Divergent Christian Communities. The mainly patriarchal family system in Divergent Christian Communities portrays an adapted role of a father, and the character of the Heavenly Father is subtly changed through the representative of God, the leader, to emphasize a one-sided view of a judging God, ready to punish if one disobeys. This view that instills fear is directly in service of the community to establish total submission. The almost inescapable environment of the community, with fear of the "unknown outside" on the one hand and fear of being abandoned by God on the other

hand, leaves little room not to be converted to this view. This portrayal and belief being established affect the members' whole life and need an all-encompassing approach to restore their belief in and relationship with Christ.

The aspects that are evident from research are that second-generation ex-members find themselves in dysfunctional families subverted, where parental obligations are altered to weaken the biological family and enable the establishment of a spiritual family dependent on the leader. The spiritual family numbed in their critical thinking finds security in total obedience and submission to the leader.

With the knowledge of the impact of the community dynamics, clinicians and counselors can proceed in developing strategies that will assist in restoring ex-members' view of God as the Heavenly Father and restoring their relationship with Him.

The Gloriavale Leavers' Support Trust, established in New Zealand to support ex-members of the Gloriavale Christian Community, has done pioneering work in this regard and has been coordinating and enabling research amongst these members that has provided insight and knowledge for the development of support in the restoration of ex-members in different spheres of life.

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